

How LEGO® bricks are reshaping the world, one town at a time

The birthplace of the LEGO brick and the company that makes it are slowly working to instill the same sense of nurturing creativity and imaginative learning that made the toy so compelling into the city's daily life, Denmark's national government, and – perhaps – one day, the world.

LEGO founder Ole Kirk Kristiansen got his start in toys after buying a woodworking shop in Billund, Denmark. His company was officially renamed LEGO in the 1930s, and despite its tremendous international growth, it remains headquartered in the relatively tiny town.

It's hard to overstate the construction toy's impact on Billund. The company built the town's airport, the second largest in the country. When the town seat of government was shifted to a nearby city, the LEGO Group bought the town hall and turned it into the LEGO House, an international attraction. Billund is also home to the LEGO Group's headquarters, most of the company's physical archives, leading master builders, a major LEGO factory, and the first LEGOLAND®.



Billund Mayor Stephanie Storbanks said the LEGO Group has significantly impacted the town, especially the area's daycare and school systems.

In 2018, the town upgraded the qualifications for all daycare employees, sending them to a LEGO-influenced course about play, learning, and creativity. That has since extended to the town's many schools, which use a program called playful learning – developed in concert with the LEGO Foundation – to teach local children.

"We started it up at one school, and it has been such a success that now we're going to do it in all other schools," Storbanks said.

The town also works with KIRKBI, the Kristiansen family's investment company, on city planning, she said.

The town hall is a perfect example of that. Billund used to have its own town hall, but in 2007, the Danish Municipal Reform combined a number of municipalities into one, and Billund's town hall moved to nearby Grindsted.

The town hall move underscored an issue bubbling up in Billund for a bit.

"The center of Billund was very boring," Storbank said. "There were not many things to go and see there, and each year, a lot of tourists would come to Billund (because of LEGOLAND), and when they got into the town center, they would think, 'Am I in the right place?'"



So KIRKBI stepped in and purchased the empty town hall building, tore it down, and built a new attraction in its place: the massive LEGO House. At the same time, the town and the company worked up a 30-year plan to help modernize the downtown area. They're just five years in, and Storbank said the city center is almost unrecognizable.

"Each day you come, you can see something different," she said.

The town's work on the schooling system and the city center aren't the only ways the toy has impacted the town – and even the country, to some extent.

In 2010, the Capital of Children was formed to help transform the town of Billund into the literal worldwide capital of children. The organization operates under the belief that children are just as capable as adults and that learning through play is a fundamental way to achieve their goals.

Capital of Children CEO Charlotte Sahl-Madsen, a former Danish Minister of Science, Technology, and Development, and previous head of the LEGO Group's R&D department, said the group co-creates everything with the child members of its panel or the Children's General Assembly it runs.

So far, those efforts have led to creations and concepts big and small, from designing a new welcome area for the town and a permanent marble art installation in Billund to participating in the town's urban design, with a focus on multi-generational living, as well as calling on U.N. leaders to meet with child participants to address their global concerns.

The work Sahl-Madsen and the Capital of Children are doing is already being noticed internationally. In 2020, thanks to their efforts, Billund was recognized by UNICEF as a "child-friendly city and municipality."

"There will be one capital of children, but there will be parts of what we're doing that we would like to share with the world – the co-creation methodology for sure," Sahl-Madsen said. "The way to have municipalities and children work together to transform democracy is what we are aiming for."

And the city of Billund's leadership remains enthralled with the concepts brought forward by the LEGO Group and the Capital of Children, extending those ideas to a broad swath of its operations.

"We were very curious about how we develop our work-life balance also here in the office and the city hall," Mayor Storbak said. "And I hear that many other municipalities in the area are looking at us now and thinking, 'Oh, maybe they have found something that we can do also.'"

Explore more ...

In order of appearance:

[KIRKBI](#) – official website

[Capital of Children](#) – official website

[LEGO House](#) – official website

[Billund](#) – Official website

[LEGO Foundation](#) – Official website

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 5, Episode 49: A Journey Into the Real LEGO® City
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Prologue – 00:00

Announcer

Please note that this episode of Bits N' Bricks contains instances of misuse of the LEGO trademark, which must always be used as an adjective and never a noun. As a reminder, it is never appropriate to refer to the company that designs and produces LEGO brand products as LEGO. Rather, the correct name for the company overall is the LEGO Group.

