ARCHITECTS AT PLAY

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*Homo Ludens
—Architectus Ludens*

Architects at Play is the result of a research process into play and the imagination, built experiments and mythological narratives. The exhibition is essentially centred on the idea of 'Creating Worlds'. It attempts to bring together two characters: the architect and the child.

Children's games have always been a breeding ground for the invention of 'Worlds'. Likewise, architects also imagine new 'Worlds'. These worlds and the mechanisms of invention they rely upon constitute the core of the exhibition, which touches on themes as varied as childhood and education, urban plan-ning, public space, history, architecture, art and creativity—in order to trace the history of imaginary as well as imag-ined 'Worlds'.

Each one of us is a playful architect. From the solitary hut to the cosmopoli-tan ark, we build worlds which we inhab-its or co-inhabits. The world of play is located in the mysterious interval that connects our subjectivities to external reality. It sometimes happens that archi-tectures crystallize in this ephemeral space, becoming for a while the stage of our lives, the horizon of our habits. This power of imagination is at the heart of the curatorial system in which childhood playgrounds and those of architects, artists and designers meet.

A journey through four playful worlds —labyrinths, symbolic toys, construction games and strategy games—showcases a number of ways of creating worlds.

In this journey to the land of representations, a focus on the Brussels playgrounds questions the embedding of these worlds in the public space.

Various works are also presented independently, without any particular contextualization, placing us in a situation of discovery and wonder.

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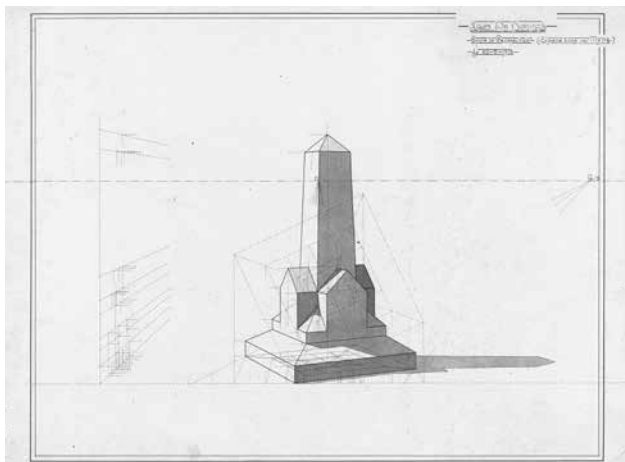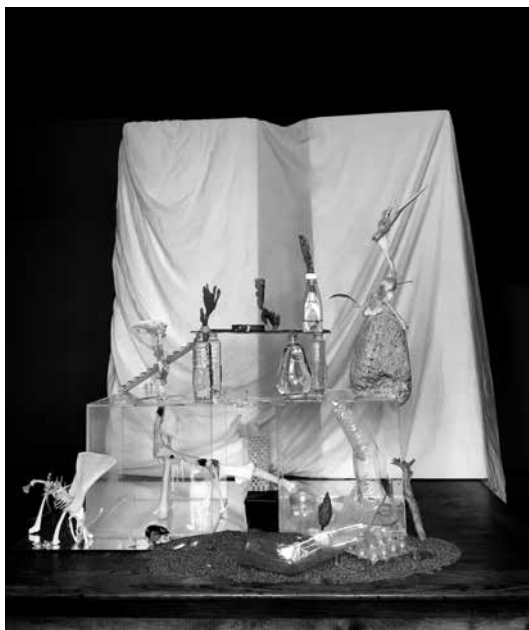
[01] Louis Herman De Koninck, study of classical orders
and shadow drawing at the Académie des Beaux-Arts
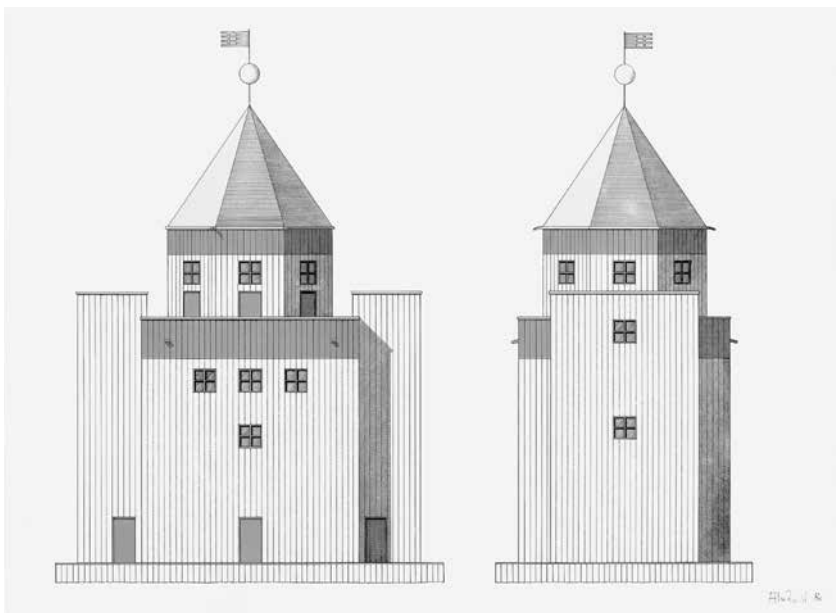de Bruxelles, 1912-1913. © CIVA, Brussels
[02] LPPL & åbäke, *The Transparent Dinosaur Museum*, 2019.
Photo: Betsy Bickle. Private collection.
[03] Renaat Braem, Van Humbeek house in Buggenhout,
1967-1970. © CIVA, Brussels

