

Born Brooklyn, New York, 1943
Resident Solana Beach, California

Jeff Raskin is an artist and Assistant Professor of Art at UCSD where he also heads a new computer center for the Visual Arts Department. He was recommended to us by his teaching colleagues, David Antin and Harold Cohen, because of a concept for a building module he wanted to design and fabricate. We gave him literature on Container Corporation and Eldon Industries, a Los Angeles toy manufacturing company. On March 12 Raskin and Hal Glicksman toured the two companies, after which the artist wrote a formal proposal:

The basic output is to be a construction module, or at *most* two modules whose dimensions are larger than 4 inches and less than 20 inches in all directions. The module will fold flat for storage and transportation, and will be easily set up, and taken down. Each unit, of cardboard or clear plastic, will interlock with adjacent units in a large variety of ways.

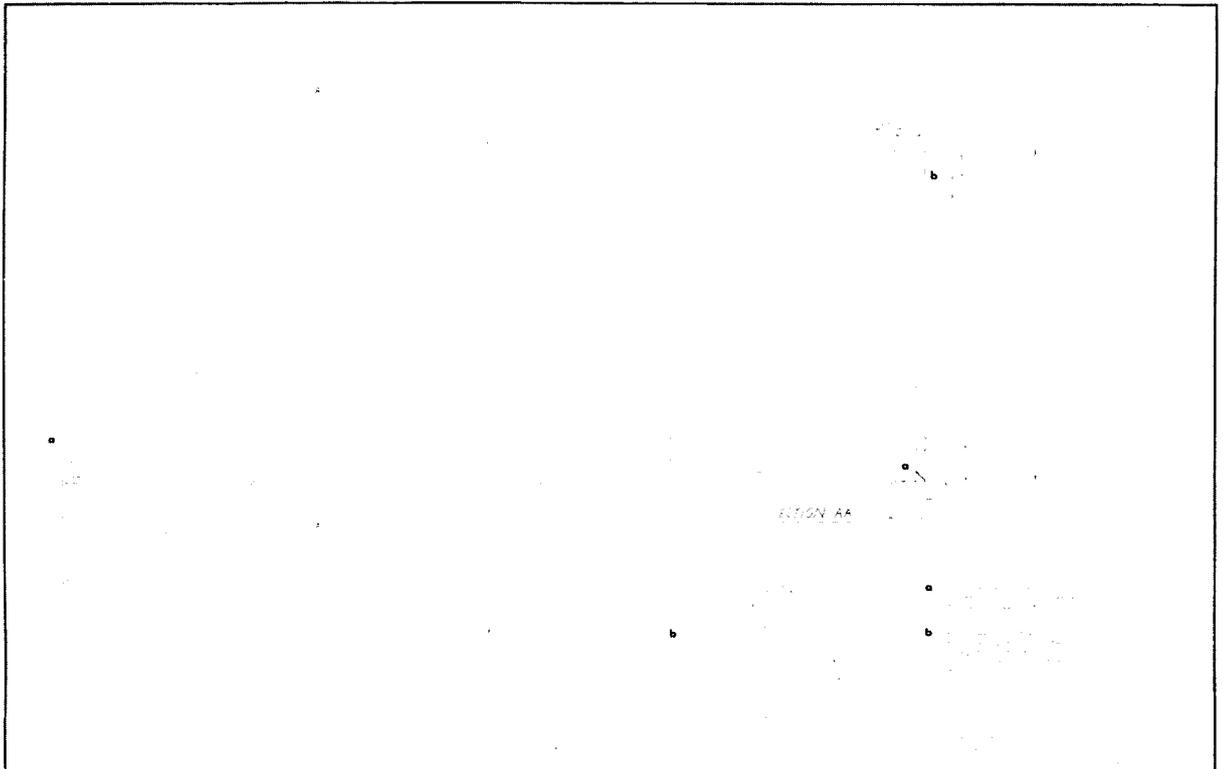
The principal work of art proposed here is a sculpture or environment approximately 10 by 20 by 30 feet made exclusively of these modules. The object might be a house. While the module could be of cardboard, at best it would be of clear plastic, polyethelene or styrene. In the latter case, it is possible that the module will not fold, but be watertight so that each unit could be filled with colored or uncolored liquids, liquid crystals, powders or objects.

The exact shape and design of the module will (and can only) be determined by working with the company finally chosen. Problems of manufacture will influence the nature of the module. In fact part of the fascination of this project is working within and around the technical nuances of the industry.

Later Raskin elaborated on the concept, explaining its derivation and rationale, and its potential as a building unit:

