

PLAYGROUND ‘ROCKETS’ REFLECT THE SPACE RACE ERA

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Abstract

The Space Race was a product of the Cold War, both of which were transformative on how the world viewed technology. These geo-political events extended into raising education standards and caused international ramifications in the arts and popular culture, including playground climbing frames. The most famous was shaped as a ‘rocket’. In NSW most disappeared in the late 1990s but a few survive including three of the 32 ‘rockets’ fabricated by Dick West of Blackheath. This paper summarises a history of play, the international socio-political influences of the 1960s, followed by a heritage assessment of ‘rockets’ made by Dick West. The Moree community seeks to ensure that its original West fabricated rocket is conserved for future generations.

Key Words: playground equipment, rocket climbing frame, Dick West, Blackheath, Blue Mountains, Moree, Chatswood, Broken Hill

Introduction

The Cold War and the Space Race were epoch-changing events. Many repercussions beyond science and technology saw social tenets of this era reflected in seemingly inconsequent places. Not only did these events transform education curricula, this occurred at the same time as the philosophy of how children play was evolving. Playgrounds and public park installations encapsulated not just what was occurring in a society but how and why; views and assumptions were manifested in a physical form. An international tangible outcome of these events was imaginary play in the form of the rocket climbing frames.

One seemingly frivolous connection was marked by the death of David Bowie in 2016 and memorialised by his iconic song “Space Oddity” (Bowie 1969) and its opening lyrics.

“... Ground Control to Major Tom

Take your protein pills and put your helmet on
Ground Control to Major Tom (ten, nine, eight,
seven, six)

Commencing countdown, engines on (five, four,
three)

Check ignition and may God's love be with you
(two, one, lift-off) ..”

Reputedly the lyrics refer to the ‘Golden Dawn’ order of magicians, a lifelong mystical philosophy held by Bowie and demonstrated repeatedly throughout his songs (Anonymous 2003). Bowie wrote it after seeing the 1968 Stanley Kubrick science fiction film *2001 A Space Odyssey*, and it was released five days before the Apollo 11 launch on 11 July 1969. Bowie’s timing was no coincidence as it marked a high point of the Space Race and the Cold War power struggle between ideologies of the then two super-powers. With Bowie’s consent, the song was sung in space by Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield in 2013 (Debnath 2013).

The Education Race

The Space Race sought to show the world which country had the best science, technology, and economic supremacy. In the 1930s and 1940s Germany lead research into rocket propulsion but at the end of World War Two this research was divided between the USA and the Soviet Union, as both realised how rocket research had a military application. The Soviet launch of Sputnik I shook the Americans and the 1962 speech by President Kennedy mobilised scientists and became a catalyst for many innovations and changes to bridge the technological gap. And so the Space Race also became an education race. About this time the NSW secondary education curriculum was revamped as the Wyndham Scheme

which sought to raise education standards, especially in the sciences and mathematics. A leading exponent was Professor Harry Messel, a physicist, who campaigned for an integrated science syllabus that was introduced in 1963, along with his iconic blue science books (Green 2015).

Wider Cultural references

The Space Race triggered

“profound reflections on humanity's relationship with the cosmos” (V&A 2008)

and growing preoccupation with, and dependence on, technology. Some cultural manifestations of technology influences were less obvious. American cars displayed rocket motifs along their sides. Architects designed ‘houses of the future’ with interiors and furniture using moulded plastics. New materials changed fashions from the ‘haute couture’ of Pierre Cardin’s ‘Space Age Collection’ in 1964 to mass market ‘ready to go’ by Mary Quant to the home sewing patterns, all of which featured one piece suits, sleek moulding, hat as helmet in white and metal segments as if protective armour.

The scholar Dave Hickey wrote that the ice-white cube that

“... became the standard ascetic interior in museums and galleries by the '60s, had its roots with NASA: ‘I remember thinking at the time that, all of a sudden, we were looking at art in clean rooms like those where the astronauts suit up’ ”. (Kennedy 2007).

His article details further popular culture links with NASA.

“... At Bell Laboratories, which was tied up with NASA in its earliest years, Billy Klüver, an engineer, organised collaborations with artists, including Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, to inject space-age technology into artworks ...”. (Kennedy 2007).

According to David Schwartz, the chief curator of the Museum of the Moving Image in New York,

“The space race that began with Sputnik not only influenced education but American pop culture as

a whole. ... the phenomenon was pushed by an unlikely person - Walt Disney”.

“What Disney did that was really important was he teamed up with the [Nazi German rocket] scientist Wernher von Braun, who was [then] the most prominent scientist of the United States and was trying to promote the idea of space travel. Disney had something to promote himself, he was trying to build Disneyland theme park in California. And so in 1955, they teamed up and created a TV show called "Man in Space”.

“[Another] TV show named "Lost in Space", actually preceded "Star Trek" by a few years.”

“Stanley Kubrick took it somewhere interesting with "2001: A Space Odyssey" (1968) which was really the most ambitious space travel movie to come out of the 1960s. And Kubrick himself was really in a space race with NASA. He worked on this film for years. And it was very important to him to get his movie into the theaters before we actually landed on the moon [in 1969]” (Schwartz 2007)

In 1962 Hanna-Barbera produced the iconic *The Jetsons*, an American sitcom cartoon that had

“a profound impact on the way that Americans [thought] and talk[ed] about the future” (Novak 2012).

