

Japan BrickFest 2018

By Richard Jones

Last June I visited Japan BrickFest 2018. The fourth Kobe Fan Weekend took place on Rokko Island, in the port city of Kobe, near Osaka and Kyoto. Organised by Edwin Knight and members of the Kansai LEGO® Users Group (KLUG), this event is a LEGO® hub event for Asia. Exhibitors attended from all over the world – predominantly countries from around Asia, but the USA and Australia were also represented.

I arrived on Friday afternoon and set up in one of the two gymnasiums used for the display, accompanied by the majority of builders visiting from overseas. We shared the space with the Great Ball Contraption, a brick built monorail and a train layout.



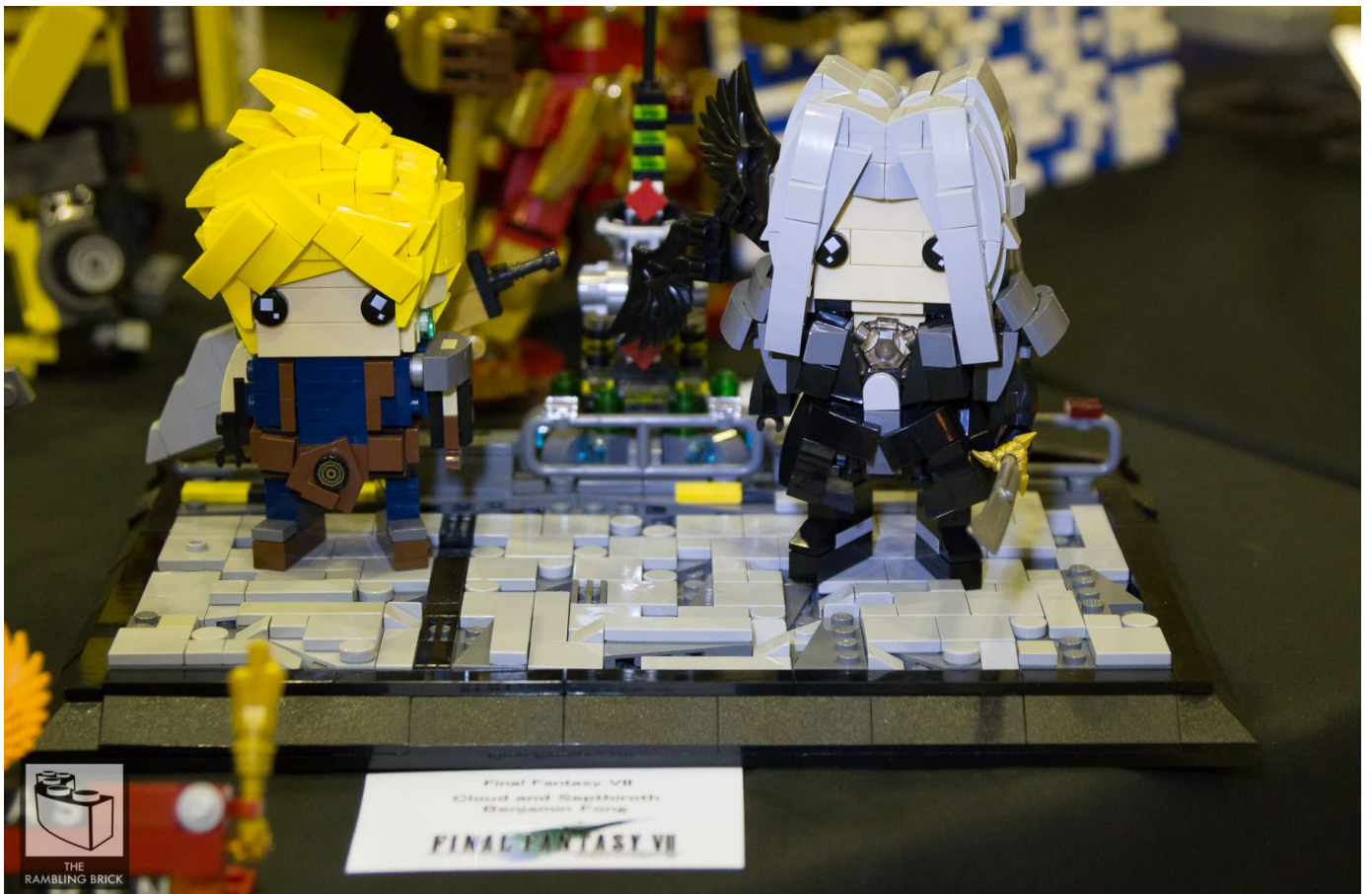
NEXO Classic Space by Richard Jones

LEGOLAND Japan had a display, and there was also an area to get your hands on some bricks and just build! The other gymnasium had many exhibitors from around Japan, and a theatre had larger scale models from members of the Kansai LEGO® Users Group.

