

BIG BOYS' TOYS



2021 has been a record year for Lego – but its billion-dollar success isn't down to the customers you'd expect. Harry de Quetteville finds out how the classic toymaker found an adult audience willing to pay a premium to play. Photography by Joshua Tarn



Harry de Quetteville getting to grips with his typewriter Lego set

What do you really want for Christmas? Maybe you've thumbed through the gift guides, considered the scents and the kitten heels, the hampers and other usual suggestions and found yourself hankering for something more. Something indulgent yet uplifting, something that, deep in your heart, you know you'll truly love.

It's not easy finding that special item for a discerning adult, one that comes with a cast-iron guarantee of grown-up pleasure and sensuous, solo satisfaction. Perhaps that's why this winter, ever more of us in middle age are finding that if they really want to hit the spot, they need to turn to a toy.

Lego, obviously. Adult Lego. No, not in a smutty sense. How did you get that idea? Instead, in a complex, immersive, sets-swishly-packaged-like-an-iPhone sense. Turns out there's now a whole range of them, designed and directed specifically by the Danish icon at those of an age, you might have thought, to have long ago followed St Paul's advice and 'put away childish things'.

Far from it. Lego has had an astonishing year. Net profits for the first six months were up 140 per cent, to almost \$1 billion. And much of that growth has been driven not by the colourful toys for children, but by intricate, rigorously detailed, sombre-hued sets pitched at adults. Sets not for play, but for display.

There are now 113 sets on the Lego website listed as 18+, like some slasher movie rating. But the only terrifying things about them are the prices. The most expensive – conveniently released last month on that super-shopping extravaganza Black Friday, and perfectly timed for the Christmas buying fest – is an AT-AT walker from the world of *Star Wars*, which will set you back a tidy £699.99, in return for a mind-boggling 6,785 pieces. Publicity shots show it proudly displayed in a stripped-back, architect's retreat-style home from which any sign of children, indeed any mess at all, has been utterly expunged. The assembled model even comes with a little display plaque, as at a museum. In the official pictures it stands in all its 2ft-tall glory, being pseudishly admired by its middle-aged, crew-necked master builder channelling Hugh Laurie – not in fun-loving Bertie Wooster mode, but with the intense deliberation of late-era *House*.

It is models such as these that have put the fuel in the rocket boosters under Lego's profits, with market analysts NPD now estimating that 29 per cent of the UK's £3.3 billion toy market is no longer the preserve of children. It makes sense. Grown-ups, after all, have got a whole lot more pocket money to spend. Of the 33 sets listed in Lego 'best-sellers' in its online shop, 28 of them are aimed at 18+.

No wonder 'adults welcome' is the new tagline from Lego, hammered home in three ads, filmed in heightened comic style and featuring professionals enduring the vicissitudes of daily life. They might be ads for bubble bath, but instead of sinking deep into the calming foam at the end of their chaotic days, these heroes find balm by reaching for the Lego. Click click, and they are shown literally floating free from their cares. 'Find your flow, build with Lego bricks,' says the voice-over.

Adult toy-buying is 'a trend that has been increasing in the past few years,' says Frédéric Tutt, NPD's global expert on the toy

industry, but it's been supercharged by the pandemic, as hordes of time-rich adults, flush with unspent cash, have sought ways not just to pass the time, but to escape the woes of the outside world, whether they be virus variants or never-ending Zoom calls. To these twin challenges, Lego offers adults the warm, safe embrace of nostalgia, and now promises serenity too, like a modern mindfulness tool.

'It helps them escape and disconnect from the media and the anxieties of the day,' says Genevieve Capa Cruz, Lego's adult audience strategist, of what she calls 'AFOLs' - or adult fans of Lego. Apart from sets being more complicated than those for children, 'every step of the adult building experience is designed to create a hands-on, mindful activity to help older builders relax.' There are, says Capa Cruz, a former advertising executive, and one of those who gets to green-light new set proposals, even audio soundtracks to accompany builders as they go. As the company's marketers put it: 'Unplug, unbox and unwind. This is your zone.'

