

Introducing the Smalltalk-80 System

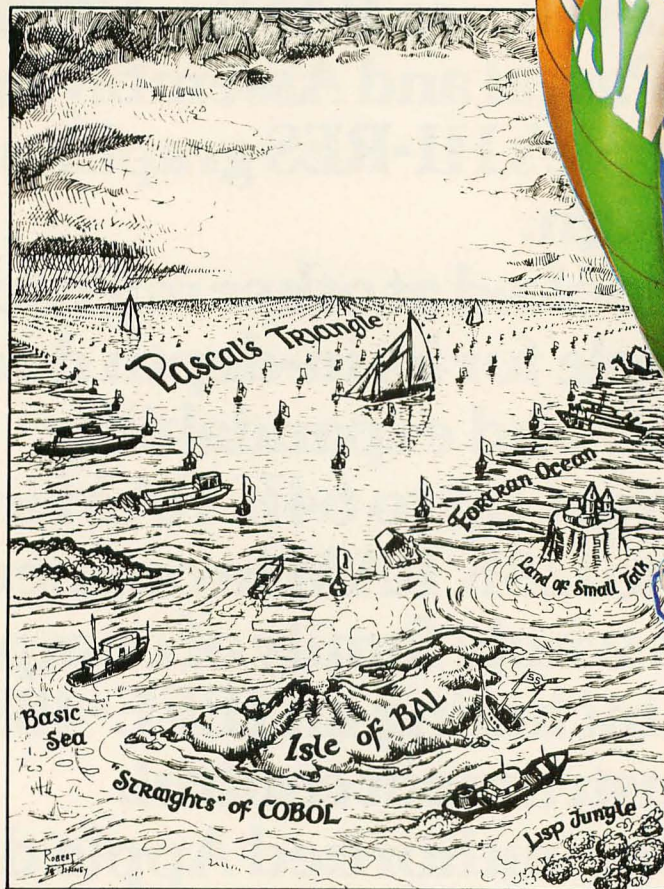
Adele Goldberg
Manager, Learning Research Group
Xerox Palo Alto Research Center
3333 Coyote Hill Rd
Palo Alto CA 94304

It is rare when one can indulge in one's prejudices with relative impunity, poking a bit of good humored fun to make a point.

With this statement, Carl Helmers opened his remarks in the "About the Cover" section of the August 1978 issue of *BYTE*. The issue was a special on the language Pascal, so Helmers took the opportunity to present Pascal's triangle as drawn by artist Robert Tinney. The primary allegory of the cover was the inversion of the Bermuda Triangle myth to show smooth waters within the area labeled "Pascal's Triangle." In explaining the allegory, Helmers guided the traveler through the FORTRAN Ocean, the BASIC Sea, around the Isle of BAL, and up to the Land of Smalltalk.

Traveling upward (in the picture) through heavy seas we come to the pinnacle, a snow white island rising like an ivory tower out of the surrounding shark infested waters. Here we find the fantastic kingdom of Smalltalk, where great and magical things happen. But alas . . . the craggy aloofness of the kingdom of Smalltalk keeps it out of the mainstream of things.

It is rare when one can indulge in one's fantasies to respond to so pointed a remark as that provided by the