I had taken my NEXO Classic Spaceships. (Imagine the 1978-79 Classic Space sets built with NEXO Knights elements and colours.) This was the third time I had displayed them this year, but the first time they had travelled more than 1000 km from home. I set about the task of discovering how my models had survived at the hands of international baggage handlers, as well as with myself bouncing between multiple railway stations.

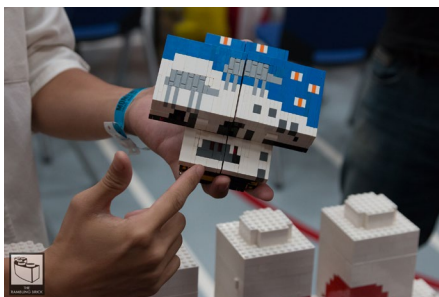
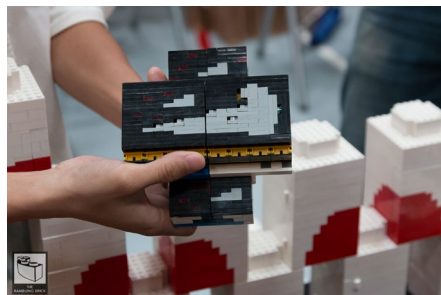
I set up my terrain and installed the lighting. Everyone I met was extremely friendly, offering words of encouragement as my various models were unwrapped in more pieces than I remembered them being in when I wrapped them up.

In the name of ergonomics, I would get up and walk around for a few minutes between rebuilds, though in reality I was stealing the chance to look around some of the other exhibits in the hall: mechs were gathering next to me, tanks behind me as well as next to me, and beside me were some amazing bricks that opened and unfolded, and played air guitar. In between were an amazing array of characters.

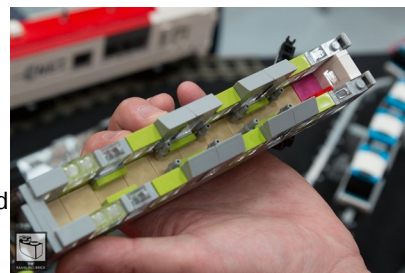


Character builds dominated the exhibition halls: some were BrickHeadz, many were not. Unfortunately, I had no idea who many of them were. Some were from manga and anime, others from history and video games. Some I suspect were from real life. There was a remarkable level of attention to detail for relatively small models, and I think there are a number of factors which contribute to this.

I had the good fortune to be sharing a small compound with Mech Master Lu Sim and other members of PhLUG (Philippine LEGO® User Group); and some exhibitors from Taiwan, including Will Ho with his amazing folding constructions, and Chris Yu with his Neo Classic Space Moon Base.



Let me digress: at the Australian shows I've attended, it is common for an individual's exhibits to spread out a little: it is not uncommon for one or two people to set up their own town display, spreading out over several tables. If you live in a three bedroom house, it is easy to give a large exhibit a trial run, with only the occasional loss of major items of furniture such as the dining room table, or the living room floor. In many large Asian cities, I suspect space is at a premium. You cannot spread your MOCs out over the house if you wish to carry out some of life's essential activities such as eating, sleeping and washing. And it became apparent that many models produced were more compact than those we might see at our local shows.



As explained by William Wong, a LEGO® train builder from Hong Kong, "My workshop is smaller, and so I am now working on trains which are three or four studs wide... Sometimes the four-stud-wide trains have a proper interior and can take a minifigure".

As well as smaller layouts, many MOCs I saw were character-based – not necessarily in a BrickHeadz style, but perhaps a similar scale. Mecha and giant robots were also plentiful, along with outstanding Bionicle creations, which were larger and more dynamic than I had ever seen before. Rather than spreading out, these were spreading up! The majority of landscapes or buildings were built over a baseplate or two, rather than a couple of tables, although there were a couple of models and layouts on display that could certainly be described as ‘just a little bit epic’.



An amazing mecha displayed by one of the members of Brick Mech Avengers. This creation stood nearly two feet tall. I love the parts usage for the lower legs.

Another point of difference compared to shows I had attended in Australia was the labelling of displays: We often have a MOC Card – a display card with such details as the name of the builder, the MOC and the part count. There was no formal process for this at Japan BrickFest. Many builders brought their own, but they were just as likely to have a business card or postcard with a photograph of their MOC and a link to high quality images of their MOCs in online galleries.



Examples of the cards given away by exhibitors to help you locate their other work online.

