

REVIEW

By Jetro de Château



41449 Andrea's Family House

It has been a long wait, but this year we finally find out where Andrea lives and who her family is. Before we get into details though, let's have a look at the history of the LEGO Friends' houses.

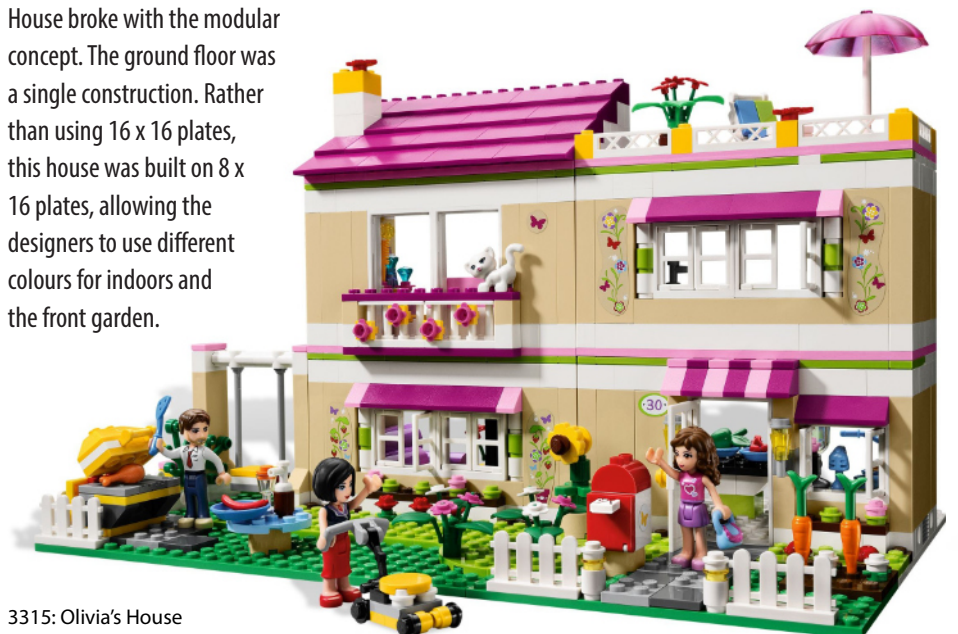
The first of the Friends houses was 3315: Olivia's House, which came out in 2011. The set consisted of 695 pieces and in addition to Olivia, there were also her mother Anna and her father Peter, the very first male character in the Friends theme. The house had a modular design: two ground floor modules (kitchen and living room) were built on a 16 x 16 plate each with an additional 8 x 16 plate by way of garden in front of each ground floor module. There were also two first floor modules (a large bathroom and a bedroom with what looked like a double bed) as well as two roof modules, one with a roof terrace and the other with a sloped roof. My favourite small build in this set was the lawnmower—a cool little construction that really captures the look of the machine with just a few pieces.

It was four years before the next Friends house came out. In 2015 it was Emma's turn with 41095: Emma's House. Again the house was built on two 16 x 16 plates and was modular in design. In this case the two modules were staggered. There was a bathroom and a bedroom for the first floor, this time with a single bed for Emma) and a roof terrace (with a barbecue, operated by Emma's mother Charlotte) and an attic with two roof

windows to top the building off. All in all, the concept was very similar to Olivia's house and Emma's house really felt like the next house on the block, despite the fact that there was less depth to the house as the garden (in the case of Olivia's house an additional 8 studs of green) was included in the 16-stud deep build. There is no lawnmower this time, but there is a little easel and painting for Emma to work on in the front garden while her father, Luis, takes pictures. After Emma's house there was a new Friends house released every two years.

In 2017 it was time for 41314: Stephanie's House broke with the modular concept. The ground floor was a single construction. Rather than using 16 x 16 plates, this house was built on 8 x 16 plates, allowing the designers to use different colours for indoors and the front garden.

