

A photograph of a baby in a stroller on a city street. The baby is wearing a light-colored knit hat and a purple top, looking up and to the left. The stroller is black with a large canopy. In the background, there are city buildings, a blue car, and a speed limit sign for 40. The text 'The Spacing of Parental Values' is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font.

# The Spacing of Parental Values

BY BRETT BLOOM

### Space & Identity

As an artist, working with a group called Temporary Services for 15 years, I have spent much of that time looking at how people use shared city spaces and trying to figure out how to make work in relation to extremely localized situations. This same experience has helped me see the multiple dimensions of how my city is organized, particularly in relation to making sure that children are treated and raised in a uniform way.

Being immigrants in Copenhagen has made my wife, artist Bonnie Fortune, and I hyper-conscious of the kinds of pressures that are pited on us to reproduce parenting norms. This seems standard for most parents. These pressures come from unexpected places, the configurations of the rooms of one's household, for example, where one must have all the right gear to not only be a good parent, but also a good consumer. We are also temporary immigrants and this adds to the pressures we feel and awareness we have of the consequences of decisions we make in relation to every aspect of our lives.

There are equal pressures to reproduce Danish-ness. Our daughter Ada, though only 1 year and 9 months old, is already more integrated into Danish life than we are. She wears the normal clothing that other kids wear, and even has some slang that is particular to Copenhagen. Ada identifies with the kids around her; she feels herself as one of them, though our visa status complicates this in ways she cannot know. Both Danes and other immigrants ask how much, if any, Danish she is speaking. She seems to be equally fluent in both English and Danish. We try to switch back and forth as often as we can, mashing the two languages up in some funny ways that becomes a game for all three of us.

We also have to perform American-ness when others emphasize our identity on a regular basis. We are frequently asked where we are from, what we are doing in Denmark, and

how long we intend to stay. We want our daughter to have a solid grounding in the cultural attitudes her parents harbor, but we have never really articulated what this actually means beyond vague feelings that emerge when we are complaining about cultural attitudes or behaviors of those in our host country that make us feel distanced or not wanted.

### Bikes & Buggies

Copenhagen brands itself to its citizens and people abroad as a biking city. Enormous numbers of residents bike in the city all year long; city officials estimate that a staggering 50% of Copenhagen residents commute by bike every day. Separate bike lanes, plowed and salted in the winter, with their own traffic lights, make biking incredibly safe and easy. For this reason, you see a lot of children in the bike traffic, whether they are riding their own bikes or are being carted around by their parents, sometimes four or five at a time in large, three-wheeled cargo bikes generally referred to as Christiania bikes. There are well-designed ad campaigns that help keep attention on the presence of children in the bike lanes. We happily participate in the bike culture and bring our daughter along whenever we can. This aspect of life in Copenhagen is one we cherish; we worry if we return to the U.S. about where we can find a similar bike friendly place. The cities at the top of our list, while great for the U.S., pale in comparison to our current city.

Of course Scandinavia is often thought of as an ideal place to raise children. We have found this to be untrue in important ways even though Copenhagen is well organized around the needs of children. We know we will have to address some of the problems, like the wide spread racism we witness, but that will come later when Ada is old enough to understand. Still the city is friendlier to children than any other city I have lived in or visited. We are quite relieved, when returning from a larger city like Berlin or London, to get back to the cozy confines of our adopted city.

We do not have to worry about space for our barnevogn—oversized buggy that we refer to as a “living room on wheels”—or whether or not a train platform will have an elevator to move this beast up and down. These things are well planned for. People get out of the way of children more readily in Copenhagen because there are many signs telling them to do this; there is almost always space or accommodation made for kids on public transportation. There is general cordiality strangers exercise towards children when entering into shared spaces; this is equal parts city planning and commonly held attitudes about egalitarian access and a well-functioning society.

