In the slew of brochures that wash in on the daily tide of the letter carrier’s arrival, there is a Frank Lloyd Wright catalog, where I find some gorgeous (and expensive) maple blocks. In dovetail maple boxes, the blocks are elegant reproductions of the Froebel gifts—learning materials designed for young children by German educator Friedrich Froebel, the creator of kindergarten. They are beautiful. I must have them.

As a child, Frank Lloyd Wright had Froebel blocks, and when he was a mature professional, Wright remembered them, saying that they were “in my fingers to this day.” Wright also said that the blocks taught him to see in a particular way, and then to want to design. I am no Frank Lloyd Wright, but on the day when the blocks arrived I knew what he meant.

The Froebel blocks are touchstones, connecting me to the design studio I work in today and to days gone by in the sunlit playroom of our old shingled house in Berkeley. Light streams in through windows on three sides of the room, illuminating the sun porch that has become workshop, TV room, and flophouse for my sister and me. I am kneeling, my wooden blocks arrayed before me on the worn Oriental rug.

I am deep in concentration, unaware of the passage of time, or of the beautiful day outside the window. I am immersed in the work of design and experiment, constructing the walled city of my imagination. I am in the moment and in my body, fully engaged as I fashion tunnels, courtyards, and underground chambers from the plain wooden shapes. Some of the blocks are very large, 4 x 4s, clad in 1-inch yellowed and scuffed pine. I can feel the slightly rough sensation of the geometric pine blocks in my fingers, their edges rounded, their slight weight pressing against my hand as I grasp each in turn, then set it in its place.

The carpet makes a bumpy pattern on my knees as I kneel for long stretches, arranging each block, then sitting back on my heels to examine what I have done. The neighborhood I build is no larger than the spread of my arms, easily encompassed, ready to hand. I am flourishing in the sunlight like one of the giant plants that grows outside in my mother’s lush California garden.

In one of my picture books, a character says, “I am the king of all I survey.” That’s how I feel, too, on this patch of rug in my playroom, but I have an extra edge—I make the world that I survey. It is mine, all mine, and I feel the deep joy of creating it. I am detached from the everyday. I am free to shape my castle, my neighborhood, as I will. I am free to change it as I want. Sometimes the blocks tumble, but I avert most catastrophes by building low structures that can’t be destroyed by a single mishap. In my city, my people obey the same rules that govern the outside world—they cannot walk through walls, they need structures that are stable and safe. Most of the time though, they act according to their own logic, which is also mine. But mostly, the people are not there yet, and often they never arrive. For me the best part is the preparation, the planning, and the design. Everything is literally within my grasp, as I finger the pieces of wood. A walkway that leads to a ladder that leads to a higher walkway. A long and winding tunnel with boats in it. A large underground room.

My bedroom and the playroom are upstairs and my father’s study is downstairs. Unlike my light-filled
play areas, his workroom seems a dark lair, in a darker part of the house and with curtains partly drawn. I see him sitting in the middle of the room, back to the door, erect at his typing table. His typewriter is a big, heavy manual and his large fingers are strong from the thousands of hours he has spent over the years pushing down those heavy keys. He has a cigarette dangling from his lips as he types. Its smoke makes a thin curl that winds its way upward toward the ceiling. By dinnertime the room is filled with haze, from hours of thought and smoking, so that when I go to call him for dinner I see him as if through a mist. But perhaps this only makes his lair the more enchanting. I see his typewriter as the alchemical vessel that commands his attention. What is he doing all those hours punching away at that machine? Many years later, my mother's uncle told me of his time in the Far East, and taught me some of the pidgin English he had learned. Piano was "bakkus [box] you fight 'em teeths." The typewriter had teeth, too, but my father was not fighting with it; he was making the keys fly and letters appear on the page. I begged him to let me try it.

I remember the day I am finally allowed to try my father's typewriter. I am about five, just starting kindergarten, and my father ushers me into his study. Everything is hushed, and I am impressed by the solemnity of the moment. At last I will get to do what I have seen my father doing. I raise my hands above the keyboard, fingers curving downward, and bring my hands down hard toward the keys, just as I have seen my father do. Disaster! Instead of letters in a neat row on the page, I have in front of me a multi-key accident, a tangled mass of metal. I am sure I have done exactly what I had seen my father do; yet the result is completely different. My sense of mastery and that I know what is going on in the world around me, is shaken to its foundation. How can things be so much more complicated than they seem? I return to the playroom to lick my wounds. My blocks give me solace, obeying my every command, even when the rest of the world does not.

After my brother is born, my parents convert part of the attic into bedrooms for my sister and me. Having my own bedroom, my private universe for my construction, is a new experience. The scope of my ambition now expands to fill the room; the bed and the floor become part of the action. My grandfather builds me a table in the form of a giraffe, and I incorporate it, too, into my constructions. Usually my bed is a raft, a safe harbor in the world of danger. Anything touching my bed is part of the raft, keeping me and my stuffed animals safe and dry. The giraffe is right up against the bed, and fingers of wooden walkway, formed with my trusty wooden blocks, fan out into the room to allow me to venture away from the bed. Back in the playroom, I would have had to imagine myself an inch high to live in my blocks compound; in my bedroom, I can be my own size. I inhabit my construction world; I am both designer and client.

In my bedroom, the new blue carpeting is a hostile sea, its unplumbed depths harboring countless marauding sharks, the bogeymen of my childhood. (We live only a few miles from Alcatraz, the notorious maximum security prison island, and I shiver at stories of would-be escapees who come to a bad end.) As I extend my construction, I extend my world of safety.

The summer after seventh grade we move across the country, to the terra incognita of New Jersey. My wooden blocks are among the many things we give away when we move. But, in my mind, I had left them behind long ago. Wasn't I almost grown up, ready to put aside these childish things? Didn't I have much more important work to do? Yet as I thought of career, my emerging interests led me back to the blocks. It is my senior year in college. I am majoring in philosophy and sociology, and I have finally settled on the topic for my senior thesis: toys. I call the finished work "The Objects of Play"
and reflected on questions like, What is a toy? What makes something toy rather than "real"? What is play and how do physical objects figure into it?

In graduate school, I become interested in the impact of information technology in the workplace, which involves me, of necessity, in the world of computers. When I begin my work, computer interfaces are unattractive and cumbersome objects—line or dot-matrix printers clank loudly; monochrome text of obscure code glows green on cathode-ray tubes. But within a few years, computing discovers graphics. The visual blossoms in the dry symbolic world. Growing up, I identify with my mother's interest in design, particularly modern design, and my father's friendship with the designer Charles Eames. During college I spend a wonderful summer working at the Eames office in Venice, California; after college, I put these interests aside. They seem frivolous, not socially useful; there is more important work to do in the world. But now, looking back over several decades, my artistic interests are more of a piece with how I work with software—design after all. My early interests seem fundamental, a phantom limb become real again.

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