

Miyazakitopia

A Tale Of Two Conventions

Text and pictures by Iain Heath

A Plot Is Hatched

2009 was turning out to be a great year for Zombies!

It's the first weekend of October, and in Seattle, BrickCon 2009 is in full swing. Several hundred LEGO® fans have spent the past couple of days frantically (yet meticulously) setting out their unique LEGO creations in this vast hall. And now, thousands of people swarm around us, pressing up against the barriers to get a close-up look at the fruits of our labor. And pointing a lot.

My own work is proudly laid out on a table in the very farthest corner of the auditorium. There probably wouldn't be much traffic down this end, except that I happen to be directly opposite the BrickArms booth. I watch the 6 foot deep throng of adolescents that surrounds them, a seething organism comprised entirely of flailing arms and black hoodies, surging endlessly forwards. The BrickArms guys have had to brace themselves between the table and the back wall to avoid being crushed like bugs. The crowd somehow reminds me of that demon from Princess Mononoke...

Andrew Becraft takes time off from the 'Zombie Apocafest' display to pay me and Lino Martins a visit. This is the second year that BrickCon has had a zombie display, and it's even bigger than the previous one. And there's a new zombie movie playing in theaters as well. Yep, definitely a big year for zombies.

Andrew knows the kind of stuff that makes Lino and me tick, and he has a proposal for us: "I think it's time to give the zombies a rest. What if next year's collaborative theme was Japan? We could call it something like Big in Japan! People could bring anything they like to do with the Japanese culture". Andrew grew up in Japan, and I'm a bit of a Japanophile, so the three of us leap on the idea immediately, brainstorming then and there about giant monsters knocking over skyscrapers, epic samurai battles, and puppy vending machines. But at that instant, I know exactly what my contribution is going to be, even if at the time it seemed completely beyond my ability... I was going to build the ultimate LEGO tribute to legendary anime director Hayao Miyazaki. It would be big. It would be great. It would be a veritable "Miyazaki-topia"!

The Man Behind The Myth

You might never have heard of Hayao Miyazaki, or even know what "anime" is. Even so, you may still have enjoyed some of his movies without realizing it. I often meet people who remember seeing My Neighbor Totoro or Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds when they were younger, without knowing

anything about Miyazaki or his later works. In fact, a friend once asked me "What's so special about Miyazaki? There are a million anime directors in Japan". The answer is simple... Miyazaki is to Japanese animation, what Alfred Hitchcock was to American cinema. Except that Hitchcock never actually won an Oscar, whereas Miyazaki did! His movie Spirited Away won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2002.

Miyazaki's movies are works of art, taking years of painstaking hand-drawn animation to complete. They also feature wonderful characters and moving storylines. And if you've seen more than one, you'll have noticed some recurring themes: child protagonists; strong female characters; breathtaking landscapes; magical spirits; impossible flying machines. Nature is an integral part of every Miyazaki movie, and his storylines often carry a strong environmentalist message. And there's always plenty of action to enjoy too, although Miyazaki isn't afraid to pause things from time to time, and let you just soak in the amazing scenery!

Thanks to the efforts of folks like John Lasseter at Pixar, Miyazaki's movies are now far more accessible to Western audiences than ever before. His entire body of work is readily available on DVD, with redubbed soundtracks featuring some star-studded voice talent. My family enjoys them on a regular basis, and they occupy a very special place in our hearts. Children seem to find them particularly spellbinding. When we first got Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds, we watched it 3 times in one weekend!

Mapping It All Out

While recovering from BrickCon, I began to plan the project. The first step was to draw up a list of the most iconic elements from each of the 9 movies (characters, creatures, vehicles, buildings and scenes). But at almost 100 items, the list was way too long! So I whittled it down to the most important 20 or so, limiting myself to just one or two key characters from each movie, and focusing less on vehicles, since that was one area that other people had already covered. For example, I had seen mini-fig scale versions of the Cat Bus, Porco's plane, and Flappters, as well as several different sized versions of Howl's Moving Castle.

I don't use mini-figs, but prefer to work nearer "miniland" scale - that's the scale of the little people you see in Legoland theme parks, or in the display cases at the LEGO store. I actually work at about double that scale, in order to create more lifelike poses and detailed facial expressions. So I figured I would just work in that style, but perhaps adding a larger central 'bust' of Miyazaki himself as a centerpiece.

