

Alternates

Building alternative models with the parts contained in one set is probably the first facet that any fan of LEGO® develops.

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Some might know me under the name industrial designer, others by NK DeSign-er, but my real name is Nathanaël Kuipers. With so many talented LEGO® builders out there, there's a good chance that you've never seen or heard any of these names. If you ask people from the LEGO community to say in one word what they might know me for, I think 3 words come to mind: supercar, alternates and LEGO-designer.

That's correct, for a few years I worked in the product development department in Denmark as a designer for LEGO TECHNIC, which I think leaves the biggest impression to most people. I would rather be remembered though for the models I designed and the inspiration they gave. Especially that last bit is a major drive for me; I want to stimulate others to be creative, to inspire them with cool models that can be recreated by anyone. This brings me to one of the other words: alternates. What better way to motivate people by showing them what else can be made with only 1 set that they have as well! Of course the challenge is to get them so far, so the main driver to me is coolness, because a dull model is not very inspiring. This means that my alternates preferably have to be as big and impressive as the official model. I decided to use the Creator line for most of my alternates as those sets contain a lot of basic bricks and are focused towards building.

Besides a cool model I try to stimulate the brain further by including a tricky part in my models, built in an unusual way. This makes the build more interesting for me, but I believe also for others as they have to overcome this challenge. It's amazing to see what kind of inventive solutions people come up with when they try to re-create a model. Unfortunately this problem solving mentality seems to slowly disappear out of society as I have often received requests if I could just give the building instructions instead. It's like the trend has become consuming instead of studying and thinking for ourselves...

Anyway, back to alternate models. People often would like to know where to start and how to get ideas. For me there's no standard formula to do this, but I can share some scenarios.

It is however essential to begin with the right mind set by convincing yourself that with the available pieces you can build pretty much anything you want. (Although I personally prefer to stay in the same theme as the original model.) The 'only' thing to do now is putting them in the right place just like a jigsaw puzzle. It is also beneficial to do a bit of preparation before you start building by having a good look at the parts inventory; which come in pairs - as a model is often symmetric - and how many parts there are to change the brick orientation. Especially those last ones are highly valuable when building alternates, as it gives the possibility to look at, and use parts in many different ways, so use them wisely.

It's probably the easiest if you know in advance what you would like to build, but also if that is not the case, there's no need to panic. In some cases I don't know what I am going to build with a certain set either, so I just start to put some pieces together that might form an interesting shape. Other times I begin by looking at pieces from different perspectives to see what else they could represent. Generally speaking these exercises give me some ideas to expand on what to build. However it does happen sometimes that I get stuck at some point, so then I just go a few steps back or start anew. This is not considered a failure, but a learning curve as this experience gives me new knowledge and insights for next time on what works and doesn't work, and on the limitations of a set.

One last thing I would like to mention is the process of swapping elements, which is a key feature when building alternates. Basically it means trying to use every element available in the most effective way; either using them for constructive, or aesthetic purposes, but preferably both. Even when you think the model is done, it's always a good idea to experiment with swapping elements, because maybe there is still room for improvements. I recommend however to set a time limit on this, because I know from experience that otherwise the alternate will never get finished...

So all of this sounds nice in theory, but what about practice? Let me try to illustrate these scenarios with some examples of alternates that I've built over the years.



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When I wanted to build something with 4508 Titan XP in 2004 - when the line was actually not called Creator but still Designer Sets - it was difficult to decide on a direction, so I just started to put some bricks together in an unusual and interesting way. The shape that I then created looked like some high heel pump shoe, which gave me the idea to start working on a female humanoid. After I had spent a lot of time trying to get the proportions of the rest of the body right, the most important characteristic to do was left: the face. Besides the pony tail I used a pair of 1x1 'tooth' elements as eye lashes to accentuate her feminine side.

With the alternate of 4896 Roaring Roadster from 2006 it all started by looking at, and using parts in a different way. In this case 2 silver metallic 'engine' elements were used back to



back to form the logo on the grill of a car. It reminded me of a classic Mustang with all the chrome, so then the idea was to create a muscle car. It's quite interesting to think of that only 2 parts can be the inspiration to a whole new creation.