Space related toys became must-have presents in both Western and Soviet countries and shopping malls introduced space-related children rides.

“Building on the opportunity, before long Woolworth replaced traditional horseback and motorbike kiddy ride machines with space rockets. For sixpence (2½p) little boys and girls could be transported to another universe.” (Woolworths Museum)

When marketing children's toys, commercials on TV too were quick to sell the space and rocket dream.

Playground philosophy

The evolution of playgrounds and play equipment is connected to the nineteenth century embryonic attitudes as to what constituted ‘childhood’, and to social reforms to lift the ‘moral tone’ of the working classes, the majority of whom lived in inner city

tenements. In parallel, also evolving were various sciences, including psychology, and social movements advocating promotion of nature, fresh air and even gardening, as an escape from the ills of the industrial revolution cities.

How children were regarded changed drastically with the rise of the industrial age. Prior to that time, children in Europe were often simply considered to be small adults owned by their guardians. British industrialists sought to retain world trade dominance while the government viewed the more highly educated Prussian military as a potential threat. This triggered the introduction of the British Elementary Education Act in 1870 that established basic schooling for children between 5 and 12. Even so, many children continued to work in factories, down mines or on farms. Social reformers sought to alleviate appalling city living conditions and socio-economic disadvantage via regulation of unsanitary and overcrowded housing, coupled with demands for access to clean water, fresh air and natural light. Physical deformities, such as rickets, and infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, not only affected Victorian era productivity but were considered to have threatened national military defence.

Former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt stated in 1907:

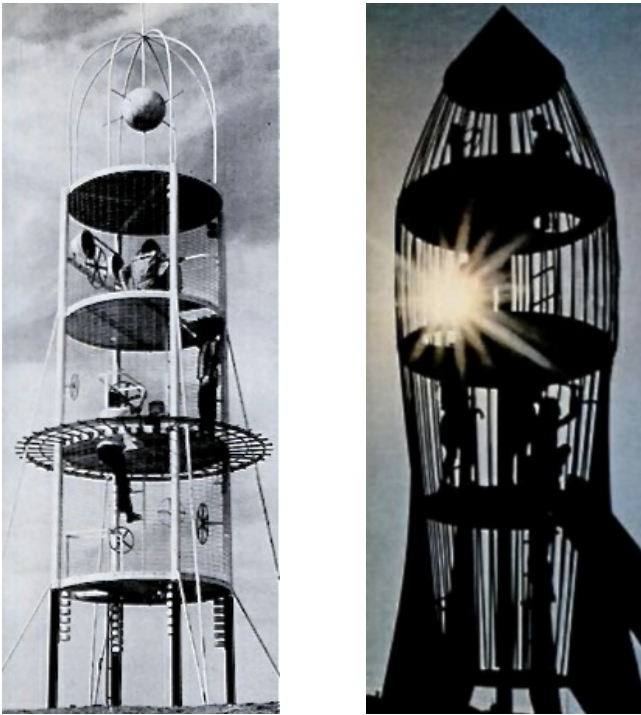
“City streets are unsatisfactory playgrounds for children because of the danger, because most good games are against the law, because they are too hot in summer, and because in crowded sections of the city they are apt to be schools of crime. Neither do small back yards nor ornamental grass plots meet the needs of any but the very small children. Older children who would play vigorous games must have places especially set aside for them; and, since play is a fundamental need, playgrounds should be provided for every child as much as schools. This means that they must be distributed over the cities in such a way as to be within walking distance of every boy and girl, as most children can not afford to pay car fare” (Wikipedia 2015b).

Within the then evolving sciences was the emergence of a specific discipline of psychology based around human thought and behaviour. In the 1870-1880s theorists arose, such as Piaget, who postulated children as progressing through various stages of mental, emotional and social phases. Swedish writer Ellen Key (1849-1926) was a highly influential early proponent of a child-centred approach to education and parenting.

According to Joseph H. Maiden, Director of the Sydney Botanical Gardens, in his 1902 *Parks of Sydney* paper (p.39), colonial attitudes echoed those from overseas and sought to erect gymnasia with an emphasis on acquisition of physical skills. Maiden recorded the first installation of equipment in public parks specifically for child play; it was the ‘juvenile gymnasia’ in the Sydney Domain and Centennial Park in 1902 (Van den Broek and Morris 1997, Chapter 2). Following the implementation of ‘zones’ under the NSW Local Government Act 1919, the number of playgrounds increased when they became a town planning and land use issue.

The Playground and Recreation Association was formed in 1913 to promote the value of play and to increase play developmental opportunities for children. This became the Playgrounds Association and its Secretary in the 1920s was the social and education reformer Maybanke Anderson (née Selfe) (1845-1927). Anderson had previously founded the Kindergarten Union of NSW in 1895 which first set up premises in the then poverty ridden Woolloomooloo, followed by another in the equally disadvantaged Sydney Rocks. Such movements sought to improve the health of working class children via physical exercise. Middle class reformers saw playgrounds as a vehicle for helping the poor and to ‘lift the tone of the community’.

