

Abandoned houses by Mike Doyle

Text and pictures by Mike Doyle

For the past year and a half, I have worked with LEGO® as a medium to create these intricate abandoned home sculptures. This was the first time picking up LEGO (besides playing next to my boys) since I, myself, was a young boy. I think I must have stopped when I was 12 or so back then. After recently visiting Legoland California, I caught the LEGO bug through an exhibit where kids build cars to race down a ramp. An hour and a half later, my wife and sister patently waiting outside came in to find me in a frenzy along with my nephews and boys building some crazy car. Well... that was it for me. As soon as we got back to the hotel room, I popped open my computer to see if adults were making anything as good as my crazy car. Oh boy, little did I know there was a whole universe of adult builders building the most fantastic things I have ever seen! I never dreamed so much could be done!!





It was then I knew there was something I could do here. I am an artist and graphic designer by trade and I felt there was something of that which I could infuse into my pieces ... if only I could build as good as these guys I saw online. Studying all the blogs and images I could find and pouring through fan made tutorials, I was able to replicate some more advanced LEGO® techniques.

Why work with LEGO rather than wood or some other more traditional medium? LEGO has many things going for it. It has a vast array of pieces to choose from. The instant gratification of making something (no glue, paint, tape or other messy material needed) is satisfying. Clicking away, piece after piece is mesmerizing and relaxing. Also there is a magic in seeing something that defies our childhood attempts. We all know how LEGO is “supposed” to look and act by our limited interaction with them. However, by applying some advanced techniques, one can create organic shapes that seems to contradict the modular, mechanical nature of LEGO that we know. Also, it really helps that I can do my art work and play with my kids simultaneously in many cases.

LEGO tends to let itself to buildings. They are angular and repetitive with occasional bursts of decoration and detail. Also, there is something magical about seeing things so large miniaturized down to LEGO scale. For me though, something was missing. While such works I saw on the internet were lovely and incredibly clever in technique (far beyond my ability), they seemed a somehow ordinary. I have always loved abandoned, dilapidated buildings and, after checking online, had found that this topic was not really being covered. Also, the topic of decay takes the rigidity of architecture and LEGO and breaks them down organically, which I saw as both a challenge and potentially visually arresting idea. Like a sculpture in a museum – bronze, marble or otherwise – I found that by limiting the color, I could let the eye focus in on the forms and patterns that decay and dilapidation. I began by choosing black

as a color, thinking that would be all I would use. But, soon enough, I began integrating white and two grays for contrast.

So began the Abandoned House project. I currently have completed three such houses, each one nearly doubling in scale. My first one, a burned home in the snow, took around 350 hours and 17k pieces. My second one was a Victorian home with overgrown yard and a tree which collapsed on the house. This took around 450 hours or more and around 50k – 60k pieces. The last piece probably took 600 or so hours and 110k – 130k pieces. This one was 5 1/2' tall by 6' wide. I work at nights after I get home from work and a little more on the weekends to make these pieces. It tends to take so much time and pieces because I build big. Scale is one of my main techniques. Building big allows for incredible detail which enhances this state of realism you can see in the pictures.

As I work, I look for and develop techniques to capture the organic forms I see in nature and natural states of decay. Since I do not use anything other than LEGO (no glue, paint, tape or otherwise) and don't alter the pieces, it can be very challenging to manipulate LEGO to this end. This can happen by accident or through lots of try and try again moments. Most all the elements in these pieces are done 2 and 3 times before I get it right. Often, I can come up with a technique while in the shower, walking or going to sleep. I think those moments where the mind wanders can be very fruitful times for innovation.

To me, this Abandoned House series takes on a few meanings. Firstly, I simply love to look at abandoned houses. Rotting wood, collapsed floors, displaced shingles, crumbling stonework all provide a textural experience that is exciting to look at. Decay produces patterns on patterns which is engaging as well. Secondly, I find the experience of looking at destroyed homes interesting because they show past, present and point to a future. One can imagine what a house might



have looked like as well as what it has gone through – that is the past. The mind even flips between past and present taking in dual images of the two.