05

[04]   Aldo Van Eyck, *Circle Terrace*
        (Amsterdam Orphenage, 1958-1961), n. d.
        © Aldo van Eyck—from the Aldo van Eyck archive
[05]   Aldo Rossi, *Teatro del Mondo*, 1980.
        © Drawing Matter Collection.
[06]   Constant, *Large Labyrinth*, 1960. Coll. Kunstmuseum
        Den Haag. © Photo: Tom Haartsen

3 MASTERS

The playground is not just a new programme in post-war cities. It is a new paradigm that shakes up the functionalist machinery of space. Artists, architects and designers imagine uses that children will inevitably repurpose as they play. The playground is a theatre in the making. It is an open, necessarily unfinished architecture that takes on its full meaning through the child's playing. The project author is therfore compelled to focus once more on the fundamental elements of the experience—colour, materials and shapes—to organize a landscape, an invitation to travel. This functional or programmatic indeterminacy at the service of possible uses is at the heart of the approaches developed by Aldo Van Eyck, Isamu Noguchi and Group Ludic.

2 MAESTRE

'Education is a natural process carried out by the child and is not acquired by listening to words but by experiences in the environment.'

The whole idea of an active pedagogy centred on the child's autonomous development is encapsulated in these words by Maria Montessori. It is about producing an environment capable of arousing in children curiosity, a certain awakening and the practice of forms that will enable them to discover the world and to find their place in it by themselves. Almost 60 years after Maria Montessori's death, this conception of education based on the child's personal experience and autonomy continues to be transmitted and explored by different generations of researchers, educators and theorists. The neuro-pediatrician Nanette Latis (Giannetta Ottilia Fantoni Modena) founded and managed the Accademia dei Bambini at the Fondazione Prada until her death in January 2019—organizing dozens of workshops during which she invited artists, scientists, architects, musicians, mathematicians and film-makers who were 'willing not only to teach, but also to acquire new inspirations'.

Aldo van Eyck, 1964 ca.
© Photo Pierre Alechinsky

Isamu Noguchi, 1946 ca. Coll. Archives of The Noguchi Museum. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / ARS – SABAM

David Roditi, Simon Koszel, Xavier de La Salle – Group Ludic, 1969.

Maria Montessori (1870-1952), n. d.
Courtesy of the Nationaal Archief, Den Haag.
Giannetta Ottilia Latis, Accademia dei Bambini, Milano, 2014.

M   09

SANDBOX

<u>The sandbox</u>

When a child starts building something on the beach, he quickly attracts other children who observe and watch him at work. Although they may well distinguish a tower or the back of an animal in these heaps of sand, these objective clues remain as tenuous as the discovery of a footprint for a paleontologist. Only the young architect holds the key to the vast imaginary world he is in the process of creating by shaping the surface of the beach. If he agrees to share his surreal estate by letting others play with him, then the tower will become a castle, and the castle a city. And in the evening, the beach will be dotted with these collective architectures of greater or lesser size, which will be washed away by the waves when the sea comes up.
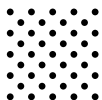
'On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. The infinite sky is motionless overhead and the restless water is boisterous. On the seashore of endless worlds children meet with shouts and dances.