We often find it funny when we push our daughter around in her buggy the sometimes envious, disdainful, or unreadable glances of assessment we receive in regards to the state or brand of the buggy. I never would have guessed that buggies were such a complicated signifier, first of the state and its support plus the implicit existential racial anxiety it harbors, but secondly of one's personal style or projection of self publicly. We received our buggy secondhand from friends who were happy to get rid of it; we were equally happy to not have to buy a new one. We gave little thought to what the buggy transmits to others in terms of status and lifestyle. Denmark is a welfare state. New parents receive a tremendous amount of support. It is common that one parent will take an entire year off, with paid leave—subsidized by either an employer or the state—to help introduce the new little person into the world and give the intense immersive nurturing that he or she needs. Bonnie researched the function of the buggy in Danish society. She Concluded:

*The barnevogn is a physical symbol of state support to mothers with small children. It signifies time away from work, time to stroll around the city. Though it represents a period of free time for the mother, who is most often the one pushing the carriage, it also represents time she is not working and losing out on career opportunities. In recent years, more*

*men will take maternity leave but it is not the norm and is reflected in the job market.*

*The barnevogn also represents “Fri lufts liv” [the life lived outside] considered essential to healthy children in the Nordic countries. Prams themselves I think were first introduced in the U.K. They have always been associated with the time and money to walk through the city at the leisurely pace required to move with such an object.*

You see buggies being pushed around the city, parked in front of cafes, and in the inner courtyards of apartment buildings. They are a constant reminder of the state's role in fertility and fertility rates, manifested in the presence of the buggies as an outward sign of collective anxiety about a shrinking, ethnically Danish population.

The use of buggies and what they signify about parenting does not easily translate from Denmark to other places. The story of Annette Sorensen reveals a lot about the differences in parenting in Denmark and the U.S. Sorensen, a Danish woman was in New York with her small child in 1997. Sorensen and the child's father, a Brooklyn resident, left the buggy outside of a restaurant with the sleeping child snuggled inside while they went in to have a drink. This is a common practice throughout Denmark and happens on every street every day. It is something people don't give a second thought to doing here. However, New Yorkers were alarmed at the “abandoned child” left alone on the street. The mother and father were arrested and the child was put in foster care for four days. The couple sued the NYPD and received a settlement of over \$60 thousand for the way they were treated. The incident triggered a spirited international debate about parenting cultures in Denmark and the U.S.

Several versions of this story exist in Denmark, and their accuracy is less important than the dramatically different ideas about parenting and city space use they demon-



The Alphabet Tower, installation shot, Flensborgade 47, Copenhagen, Denmark



strate. Many people talk about this incident as if it happened recently without any sense of the details of the actual incident. The cultural and ethnic homogeneity of Denmark produces a general trust amongst people in public that allows for the buggies to be used and to be left undisturbed. This is not the case in American cities where racial and ethnic tensions create a heightened sense of distrust and suspicion. In Copenhagen, parents set their buggies up in a way that they can constantly monitor them. The children are watched very closely; this was clearly not understood by the New Yorkers who played a role in the arrest of Sorensen.

A public ritual common to parents all over Denmark, and one in which we will participate, is to take a young child, when she is ready to stop using a pacifier, to a park or playground to visit a *suttetræ* [pacifier-tree]. Together parents and child tie a pacifier, or a bag filled with all the child's pacifiers, into the tree where it will sit with hundreds of others weighing down the branches with the shared certainty that a publicly marked transition offers. Parenting often feels like a private endurance test playing out in the banal travails of grinding domesticity. The visit to the *suttetræ* offers assurance that you are doing things right. Both parents and child make their individual offering to the collective identity. The *suttetræ* produces many things, among them the identities of parents and children and the complicated process of growing up.

### We Take Play Very Seriously

Playgrounds are sometimes confusing social spaces where parents of young children hover like a protective force field if the other parents and children are not familiar to them, a potential threat perhaps. While they are acting as security guards, there is an accompanying unspoken emotional or psychological distancing that happens: other parents and children are disappeared until one must absolutely be forced into an encounter. Violent or

humorous antics by children can break down the fourth wall making everyone suddenly available to each other.