The Parks and Play Grounds Movement was formed during the 1930s Depression out of a number of small bodies. Its values merged a form of nationalism and a belief that the right environment had a great effect on a person’s character. As a legacy of the First World War, together with gathering political unease at that



A ex Anonymous (1959) ex Anonymous (1963) B
Figure 1. Early playground rockets in the USA.

time, such nationalistic tendencies paralleled overseas movements where the general fitness of the community reflected the ability of a country to defend itself in the event of war.

Between the World Wars to circa 1960s, children's playground equipment changed little, with an emphasis remaining on physical skills, usually via some sort of climbing apparatus. But from the 1960s onwards equipment began to evolve with the introduction of generic commercial products that had limited appeal to older children. Occurring about this time too was the next stage in the evolution of insights into childhood concurrent with a liberalisation of the NSW education system. As educators sought to foster children's curiosity, playground equipment was introduced to cause creative play, the theory being that "physical active play allows children to test and develop all types of motor skills. It promotes significant health and wellbeing benefits" (Barblett 2010).

The Cold War 'Space Race' leading to rocket shaped equipment

The revolution in playground equipment, education and child psychology functioned within the wider

milieu of the Cold War. This was a state of geopolitical tension between the superpowers of the Eastern Block, being the Soviet Union and countries under its control, and Western Block of USA and NATO allies. To prove superiority of technology, military power and, by extension, political economic ideological ascendancy, was to be the first to launch a man into space.

The Soviet Union launched the first artificial satellite, Sputnik 1, in 1957 and followed this with a dog, named Laika, that was put into orbit. The first human into space was Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin in 1961 and three weeks later astronaut Alan Shepherd became the first American to go into space. The technological expertise needed to get Shepherd into, and down from, space was a theme of the 2017 movie *Hidden Figures*. The Space Race peaked in July 1969 when the USA landed the first human on the Moon with the Apollo 11 mission.

The Rocket climbing frame was thus a symbol of active Cold War propaganda and societal fascination with the Space Race. In 1959 *Popular Mechanics* magazine published a photograph of a 40 feet (12.2 m) high, three level, play rocket ship that had been erected in California (Figure 1a; Anonymous 1959) with a caption that included the claim of being "in tune with the times". Another was erected in Philadelphia in 1963 (Figure 1b) and the magazine *Life* featured an article on space-related play equipment (Anonymous



ex Richter 2013

Figure 2. A Soviet era playground rocket.

