



Interview: LEGO® Architecture

by HispaBrick Magazine®

pictures by HispaBrick Magazine®

Can you please tell us your name and position in the company?

My name is Rok Žgalin Kobe. I am a designer for the Architecture line, but I'm also on the team for Creator Expert for which Jamie Berard is the creative lead.

Who is the target customer for the Architecture line?

I'd like to believe that we are being very inclusive. Even though people would assume this is an adult-oriented line, we still do the building instructions in such a way that it is very approachable even for a younger-age audience. We keep in mind that it might not be the product for what is necessarily a LEGO® fan, so it could be for somebody who hasn't had a lot of exposure to LEGO® before who would pick up one of the Architecture sets. They are designed with that in mind too. Even though there is quite a lot of detail and many interesting building techniques, we still strive to keep them simple, with a nice building experience.

Do you see Architecture as something somehow apart from the normal LEGO® products?

We are celebrating ten years of Architecture now and I think that is quite an achievement for any LEGO® line. You might say we are an evergreen now, that we have finally matured. I am proud to put it next to other great lines, like Creator Expert, which also has an anniversary for their modulars.

Who chooses the buildings that you get to reproduce?

It's a group effort. We have a lot of factors to consider. From the look of the model, the price point, where it fits in our portfolio, whether we have models that are similar in colour already out there. There are plenty of factors to consider. You can imagine it as a big mixer board with levels going up and down that we can fine-tune in bringing the process forward.

How is the scale of the building decided?

Again, we do an exploration. What we would like to do and what I strive for is to deliver the best possible looking model and think about other things later on. But that is of course not the case in the real world. So these things go hand in hand. And marketing is also involved in this process.

The first buildings were very simple. Was it a proof of concept? Or was it something sought after?

The story behind it is basically that Adam Tucker started doing it on his own. It was kind of an experiment that LEGO® picked up on and then developed within a new business group which I was part of. It wasn't considered a mainstream product at that time. But now we are a proper line.



Step by step the buildings have gained detail. How is the level of detail defined?

Basically every model we have ever made was designed to outdo the previous one. To show the evolution of the line, we slowly started adding more and more detail to bring it into the direction of where it is today. In a way that makes it much more approachable. The beginnings, the small models were very nice, but at the same time they could be considered very niche. It actually took a bit of power of abstraction to actually recognise them as the buildings they represented, whereas the direction we are in today... You can see the difference between the two Guggenheim museums (21004 vs 21035). The bigger scale allows you not only to capture more of the detail, but more of the building ideas and underlying concepts as well. It is a fuller package.

Is this why you sometimes repeat a model? To give a better building experience because you can grow in size and in detail? Like the Guggenheim or the Burj Khalifa?

It's a magnificent building and we thought maybe we didn't do it justice the first time around. Or just to show how it would look now with the evolution in the line. Because the first model fits perfectly well with the concept of Architecture back in the day, but we actually wanted to give it another shot with full attention given to the details and shapes.

What are the limitations in construction techniques for a model to enter into the Architecture concept?

Part of the design decision for these models is to try and keep them as much a core LEGO® product as possible. That

is, to use the LEGO® that people are familiar with. One of the prime decisions here is that we are stepping away from specific moulds. For instance, people are asking for a face on the Statue of Liberty – some have made it Bionicle style or like Star Wars characters. That is not the point of the Architecture line. It is to showcase that you can still do amazing things with what is available and we are working within those limitations. That is the first reason. And then if you take it one step further, I prefer to keep it to the core of bricks. You can see we are not adverse to using specialised bricks, but we are not doing it just because we can, but rather where it is appropriate and where it fits.



Do you have any limitations on building techniques that you do not want to use?

Within LEGO® there are many ways that you can get the system wrong, so to say. There are many techniques that are considered illegal. But that is what we have model coaches for – to make sure the model is designed within the LEGO® system. They are the “guardians of the system” so to speak. But just like how real-life architecture is about pushing the boundaries – about thinking ‘oh, that’s impossible’ and then making it – some of that thinking applies to the LEGO® Architecture series as well. Because if we want to replicate certain things, then we have to use techniques which maybe haven’t been used before, and that’s part of the architectural level of our line.

Do you limit yourself in the type of parts you use in order to retain the simplicity of the model?

I do set limits on myself for that. I prefer System to Technic and Bionicle, but that doesn’t mean I exclude them. Far from it, because if the best solution for a form is from a different part of the portfolio then I am by no means afraid to use it. I’m not a purist in that way. This hair part was the Minifigure, Hair Wavy and Windblown to One Side (Bricklink part 32602) from Pirates of the Caribbean. I had to ask permission from that line to use an element which was specifically designed for that line.

What has been the hardest building to reproduce?

They all have their own challenges. As you can imagine, more time was spent on the Statue of Liberty than on certain other sets. The size and complexity have an effect. But at the same time the Capitol was done rather quickly because they worked at the concept level already. So it can be very different. But if you are asking about the most difficult, you’d be surprised at the challenges. It might be a challenge to get something in a

certain colour that is needed for the model. There are different challenges that pop up during the development.

Why are certain locations such as New York, Paris or London repeated?

We just did the first Asian skyline – Shanghai. Before that we had Sydney, Australia, we have the Great Wall of China. From my side I am actively trying to promote diversity in the sense that we should reach as many different places as possible. But of course, New York is New York.



Have you ever thought about reproducing modernist buildings, based on curved elements? Do you think it is feasible to reproduce this kind of building with current LEGO® elements?

