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start of the twentieth century. Here, too, the presentation centred on the contents, while the appearance of the house itself was of lesser importance. Yet by referencing the age-old tradition of showpiece doll's houses, it furnished the canon of Dutch design with a venerable setting.¹⁴

Although such old-style doll's houses are more the exception than the rule today, keen collectors are still prepared to spend large sums acquiring decorative miniature houses. Houses not to play with but essentially to marvel at and showcase their valuable contents (furniture, dolls). An ambitious example of the type is the *Spiral Dollhouse* →11, which a private individual in 2014 commissioned from the office Architecture BRIO, as a gift for his life partner, an ardent collector of Barbie dolls. The architects gave the excessively slinky mannequins a suitably stretched house with a vertical scale of 1:6 and a horizontal scale of 1:13. With their sleek, contemporary wooden design, they emphatically distanced themselves from the familiar kitschy Barbie glamour.¹⁵ The house is at the service of its occupants, yet it had to be both attractive and playable, because the designers were not told for whom it was intended and therefore assumed it was for a child. The same was true for Linda Stenberg when she launched the *Arne Jacobsen Dollhouse* →12 in 2009 under the brand name Minimii: a faithful copy in miniature of Jacobsen's house in Charlottenlund of 1929. The walls are held in position by invisible magnets, enabling children to open and play with it from all sides. But it is mainly adults who want to acquire it, often as a showcase for the modernist furniture that Stenberg also produces and that ultimately generates most of her turnover.¹⁶

Modernist is Already Quite Modern

Stenberg started Minimii because within the available range of doll's houses she saw nothing but 'old Victorian styled dollhouses furnished like [her] grandmother's house with terrible old brown chairs'.¹⁷ That was also the motivation for other designers. Amy Whitworth, who came up with the *Qubis House* (2012) a short time later, was completely unable to identify with the old-fashioned world she encountered at doll's house fairs for aficionados, where time appeared to have stood still: 'It's a big market with exquisite, absolutely amazing replicas of traditional pieces of furniture in different historical styles: Edwardian, Victorian... Some of these little chairs and tables would cost thousands: beautifully done and painstakingly put together...'¹⁸ Architect and toy designer Wolfgang Sirch puts it even more emphatically: a lot of toys are 'olde-worlde; as though designed for the Flintstones'.¹⁹ Since the rise of Asian imports and online commerce have made the range so uniform, there is scarcely any room for 'exotics that do not conform'.

Disillusioned by the existing market supply, all these makers sought alternatives. Sirch and his companion Christoph Bitzer designed in 2004 the *Villa Sibis* →13 and in 2012 the *Maison Rive Gauche*, two sleek, simple houses made of high-quality material. *Villa Sibis* has a base measuring 114 × 62 cm, supporting a house measuring 73 × 33 × 25 cm and a swimming pool, both in the form of an

14 See the Stedelijk Museum exhibition archive: <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/supermodels-100-years-of-dutch-design-and-iconic-architecture> (last consulted on 16 February 2022). An earlier, smaller version of the *Dutch Design (Doll) House* (with 35 of the 60 rooms) was on display at the Salone del Mobile in Milan in early 2014.