Ethan Vincent

Hey, Brian.

Brian Crecente

Hello.

Ethan Vincent

Hey, I'm excited about today's episode. It's the second of two episodes we created while in Billund, the LEGO city.

Brian Crecente

Yes, home to the LEGO bricks since its creation decades ago, Billund, Denmark is in many ways the ultimate company town. But it's not a one-way relationship. The town and its ideals influenced the company as much as the company helped shape the town. It's a symbiotic relationship that reveals the underlying philosophy of the LEGO Group's approach to play, learning, and of course, brick-powered creativity.

(Bits N' Bricks theme music)

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 01:04

Ethan Vincent

Welcome to Bits N' Bricks, a podcast about all things LEGO Group. I'm Ethan Vincent.

Brian Crecente

And I'm Brian Crecente. Together, we look back at the rich history of the LEGO brand and chat with designers, thought leaders, and innovators who all work for one of the most popular and respected toy companies in the world: the LEGO Group.

(Bits N' Bricks theme music)

Ethan Vincent

Now, in the previous episode of Bits N' Bricks we chatted with some of the LEGO Group's creators about the company's history, current state and future, all through the lens of the 90th anniversary of the company, but during our visit, we also took time to immerse ourselves in Billund, this city of LEGO bricks, LEGO employees, and LEGO DNA. It's hard to overstate the impact that the construction toy has had on Billund. The company built the town's airport – the second largest in the country – and when the town seat of government was shifted to a nearby city, the LEGO Group bought the town hall and turned it into the LEGO House, an international attraction. Billund is also home to the company headquarters, most of the company's physical archives, leading Master Builders, a major LEGO factory, and LEGOLAND®.

Brian Crecente

You know, Ethan, it's funny. When we were doing all these interviews over the last, I think two years, I remember, someone once talking to me about what it was like to be in Billund back in the '50s, and they said that – and I don't know if this is literal – but they said that the LEGO brick was so much a part of Billund, you'd even find them sort of scattered in the town's gutters. But you know, there's so much more beneath that studded surface, like a deep-seated belief in the power of play and the value of working with children on things like human rights, climate change, and urban planning.

Chapter 1: Capital of Children – 03:03

Charlotte Sahl-Madsen

The children are so full of inspiration. We haven't had one single workshop in this place for the past five years without all adults left behind saying, "Wow! We could never have thought of this solution ourselves." So I mean, it's pretty stupid not to. So it's a matter of respect. And it's a matter of coming up with the best solutions. And then we need the children. They deserve it. They're going to live in the future. They're going to take advantage of the urban design decisions or the political decisions that we're making, so –

Ethan Vincent

That's Charlotte Sahl-Madsen, the CEO of Capital of Children Playful Minds. She's also a former Danish Minister of Science, Technology, and Development. She previously led the

Ebeltoft Glass Museum and ran the LEGO Group's R&D department. But these days, she dedicates her time to the Capital of Children.

Brian Crecente

The Capital of Children is this fascinating organization that works with the LEGO Foundation in the town of Billund to help develop initiatives that work toward making the city Billund the literal capital of children. Importantly, a large part of that involves working in a meaningful way with children.

Charlotte Sahl-Madsen

If there should be any place in the world where you develop a capital for children, and together with children, the latter the most important, I mean, it should be Billund. It's so obvious. It's a matter of why we haven't done this earlier. We co-create everything with the children. And there's a lot of organizations, teachers, and others saying that they include children, they involve children, they invite children into creative processes. We're trying to raise this level and say, "If you should do to co-creation in an ethical way, you should have children participating from the very beginning." They are not just coming up with answers to a question you formulate. I mean, they are trying to identify what is the most important question to try to answer. And there's a lot of ethic in this.

Ethan Vincent

Early on, the organization identified two areas to focus on: informal learning environments and urban design.

Charlotte Sahl-Madsen

When it comes to the urban design, we are trying to develop the creative world citizenship, trying to explain democratic processes to children, that the urban area belongs to all of us. We need to agree on how to work together to come up with suggestions and make decisions what should be in those areas. There's also a child safety element. It should be safe to walk or bike in the center of Billund, so we asked them to come up with suggestions how to improve play through generations, instead of having children in a more traditional playground and having adults checking their emails on the cell phone in the corner. So we would like to improve play through generations and through cultures, because we have so many very inspirational countries represented in Billund, so we should take that as a gift and try to translate that into a new kind of playground.

