

Interview Marta Tantos

Design Manager Concept Lab

By Hispabrick Magazine

Pictures by Marta Tantos

In this month's interview we will enter one of the most unknown departments of any toy company. We will learn how a new set or line is created from the beginning. We will enter the abstract world of ideas and imagination in pure form. We will speak with Marta Tantos, Design Manager of the Barcelona Concept Lab. We are grateful that she has spent this time with us.

Hello Marta.

Hispabrick Magazine: How did you start in the company?

Marta Tantos: I was in Denmark doing an internship as engineer, when I saw the ad on the paper. LEGO® was looking for a person for the R&D department with a mix of skills of design and engineering. And here I am 13 years later.

HM: Have you always been in the same department?

MT: Yes. The department has changed name 100 times, but it is the same. From LEGO Futura to Markets & Products today. What has changed is the group within the department where I work. I started in the Play Themes group doing Space, then some Castle and Adventurers, ... to move into the front end group called Volcano. Eventually the different front ends groups were merged to one, which is the current Concept Lab.

HM: Can you explain which is the main objective of the Concept Lab?

MT: The main goal of Concept Lab is to develop great new play experiences for the builders of tomorrow.

HM: How many Concept Labs are there at present in the world? Where?

MT: At the moment, the main base of Concept Lab is



located in Billund, and then there are 4 small satellites based in Los Angeles, Tokyo, Munich and Barcelona.

HM: Are all the Concept Labs connected and working on the same projects? (we know that you have a very restrictive NDA and you can't talk about concrete projects)

MT: Yes and no. It might be that, some periods of time where everyone starts a project with the same brief, but eventually it really depends on the development of the ideas. It is not unusual that Concept Lab works on projects which are at 2-3 different levels of development. And this of course implicates, that different groups work on different tasks.

HM: Does TLG give you any kind of orientation about themes, colors, genders..?

MT: Usually, when Concept Lab gets a new brief, it does get several specifications to narrow down the scope to work, in order to come with new ideas. But, never so detailed to specify the colors.

HM: Can you explain the research method you are using?

MT: Research is a very important part of the



development process. The type of research we do depends again on the projects we have in our hands. Sometimes it is a matter of spending few days doing some analysis of the market, the trends, etc. While in other cases, we go much more in depth to understand in detail kids, families and other core targets. To do this, in the last years, we have carried out activities bringing us to the home of those families, which combined with other activities more theoretical have given us a great number of insights. Those insights and consumer needs are very often the drivers and starting point to create totally new experiences.

HM: What do you do when you are living with families?

MT: Before we come and visit families, there is a process of describing the tools and methods which will give us material to be analyzed. We come with some specific exercises and materials to make the dialogs and activities easier and fun. Big part of the time goes along with the usual family routines. So, if the child is going to ice skating class, we go with them. If friends are coming over for playing dates, we integrate them into those activities. Since we are working mainly with children, there are always some parts focused towards the parents, others for the kids and usually for both together.

HM: How can you translate these experiences in something that you can use to develop a toy?

MT: It is a long, tough and very inspiring process. We do analyze all our data, observations, results and experiences among the group. The main purpose of these sessions is to find patterns across the material and end up with some needs the kids and/or families have which become important starting point for the concept development phase. All ideas, have some

background behind supporting why the experiences should be relevant for the consumers.

HM: Is it difficult for you to try and put yourself in the place of a kid's mind?

MT: It is not an easy task. Although we have all been children, we have to remember we are not designing for ourselves. It is therefore extremely important to understand what is to be a child today. Their motivations, their fears, what makes them happy and what helps them learning and growing in a creative environment.

HM: How many projects do you develop in a year?

MT: Concept Lab develops many projects, but as a natural part of the innovation process quite a few never make it.

HM: And if this/these projects turn into a project to a product, how much time passes between the moment you start it and the final customer can buy it in a shop?

MT: Everything relates to the type of project. Sometimes it has taken the usual development time if we were totally aligned with the rest of the process of developing products to the market. While others, due to complexity and the strategy, they might take up to several years.

HM: Which of your projects is something we can find in a shop today?

MT: The latest project which will hit the shops this year has been developed by concept Lab all the way through. This will be a new series of LEGO® constructible games, and it just received one of the innovation awards at the Nürnberg Toy Fair. In most

cases, I might be involved in the very early stage of the development, and eventually there is a project team established around it, which means I personally get out of it to start the innovation process again. So, for the Games case, from the very beginning there was a very professional team that is working very hard to make the best experience!

HM: Which steps does a project follow when is accepted by the company?

MT: There is a very concrete and specified process for us to follow with many steps. This consists of basically research and exploration of concepts in several loops to get closer and closer to a more finished proposition.

HM: Can you request new bricks for your projects?

MT: Yes, but only if it necessary.

HM: What do you think about the AFOL Community?

MT: I am impressed! What can I say I am amazed how you guys live the LEGO® experience and values all the way through. It is incredible how a “single” brick has been able to gather sooooo many people around the World to have something in common and to keep on playing not matter the age. It is great seeing how LEGO is part of your passion, and the incredible work you do to spread it.

HM: Have you gotten any ideas / techniques from the AFOLs?

MT: For me it is extremely inspiring seeing the stuff you all do. Sometimes, seeing how you use the elements, what themes you create, and how you experiment beyond what sometimes is allowed when designing for small children.

HM: Last year you attended the Hispabrick Event. What do you think about it?

MT: It was a fantastic opportunity to both see what everyone is doing, how you relate to each other, and how you want to make other people participate in your passion, which often absorbs an incredible part of your time. It is great, knowing all the effort from both the people arranging it, as well as the participants coming from all corners of the Iberian Peninsula.

HM: Do you think that the Spanish Community has a good level compared with foreign Communities?

MT: I think so. It is of course clear, that just by numbers, ... in other countries where LEGO bricks have been present for more years, the amount of AFOLS might be smaller here, but this does not relate to the quality. And let's not forget that if it is important for each of you, that is always the starting point.

HM: Finally, some short questions. Did you play with

LEGO bricks when you were a kid?

MT: To be honest, .. not so much. I did play with other type of construction sets, but not a lot with LEGO bricks.

HM: Your most-liked LEGO Theme

MT: That is a very hard question! Castle, Space, ... Creator, and I could go forever!

HM: One which you don't like

MT: I actually do not remember any now.

HM: Your favourite set

MT: I guess it is more of a nostalgic thing, but a couple of sets from Insectoids are really nice for me. The biggest set of all, because it was the first set I build when I arrived to LEGO without “any” LEGO background, and therefore an amazing personal challenge. The smaller set because so few pieces made a nice good looking and playful mosquito.

HM: Your favourite MOC

MT: A day of today, no doubt: THE DOLL (by Arvo brothers) is my winner. An amazing creation, Inspiring, Incredible balance between the finest design and the use of the bricks with a subtle precision. I could look at it hours and hours!!!

HM: Do you want to say anything else?

MT: Well, big thanks to Lluís and all of you that make the LEGO Brand such an important and emotional place to work. Keep on playing!

HM: Many thanks for your time and your answers.■.