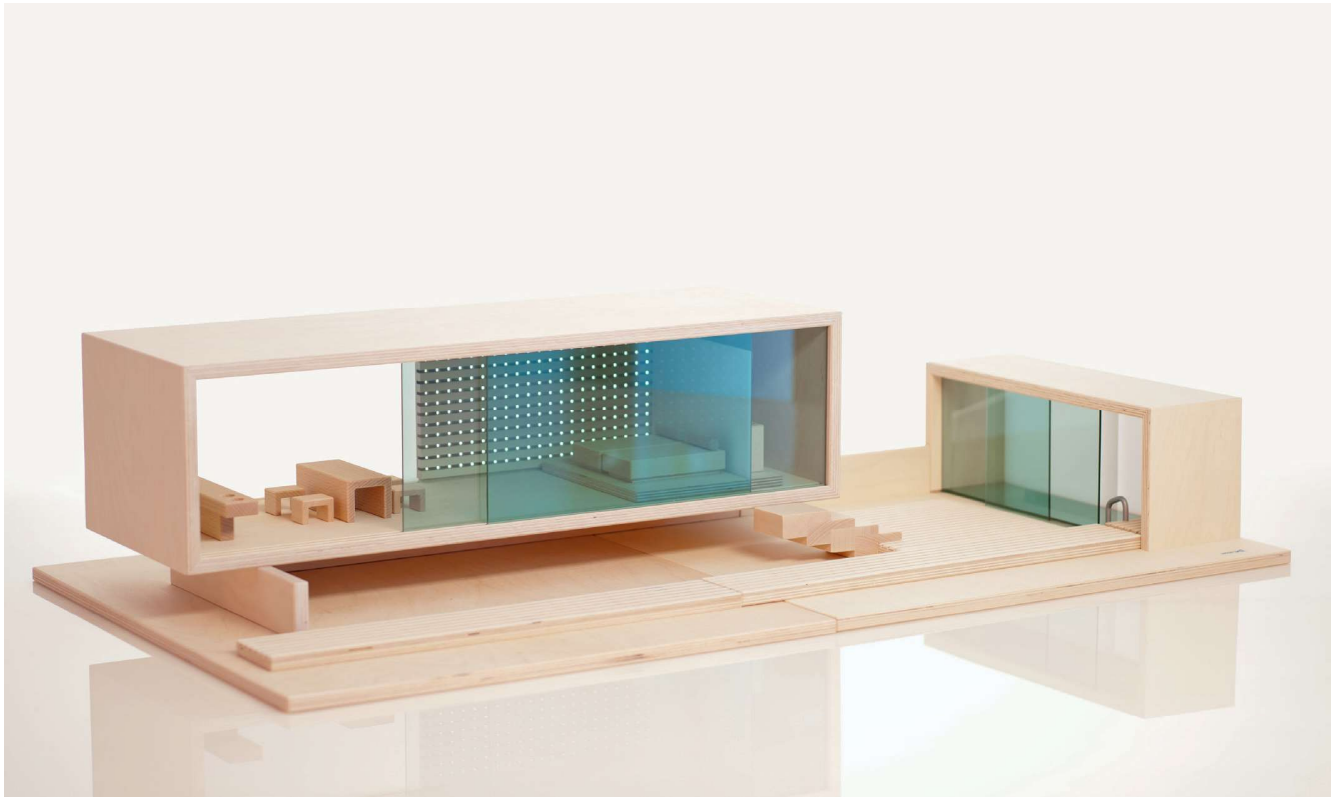
15 See: Marwaha 2014. The stereotypes of Barbie, Ken, their lifestyle and home are widespread and persistent. They are zealously driven by Mattel, the Barbie company that constantly releases new products. It is also interesting to note that a miniature house can, conversely, be enlarged; for example, Malibu boasts a full-scale Barbie house, which could be rented for a few nights in October 2019: <https://news.airbnb.com/barbie-opens-the-doors-to-her-iconic-malibu-dreamhouse-on-airbnb> (last consulted on 16 February 2022). On the other hand, there are always designers and artists who deliberately turn the Barbie clichés upside down. An example of that is the brutalist *Barbie Dreamhouse* that Roksanda Ilincic and SHOWstudio designed in 2013, a 'base with a modern and contemporary feel'. It was never built, but the presentation film of the virtual 3D model gives a good impression of it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrPyQl6piP4> (last consulted on 16 February 2022).

16 To meet that urge to collect, Stenberg devised in 2011 the much smaller *MiiBox*: a halved Arne Jacobsen house, clearly recognizable by its typical façade, behind which lie six small rooms for displaying miniature furniture. You can play with it, but *MiiBox* is largely intended to hang on the wall.

17 Interview with Linda Stenberg on 9 March 2021.

18 Interview with Amy Whitworth on 27 November 2020.

19 Interview with Wolfgang Sirch on 3 November 2020.



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open wooden module with transparent sliding panels on both sides.²⁰ There are many similarities with the *Modular House* →14 by Mini Archi from 2013: they are roughly the same size, consist of simple wooden frames with sliding partitions, and at first glance they look like modernist villas with a pool. But Ana Maia and Laurent Maes, the founders of Mini Archi, want to fill in as little as possible for people playing with the *Modular House*, preferring instead ‘to sharpen children’s aesthetic sense’.²¹ The full and half modules, panels and blocks that appear when you open the biggest box can be positioned freely on top of or next to one another. The villa with swimming pool is just one of the countless options. The pair envisaged a gender-neutral, sustainable, modular house that you can play with again and again in different ways.²²

When asked about their sources of inspiration, many contemporary makers refer to the first half of the twentieth century: the Bauhaus, the Barcelona pavilion by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1929), the post-war Case Study Houses... Stenberg also went back 80 years in time with her *Arne Jacobsen Dollhouse*. Were there no recent architects in Denmark around 2009 considered eligible? To her, Bjarke Ingels seemed like a suitable candidate, but the collaboration with the Arne Jacobsen estate just happened to be established more smoothly. Yet didn’t she want to avoid children playing with an interior that was just as old as their grandparents? That was something she could partly solve: to be sure, the exterior had to be a faithful copy, but the Jacobsen estate gave permission to replace the tiny 1920s interior spaces with more generous rooms that reflected contemporary standards. Despite those adjustments, the *Arne Jacobsen Dollhouse* confirms the impression that ‘modern’ still means ‘modernist’ in the Land of Doll’s Houses. Flat roofs, columns instead of walls, large expanses of glass, abstract furniture, and no ornaments or decorations: that package seems to be enough to do away with the pitched roof.

