

LEGO® FRIENDS

City for Girls

By Jetro

Images by Brickset

When LEGO® Friends was announced in 2011 there were mixed reactions. One of those that stood out most (with the exception of the various groups that tried to use the product to further their personal campaigns) was one made on twitter saying: "There already was LEGO for girls. It was called 'LEGO'".

That comment was not only over simplistic, but also grossly inaccurate. When Godtfred Kirk Christiansen set down the "10 characteristics for LEGO" in 1963, one of these was: "For girls and for boys and while it is true that theoretically a brick is a brick and it's only your imagination that makes the difference, from very early on LEGO has made determined efforts to specifically cater for the female segment. No less than 5 strategic initiatives were taken before Friends to make LEGO especially attractive for girls, in the same way as other initiatives were clearly more targeted towards boys. So let's have a quick look at those "girl" themes:

Homemaker

The Homemaker theme was launched in 1971 and ran till 1974. A total of 30[1] sets were released that consisted mostly of furniture. The minifig had not been born yet and so the scale used was quite different from now, with built up figures made with a head, 2x2 bricks and hinges. This scale fell out of use when the minifig was introduced in 1978.



Paradisa

This subtheme of Town ran from 1992-1997 and a total of 18 different sets were produced. This was "LEGO for girls" in the truest sense in that the sets were slightly more oriented to girls, but still stayed 100% within the LEGO system of bricks and

were fully compatible with any other "traditional" LEGO. The sets included a lot of pink and other pastel colours. They were certainly not the only Town sets to include female minifigs and the paradise island atmosphere of the sets made it ever so slightly more difficult to integrate them with the rest of the sets, but certainly not too much of a stretch either.



Belville

Produced from 1994 to 2008 and with a subtheme called Fairy Tale between 1999 and 2001, these sets included minifigs that were about 10 studs tall and had more points of articulation than a standard LEGO minifig. They included many large, single purpose pieces, most of which did however combine with standard LEGO bricks. About 80 different sets were produced, that included many play elements, but required very little construction.



Scala

This theme had a small start in 1979-1980 with a few sets introducing LEGO® jewellery (bracelets and pendants), but it wasn't until 1997 that it really kicked off as what might be called LEGO's answer to Barbie. Although loosely based on the LEGO brick system, the sets included dolls that ranged from 8 studs (a baby) to 20-22 studs in height ("father" and "mother" dolls with many articulations), with clothing and lots of little details. In total about 75 different sets were produced, but many of the elements were very specific to the theme and are hard to combine with anything but their intended counterparts.



Clikits

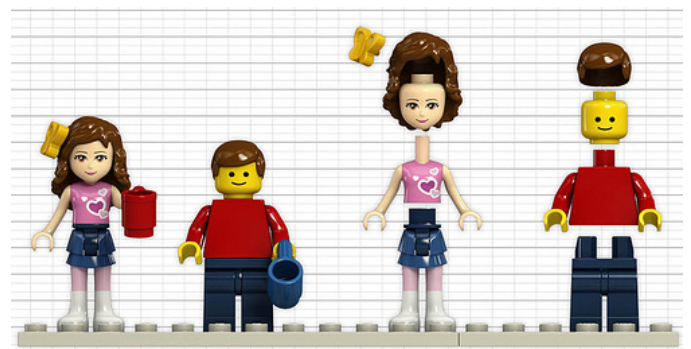
This theme was produced from 2003-2006 and consisted exclusively of sets to build and decorate your own jewellery and accessories. However, the parts in these sets were exclusively designed for the Clikits theme and do not in any way fit in with the LEGO system of building. A startling 74 different sets were produced, including such things as bracelets, hairbands and picture frames.



Friends

That brings us to LEGO's latest offering specifically directed at Girls: LEGO Friends. Launched in late 2011 (The earliest sets became available in France during the month of December), the theme is arguably closest to Paradisa in several respects. For starters the elements used in this theme are all perfectly compatible with the LEGO building system and there are no unnecessarily large or simplified parts. Also the sets require a fair amount of construction and there is some similarity in the pastel colours that have been introduced with this theme and those available in Paradisa.