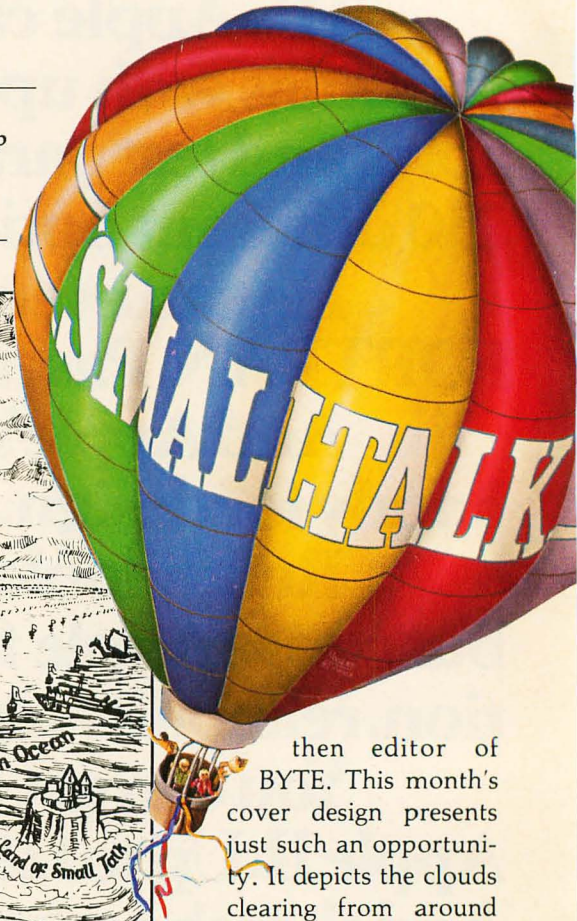


then editor of *BYTE*. This month's cover design presents just such an opportunity. It depicts the clouds clearing from around the kingdom of Smalltalk, and, with banners streaming, the Smalltalk system is taking flight into the mainstream of the computer programming community. This cover was also executed by Robert Tinney, to the delight of

the Learning Research Group (LRG) of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center. LRG is the group that has designed, implemented, and evaluated several generations of Smalltalk over the past ten years.

The balloon on the cover symbolizes the Smalltalk-80 system that is being released this year for more general access. The release is in the form of publications and a file containing the Smalltalk-80 programming system. Twelve articles describing the system appear in this issue of *BYTE*. Through such publication, LRG's research will become generally accessible, dispelling the clouds.

