



# Interviews

## Interview: LEGO® Friends

By HispaBrick Magazine®

Pictures by HispaBrick Magazine® and LEGO® System A/S

LEGO® Friends was launched in 2012. Since then, it has become in a great success, being actually a core theme of the LEGO® product range. We had the opportunity to chat with two designers of LEGO® Friends, to understand what's behind this huge success.

**HispaBrick Magazine®:** Can you please introduce yourselves?

I'm **Fenella Charity**. I'm the senior design manager for LEGO® Friends. I've been on the line for ten years this year. I was part of the original team developing what became LEGO® Friends. In that time I have been a designer making models and now my job is more to lead the team and give art direction and design direction on the models.

My name is **Ricardo Silva** and I'm from Portugal. I'm a Senior Designer in LEGO® Friends and I've been working on this theme for the past five years.

**HBM:** You say "what became Friends". How did Friends get started?

**FC:** The original brief was to create a line of toys that would appeal to girls that were not engaging in LEGO® at that point. We were very aware that there were (and are) girls buying LEGO® City, Star Wars, Ninjago; there are lots of lines that we offer that are interesting to girls, but there were a lot of the girls out there in the world were still not coming into LEGO®. We set out on a mission to create a line that would appeal to girls that didn't own LEGO® already. The Brief was to create a truly LEGO® and a truly girly experience. We developed the concept during four years and did a huge amount of research and we talked to parents and kids all over the world. That is also how we developed the minidoll and everything around the

theme, because we saw the need for it.

**HBM:** Before Friends there was Scala, Paradisa ... What makes Friends so different?

**FC:** I think it is all about the brief we were given, to make it truly LEGO® and truly girly. Obviously we had success with Scala and Clickits and other lines we have done, but LEGO® Friends has seen a different scale of success and that is because we still use the same system, the same bricks as we have always done and it fits into the same toy box as other LEGO®. In the past, with Belville and Scala especially, the scale was very different and we used bigger pieces. That wasn't necessarily a truly LEGO® experience.

**HBM:** Why is LEGO® city not sufficiently attractive for girls?

**FC:** That's an interesting question. Obviously, it is attractive to some girls and we see that with Friends and City you can combine things and they can live in this world together and kids will do that at home. For the target group that we were going after initially we made a line that was with the minifigure. We saw that the girls that wanted to play with LEGO® Friends wanted to reflect themselves onto the figure and the minifigure was slightly too far from reality for them. It was impossible for them to shrink down and become a Friend in the universe. That was a real eye-opener for us. We would have liked to make the whole Friends range with the minifigure – that would have been very straight-forward for LEGO® to do. We wouldn't have had to invest in the new minidoll. But the testing showed very clearly what we needed to do to recruit the new girls. The other thing we found during testing was the level of detail that we needed to create was really important. You can see we prioritise interior details and small build details where City may want to prioritise different play types in their models.





Comparison between the prototype and the real model of the set 41314 - Stephanie's House

**HBM:** And are the pastel colours also important?

**FC:** Obviously the colour palette is very different. I wouldn't necessarily say it's pastel, but it is very vibrant and bright and it is multi coloured. The six new colours[1] that we added in 2012 did have some pastel shades, but that was so we could create tone in tone in our sets. We would always use them together with a darker colour to create a light-dark contrast. (You can see in the models in front of us) we always make sure that we have classic LEGO® colours in the set as well, like red and yellow, and bright colours like lime green and warm yellow. It's important that we have a variety of colours in the sets.

**HBM:** Why is the minidoll so much less articulated than the standard minifig?

**FC:** That's really due to the prioritisation of realism as the most important thing. We worked as hard as we could to make the hip work.