They build their houses with sand, and they play with empty shells. With withered leaves they weave their boats and smilingly float them on the vast deep. Children have their play on the seashore of worlds. […]'

Rabîndranâth Tagore, *On the Seashore*, 1913

Agence Rol, *jeux d'enfants au bord de la mer*, 1923.
Source: gallica.bnf.fr / BnF

S

LABYRINTH

<u>The labyrinth</u>
In the beginning, the world is an absurd chaos. And we become adventurers, in search of the centre of the labyrinth. The darkness of the world is illuminated by this movement of exploration that situates us but distracts us, each step reviving the vertigo of disorientation. The fear and anguish caused by this loss of sensory and spiritual points of reference are only the necessary prelude to the pleasure of discovering new sensations, emotions and ideas that transform us. Immersed in the entanglement of the world, our body becomes the centre of situations. Induced by our contact with the surroundings, an intoxication suddenly envelops us in emotional atmospheres that bring us to life. So, to decipher the enigma of the world, the question we may have to ask is: where is the centre of the labyrinth?
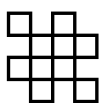
'The adventurer is the one by whom adventures happen rather than the one to whom the adventures happen. The construction of situations will be the continuous realization of a great, deliberately chosen game; the passage from one to the other of these sets and conflicts whose tragic characters died in the space of 24 hours. But there will be no shortage of time to live.'

Michèle-I. Bernstein, André-Frank Conord,
Mohamed Dahou, Guy Debord, Jacques Fillon,
Véra, Gil J. Wolman, in "Une idée neuve
en Europe", *Potlatch,* No 7, 3 August 1954.

CONSTANT

To drift away in the urban labyrinth. To lose yourself in the world but also to lose the world. For the revolutionary artists of the Situationist International, this vertigo was the key to creating a new world. The New Babylon project, imagined from 1958 onward by Constant in association with Guy Debord, is the spatial embodiment of their desire to destroy the functional order and to establish 'a moving order of the future'. An ideal, labyrinthine city on the scale of the planet, this kaleidoscopic universe with atmospheres constantly renewed on the basis of the inhabitants' desires is the playground of a new society of *homo ludens*. This playful humanity frees itself from the daily yoke of work to once more enchant its everyday life through the construction of situations.

L

THEATRE

Symbolic toys

In the course of our wanderings, we collect some objects whose brightness suddenly stroke us. When nostalgia for these illuminations grips us, we become stage directors, trying to bring these lost objects back to life. These fragments of the past then become the protagonists of scenes that we witness with a sense of wonder. The illusion of representation then makes these absent objects present in our flesh. In the great theatre of the world, shapes are symbols waiting for a gaze. When we look at them, they have the magical power to recreate imaginary topographies in which our memories are embodied, carried by the impulse of our desires.