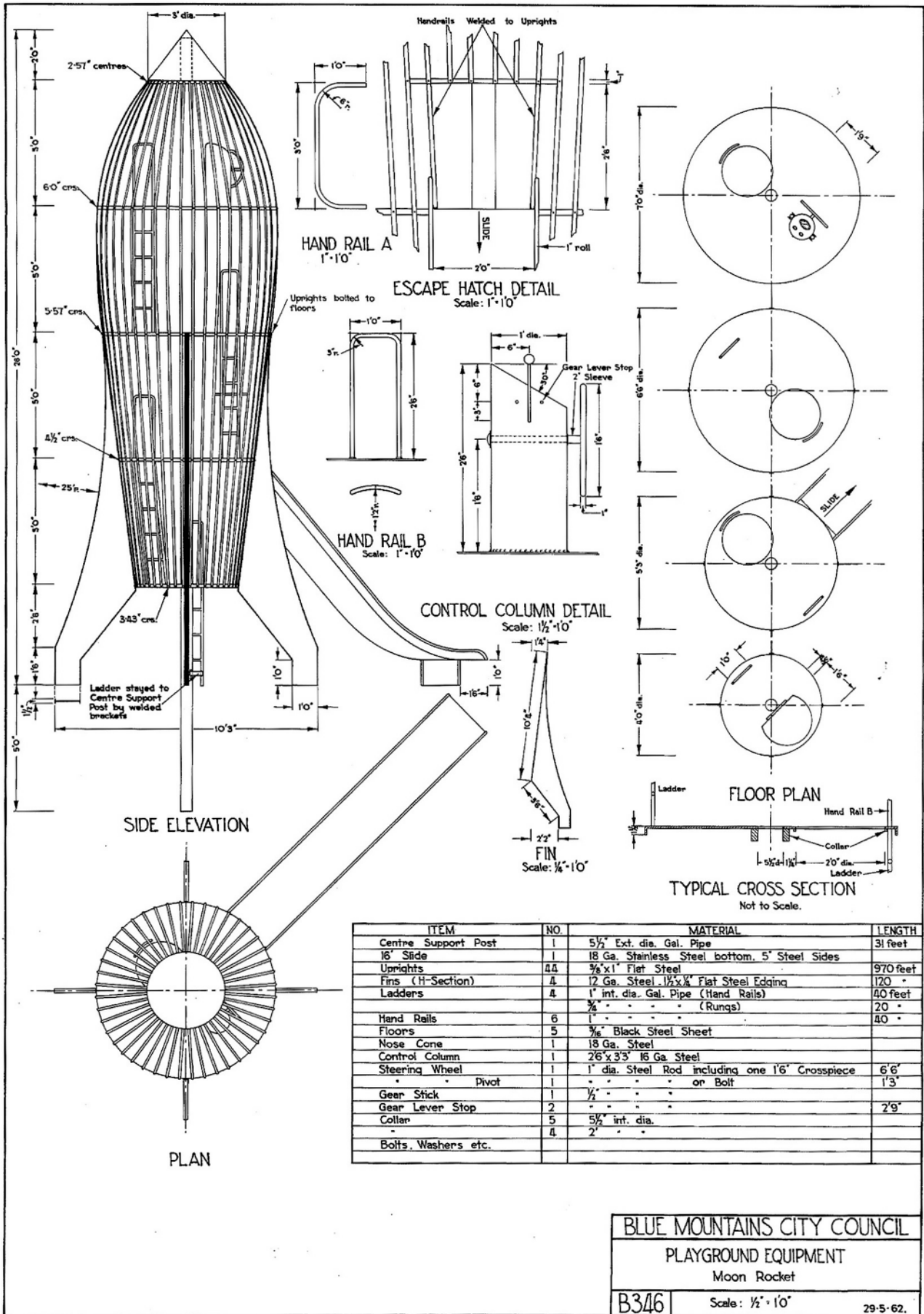


Figure 3. The Yeaman-built 'rocket' plans for the Blue Mountains City Council Engineering Dept, dated 1962.

1963); the close link with the Cuba Missile Crisis is conveyed in the magazine cover, while the story by-line is “playgrounds take a space-race spin”.

In October 1962 the USA mounted a naval blockade of Cuba which had agreed to host Soviet nuclear missiles pointed towards the USA.

“What followed was probably the most tense 13 days in world history” (Meacham 2017, p.28).

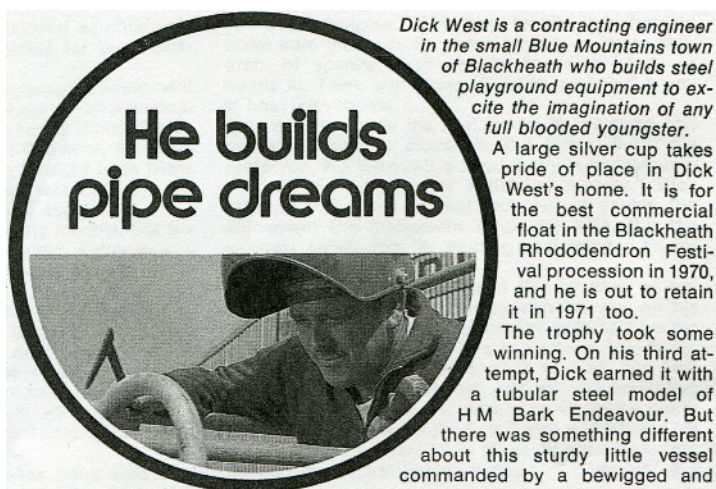
Author Fraser MacDonald wrote:

"nuclear weapons were made intelligible, and transposable, to a domestic context through children's toys and playground equipment featuring Cold War symbols" (Wikipedia 2015a).

To climb was to be an aspiring astronaut or cosmonaut: in the USA an astronaut was to be a ‘star sailor’ while the Soviet cosmonauts were referred to as ‘sailors of the universe’. Playgrounds in the Soviet Union (Figure 2) also sought to stimulate children's excitement about space following the successful space orbit by Yuri Gagarin. However, as with most Soviet-era play equipment, its play rockets were mass produced resulting in identical equipment being installed throughout the Eastern Block (Richter 2013; Wikipedia 2015a).

The Rocket launch in the Blue Mountains

Australian children too were caught by the ramifications of the Cold War and the Space Race. The Chief Engineer of Sydney City Council visited



ex Anonymous {1971}

Figure 4. Dick West welding a play climbing frame.

the USA and Europe in the late 1950s, and returned with plans for a playground rocket. Subsequently a plan was prepared in 1965 for the Knight Street/Flora Street Park in Erskineville; it shows two new structures to be built of pipe and intended to stimulate imaginative play – a jet plane and a rocket (Van den Broek and Morris, 1997, Fig.13).

In 1961 the then Blue Mountains City Council Engineer, Mr. John Yeaman, flew to the USA on a Super Constellation jet plane, then a very expensive flight (West 2016), and he returned with plans (Figure 3) for a play rocket (Anonymous 1997b; Anonymous 2001a, West 2016). The first rocket (20 feet (6.1 m) high) was fabricated under Yeaman’s supervision in the Council’s Albion Street blacksmith works and was welded by Ray McLaughlin (Anonymous 1971), subsequently being installed in Blackheath Soldiers’ Memorial Park (photos: Blue Mountains Historical Society Inc. nos. P7160 & P7161; Yeaman 1976, p.271; Archaeological & Heritage Management Solutions Pty Ltd. 2007).