**RS:** At the time we tested a lot of different figures and some of them had rotating hands and individually moving legs, but when you do that you need a certain amount of material around those elements. The figures needed to have larger limbs in order to achieve that kind of functionality and that wasn't appealing when we tested them. So, we had to go back and skin the arms a little more, to make them more elegant and realistic. Then we had to decide in which direction we wanted the clip of the hand. We realised that most of our accessories (more than 75%) were using the hand clip vertically, so we decided to do it that way. All the new accessories we have created until now for our minidoll can be used vertically and of course the minifigs can use them also.

**FC:** We had a lot of discussions about the hands. The minifig is quite abstract and it is OK that it doesn't look like a real person. It's fine to have a skin-coloured arm with a kind of sleeve at the end of the wrist. But for us it wasn't appealing. We needed to make it look a bit more natural and realistic. The hip function also required so much material around it that it wasn't possible. The studs on the bum couldn't be done with the geometry we needed for the figure.

**HBM:** Where did the names of the 5 original Friends come from?

**FC:** They were randomly picked. It's not as if anyone has a daughter called Olivia. The most important thing and what took the longest time was to get globally recognised names. Names that could work in China, in the US, Germany or Spain without too much trouble. We had a shortlist of names and we also had to do legal checks to see if there were any other brands using these names for their main characters. There are lots of things that narrowed the list down. There was also the consideration that names ending in a vowel sound very feminine and more appealing.

**HBM:** Why do the dolls have names, because there often aren't any specific names in other LEGO® themes?

**FC:** For us in LEGO® Friends it is because we are building a world that kids can relate to and that means that the characters are an entry point for them. We've built up the characters for the 5 Friends – we know who each one is and we know that all the kids that love our brand now relate to those characters in some way, whether it's one of them or all of them. It was important that there were five girls that represented a selection of society that could be an entry point for the consumers coming into LEGO® Friends.

**RS:** I think that the main reason was to make them relatable, so the kids could say "oh, Andrea; she's a friend of Olivia – my friend is also like that because she likes the same things". That way it is closer to reality and they feel they belong there. That's one of the things that girls really like. They like to belong to Heartlake City, to belong to this world. So the fact that the five Friends have a name is to make them closer to reality and to make the girls feel they are there, together with the main characters.

**HBM:** There was only one male character in the first series of LEGO® Friends: Olivia's dad. It was a completely female society. Now there are some more boys in Heartlake city. Has anything changed in your brief? Why have more boys been included?

**FC:** It was always intended that Heartlake City would be a fair representation of society. There were several reasons why we only had the dad in the first year. One of those that we simply had to establish this universe. The five Friends took a lot of focus there and we put them in a lot of different models. Also, in terms of new pieces we created a whole new figure platform. At that point we didn't have a boy torso – we hadn't had a chance to create that. But it was also something we consciously decided. The boy was very new when he came out and we didn't want to go all in with everything new straight away and so we introduced him in 2013. Now we have an increasing number of boy figures in our sets, but because the five friends are the core of the brand there will always be a bit more focus on those girl characters.

**RS:** The boys are not the main characters. It's just like with other girl characters in the theme. There are other friends besides this group of five, but they always come in like the boys do. If we need an additional character, we bring in a boy or a girl. They are a kind of "fillers" to make the story a bit bigger.

**HBM:** There's a much wider variety of kinds of builds in Friends than in City. While City brings out yet another police or fire station, Friends creates a much more complete cityscape. Is that something that comes from the designers or is that a demand from marketing?

**RS:** We need to remember that City also creates its products for kids and those kids really like to play the police and firemen and that's why it comes up so many times. Even so, City is also always experimenting new fields. Right now, there is Jungle Exploration and there is always something different. Of course they also have their classic play, but that's because the customers really want it. As for Friends, since the beginning we have always tried to bring new things and every year we brainstorm what should be the next place the girls want to go to. In these brainstorm sessions we always come up with new things. And with every new thing we evaluate and test it to see if it is strong enough. We did that with the amusement park and with the snow theme and we could see in the tests that the kids were really happy to have a fresh new idea. For us that's amazing and we love it, because it allows us to use our imagination and explore new things.