'The Theatre of the World also seemed to me to be in a place where architecture ended and where the world of the imagination began and even the irrational…'
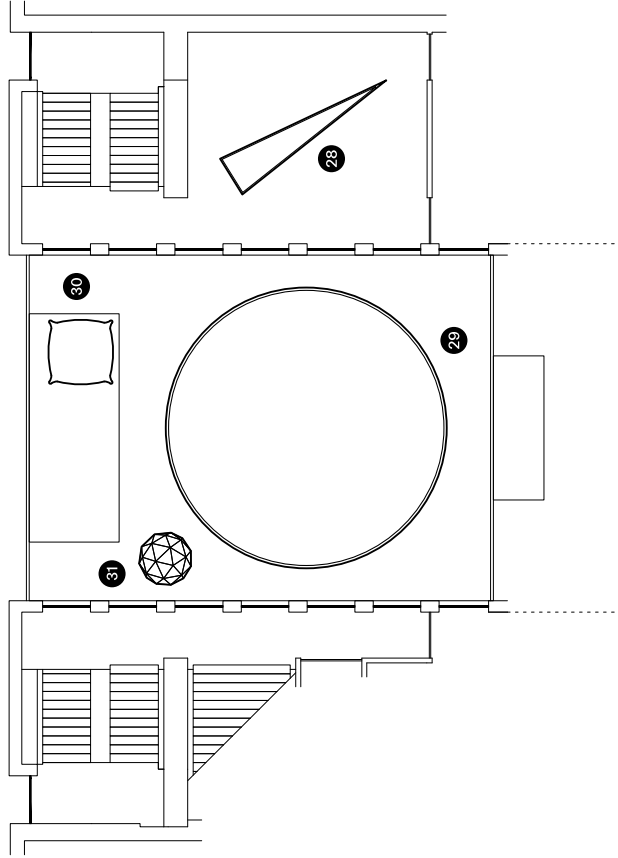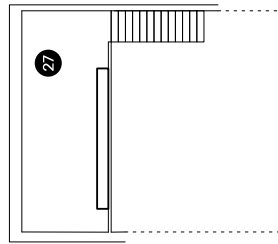
Aldo Rossi,
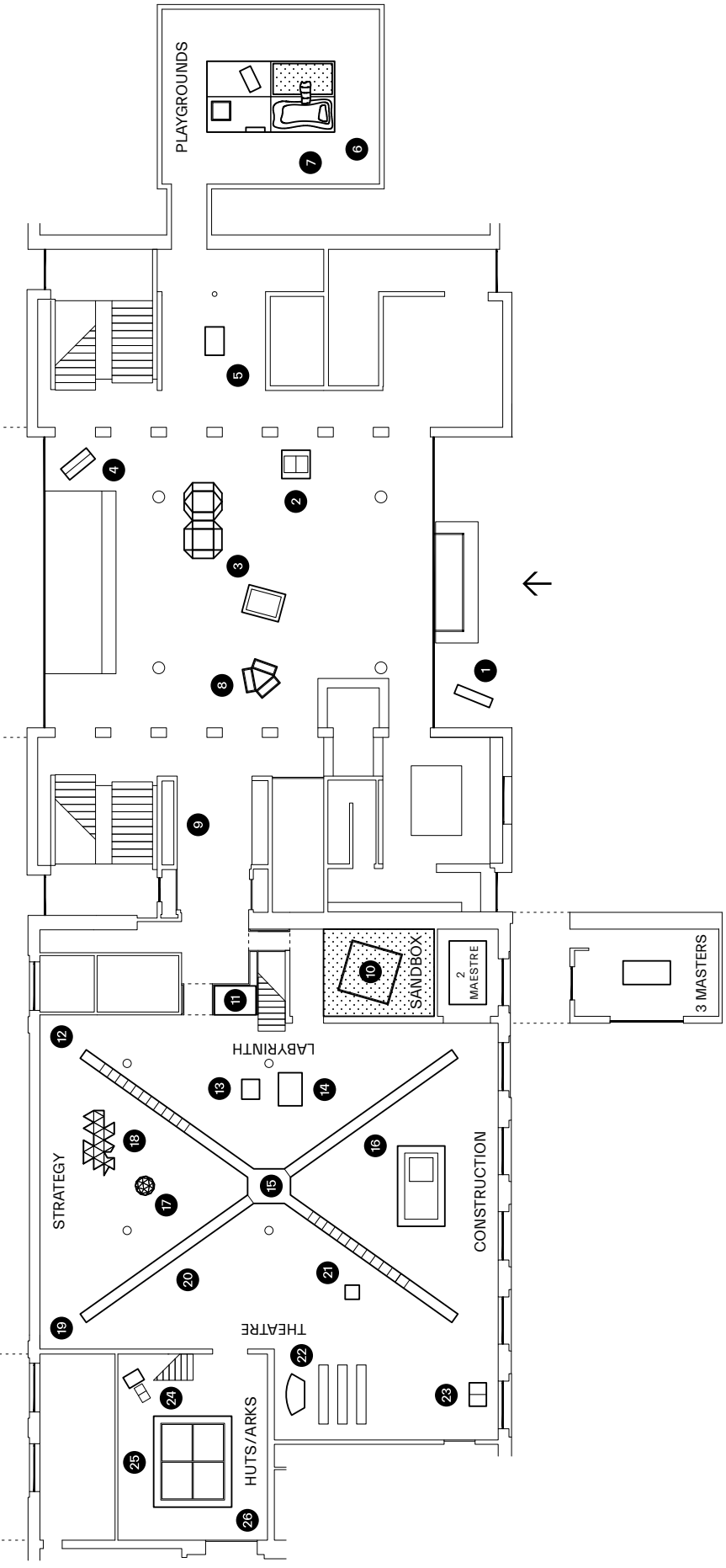*A Scientific Autobiography*, 1981

ALDO ROSSI

To record the flow of recollections that surface from our memory depending on analogies. To redesign, to repeat to bring about a new symbol. Aldo Rossi's *Teatrino Scientifico* identifies that paradoxical space where the play of reminiscences leads to the materialization of fragments of architecture permeated by autobiographical sentiments. For the Milanese architect, architecture is an imitation game and the city is a theatre of the collective memory. The architect, like a toy collector, gathers fragments of this vast palimpsest and updates its symbolism by proposing them once more in new projects.

Designed in 1979, the *Teatro del Mondo* is a barbarian toy lost in the Venetian landscape, made up of marble and bricks, cornices and colonnades. Indicative of Aldo Rossi's architectural surrealism, this archetypal form opens the public to the world of dreams and guides it through imaginary topographies between personal memory and collective history.