Jacky Chen, a member of the AFOL Engagement team based in China, had a meeting with Ambassadors for the Recognised LEGO® User Groups and Recognised LEGO® Fan Media in attendance. It was a terrific opportunity to meet representatives of LUGs from around the world, as well as renew friendships with people I had met previously. We discussed the focus of some of the LUGs represented, as well as plans for the near future. A particular highlight for me was to catch up with YouTubers Joshua and John Hanlon from Beyond the Brick, as well as Jun Weng from Brickfinder.net, to discuss life as LEGO® Fan Media.

During the weekend, a number of workshops were run for registered exhibitors: a Great Ball Contraption workshop, run by Akiyuki; a ‘Cute Model’ workshop run by Sachiko Akinaga; Mecha Building, with Lu Sim (Messyworks) and Sculpture Building with Schneider Cheung.

There were also speakers from the LEGO® Group: Stuart Harris, responsible for the design of the visitor experience at the LEGO® House in Billund, spoke about his work with the LEGO® Group, and also presented a video about the development of the LEGO® House, which is now available on Netflix.

Frédéric Roland Andre, a senior designer with the LEGO® Group, was also present. Fred has worked on NEXO Knights, Ninjago, Galaxy Squad and LEGO® Star Wars themes, amongst others over the years. Having lived in Japan for a number of years, he has a good working knowledge of the Japanese language, which was helpful in discussions with local builders.

During the exhibition days there were opportunities for members of the public to join in as well, with construction of a mosaic, a Stamp Rally (where kids collected stamps to show they’d explored all parts of the show) and the Brickmaster Competition, which was offering a family stay at the recently opened LEGOLAND Hotel in Nagoya as a prize. Another highlight was the traditional Japanese Drumming Workshop, and the House Band, the Ofuromates, providing tunes for the public to enjoy while wandering between exhibition halls. While most of the visitors to the exhibition spoke limited English, I certainly met a few with whom I could have greater conversation about my MOC. The time is coming to level up and improve my use of languages that are not English. When a few children looked at my model with eyes wide open, and dragged their parents over, I was reminded of what it was all about: sharing the joy of the brick, with people from around the world.

Specifically for the AFOLs in attendance, there was a function on the Saturday night: Dinner, a stop-motion movie festival, unveiling of the event kit and a trivia quiz. With questions ranging from ‘name that minifigure’ (always exciting when the designer of the set in question is on one team) to ‘What colour is the sign on Fort Legoredo?’, a great time was had by those participating. I had the good fortune to be on the winning team along with CK Tsang from HKLUG, and Josh Hanlon from Beyond the Brick. I have been accused of being a little too trivial in the past, but occasionally it can pay off! Our next challenge was to work out the best way to transport the prize set back to our home countries.



Josh Hanlon, Richard Jones and CK Tsang



Event kit

[Fun Fact, half of the volume of the box for 31069 is in fact air. Contents may have settled during shipping, but it provided lots of useful space for transporting other purchases home, with a small degree of protection. But does this mean there has been a slight turnaround on the 'package volume reduction policy' announced a few years ago?]

Sunday provided another day of public attendance, workshops and great company. We would take the opportunity where we could to look at other exhibits around the event. There were so many fantastic MOCs to see at the event that I will only post a few highlights.

Finally, the weekend came to an end: we took the drone-powered group shot, packed up our models and said our final farewells. This was an amazing experience for me: cultural immersion, in close to the same time zone, surrounded by people from around the world with a love of the brick. I must congratulate Edwin and Miki Knight, and other members of the Kansai LEGO® Users group, for putting on an amazing event which has been growing every year. Special thanks to Nathan as well as Edwin and Miki for their kind hospitality while I was attending JBF2018. To the new friends I made: I look forward to meeting you again in the future.



For those thinking of attending, next year's Japan BrickFest will be held on June 8-9, 2019. Registration opens on October 1st: check out the Japan BrickFest website for details. June is the rainy season in the Kobe/Osaka region. Umbrellas can be purchased for around 600 Yen (approx US\$6), from most convenience stores. There are good hotels within an easy walk from the venue. If you are arriving or leaving by Shinkansen (bullet train) there is a bus that runs from Shinkobe Station to the Sheraton Plaza, which is about five to ten minutes walk from the venue. There is also an elevated train line to Rokko Island.

Travelling to Japan with a case full of LEGO® is not without its special challenges, but was immensely satisfying. The feedback I received from both the general public and fellow exhibitors was universally supportive. This is a fun event, demonstrating a diverse range of building styles, and many warm, friendly people. Being in a similar time zone to home

(only one hour behind Melbourne) meant that jet lag was not a significant problem. I would recommend it, especially if travelling from Asia, Australia or New Zealand.

In my experience, LEGO® fan events are a great way to make new friends. Travelling to international events presents even more exciting opportunities, including learning about new countries and their customs. I would highly recommend it as a way to explore other parts of the world.

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