Tim Boyle, architect and designer of, among others, the *Emerson Dollhouse* (2010) →15 for Brinca Dada, confirms this.²³ His houses are more complex in terms of infrastructure—they have electricity for example—but in terms of design he drew inspiration from the architects of the Case Study Houses, an experimental, modernist housing programme in the Los Angeles area, just after World War II.²⁴ Boyle’s doll’s houses are intended as toys, but their realistic appearance had to appeal to adults in particular as potential buyers. He responded to their ecological awareness with sustainable materials, solar panels and LED lights, and to their dreams with the modernist look. Because in his surroundings, modern architecture is rare and therefore: ‘You don’t have to do very modern and everyone is already like: “Wow! Look at that! It’s so modern!”’

Liliane Limpens also recognized that you needed little to create a discernible, contemporary appearance. In 1999 she came up with the *PoppenVilla* →16, ‘the Bentley among doll’s houses’. What sets it apart, above all, are its dimensions: 130 cm tall, 120 cm wide and 62 cm deep. Several children can play with it at the same time, with 30-cm-tall dolls or soft toys. Limpens wanted to make a sustainable design house out of high-quality materials: clear-varnished birch wood and stainless steel. Her motto was: ‘Papa and mama have a granite kitchen working top, stainless steel taps, double washbasins, a design bed... Thus so should the



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20 In hindsight, *Villa Sibis* turned out to be somewhat voluminous, which is why the base was omitted in the *Maison Rive Gauche*; the dimensions remained roughly the same. In the second house, two columns hold the floor and ceiling in place; the players determine the position of the glazed corner walls.

21 Cited from: <https://www.miniarchi.com/en/brand> (last consulted on 16 February 2022).

22 Interview with Ana Maia and Laurent Maes on 27 March 2016.

23 The *Emerson Dollhouse* won in 2010 an Eco-Choice Award and in 2012 a Creative Play of the Year Award. Boyle also designed the *Bennett Dollhouse* for Brinca Dada in 2010, and the following year the *Edward Dollhouse* (a cheaper version of the *Emerson*, in other colours and without electronics) and the *Dylan House* (inspired by the designs of Paul Rudolph and Tadao Ando). The price varied from 200 to 600 dollars. Brinca Dada was disbanded in 2015.

24 For example, the form of the *Emerson Dollhouse* (2010) is derived from the Kaufmann Desert House (1946) by Richard Neutra and the materials have been taken from A. Quincy Jones, who designed a villa for film star Gary Cooper and his wife in 1954.



children and their dolls.²⁵ Such details do of course come at a price that, despite the miniature size, is beyond the reach of many people: over 1700 euros without furniture. It also features a ramp, a recent feature to make the *PoppenVilla* supposedly 'gender neutral'. Limpens advises every new customer to immediately place a car on it, because: 'Then the little boys know: "It's also for us."²⁶ Will this substantially help to solve gender problems? Whatever the case, the house is immensely popular: thousands of hospitals, crèches and primary schools in various countries have ordered one over the past two decades. It looks modern, is a niche product with a good marketing concept and has scarcely any competitors. Yet the innovative aspects are not architectural: this is an upper-middle-class family home with a pitched roof, which suggests a classical family unit comprising two parents and two children.²⁷

The success of the *PoppenVilla* has not been matched by all manufacturers: Sirch, Minimii and Mini Archi have reason to be satisfied if they sell fifty houses in a year. So what does the *PoppenVilla* have that they lack? It is certified for sale in the EU and US, because the toy market is strictly regulated and official testing agencies apply high standards. Smaller producers of doll's houses that cost 300–500 euros can scarcely afford the necessary quality, safety and environmental certificates. Moreover, the required sturdiness places demands on materials and construction, which in turn do not always chime with elegance. And that is precisely what Sirch, Minimii and Mini Archi value so highly: they reach many more customers through museum shops, design shops and concept stores

²⁵ Cited from: <https://poppenvilla.nl/LilianeLimpensVisieMissie.htm> (last consulted on 16 February 2022; see the heading 'Gelijkwaardigheid'.

²⁶ Interview with Liliane Limpens on 2 October 2019.

