

Reflections on the Castle Theme

by Carlos Mendez

It was the beginning of the 80s when the LEGOLAND Idea Book (6000) fell into my hands. I had only been in the world of LEGO for a couple of years and my parents made an effort to find and buy, in a small province of Spain in that decade, those sets which filled my letter to Santa Claus each Christmas. Back then my collection was exclusively City (or Town, or whatever you want to call it) and upon seeing the adventures of the book's main couple, I decided to expand my horizons (my parents still regret getting me that book!). Other AFOLs of my generation may remember the book. A couple of minifigs went through different scenes of the city until they decided to travel to space and later to the middle ages.

It is not very clear if everything that happens is a movie in their heads, a shared dream, or a good trip provided by some spoiled popcorn that they were having in the cinema where their journey through space-time began. The point is that the book was a discovery and an inexhaustible source of ideas for me (a win for LEGO). Given my budget limitations at that time, I had to choose where to diversify my hobby, and my more fantastic side was stronger and Space became my reference line (over time I abandoned the City theme). But I'm



not going to lie to you, Spain is a land of castles and knights, so I never stopped seeing news of the Castle theme. Just as I couldn't stop watching it disappear.

It is true that less and less historical films are seen on the screens. It is rare to see Roman or medieval films in today's cinemas, though both genres have been very important in the history of cinema. Probably that is because we talk about history, about characters that have existed and events that have happened, which always leaves less room for imagination. How many movies are

there about King Arthur? How many about Robin Hood? It is clear that the future gives much more scope to the imagination than does the past. But not everything was going to be bad news, the truth is that stories of knights and princesses seem to have found their salvation in fantasy. The Lord of the Rings, The Wheel of Time, The Malazan Empire – a large number of successful fantasy books have, to a greater or lesser extent, a medieval air, either in their stories, or in the aesthetics of castles, swords, bows, magicians and, why not say it, chivalric honor. Because in the end, the charm of castle stories is the eternal struggle between good and evil, balanced by a technology that forced enemies to look each other in the eye when fighting, where honor was what separated the good from the bad guys.

Although there is no longer any Castle theme as such, LEGO has not completely forgotten its fans. The Lord of the Rings sets were a breath of fresh air for fans of the theme, who were able to access new parts and minifigs for their most classic builds. And in recent times Creator sets have appeared that have fueled the illusions of a new Castle theme. But what would LEGO have to do for a new Castle line to be successful among AFOLs and at the same time attract younger generations?

We have asked Bruce NH (of Bricktales and a member of Classic-Castle) about the subject and here we leave you his opinion.



“There have been some great offerings for LEGO castle builders recently, like 21325 Medieval Blacksmith, and 31120 Medieval Castle, not to mention the Collectible Minifig line, where almost every series gives us one or more great figs. But what we really need is a dedicated theme. Large sets such as 21325 are amazing for adults who are already focused on this theme, but the high price makes them prohibitive for kids or those just starting to get interested. The big sets also make it nearly impossible to build up an army. We all love the new Black Falcon design, but it would cost US \$250 to get four of them from these recent sets. A true theme would have sets at multiple price points, ranging from low priced sets a kid could buy (or that an adult could buy in larger numbers) up to a signature very large set. This would make it possible for new people to get invested in the theme (thus ensuring a new generation of castle fans) while also offering something special for established builders to look forward to.

If I were designing such a theme I would start with a modular castle. If you go back to the early days of LEGO Castle, sets were designed to fit

together. Sets from the 80s like 6040 Blacksmith Shop, 6061 Siege Tower, and 6062 Battering Ram, have short pieces of wall with a pin system that allows them to connect together. These even could connect up with larger sets like 6067 Guarded Inn, and 6073 Knight's Castle, to make a large walled castle. LEGO has even employed this strategy more recently (well, ten years ago) with 9474 The Battle of Helm's Deep and the modular add-on set 9471 Uruk-Hai Army. It was easy to





buy several copies of 9471 to extend the defensive wall, and since each one came with five figs, a horse, and multiple weapons, it was a great way to build up two opposing armies.