T

PLAYGROUNDS

7
6

5

4
2
3
8

1

9

SANDBOX
10

2
MAESTRE

3 MASTERS

11

LABYRINTH

12

13   14

STRATEGY

18
16
17
15

CONSTRUCTION

20
21

19

THEATRE
22

HUTS/ARKS
24
23

25

26

17

CONSTRUCTION

Construction games

The fragments we accumulate constitute the bricks of a vast collective language, the meanings of which we share through the abstraction of speech. We then become *bricoleurs*, capable of always constructing and deconstructing new and complex assemblies by combining elementary parts. Through these construction games, we open up bundles of meaning in the meaninglessness of fortune. In the combinatorics of the world, our constructions are diagrams, nodes of possibility which, in their uncertainty, remain open to the interpretation of others.

'By careful planning we could have an environment in which the human mind and spirit may either relax or find the stimulus and delight which leads to creative activity... This series of forms, these ideas, shall not be sealed or enclosed by some limiting scheme or statistical or sociological theories regarding the activity of the people, but in their incompleteness the place will leave to people themselves the possibility of developing new experiences for themselves.'

Cedric Price,
Objectives: Glengall Wharf, Isle of Dogs, 1963 ca.

CEDRIC PRICE

To deconstruct the totalities that immobilize our societies—discourses, plans, programmes, habits, prejudices. To restore mobility to the elements of reality so as to upend the meaning and let new combinations happen. At the start of his career, Cedric Price saw himself as an 'anti-architect', laying into the profession's certainties with humour and provocation.

The Fun Palace, an unidentified urban object, somewhere between the adventure ground and the 'folk high school', is like a large construction game. Designed from 1962 onward in a collective process involving, among others, the dramaturge Joan Littlewood and the cybernetician Gordon Pask, this prefab Meccano set is perpetually under construction, evolving according to the wishes of its users. This ideal work in motion limits architecture to an underdetermined system offering users possibilities in terms of interpretation and participation.

C   19

STRATEGY

<u>Strategy games</u>

The empirical experience of the world is not satisfying enough for us. We we tend to objectify to objectify it in order to understand it. We try to discover the order and laws of the system in order to better take hold of it. We rise above it and become strategists, translating each situation into a game board. These scale models enable us to stop time to simulate possible futures. As rational as they may seem, all these maps are nevertheless nothing but hypotheses, reflecting our unchanging thirst for unity with the cosmos.

'There are certainly some extremely beautiful things in the game of chess in terms of movement, but not at all in the visual domain. It's the imagination of movement or of the gesture that creates the beauty, in that case. It's entirely a question of grey matter.'

Marcel Duchamp,
Entretiens avec Pierre Cabane, 1967

BUCKMINSTER FULLER

To zoom out, to widen the focus in order to understand human systems, to perceive the possible trends and synergies in order to better anticipate their developments. Such is the approach taken by Richard Buckminster Fuller, the 'scientist-artist' who dreamed that humanity would one day map the entire universe. The first step towards this utopian horizon was to understand the Earth in order to be able to 'make the world work for 100 percent of humanity'. The World Game, which he imagined in the 1960s at the height of the Cold War, is a simulation game that invites the Earth's citizens to create an alternative world by imagining international cooperation strategies. Fuller imagines repurposing military information technologies to build the World Game's playing boards. In the Geoscopes—gigantic spherical piloting halls—the new pilots of spaceship *Earth* could observe the show of the world in 4D.

S

HUTS/ARKS

Huts and arks

The worlds that humans create at play are the foundation of their existence as imaginative and communicative beings. The origin of architecture, the 'primitive hut', is then no longer to be sought in the childhood of humankind, as rationalist architects thought. It is located deep within each of us, in the playful childhood of our minds. Our architectures are rooted in these dreamlike huts that we keep building so that our inner child can come and play there, tirelessly seeking to inhabit and understand the world.

These solitary huts are also cosmopolitan arks on board of which we take along all our encounters. Thus, it is only by 'playing' collectively that we will be able to invent the rules of cohabitation of the great planetary ark.

'Surrounded by a world full of wonder and forces, whose law man may define, may want to understand but never decipher, which reaches him in only a few fragmentary harmonies and which suspends his soul in a continuous state of unresolved tension, he himself conjures up the missing perfection in play. He makes himself a tiny little world in which the cosmic law is evident within strict limits, yet complete in itself and perfect in this respect: in such play, man satisfies his cosmogonic instinct.'

