

Construction of modular buildings

The long shadow of Corner Cafe

Text and images by Valgarise

Introduction

One of the most obvious uses of LEGO® is building houses. Which fan has not built a LEGO house before or after his/her dark age? Probably very few. Moreover, this is probably the best area where the two trends in modern LEGO can be observed: The children's toy and the hobby for adults.

In my opinion, the appearance of the Corner Café marked a before and after in the construction of houses, and not because of its modular structure, which is important without doubt, but because of the richness of the model. They are houses with about 2,000 pieces, with a high level of architectural detail, and diametrically opposed to the model "for children" that consist of fewer parts and "open spaces" that have to be closed in your imagination. Obviously these models are not usually focused on children, as they are more complex to build, are priced higher and are less "playable".

The great importance of the Corner Café and its subsequent sequels is to show the potential of LEGO in this area. It's very striking to see the kind of comments this kind of construction elicits from the inexperienced public. Generally you can hear things like "I did not know that you could do this with LEGO" or "I thought that LEGO were houses with these square bricks"...

Pardon this brief introduction on the Corner Café but I want to express how important it was for me to discover this type of construction. One of the reasons that motivated my 25 year-long dark age was the proliferation of what I called "special parts" that came in the official sets. If you wanted to do something sophisticated you needed them and they were not easy to get (actually almost 25 years ago Internet did not exist). When I returned to LEGO about 3 years ago, the situation had changed and the access to these pieces showed me that they provided a wealth of possibilities for the models as can be seen in this mythical set.

In my case, several years ago I decided to build a city to accompany my Corner Café, specifically for this set and as a tribute to it, no other house in the city (or nearly none) should be an official set.

The building style I have chosen is Victorian, although with certain liberties. I have included a picture of the current state of my city:

Despite the relative complexity of the houses there is one basic premise: the city has to be playable. In fact, this city is built for my two sons and nephew to play with and at the same time play with them doing a thousand different stories. There are no "do not touch" signs, they can play as they want, and then the reconstruction brigade will come to fix the damage. The important thing is to have fun and put your imagination to work.



Some characteristics of LEGO modular houses

Having said that, let us concentrate on the subject. The modular buildings usually are constructions with a high complexity that intend to emulate real architectural structures.

Say no to smooth surfaces!

I am sorry to say this but I think probably there is nothing more horrible than a smooth wall of bricks, so one of the things to consider when making a facade (at least for me) is not to build large flat areas in a single colour. If you look at the different modular buildings it is hard to find flat surfaces, and all sorts of techniques are used to avoid them: pads of different types in the CC and the Fire Brigade or bricks that are not flat (brick modified 1x2 with groove) in the Green Grocer.

Another basic resource is the variation of the depth of the facade. It's relatively simple and effective. The windows can go inside or outside the level of the main wall. The ornaments can jut out or "enter" the wall. Personally it is something I use frequently.

Colour Schemes

Another important factor when making a design is the colour scheme we use. It's amazing how the same model can be

changed simply by using different colour combinations. In the current models so far (we'll see in the future) a colour separation by plants is used (e.g. Corner Café) or the same scheme throughout the building but with touches of colour to break the monotony (e.g. Green Grocer, Fire Brigade or the new Grand Emporium).

Another factor to consider is the colour palette you'll use for the entire city. Personally I have major problems there, I mean.

- **Multicoloured Cities.** We've all seen cities like Amsterdam where there are multi-coloured houses, one next to the other (one red, one black, one blue ...). This is a possibility that has several advantages: you can use any bricks you have almost in any colour and it also makes the city livelier. However, this type of colour scheme causes a certain lack of homogeneity, i.e. the houses do not mix with each other and the result can be somewhat jarring (as in the case of my town).

- **Cities with limited range of colours.** In this case the result can be much more realistic and more homogeneous. If you look at the current sets that LEGO has produced you will see colours like Tan, Gray, Dark Gray, Dark Red, Brown, Green Sand ... Virtually all are very muted colours that give a realistic appearance and resemble real materials (stone, brick, wood, etc.) used in construction. Obviously the cons are that the city can be much duller, less happy and getting the bricks is more expensive.

Volumes

A house is of course a geometric shape (or combination of various shapes) and therefore it is important to break the monotony of the model. A good example is the tower of the CC, bay windows of Green Grocer or the towers (bell and warehouse) of the Fire Brigade.

