

Palo Alto

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Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace



Nicholas Wright

It took two weeks and 3,000 LEGO bricks to recreate San Francisco's Coit Tower.

by Rebecca Wallace

No matter how shrewd or mathematical you are, you can't escape the great LEGO puzzle: How do you build a round sculpture out of rectangular bricks? Russell Clark knows his craft, and it took him two weeks and 3,000 pieces to recreate San Francisco's Coit Tower.

"It's as round as I could get it," he says, eyeing his white handiwork, which is impressively circular, considering.

Across the room from the huge LEGO cityscape now on display at Palo Alto's Museum of American Heritage, a diminutive Christmas tree is decorated with ball orna-

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Nicholas Wright



Nicholas Wright

Top: Russell Clark and his fellow members of BayLUG (the Bay Area LEGO Users' Group) and BayLTC (the Bay Area LEGO Train Club) have created a smorgasbord of urban, suburban and rural scenes in plastic, complete with trains whizzing around. Above: LEGO Street, U.S.A.



Brian Connelly

Jackson Eagle, 6, takes a peek at the LEGO display at the Museum of American Heritage in Palo Alto.

Brick

by **Brick**

A LEGO landscape fills Palo Alto museum, with planes, trains and local landmarks

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Brian Connelly

Beverly Shane, right, points out a passing LEGO train to her younger sister, Olivia.

LEGO exhibit

(continued from previous page)

ments fashioned from LEGO bricks. Their curves aren't half-bad, either.

One of Clark's fellow members of BayLUG (the Bay Area LEGO Users' Group) made the ornaments in hopes of mastering the round shape — and of making one ball for each LEGO color.

Rather painstaking, no? Clark smiles. "A lot of our members are engineers."

Visitors to the Museum of American Heritage may not be so methodically minded, but they'll certainly find plenty to look at in this exhibit, now at the museum for the second year in a row.

On the sides of one museum hall, there are such LEGO creations as old fighter planes and a space shuttle. In the middle is a 12- by 25-foot LEGO smorgasbord of urban, suburban and rural scenes. Because BayLTC (the Bay Area LEGO Train Club) has teamed up with BayLUG for this event, several LEGO trains and a cable car whir and putt-putt through the world.

The range of buildings and vehicles is amazing, including restaurants, Chinatown, a Christmas tree farm (including some stumps), a lighthouse, a water tower and San Francisco's Maritime Museum and the Palace of Fine Arts. Tiny people raise glasses in a café, drive tow trucks and ride in a train dining car and a horse-drawn carriage. There's even a farmers' market with plastic carrots.

Even though she's seen the exhibit countless times, gallery supervisor Donia Bencke, an avid swing dancer, only now notices a small knot of happy-looking LEGO people cutting a rug next to LEGO musicians on a wee stage.

"I'm so entertained by that," she says delightedly. "I just now figured that out."

LEGO bricks (don't call them

LEGOs, according to the folks who make them) have proved abiding — and sometimes brain-boggling — entertainment for many over the years. It's all thanks to Danish toymaker Ole Kirk Christiansen, who in 1934 came up with the name LEGO from the first two letters of "leg godt,"

The LEGO smorgasbord includes Chinatown, the Palace of Fine Arts, and a farmers' market with plastic carrots.

words that in his native tongue mean "play well."

Clark, who co-founded BayLUG and is its current president, hasn't let adulthood stop him from playing well. The ponytailed 30-year-old has been snapping plastic bricks together since childhood and never takes anything apart. His packed 10-foot-by-10-foot-by-10-foot storage unit attests to that.

He buys bricks in bulk tubs from Toys "R" Us and goes online to hunt down more obscure pieces. (Currently, his wish list includes bricks with logos of the Boston Red Sox and The LEGO Store in Moscow.) And he spends three, four hours a week — "more than my wife would like" — building.

Clark, a San Jose resident who works in publications for a defense contractor, is serious about his LEGO passion and quick to show off favorite creations, speaking in short, quick sentences. He chose the LEGO medium because, he says, it allows him to faithfully recreate buildings and other structures he sees in real life.

He points out a lighthouse he made based on one in Santa Cruz: "Been there, seen it, took pictures of it, built it."

Other LEGO enthusiasts sound similarly meticulous. Mark Benz, another member of BayLUG, made many of the LEGO works

on exhibit, including an intricately detailed segment of the Bay Bridge. He plans to add a second and third section, according to Clark.

Another BayLUG member, David K.Z. Harris, states on his Web site: "I love puzzles, especially spatial relationships, and pattern-matching. As a result, LEGO bricks are a wonderful toy for me. ... I even enjoy sorting the parts after I disassemble models."

As the years roll on, LEGO bricks retain their popularity, but their palette has broadened. There are product lines featuring Harry Potter, Thomas the Train and Dora the Explorer. And the pieces now come in a wider range of colors, including pale sand blue and light yellow.

A taupey shade of brown makes Clark smile as he points it out in the museum display. Time was, the only way you could get bricks this color was by buying them in a "Star Wars" kit. Now you can get them individually on the Internet, but the memories remain.

Clark taps the brown brick affectionately. "We call this Yoda Brown." ■

What: "Living LEGO-cy," a sweeping exhibit of LEGO trains, buildings and other creations

Where: Museum of American Heritage, 351 Homer Ave., Palo Alto

When: Through Jan. 15. Exhibit hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday through Sunday.

Cost: Free

Info: Call (650) 321-1004 or go to www.moah.org.

About the cover:

A LEGO couple tosses back some plastic beverages at a pint-sized café. Photograph by Nicholas Wright.



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