Gottfried Semper,
*Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen
Künsten, oder Praktische Aesthetik*, 1860
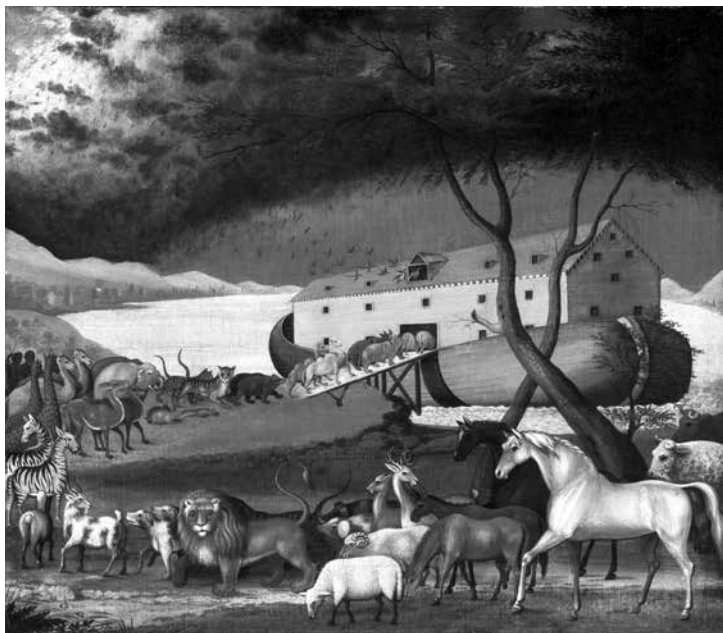
Edward Hicks, *Noah's Ark*, 1846.
© Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

PLAYGROUNDS

'Children in a world of architects,
architects in a world of children'*

Public spaces reserved for children to
play in, playgrounds are an expression of
that right to play. The very first play-
grounds emerged in the second half of the
nineteenth century already in order to
steer children away from the new dangers
they were facing in the industrial city
and its unsafe streets. These dangers
would increase with the arrival of cars and
the rapid urbanization of cities.

 Today, many playgrounds have had
their original equipment replaced by
standardized games in line with the safety
measures in force, also in constant
evolution since the last quarter of the
twentieth century.

 * André Paulus, "L'enfant dans un monde d'architectes,
 l'architecte dans un monde d'enfants", in *A+*, No 65,
 July-August 1980

'The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right.'

Declaration of the Rights of the Child,
20 November 1959

'FRESH AIR FOR THE YOUNG'*
AND SAND!

Between the wars, guided by the popular phrase 'mens sana in corpore sano', society viewed outdoor sport, play and education as complementary disciplines, as can be seen from the construction of open-air schools and the development of playgrounds in public spaces.

Contrary to past educational methods, outdoor play was seen in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as being of great educational value. Sand was considered an excellent means of play. Free of any rules, playing in sand stimulates the imagination and creativity of children. The sandpit would coincide with the principles of modernism set out in the Athens Charter (1941), i.e. the distribution of the city's functions: dwelling, work, recreation (use of leisure time) and transportation. Sandpits were built at the foot of tall buildings located in vast green spaces. Still used in today's playgrounds, sand now requires a certificate, as stated in the decree of 9 May 2001 on the safety of playground users.

*In the article by P. L. Flouquet, 'Plaines de jeux' (Playgrounds), *Bâtir,* August 1938

P   25

FROM CLIMBING FRAMES TO PLAY SCULPTURES

For the 'Children's Realm', the child-minding facility of the Brussels World Fair Expo 58, architect Paul-Émile Vincent designed a series of climbing frames but also sliding games. Their unidentifiable forms evoke the play sculptures that Dutch architect Aldo Van Eyck imagined in the 1940s already for the city of Amsterdam to let children imagine how to use them. The one imagined by architect René Braem, based on the iconic image of the mother holding her child, is closer to the abstract sculptures that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s. In France, the sets designed by Group Ludic, imagined as artworks, present some striking examples. The abstract sculptures sought to connect children to abstract art and to the beauty of forms and colours.

From the 1980s onward, in response to the growing aversion to risk and as a result of the introduction of drastic safety norms, standardized modules gradually replaced the original playsets, which then lost some of their depth.

PLAYGROUNDS IN THE CITY:
ADVENTUROUS TERRITORIES

The creation of quality playgrounds and green spaces accessible to the public is a key urban issue, essential for both adults and children. Various studies commissioned by Environment Brussels in recent years have made it possible to engage in a reflection on the issue of the leisure offer in Brussels.

The reflection made it possible to draw up a list of the existing playgrounds and to set out several guidelines. Indeed, although the Brussels Region has almost 300 playgrounds and more than 140 areas such as sports grounds or skateparks, some zones suffer from a cruel lack of leisure infrastructure. The need to create new quality spaces was thus highlighted.