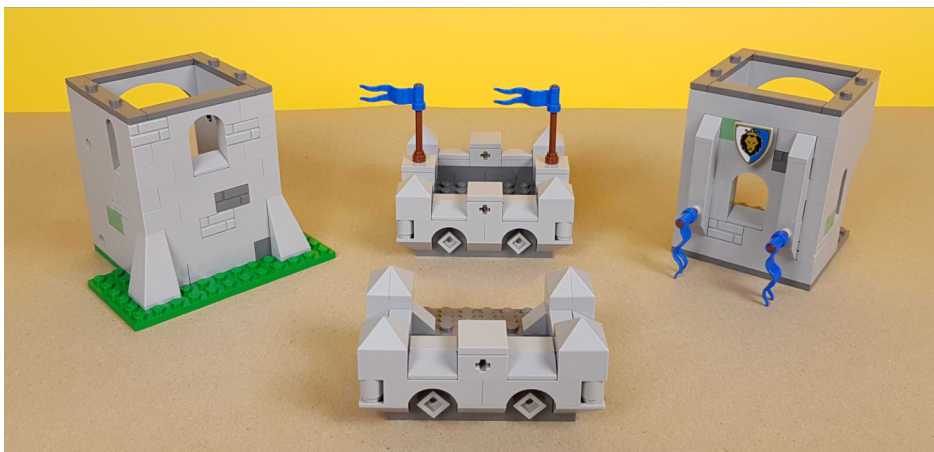
My proposed LEGO Castle theme would consist of multiple modular sets at different price points, and two opposing factions. These could be combined to create a large castle under siege. Buying multiple sets and connecting them up in different ways would give the builder the option of configuring their castle however they want. The smallest set would consist of a short length of wall, one or two defenders, one or two attackers, and a small siege engine such as a ballista (essentially a new version of 9474). The next larger set would consist of a larger section of wall, again with both defenders and attackers, and a catapult or siege tower. At the next price point we would get a corner tower, again defenders and attacking figs, and a trebuchet. It would be

important for the walls to connect up to the tower either at 90 degree angles or at 180 degrees, so the castle could take on multiple shapes. Next up we get a gatehouse with a battering ram. Finally, the largest set would be the main castle keep. Each of these sets would include both attacking and defending minifigs, hopefully with a couple of torso variations for each faction, but as we get to the larger sets they would also include specialized figs, such as a knight in full armor in the tower set, a general for the attacking army in the gatehouse set, and a king and queen in the main castle keep.

The next year of this theme would be peaceful, focused on civilian buildings. This could be a town surrounding the first year's castle, with a blacksmith, an inn, and a farmhouse. Maybe introducing a faction of bandits like the old Wolfpack for some conflict. A third year would be back to conflict, but this time with a different style of modular castle – perhaps the home of the attacking faction from the first year.

Castle is one of the classic LEGO themes, with over forty years since the original Yellow Castle, and it deserves a reboot. The occasional special large set is great for AFOLs like me, and probably many of those reading this article, but what we really need is a plan to move forward with a theme to get new builders involved. This will





ensure the life of the best LEGO theme for the next forty years and beyond."

Bruce NH himself put us on the trail of Michał Piotrewicz and his medieval castle project which he presented to LEGO Ideas some time ago, and this is what he told us:

"Like many of us adult fans of LEGO, I really miss the good old days when the LEGO knights proudly ruled over the land (or just the carpet) guarding their mighty castles, fighting tournaments and setting out on an endless number of adventures. But fond childhood

memories and sheer sentiment are not the only reasons for me to miss the old Castle series. These old sets also included many features that made them really fun to play with, provided good flexibility and extensibility, and also (like most LEGO sets back then) sparked our imagination by including pictures on the boxes and in the instructions booklets showing alternative things that you could build with the parts from your main set. With all this you had the feeling you could rebuild and reconfigure your castles, make them bigger or smaller, or a different shape, and just create something new to play with every day.

With the Modular Knight's Castle project I attempted to bring the spirit of the old Castle series back to life by creating a set that was easily reconfigurable and could provide many play possibilities. While designing it, I was doing my best to follow these four simple requirements:

- It had to be modular, i.e. composed of fairly

generic modules that can be built once and then be easily rearranged to create the different shapes and looks of a knight's castle without the need to completely disassemble it and build again from scratch.

- It had to provide flexibility to shape the castle quite freely, not just by using straight lines and right angles. This implied designing walls with hinges – similar to those which we all know well from classic LEGO Castle sets.
- It had to be sturdy enough even for younger children to play with, without causing damage (or at least not too much). The system used to connect the modules also had to meet this requirement.
- It had to be as playable as possible: including all the play features that you can expect from a toy castle, such as a working drawbridge and/or portcullis, and still have enough

space on the walls and inside the towers to easily place all the knights who are defending it.

As you can read, ideas are not lacking, nor are AFOLS unwilling to revive the line, as shown by the success of sales, for example, of the Castle sets put up for sale through Bricklink, or the expectations that each new set or each new rumor about this line arouses. Perhaps in the near future, the multitude of franchises now filling the LEGO catalog will leave room for the return of our favorite classic lines."

Bruce N H: www.classic-castle.com

Michał Piotrewicz: www.flickr.com/photos/156847189@N02/

Pictures by Michał Piotrewicz and Brickset