I think this is one of my pending matters. Until now I don't have a model that really satisfies me and, like most of the houses I've done are middle ones, there aren't many options to vary the volumes (at least that's how I see it).

Some examples: inspiration and construction details

Obviously I am not an architect and I have little knowledge of architecture (I've read a couple of books on the subject that help you understand the language and identify the different elements, but very basic). As a result the way I "imagine" a house can be quite diverse. Some examples:

Cake shop:

In this case, the idea arose because my daughter wanted a pink house. As more than one fan knows this is a difficult colour for two main reasons: it tends to be loud and expensive.

I bought 50 1x1 pink bricks and tried to do something with them. The idea did not catch on until one day my daughter gave me 2 stickers that pointed me in a clear direction: a bakery (I previously had an ice cream shop ... note: I may have to consider making a dentist's in the future, there are excellent heads of minifigs with expressions of horror and evil doctors for the set).

Usually I first work in the front with no side walls, just a weak structure. In fact this house was unfinished for several months because I didn't have enough parts to build the sides and no idea how I wanted to build the roof. To my regret I never work with LDraw and rarely do sketches on paper so I mainly have

ideas that work directly with the parts. On many occasions parts handling gives me ideas for details. Other times I buy bricks because in my temporary mental scheme of the model they will look good, but once assembled I don't like it, ouch! That hurts doubly, my mind and my pocket!

Sometimes the lack of a type of part requires the building of alternative solutions that can result in an improvement of the initial model. For example, the cake shop would have the details in dark red but when I ordered the pieces were sold out. As I have those parts in red I changed the original plan. Fortunately I think the result was better because the lighter red gave more joy to the final model.

In this model we can find a couple of interesting details:

- The top window uses curved bricks to build the arc. I used 1x1 technical bricks to lock them to the front.
- The door frames are made using inverted plates. It's an idea I found on the internet which I think gives great prominence to the model.



Florist's:

This is a completely different case because I had a model to follow or adapt. The inspiration for this house came from a fridge magnet that my oldest nephew had brought from Belgium. I liked the house and I took a photo to work on it later, I include the picture:



In this case I had to make several adjustments especially in the colours (which I did not have) and the height of the house since it would have been too high compared to the rest of the city.

The technical details that we can emphasize are two:

- Relief on the first floor of the



facade. In this case gray tiles have been used as bricks. These tiles are mounted on plates that are attached to the facade with brackets. In this case depending on the colour and the regular or irregular arrangement of the tiles you can create the impression of different materials such as stone or brick.

- Roof. For the construction of the roof I chose to use flags tied together by a bar structure. The advantage of this roof is that you can get the desired angle without having to conform to the defined angles of the slope bricks. In fact, each row of flags has a different inclination.

A useful detail is that the two houses have removable floors. Instead of fixing the floors to the structure they are resting on a ledge inside, finished with tiles, so the floors can slide out. It is much easier to play with this type of flooring because there is more room for hands and the removed floor also can be used with ease. Of course it must be borne in mind that at least in my case I never build the back wall of the houses so they are easily accessible and because it saves a lot of parts.

Shopping Centre:

In this case the design was adapted from an engraving of an architecture book showing the facade of Bloomingdales as it was inaugurated in the late nineteenth century.

The facade has a triumphal arch structure and personally I find it interesting. It was adapted to LEGO by reducing the number of modules, because if it had been taken as a whole it would have been about 52 studs wide. That is unmanageable in both space and cost.

The original design consisted of 3 floors, but once built I realised that it was too dark, and that you cannot see anything inside. Unifying the two upper

floors, with the skylight in the roof and the interior courtyard I got more light into the model. The existing support bases for the floor of the upper floor were used to place icons of the themes of the products sold in the Mall.

Conclusions:

The use of different construction techniques, such as pads, textures and colour combinations will allow more variety to the model. If you also combine it with colours that resemble real materials (brown, dark red, gray, etc.) you will achieve a very realistic result.

The modular construction with 16 or 32 studs is very easy to combine, but you must not limit creativity to stick only to these dimensions. Sometimes you need to build with additional sizes if the façade or the distribution of the house requires it.

If you are going to design a city yourself is advisable to have a clear idea of the colour palette and the area in order to avoid later surprises.

And lastly, and most important, I encourage you to build City, it is a very rewarding activity because you can build and assemble your own stories to have a good time.

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