



# Interviews

## Interview: LEGO® Creator Expert

By HispaBrick Magazine®

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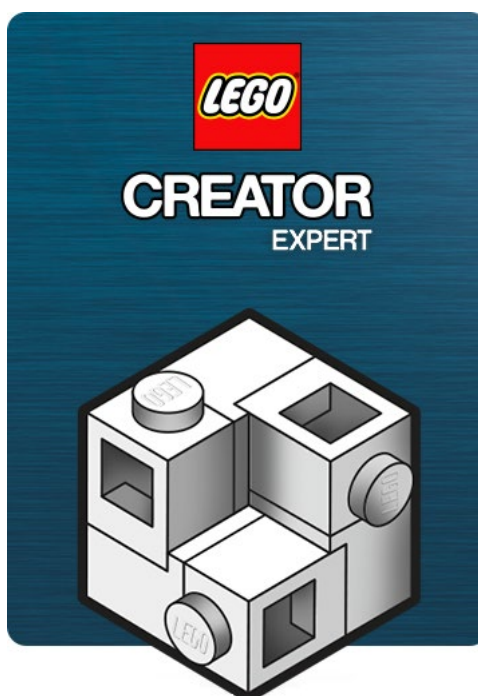


**HispaBrick Magazine®:** Can you please tell us your name and position in the company?

My name is **Jamie Berard** and I am a design manager specialist for Creator Expert and LEGO® Architecture.

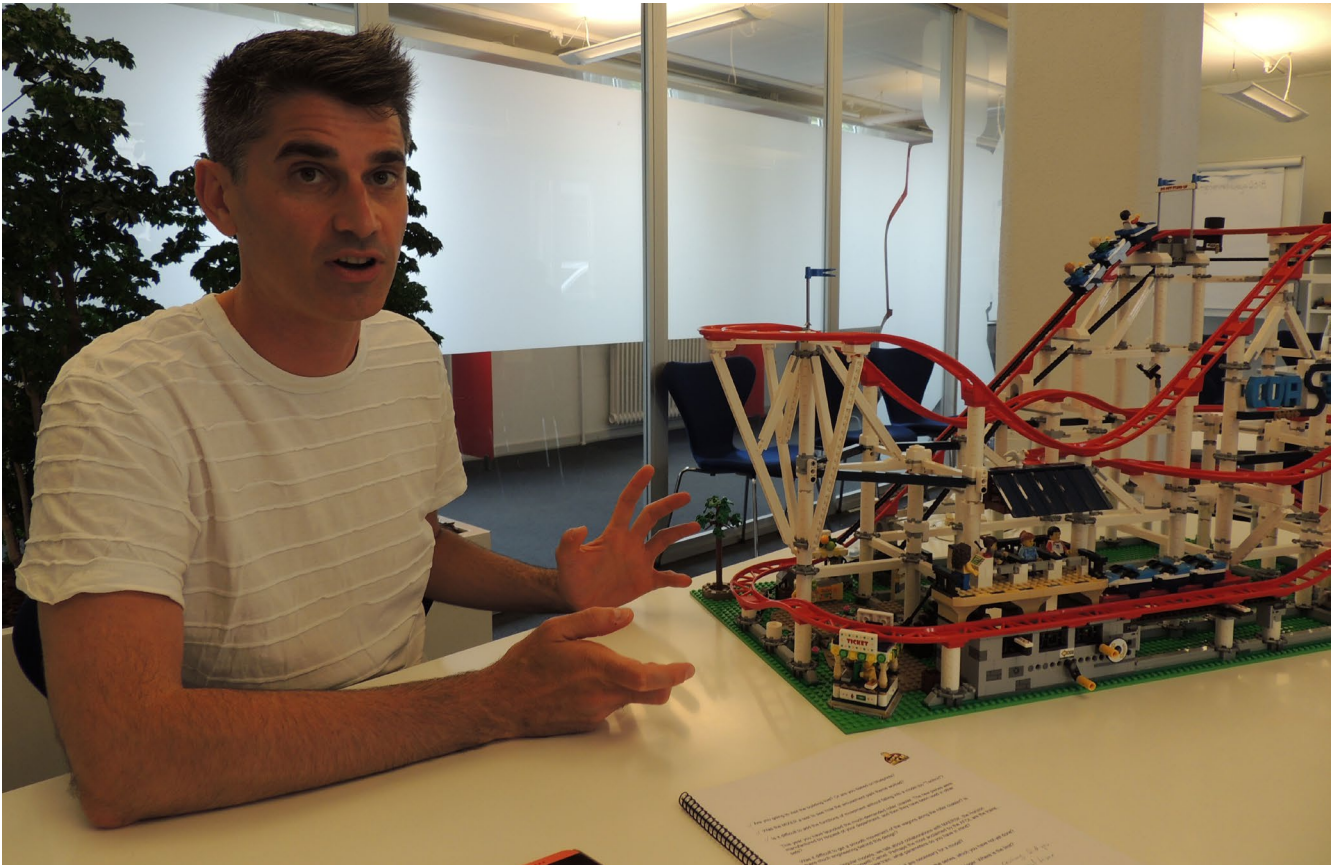
**HBM:** Who is the target audience for the CREATOR EXPERT series?