Smalltalk is the name LRG assigned to the software



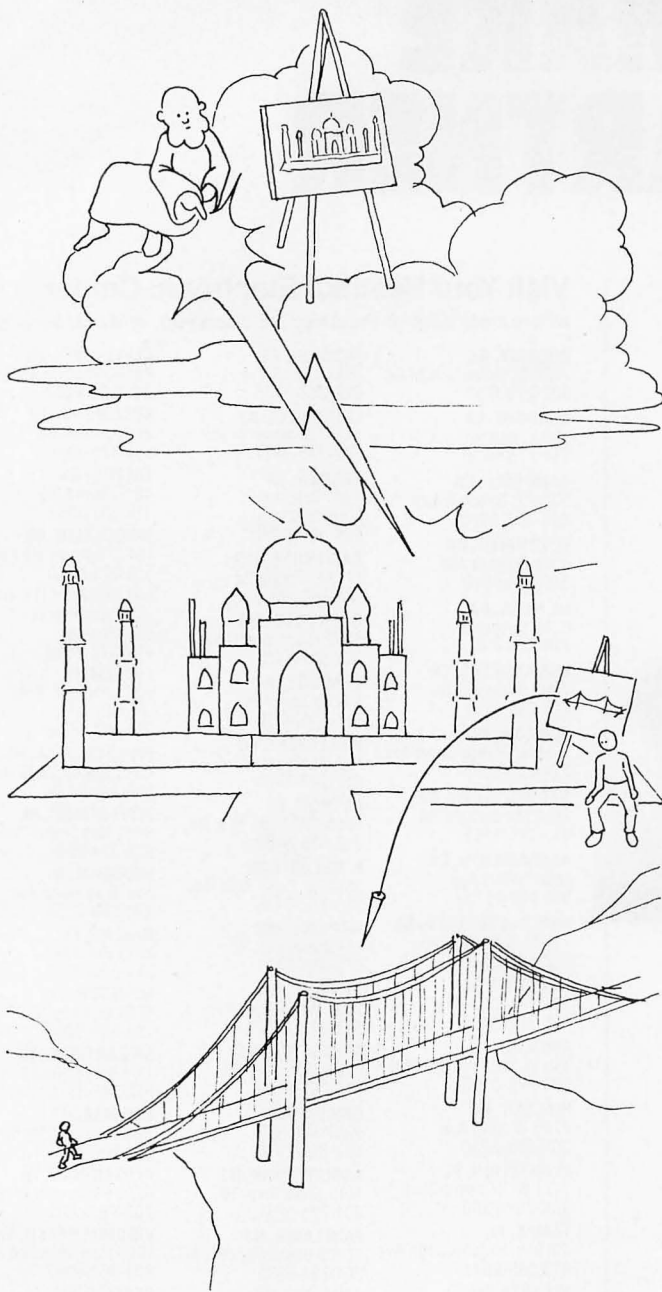


Figure 1



Figure 2

part of Alan Kay's personal computing vision, the Dynabook. The vision is a hand-held, high-performance computer with a high-resolution display, input and output devices supporting visual and audio communication paths, and network connections to shared information resources. LRG's goal is to support an individual's ability to use the Dynabook creatively. This requires an understanding of the interactions among language, knowledge, and communication. To this end, LRG does research on the design and implementation of programming languages, programming systems, data bases, virtual memories, and user interfaces.

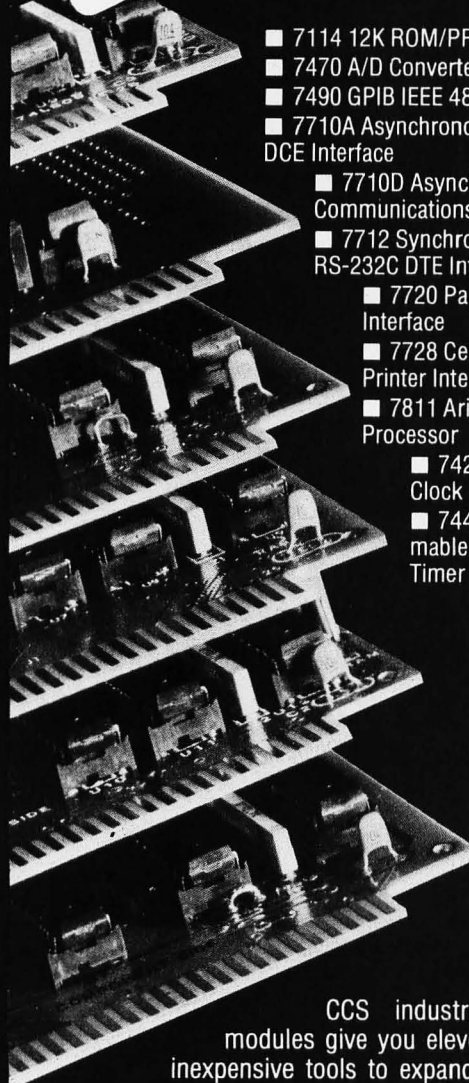
The ivory tower on the island of Smalltalk is an exciting, creative place in which to work on these ideas. A

sense of LRG's long-range goals is aptly portrayed in the illustrations designed by Ted Kaehler.

In figure 1, we see a view of the conventional software development environment: a wizard sitting on his own computational cloud creating his notion of a Taj Mahal in which programmers can indulge in building applications for nonprogramming users. The Taj Mahal represents a complete programming environment, which includes the tools for developing programs as well as the language in which the programs are written. The users must walk whatever bridge the programmer builds.

A goal in the design of the Smalltalk system was to create the Taj Mahal so that programmers can modify it by building *application kits*, which are specialized exten-