I also wanted to integrate all of the models into some kind

of scene, probably a sweeping natural landscape spanning several baseplates. Flight and aircraft are very important themes in Miyazaki's movies, so I also decided that some of the models would have to be suspended to look as though they were flying, although at the time I had no idea how I would accomplish that!

BrickCon 2010 was still almost a year away, which seemed like plenty of time. But I knew I would have to be aware of my own limitations, to ensure I could complete enough pieces to make the diorama interesting. I don't have much experience with buildings, vehicles or scenery, and certainly nothing massive. So I planned to build those elements at "microscale" and place them at the back, to create the impression that they were far away.

Why Doesn't LEGO® Make Furry Bricks?

They always say "start as you mean to go on". I knew that if I just started working on the human characters, I wouldn't really be stretching myself enough to get round to the bigger stuff. So the first model I chose to build was Totoro.

Everything that wasn't a human was still going to need to be in proportion to the human characters, so that pretty much set the scale for Totoro – about 20 bricks tall - already way bigger than I was used to building. And another problem presented itself immediately. Look at Totoro... He's round and fuzzy! Both qualities you don't normally associate with LEGO bricks.



The previous summer, I had been working on a set of Star War figures, and ran into a problem making R2D2's cylindrical body and domed head. Every technique I used to recreate those curves, came out looking jagged and angular. But then I tried building the dome using half a Lowell sphere (named after its discoverer, Bruce Lowell). Although the Lowell design has studs sticking out in every possible direction, somehow the overall effect was convincing. It looked round. Round and

fuzzy, but round.

So I figured I could adopt a similar approach to create the rounded body of Totoro, using another technique called a Bram sphere (named after its inventor, Bram Lambrecht). Bram spheres create convincing ball shapes by taking 6 identical wedges made from stacks of LEGO plates, and attaching these in an overlapping fashion around a central cube. They can be built to any size, and Bram even has a web page where you can feed in the desired diameter, and it will generate a picture of the wedge you need to build. Bram spheres are fuzzy too, because the studs face outwards, but I figured this would actually work to my advantage when recreating a furry animal.

However, Totoro is not perfectly spherical. I have a book of artwork from the Totoro movie, so I was able to study him in detail and take some measurements. It looked like he was drawn using two overlapping spheres, a big one for body, and a smaller one for the head. I wondered if I could build two overlapping Bram spheres. I tried this idea out with some smaller spheres, and soon decided I lacked the engineering skills to make it happen! So instead, I decided to build just the larger sphere, but elongate the top half by a factor of two, to create a sort of egg shape.

It also seemed to me that each wedge was going to need a complicated outer shell of overlapping plates supported by an inner core of 'filler' bricks, and if I needed to make any adjustments to the shape later on, I was going to have to be endlessly tearing the wedges apart to replace a few plates. So in the end, I decided to construct the wedges as a series of very long 1-stud-wide strips, stacked side-by-side on top of some larger plates. This broke the process into simpler manageable steps, and took a lot of the guesswork out of the BrickLink orders, since I only needed plates of one width.

Of course, my 'egg' scheme made things more complicated. Firstly, it meant all 6 wedges would not be identical. Secondly, I discovered that when you elongate the top half of the sphere, the wedges don't mesh smoothly together any more. So a lot of additional 'sculpting' was required to achieve the effect of Totoro's gently rounded body. I also realized that the top wedge would need to retain its normal dimensions, to avoid turning him into a cone-head!

By the new year, Totoro's body was basically complete. I made an arm and tail in a matching 'fuzzy' style, although getting those to attach seamlessly to the body was tricky. After that, the rest was easy: facial details, the umbrella, and a set of smaller accompanying characters.

For the smaller sized Totoro, I went back to a Lowell sphere. And for Mei and Satsuki, I spent a ridiculous amount of time working on the facial detail, to make them as animated as possible. I'm particularly proud of Mei's face, especially the 'screaming' version! And with that, stage #1 of Miyazakitopia was complete!

