



Bricks by the Bay 2021: The Con to End All Virtual Cons?

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I'm a "glass half full" kind of AFOL. Some of the most frequent words of the past year may have been "pandemic" and "isolation," and truly those words weigh heavy on the soul... but can you imagine how much worse this time would have been without the internet? AFOLs have been able to quasi-interact with social media MOC posts and virtual LUG meetings. We could order LEGO online to reduce the likelihood of transmission of the virus to our favorite store employees. The AFOL community even welcomed loads of new members into the fold, who found time for the hobby in isolation.

2020 was (to put it lightly) the pits, but someday a group of super nerdy actuaries will sit down and quantify exactly how many lives the internet (or LEGO) saved over the course of the pandemic. That, my AFOL friends, is a "glass half full."



That being said, let's not ignore the elephant in the breakout room: AFOLs miss cons.

And cons have done their best to step up for us.

Bricks by the Bay was the first convention I attended virtually in 2020. In normal times, this is for me an annual family pilgrimage to the San Francisco area. The community is warm, and Bricks by the Bay pays special attention

to invite children into the fold (without distracting from the AFOL experience). This is especially important to my [piano player KFOL](#) who has his own LEGO friends.

Through no fault of organizers, of course, the virtual experience last year was rough: every convention was flying by the seat of their pants in uncharted territory. Zoom was new to many users (and already reviled), and everybody online missed the experiences and each other so terribly that the pain was palpable. But a virtual Bricks by the Bay 2020 was better than nothing. WAY better than nothing. Both for the AFOLs and for the KFOLs who had their own dedicated channel of programming. We all were glad to have had the online experience but were eager to see everyone in person again the next year.

But the world had other plans and a year went by... and we were all still online. The weekend of June 18-20, 2021, Bricks by the Bay hosted its second virtual convention with the theme “Adventure Awaits.” The world had had a year to iron out the virtual wrinkles, the Bricks by the Bay committee leadership had been infused with new blood, and—yes, you could smell it—vaccines were in arms and hope was in the air! In this nerd’s opinion, Bricks by the Bay 2021 was a smooth and engaging event... and hopefully the last of its kind!



This year, convention organizers developed a convention kit, the “Box by the Bay,” which included a bag of sparkly new elements, seed parts for convention games, and a con kit model of an iconic San Francisco trolley car, [designed by Tim Heiderich](#).

Bricks by the Bay occurred somewhat in tandem with the [Paredes de Coura Fan Weekend in Portugal](#). In fact, some attendees abandoned all notions of sleep for the weekend and attended both events. (Simultaneous inter-continental convention attendance? That could never happen in normal times. Talk about a “glass half full!”)

Friday evening involved an opening ceremony and adult mixers. Director Steve Parmley introduced the convention games that could still be accomplished virtually with the Box by the Bay: a seed part build, a con torso vignette build, and a build using the con kit (trolley). MOCs in other categories had already been submitted to the MOC gallery.

Saturday and Sunday both offered two channels of constant programming. Many events continued past their designated end times, because of attendee enthusiasm. Having individual tracks for each presentation was a seamless step up from last year's format, as rooms weren't being passed from speaker to speaker.

Stuart Harris from the [LEGO House](#) talked about the creation of the institution and current events, designers of the (jaw-dropping) new typewriter set talked about its development, and the director of quality control spoke about challenges unique to his position at The LEGO Group. (That reddish-brown problem? They're on it!) A normal convention would be lucky to have any one of these speakers. The opportunity to have several representatives from The LEGO Group chime in from their offices on another continent is a silver lining to virtual conventions that we will surely miss.