To complete the existing offer, it was decided to develop a 'play network', a web of interconnected playgrounds and sports grounds. The emphasis was largely put on the redevelopment of existing playgrounds which had become obsolete, the current trend being to integrate them in broader landscaping projects. Very popular in the 1980s, standard playsets were abandoned in favour of play equipment created by architects and designers which let children develop their imagination, their curiosity, their autonomy, whether alone or with others.

URBAN SKATING

Rollerskating emerged in the eighteenth century already when a Belgian-born inventor, John Joseph Merlin, had the idea of adapting, towards 1760, ice-skating to land by attaching metal wheels to a wooden board. Yet it is only in the late 1950s that skateboarding appeared in California. The sport of choice for surfers who adapted their favourite pastime to the sidewalk—they were in fact nicknamed 'sidewalk surfers'—skateboarding consisted at the time of a small surfboard and metal wheels without bearings. Skating was done in the street—not always in the safest conditions, for that matter.

Skateboarding gradually became more common, and went through a surge in popularity in the 1970s with the introduction of polyurethane wheels, a plastic material that made it possible to skate faster and to realize skateboarding tricks. The Skateparks, which were the first areas dedicated to this urban sport, emerged in turn. These hybrid spaces had the advantage of being accessible all year round and were specifically designed for the practice of the discipline with their ramps and different modules. They were not only used by children, but also by adolescents and adults.

In Brussels, the skatepark at the Square des Ursulines, inaugurated in 2006, is a good example of the successful integration of skateboarding in the urban environment.

Decroly school in Uccle, 1936.
Coll. CIVA, Brussels / W. Kessels ©2019, SOFAM
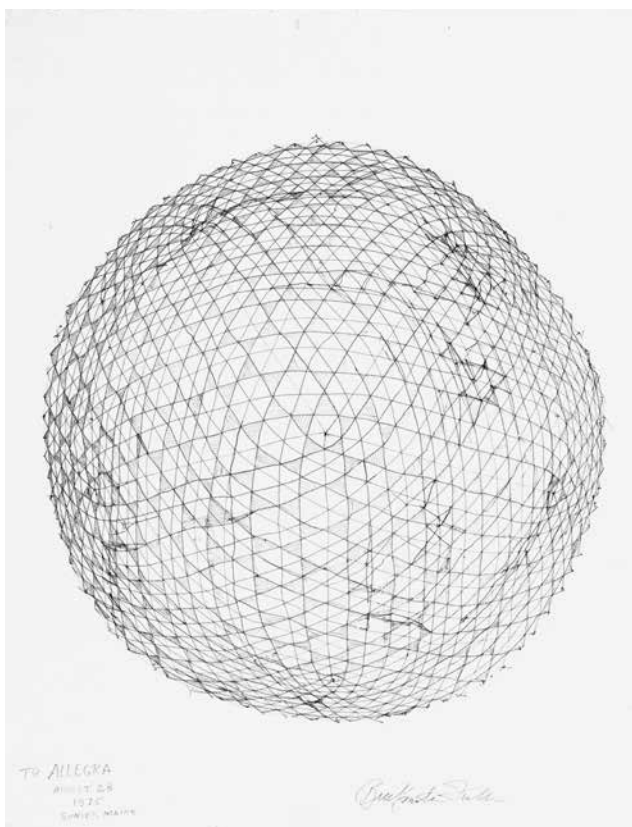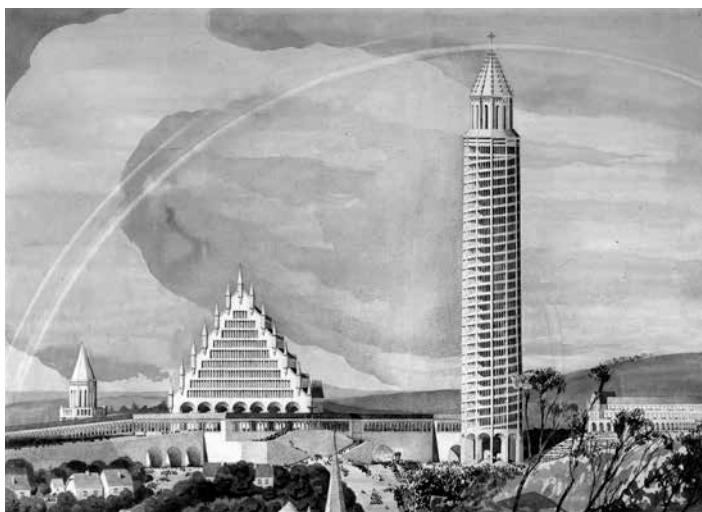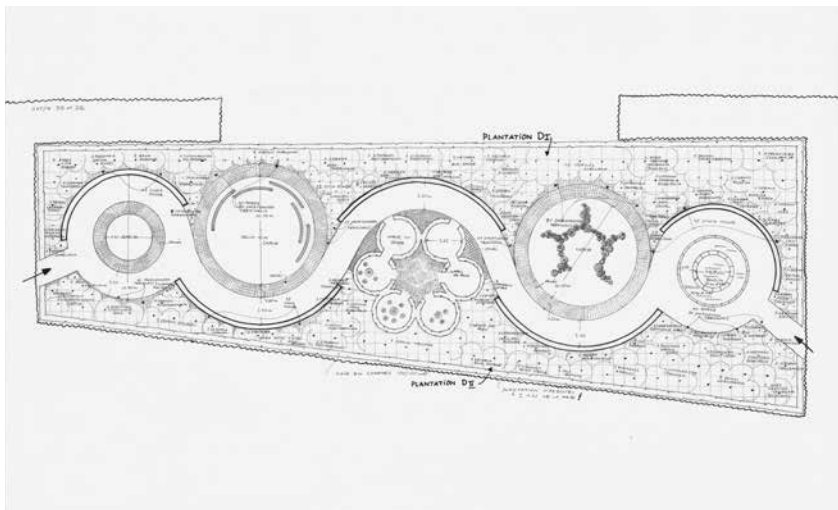
[10]   Ferdinand Joachim and Philippe Rotthier,
       geodesic dome, 1979. © CIVA, Brussels
[11]   Henri Lacoste, project for the basilica Notre-Dame
       in Beauraing, 1943. © CIVA, Brussels
[12]   René Pechère, playground of the gardens
       of the Government Administration Centre in Brussels,
       1975 ca. © CIVA, Brussels