Brian Crecente

The current focus of the group and its general strategy came together about five years ago, based on the need for the organization to have a more specific direction.

Charlotte Sahl-Madsen

We agreed that co-creation with children in an ethical, willful way would be our methodology. The LEGO Foundation, the LEGO Group, they are world champions in learning from play, and that would, of course, be our approach. But in addition to that, we would like to come up, together with researchers – and we have had some national international professors assisting us – coming up with a methodology to secure taking in children's perspective in every step when it comes to the urban design projects. It's taking into consideration what is the agreement we would do with children in every step. Be very specific in the beginning what is actually agreement we do together? What do we promise each other? Secure the children meet the highest professionals. I mean the most important researchers within urban design. So you will see children in Billund biking side-by-side with Professor Jan Gehl. I think he's 85-something now. And he's telling about basic principles in urban layout. So we are securing that the children meet the best possible experts so they gain also new professional insights.

Ethan Vincent

And, Brian, one of the things that I thought was really fascinating is Charlotte told us the sculptures are built out of pink marble. And I guess the reason is because they're designed to last not just for a lifetime but an eternity. The result of this co-creation process isn't just philosophical. Last year, for instance, the organization worked with the Danish artist group Superflex to create the Play Contract installation. The collection of sculptures is spread across a grassy knoll in Billund. Each with phrases etched into them, they're a gathering place, a playground, a landscape that inspires both reflection and play.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, my wife Trish and I took a moment to visit this sort of creation, I think a little bit by accident. We were sort of wandering around Billund and came across them. There's this placard there that describes it as a playground for grownups and says it was created by Superflex, KWWY.studio, and 122 children from Billund – and then it actually lists the names of all those children.

Ethan Vincent

That's cool.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I thought that was really neat, and then the placard also notes that the five sculptures are meant to be touched. So you can sit on them, you can hide in them, you can lean on them. They're really sort of fun installations that seem like some sort of relic from a lost time bursting out of the grassy expanse between the roadway and this, sort of, reed-filled stream.

Ethan Vincent

And that's not the only impact the group has had on the town of Billund.

Brian Crecente

The group work to co-create urban spaces, safety zones, other colorful sculptures, and even a pop-up skate park. Their work on informal learning environments now involves all the schools in the Billund municipality, and the town itself is very involved with the group's approach to urban design.

Charlotte Sahl-Madsen

I think that's the most important proof you can have, that those methodologies are important, they work we can show it, we have a major showcase. I mean, where else do you have an entire municipality working like that? When we do urban design, it's of course important that we work closely with the municipality, so all their architects and urban planners, they actually having desks next to our team here at the same place because they really need to work close.

Ethan Vincent

And the work that Charlotte and the Capital of Children are doing is receiving international recognition, too. In 2020, thanks to their efforts, Billund was recognized by UNICEF as a child-friendly city and municipality.

Charlotte Sahl-Madsen

There will be one Capital of Children, but there will be parts of what we're doing we would like to share with the world. The way to have municipalities and children work together – being a creative world citizen, which is what we aim for – every child is a creative world citizen, but maybe we could assist them in fulfilling that much more. And part of that is having a much more holistic approach to democracy, to be curious for different cultures, to try to have an outlook on the world. So playful learning is not just about having fun. Playful learning is much more than that. It's about taking creativity into consideration, trying to understand your surroundings, your colleagues, your friends, what's the best solution for them. So the playful learning is a huge approach to how to learn, and part of that is understanding yourself and how can you contribute to the world.

(Brief tune plays)

Charlotte Sahl-Madsen

As the children said, "We don't do this for fun. We do it for the future."

Chapter 2: LEGOLAND – 10:55

Brian Crecente

Our first stop, in both this episode and our visit to Billund, was the original LEGOLAND. Before popping up around the world with locations in the United Arab Emirates, Japan, Italy and of course, the United States to name a few, LEGOLAND had a single location in Billund which opened in 1968.

(LEGOLAND segment in The Land of Fairy Tales (1968))

Narrator

The legend lives on here at Billund, deep in the hearts of the farmlands of Jutland. This project has nothing to do with Anderson's immortal characters, though fairy tales are once more to the fore. They're constructing a model village, a 10-acre children's play center with a difference. Every building here is being made from tiny plastic bricks, bricks that children themselves use for their own miniature playtime construction. Millions and millions of bricks are being slotted together to build up this colorful dream world.)