**JB:** Our main focus is on adults and the core is adult LEGO® fans, but over the years we have found that there is a broader selection of people who are into the series. We have a lot of data from NPS (Net Promoter Score) showing that there are a lot of kids who are aspiring to build the larger models and love them. We also have things like the seasonal set that get a really weird cross section in a wonderful way: adults, grandparents... all kinds of people. But when we design models, it is for adults and the adult fans.



**HBM:** At the beginning they were called “advanced models”. Why was the name changed to CREATOR EXPERT?

**JB:** We used to call them Exclusives (D2C Exclusives). The thing is they never had an external name. You guys (i.e. the fans) were clever enough to come up with “advanced” and all these other names, but we found the markets were calling them the 10,000 series and other names and it was actually very hard to find them. How can you search for them if they don't have a name? That's when we decided to go with “Creator Expert”, because the closest connection we had was with the Creator team. That's what many of the models extend from, and then we just thought this would be the upper-age version. But even within that there are still some things that we do that don't always fit in as an extension of Creator, yet we are the group that always ends up doing them because we will take the opportunities that are there.



Jamie Berard with the latest Creator Expert set, the Roller Coaster

**HBM:** Where did the idea for the CREATOR EXPERT logo come from?

**JB:** Isn't it great? I think it was Roberta. She's one of our graphics people. We were trying to come up with all different kinds of things and we were talking about different elements that were special to us and the Erling[1] came up. She came up with that masterful thing. I can't take any credit for it, but I like it. I think it is very cool.

**HBM:** Let's talk about the models. Within the line there are modular buildings, scale vehicles, the winter series, the architectural series, the attractions of the amusement park and other unique models. How many people are dedicated to the design of these sets?

**JB:** The best way I can describe it is I have three dedicated resources for Architecture and Expert combined. Then we get celebrity guests and we bring people in to do models as needed. So, there's a core group and there are always at least one or two people who are in our group temporarily, working on something.

**HBM:** Are there separate teams according to the theme?

**JB:** For the most part Architecture is pretty much Rok and Lars Joe who used to be in charge of the Architecture line completely. Now he's leading that group, but also building. Expert is always Mike Psiaki as our core and then we bring in different people to work on it. The roller coaster was mostly Robert Heim, who was actually from the MINECRAFT team at the time, and Carl Merriam[2] from the Boost team also worked on this.

**HBM:** How is the theme of the modular building (Fire Department building, and American Diner) decided?

**JB:** We had much more vision mapping in the early days. We knew when we launched the Café Corner that we were going to do the Green Grocer and a Firehouse. After that we had five-year maps which we found we didn't always use in the order that we thought. We would shift some ideas forward and move some back. Now we have ended up realising that it is actually a little more fun to allow for three different options to be explored and then try to choose which is the best option at the time or mixing them together. So, to say that next year we will be doing a certain building is probably a bit premature because we want take in all the ideas and maybe we are surprised and do something else. We also have building boosts right now where we sometimes get some really fun ideas like the boxing ring for the diner. That came from a building boost where one of the designers proposed that as a theme.