²⁷ The washbasins, mirror, rails and worktop make the bathroom and kitchen instantly recognizable. The other rooms are almost automatically designated as living room, parents' room, children's room and study. Limpens calls the seventh room (on the ground floor) a 'recreation room': it could be a horse stable, bike shed, garage, sports or music room. In that respect, the slightly smaller *PoppenVilla Light* is more abstract, with three indoor spaces and one outdoor space that are not further defined.

than they do through toy shops. Alain De Rauw, international sales director of PlanToys, knows all about it.²⁸ He also says resolutely: 'We're more fashion article than toy.'²⁹ PlanToys certainly does come up with didactically well-considered concepts and certified products, but a traditional toy shop that does not follow trends is not the place to sell them: 'too stuffy, too old-fashioned, too little eye for opportunity'. But, then, how and where? The six doll's houses currently marketed by PlanToys illustrate the complexity of answering that question.

Social Media: The Contemporary Showcase

In 1990 PlanToys launched the very first doll's house that came as a kit: *My First Dollhouse* →17, assembled with ten screws and playable from all sides. That, combined with the sustainable material, was highly innovative for its time. *My First Dollhouse* was (and still is) a resounding success; that is why De Rauw refers to it as the 'Classic' Dollhouse. It was followed almost thirty years later by the *Slide N Go Dollhouse* (2018) →18, which could be taken everywhere, and the *Contemporary Dollhouse* (2020 →19, a hip version with curved corners. All are made of sustainable rubber wood, not very big (less than 50 cm wide and high), open and relatively abstract, in natural shades and neutral colours. The pitched roof suffices to read it as nothing but a house, and the spaces are not defined further. The *Slide N Go* is not a bestseller but performs reasonably well; of greater concern is the *Creative Play House* (2004) →20, although that, according to De Rauw, is one of their most remarkable products: 'The more children who see that house, the better and more beautiful the architectural structures we will see within twenty years'. So why are the sales figures so disappointing? Perhaps the lifestyle stores that are interested in PlanToys products expected more fashionable colours; they are under consideration in a newer version. But the chief reason: 'The *Creative Play House* is too difficult: You can build it in a hundred different ways'. And that richness is precisely the problem: 'You have to explain more. Simple toys sell more easily.'³⁰

However, De Rauw doesn't throw in the towel that quickly, fortunately, as demonstrated by the *Victorian Dollhouse* (2003) →21: a striking three-storey house, much bigger than all others (over 70 cm tall and 60 cm wide), with windows and doors that open and close. It's also more expensive: about 350 euros (compared to 150–250 for all others), but that does not explain why it has sold so poorly for so long. So poorly in fact that in 2016 De Rauw reluctantly decided, with pain in his heart, to drop it from the collection. Yet a month later he changed his mind at the very last minute. Two female bloggers from Denmark had discovered the house and, from one day to the next, it went viral. Annual sales in Belgium rose from 1 to 76; in Germany they went from 3 to over 500. And the success continues. 'The style and quality are excellent; the *play value* is fantastic.' People turn it into something very personal: they paint it, spend a lot of time on additional illumination, wallpaper, furnishings... 'It's a must-have for all bloggers, vloggers, everybody with style. The impact of social media is gigantic.'³¹ The biggest hits on Instagram are perhaps the twenty-first-century equivalents of the showpiece doll's houses: For this is where people display abundance, taste and originality in an attempt to become part of the elite.

28 PlanToys was set up in 1981 by Vitool Viraponsavan, architect and co-founder of PlanArchitect, one of Thailand's most successful design offices. The 'child product company' distinguishes itself by a deeply rooted sense of ecological and social sustainability. The assortment consists of hundreds of wooden toys, including six doll's houses, for babies and especially young children.

29 Interview with Alain De Rauw on 30 October 2020.

30 That is also confirmed by the makers of the *Modular House*: not everybody embraces an open concept. According to designer Laurent Maes, adults in particular experience a sort of writer's block when faced with virginal white or natural wooden units. Hence the idea of holding workshops. Players receive supervision while furnishing one of the rooms, selecting (and depicting) a setting for the house, and even devising a new module. Responses are invariably enthusiastic (but sales remain sluggish).

31 It is even better if you can secure a celebrity for your product. The *Victorian Dollhouse* entered the limelight without such backing, but Tim Boyle knows what a difference it can make. His *Emerson House* enjoyed huge popularity among celebrated New York actors and editors in chief of fashion magazines, reaching more than four million readers within the first year. It was lauded by film star Julianne Moore on social media, appeared in rapper Nelly's video clip *Just a Dream* (2010) and won numerous prizes.