

By HispaBrick Magazine®

Mel Caddick is an Australian LEGO® Designer, who works in Billund designing some of the most desirable sets by the AFOLs. We had the opportunity to interview Mel at the LEGO® Idea House during the visit we did last March to the LEGO facilities in Billund. In the following lines you will find explanations about her works and her thoughts.

HispaBrick Magazine: Name, age, etc.

Mel Caddick: Melody Caddick, Age 40, Australian, boyfriend, 2 teenage boys, I like to travel and the outdoors, LEGO build, love animals, meeting new people, I have a sweet tooth!

Dislikes: mean and grumpy people, roller coasters, scary movies.

HBM: Did you play with LEGO when you were a kid?

MC: Yes, I received my first set when I was 3 from my Grandparents – I reckon the set was bigger than me! I had a lot of LEGO sets as a child and I was always encouraging my mum to buy my younger brother LEGO sets as a child. Sometimes she would give me money to buy him a gift and I would buy something I thought would suit the both of us – she eventually figured this out. I was the sort of kid that if I wanted something and couldn't have it, I would build it out of LEGO bricks, so the more the merrier. If my brother wanted a car I would build him a car using LEGO bricks, or encourage him that he needed a LEGO car and not a Matchbox car etc.



HBM: Did you ever dream to be a LEGO designer?

MC: Yes. But I always thought it wouldn't be possible because I lived too far away. And at the time I was just a young kid and I didn't actually realise that there was a designer behind the products. I didn't know or understand how it was created. It wasn't until I was a little bit older that I understood there was a designer and that there were all these people who were assigned to a project. But I did think it would be cool to do that. However, I also thought it was created by a robot and crazy stuff you think of when you are a child. And when I realised the company was based in Denmark, I thought that's really too far away and I didn't speak Danish, so I didn't think it would be possible at all... (As a kid I grew up in both New Zealand and Australia). There's nothing cooler than being a kid, playing with LEGO bricks, thinking how great it is... only to grow up and work for that very same company you grew up with!



HBM: How did you join LEGO and have you always been in the same department?

MC: To begin with, I was living in North Germany (I moved there in 2005). But I joined back in 2008, which

is 7 years ago (in August). I initially joined 'LEGO® Serious play' and after that I joined the 'Licensing' department. After some time there, I noticed there was an ad/poster for possibly several design positions coming up. I applied, and I thought even if I am not successful, I still have a job working for the LEGO® Group and that in itself, is a dream! – You can do almost anything and still be happy to work for the company – but I thought I would give it a go. There were more than a lot of applicants for this so I didn't think too much about it, and then a group of us were chosen for a workshop – I was part of that lucky group so that was pretty exciting, and then I thought "OK, I'm really lucky and thankful to have gotten this far. But I don't know how much further I will get" I was trying to be realistic as there were many talented people attending, mostly designers with a design background, something I did not have. The workshop was probably one of the most stressful times of my life, occasionally thinking "will I get it, or will I not?" I mean, here was my BIG chance! And even though I was pretty nervous, I did my best. Sometime after, the results were out and a bunch of us were chosen and I was absolutely gobsmacked that I even got a position, so I was very, very excited, I couldn't believe it! I joined the 'LEGO® CREATOR' department and now I am currently in the 'LEGO Licensing and Extended Line' Department. My childhood dream came true! That was almost 5 years ago.



HBM: In your opinion, what's the difference between LEGO bricks and other toys?

MC: As I mentioned about when I was a child; with

LEGO bricks you can pretty much build anything you imagine. If you think about it, you can build almost anything you want thanks to the width, depth and complexity that it so extraordinary for The LEGO System in Play Of course I like other toys, products as well, but LEGO play is quite versatile. You can do so much with it.



HBM: What was the first set you designed?

MC: I think it was Brickley. I was working on several sets simultaneously. On Brickley and also on the 'LEGO Inside Tour' set; the Moulding Machine and of course one came out before the other one even though I was working on them around the same time. So it was one of those.



HBM: Was it difficult to design following the design rules?

MC: When I first started it was a little difficult as there is a lot to learn. You have to understand all the different guidelines, the LEGO culture and various things to take into consideration. Figuring out what you can and what you can't do. Especially if you are normally building as a fan and then suddenly start building for the company. Obviously they are two very different things and there are many things to take into consideration. I mean, it

wasn't extremely difficult, but it was a challenge trying to remember everything in the beginning and make sure you are doing it in the right way. Of course you want to do a good job. But it's a lot of fun. It's nice to build differently than as a fan - you learn a lot of stuff. And then you can apply that to your fan-type buildings as well, in which sometimes you end up doing subconsciously.



HBM: How do you get inspired when you design a set?

MC: By talking about it. Sometimes we have a brainstorm and we talk about the brief, what it is that needs to be created. You think about what you are going to build and how and you build on that. You get inspired by discussing it, as inspiration often snowballs from there. Of course also looking around on the internet and seeing what is out there – I prefer realistic visuals ...

HBM: You designed some sets for the LEGO® inside tour. What inputs did you have when you were requested to design them?