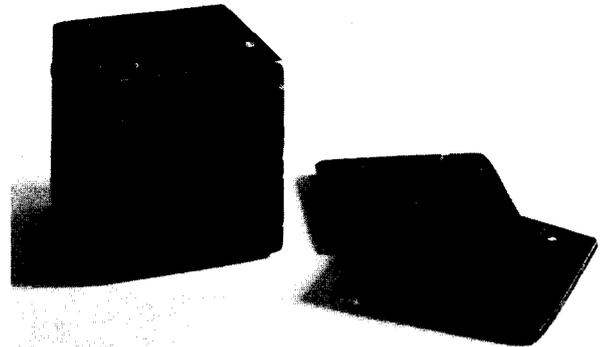
I like to play with toys a lot and I've always been frustrated with building sets. They always have some direction in which they're heading. I remember when I was a kid in New York and we decided to build our own house, and I got this plastic block set. It was very suitable for building a model—like a scale model of the house. But it only allowed the bricks to be laid on top of one another in normal brick-like staggered fashion. If you suddenly wanted to go out from one wall at right angles to it, you couldn't do it at all. More recent brick sets are made so that if you find the right *piece*, you might be able to make projections from a square wall, or make something free standing or arching over. Each set of bricks or Lincoln logs always had some particular genre of construction in mind. I had settled on actual simple cubes of wood or metal or plastic. I made myself such a building set out of clear plastic cubes. They simply stack, but at least there was no restriction; they

didn't have any sense of direction built into them aside from the rectangularness. I like the rectangularness (basic square rooms seem eminently practical). Building things at right angles doesn't seem to be much of a hang-up for me. I wanted the most general block that I could have; any two blocks would have to be able to attach together firmly so that they could be self-supporting over a small span; larger spans requiring additional structure. They would have to not be limited to flat walls, but any block would have to, on any face, be attachable to any other block. No other block set comes anywhere close to that. This would allow you to build an absolutely solid, completely interlocked cube. To make this perfectly general, I spent some time finding out if there's any way to make a hermaphrodite connector that could be both male and female so that every face of every block would snap together. If I had one of those sets, I'd enjoy building with it more than any other set I've ever seen. Furthermore, a two to five centimeter size block is fine for building models, but I'd also like to have a larger set of blocks twelve inches across or one quarter meter, and you could use these things for architecture, building wall partitions, for building *buildings*. If they are made out of plastic like Delrin, they would be strong enough to build stairs and a few structural members. If I violated my principles only slightly and glued some of them together you could make quite large structures. I rather like to be able to take whatever one makes apart and rearrange it as the need changes. I envisage (and would probably build for myself) a house, a garage. They would be relatively light also. Because they are hollow, if you needed weight, they could be filled with sand, fluids, plastic. Cubes can come apart into two symmetrical pieces, each being three sides of a corner. And so you can stack very compactly; you can take a building and put it into a hundredth of its space, or even less than that, and transport all the parts economically. It's a practical thing as well as a nice thing. If you then took certain blocks and modified them (although that's not very pure of me) by drilling holes in the sides, you could have all the plumbing running through the wall; you could see it all. (Although certain kinds of plumbing I guess you would want to have running through the walls.) You could have a fish tank built in the wall; with some blocks clear and some full of sand, you could have windows. You could move the windows around by shaking the sand out of one and now the window is there. I would have all the blocks clear, but if you do want an opaque wall, you would spray paint the inside or the outside. I like large things: I don't know why because I like miniature things too. You had some of my favorite miniature things here in the Cloisters exhibition—a little wooden model with a whole battle scene inside. Working on that scale has



always fascinated me, and I build an awful lot of ultra-miniature things, but I've never exhibited them. First of all because it would take hours of educating people to see what I'm seeing; nobody's adjusted to looking at things that way. There's another thing, though, about being able to walk around in stuff. That's nothing new; everyone has done that who's working with environments. The last mazes show I had at UCSD left so many avenues to be explored—literally and figuratively. I want to explore some of those with the clear blocks. If I were to build a thing that was contorted, perhaps not really a labyrinth so that you could be six inches from somebody on the other side of a set of blocks and still be a half hour's walk from them. I would like to do something on that scale. And the idea fascinates me of having identical rooms in different places, so that you can't tell if you're in Room A or Room B. You think you come back to the same place but it's really different. The room merely looks the same. I'd like to explore things like that.

In May, after Raskin had made a prototype unit [1], we arranged further meetings at Eldon with an engineer. Tony Smith was already working with Container Corporation of America, and since Raskin's first option was to fabricate the module in clear plastic, we proceeded with Eldon. On July 23 we met with Robert Silverstein, president of the company, to describe the piece in greater detail and to discuss the feasibility of executing the modules. Silverstein agreed to project a cost analysis and



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intimated that on the basis of that estimate, Eldon would proceed to fabricate the units. Shortly after this meeting, however, Silverstein's office called to say that Eldon declined to take on the project because it was too expensive for them.

We then approached Dart Industries, which had previously considered a proposal by John Chamberlain. Raskin's proposal received careful and enthusiastic study by Dart designers. However it was again rejected by management as being too expensive. For several weeks after that, we pursued the fabrication problem elsewhere, at various local plastic manufacturing firms, but without success. In September, 1970, we made a last

attempt to carry out the project. Much earlier in the program, we had invited Mattel Toys, Inc. to join A & T but they refused, not wishing an artist in residence at the company for twelve weeks because of its tight security regulations. Nevertheless we approached Elliott Handler, Mattel's president, once again to explain that Raskin's project was completely planned and would not necessitate a lengthy collaborative period. Raskin described to

Jack Barcus of Mattel's design department the uniqueness of his module. Although the work was not marketable from the company's point of view (as a toy, it was too expensive), they expressed definite interest but did not take action on it. Late in October, 1970, Raskin re-designed the module for fabrication in cardboard or other similar material, with the end-view of effecting an economical production. [2]