Decay not only is interesting on a visual level but also as a reflection of the times. Many suggest that these LEGO® buildings are spooky haunted homes. When making them, the notion of haunted and spooky never occurred to me. But I would suggest something far more haunting than any Halloween can bring. That is, the state of our nation and the world. From greedy and corrupt financial practices which unapologetically have brought the world to its knees to deep rooted anger and stagnation in our government, there is this sense that things are in decay. An American dream filled with shiny white spindles and picket fences now seem weathered and beaten down. Vast inequities in our society, reinforced by government, paint a picture of diminishing returns for our children. So when I look at these pieces, this is what I see.

Interview with Mike Doyle:

HBM: Please introduce yourself to our readers.

MD: I'm 44, married with 2 young boys (who love playing with LEGO as well). I also am an artist and graphic designer.

HBM: Looking back, which of the three is your favourite?

MD: With any creative endeavor, I tend to like my most recent project the best. In this case, it's the Victorian on Mud Heap. It has the most detail and lots of places for light to cast interesting shadows. Actually come to think of it, my favorite is the one I have not done – the next piece. In my head, these pieces are absolutely fabulous. :D

HBM: ¿Which of the three has been the most difficult one technically speaking? Have you had to use new techniques for this third project?

MD: That is somewhat hard to say. Since I had started from scratch with regard to building knowledge (except the basics of course), my first piece was quite difficult. I really didn't know what I was doing. Each time I challenge myself to do something new and so it takes much experimentation and sweat to get where I want to.

The 3rd piece was the most difficult technically, but I had more experience under my belt by then. Some of the biggest challenges for me in this one was the mud, curtains, roof and

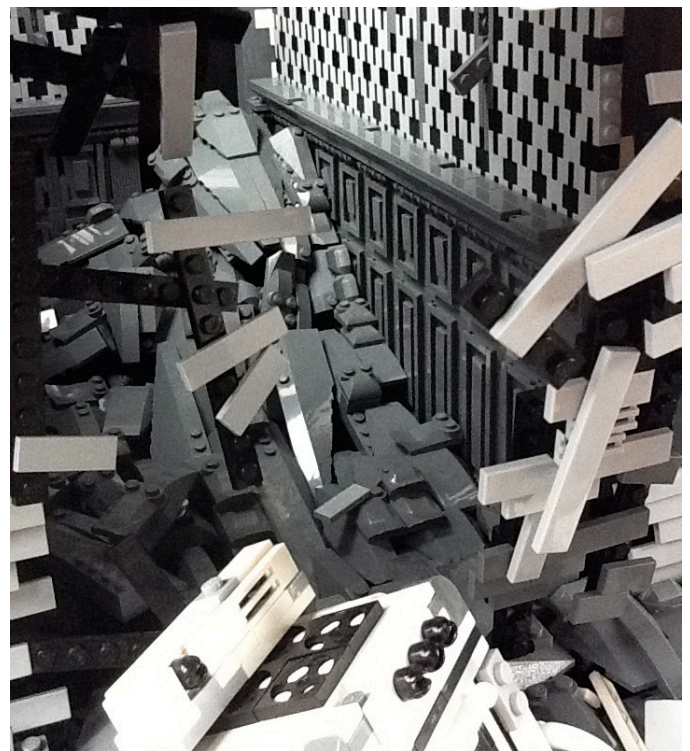


porch detailing. Oh, also in the beginning the wood siding on the house. I'll describe the process for each of these.

I knew going into this that the detailing of the mud was really important. I had researched what others had done, but unfortunately such techniques really rely on color – brown to be exact. That and other objects like brown colored legs on minifigs to convey mud. Since I don't use colors per se the form needed the most study. I began by using 4x8 plates and such, attaching curved wedge pieces to the surface for the mud detailing. To then get each plate angled, I used hinges. While the look wasn't bad, it proved to be too fragile. Any time I'd apply pressure for a plate, an older one would pop off its hinges. The whole thing was too rigid to work.

Eventually, I stumbled across a more flexible manner of angling the plates by using rigid hoses. I would attach a hose to the base and then another to the back of the plate. There are many pieces that one can use including 2x2 round plates. The holes in the middle fit well. This was enough to get a plate in the air. I would then repeat this with another hose on the back of the same plate. In this way, the combination of two hoses provided enough tension to keep the plate suspended in the air and was flexible enough to allow me to apply any complex angle I wanted. The main advantage to this technique was that it enabled plates to tuck against each other quite well. There was enough flexibility to give a little each time another plate was added to this matrix. I call this a "spongy" application. You could press down on these plates gently and, like a sponge, they could absorb a little pressure and slightly move one way or another. In the end, I'm not sure if the mud is 100% convincing, but no matter. It looks very nice and has a wonderful organic feel to it.