MC: The LEGO Inside Tour is an exclusive tour so these sets need to be exclusive as well. And they have to be something that is related to the company in a special way as well and preferably something that has never been released before. So it's an advantage to work on something like that. And hopefully, something that is exciting for the tour attendees. But I have done 2 of them so far, the LEGO Moulding Machines and the old LEGO plane. Upon visiting those areas, you come across pictures or information and that helped to expand the initial ideas, for example adding the control

tower for the plane, and the accessories and the old moulding machine to show both the first and back then the latest moulding machines.



HBM: Did you have any influence on the model chosen?

MC: Yes (as in the previous question). With the moulding machine set, I knew that we wanted to do a moulding machine (so I wanted to do one of the latest at the time) and I thought it would also be cool to do the old version as well, so we could have the old and the new. And of course it is not just to build a moulding machine, but if you can try to put a function or two in there as well - that makes it even better because it gives a bit of playability and realism.



HBM: Did you follow the same design rules as for a regular set or did you have more freedom?

MC: We had a little bit of freedom in the design – but once done, the set needed to fit into the box. We still have the same design guidelines. And of course, limitations. Things we can use and we can't use and so on ...



HBM: You have done a lot of animals: bear, rabbit, reindeer ... Are they your speciality? Why?

MC: Of course it could be a coincidence that I like animals, but these are the things that I have been briefed on. We get briefs from different people within the company and they may ask for something that has a minifigure or something that doesn't... And in this case it was something that didn't have a minifigure, and it was going to be some sort of sculpture - like a bear or a reindeer. If we were building it for ourselves it would look different. But because we are building it for children it has to be in a particular way and we have to make sure that it makes sense in a building instruction and for the children that are actually building it. But I wouldn't necessarily call them my speciality.



HBM: Taking a look at your latest designs it seems you are focussed on tiny sets, like polybags, seasonal sets, micromodulars. Do you feel more comfortable designing tiny sets than bigger ones?

MC: This is the line of work I do, a lot of promotional sets and gift with purchase etc. That's what my area does. So my work simply reflects what I'm briefed on.

We do a lot of these particular kind of sets for companies and they have to be at a certain size. I don't mind what size set I work on. I've built some larger sets and I've built some smaller sets – maybe the challenge is more with the more smaller sets because the FMC is so small and you think “what can I build out of that and include loads of detail that a young kid can also build?” and that would actually make sense and will make people go “oh, that's so cool!”.



HBM: How does the cost (FMC - Full manufacturing cost) or the number of parts influence the final design?

MC: If you have a lot of FMC then naturally you have more options. If you have a little FMC then you are limited to how much you can spend, but yet again, there are many points to take into consideration, because there's a certain type of balance you need: it needs to fit onto the building instructions and packaging, machines, does it fit the age mark etc.. There's all sorts of different things to take into consideration and that has an impact on the design as well. Maybe you can't use a large element because it doesn't fit in the box or the bag and so on ... So we have to be creative to suit all needs.

HBM: What do you think is more important in your models, the variety of colours or the variety of parts? (Thinking about AFOLs)

MC: Of course we think about the AFOLs, but it has to match the age mark, so if it's 6+ it has to be buildable for 6+ kids.

We take the AFOLs into consideration by maybe putting in new or rare elements, but of course that also comes down to cost. Some of the new elements are a little bit expensive because they are not so commonly used yet.

When it comes to colour, I try to put in a variety of colours, but there are also other people who apply their input as well based on various principles. With the animals for example, we had to add a little bit more colour in there. Of course it would be nice to have an all tan bear, but then children will find it difficult to see where the next steps are, so you have to throw in a bit of extra colour, even adults get a bit thrown off at times. There are some points we take to help the children, together with the building steps.



HBM: Where is the limit of detail when designing a small set?

MC: That depends on the age group and I work with several age groups. We can't have too many small elements if it is a small age group, because it may be difficult for the children to place some of those elements. Small parts add to the detail of course, so there can be a limit, but we also have to be careful

of what elements we use because they can be expensive or maybe they don't make sense.



HBM: Do you get any useful feedback from the AFOL community?

MC: Yes. I like reading the criticism especially when it's constructive. For example when somebody says they don't like something about a set, but they also say why they don't like it and offer suggestions and useful advice, that helps us because although we can't take everything into consideration, we can make an overview of what people are saying, what they like and don't like and hopefully apply those things to the next sets we do.

Of course we can't make everybody happy – it's difficult to make something that everyone will like, but that is just how it is. Simply, the kids come first, they are the ones we create for and the input we get from them is hence imperative.



HBM: What is your preferred set from the ones you have designed?

MC: I don't actually have a preferred set to be honest. But I really enjoy doing new models that we haven't done before. I think that is because when I'm designing a set there are many points we need to take into consideration, but also because there are particular elements I would like to use, but maybe they are not available until later on so I have to use whatever is available at that particular time and that can be OK, but it can also be a challenge. Sometimes you read feedback on forums and you think "yes, I would have liked to use that element, but I couldn't at the time, because it wasn't available or didn't provide what we needed, so this is what I had to use". Or maybe someone asks about a particular element in a set and they think "why have you used that?" Maybe the other element wouldn't work or maybe with the other element, the model wasn't stable enough.

HBM: What feelings do you have when you see a kid with one of your sets and a smile on their face?

MC: That's the best and my ultimate goal. That's why we are here. We are here to create these sets for kids. When a kid has that set in their hands and that smile on their face (especially after building it), that's exactly what we are trying to do - make them happy and hoping they have a great LEGO® experience ... It's inspiring!

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