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BABIES IN BOXES

What would the ideal crib be like? Would it be a drafty cage with no top? Or a cradle that gives you back pains when you pick up your baby?

These two unlikely designs—the crib and the cradle—have been about all we've had. But in 1944, psychologist B. F. Skinner thought he had a better idea. Adults sleep in adult-sized rooms. Why not let babies sleep in baby-sized rooms? So Skinner replaced a cage-style crib with the first baby-sized room—the "aircrib." Heated and humidified for baby's comfort, it put the infant at waist-height, so it doubled as a changing table. Its first occupant: Skinner's daughter Deborah.

This unique crib made its public debut in, of all places, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, in October 1945. A headline proclaimed, "The Machine Age Comes to the Nursery!" and a psychiatrist lauded the new crib as a "tremendously interesting idea."

Plans for building aircribs abounded. One prospective manufacturer slyly dubbed its version the "Heir Conditioner."

But the aircrib didn't catch on. Skinner's

famous lab studies of rats and pigeons were often conducted in small chambers called "Skinner Boxes." Uh oh. Some people confused the aircrib with the Skinner Box and assumed Skinner was conducting experiments on his children. By the 1960s, rumor had it that daughter Deborah was psychotic.

In all, perhaps 300 children have been raised in Skinner-type cribs. We recently tracked down more than 50 of them. The outcome? Positive results across the board. All of the children had normal health, and their parents praised the crib for its safety, warmth, and convenience. As for Deborah, she grew up normally, married a professor, and is now a successful artist in England.

Alas, the aircrib probably doesn't have much of a future. Major companies have little incentive to mass-produce it because it can't be protected by patents. (After all, you can't get a patent on a small room.) Built one by one, with independent heating and ventilation systems, aircribs are too expensive to become commonplace. Back to the cage!

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Room with a view: peering out of an aircrib.