**FC:** There will be things that repeat (e.g. the swimming pool or the vet), because they are classic themes for our line, but I think we are also very lucky that we get to invest in things like architectural styles. Our consumers are looking for different things than City consumers. That variety comes from the fact that Heartlake City is a very rich and detailed universe. With Stephanie's House, for example, we could explore a new architectural style and still do a house. We know that a house is going to be a good product for the core city, and that's why we were able to add a lot of new detail.

**RS:** Answering the end of the question, the decisions end up being a combined effort. The designers start working and exploring models, but then we have to talk with marketing and see if there are good things that we can take out of it, and then we move forward.

**HBM:** Can you tell me a little more about the design process of a typical Friends set?

**RS:** This was the first take we had on Stephanie's house. We have been trying to bring up one of their houses every now and then. We've had Olivia's, we've had Emma's and now we have Stephanie's house. This was one of the first concept houses that we created.

**FC:** Normally we have a brainstorm, but we might also get a brief from marketing saying we need another house for this year, because Emma's house is not going to be on the shelf anymore. Then we would think about which character we would like to make the house for this year. In that process we might build on Mia's house and Andrea's house, but Stephanie's house would also be in the mix. Then we evaluate what different influences these five friends would have, where they live within the city. We start with references from the

Internet and references from our own experience sometimes. We define a colour palette. You can see that quite early on this is Stephanie's colour palette and we were quite sure from the beginning that her house should be these colours and should go with her personality.

**RS:** We also make sure that we have the details that belong to the character. We have the bunny that's one of her pets, we have the tennis racket inside and there are some more things that are related to her in the bedroom.



Five original LEGO® Friends characters

**FC:** You can also see that one of the briefs from me to the designers was that we wanted the architecture to look differently from what we had done before, in Olivia's house and Emma's house. One of the big innovations in that architecture was the windows. In this first model you can see we were using existing pieces from LEGO® City – not something we had used in LEGO® Friends before – but it already gives you an idea of how the windows can completely change the look of a model. As a result we realised that we really wanted this bay window at the front. But we felt that the windows were still very closed and a big selling point for us is that you should be able to see through the windows to the details inside. Then we started thinking about decorating the window so that it appeared to have a lot of frames, but it didn't actually. Of course that also helps simplifying the building experience a little bit, because it was getting a bit complicated.



First design of the bay window

In the second model you can see it is more of a Creator Expert build where we have used hinges to create the window and it is quite a complex build, which means you have to spend a lot of bricks to get the window to look the way we wanted. In the end we used a new frame that LEGO® City developed, making it a great building experience. So you can see the windows were an important point all through the process.



Second design of the bay window

The same happened with the swing. From early kids tests we could see that it was a really important function.

**RS:** Of course there were things that changed during the concept phase. We had a barbecue or even a pool on the top, but those were things that we had done before, so we could live without them, allowing us to bring something new. We

came up with a balcony in front of the house and of course we had the new staircase that you can see to the side. That is a new piece that we developed in Friends and we wanted to make the best use of it. This was the right moment to do it. We could use it in the house. It also hinges, which helps us to move things around and make it more active. It brought something new and fresh to this model.

**HBM:** It's a two-piece staircase. I always feel slightly uncomfortable when I see large pieces and think: "was that really necessary?"

**FC:** There's a balance of course. What is really important is that for the kids this is instant play. As adults we could spend quite some time building a beautiful elaborate staircase and we might do that in a Creator Expert model, but for our primary target group especially, this is such an easy way to create stairs and immediately provide play. You can see the same with our slides. We have these big slide pieces and they are one of the most popular pieces in our assortment because they create and instant function and provide instant play. Of course it's a balance and we don't want too many of those big pieces.

