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In 1693, the philosopher John Locke suggested that learning to read could be a more enjoyable experience if there were "Dice and Play-things with the letters on them, to teach Children the Alphabet by playing." The father of liberalism and blocks would have loved Dinosaur Hill, where abecedarian wooden blocks come in fifteen languages, including Hebrew, Korean, Arabic, Norwegian, Braille, and American Sign Language (\$39-\$43). The store also stocks elegant Anker blocks, from Germany, molded out of quartz sand, chalk, and linseed oil. According to the British Web site that sells the blocks, after the First World War the company's American subsidiaries were confiscated by the United States, which feared that, by developing the technical skills of German youngsters, the blocks would empower Germany to start another war. Anker blocks are a gift of choice for grownup architects. Future Howard Roarks might like something from the architecture series, such as Rockefeller Center (\$39.99) or the White House (\$49.99). (By the way, Lego wins the Worst Toy to Step On Award.)

ON AND OFF THE AVENUE TOY STORIES

By [illegible]

In the transportation category, the Citation for Greenest Guzzler goes to a dump truck made from recycled plastic milk containers (Dinosaur Hill; \$27.50). As for the vehicle I'd most like to drive, however, or at least put on my desk: a sleek Automoblox roadster made of cherrywood and trimmed with plastic and leather. The cars can be taken apart, and you can have more than one they can be combined into a new mode.

Teddy bears dressed more stylishly than I am (Dinosaur Hill, 306 East 9th Street; \$80-\$200), cherrywood baby rattles so burnished they could be handles on a George Nakashima bureau (Dinosaur Hill).