The main difference from the aesthetic point of view is the creation of a new kind of minifig for Friends. Rather than creating a large, doll-like figure with actual clothes. Like in the Belville or Scala themes, the Friends minifig is only slightly taller than a standard minifig (about 5mm). This is not a very big difference as "standard" minifigs with dress (using the Slope 65 2x2x2) are roughly the same size. However, the mini-doll is a complete redesign from the standard minifig, making it a lot thinner, with curves, longer legs and a shorter torso, and using different connection sizes for hips and neck. The articulations also differ as the Friends doll can move head arms and hip, but not rotate the hands or move the legs independently. On the plus side the hair pieces come with several sockets to attach decorations like ribbons or bows. This does not mean that the Friends can't change clothes, because in each of the sets the main characters appear in they are dressed differently, and body parts (read clothing) can be changed between Friends



Picture by Huw Millington

According to David Lafrennie, LEGO®'s American PR director at the time of Paradisa, the line was very successful[2], so why it had so few sets and was discontinued after only 5 years is quite a mystery. One way in which Friends is different from Paradisa is in the strong background story to the theme has. Not only do the 5 main Friends characters have extensive biographies and very clearly defined personalities, the world they live in, Heartlake City, is also a well-developed community, centred around a number of common interests of the Friends. In addition, LEGO has launched a promotional DVD telling the story of how the Friends meet each other in Heartlake City and so providing a complete background for girls to start playing with the sets, either re-enacting scenes from the film or creating their own scenes following the model.

From its release, Friends has become an immediate success. Twice as many sets were sold as initially forecast for the first half of 2012 this no doubt has had an important impact in the 24% increase in Net sales compared to the same period last year. Meanwhile, the second wave of Friends sets has arrived and images of the sets for the first half of 2013 have been shown as well. LEGO plans the Friends Theme to become an evergreen for girls, the way LEGO City is for boys, so LEGO Friends are here to stay.

Adventure Camper – 3184

Let's have a closer look at one of the Friends sets to see how this theme differs from earlier offerings aimed at girls. Rather than creating sets with large, quickly assembled pieces, the Friends theme in general and the Adventure Camper in

particular have a very similar building experience from any other modern LEGO theme. This 309 piece set comes with a single instruction manual, but the pieces are prepacked in three numbered bags, indicating three separate building stages. This sets relatively easy targets while allowing (part of) the set to be played with before completing the entire build. Like most Friends sets one of the smaller bags inside the larger numbered bags contains a set of accessories, including knives and forks, cupcakes, a mixer, a frying pan and more. There is more detail to the set as it also includes such things as a turkey drumstick or a printed 1x1 brick that represents a juice carton.

Since the Friends dolls can't turn their wrists, they can't actually hold on to the handle bars of the bikes, but they can ride them reasonably well (although it looks like they are standing rather than sitting) and the yellow basket that can be attached to the luggage carrier makes for a cute detail. Friends dolls can't sit on studs either, so the design of the camping table and front of the camper requires the use of plates, but in the case of the camper these are enhanced with stickers to make them look like cushions. At times it can be hard to make these dolls sit without them toppling over, and in the front of the camper a special part has been used that fits right between the feet of the doll and keeps it in place. Also, since Friends dolls are slimmer, both dolls can sit next to each other in the compartment.

Small accessories tend to get lost easily and so the set includes a container that closes with a pink tile to store the cutlery and more storage space under the bed in the camper.





All areas of the camper are easily accessible, either by removing the roof over the front part of the camper (the only large piece in the set that could have been built up of other parts) or by opening the side wall of the living compartment or opening the roof that's built with hinges. The back door of the trailer can also be let down to easily load or unload the bikes and the surfboard, which, alternatively, can be fixed to the back of the camper.



Conclusions

After going over the history of LEGO® sets specifically targeted at girls and taking a closer look at one of the Friends sets, it looks like all the off-hand dismissals of the theme are not only inaccurate, but completely dismissible after a closer inspection of the product. Whether or not you like the new LEGO Friends dolls, the sets are well presented, fit in with the LEGO building system and contain a good variety of parts. The new colours are a welcome addition to the colour palette and the sets have been carefully designed to have both a well-polished finish and contain interesting building techniques. Friends has made a strong start. A total of 22 sets have been released in the first year, not counting polybags and other promotional items, and more sets have been listed for 2013. As mentioned earlier, Paradisa only had 18 sets in its 5 year lifespan. From the sales results, it looks like the intended audience is happy with the theme and new strategies are being developed to keep the theme going strong. I Sincerely hope that Friends is here to stay!

[1] Two additional Homemaker sets were released in 1980-1982 but only for the USA market

[2] <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/lego-a-s-history/>

Acknowledgements: LEGO SYSTEM A/S and Jan Beyer for the set.