29

51N4E
360° Architects
AgwA
AHA
Aida Takefuji
Akarova
Alberto Sartoris
Aldo Rossi
Aldo Van Eyck
Alfred Ledent
Alice, Anton, Blixa, Valentine
Andrew Kovacs
Anne Van Loo
Archizoom Associati
Art Nowo (Heinz Klein, Georg Leidig)
Atelier De Visscher
& Vincentelli et Jozef Legrand
BAUKUNST
Bruno Munari
BRUSK
BUUR
Cedric Price
CENTRAL
Charles Aubertin
Charles Dominique Joseph Eisen
Charles Vandenhove
Clara Leverd
Claude-Nicolas Ledoux
Constant
David Hockney
DVVT
Edmond Alexandre Petitot
Edward Blore
Elena Gileva
Elias Guenoun
Enzo Mari
Fala Atelier
Fischli/Weiss
Florent Chavouet
Gaiking
Georges de Hens
Georges-Eric Lantair
Giannetta Ottilia Fantoni Modena
Gijs Van Vaerenbergh
Gio Ponti
Groupe Alpha
Group Ludic
Gru.a Architetos
Gustave Herbosch
Guy Debord
Haus Rucker co
Heinz Klein, Georg Leidig
Henry Lacoste
Isamu Noguchi
James Gowan
Jean Aubert
Jean-Francois Pirson
& Jean-Pierre Caumiant
Jean-Jules Eggericx
& Louis Van der Swaelmen
Jean Nicolas Louis Durand
Jef Degryse
Ferdinand Joachim & Philippe Rotthier
Jonathan De Pas, Donato d'Urbino
& Paolo Lomazzi
John Hejduk
Julien Schiellemans
Karbon'
Karel Verhoeven
Label
Laura Bouyard
Laurent Busine
Léon Krier
L'Escaut
Lieven De Cauter
Louis Herman De Koninck
LPPL and åbäke
Luca Merlini
Lucien De Vestel
Luc Van Malderen

Madelon Vriesendorp
& Charlie Koolhaas
Marc Cuisinier
Marcel Gossé
Maria Montessori
Martine Canneel
Maurice Culot & La Cambre
NoAarchitecten
Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen
Office for Metropolian Architecture
—Rem Koolhaas
Oscar Schlemmer
Paul Emile Vincent
Paul Mignot
Peter Märkli
Pierre Antoine
Pierre Hebbelinck
Pinaffo & Pluvinage
Raphaël Zarka
Renaat Braem
René Pechère
Richard Buckminster Fuller
Robbrecht en Daem
Ryan Gander
Sarah Pschorn
Stefano Graziani
Studio Ossidiana
Suède 36
Takahashi Ippei
Thomas Raynaud
Vers-A
Victor Bourgeois
Vinh Linh & Antoine Devaux
Willy Kessels
Wolfgang Bregentzer

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