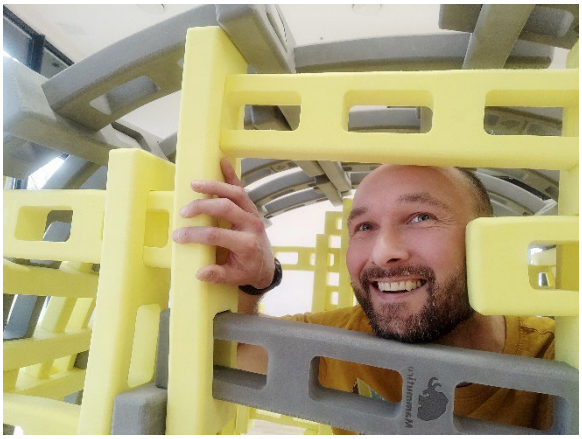
This month we met Dominik Berliński creator and owner of **Mammutico**, a new exhibitor and sponsor at this years **Ecsite Conference** in Malta. Dominik gave us a fascinating insight into loose parts play and its benefits for child development.



Good morning Dominik, nice to meet you, could you please introduce yourself to our readers?

Yes sure, so I am Dominik, creator and owner of Mammutico, but I am also a playground safety specialist and a RPII (Register of Play Inspectors International) international inspector of indoor and outdoor playgrounds. Mammutico is a loose parts playground concept and we are operating in Poland, Lithuania, Germany and Italy.

Loose parts playground equipment, can you explain to us what that is?

Loose parts play gives a child freedom to use play items as they wish. Unlike most conventional toys which have instructions for use, loose parts allow children to discover and play based on their own creativity. It's like tinkering.

What inspired you to develop Mammutico as a solution for child safety in playgrounds and educational institutions?

I was inspired by Professor Marek Kosmala, who showed me American big blocks at a conference, and I immediately believed in this type of product as an ideal, safe implementation of the loose parts playground concept and decided that I would like to create similar products in Poland. I love the idea of this most creative approach to playing, which stimulates children's individual and social development.

What impact do Mammutico blocks have on children's play experiences and their learning outcomes?

Thanks to the fact that our blocks are large but at the same time very light, children can build objects bigger than themselves. They are not only physically involved but also willingly cooperate with each other in achieving common goals. We developed game scenarios for our blocks, that do not contain ready-made, repetitive solutions. Here, users themselves decide how to complete the exercise, for example, building a maze that they can later go through with their eyes closed. Children can also face their fears by building a creature that goes from scary to friendly – because it is soft and they made it themselves! During workshops with Mammutico blocks, we start with recreating real-life objects and then we gradually move on to stimulating imagination and end up creating quite abstract constructions, such as a new letter that needs to be named or building something absolutely pointless. When children build these amazing creations, they are happy to talk about them, thus building self-esteem. Other benefits from playing with Mammutico blocks include: integration between users of different abilities, developing spatial imagination and the ability to come up and implement building plans.

How has Mammutico collaborated with museums and cultural centers to create interactive and educational exhibits for children?

Participation in the creation of an entire exhibition is the most interesting for us. For example, for the Museum of Engineering and Technology in Krakow, we prepared and implemented a project aimed at making visitors understand the issues of urban engineering. As part of this project, a city panorama was created showing characteristic buildings in Krakow, and with the use of various types of blocks, children can carry out custom lesson scenarios. The aim of one of them was to understand the operation of water, sewage, gas and electricity networks, resulting in children learning where the tap water comes from, what happens to it after it is used up, and where and how electricity can reach the socket at home or school. In this case, they dealt with both urban planning and a complex network of underground installations. On the other hand, we often simply provide sets of blocks, which serve as a temporary exhibition or attraction presented outside the museum or during activities conducted by the institution in nearby schools and kindergartens.

Is there anything that sets Mammutico apart from other play equipment and blocks on the market?

The size. Our large set of bricks will barely fit on a Euro pallet, because tightly packed it takes up a space of about 2 cubic meters.

To paint a picture, let me compare Mammutico sets to traditional playgrounds. On the one hand, we have a playground, usually equipped with the usual set: a swing, a sandbox, a carousel and a slide. In some bigger spaces maybe a cableway, a trampoline and an artificial hill. But the most attractive elements there will be water devices and sand, because these can be experienced more deeply with the senses and, above all, changed. However, as a rule, playgrounds are usually invariable and most of the devices are used by only one child. On the other hand, we have Mammutico blocks - a creative attraction, open to any and all transformations, which can additionally be used both indoors and outdoors, even in water. It's also fun to demolish the structure you've just built and start again with something new.

Can you describe the design and development process for the Centre for Playground Inspection and Mammutico blocks?