Conscious of the need to lend a bit of extra depth to the house (just 8 studs felt a little meagre) there was an additional 6-stud-deep section behind the living room. This section was connected to the main structure with hinge bricks and contained a staircase. Stored under the staircase was a vacuum cleaner for Emma's father James to manhandle, while her mother Alicia was on a video call in the study on the second floor. The ground floor was finished off with tiles so it was easy to remove the two modules of the first floor. However, the fact that those modules



3315: Olivia's House



41095: Emma's House



41314 Stephanie's House



41369: Mia's House

Set number	Set name	Year	RRP	Pieces
3315	Olivia's House	2011	75€	695
41095	Emma's House	2015	70€	706
41314	Stephanie's House	2017	70€	622
41369	Mia's House	2019	70€	715
41449	Andrea's Family House	2021	70€	802

(bedroom with balcony on one side and bathroom and study on the other) could be removed was great for storing the set, but not for changing the layout: each module only really fitted in its designated place. There was also no top module, no roof terrace or attic; just a little sloped façade and some sloped bricks to create the impression of a roof. This meant that the top floor was open to play. It is hard to say what happened that year. The set price stayed the same as for the previous house, but compared the two both Olivia's and Emma's house, the piece count went down by 80. To compensate, the windows in the bay window (a really nice construction) as well as the tree upstairs windows, are beautifully printed, giving the set a lot of style.

Add two years and we arrive in 2019 when we get 41369: Mia's House. Up until now, the Friends houses could all have been part of the same neighbourhood. Mia's house breaks that trend. Rather than living in a house in the suburbs, it would appear that Mia lives in the countryside outside Heart Lake City. And Mia's house is different in many other respects as well. There is nothing modular about Mia's house – it is one connected build, with the two small exceptions. There is a small well, giving the house even more of a countryside feel, and the kitchen table is built on a five-stud-deep semi-circular base. Mia's house has a maximum depth of only 12 studs, a far cry from the lush 16-stud footprint we had been used to up until then, which explains why the kitchen table needed to be on a separate base. Mia's parents, Ann and Angus, have done their best to give their daughter a cool room and plenty of outdoor activities. She has a study with a ladder that takes her up to her bed in the loft, on the outside of the house there is a rock-climbing wall and Mia has a horse. An odd detail of the house is that there are stairs to get to the first floor, but they are on the outside of the building, making it seem as if Mia had her own little apartment on the first floor. I loved the detail of the beehive and the little birdhouse and the glass doors are beautifully printed. The piece count is up again, to 715 so it isn't that the set is small or



flimsy. I like the build, but it doesn't quite fit my idea of a Friends house.

And with that we arrive in 2021 and the last of the Friends' houses, 41449: Andrea's Family House. This most certainly feels like a Friends house again. We are back in the suburbs and we finally get to meet Andrea's family. Andrea isn't the only one with musical talents. Her mother Donna plays the keyboards and her father Martin plays the drums. And there is a little surprise. Andrea has a kid sister: Liz. The inclusion of the micro doll in the Friends theme has added some more diversity to the sets. Together with other characters that have appeared this year, like Savannah, who is blind and Nora, who is elderly, and the reappearance of the baby first introduced in 2017, there has been a significant extension of role play opportunities in the 2021 Friends sets. My only gripe with these micro dolls is that while the design team has done a great job of including at least some connectivity in the micro doll hands, none of the sets I have built in this wave actually include anything for the micro doll to hold. Not that that is an easy task. The only thing those tiny hands can hold are some of the decorations the minidolls can wear in their hair and other elements with similar tiny pins.

There is a cute little bird in the set, as well as a fifth character: Stephanie. I can only guess whether Stephanie is included to make sure there is racial diversity in the set, because Stephanie



was underrepresented in the theme this year or because, despite the large piece count, there was still room in the budget for an additional minidoll. Whatever the reason, Andrea's house is a great playset on its own with a character selection that can spark many new stories.