Over subsequent years, the Yeaman rocket was supplemented by other fantasy pieces designed and fabricated by Dick West (Figure 4). These included a Gemini Space Capsule, a Tiger Moth Plane, an Old Woman’s Shoe, a Stage Coach (reinstalled in 2002), an Elephant Slide, a Vintage Car, an Endeavour Boat, a Submarine, a 15 foot (4.6 m) high Dinosaur (Figure 5) and a 12 foot (3.6 m) high Gulliver Clown. In 2017 all that remains are the low level pieces – the Tiger Moth Plane, the Old Woman’s Shoe, the Stage Coach and the Vintage Car (Figure 6).

Richard (Dick) West (b.1932 Carlingford; d. 2017 Lithgow)

Dick West was a blacksmith, welder, and fabricator who, according to his son Ross, had no formal training in metal fabrication nor undertook any apprenticeship.

“He just went and learnt that skill. He made timber wheels and put a steel band around them in a similar way as making barrels, he learnt to weave for chair seats. A fabricators skill is to work out how to build things themselves.” (West 2016).



photo: Ron Morrison (1973)

Figure 5. Dick West’s ‘brontosaurus / dinosaur’ in Blackheath Memorial Park.

In 1950 Dick started as a fettler when the British firm BRCC won the contract to electrify the Blue Mountains railway line to Lithgow. Dick and Betty (née Blome) went to live in Blackheath in 1956 (Anonymous 2001a) and he started his own business in 1959 trading as R.J. West Engineering in a building on the corner of Railway and Station Streets, Blackheath, initially making boat and car trailers, and decorative welding. Ross West said there are still many wrought iron gates and scroll works around Blackheath and throughout the Blue Mountains made by his father. Dick was friends with Frank Lindstrom (1890-1982), who founded the Franklins’ Supermarket chain, and Dick fabricated several pieces on the Lindstrom property (7-13 Belvidere Avenue, Blackheath).

John Yeaman was great friends with Dick West and gave him the USA rocket plans so Dick commenced making ‘moon rockets’ in 1963. By 1971 he had made 20 rockets, and went on to build about 32 rockets according to his son, Ross (Anonymous 1997a, p.1, col.2; 2001a, p.17, col.2; West 2016), although another oral history claimed 38 moon rockets (Daley 2009). West rockets were installed all over Australia, but mostly in NSW, often financially supported by community and service clubs, such as the Rotary and Lions clubs.



photo: S. Jackson-Stepowski (2016).

Figure 7. The original Blackheath ‘H.M. Endeavour’ at the West family property

In 1970 Dick built the *H.M. Endeavour* ship climbing frame (Figure 7) for the annual Blackheath Rhododendron Festival parade (Anonymous 1970) and mounted it onto a spring loaded Ford Prefect car chassis so it looked as if it was ‘rocking on the waves’.

This won the trophy for the Best Commercial Float and its procession along the streets is recorded in a family video (West 2016). West is reported as saying “It is a tremendously satisfying activity. You get a great kick out of seeing the enjoyment the equipment gives the kids. The greatest satisfaction is creating something – something different” (Anonymous 1971, p.25, col.2).



photo: Peter Rickwood (July 2017)

Figure 6. Dick West’s climbing frames in Blackheath Memorial Park in mid 2017.

year	specific name	location / park name	current LGA	extant	proof by Dick West	LEP item	use	CMP/ PoM	LG Act class	
1..	1961	Moon Rocket	Blackheath Soldiers' Memorial Park built by Blue Mts City Council under supervision of Chief Engineer, John Yeaman. 1997 move to Bates Lakeside Holiday Park into back block but rusted out and was crushed. see also Woodford & Muston Park Chatswood	Blue Mts	no	no built by Blue Mts Council	n/a	n/a	Crown Land	
3	1972	The Rocket	Kirby Park West video of its installation	Moree Plains	yes	yes	SHR nom	as a park sculpture	in DCP park yes + in MPSC Parks Plan	CL
4a	?	rocket	Woodford Children Home bought by G. Bates in c1997, sold to Willoughby Cncl in 2014 restored into Muston Park East Chatswood still with West plaque	Blue Mts	yes as relocated to Muston Park Chatswood	Yes + via oral recall	no	no	park yes but not in PoM pending update	n/a
4b		rocket	Muston Park East Chatswood	Willoughby	yes but relocated	yes original - see above	no	in use modified	pending	?
2		Deni rocket	Scott's Park	Deniliquin	no	no	no	in use modified ?	no	?
5		rocket	Space Arcade, John St Salisbury	Salisbury SA	no	yes	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
6		rocket	Duke of Cornwall Park (reputedly returned to Blue Mts Cncl depot)	Broken Hill	relocated unknown?	no	n/a	n/a	n/a	?
7		rocket	formerly in AJ Keast Park at Clarendon West family	Broken Hill	yes relocated	no	n/a	n/a	n/a	private
8		rocket	Enmore Park	Marrickville	yes	no	no	Yes sculpt	?	?
9		rocket	Johnston Park	Marrickville	yes	no	no	No	?	?
10		rocket	Waverley Park	Waverley	yes	yes	no	Yes sculpt	?	?

Table 1. A sample of the data from the 2015 e-survey.