**HBM:** Do you think these are the models where you get the most pressure from the fans?

**JB:** I think they have a higher level of expectation and there are also more people doing them, so there is more to benchmark against. There are so many people who have made fire stations and police stations and banks that when we do a bank or a fire house there are already fifteen others where people say "I like this guy's better" so we found that we really need to keep our game high, trying to surprise you guys. Even if it is not a new idea to do a bank, if we do one we want to surprise you with some fun and interesting ways of using the elements or maybe attaching a laundromat next to it which is something that I hope hadn't been seen before. That's where I think it puts a little more pressure on us to think of something fresh.

**HBM:** Do you inspire yourself in any way from MOCs that you see online?

**JB:** I am inspired by everything. It is less likely that I am online searching. I have to admit that I am not very active online in general. I don't have time to go through websites, but I do go to fan events and then I get inspired by seeing things in person and talking to people, because when you talk to them they are more likely to open it up and express their thoughts behind it. That is very inspiring. But sometimes it is also tough, because there are some ideas out there that are fantastic and then I'm like: "Ah! That would be amazing to use!" But now I know someone has already done it, and that will often spark me towards thinking the idea is neat but maybe I can take it in a different direction. At least it sparked my thinking, but it also prevented me from doing something. More often than not when a set comes out and there is a similarity and people say something is similar to another build my hope (at least when I do it) is that those are happy coincidences and when you make things there is inevitably going to be some overlap. But I genuinely want to feel that when we launch something it is our own creation. Of course, we are all influenced by each other, but I would never want to take something and just throw it in.

**HBM:** How do you deal with the criticism?

**JB:** I genuinely love it. I know a lot of people think that is weird, but I think that whether people love it or hate it, if they are talking about it then I am happy. Because that means they have an interest. The worst thing in the world is when something launches and everything goes quiet and you can only hear the crickets chirping. That is like death for me. We really missed the mark if people don't like it.

**HBM:** Does that ever happen?

**JB:** Fortunately for us not so much and I can't even think of an example now, but there have been occasions when people have just sort of nodded and that's it and you get the feeling you could have done better. But when the Fire Brigade came out it was as if I had just slapped someone's mother. People were offended. They felt it was so American and the flag was hideous, and "it's only two floors, everybody knows the modular are supposed to have three floors", etc. There were so many people being critical, but in the end, I learned that it is the modular which brought the most people into the modular line. And it did very well. Even compared to today it did very well. And yet if you just read the fan forums at the time, many people were offended. I really just thought I had ruined the whole line. But I was naïve to the idea of thinking how much people were talking about it. And then I learned that after a short period of time they got used to the changes, and they started to say it is the changes we actually like, it's different. It is strange how more often than not fans' initial reaction is "I don't like it if it is not what I was thinking" and then as soon as they start to look at it again, they go "but I do kind of like that" and then they dig into it and change their mind. My hope is that if I can be patient enough and listen to people genuinely I can filter out what is the real issue and what is "this is uncomfortable to me right now" but they will adjust. That's a fine art. We don't always get it right, but I think we are getting better at filtering.

**HBM:** What is your preferred Modular Building? The one you are most proud of?

**JB:** I would say Assembly Square was a big moment for me. It was nice to bring together the whole department and a lot of people contributed to that and it was really fresh and fun. But if I think back to the one that I enjoyed working on the most I think that was the Parisian Restaurant. I had come off of two years of not doing the modulares, Astrid had done the

previous two, and there was something about stepping away from something I loved doing and coming back to it. I was just having fun. That is the best way I can describe it. Things were coming together naturally. I had too many ideas and I just had to make it work together. It was a very different experience for me, to go to something I had done many times before and start all over again and love it again.



10243 - Parisian Restaurant

**HBM:** Have you ever noticed modernist buildings of architects like Gaudí? If so, are they too curved to be reproduced with LEGO® bricks?

