



A House is not a Home

The first basement level here has been almost completely turned upside down over the past month or so, when what was previously my main storage room was turned into a woodworking shop. In the process, a number of long unused items were unearthed and brought into view (I wrote about one of these - the bicycle - a couple of weeks ago).

Another such item - and one that definitely falls into the classification of 'something you can't throw away' - was a pair of boxes containing a house and furniture. I mean, of course, a doll house and its accompanying set of furnishings.

I made this toy back in the earliest days of our life in Japan, when my daughters must have been about 5 and 3 respectively. Being a fairly handy father with two daughters, having a go at the construction of a doll house is a fairly obvious project to undertake. I think it was partly motivated by my own memories of something my own father had made for myself and my brother a great many years ago. This wasn't a doll house, but a toy garage ('gasoline stand' to the Japanese readers), and was a quite extensive structure, with a wide plywood base on which was a building with bays into which one could push toy cars, a ramp up the side to a parking lot on the roof, and of course sets of gasoline pumps in the forecourt.

My brother and I already had a vast collection of the toy cars known as 'Dinky Toys', and as my father had made the garage on a scale that matched these, the scene was thus set for many hours of pleasurable play. And play we certainly did; I think we pretty much wore it out over the next few years.

So given that memory, I 'spared no expense' in making the doll house as extensive and interesting as I could. I tried to avoid falling into one trap. I thought that if I made things too realistic, it would make the 'imaginary' play less interesting for the girls, so I made the overall shape as a kind of open shell with eight rooms, without making it obvious which was to be used for which purpose. The girls could then distribute the furniture as they wished, 'creating' rooms anew each time to suit their own requirements.

The furniture, on the other hand, was as realistic as possible. A piano is obviously a piano, a bathtub should look like a bathtub, and having them as attractive as possible isn't going to stunt anybody's imagination. My brother was visiting at the time, and the two of us created a number of 'masterpieces in miniature'. Our tiny tatami mats are a wonder to behold, the table tennis table is ready for instant action, and the blackboard in the playroom can actually be written on with chalk!

The girls were of course very impressed when it was unveiled, happily set it up for play, and eagerly explored all the bits and pieces.

And then pretty much never touched it again.

Does this tell you that my two daughters weren't interested in 'playing house'? On the contrary, they played in such a fashion for endless hours, day after day after day. But they did it in their own way, getting out our box of old random Lego parts and setting up a baseplate. On this they arranged a low layer of bricks outlining a structure; here's the kitchen, here's the living room, etc. and etc. They never bothered to take the time

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to actually build complete structures - the rough outline of the walls/windows/doors was enough. And on this baseplate they played out their fantasy 'doll house' episodes and adventures.

So the 'real' doll house went into its box (it comes apart for easy storage), and has slept peacefully in the basement ever since. I think though, that its day will come. Perhaps not as a useful toy in somebody's living room, but I'm thinking that one day I'd like to have an exhibition. Not of woodblock prints - everybody knows what they are about - but of all the other odds and ends I have made/done over the years.

My first classic guitar, woodworking tools, manuscripts of musical compositions, a small shelf of books, computer software, endless wooden toys ... and yes, even a doll house. It'll be an exhibition like you've never seen!

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