Copenhagen has many stunning, highly imaginative playgrounds, ones that are not possible for fear of lawsuits in the U.S.. We often take Ada out in search of playgrounds. It is hard not to speculate about American attitudes about liability and its impact on children's imagination. One of the world's first adventure playgrounds—where kids can build their own playground out of scavenged materials—was started in Emdrup in 1943, just 10 minutes by bike from our home. It is no longer the scrappy, rough hewn place it once was, but a trace of its past is still present.

Indeed experimental playgrounds have a long and interesting history in Copenhagen. In the late 60s and 70s, neighborhood activists would work with artists, carpenters, parents, neighbors and others to install guerrilla playgrounds, handmade from wood in the large courtyards of apartment buildings and in city spaces. One artist who was active in this culture and brought it into the more rarified spaces of institutional art, only to disrupt them, was Palle Nielsen. His project, *The Model*, realized with fellow activists, at the Moderna Museet [The Modern Museum] in Stockholm, broke artistic and social territory on many fronts that continue to resonate with the large number of people who are trying to make artwork that engages one social situation or another. *The Model* turned the museum into a giant playground that kids could reconfigure and change to their will. They could repaint everything, climb tall towers, play records on several stereo systems simultaneously, wear and deface masks of world leaders in a relatively unregulated space. The film footage of *The Model* shows an almost feral, wild energy in the children that is certainly not the norm of playgrounds.

This ambitious and ground breaking work has been added to the official cannon of Danish art (yes, such a thing does exist and we laugh about it with our Danish friends) and

was recently included in MoMA's encyclopedic exhibition *Century of the Child: Growing by Design, 1900–2000* (July 29–November 5, 2012). The publication that accompanied the show is a must have for parents excited about how innovative design can stimulate and challenge both themselves and their kids.

### The Alphabet Tower

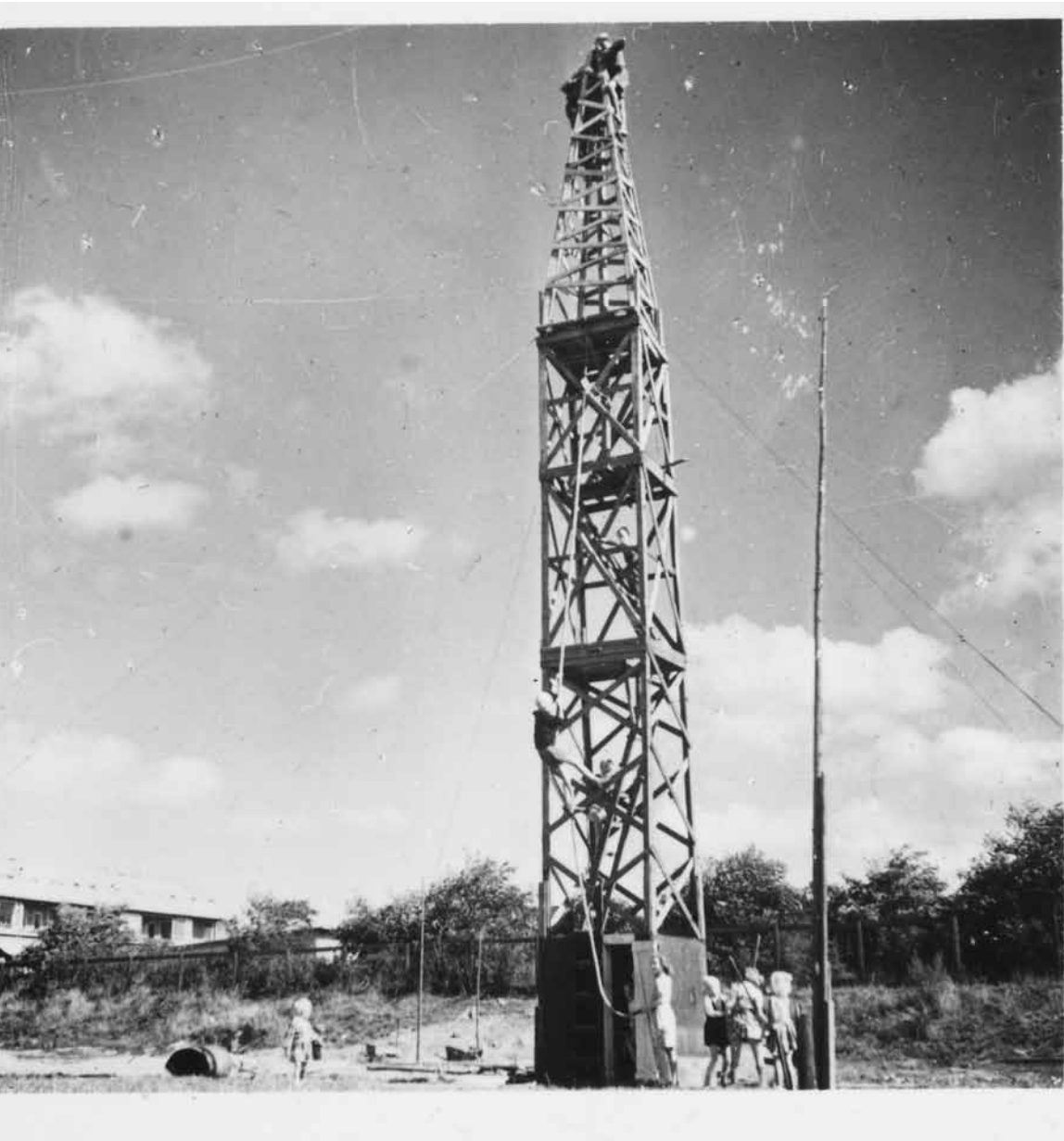
The artwork that Bonnie and I engage in is often realized collaboratively. When we are both invited to an exhibition or conference, we insist on bringing our daughter along when we can. This summer we were in Pyhäjoki, Finland, where the country's 6th nuclear power plant is in the planning phase. It is obstructed by a courageous small group, Pro Hanhikivi, that has delayed the process for a number of years. Finland claims energy independence as the reason to build these new plants. We were at a gathering of artists, activists, local organizers, media theorists, and others to take a look at the building of the nuclear power plant and to see what our cultural work could add to the discussion and the fight to oppose the plant. The two weeks were centered around having discussions, forging collaborations, and making new work around how to change the culture that produces such destructive, short sighted sources of power rather than deeply questioning the need for so much energy consumption.