**JB:** It's a wonderful style that is very difficult to capture well in LEGO®. Even in person you have to be there in some ways to appreciate and see it and enjoy it, and with our limitations of the bricks it could potentially just look messy. That is even a challenge we have making 'normal' buildings: pull back on the details, hold back to allow something to work. It can get very dense and your eyes can get lost. My fear is that this is a particularly difficult style of architecture and I'm trying to think of a scale that would allow it to work well, but it is a good challenge.

Have you seen any version that people have built that worked well?

**HBM:** Just one, and it was OK, depending on the perspective.

**JB:** Yes, and that's it. Sometimes you see a photo when you look online designed for one nice shot. I remember seeing a couple of things in the past, years ago, on The Brothers Brick. There was another one where they had a beautiful black and white creepy house and it was just wonderfully crafted. And when you first see it you think it is minifigure scale, because that is how we all think. Then I started looking at the details and saw it was much taller. Later on, I saw some images of the side and realised it was totally built just for that image. If you turned the camera half a degree you would have seen all the blind spots. I was really impressed when I first saw it, but if you are really just building for a photo, and you sneeze and it falls apart... then I lost a lot of that initial excitement.

**HBM:** Regarding the scale vehicles, do you decide the model you want to design? Or does it come at the request of the commercial department?

**JB:** Those are mostly our wishes of what we would like to do.

We are very fortunate to be in a position where a lot of car companies approach us and would like to partner with us. We just have to think of what is the mix or balance that we want to accomplish. I can't take credit for the choices but I'll propose what I think I would like and then it gets approved. That's more of a mapped thing, a little bit more than the modular buildings used to be. With the vehicles we have a lot more depth and understanding about which ones we want to do and why and so we have ideas on when this one exits we can bring in something else because it is capturing a similar audience. But we want to make sure there are different audiences for each one, so very hopefully you will see them and have your favourites, but not necessarily want all of them, but then we are covering enough people with the variety. It is a little bit like the modulars as well. We try to make sure that each of them is different so they don't cannibalise each other.

**HBM:** At what level is the model manufacturer involved?

**JB:** Quite a bit. Some more than others. Without going into specific conversations with some of our partners, I think there have been some instances where they are super particular, down to the angle of the windscreen where a degree off is wrong, that is someone else's car and you need to get that right. We have actually had instances where the interpretation in LEGO® is not fully understood by the partner, when they are used to working with die-cast cars or something. And that has taken a lot of work to try to make them come around, to compromise, and then we will show them something like the VW Camper Van, which is a series of compromises. The shapes on the front are meant to all be curved and smooth, and even just the A-pillars on the side of the windscreen and the front; there are so many things that have been LEGOised yet are wonderful, and everybody loves it. It's a great product. So we often will try to use that and say "we know this compromises, even the doors having to go in and the hinging and stuff like that, but this is what people love about LEGO®. And for a car person that is all above the line in every little shadow and detail, to get them to accept this gauge on the side of their vehicle is difficult, but it mostly works.



10220 - VW Camper

**HBM:** The Winter series has become a classic. Is it difficult to fit the Christmas theme without touching on the religious part of the holiday?

**JB:** No. You can say this is good or bad, but it has been commercialised so much that from our starting point it is basically a fantasy village, a little utopian community. And in that sense, you can exaggerate a lot of features and pack in the snow and have a lot of fun with it without having to worry about really representing something important about the holiday. It is really just a cute fun town with some playful characters. Add in a light brick and throw in a few decorative

features, capture some of those things about going away for a holiday... A lot of it is about the preparation, like going to the post office to send your packages and there are only a few occasions like Santa's Workshop where we explicitly went with Santa and even that is not religious. So I think that we haven't found it to be an issue, and if we did start to go more into a religious direction I would start to have more difficulty trying to think of how to express that in a fun and playful way. So it's better to step away from that and just treat it as a commercialised holiday.



