LEGO® Architecture

By Iva Pavlić

LEGO® and architecture have always been connected. Many architects have built their first buildings out of LEGO® bricks and played with shapes and colours. LEGO® Town or City has had buildings following contemporary trends, but it was not until 2007 that LEGO® started the Advanced Models series, which contained recognizable buildings such as the Taj Mahal built from thousands of bricks. They may seem like the predecessors of LEGO® Architecture, but they were designed in a different way. Sets with such a large part count tended to be realistic in terms of shapes and details, while Architecture sets capture the essence or main features of a building in as small a number of bricks as possible.

The LEGO® Architecture series started with Brickstructures in 2008, followed by Landmark and Architect subthemes. Five years later the 21050 Architecture Studio was launched. Its idea was different from that of the other sets, which were meant to be built and displayed. Architecture Studio contains 1210 pieces, mostly white with a few transparent exceptions, and it explores the architectural concepts of famous buildings with the help of a 272-page booklet, which meant it was meant to be rebuilt over and over again.

A new series emerged in 2016 – the Skylines – groups of several buildings characteristic of Venice, New York, Berlin… From a simple line, they transformed into three-dimensional compositions. In Sydney the Opera breaks the line, while in London the Eye is in the second row.

You can easily tell LEGO® Architecture apart from the other sets just by looking at the boxes: black with white letters and a single picture on the front, they are very elegant and stronger than the others. The biggest con is that their contents do not always justify their size.

The part count ranges from 57 up to Robie House's 2276, but the average is around 500. Each of the sets contains a black tile with the building's name. The building instructions are smaller than usual, printed on thicker and shinier paper, and are also black with white letters. The booklets contain the basic information and a description, along with photographs of the real building and its features.

21002: Empire State Building, 2009.

The Empire State Building is a skyscraper built in 1931 in New York. Back then, the footprint of a building was determined by the surface of the land it was built on, in order to ensure enough air and sun in the city's streets. That is why this art deco skyscraper has a distinctive shape – the upper floors are smaller in footprint, making the building shrink towards the top, since the height was limited only by the day's technology. Although there was no such law outside of New York, the style spread over the globe, wherever skyscrapers were built in the 1920s and '30s.

The model is built using bricks and tiles, and parts of it are inset by half a stud using jumpers. This technique and the monochromatic colour scheme emphasise the shape of the sturdy and stable 26cm tall model. Just like the real skyscraper, the model is topped by an antenna, which is the reason why the skyscraper 'stretched' to 443.2m, becoming the world's tallest building. It kept the title for 36 years, until 1967 when the Ostankino Tower was built in Moscow.

21003: Seattle Space Needle, 2009.

The Space Needle is an observation tower in Seattle, built for the 1962 World's Fair and designed as a tripod with a central pillar, making it sturdy and highly resistant to winds and earthquakes. The Skycity restaurant sits at a height of 150m and rotates like a flying saucer, completing a full turn every 47 minutes. The building is 158m tall, while the LEGO® model stands 22.2cm tall.

The Space Needle is the theme's smallest set, with only 57 bricks, but no set is more surprising in its parts selection: they are mostly Technic and all light bluish grey, apart from the black tiles in the base. The build is pretty simple and fast, but there is something unusual here as well – the 160mm lengths of hose need to be cut to 133 mm. They are inserted into connectors at the base and under the restaurant and further secured by a pulley (4185). This technique produces the characteristic tripod with bent legs which makes the model as solid and stable as the real building. The rotating restaurant is built from two simple radar dishes (3960) between which is a gear (3649), and it sits on a pillar made of axles and connectors. Smaller dishes and an antenna finish the top.

It may be the smallest, but it is also the most unusual and visually most interesting set of the theme. Although it is just a display piece, it begs you to fiddle with it, take it apart and put the hoses and gears back in place.

21011: Brandenburg Gate, 2011.

The Brandenburg Gate is a triumphal archway built in 1791 in Berlin. On each side it has six columns, forming five passages. Above them is a massive cornice on top of which sits a quadriga – a four-horse chariot ridden by the goddess of victory. In 1868 a wing with more columns was added to each side.

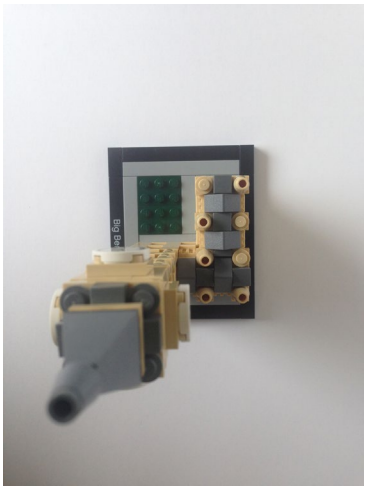
The massive doric columns on the model are built out of tan round bricks and tiles. The frieze, built using round and regular plates in two rows, is the same footprint as the gate itself. On top of this is the cornice, one stud wider, thanks to the use of jumpers. The quadriga is a fantastic combination of a travis brick (4733) with a round plate on top, and the horses are grey taps (4599b).