The rockets and other fantasy climbing frames fabricated by West demonstrated a creative imagination combined with an exceptional technical skill, more so for the time when they were built without the aid of today's machinery. Metal was sourced from the BPH Steelworks Group in Wollongong: Stewarts & Lloyds manufactured the steel tubing and Commonwealth Steel Co., Ltd produce the stainless steel sheeting (Anonymous 1971).

Dick designed and welded items for his own children, such as a metal framed rocking horse, chairs and go-carts, and family furniture. All his family worked with horses and hence Dick learnt blacksmith and wheelwright skills and he retained a love of Clydesdale horses into his retirement on a property in the Megalong Valley (Daley 2009).

Dick West rockets that have survived

A survey in 1997 of 240 playgrounds, in 26 Sydney council areas, located 862 pieces of playground equipment, of which only two were 'rockets', both having been modified and closed to use (Van den Broek and Morris 1997, Table 4). The author of a later article inferred:

“Some [rockets] still survive in rural areas untouched by urban angst” (Guilliatt 2000, p.27, col.3).

An e-based survey in 2015 (Table 1) located 33 'rockets' that had been installed - 29 in NSW, two in Victoria and one in each of South Australia and Queensland (Jackson-Stepowski 2015). Of these, 14 appear to be extant and all bar one reside in public open spaces, but none are recorded on a heritage list. One is located in a heritage scheduled park yet is not identified specifically as a contributory element of that park. Three parks possessing playground rockets have



photo: S. Jackson-Stepowski (2016).

Figure 8. The former Broken Hill Rocket at the West family property at Clarence where there are also the original ‘Elephant’ and ‘The Endeavour’ (Figure 7).

a Plan of Management, and one is managed under a Development Control Plan, thereby possibly affording some heritage conservation measures. Of those 14 extant rockets with proven provenance of being fabricated by Dick West, two have been relocated - the former Broken Hill (Figure 8) and the former Woodford Children’s Home (Figure 9) rockets. *In situ* is one at Kirkby Park, Moree, (Figure 10) that was definitely made by Dick West and reputedly another in Waverley Park (Figure 11) was made by him (pers. comm. Ross West) but this lacks a manufacturer’s plaque to give certainty.



A

photos: Jason Baker (2016)

B

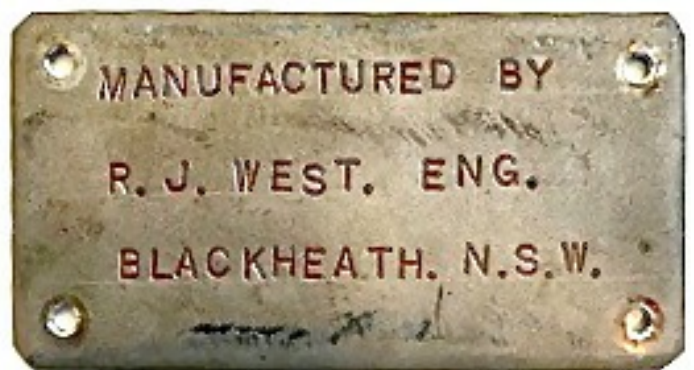
Figure 9. A The former reconditioned Woodford Children’s Home rocket and B the West plaque removed prior to its installation in Muston Park, East Chatswood (Glooloo 2015).

Ross West recalled

“When the rocket was being installed at the Woodford Children’s Home, they had hired a crane 3 times the size needed, so Dick lifted the rocket as high as possible up into the air as if his rocket was off to the moon” (West 2016).

Dick West “had a great sense of sadness” (Anonymous 1997a) when his structures in Blackheath Memorial Park were removed on 1 May 1997, because they did not conform to revised Australian Safety Standards. While four fantasy pieces were eventually re-installed back there in May 2001, the iconic Yeaman built Blackheath rocket remained nearby in the ‘bottom block’ of the Lakeview Holiday Park and Cabins at 63 Prince Edwards Street, Blackheath, operated by Geoff Bates (Anonymous 1999, Bates 2015). It was Geoff Bates who lead the ‘Rescue our Rocket’ campaign, with the Blackheath Chamber of Commerce, later in 1997 (see also the West family video of this rocket and campaign in the annual Blackheath Rhododendron Festival parade).

When the Yeaman rocket “rusted out it was crushed” (Bates 2015), and Geoff Bates obtained another rocket for his caravan park from the Woodford Children’s Homes (Anonymous 1999), this one had been built by Dick West, but installed as a static sculpture. When insurance premiums rose, Bates on-sold that Woodford rocket in 2012 to Willoughby Council which sought a rocket to comply with a park masterplan wherein the local community had indicated



that it “wanted their rocket back” (pers. comm. Willoughby Parks Officer), the previous one having been removed in 1994. The Woodford Children’s Home Rocket (Figure 9), via a caravan park, was reconditioned, and re-configured to 2016 standards at a cost of \$90,000, then re-installed in Muston Park, East Chatswood (Gladstone 2015; Glooploop 2015).