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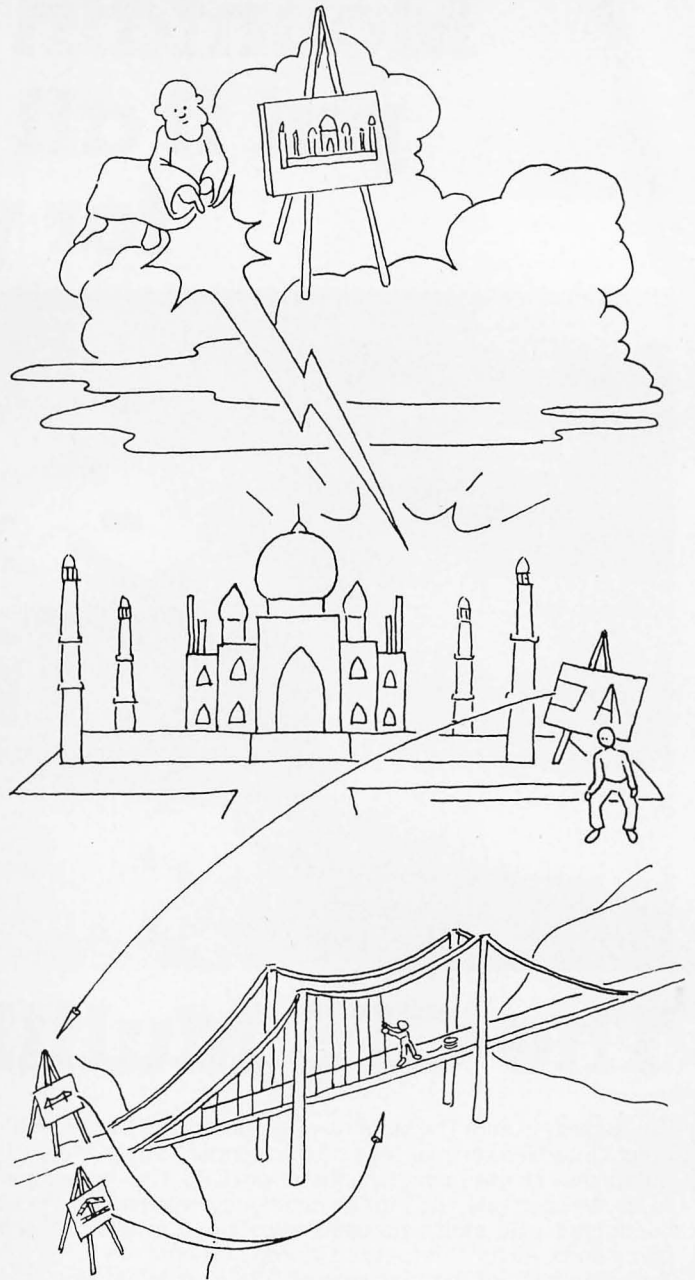


Figure 3

sions and/or subsets of the system whose parts can be used by a nonprogrammer to build a customized version of the application. Applications that can be created from a kit are related in a fundamental way: the programmer may, for example, create it for building bridges, but it is the user who pieces together the parts to create a customized bridge (see figure 2).

One of LRG's current research goals is to provide system parts to aid the programmer in creating kits. Although Smalltalk itself is conceptually sufficient for this task, it needs better support to help the programmer piece together the graphical display and the control for an interactive user interface. This is the "kit maker," as shown in figure 3.



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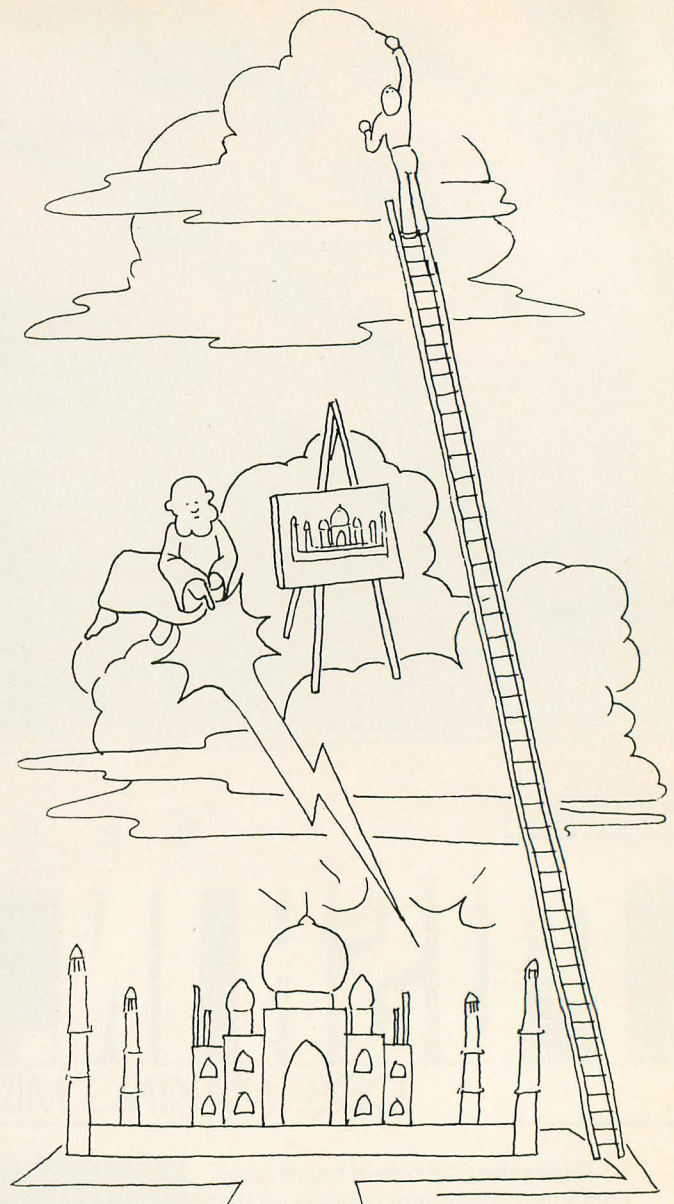