Brian Crecente

Squeezed in between the airport and the company's new campus, the theme park is a sprawling location that includes a number of themed hotels, a conference center, rides and more than a few amazingly detailed massive LEGO brick builds. The LEGO brick Miniland is a model village that includes landmarks from around the world made from millions of bricks. Ethan, myself, and Trish, my wife, spent some time wandering the grounds, and Ethan I know, despite the sort of on and off rain that was happening when we were there, you were recording the whole time.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, yeah, I did. And I got some great things. A lot of spontaneous stuff. And I think we should just listen to it.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, totally.

(Tune plays)

Ethan Vincent

Can you get the sounds of the airplane? (sound of plane engine). What do you think, Trish?

Patricia Pascale

It is seriously incredible. It's given me chills. Like, it's seriously given me goosebumps.

Brian Crecente

Aw.

Patricia Pascale

It really is. It is totally mind-blowing.

Ethan Vincent

We're standing here in crazy rain right now, like it's already starting to rain.

Brian Crecente

And it snows here, right? There's snow. There's probably no hurricanes, but like, this stuff has been here, for what? Sixty years?

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. Something like that.

Brian Crecente

And they look – they must refresh them, but they still look amazing.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. I mean, you just saw the huge train that went by, and you could see some serious wear and tear on it. I don't know if you saw that. But there was some.

Brian Crecente

What I wonder is who has to do the gardening because they like, all kidding aside, if you'd left this unkempt, because this is living, it looks like living grass and stuff. So someone has to come in with the world's smallest lawnmower. (chuckles)

Ethan Vincent

Well, it's probably – look how big the Minifigs are. So they can do a little bit more. These aren't your usual Minifigs or Minifigs.

Brian Crecente

Oh, right, these aren't Minifigs. They're built people. They're constructed people.

Ethan Vincent

Look at the train. Here it is.

Brian Crecente

What happened? It looks like it went through a rockslide. It's really weird. There's rock on the ground and there's some rock on the – I wonder – that's really strange. How could that have – kids. Kids. That's how it happened.

Ethan Vincent

Dad get some of those rocks and throw it on that train. "OK."

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it's just – see it's like a contest. Can you land a rock? I'm surprised there's not little coins on it. That would be cute.

(LEGOLAND Miniland NASA Space Shuttle

Announcer 1

Apollo 11 launched July 16th 1969. On April 12th 1981, the first space shuttle lifted off from pad 39A with John Young and Bob Crippen aboard. The space shuttle here is going through its pre-launch processes.)

Announcer 2

10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, we've gone for main engine start, we have [sounds of a rocket] –

Brian Crecente

I covered a rocket launch for a newspaper. I was actually – they don't show this, but outside the blast radius, they have stands, these little metal stands. And that's where like all the generals and the family of the astronauts and press go. And I was able to be there for one of the launches. It's crazy (laughs) as you can imagine.

Ethan Vincent

The thing I like is that there's a real educational element here too, right? As a kid, you'd be like, "Oh, that's cool." You know, you're actually learning. I think that's a cool thing.

Ethan Vincent

It did stop raining so that's good. We're right in front of LEGO NINJAGO® The Ride. We're going to go in there and check that out.

Brian Crecente

Yes. We are making our way through the NINJAGO dojo is what it looks like. And there is no line. So this has got to be like at least an hour, I think when this thing is full.

Ethan Vincent

I remember standing at the very back of that line with our family. That's how packed it is in the summer.

Brian Crecente

That's what she was just saying: Can you imagine how long this line must get? What is this? Oh, we're going to be picking up some glasses. Yeah, this is going to be a kind of like a Wii game. It senses your hand movements, and you can attack with that.

Ethan Vincent

Come on, Brian, you can do better. (Sounds of ride)

Brian Crecente

I'm trying to figure out where the sensor is. (laughs) (Sound of ride continues)

Ethan Vincent

All right, let's look at the score here, Brian. What do you have?

Brian Crecente

10 million! No 54,650.

Patricia Pascale

14,000.

Ethan Vincent

87,950.

