



BY FRED GREAVES FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The Statue of Liberty is among the creations of Legoland designers like Tim Petsche.

## Age 35, and Something Went Snap

### With Legos, Grown-Ups Reclaim a Piece of the Past

By TAMARA JONES  
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The masters of the plastic universe are baffled. From their imaginations, their computers, from their calloused fingers, magnificent kingdoms have sprung. They can re-create the Seven Wonders of the World in a literal snap. But now they huddle in their model shop of Legoland California and contemplate the seemingly impossible:

How in the rectangular heck do you give a Lego bride a Lego bosom?

Tim Petsche considers miniature chef hats borrowed from a Lego kitchen set. Too big. What about a couple of Lego daisies? someone else suggests. Too weird.

Too bad.

Such are the dilemmas of grown-ups in a child's fantasy job.

Petsche and his five teammates are the salaried elite in a vast subculture of adult Lego hobbyists whose collections of little plastic bricks overtake entire rooms at home — professors and lawyers and accountants and engineers who find a creative outlet in the sturdy Danish blocks. People who reclaim and reassemble lost childhoods piece by tiny piece.

See LEGO, D2, Col. 1

# Rebuilding Childhood Obsessions With Legos

LEGO, From D1

"You go into what we refer to as the Dark Ages, when you stop playing with them as a kid, but come back to them as an adult. Some people stop at 12, then break out their Lego sets again at 30," explains model builder Eric Hunter, 36, who landed his dream job a year ago at America's only Legoland, in the Southern California coastal town of Carlsbad.

Hunter and the other master model builders work in a Carlsbad shop filled with some 2,000 floor-to-ceiling bins full of virtually every piece Lego has created, in every color (that would include the seven shades of pink). Outside in the theme park, their obsession with detail is why a small black Lego rat can be found in the New York subway display, and why Secret Service men on duty in mini-D.C. all look alike and sport tiny earbuds.

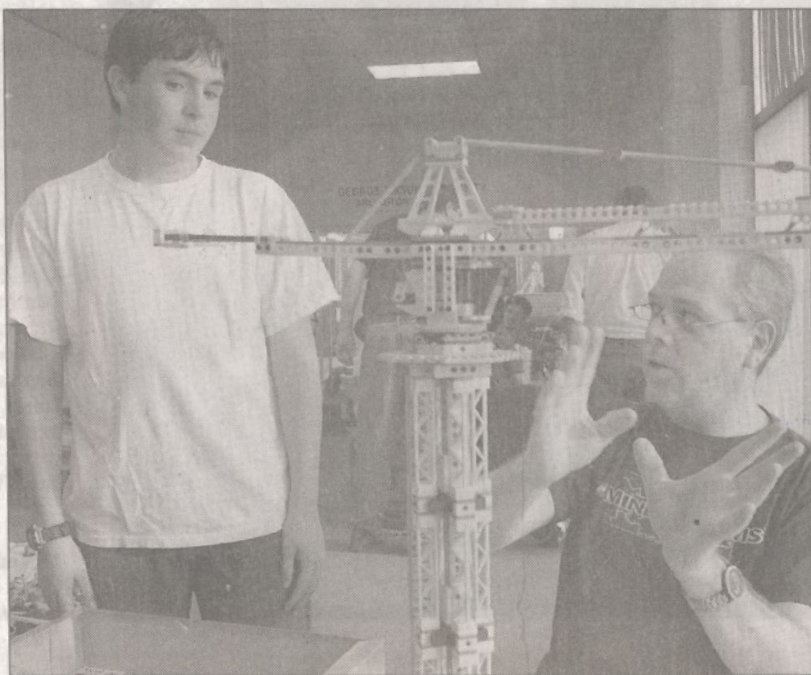
"I have Lego thoughts and dreams," Hunter says. "I'll be driving down the freeway and I'll see a building and think, 'Can I build that out of Lego?'"

His work is focused on a planned Las Vegas exhibit, due to open next spring in the park's Miniland U.S.A. Designers expect to use more than 2 million bricks to build miniatures of famous Vegas hotels and casinos, complete with a tacky wedding chapel and Lego showgirls.

Hunter is painstakingly putting together a miniature Excalibur Hotel, which, he notes cheerfully, has 2,200 windows and 28 turret styles, details cleaned by a Lego reconnaissance team dispatched to Vegas to study and photograph the real thing.