We took Ada along and were anxious to see what the group was like and how accepting they would be of her presence. We felt like we had to warn everyone beforehand that she would be there because of earlier experiences at an artist gathering where Ada's presence was met with mild irritation. Artists tend to think of themselves as open minded, free spirits, but at the same time have internalized an unspoken "professionalism" that tells them that children must be excluded from discussions and gatherings around art. We work hard not to accept these limitations, either by refusing to accommodate this behavior by others, or by resisting the internalization of "professionalizing" prohibitions.

We would rather include Ada in our work and in artistic discussions, especially because we tend to be involved in more activist art circles, which need to be challenged when they produce abusive situations; lasting social change comes from changing social norms.

Another way in which we include Ada besides taking her to various events and gatherings, is to involve her in the art making process, though she is still quite young. This past spring, Bonnie, Ada, and I made a small indoor playground of our own for an exhibition in Copenhagen. We called it *Household Ecologies #5: The Alphabet Tower*. It consisted of several components. We made a slide out of surplus materials that came from an older public art project. We wrote an essay linking consumer culture to the lack of wilderness or wild space in our lives and how we may reconnect to that through thinking and acting in a way that does not reproduce consumer norms. The essay filled one side of a poster; the flip side of the poster could be folded into a three-dimensional form that echoed the roof we put on top of the slide.

In preparing for the exhibition, we tried to set up a situation where Ada could work with us and contribute to what we were making though her own movements were quite limited as was her use of language. She interacted with the slide at almost every stage of its construction. Her limitations for easily scaling it were an obvious thing to test, but she started using the slide in her own ways that gave us some ideas of how to further develop it. She would climb the tower in unexpected ways or use tools or waste from the process as further extensions of the fun that it could offer. She reciprocated playfully to the situation we set up and this got us thinking about how to apply this approach to other collaborative relationships. How do you create surpluses that exceed both the limits of the concepts you are working with and the limits of the people involved to make something more interesting and inclusive? The answers to these questions have exciting implications for



Tower of wood, built by children, at Denmark's first *skrammellegeplads* [junk playground], Copenhagen, c. 1942. Courtesy of the Danish Royal Library.