10245 - Santa's workshop

**HBM:** Why do most Winter sets have a classic ambience (vintage cars, horse cars...)?

**JB:** I think it is just that 'old world'. There are a lot of paintings and stuff you see that throw you back to another time. And I think the holidays are such a weird contradiction where you are going home to a reality, to a family, and something very real, and for many people that's the reason they want to escape. They need to get away, it is too real. So I think it is nice that we can offer them that little dream village in the corner when you have the chaos and the noise and all the people, so you can have your moments in that utopian little place where you can't hear so much of the noise. You just hear the snow falling. I think there's something nice about the horses and some of the older vehicles. You were never there, so you can only imagine the best of it.

**HBM:** About the Architectural buildings, how do you establish the size of the buildings you are reproducing?

**JB:** That is usually based on a key feature. For something like Big Ben, we had to do the clock face and that scaled the whole tower and everything else. For something like the Sydney Opera House, it was just those shells. We literally had tried that so many times and gave up and finally came up with that one combination which we knew was scalable, but we knew that at its smallest size it had to be this big, and then everything scaled off of that. I think it is usually one item. Also with our cars. It is usually the one detail, the fender or the wheel, the windscreen. Sometimes there is a defining feature; we will build that and then everything else comes from there.

**HBM:** Do you visit the building personally? Or do you base the model on blueprints?

**JB:** We don't often visit things. A lot of it comes down to time. We don't have a lot of time to be travelling everywhere and exploring these things. Areas like London are easier; We are there more often for something else and then we will stop

by and take pictures of Big Ben knowing it is something we would like to do. But otherwise it is online and even things like blueprints are harder to get now more than ever because a lot of the buildings we want to do are very famous or known and then with today's environment of a lot of those materials have been pulled off the internet and they are trying to protect it and so for security reasons we aren't given as much access as we could have found years ago. But on the flip side, the internet is a wonderful place and you can get enough images now. It is almost like you are offsetting the factual blueprints with enough reference images that you can almost see if somebody left a toothbrush on a window sill in one of those buildings. It is in one of those photos somewhere. So we depend quite a bit on photos.

**HBM:** Was the Fairground Mixer a test to see how well the amusement park theme would work?

**JB:** That was more me just wanting to do something I have always wanted to do. For years I wanted to do the Fairground theme. That's why I got hired into the company and it is a passion of mine. And I finally had a manager who was open to the idea and asked "What are you talking about? What can you do?". Then I thought if I'm going to do it I want to show what I perceived as one of the harder, cooler things to do, which is packing something on a truck. Looking back at it I wouldn't necessarily do it the same today, but it was just fun for me to do something like that. And then they got excited and were like "wow, you can do that" and they had nothing else to look at so it seemed cool at the time. But we have found now, since then, that a Ferris wheel is much easier for people to understand, a carousel, a rollercoaster... You don't have to say much, everybody knows it and understands it. You say a mixer, and you get "what's that?" And then people look at it and some of them ask "so what does it do?" And once it comes alive they love it, but it was a corky product, I have to admit, though it got us started so I can't complain. It served us well. But it is a little bit of a special one.

**HBM:** Is it difficult to add the functions of movement without making a model that is too "Technic"?

**JB:** Yes. There is actually a great point in that. As much as I love the fairground and I love movement and I love MINDSTORMS and I love Technic (I buy a lot of Technic models) I like the challenge of not overusing Technic or falling back on Technic as a crutch to help do something. When you look at something like the roller coaster, very early on we were looking at whether we should just make a Technic frame that can support everything. In many ways it would have been a lot easier and would be very strong, but it is a very technical solution and as a building experience you are constantly building everything sideways and never quite stacking. It is a different building experience. And I think when people are buying a Creator Expert product I think they have an expectation of fun building techniques, and a degree of building that is not just snapping Technic beams together. I think we have a fine balance. We try to use it where we need to, and otherwise try to pull it back and ask "can we solve this in another way, in a System way?" We can argue whether we are at the right level now. I am not sure. But I think it is at least a fun challenge to see if things can be built with more standardised bricks. I would prefer that.