Figure 4

As part of the Dynabook vision, the system should help the programmer build a personal computational cloud (see figure 4). Two research projects, ThingLab by Alan Borning and PIE by Ira Goldstein and Danny Bobrow, took advantage of Smalltalk's support for creating new metaphors.

We are often asked: "What makes Smalltalk different from other languages?" The articles in this issue attempt to answer that question. Look for an emphasis on interactive graphics, on modular development of programs, and on integrated approaches to accessing program development tools. Also, look for the distinction between a programming language and a programming system, and consider the difference in providing a system in which the user can feel individual mastery over complexity. Although each article can be read independently of the

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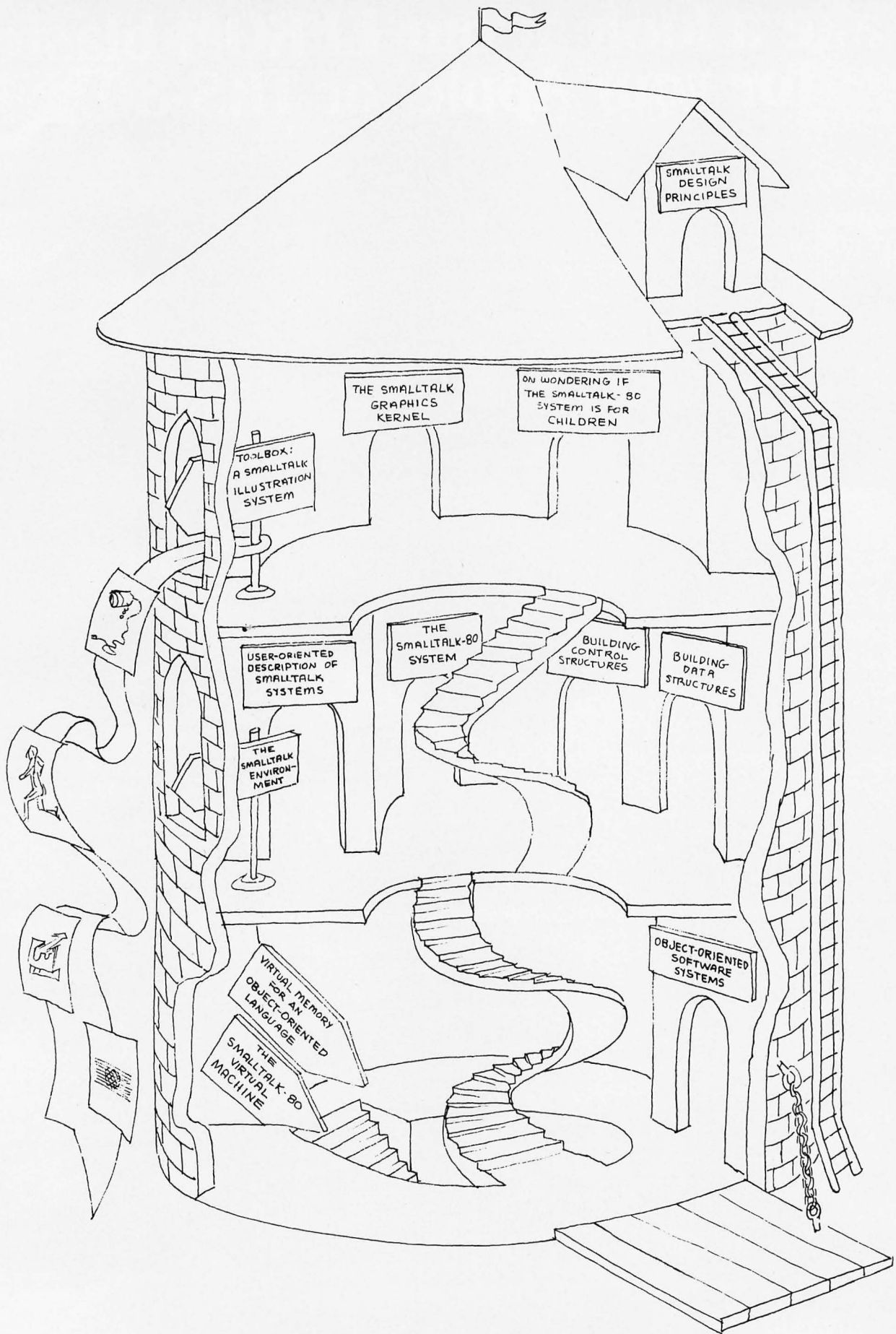