The curtains were another feature that I wanted to highlight in my piece. On flickr, I found a house from Legoland's Miniland in a San Francisco row of houses that had lace curtains. For this, they had used 1x2 grille tiles. This effect was nice but I soon realized there were other pieces that, when added to the grilles could really make a convincing lace curtain. On the bottom floor, I interlaced the grilles with 1x1 round plates. On



the top floor, I interlaced 2x2 turntables with 1x1 round plates and finished the bottom with the grilles (as hanging tassels). However, what I really had wanted to do was somehow convey that the curtains were folding in on themselves. With some experimentation, I found that by creating two levels of the back plate the light would cast a shadow which suggested folding curtains. The process was to take black plates (for contrast) and apply a vertical strip or two of 1x plates for the grilles, turntables and round 1x1s to sit on. Very simple and very effective, I thought.

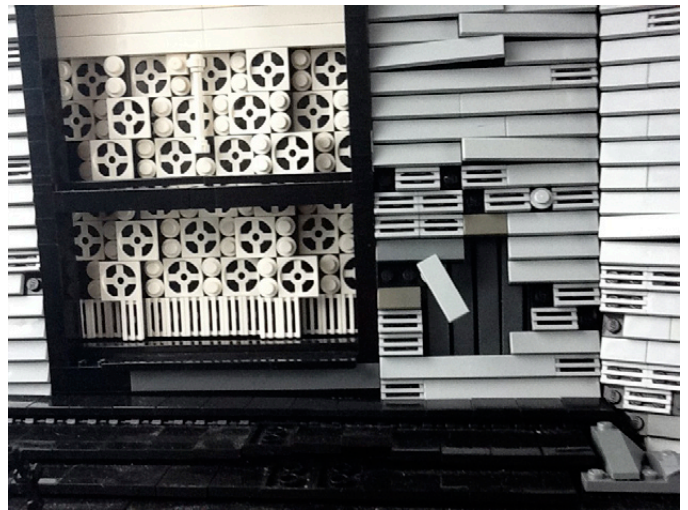
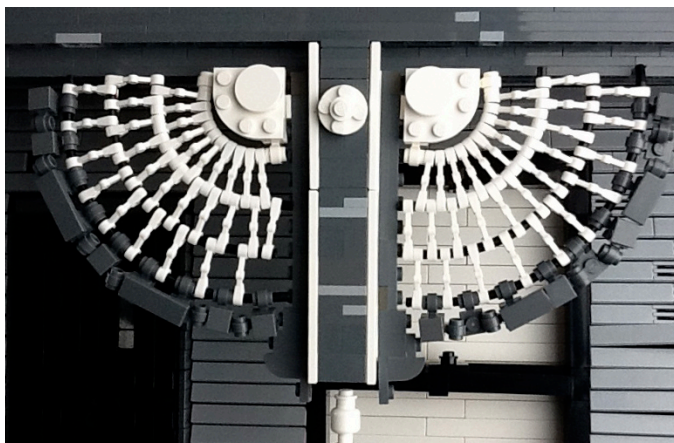
The roof was another challenge. In previous pieces I would use 2x2 tiles offset and stacked in a staircase manner. The problem with this is that I didn't have too much control over the tiles. Either they were pressed on solid or half pressed – which became a bit fragile over large spaces. Fortunately, I work bottom up in general, so I didn't have to deal with the roof right off. During the process of building, I ran across a piece at a LEGO® store pick-a-brick section which seemed perfect for roofing. It was a 2x3 tile with 2 clips. I saw right away that somehow this was just the right size to give proper overlap and had potential to pivot if I wanted (sort of like a half pushed tile, but with more control). Indeed, by attaching these 2x3 tiles to 1x2 plates with handles, I could pivot these shingles up and down as I liked to give a really convincing effect of wind blown shingles.