**HBM:** This year you have launched the much-demanded roller coaster. Was it difficult to get smooth movement of the wagons along the roller coaster? Is there much engineering behind this design?

**JB:** Yes. This whole thing is difficult. By the way, Robert is the designer of this and he could speak a bit more about it, but what I can say is that it was a collaborative effort. We had Mike Psiaki working on it, Carl Merriam... I worked on it for a bit, Robert worked on it the most. And then we had an entire engineering team behind it, because the strange thing about this product is that it's one of the few products we have ever made where we were making the product as we were also designing the system that supports the product. While they were designing Boost, which is going to connect into it and upgrade it, things were changing along the development process and we had to adapt. It was give-and-take work. They changed some of the track pieces because of our roller coaster but we also changed our roller coaster because of some changes they had to make to the different parts. It was an extremely organic process with a lot of back and forth, but the chain especially was just for us. It came very close to just being taken out as an option because it was quite difficult to come up with a solution to make the cars catch the chain consistently. You could argue that we did our best. The chain has to be fairly tight for it to work so some people who are getting this may find that it doesn't always catch and they just need to take out a chain link or two, tighten it and it should then have better performance. But the challenge is that because of the weight it wants to pull back and then it lifts off the chain and if you don't have three cars, the first one will pull back, the second one will pull forward and you need the third one to level them out. It took a bit of effort simply to understand what was needed to make this work. And then there is the structure. Just being able to lift it, to come up with a frame that is sturdy enough for the average person to lift it... but if you and I are carrying it together we should be able to lift it from both ends. That requires two different ways of supporting it, and that was a huge challenge. That caused us to add the wheels on the top, because initially the model was even longer and there was another hill to get around the first hill so you didn't need the tires. But then we decided it was getting really long and we had to compromise and add the tires, which isn't really bad, because tires are associated with fairground rides. That is how they do stop and start many things. So, we were still authentic enough, but it took a lot of back and forth and compromise. I think it is wonderful that we have this option, because the adults who use it will make it work. They will find a way. But the kids don't need that, which is why you will see the pirate roller coaster. They will just move it up themselves because it is more intuitive, it makes sense for them. But I like that they decided to make a system that is for everyone. It is easy enough for young kids to use. They can just snap it on and off and push it around. But then if you really want to you could make a roller coaster that could fill this room, and that is kind of awesome.

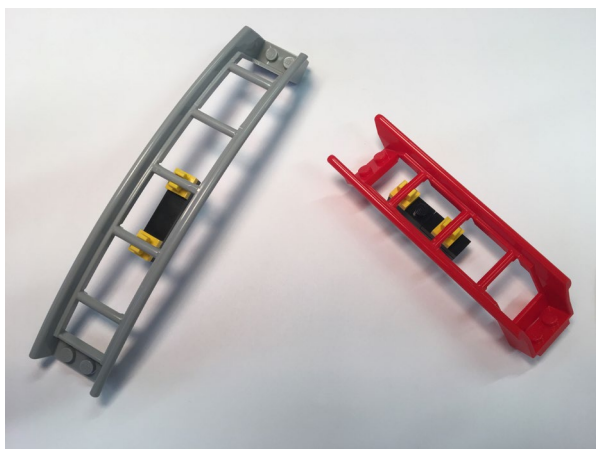
**HBM:** Where those new parts of the roller coaster requested by your department or were they requested by another department and you took advantage of their availability?

**JB:** I am fortunate that my background in the company allows me to represent design in some areas. We wanted to come up with a new big moment, a new "wow" system, to launch to the world. We had many options but we ended up with the roller coaster track, because you could use this structurally, for cranes or for staging and all kinds of things. They wanted something versatile and flexible. I was part of the process of helping find the "wow". Once it was decided, I was one of the people that got to represent design when our engineers, and what we call the design lab, was trying to figure out this system. Because the geometry of this is fascinating. Trying to make it fit into the LEGO® grid, but then function as best we can as a roller coaster. We explored twisting flexible tracks,