Ramping Up

Winter gave way to spring, and I found myself distracted with other random LEGO projects and preparations for a different LEGO convention. By April, my next Miyazaki model was still just a work in progress, and it began to dawn on me just how little serious building time remained before BrickCon, and how much work I still had to complete.



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It was time to get hard core, and take things up a notch!

Until that time, I had only ever worked on one model at a time, building as ideas or inspiration came to me. I tended to work with just the bricks I already had in my modest collection, and usually recycled old models to create new ones. I was still only a 'dabbler' with BrickLink at this point, being careful to only order exactly the bricks I lacked to complete each model. And I was still working on the living room floor, with a collection that was only primitively sorted into a dozen gallon-sized Zip-lock bags.

I realized I had to industrialize my building process, if I was to stand a chance of completing this project on time. I prioritized the to-do list and built to a strict schedule. I forced myself to "parallelize", working on several models at once, moving between them as I waited for various overlapping BrickLink orders to arrive. And I finally set up a proper work space, clearing out our spare room and bringing in a couple of collapsible picnic tables. The final step was to acquire a large number of clear plastic containers so that I could organize my growing collection of bricks. Having your bricks properly sorted saves you an enormous amount of time searching for what you need - or determining if you actually have what you need!

With the addition of an internet radio, I was ready to get down to it. What followed was a summer of many (uncomfortably hot) late night builds. At times it felt more like work than play! But towards summer's end, I had completed almost everything on the list.

Putting It All Together

Here's a closer look at the construction behind each of the various models. You can find detailed photographs of each one up on my Flickr photostream...

"Nausicaä on her glider" – This was the second model I

attempted after finishing Totoro. The glider has a very particular curved design that was hard to emulate. Remember, I had never built a vehicle or aircraft before! The first step was to decide on a scale. I realized that if I created the pilot at my usual 2X miniland scale, the glider would be really huge. So against my natural instincts, I decided to make Nausicaä to the miniland 'standard'. In the past I've described the miniland standard as "horribly deformed". But this project made me realize that miniland is just another useful weapon in an AFOLS arsenal. When you only need to create the impression of a character, it's a very handy technique, and I use it quite often now! To create the pilot's wind-blown "hanging on" pose, I had to build her entirely studs-down, due to a lack of available brick types in medium blue.

"Spirited Away" – I wanted to capture the emotional state of the main character, as she goes from a nervous outsider to becoming part of the world around her. Hence, I created two versions of her, and developed a new larger head style that seemed to match the proportions used in the actual animation. No-Face's face would have been a lot easier if I'd just painted on the facial details; brick-building them took a very long time. His body was a lot simpler, though. Because it was black, I could get away with a fairly blocky outline, rounded off into a hood shape at the top using lots of long sloping bricks.

"Ponyo" – My dream here had been to recreate the rolling waves and leaping fish from the original chase scene. But that would have been an entire project in it's own right. So I settled on doing just the top of one fish, and adding a host of smaller details, such as the 'splashes' made from medium blue wing plates. Getting the contours of the big fish took some time to figure out, but a big bag of 1x6 curved slopes helped a lot.

"Laputa robot" – The first challenge here was choosing a color! The robot appears in several colors in the movie, none of which had a great match in the LEGO® palette. Light gray would have been the easiest to work with, due to the rich variety of bricks in that color, but it would have looked dull. So in the end I daringly chose dark orange, for a lovely rusted



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effect. This made the design hard to figure out, since the range of brick types in that color is quite limited. But fortunately, 1x6 curved bricks are readily available, which meant I had a means to create his curved torso. The limbs needed to be flat, and getting the outstretched arm to curve upward required a fairly complex arrangement of hinges and supports along the back (...it barely stays in place, fighting under its own weight!). The head was also tough, since in the movie it is domed, the face plate is a bizarre shape, and the eyes are different sizes. So I had to apply the careful art of approximation to create something recognizable. The moss effect was simply a matter of replacing certain dark orange bricks with lime green ones. The miniland figures of Pazu and Sheeta, and the addition of a tiny flower in the robot's hand, helped evoke the feeling of a key moment in the movie.

"Kiki" – Sticking to the miniland standard helped keep this one simple. A dark tan bush from a Prince of Persia set made a great broom end. But it took a while to gather enough dark purple to make her billowing dress – yet another color with a very limited selection of brick types! I actually had to rebuild

this one twice over to make it more solid. Building for strength is an important part of my process: it becomes impossible to handle or finish a model that explodes every time you try to add another brick!