For the wood siding on the house, I did a lot of experimentation only to find out the answer to this is incredibly simple. Simply stacking (stair step style) 2x plates and then applying 1x tiles on top of this. Then I would take this entire wall and angle it so that the stair stepping would go straight up. I allowed the tiles to extend 1 stud on each side (right and left) of the walls so that when I butted another wall along side them, they would remain very tight.

HBM: What piece is repeated most in your constructions? Did you miss a particular type of piece that you wish LEGO would make?

MD: I definitely rely on 1x1 headlights and jumpers for all sorts of things. Also, I have really grown to love rigid hoses. There is so much one can do with them in terms of “spongy” design to create an organic feel. Finally, I love droid arms. They make excellent weeds and tree branches. Also, I found a great use for them on the two “fans” in the last piece (around the second story). Droid arms connected to hoses make fantastic wireframes as well, which I've yet to integrate in my pieces.

I can't think of a piece offhand that I would like, but I know when building, I constantly am thinking how a certain piece would be perfect for given situations.



HBM: Have you had to leave out any detail of your constructions because you could not recreate it in LEGO?

MD: Absolutely! :D In the last piece, Victorian on Mud Heap, the roof had a decorative shingle detail that I couldn't get right. Basically, shingles were a different shade and turned at a 45° angle to form a line and pattern.

I can't think of anything else for now, but I can say that working with decaying houses does have an advantage working with pristine structures. That is, if something isn't matching up exactly or working out well, I can just punch a hole in it or somehow distress to look like it was purposefully messed up. Hey, why kill myself here to get something “right”. If it looks good in the end, that is all that matters. The downside to creating a distressed moc is that one constantly has to stop a routine process to add some decay into the piece. It's fun, but time consuming.

HBM: Have you ever been tempted to add a touch of colour to your creations, to simulate rust, moss, dead plants...?

MD: No not really. I must admit it is frustrating at times not being able to readily use color to help describe surface detailing. For instance, the mud which I previously spoke of. On the other hand, I know in the end, the piece will be stronger for lack of color. This is my style and vision for these pieces. By removing color, only texture is left. That is what I want the eye to pour over.

HBM: In the fantastic interview Marcos Bessa did with you I read that although you built with LEGO as a child, your first contact as an AFOL was “Two Story with basement”. Where do you find the strength to start such a project basically starting from scratch?

MD: Ha, thanks! Believe me, if I had known what I was getting into, I would not have done it. But I was naive and everyone in the community does such wonderful work, it didn't seem like it would be that hard. To most, that house probably would not have been much challenge. To me, everything we take for granted was a new discovery to me.

HBM: Taking into account the amount of time this can take up, what do your family and friends think of this hobby?

MD: I think they think I'm a little nuts. My wife has been extraordinarily patient with me. In particular, with the costs. As you know LEGO isn't exactly.... cheap. It also is the sort of thing that I can't really tell people I do. I have to show it to

them. When they see it, their notion of building with LEGO® is changed.

HBM: Will you continue your series of buildings or do you have other projects in mind?

MD: That's a good question. Every couple of weeks I seem to change focus. I have wanted, from the beginning, to create minerals. These would be built large, and, like my houses photographed to get incredible detail. Corals interest me too as well as mushrooms. Things that have interesting texture and an organic feel attract me.

While I hope to continue the abandoned house series in the future, my next project will be of 3rd world slums. Here, again, you have decaying materials and an environment rich with textural detailing. Surfaces break unevenly providing all sorts of movement within the space. Interestingly enough though, while the previous series speaks toward abandonment, this series is made, in part, by habitation – habitation of those things abandoned. The pieces will continue to be monochromatic, large and very organic. I'm extremely excited to get started on this.

Websites:

<http://marcosbessa.blogspot.com/2011/02/en-mike-doyle-artist-of-moment.html> (interview by Marcos Bessa)

<http://mikedoylesnap.blogspot.com/> (where I show my work, talk about LEGO and how I make things)

<http://bumbleandbramble.blogspot.com/> (place to buy fine art prints of the work)

<http://mikedoylesnap.blogspot.com/2010/10/lego-primer.html> (a great introduction on getting into the hobby)

<http://www.remocable.blogspot.com/> (a gallery of LEGO work done by folks all over the world that I curate)

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