we had curves... We have this mapped out for other elements. There is a lot of potential in the system. We tried to figure out every aspect of the element. For example, what should be the spacing of these bars, given that an even spacing on a curve won't align with the vertical grid? Our solution was to make the direct distance between each rung a half-stud multiple, which allows for connection to clips on plates or jumpers within the grid. Some of the principle discussions like that were fascinating to work through. And then to decide how some of them needed to have this triangulation and in others we had to do it differently (add example pictures!!!) because we couldn't put the triangles on the upper ones as we needed space to pass the chain through. It was wonderfully complex to think through all the ways we wanted to use it. And then they ensured that it is mouldable etc. It's a fun process, but it involved a lot of people and a lot of back and forth.



*Top rail has no triangles to allow chain pass through*



*Rails fit in the system*

**HBM:** Within the singular models, we talk about collaborations with MAERSK, the Horizon Express or the Sopwith Camel. Perhaps the most acclaimed by AFOLs are the trains. When you think of a new train, what parameters do you have in mind?

**JB:** When we were doing the trains more regularly we wanted to make sure that the first one was the steam train to show off the power functions. We had the XL motor and we had just got rid of 9V trains and people were upset, so we wanted to really give them something interesting that was for adults that showed the potential of the new Power Functions. It also meant we wanted to do big train wheels, which is something the train fans wanted, and we kind of hit both of them at once: support the new Power Functions and also introduce big train wheels.

Then we asked what can we do that is quite different from this, and that would be a high-speed passenger train. So again, it is trying to throw your net broadly to show very different expressions. If you have a steam train and a very fast passenger train, what is in the middle? Well, you've got a MAERSK train, which is for cargo which covers the other one for trains. I think the decision making became quite easy as far as type of train is concerned. Then once you decide on the type of train which specific one? You could ask why we didn't do the Shinkansen (Japanese high-speed train), and a lot of that came down to our own aesthetic choice and interest... Something like the Horizon Express reminds me of the 1980s train which when I grew up I thought was amazing. I look at it today and I smile, because it is quite simple. And yet the impact it had on me as a child is still there, so I thought maybe we could have that as a starting point. How could we update that train and give shape to it with the new curves and other elements. I don't think I had as much exposure to the Shinkansen to even think about it. (Since then I have been to Japan and now it is all about the Shinkansen.) It is also about making sure that it has a global presence, that people know it enough and some of that was a little more subjective in the earlier days. We would have a little bit of a sense of what we thought just asking people around us what they know. Now we are more likely to have a lot more data, and we have analytics to know where people know stuff and why, so that when we make decisions we don't just guess but are a little bit more knowledgeable.

**HBM:** Can you design new pieces that are necessary for a model?

**JB:** Yes. Not often and not many, but something like the VW Beetle with the new  $\frac{1}{4}$  curved bow. Since we don't do many elements we try to make it as versatile as possible. We used



10233 - Horizon Express

it in the Beetle, then on the bus, and other people have been using it elsewhere. We try to make new parts really generic so we can use them more. Then we also had the Ferrari windscreen which later we got to use in a Creator car. We are always trying to make sure that other people can use them. But it is not often that we get to design new elements, and it is almost always for cars because the partner, again being very specific, will say "these need to have our rim" or windscreen or something else and then we LEGOise it as best we can.

**HBM:** What theme would you like to do within the series that you have not yet done?

**JB:** That's a tough one because if I can imagine it we can do it. But if say it, then it is harder to do because people will know I just said it. So I will have to tease you a bit on that one and say I am an optimist and I'd rather keep some of these things to myself so that they can happen, and so I'd rather not mention it.