Brian Crecente

Clearly, you cheated. (laughs)

(Tune break)

Chapter 3: LEGO Idea House – 15:54

Ethan Vincent

LEGO founder Ole Kirk Kristiansen was born about 10 miles from Billund. In his 20s, he moved to the town and purchased the Billund Woodworking and Carpentry Shop. After a fire burned down the business in the 1920s, he built a new factory with an attached family apartment. Today, that building is known as the LEGO Idea House, a private museum but also home to the company's archivists, historians, and typically only open to partners and employees.

Brian Crecente

You know, we were lucky enough to get some time with two of the company's corporate historians. You should go check out our interview with Signe Wiese in our previous episode. Today we're talking with Kristian Reimer Hauge as he walks us through the sprawling exhibit inside the building.

Ethan Vincent

Kristian said that, prior to COVID shutting tours down, the LEGO Idea House would have between 250 and 300 visitors a year.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

So plenty of tours, which is one of the ways we sort of communicate our history here in the company. So we are standing in the beginning of the historical exhibition. And what I think is cool about the historical exhibition and where we are is these buildings that comprises this exhibition. This is the cradle of the LEGO Group. So in just a few seconds, we will walk into our founder's old family home, and we will end the tour over in a building that is next to that which is our first headquarters. It's just fantastic to be in these buildings where it all started. So this image of Ole Kirk Kristiansen here: He's our founder, and he was a carpenter. He was apprenticed by one of his older brothers. He's from a very, very large family – 12 brothers and sisters. After finishing his apprenticeship, he sees that the local woodworking factory here in Billund is for sale. What we're looking at here: We are looking at, sort of, drawings, for example, of farm houses, you know, lots of local farmers. They were Ole's best customers, so when they needed a new roof construction for their farmhouse, a new barn, stables, they would contact Ole and that was basically what he did for many, many years. And he was well-respected, well-renowned around here.

Brian Crecente

To summarize, like, the work he did early on, this wasn't little stuff. He was building houses and roofs and things like that.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

It was very, sort of – he had these large enterprises. Yeah, sort of the at least the carpentry work on on houses, right? He had the carpentry work on a local church. We actually have it up here, that church up there in the corner. Those types of things, but also smaller things, you know, kitchen cabinets, repair, tools, and so on. So it was a little bit of everything, but yeah, quite large enterprises mostly.

Brian Crecente

Speaking of that, how did he transition into – what was the big shift for him when he moved to toys?

Kristian Reimer Hauge

Yeah, so it has to do with the Great Depression. You know, this global economic crisis. The Danish farmers are hit really hard on import export. They cannot afford to buy Ole's services, you know, they were his best customers. He has to think out-of-the-box. He has to try and save what's left of his company. So it's out of necessity, no doubt about that. He quickly sort of sees that he's actually pretty good at this. He sort of starts to zoom in a little bit on the toys because – again, he focuses on quality, you know, he actually takes toys seriously.

(Tune break)

Ethan Vincent

So, Kristian continues to tour, takes us through the main floor, this, you know, very cozy, well curated museum with plenty of early wooden toys displayed behind glass. And, of course, there's Ole's signature wooden duck, but also the very first molding machine.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

So this beauty right here (laughs), this is a plastic injection molding machine.

Brian Crecente

That's awesome.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

And this is similar to the machine that Ole he orders in the late '40s. Well, he orders it in, I think '46, and it's delivered in '47 and then roughly from '48 we start to produce plastic toys as a supplement to wooden toys.

Ethan Vincent

One of the interesting parts that I love is that the family wasn't too excited about this purchase. He spent a lot of money on this, and it was kind of a pipe dream at the beginning.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

Yeah, absolutely. So this molding machine, again, after starting to have problems finding high-quality wood enough he wants to supplement his production of wooden toys, and again, he zooms in on plastic and this molding machine. The price was 30,000 Danish crowns, which just to put that into perspective, is more than the profit from the year before of the company.

Ethan Vincent

The rest of the tour takes us through the history of the LEGO brick, the evolution of the system of play, this chronological walk through the various themes and genres of the LEGO brand all the way up until today. And then, of course, we arrive at that moment where Kristian took Dave, Brian, and myself downstairs into the vault. And it's the part of the tour that we've reported on several times throughout Bits N' Bricks, and for Dave, well, he was able to find his childhood set, set 6396 The LEGO International Jet Set from 1990 in its original packaging.