Dick West made two rockets for Broken Hill but in the late 1990s, when the safety of playground climbing frames was questioned, Broken Hill Council contacted Blue Mountains Council to ask if it wanted them back. Blue Mountains Council then asked Dick to help with their relocation, which he said he would do provided he could keep one of the rockets. He retained the Broken Hill Main Street / Duke of Cornwall Park rocket which now lies on its side in the front yard of his older son’s house at Clarence (Figure 8). Conflicting accounts infer that the other rocket was taken to the Blue Mountains Council depot while Broken Hill records indicate that the rocket from A.J. Keats Park was moved to Mr. Hennessy’s back yard, near Rocky Point, Broken Hill (pers. comm. Broken Hill Librarian 2015).



photo: Waverley Council (2017)

Figure 11. The playground rocket in Waverley Park, Spring St, Bondi Junction, Waverley.



A *photo: S. Jackson-Stepowski (2015)*



photo: S. Jackson-Stepowski (2017) **B**

Figure 10. A. The West-made Rocket in Kirkby Park, Moree and behind it is the 2009 Big Rocket

B. The plaque ‘MANUFACTURED BY R.J. WEST ENGNRG BLACKHEATH N.S.W.’ on the central column of the Moree Rocket.



A photo: S. Jackson-Stepowski



photo: S. Jackson-Stepowski (2017) B

Figure 12. The Marrickville Council rockets made by ‘Cyclone’.

A. In Enmore Park, Enmore Road, Marrickville.

B. In Johnson Park, Constitution Road, Dulwich Hill.

The Moree Rocket in Kirby Park (Figure 10) was purchased in 1972 to commemorate the Centenary of Education in NSW and was specifically “for the children of Moree to play on” (Anonymous 2017a). The project was instigated by local resident June McKinnon and most funds were generated from a community ‘Centenary of Education’ Ball. Ross West has a video of the Moree rocket installation, being rare evidence that validates its relationship to Dick West, as well as the brass West Engineering plaque on its central pipe. The 1990s safety concerns forced cessation of active use, but the Moree rocket remains as an imaginary installation in its original park setting.

The Kirby Park link with aspiring technology needed for space research persisted when, alongside the West original, a 15 metre high ‘Big Rocket’ (Figure 10a) was installed in 2009 to coincide with the International Year of Astronomy and the 40th Anniversary of the

Moon Landing; it was ‘launched’ on 1 July 2009 by Astronomer-in-Charge, Dr Fred Watson.

The Moree rocket is a rare surviving example of the work of its fabricator Dick West, and it has an added layer of space-related association with the The Australian Overseas Telecommunications Commission (OTC) Moree Earth Tracking Station which opened in 1968. That Station played a vital role in the development of the telecommunications industry in Australia, and relayed signals for the first Moon landing. Hence with the building of the OTC Moree Station, it was unsurprising that the Moree community was thoroughly aware of the technological implications and the role of rockets in the race to take command of space, and sought a ‘rocket’ of its own.

The playground rockets that are in Enmore Park and Johnson Park (Dulwich Hill) were made by Cyclone

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(confirmed by a plaque on a fin) for Marrickville Council and the key aesthetic and fabrication difference to the Dick West products is their more chunky shape due to the use of square section metal (e.g. on the edge of the fins) and the welding joints are more obvious. The Enmore rocket (Figure 12a) has been modified such that only the lowest level is accessible for small children so it has small plastic slides; the Johnson Park rocket (Figure 12b) is now closed off making it a static aesthetic feature.

The Demise of the Playground Rockets

The Blue Mountains Council dismantling of the Blackheath metal play equipment in April 1997 caused community uproar that lasted many months and was featured in local and Sydney media and press articles (e.g. Anonymous 1997a,b,d,e; Borschmann 1997).

What prompted such risk adverse local government reactions was a Supreme Court (Guilliatt 2000, pp.26-27) ruling about a child's fall in an adventure playground in the Victorian seaside town of Warrnambool and subsequently Standards Australia changed its guidelines that triggered reviews of tubular steel play equipment. That led to the demise of most iconic play devices, including climbing frames, swings, see-saws, and elevated structures. Despite the rise of 'adventure playgrounds' made popular in the USA and Europe, the play experience dramatically changed when 'offending' playground equipment was replaced by homogeneous, uniform, height restricted and catalogue plastic constructions. A further standardisation came with commissioning of specialist designers and landscape architects (Van Den Broek 2000, p.21).

"The purge has been nowhere near as zealous in Melbourne, largely because the State government-funded Playgrounds and Recreation Association acted as an intermediary between councils and communities [in that state]. 'I suspect we've had greater community [anti risk] involvement' says Barbara Champion, executive officer of the association ..." and "a lot of antique playground rides might have been saved had council engineers considered a few modifications" (Guilliatt 2000, p.27, col.3 and p.28, col.1).

Ironically the demise of playground rockets occurred as the United National General Assembly declared an annual Space Week in 1999. The week chosen marked the launch of the first human made satellite, Sputnik 1 on 4 October 1957, and the signing of the Outer Space Treaty on 10 October 1967.

Social significance

A rocket installation often caused popular (and often unofficial) renaming of a local open space as 'the rocket park'. Indeed, many residents referred to 'the rocket park' (e.g. Anonymous 2001b) rather than the official place name, whilst some were actually formally renamed as such, e.g. Apollo Park in Grafton.