Abbie Headon, author of *Build Yourself Happy: The Joy of Lego Play*, reckons building blocks bring contentment in two forms. 'First, it's a form of immersion - you follow the instruction books, you find all the little pieces, and you put it together just right,' she says. Next to her, as she speaks, is an example - a detailed Lego model of Trafalgar Square (1,197 pieces), from the toymaker's architectural range. 'But there's another, through Lego's simple colourful bricks,' she adds. 'During lockdown, I used to keep a selection and when I was sad, click them together into different shapes, and just enjoy the colours, the feeling of it. It lifts you out of the mood you were in.' She sounds quite emotional as she recalls the experience.

And although it's easy to write off such fondness for Lego as the fringe feeling of a



David Beckham spent many happy hours in lockdown constructing various Lego sets

hardcore few, the truth is that it's all too easy for less devoted souls to succumb to the appeal. Headon recalls her book's launch party, which she had festooned with bricks, descending into gentle farce as the guests found themselves unable to resist playing. 'They were people in the 40s and 50s,' she says. 'They'd say, "Sorry I just need to finish building this." It was lovely how quickly you can be immersed in it.'

When she wrote the book in 2019, she says, she was keen not to make any 'therapeutic guarantees', but admits, 'I've seen how Lego can be used for children who have difficulty expressing themselves, particularly on the autistic spectrum.' Play offers an essential tool for therapy, says Monika Jephcott, chief executive of Play Therapy UK (PTUK). 'When you talk, you often block things you don't want to talk about. It can take ages to get to the core of what is important.' For adults, she says, Lego can be beneficial because 'you have an outcome, you must concentrate. It is sensory orientated and it has an aim, providing focus that can be an escape.' In lockdown, it provided 'a sense

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of achievement. You can be proud of what you've done. Even in isolation you get that little boost.' In many of her courses, particularly for children, Lego, 'has become a therapeutic media'. Headon also points out that, for adults, there is even a Lego strand called Serious Play. 'It's used in office environments for people to build solutions to problems in Lego, which then feed out into the professional, corporate world.' Lego tutors, she says, will come to your workplace, 'to brainstorm solutions'. Toto, we are not in Kansas anymore.

Thanks to lockdown, there's now no shame in professing a grown-up love of Lego. 'It took up a lot of time and was weirdly meditative,' the actor Daniel Radcliffe, of *Harry Potter* fame, revealed last April, displaying his 3,000-piece *Jurassic Park* set on an American talk show. Today, *Harry Potter* is one of the most successful licenses that Lego operates, with everything from Wizarding World mini figures (£13.49) to Hogwarts Castle (£349.99). The latter (6,020 pieces) was among several sets that the celebrity ex-footballer David Beckham pictured himself attacking during lockdown, though he was mildly ribbed for indulging, mostly by his wife, Victoria. While Beckham is building Hogwarts and the Disney castle, other grown-up Lego fans are rushing to build Old Trafford, the stadium he used to play in as a Man Utd footballer (3,898 pieces).

These are the new themes - 'passion points' as Lego calls them - sports stadia, film tie-ins, high-performance cars, even Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe (3,341 pieces) - part of a range of '2D' sets specifically designed to go on your wall. 'Imagination is the limit,' says Capa Cruz, when considering where the company might go next, while hinting that video-game characters - a Lego Mario perhaps - might fit the bill. But it is possible to wonder, in all this rush to capture the grown-up market with super-detailed, super-popular franchised models, if Lego is

TOPPING THE CHRISTMAS WISH LIST...



Old Trafford stadium

This 3,898-piece replica, costing £249.99, kept many busy during lockdown, including ex-players Ole Gunnar Solskjær and Bryan Robson.



AT-AT from Star Wars

At £699.99, this is the most expensive adult set on the Lego website. With 6,785 pieces, expect to spend six-plus hours completing it.



Titanic

Measuring 17½in high and 55in long, the main issue will be where you will display this 9,090-piece model, once it's finished. Price: £569.99.



Hogwarts

Originally released in 2001, this is the fourth iteration of the castle from *Harry Potter*. It has 6,020 pieces, comes with nine mini figures and costs £349.99.



still using its own imagination – or we ours.