Dave Tach

I had that plane.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

Oh, you had that plane?

Dave Tach

I had that set except – I put that plane together with my niece not two years ago.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

You know, that's the beauty of showing people this history is that all of a sudden, you hit the memories.

Dave Tach

To be clear, that's not a plane, that's my plane. This is my era of LEGO stuff.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

Exactly. That's why I never get tired of showing this to people because, you know, it's memories, its emotions, and it's just very, very cool to show people their childhood memories and make them relive them, right? And that is no different if you are a business partner or if you're an employee. You know, we have all – we all have these memories with our product.

(Tune break)

Chapter 4: LEGO Archives – 22:22

Ethan Vincent

The LEGO Idea House is also where we met with the company's archivist or records manager Tine Froberg Mortensen.

Brian Crecente

Tine has been so helpful over the course of producing this podcast. She's also the person who's been archiving the podcast itself and the research we do. That includes not just our episodes, interviews, and notes, but sometimes even games.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, Brian, you actually tracked down a copy of the very first LEGO video game ever made – Fun to Build. You purchased it and you sent it to Tine for archiving, right?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, and I sent the Sega Pico you use to play the game, too. We got to see it in the archives during our visit, which I thought was pretty cool.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, it was. You know what was weird, Brian, is I was kicking myself for not turning it on.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I know.

Ethan Vincent

Why didn't we do that? Why didn't I say, "Hey, can we just please turn this on? I just want to see it."

Brian Crecente

It's funny, because I also – I had at my house for a while, and I didn't try it. I will say in our own defense, that this is an older system so you need RCA plugs, you need an old TV or a converter, so we have an excuse.

Ethan Vincent

(chuckles) I know, but it was weird. Like, I walked away from them, even now in my memory I'm like, "Why didn't I just fire that up?"

Brian Crecente

It's so weird (chuckles). So Tine explained how the archives work hand-in-hand with the LEGO Group and LEGO Idea House.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

The LEGO Group archives are part of LEGO Idea House. So, we have the LEGO Idea House, and then we have sort of three sub-departments. We have LEGO Group archives, I'm heading up; and then we have the Heritage Department, with three of my colleagues the three corporate historians; and then we have more administrative area, where we have a

department secretary and a model builder and another colleague who sort of makes sure that we get all the boxes for the archives that we have. So even though we're sort of like three sub-departments, we all work within the LEGO Idea House. And the purpose of the LEGO Idea House is, you know, to collect, preserve, and mediate the LEGO Group history values and development right from the beginning and up until today. So what goes on, you know, in the far future, that's not like our sort of core area. We sort of take care of the business up until today.

Ethan Vincent

A big part of Tine's job is maintaining the company's massive archives, which takes up about four miles of shelf space.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Well, if you visit the archive, it will look like, I think, a traditional archive you can see anywhere in the world. We have lots of shelves with all different kinds of boxes where we have documents. But we not only have documents, of course. We have the LEGO products, the wooden toys, the LEGO boxes. We also have an element archive. We also have an archive for, you know, boxes before they are sort of folded out to be fit with bricks. And then we also have different kinds of artifacts that sort of give an impression of the LEGO Group: prices, clothes, uniforms from the LEGOLAND park. We have tins, and birthday presents – all different kinds of things that you can imagine that would give people an impression of what the LEGO Group looked like and looks like today. And we are not based here in the Idea House. The Idea House is way too small. We actually take up five warehouses in Billund, and then we also have a warehouse another place in Denmark, and that is actually climatized, so that is where we store all the wooden toys, and one sample of each launched LEGO box. So we get one sample that is sent to the climatized warehouse. And then one sample that is being brought to the vault. We have this special part of the archives here at the Idea House where we have one sample of each box. Often designers come there to be inspired if they do not visit us at the archives. But also, for example, for a LEGO inside tour or other fan tours, they have a wish to see, you know, the box from their childhood, we have them here in the Idea House. And then we have free samples that are actually locked for legal purposes.

Brian Crecente

Just to have?

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Yeah, just to have. And if we have more than five samples, we put them in, what we call, the exhibition archive. And these are the samples we use when we have requests for exhibitions. For example, this year when we have our 90th anniversary, lots of our sales offices they would like to have a sort of historical exhibition. We take the boxes from our exhibition archive to send to them or build the model and send to them. Sometimes they

would like both the box and the model. We usually build the model ourselves and wrap them up safely and send them out to the sales offices, and we have guidelines and everything to make sure that they handle them correctly. Sometimes they only need the model, and sometimes they actually only need the box.