Before starting production, I was first looking for a sufficiently durable and lightweight material that would meet the heightened standards in terms of flammability and toxicity. In addition, we submitted our foam for testing for the presence of carcinogenic substances, a long list of which is provided in the REACH Regulation (EC) 1907/2006. As soon as the search for the material was successful, the design process began.

I invited Karolina Perrin, a designer, who developed among others, project of the Bzzzz Gallery at the Copernicus Science Center, intended for the youngest visitors.

I had the initial idea for the first line of Mammutico Smart blocks and Karolina creatively developed it, then we conducted functional research together with young users and made significant improvements to the design, which we finally registered with the he European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO).

Karolina prepared story telling for these blocks and even created a bold Mammutico logo with a characteristic Mammoth.

I invented the next product lines myself or in cooperation with other designers.

How do you ensure the safety of your products, and what safety standards do they meet?

I manage this myself, because I had been running the Centre for Playground Inspection for many years. In addition, thanks to cooperation with the office supervising the toy market in Poland, I also presented the products for testing in their laboratory, where the result was positive.

Based on the results of tests carried out by such laboratories as TÜV Rheinland and Intertek, we issue a Declaration of Conformity confirming compliance with the EN 71 toy standard and the toy directive. The test results themselves can be downloaded from our website along with the product instructions. We are very transparent in this regard.

How has Mammutico contributed to the conversation around the importance of play in child development?

I carry out this task most often by writing articles about playgrounds and conducting trainings and presentations as part of the activities of the Centre for Playground Inspection. Whereas at Mammutico, we do this by participating in conferences of science centres or those addressed to educators, and at industry fairs. We also ask for the opinions of our clients, including psychologists and educators, and we present their opinions on our website, in catalogs and social media, usually in the form of attractive videos. This form is especially important in our increasingly digital world.

How does Mammutico ensure that its products are accessible and inclusive for all children?

For this, we rely on the knowledge of psychologists and special educators. My professional experience in the playground industry helps here too, because I translated into Polish the technical report issued by the European Committee for Standardization CEN/TR 16467:2013 Playground equipment accessible for all children. In practice, our blocks are very warmly received by children with various disabilities, such as visual impairments, difficulty in moving and children in the autism spectrum. But most of all, Mammutico supports the integration of children with different abilities as well as intergenerational integration. Adults are also eager to play with blocks, for whom we even conducted an English course with the use of large blocks.

Can you discuss any sustainable practices that Mammutico has implemented in its production and distribution processes?

I'm sensitive to greenwashing so I'll tell you what it actually looks like here.

The Mammutico foam itself is difficult to recycle, but it is not without reason that I chose a durable material that can be used for many years. The blocks do not absorb water and will not deform with time. In addition, the edges of the blocks are chamfered and rounded to make it harder to damage them. If, after years of use, the aesthetics of the product deteriorates and the owner wants to replace it with a new one, it is easy to hand over the blocks for further use, e.g. in a social kindergarten.

We did this with our first set used for rental and presentation, which was given a second life - so it has been in use for 8 years. We also had requests to donate old blocks to a dog shelter, because not only people are happy to play with Mammutico. To store blocks, we offer very durable bags made of car tarps. Our very first bags are still used by us. If, for example, the bottom of the bag is worn (possibly after about 20 years), the bag can be repaired or converted into something else. Mammutico definitely fits the requirements of reduce and reuse concept - because we offer a durable product that can be used for a long time in many different contexts.

How do you balance the need for safety with the need for fun and creativity in your products?

This is my favorite topic in the context of playgrounds!

Fortunately, with our blocks, there is nothing to worry about, because they are very safe, soft and light. Well, maybe not entirely, because in the instructions we indicate the need to play under adult supervision. This is primarily due to the possibility of building a tall structure that you could climb on and then fall to the wrong surface. In addition, we recommend extreme caution when playing in the water, where again Mammutico works great.

Can you tell us about any exciting new projects or partnerships Mammutico has in the works?

We are working with the Museum of Engineering and Technology in Krakow, preparing a new exhibition for them, four times larger than one we built for them before. As for the details, maybe I'll be able to say more during the Ecsite Conference.

What will you be showing the Ecsite participants at the 2023 Ecsite Conference?

We have lots to show! We want to show mainly construction blocks and accessories that expand their usability. We will definitely bring our first, most proven Smart blocks.

We will also be happy to show the Perfect line, which is based on one block shape, but gives amazing construction possibilities. This is our most demanding product that will work in a variety of scenarios. And probably something good to eat and drink, straight from Poland. I also hope for interesting conversations and inspirations. I am naturally looking for opportunities to collaborate and combine different ideas. I would love to hear about the ideas and new perspectives that the participants of the conference may have about Mammutico.

That is why I am sure that after the Ecsite Conference we will leave with heads full of new ideas for cooperation, which will translate into a number of benefits for visitors to science museums.