I will answer your question with a question: If you hadn’t seen the LEGO® Architecture Shanghai Tower, would you consider it feasible for that to be made in LEGO®? Or the Guggenheim, if you hadn’t seen it before? Or the Statue of Liberty. These are all organic shapes. I hope I have succeeded in answering your question.



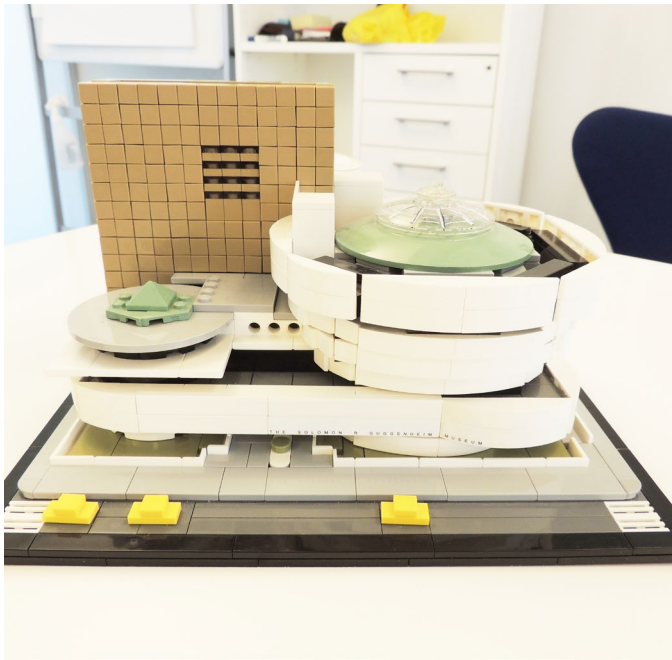
The Skyline is a new concept that you are exploring. How did this concept arise?

It enables us to do many things at the same time. You get to do skyscrapers – that would be quite difficult or monotonous to reproduce as core models.

It would be a lot of the same, whereas in a skyline you have a collection of elements. You are doing justice to a whole city, which may not have a single masterpiece as the defining building, but which is still known.

You can create a great thing out of five landmarks, which aren't necessarily the Statue of Liberty but which are still recognisable as the city itself.

It gives you a different perspective and a different price point as well. So it really fits the bill and has been quite a success.



Is it difficult to work on such a small scale and still have the buildings continue to be faithful to the original?

It's quite difficult. Almost every brick in a skyline set is visible, so you have to juggle around quite a bit.

At the same time in every city there are multiple buildings that you can choose from.

You can go back and forth on the mixer table and add and remove where needed. Where it makes it hard in some aspects it makes it easier in others.

Do you need some kind of architectural background to design these kind of sets?

I'm an architect, and it certainly doesn't hurt. That's for sure. So far in the last seven years the sets were either designed by me or by another colleague, Lars Joe, who is also an architect. My design process is definitely easier because of my background.

Because even if you are not as talented as some of the guys I am working with, who are amazing and naturals with the bricks, they can build anything, you can still help yourself with your education, with the processes that you have learned in your previous work or in your career.

I was relatively old when I came to LEGO®, I was in my thirties, so I was established as a professional beforehand and I definitely lean back on that knowledge.

Do you visit the buildings you are going to reproduce?

I wish I could. I travel a lot with Google Earth :) Architecture was always my passion, so even before I started to work for LEGO® I visited almost all the buildings I have worked on, with one or two exceptions. So I can talk about cities and landmarks without having to pull out my smartphone, so I have a three-second advantage.

Do the box and the booklet have the same importance as the model itself?

It's part of the overall experience. It gears towards a fuller experience, a more premium experience if you like. But still without sacrificing the model. At the beginning we got a bit of a bad reputation as being really expensive line, especially for models with such a small piece count. Now we have improved on that. It is one of the issues we have tried to correct over the years.

Do you need permission to reproduce certain buildings?

It depends on the age of the building. I don't know the exact time, but there is a limit on how long an architect must have been dead before it becomes common property where there are no intellectual rights. Or sometimes there is a foundation or trust behind it that runs it, or if it is government or private property. So it differs. But there has to be a legal team on it as well.

Have you received any comments or feedback from the architect of a building?

Yes. We do involve them in the process. We ask for their feedback, their permission and their thoughts on the project. But of course that varies. Some might know the limitations of LEGO® very well, because they have played around with it. Others have no idea how it works.

What building would you like to reproduce?

The ones that I haven't done... I have sketches of some, but since I am hoping they may make it into a future product I won't answer you directly. Now everything is possible, but if I go ahead and say something I might seal its fate or spoil it.

Did you ever think about recreating constructions that have disappeared, like the lighthouse of Alexandria or other historical constructions of ancient times?

There are monuments that are not with us now but that have influenced whole generations and whole styles. The ancient monuments that you mention have their influence on architecture up to this day.

You have an example of a development model for the Guggenheim Museum as well as the smaller final product. Can you explain the difference?

They are actually both in the same scale, but the final product has been built and adjusted in such a way that it provides better value for the customer. You would otherwise have to pay a lot more money to arrive at what is basically the same set. It goes to show how we must perfect the model at a price point for better value perception. Not doing that one at the higher price point allows us to build a different one that can really benefit from a bigger version. Bigger isn't necessarily better, especially if you have to pay for it. This way we can make a model more accessible. #