Detail of a playground shaped like a giant robot, designed by Danish design firm Monstrum, located in Bispeparken, in the Nordvest quarter of Copenhagen

KO #4

HOLIDAY 2013



Ada and *suttetræ* [pacifier-tree]



me, having worked in collaborative ways for over 18 years, and opened up some new ways of thinking and directions for working to further erode inherited ideas of how an artwork traditionally has been authored.

We had to set up situations where we could learn from her and let Ada show us things. It was important to work with Ada as Bonnie and I both spend a lot of time with her; in order to get it done, she would have to be around any way. Ada learned about tools and loud noises they make. She tested putting many things in her mouth. Most were very unpleasant. There are many things though that are to be learned in the long run or that we hope show up in some residual way from the many things we have made with or for Ada in our house including *The Alphabet Tower*. We try to make things for our house based on ecological reflection and ethics rather than the full on consumption that we feel pressured to replicate and see mindlessly propagated all around us. We believe that our choices, activities, and things we make, scavenge, or otherwise bring into the apartment can empower our daughter, be it in Montessori-style furniture we have built or the ways in which we integrate art into everyday contexts.

We were obsessed with Ken Isaacs, an experimental architect who was based in Chicago, for many years teaching at the University of Illinois Chicago; he made two books that had a big impact on us. We made PDFs of two of Isaac's books and put them online; they spread around the internet quickly. We built our own versions of Isaac's *Living Structures* for our bed and when Ada was born, appended an additional structure for her. As she became more mobile, and could get out her bed, we had to move the entire bed closer to the floor. We detached Ada's bed, put it on the floor, and made what we were calling a "low-rider montessori living structure." Ada could get in and out of bed by herself, the main concept behind a Montessori bed, and could wander around or play if she wanted.

Experiments in art, collaboration with our daughter, and understanding the fluid ways in which identity gets formed and mutates are on the horizon and I am excited to see where all of these things take us. I feel that we must give our daughter the tools to find her way out of consumer society as she is inheriting the ruins of a globe eviscerated by the greed and vicious resource extraction that previous generations have foisted on all of us, even those who refuse this way of being in the world. Art, activism, and a positive culture of care and concern for ecology and biodiversity, are just some of the tools that younger people will need to help cope with the massive changes that are already under way.

KO #4

An Excerpt from  
*Household Ecologies #5:*  
*The Alphabet Tower*

Domestic space is built on, and at the expense of, wild space. Everything we own, everything that shapes our daily lives depends on the earth and its finite resources for its existence. The structures of contemporary life render these connections largely invisible. We don't really know, for example, where our bananas come from when we purchase them at the store. Purchasing something is the primary mode of interacting with the world when you live in a city. Our daily patterns, moving us from home to work to the store, require few muscles, calories, and very little meaningful engagements with the landscape. The spaces we inhabit are more about the easy flow of goods, money, and people than they are meaningful exchange. We buy a package of bananas. We take it home, eat it, and throw away the plastic wrapping and peels—an isolating set of steps that ignores the wild world that brought the banana to us.

We live in a city out of economic necessity. Although we are in a city we still want to feel connected to a larger ecosystem. In considering how our small Copenhagen apartment is connected to a larger flows of natural resources, we began making a series of aesthetically appealing, functional objects. It began as a way to have a sense of agency and connection with our environment not possible within the purchasing paradigm.

The objects shape our space physically and philosophically. Because our lives are for the most part removed from the production of our daily life, we are attempting to connect with the social and environmental ecology of our living space. In making functional objects that consider our daily needs, we are trying to peel back some of the ignorance that the over-industrialization of our lives produces. Over-industrialization has made us hyper-specialized to do certain tasks, but has left us unable to shape our daily situation except through purchasing each thing we need.