Andrea's Family house recovers the original 16-stud depth of the earlier Friends houses, even though most plate sizes are smaller, allowing for a more flexible use of colours—separate colours for the ground floor interior, garden and garage. The ground floor is a single construction (no modularity) and has a layer of tiles at the top, making it easy to place or remove the upper level to provide better access to the interiors. It contains a large family kitchen and you can rotate the kitchen counter (built on a plate that is connected to the main structure with a hinge brick) to get better

play access. The garage with a rolling garage door is a really fun area. This is where the family gets creative and stores their musical instruments: a complete drum kit as well as a pair of clips to store e-drum sticks, a simple keyboard with two printed tiles for the keys, and of course Andrea has a microphone. The garage is also the place for a washing machine and soapbox.

The most exciting new element in this set is the Window Round Corner 3 x 3 x 2 (design ID 73878) which is new in 2021. It allows for a bay window with a minimal footprint (6 studs wide as opposed to the 12 studs required for the bay window in Stephanie's house) and uses the standard flat window panes (design ID 60601) used in the 1 x 2 x 2 window elsewhere in the build.

The top floor is built in two segments that each have a fixed place. The rooms are small, but with



an excellent use of space and a lot of fun details. There is a living room with a sofa, an armchair and a coffee table, next to a bathroom with a washbasin, shower and toilet. An interesting detail in the bathroom is that for the first time in a Friends house you can have some privacy in the bathroom. There is a window to let some light in, but the glass is opaque, so you don't have to worry about anyone seeing you while you have a shower. The second half of the upstairs modules contains Andrea's bedroom, which contains a bunk bed, presumably for Andrea and her sister Liz, and a ladder nicely worked into the wall to reach the top bed. Andrea gets a cool light with a flex arm so she can read after her sister dozes off. Finally there is a balcony on top of the porch.

There is no third floor, and similarly to Stephanie's house, only the contour of the roof is represented at the front of the house. There are,

however, solar panels attached to the roof, making the house more environment friendly while at the same time making the roof feel a little more closed.

There are plenty of stickers in every room, but they really add to the atmosphere of the house: shelves with plates in the kitchen, more musical instruments in the garage, a beautiful mirror in the bathroom, a TV set and speakers in the living room, etc.

It really feels like the Friends designers have managed to find a good balance between size, playability and cost. The set contains some 100 more elements than its predecessors and it really feels like a big house. At the same time, the recommended retail price of the set is in the same range as the preceding Friends' houses.

There is a distinct difference between the way my daughters and I relate to these sets. For them

the sets are all about play. For me there is an important element of display. This display focus often means I tend to place houses in a square grid, mandated by the street options I have available. Somewhat frustratingly to me, Mia's house does not conform to that mandate in any easy way.

Even with the differences in relationship to the sets, my daughters' assessment of the sets often coincides with mine on many points. To them Mia's house is a cool getaway somewhere in a forest, a weekend or holiday destination, but not the ideal place for the daily business of meeting with friends and going to school.

Next to the road

Since I have been building MILS street modules for my City layout I was interested to see what could be achieved with the Friends houses.



Matching these houses to the height of the MILS modules took some engineering. We built some struts made to place under the houses using the materials we had available. Stacking a brick, a plate, and a tile creates the perfect support to place under the houses as a makeshift solution. We also felt there should be some green space

between the houses so we set about building that too. We then placed some cobblestone modules in front of the houses to see what the result would look like.

Next up we wanted to compare the result to what we could achieve using the new thick road plates. It took next to no time to create a street with some nice decoration. The first thing that drew our attention was that we missed a pavement, or at least some more separation between the houses and the street. We also noticed that it was fairly easy to connect the street elements to the houses to anchor them in place. We only needed to move a few of the decorative elements in the gardens to make space for the DBG 2 x 4 tile that connected it to the road plate. The street level is one plate (or tile) higher

than the level of the houses, but that wasn't really distracting. The real plus side of the thick road plate was all the decoration that comes with them: street signs, lampposts, traffic lights, flowers and small trees. Compared to the older thin road plates LEGO used to market, these decorative elements really help to create the feeling that this is an actual street, rather than an empty stretch of asphalt.

Despite the quick build and the great level of decoration, my daughters really preferred the slick look of the cobbled MILS modules. I can't really fault them for that. The thick road plates are the clear winner when it comes to everyday play, but when we get serious about building our next Heartlake City diorama, the MILS modules will be in high demand!