Patience is a given for AFOLs, as Adult Friends of Lego are known. Hunter spent a decade building his dream car out of more than 10,000 pieces: a '91 Acura NSX that he fell in love with while working in a carwash. His Lego version was two feet long and a foot high.

When he learned Legoland was holding a national competition to hire a new model builder, Hunter made it to the semifinals with the scorpion he assembled when given a bucket of 2,000 Lego pieces and 45 minutes to build any animal. He'd taught himself to make a sphere out of squares, the required skill test for any model shop hire. Hunter lost the contest, but networked in the Lego community and visited the park



ABOVE AND RIGHT BY RICH LIPSKI — THE WASHINGTON POST



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**Designer Mariann Asanuma tries to replicate one of the MGM Grand's lion statues at Legoland's model shop in Carlsbad, Calif. The shop has 2,000 tubs filled with Legos.**

often enough that the model shop manager remembered him when another opening came up later. The pay is modest — top scale is about \$45,000 a year — but there's a 10 percent employee discount on Legos, a perk that adds up with a hobby that AFOLs say can easily devour thousands of dollars a year.

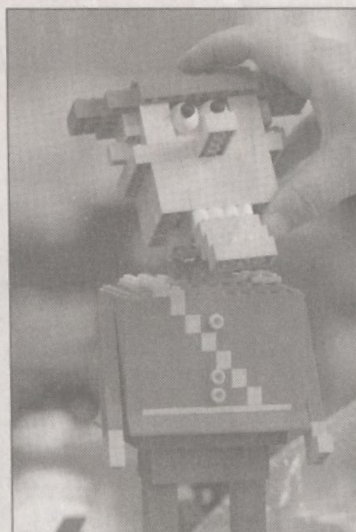
The model builders take turns running inspection before the theme park opens each morning. In Miniland, they make sure the presidential motorcade zipping along Pennsylvania Avenue hasn't been crushed by a renegade possum overnight, and that no seagulls have strategically bombed the White House. They make sure enthusiastic AFOLs haven't pinched any of the discontinued bricks — transparent ones are particularly coveted — for their private collections.

And they smile at their own inside jokes, such as the home brewery that

the model builders constructed and hid atop the model of the Kennedy Space Center, and the Elvis impersonator amid the crowd of mini-commuters at Grand Central Terminal. Then there's the Lego body of Jimmy Hoffa, buried where no tourist will ever see him, deep within a column of the new Freedom Tower in fake Manhattan.

It's an attention to detail shared by the AFOLs who gather for a monthly play date in a deserted lounge at George Mason University's Arlington campus, where a dozen or so fans brought their Legos by the giant tub and jumbled boxful on a recent Saturday.

Georgetown mathematician Judy Miller's onion-domed reproduction of St. Basil's Cathedral posed delicately beneath the yellow crane that Abraham Friedman was building higher and higher. Michael Harrod smiled bravely when a clumsy neighbor accidentally



**Above, some reconstructive surgery on Dudley Do-Right who was decapitated. Left, Abraham Friedman, 50, talks building blocks with Alex Valentino, 13 at a Lego social club in Arlington.**

decapitated his Dudley Do-Right of the Mounties sculpture.

"We used to have rules, bylaws, a lot of bureaucrats and heavy structure, and it killed us," Friedman, a software developer, says of the Washington Metropolitan Area Lego Users Group, or WAM LUG. "We used to have two-hour meetings and we'd argue and discuss things forever. So we dissolved the constitution, got rid of the rules. Now we're just a social club. We hang out and build things."

Besides showing off their latest projects and discussing construction challenges, members also share sorting strategies. Dan Rubin, a 27-year-old lawyer from Silver Spring, prides himself on his system of sorting by shape rather than color, the 400,000-some Lego pieces that his fiancée has consigned to their basement.

"It's easy to become obsessive about acquiring a certain piece instead of building," observes Magnus Laughaug, who is just coming out of a nine-month castle phase to concentrate on military vehicles. His green tanks reflect a love of military history and technology rather than a political statement, Laughaug says, adding: "I don't build in a sociopolitical vacuum, though. It's impossible to build these and not be aware there's war going on."

Friedman is casting a critical eye on his finished crane. Judging from the width of the boom and the size of the mini-figure construction worker standing on site, he quickly calculates that the crane is not to scale: It wouldn't be high enough to erect a skyscraper in real life. He is disappointed, but considers the four hours he spent building well spent.

"Just the act of snapping the pieces together is so satisfying," he explains, not even looking down as his fingers connect one brick to another. "The click when they go together."