"Cat Bus" – A quick microscale design with some tan and dark tan, that I placed flying over the top of the Laputa castle in the final display. I actually enjoy microscale a lot, and hope to try some more ambitious things at this scale some day.

"The Ohm" – To simulate this creature's complex overlapping segments, I built it in "slices", and used a lot of different sloping bricks. The slices snap together with a 1-plate gap between them, to keep them visibly distinct. The eyeballs connect to the body like cuff-links, with a brick that goes through a small hole and is secured from the inside by a jumper. This gives them a little slack, so they naturally hug the curves of the body. But if you shake the model, it sounds like a rattlesnake! I also designed a "mini" Ohm that uses only a dozen or so basic bricks, and posted instructions online so that other BrickCon attendees could build their own and bring them along for a



together. Also, many of the vehicles and buildings had been at the bottom of the list, and would probably not make the cut at this point.

Ordinarily, I spend a couple of hours a day scouring the internet for great LEGO creations by other builders and blogging about them. But with all the late nights, the number of posts was w-a-y down. But looking at other people's work is always so inspiring, it convinced me that I needed to try and step up to the bar that so many of my favorite builders had set, and try something big (...well, big by my standards!).

That's when I decided that the city of Laputa (from The Castle In The Sky) was to be the centerpiece.

special "OhmLUG" display. Brad Krick in particular created some hilarious customized versions, including Star Wars™ Ohms and Classic Space Ohms!

"Hayao Miyazaki" – I decided to play it safe and create the Miyazaki bust at the same scale as my Sarah Palin bust from 2008. I started by deciding how to do the glasses, and that determined the size of everything else. The hair bang is secured with two hinge bricks that allow it to hang at a realistic angle. Funnily enough, the bust didn't really look like Miyazaki when I first completed it. After some time I realized that the nose was all wrong. As soon as I added those huge flared nostrils, Mr Miyazaki was suddenly looking back at me from across the table!

"Princess Mononoke" – At first I couldn't decide what scale or style to adopt for San, and was actually working on 3 prototypes at once, until I decided to go with my 'traditional' style. Figuring out how to build the war paint into the face took some time, as did all the flowing garments. In the end I went for a studs-sideways approach for the body, which I find makes it easier to get more detail into clothing. I wanted a dramatic action pose, and somehow this one just popped into my head. Despite a lot of effort, I couldn't get her legs to actually attach to the body in those positions, so they are actually free-standing. And as with many of my regular LEGO® figures, the eyes are painted in with a black sharpie. Ashitaka was fairly simple to do, and was finished much more quickly. Recreating the ghostly worms on his arm was kind of a spur-of-the-moment idea, and since they had to be dark purple, there were only a limited number of ways I could do them.

Something Is Missing

At this point I was pretty pleased with the collection, but it still didn't seem like enough to make an impressive, busy diorama. And I still needed to build a landscape to house it all. That was really worrying me. In the end, the bust I created of The Man Himself was pretty convincing, but not large enough to make a good centerpiece. I needed to something with a 'wow' factor to bring the other pieces

It seemed like a crazy decision – I'd never created a building before, and now I was going to start by making one that flies and has no right angles! As always, the first step was to choose a scale. I usually find it's important to zero in on some small but vital detail of your subject, and figure out how you're gonna do that part, and then multiply up from there to determine the overall size of the model. In this instance, the vital details were the towers and archways set into the castle's outer walls. After much experimentation, I found a reasonable way to do the walls that could capture these details, allowing me to begin in earnest.

The dome at the bottom of the castle was clearly going to be another Bram sphere (well, half a Bram sphere), so building that was just a matter of ordering in the bricks and setting up a "production line" to assemble them. The real problem was gonna be arranging those ringed outer walls. There needed to be at least 3 rings, of the same basic design but different diameters, set atop one another, with grassy lawns in between. Once I had fabricated enough lengths of wall to play around with, I had to figure the exact width for each ring, that would keep them all in proportion, but also allow me to knit together a system of lime green wing plates for the lawns. The internal structure of the walls was also pretty complicated, with the various layers resting on top of one another like the layers of a wedding cake. In the end, the tree at the top was a very quick





n' dirty build, stacking bricks and plates by eye to create the overall shape. Adding all the little buildings was the fun part – so I saved that until last.