**HBM:** How important is the TV series to the brand?

**FC:** It is pretty important to the brand and, I think, as we move forward it gets more and more important. It is what creates this idea of this universe coming together. Also, it is a new



Fenella Charity and Ricardo Silva with the first (right) and the second prototype (left) of Stephanie's House

way to recruit kids that don't know about LEGO®. We've had quite some cases where kids had been watching the series on Netflix and then gone to the toy store and seen that it is a toy and have come into the universe in that way. Of course we have massive LEGO® fans out there, kids and adults alike, but there are lots of kids out there that don't really know we exist.

**RS:** We also work together with the people that are writing the TV series when we are building the model. Sometimes we just need to add little details into the models in order to make a clear connection with the TV series episodes.

**HBM:** Friends is much more rounded: the minidolls, the animals, even the builds. Does that make it more real?

**FC:** The curved aesthetic is definitely something that we want to continue because it is something that differentiates us from other lines in LEGO®. It makes us have a defined tone of voice.

**HBM:** Friends minidolls are now also being used in other themes – Elves, Disney Princess, Supergirl... Does the Friends team also work on that or are those separate design themes?

**FC:** The minidoll is supposed to be a foundational thing, not exclusively attached to Friends. Of course it is because we launched it first, but we see the minidolls as having lots of potential across all themes. Some of the original team members that worked on what became Friends went on to work on LEGO® Elves and Disney Princess and we share insights. I think the main thing there for us is how we differentiate. We have very different target groups within the business with the minidolls. Friends would appeal to a different kind of kids than Elves or Princess. We really try to make these product lines really diverse and try to differentiate them as much as we can.

**HBM:** How many elements can you create every year?

**RS:** We usually make new elements in case of need. If we are developing a theme and we see the opportunity to create a new element that we really need then we can do it. If we see that there is no need to create a new element then we don't.

**FC:** In the beginning we of course had a lot of new elements, because we had to create the minidoll and I think as the years go on we will be injecting them as necessary.

**RS:** We actually have a lot of really cool elements that we have developed in LEGO® Friends. I have a sample of them here.

**FC:** Quite often kids not necessarily realise that maybe Friends develops the animals or the scooter... One of the elements we are really proud of is the hot-dog bun. Angry Birds launched it before us, but we developed it.

**RS:** The same happened with the scooter. It was in a LEGO® Expert set (the Parisian Restaurant) before it appeared in a Friends set.

**FC:** Also the quarter tile, which we decorated as a water melon and a pie and now as a pizza. It also has been an awesome element to build details.

**RS:** Elements like these can be used across LEGO® and that is very good for us.

**FC:** Also the Chameleon – we developed it, but then Disney Princess had Pascal from Rapunzel and they used our piece. The same happened with the fox that was also used in Elves. Sometimes we also develop functional pieces. In the Amusement Park for example we had the drop tower and we created the piece that went with the pole.



Elements designed by the Friends team

**HBM:** The criticism has died down a bit since the start of Friends but there are still people saying that Friends is sexist. What would you say to those people?

**FC:** I don't really have anything to say to them, but I have a very strong feeling from all the work that we have done that we are really proud of our work and we feel it is the right thing for the consumers we are appealing to. At the end of the day when you do a kids test and see how excited they are about the product, then you know that you are doing something good.

**HBM:** Is LEGO® Friends proof that LEGO® is a toy for all genders?

**FC:** LEGO® has always been a toy for all genders.

**RS:** This is just another example of a LEGO® toy for all genders. Anyone can play with it. We could see this really well in the competition we had at the beginning of the year,

the LEGO® Friends designer competition. We asked the kids to build a place where the LEGO® Friends could go and hang out. The competition was open for two months and we expected to get around 10,000 entries. We ended up having 28,000 entries and this was a really amazing score for us. And an interesting thing about it is that we had thousands of entries from boys, so this ends up proving that LEGO® is for everyone.

[1] Lavender; Medium Lavender; Dark Azure; Medium Azure; Yellowish Green and Light Aqua.

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Jetro de Château interviewing Fenella Charity and Ricardo Silva



Interior of the first prototype



Interior of the second prototype