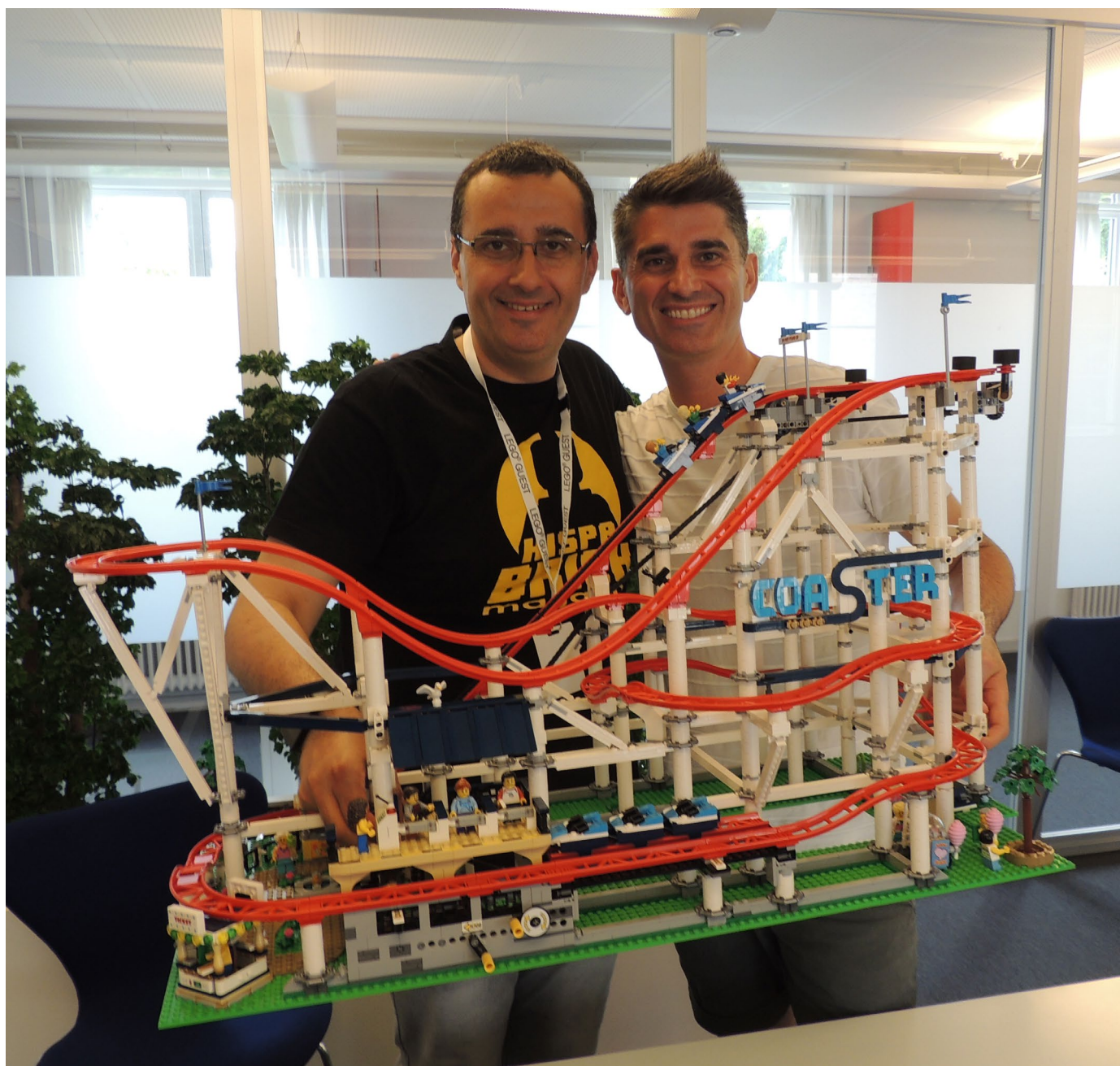
**HBM:** Each time the CREATOR EXPERT models get bigger. Where is the limit?

**JB:** The roller coaster proved we can do large models that people want, and so far people have expressed some interest in it. I think I am not as averse to the size constraint. I am more thinking about whether it is enough of a theme that people will be excited about. There are only so many things that are that big. And then to find the ones that connect with a lot of people, that is the challenge.

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[1] Angular Brick 1x1, named by the LEGO® Designer Erling Dideriksen, also known as the headlight brick

[2] See our interview with Carl Merriam in HBM028



Jamie Berard and our redactor Lluís Gibert