Figure 5

others, knowledge of the Smalltalk-80 system and its design philosophy is a prerequisite to understanding many of them. The map in figure 5 is presented to help the reader find a course through this hitherto uncharted ivory tower.

You can begin at the drawbridge by reading Dave Robson's introduction to object-oriented programming (page 74) and then proceed by reading the description of the Smalltalk-80 language (page 36). The two examples of programming in Smalltalk-80 are likely next steps: one, by Jim Althoff, tells you how to build data structures (page 230); the other, by Peter Deutsch, describes how to build control structures (page 322). Or, you can follow a hallway to the user interface window and read Larry Tesler's description of the Smalltalk programming environment (page 90). Trygve Reenskaug offers further perspectives on providing a programming interface to a Smalltalk system (page 147).

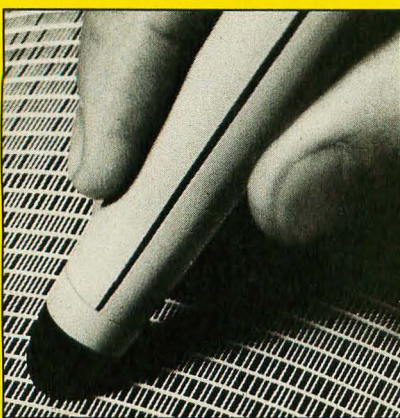
At any time, you can take the side stairs to read Dan Ingalls' presentation of the design principles behind Smalltalk (page 286). Those readers who are interested in implementation details can head for the cellar and read Glenn Krasner's article on the Smalltalk virtual machine (page 300), or Ted Kaehler's article on a Smalltalk virtual memory (page 378).

The walls of the tower are covered with visual images that will please any graphics enthusiast. Many were created by the ToolBox painting component of Smalltalk, as described in Bill Bowman and Bob Flegal's article (page 369). Greater detail about the Smalltalk graphics kernel is provided by Dan Ingalls (page 168).

Ivory towers are often associated with educational enterprises. So it is not surprising that field studies of the various versions of Smalltalk have been carried out mostly in educational settings; elementary, junior, and senior high school students as well as university students have helped us test our ideas. Joan Ross and I provide some of the history in an article exploring whether the Smalltalk-80 system is for children (page 348).

Many people have helped to build our ivory tower, to surround it with protective clouds, and then to blow some of the clouds away. All the people, past and present, of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center contributed a brick or two. George Pake, vice president of Corporate Research, assembled the bricklayers. We especially herald the person who is responsible for laying the foundation, Alan Kay, and current members of LRG not named as article scribes: Peggy Asprey, Alan Borning, Laura Gould, Bruce Horn, Neil Jacobstein, Kim McCall, Diana Merry, Steve Putz, and Steve Weyer. Special thanks to Bert Sutherland who did the "preflight check." ■

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