It all seems a long way from Billund in Denmark in 1932, when Ole Kirk Kristiansen founded Lego, fusing the two Danish words ‘leg godt’, which means ‘play well’. Or indeed from 1958, the critical year when Lego patented the brick with studs on top and tubes below, an example of which would still click satisfyingly into place with a brick minted yesterday. The numbers testifying to Lego’s reach since then are almost bewilderingly immense: more than half a trillion bricks made (at least 80 for every person on Earth). Partly, of course, that’s because Lego’s plastic bricks never die, meaning that while they are many colours, they are not green – although Lego says it has a 150-strong team working on recycling plastic for its bricks. This summer it produced its first prototype, but generating the same ‘clutch power’ is proving tricky, and its engineers say ‘it will be a while before [people] will be able to play with bricks made from recycled plastic.’

Collectively, we spend an estimated five billion hours a year playing with the stuff. Not an insignificant number of those are put in by Jess Dowden, 46, who lives in London with her partner and children and, after decades without bricks, has become ‘a total midlife Legohead’.

‘I used to play with Lego as a child, then my parents kept it in the loft,’ she says, telling a story typical of many AFOLs. ‘Then when I became a parent, I started getting sets again for my boys.’ There were two problems with this arrangement. First ‘their love for Lego ebbed and flowed’, whereas Dowden’s only flowed; the second, ‘I am piece-finder when I am building with them.’

Quite soon, Dowden could conceal the truth from herself no longer: ‘I realised I wanted to do it myself.’ So she did, ordering adult sets in lockdown. ‘I really enjoyed the peacefulness of it, and the focus.’ Adult Lego, she says ‘is a lot more complex’ even if the complexity is not always apparent. ‘There’s a lot of details that you don’t necessarily see.’

Nostalgia is a key ingredient. While the first plastic bricks were moulded in 1958, Lego sets were quite rudimentary until 20 years later, when themes still recognisable today – like the classic Space Explorer sets I grew up building myself – were released. ‘It was in the 1970s that the

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mini-figure development began,’ says Sarah Herman, author of *A Million Little Bricks: The Unofficial History of the Lego Phenomenon*. ‘Once Lego had mini figures, it wanted to populate a universe with them.’ In this chronology, those in their mid-40s, like Dowden (and me) are the first generation to have played with contemporary-looking Lego as children then rediscovered it as parents. The cycle of generations is a powerful commercial driver. ‘Now you have people in their 30s and 40s building again with their children, suddenly you have this huge adult market,’ says Herman.

That logic also, however, means that family members who didn’t play as children can miss out on what all the fuss is about. ‘He’s quietly a bit baffled,’ says Dowden of her partner. ‘But then I don’t think he was a Lego person growing up.’ As for her children? In a weird reversal of the usual parent-child dynamic, ‘My Lego has taken over one of my son’s bedrooms. I’m worried he’s getting to an age where he might want to clear it out.’ Well may adults elsewhere, sick of the howling pain of treading on pieces as they creep in to check on their slumbering tots, shake their heads in bemusement.

Lego is playing up to our nostalgia, with many adult sets rooted in ‘80s culture – like the intricate recreations, for example, of the *Ghostbusters* wagon (2,352 pieces, original film released in 1984), or even, in a meta toyland send-up, of the original Nintendo Entertainment System – a video-game console released in 1983 (2,646 pieces).

And Lego is not just catering to an adult audience, it’s feeding off it. A resolutely family business, the company was run by generations of Kristiansens until 2004, when it found itself in deep trouble and an outsider, Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, took charge for the first time. It was Knudstorp, who is still at the company, who turned Lego around financially, and opened it up not just to the influence of outside themes, like *Harry Potter* and *Batman*, but to its fans’ whims, too.

‘Lego didn’t have a relationship with the adult community,’ says Herman. The company didn’t engage with the many unofficial events run by fans, or the MOCs (which stands for My Own Creations) they dreamed up. That began to change. ‘They appointed a couple of people to work as community liaisons, whose whole job was to go to these events and meet the fans.’

Though the adult team remains ‘quite small’ at Lego, says Capa Cruz, it doesn’t always need to be huge. Because suddenly, instead of ignoring MOCs, they became feted by the company, which began to crowdsource new ideas. The best fan creations were voted on by the public, and transformed into official Lego sets. The *Ghost-*

busters set is one such creation. ‘Lego used to ignore these people; now they realise they are getting free ideas and a built-in audience for new sets,’ says Herman. The move to bring adult fans in was sealed in 2019, when Lego acquired the biggest online fan forum, Bricklink.