Sometimes it happens that I have problems solving the puzzle to build the alternate(s) I want. This was for example the case with the 4403 Air Blazers set from 2003. In the instructions manual there were also several ideas presented at the time for inspiration. One of them was a jet which had folding wings and other similarities with an F-14. Because I didn't like the looks of it, nor the simple mechanisms, I wanted to see if I



could come up with something better. I quickly found out that this was not so easy, because I had to combine a slick and fast looking design with some advanced mechanisms. My first attempt didn't last very long and after changing direction it resulted in a helicopter that was similar to the main model. My second attempt didn't go much better and instead I started to experiment with SNOT (studs not on top) techniques, which led to some futuristic flying hover vehicle.

Because I didn't give up on the jet and had learned some new tricks from other builds, the third attempt actually started to look like something. The tricky shape of the cockpit, the wing sweep mechanism and a retractable landing gear finally came together in one package.

Up to this day the model is still one of my favourites, because combining form and function worked out well, because it was a real challenge to design, and because I like the unusual construction, even though I now know that many solutions are officially not allowed.

Another of my favourite alternates was made from a set that came out in 2003 as well: 4099 Robobots. This set has special memories, as my first chance to build with it was in a workshop organised by the LEGO® Company. Because I felt under pressure, and because many elements were new to me, my first experience and result wasn't so great. Of



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course I had to buy the set when it became available, just to see if I could do better. In the end I created a transformer, which I called BlueSky. If only I had built this at the workshop... Up to this day I think it's not possible to create anything better with this set, so therefore it deserves to be a favourite on my list.

The last model which I think is worth mentioning is again from 2003, this time made from 4404 Land Busters. The coolness is in this case neither the functionality nor special features, but the size, the looks and the way it's built. Pretty much all the yellow bricks in this set have been used, and, just like the original, hardly any studs are visible, which is especially important considering that this has to be a slick looking Formula 1 car. To be able to achieve this, I had to integrate SNOT techniques all over the model in various directions. Because the different sections



not the most desired by builders due to a pretty basic parts palette, but therefore very rewarding when you can come up with an interesting model. I actually bought this set, because Joe Meno, who is responsible for BrickJournal, asked me to do an alternate for his magazine. In this case I had a hard time to get inspired so I first built the 3 original models. Suddenly I was 'in the zone' and that's why my first alternate of this set came together in pretty much no time [1]. After publishing this alternate, I continued to build with this set and ended up with 3 differentiated models compared to the originals. It just proves again that the only limit is our imagination...

Hopefully my little story has given some ideas and insights on how to build a successful alternate. If you'd like to get some inspiration or just see what else I have designed (we haven't touched on the word 'supercar' for example, which may be something for another time), you could have a look here:

fitted almost seamlessly in this difficult shape to create the smooth surface, I believe it also deserves a special place on the list of my alternates.

Maybe the reason why many of my favourite alternates are from the early period when I started to build again after my 'dark-ages', is because there were so many new things for me to discover and explore with. Trying to master new elements, new ideas and new techniques was great fun, especially because the whole SNOT concept was new to me. Nowadays it's more about refining the different skills.

So what to buy when you want to build alternates? Like I said earlier I recommend the Creator line, and sets in the range of this year's 5867 Super Speedster are probably a good start; they are not too expensive, but they still have a decent amount of useful elements to build some diverse models with. It also takes maximal only a few hours to create a good alternative, even though some strong design decision making is still required. I also had for example a lot of fun with the set from 2009 in the same price range: 6745 Propellor Power. Maybe

<http://www.brickshelf.com/gallery/industrialdesigner>,
<http://mocpages.com/home.php/174>.

Possibly you will find an alternate from a set that you have as well. In that case, what are you waiting for? I challenge you to build this, or another cool alternate from this set. Of course you can do the same with any other set you like. Give it a try and do not get discouraged.

I always say that any model you design and create yourself is much better than an official set, because it's based on your own ideas. Make sure you always remember that!

[1] Joe Meno put together some basic instructions here: <http://www.brickjournal.com/files/PDFs/6745.p38.pdf>
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