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FOREWORD

The interest in children and childhood as serious subjects of inquiry has grown dramatically in the last decade. This is the result of a dawning sense of the fully understood changes in childhood in the globally conscious twenty-first century, a era fears about the demise of the childhood we have come to know in the Western world since the early twentieth century, as well as from developments within a variety of disciplines. Together they have made children into the newest subject of study for historians, art and architectural historians, sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists. For many of us working in this area during this time, the study of children has been an exciting means to understand many of the underpinnings as well as some of the hidden corners of human experience.

Studies of the material culture of children—their spaces, toys, and furnishings—have grown along with this new interest, and museums and other exhibition spaces over the last several years have invited the public into this new world of child studies.¹ This phenomenon suggests that the interest is hardly confined to the academy and that children and their lives have become significant points of a much wider fascination and concern. In fact, spaces and material objects are extremely effective vantage points from which to observe the results of the upsurge in scholarly attention to this subject. Schools, children's nurseries, toys, books, shelves, and other material objects—created by adults according to both their understanding of what childhood is like and their commitments to investing in children—are the sites and objects that help to define children's worlds, as well as their experiences and their imaginations. This material world is where childhood (as adults define it) and children (as real participants) intersect. These specially made spaces and objects have been very much a part of the experience of the middle classes in Europe and the United States since the mid-nineteenth century. How children use their spaces and the objects created for them, by adapting and reworking them, is a large part of what has constituted children's experience. And for observers new to this world of scholarship, seeing (actual objects at exhibition, or the many illustrations included in this volume) as well as reading is most helpful.

Other societies and earlier periods in the West did not pay as much attention to children's special needs and had fewer resources to build separate spaces and objects exclusively for children. Nevertheless, in these societies and cultures,