It is one of these fan-designed sets – dreamed up by teacher Steve Guinness, from Chester – that Lego sends me to see what I think of its adult incarnation. A mid-century typewriter (2,079 pieces), it bears all the hallmarks of this new, grown-up toy adventure. Gone are the characteristic knobbles; its surfaces are sleek and shiny. In its mechanical authenticity – with its moveable type, and real sheets of paper, it stretches the boundaries of what you think Lego can do. With its black and red spool ink ribbons, made of fabric, it’s not even all about plastic, begging the question: how much can Lego change and still be Lego?

This, after all, is just the beginning. Adults can now build bouquets of flowers (756 pieces), or the White House (1,483 pieces). It all seems a far cry from the brown boxes of assorted pieces I had to rummage in as a child. To me, the typewriter can feel sometimes a bit like hard work, each similar key mechanism inevitably requiring a lot of repetition. But my nine-year-old son’s eyes light up and he elbows in. There is nothing he loves better than meticulously assembling sets, and soon he is racing through pages in the manual. I take on a consultant role, and together we work through tricky sections.

As the finished model takes shape however, the suspicion dawns on me that this might be less like the Lego I used to know – build to destroy and rebuild – and more like a jigsaw, where the point is not the process, but completion. Adult builders like Jess Dowden, for example, freely confess that the last thing they plan to do, having lavished so much time on building, is to break the model up once they’ve finished, as I used to delight in doing as a boy.

‘It’s changed the way we use Lego,’ says Frédérique Tutt. ‘It’s almost become a collector’s item as opposed to just a toy. My children don’t undo their sets in the way I remember doing. They don’t actually play with them very much. They put them on the shelf. But that explains Lego’s success, because you keep wanting to buy another set.’

Capa Cruz prefers the idea that creativity is ‘a spectrum’, from ‘guided creativity’ – following every instruction – to ‘freestyling’ – modifying and rebuilding.

‘Especially adults,’ she adds, ‘we tend to be a bit scared that “oh, I’m not that creative”’.

And though true devotees may get a little



Below The typewriter set is based on one used by Lego founder Ole Kirk Kristiansen

precious about their finished toys, ordinary fans like Dowden and Abbie Headon seem to accept that entropy wins out in the end. ‘I do my best to keep them nicely,’ says Dowden, ‘but the combination of dusting, cats and people – slowly they erode.’ And no advance can banish the original simplicity of the Lego concept. ‘For me, it’s the infinite possibilities and the colours and the tactile sensation,’ says Headon. She seems to take as much joy in a couple of pieces clicked together on a whim as in her completed Trafalgar Square.

But the question is, will the grown-up pandemic converts stick with it as life gets back to normal? ‘That’s everyone’s question,’ says Tutt. She guesses at least half will

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keep coming back to Lego. Dowden is one who will. ‘I don’t know if I’d be doing this if I hadn’t had lockdown,’ she says. But now she finds herself ordering a *Home Alone* model (3,955 pieces), based on the hit film, as a Christmas present to herself. It is, says Capa Cruz, one of a range of adaptations from the small and big screens – the *Friends* set is another – that is boosting Lego’s female following. The men still dominate, says Capa Cruz, though Lego doesn’t do exact breakdowns and has just announced that henceforth it will not market its toys distinctly to boys, girls, men or women.

Will such designs still resonate in decades’ time the way classic Lego figurines echo down generations? ‘A lot of their success is depending on these other franchises that are not uniquely Lego,’ says Herman. ‘I wonder if that will translate in 20 years.’

Nevertheless, once my two boys are in bed, I click a few more bricks from my giant typewriter kit together, and before I know it a couple of hours have passed, and I have to promise myself that I will only tackle one more bag of pieces before I put it away. The years roll away. The fundamental joy of it makes it hard to worry for Lego’s future. ‘Lego is the number one toy manufacturer in Europe,’ says Tutt. ‘When you’re number one you always fear losing your spot. But every year they outperform the market. Their talent for reinvention is amazing.’

Expansion in the adult market may well be just the next masterstroke, whatever St Paul’s advice. For as CS Lewis famously remarked on that Biblical injunction, ‘When I became a man I put away childish things – including the fear of childishness.’