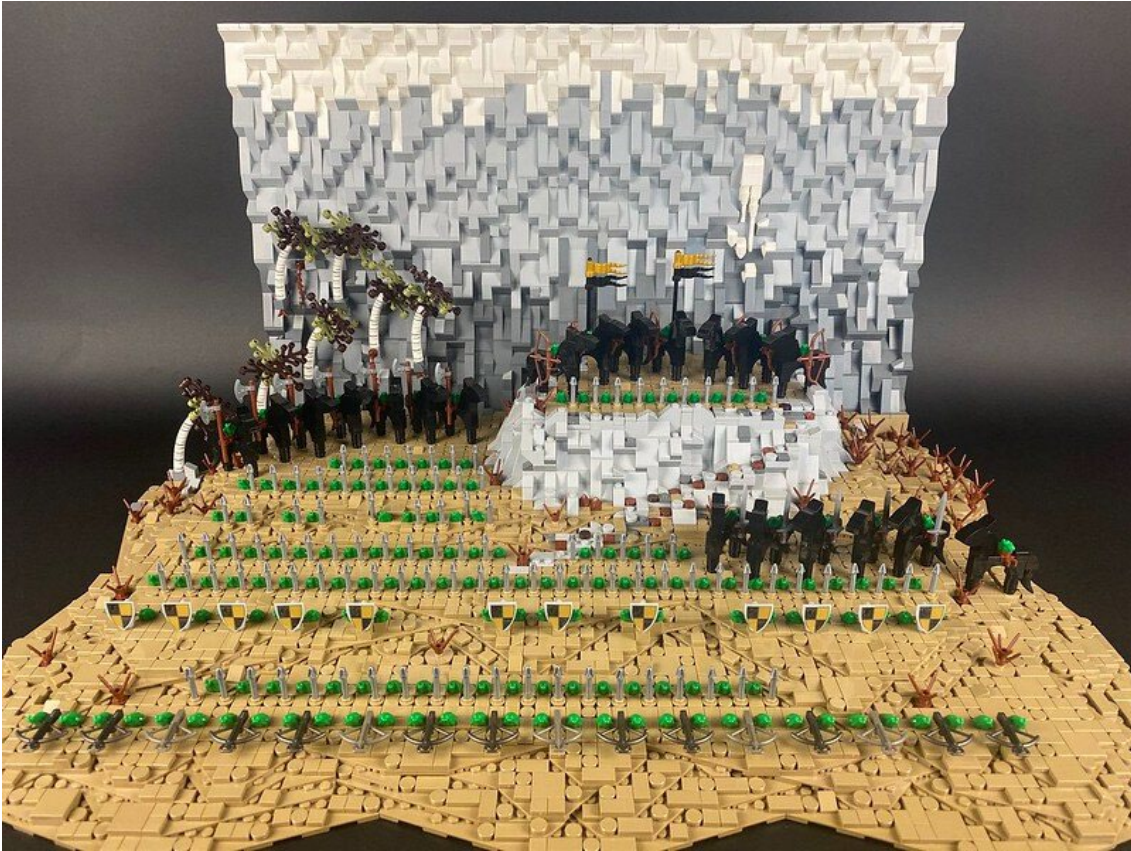


Virtual Quilt- This had me in stitches! Credit to Daneen McDermott.

Members of the local committee gave presentations on many topics: Brick Geometry (amazing info reminiscent of [BrickNerd's series of SNOT articles](#)), how to design in stud.io, using brick built windows and doors, women and girls who inspire, mech building, LUG building, [teaching seniors with dementia how to build with Duplo](#), The LEGO Group's [foray into virtual reality in the 1990s](#), and public library outreach/ FLL programming.

In addition, the convention supported talks about the several collaborative displays in the MOC gallery, specialized programming for the KFOLs, a [LEGO Masters roundtable](#) with contestants from the first and second American series, and unique presentations by "vendors who are makers." The latter wasn't a mere sales pitch; I learned a lot about the development and production of wares I had previously (and sadly only merely) glanced at in the vendor aisle.

Loads of MOCs were uploaded to the virtual gallery, but in my opinion, virtual conventions are really not conducive to MOC displays. Only a Star Trek-quality holodeck could fill that void. It's hard to see how amazing a MOC is on a Chromebook or phone versus in real life. Our [Nerd in Chief](#) picked up best in the Art category, but my personal favorite MOC result was [Kelly Bartlett's](#) "Army of Frogs" conquering the Military theme. Her frogs were green, but that tickled me bonsai pink!



Prepare for Amphibious Assault!

The schedule was so packed that it made choosing what to do at any given time difficult—just like a real con! Perhaps because most people in attendance knew that American convention halls already have in-person LEGO events coming up on the docket with vaccines being deployed, the mood was light and there was a lot of participation from the attendees. Social channels stayed open late into the night.

[Bricks by the Bay](#) expects to return as a full-on convention, in person, in Santa Clara, California June 23-26, 2022. The theme (which they had hoped to use this year) will be "Looking Back" with real-life MOC galleries open to the public, games, workshops, and all of the fun we may now only vaguely remember from the before times.

I imagine it will be an exhibition hall jam-packed with gorgeous LEGO creations—and a giant AFOL hug-fest. My cup will overflow.