So there it was, my centerpiece. It looked great. All I had to do now was make it fly!

Show Time!

Summer ended, and BrickCon loomed. To ensure a smooth 'glide path' to completion, I sadly decided to call a halt to any further items on the to-do list, so that I could round off some other BrickCon projects and then figure out how to build the diorama.

But the reality was that creating a multi-baseplate landscape large enough to give each group of models room to breathe, was simply beyond my capabilities, my budget, and the time remaining. Plus, I just didn't have a clear picture in my head of what it would look like. So I decided to abandon that plan, and devise a non-LEGO® way of presenting Miyazakitopia.

So I decided instead to construct a set of round plinths of different heights, draped with fabrics, and placed on a larger bed of more fabric. But as the design of the plinths became more and more like fake sections of tree trunk, a thought suddenly occurred to me... "Wait a minute, I live in an area filled with trees! It's basically one continuous forest with some towns and roads sprinkled in." So I reached out to all the tree removal companies in my area, to see if anyone would be willing to save a few sections of trunk for me. In the end, with only a couple of weeks to go until BrickCon, one company said it could help out, and supplied me with a variety of interesting logs, bark still attached, covered in lovely mosses and lichens. Perfect!

I hastily estimated the heights I wanted for each log, and began the

task of sawing them down to size. For the "flying" models, I created poles using steel rods and lengths of doweling, set into wooden bases. The castle was holding up ok, but I just wondered if it was going to topple over at some point and smash to pieces! I took its central tree apart and hollowed it out to make the model less top-heavy. With a quick trip to the craft store to gather 'decorative' supplies, I was ready! I had no idea exactly how the diorama was going to look, since I hadn't had a chance to do a test run. I was just going to have to improvise...

And so the big day finally arrived. As I wheeled my collection of logs in on one of the large push carts, and started to set them down under the "Big In Japan" area for later, I could see the amused looks on peoples faces. Every so often someone would wander past them and

joke "Hey, that's not LEGO!". To which I would reply "I know! And neither is my fist!". Well if they thought using wood to present LEGO models was a weird idea, I knew they were going to be really confused when I started pouring sand on the table!

It took me many hours to 'install' the Miyazakitopia diorama. Once I'd decided on the exact arrangement of logs and models, made an ocean for Ponyo, and a desert for the Ohm, I then proceeded to build a Japanese garden around it all, filling in the gaps with mosses, dried plants and river rocks. Yes, it was very ostentatious! And the mess of discarded vegetation that lay on the floor around me was epic. It was almost like performance art. But I was very pleased with the end result, especially the way the earthy tones of the garden brought out the brighter colors of the LEGO models. Just like Miyazaki does it in his movies, I thought to myself...

So finally, after a year of planning, preparation and hard work, it was done. Now I could sit back and enjoy the reactions of the public, as they spotted their favorite characters, or tried to see how many they could identify. But as fun as that part was, what really brought it all home for



me was talking with other AFOLs at the convention who were also big Miyazaki fans. Miyazaki's body of work affects different people in different ways – often one person's most favorite movie turned out to be another person's least favorite! There's no single crowd-pleaser, and each of Miyazaki's movies seems to have its own little fan base!

But it was great to talk with others about that deep connection that we shared to these wonderful movies. And being able to bring some of those feelings to life in a new way through our other shared love, LEGO®, was the most rewarding thing of all.

So my fellow AFOLs, I guess the moral of this story is... Build what you love!

About The Creator

Iain Heath lives in Seattle, Washington, and is an active member of SeaLUG (The Seattle LEGO Users group). On-line, he operates under the alias Ochre Jelly.

Images of the Miyazakitopia collection can be found at...
<http://www.tinyurl.com/miyazakitopia>

To see images of Iain's other LEGO creations, you can browse his Flickr photostream at...
http://www.flickr.com/photos/ochre_jelly

Or to read Iain's blog, The Living Brick, where he features the best "character" creations by LEGO builders from all over the world, go to...

<http://thelivingbrick.blogspot.com>

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