The Sydney Morning Herald headline "Rocket rescue mission blasts off" (Borschmann 1997; also see Skelsey 2000) records community protest at the removal of rockets, such as from Willoughby and Blackheath parks. Broadcaster, Richard Glover on morning ABC 2BL radio was quoted as saying he had "... received calls from people in Sydney and as far as Central Coast (with) ... stories about the Rockets in their local parks"; (Anonymous 1997e, p.24, col.1).

The Blackheath Memorial Park and Pool Committee, Chamber of Commerce and others campaigned under the banner "RoR" (Anonymous 1998) – Rescue our Rocket – to unite the community and interested parties to reinstate the playground frames resulting in the Blue Mountains Council reversing its decision on some structures in 1996. Five Dick West original frames were modified by him in 1999-2001 under Federation Funding of \$20,000 (Anonymous 1999).

"However the icon of the collection, the rocket, is beyond repair. Fortunately Broken Hill Council has generously donated two similar rockets to us ... A specially commissioned Federation piece, to be made by Dick West, will later join the collection" (Hamilton 2001; also see Anonymous 2001a).

The fate of the Yeaman Rocket was for it to remain on private land in a caravan park until it was crushed, while Gulliver's Head only survived by being taken to Ross West's workshop ! But the dilapidated Rocket

was put on a lorry and participated in the 1997 Rhododendron Festival parade (Anonymous 1997c).

The pull of the rocket imagery remains. In 1994 the residents of Willoughby were outraged at the removal of the rocket which had been a popular attraction in the park for over 25 years. This was the sentiment echoed multiple times by many communities that had lost their rockets and in 2009 the Blue Mountains City Council flagged “re-introduction of rocket to Park” as an aim for Blackheath (Blue Mountains City Council 2009, 5.6B, p.55). The reconditioning and re-installation of the ‘Woodford Children’s Home Rocket’ in Muston Park, Chatswood, (Figure 9) was to accompany the still *in situ* original West made ‘plane’.

A more recent example of community sentiment was the campaign in Blackheath to have constructed a new rocket (Curtin 2016; 2017) based on rockets previously made by Dick West but modified to comply with modern safety requirements. Raising the money to enable that was the 2016-2017 project of Rotary Club of Blackheath and appropriately it was lead by Andrew Hancock - a grandson of the late John Yeaman who initiated the construction of rockets in Australia. The new rocket was duly constructed and loaded on a lorry in November 2017 for display in the Blackheath Rhododendron Festival parade (Figure 13) and it was intended to have it installed in Blackheath Soldiers Memorial Park (Anonymous 2017b) in time



ex Anonymous (2017b)

Figure 13. The new rocket that was to be installed in Blackheath Memorial Park in December 2017.



photo: Merinda Campbell, August 1973

Figure 14. The former Earlwood Park rocket on a 1973 35mm slide in the Hallam collection held by the Mitchell Library of NSW. It was back-lit for display in the Richard Aitken exhibition ‘Planting Dreams’ in 2016 (Aitken 2016).

for Christmas 2017 but geotechnical problems caused that to be delayed until 2018.

Playground rockets were a popular attraction from the 1960s until their demise in the late 1990s. But they have persisted to be of interest to people other than those of the local communities for which they were provided. These sentiments were demonstrated by the Earlwood Park rocket being the lead feature for a Mitchell Library exhibition in 2016 entitled “Planting Dreams” (Figure 14) and by a photograph of the Johnson Park Rocket that was The Marrickville Urban Photography Competition winner in 2015 (Maharaj 2015).

Conclusion

Playground rockets are a tangible product of the Cold War and its ‘race’ to launch man into space and land man on the moon. Climbing frames were considered an ideal device to build physical fitness, a necessity in case of military conflict. The societal pre-occupation with ‘moon rockets’ occurred at a time

when educators sought to encourage more imaginative play, and when governments devised specific programmes both to encourage the study of the sciences and to raise secondary achievement standards for economic as well as military reasons. The Rocket Climbing Frame thus not only demonstrates the changing educational philosophy about childhood and the importance of child-centred and imaginary play, it also encapsulates what was occurring in the developed world in the post World War Two era. The Rocket is a physical consequence of, and a reflection of, socio-political views and values of this era. The Rocket frames had, and for the few that survive continue to have, considerable visual aesthetics due to their iconic shape and height. A rocket remains a popular tourist attraction and continues to evoke an emotional response and memories for multiple generations, and to inspire the young and old. Their social significance also caused many public parks to be informally renamed and continue to be known as a 'rocket park'.

Postscript

This paper came about because a regional town community sought to ensure that the heritage significance of their 'rocket' was recognised and that its legacy continues on for future generations. As part of a comparative analysis, an e-survey was undertaken to ascertain what 'rockets' remained in NSW

(Jackson-Stepowski 2015). Heritage assessments also require a thematic history and biographical information about persons associated with a 'place'. Hence the reason for the research into what was occurring around the time that the 'rockets' were fabricated, and about the leading NSW fabricator, Dick West.

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