The wings are tan bricks and fences, while their roof is a bit problematic: it is built out of sand green cheese slopes. Although the corners are well built, the gables are not – the top of the lower slope is taller than the bottom of the upper slope, which gives the roof a 'spiky' look.

21013: Big Ben, 2012.

Big Ben is actually the bell, although the full tower is also known as Big Ben. It was built in 1859 in the north-western part of the Palace of Westminster in London. It was built in the neo-Gothic style. The lower 61 metres are built out of brick and covered in stone, whereas the upper part of the tower is made of cast iron. The total height is 96m and the model is 19.4cm tall.

Most of the model is built using the SNOT technique: grille tiles held onto travis bricks and framed by round bricks and tiles. This way the grooves nicely represent the elongated windows of the tower and the palace next to which it stands. This is not compromised by the 'floors' built out of plates, probably thanks to the monochromatic colour scheme. The same building technique works surprisingly well for the concave corner of the palace. The roof of the palace is built out of alternating dark bluish grey double slopes and 1x1 tiles. Combined with tan round plates, they emphasise the Gothic style on the edges of the roof. This set's weakest link is the clock. It protrudes out of the tower by two plates and the standard black and white printed clock face just doesn't cut it here. Perhaps the most elegant part of the set is the top of the tower, with its tan and dark bluish grey tiles, plates and round plates topped off by a quadruple 2x2x2 slope (3688) and a 1x1 cone.



21020: Trevi Fountain, 2014.

The construction of the Trevi Fountain was finished in 1762. Its backdrop is the Palazzo Poli, with massive Corinthian columns which stretch over two storeys. In the middle is a triumphal arch in the centre of which is Oceanus in a two-horse carriage. The fountain is 49.15m wide and 26.3m tall, and the model is 26cm wide and 19cm tall.

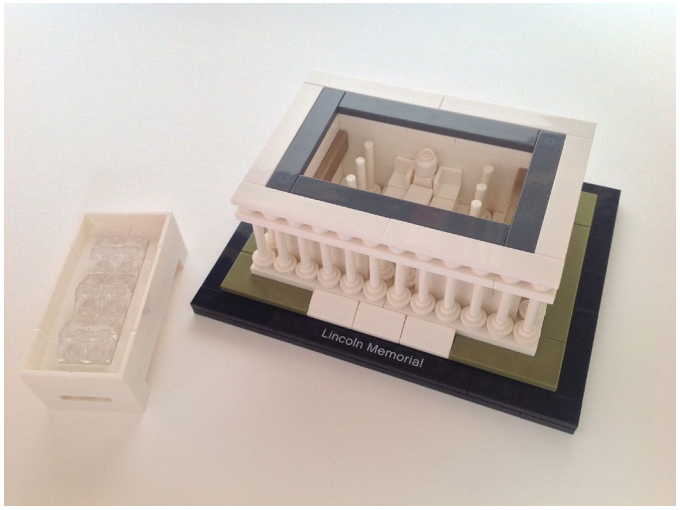
The model is white with grey rocks. In the monochrome colour scheme, trans-blue sparkles like real water and glass. It is hard to pick a favourite detail: the trans-blue plates used for the windows, plates with handles (60478) for the balconies, single tiles for the pilasters, making the elongation effect stronger… The niche is built using an arch brick and bars, while the frieze is built using jumper plates which offset it by half a stud. Apart from the three central ones, the sculptures are cones (4589b) on plates. The triumphal arch has another frieze built out of white plates with door rails (32028) with white fences, shield and cones on top. The rocks were carefully built out of light bluish grey slopes of different sizes; there are almost 50 of them in the set. There is so much detail in them that it is sometimes difficult to follow the instructions, and the blue plates really look like they flow between them.

The least attractive part and the set's biggest con are the horses. Compared to the cone sculptures, abstract enough to fit the model, they seem too detailed. The curved-top bricks for their heads and the skeleton arms for legs just look bad. This technique ruins the simplified rich baroque architecture, which did not lose a bit of its richness in the rest of the model.

21022: Lincoln Memorial, 2015.

The Lincoln Memorial is a monument built in 1922 in Washington in honour of the USA's 16th president, Abraham Lincoln.

The shape is reminiscent of a classical Greek temple. The peristyle with its 36 columns symbolises the 36 states in the Union at the time of Lincoln's death. On top of them sits a frieze with state names, medals and a cornice. The colossal statue of the president sits inside, and the only significant change since the monument's construction are the 1929 holes in the marble roof made to additionally light the statue.



The model's main colour is white: the columns are made using white bars (87994) stuck into the open studs of round plates. These columns appear as strong as the doric ones of the real building. On top of them is the frieze made of white plates, round plates and tiles. The central section of the roof sits on sideways facing tiles and can thus easily be removed if you want to take a look at the tripartite interior. The roof allows light to enter through transparent slopes (54200) so you can see the white microfigure through the two-stud-wide entrance.
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