(Tune break)

Brian Crecente

Now the archives don't actually have every single LEGO brick set ever made. Instead, the archives focus on those sold in retail stores. So for instance, they don't have something like, I don't know, a set only available at Comic-Con. On top of that, the collection isn't 100% complete. If they don't have the box, though, Tine said that they do still have the documentation and pictures. All of these, carefully tucked away in half a dozen warehouses spread across Denmark, are tracked with computer databases.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

We operate with three different kinds of databases. We have one database only relating to the launched products: wooden toys, LEGO boxes, elements, and stuff like that. And then we have another database where we concentrate on everything that is not related to a launched product: minutes of meetings, documentation strategies, you know (laughs), the LEGOLAND uniform I mentioned earlier. And regarding the podcast, the material we have from that it will be filed in that database. That is also restricted, only accessed by the LEGO Idea House employees. And so all things that relate to the LEGO Digital 25th anniversary, right from the material we found for the team before making the podcasts, the transcripts from the podcasts, and everything, is filed in that filing number. And of course, it is all digital, so it is placed on our digital shelf on SharePoint, so if one of my colleagues doesn't know that the podcast transcriptions can be found on LEGO.com, so "I need to find the transcript from the, I don't know, the third LEGO digital podcast," we can find them for them. So everything is filed.

Ethan Vincent

Tine and her group also support marketing efforts on occasion, like this year's 90th anniversary.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

We have been content providers for many of the exhibitions that are sent out to the different LEGO entities around the world and then also with pictures and all advertisements. Regarding to the sort of communication on the 90th anniversary, it's of course the communications department, but my two colleagues, Kristian and especially Signe, has been like our sort of point of contact from the other departments relating the 90th anniversary. And of course, if we have the possibility to bring the LEGO products out

to people all over the world to see the wooden duck or a wooden horse or the fire truck – yeah, it's nice that people have the opportunity of that.

Brian Crecente

Sometimes, Tine and the rest of the group do independent research into the LEGO Group's history and publish their findings. Or, you know, they just write articles to unearth some interesting facts for the company's many employees worldwide.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

I think having the opportunity to sometimes just dig deep into a little topic that we always talk about, if we have, you know, give to us. Just the possibilities as to really sort of getting into that topics, like doing a bit of research yourself – that is just nice, just if you have only one or two weeks to just concentrate on one little thing. And it doesn't happen that often that we have time to do that, but when it does, it's just really nice. The last one I did was relating the Kirk Christiansen surnames because, you know, there's always been this history that Ole Kirk Kristiansen is it with a Ch or a K he never changed his surname, but his son Godtfred, baptized with a K, but later legally changed his name to a Ch. Kjeld also baptized with a K still using the K and Thomas as well. So there was this Danish author writing this book in collaboration with Kjeld, and sort of to be sure that we were actually right in stating that Ole Kirk Kristiansen's surname should be spelled with a K. I dug into lots of church journals finding the surnames of everybody – that you can because there are also legal restrictions on how new the church books are you can have a look in. So I just collected all the surnames of both Ole and his parents and his brothers and sisters and Godtfred and his brothers and down to Kjeld – not Thomas and his sisters because they're too young. So yeah, that was just so much fun.

Brian Crecente

So that must have been – what was it like when you – you know, I've done a lot of research in this job, but in other jobs, and for me, at least, it's always exciting when you find that one little nugget that proves the point or, you know, that's been lost to time. What was that like for you when you discovered that?

Tine Froberg Mortensen

I told the whole department. We had an online meeting, it was during COVID and I said, "I have something to tell you," and then I just spent like half an hour just going through all the surnames for the whole Kirk Kristiansen family. Because as the company archivist, you need to know your past. And I think some of the values, the core values that we have in this company – you know, quality, caring, learning, fun – we can actually date them all the way back to Ole, our founder.

(Tune break)

Ethan Vincent

So, Brian, one of the things that I love is Tine in that interview was so nice and gracious and we talked for quite a bit about the archives, and we were super fascinated – even after the interview we just kept talking about it over and over again, and man, I really have to give Tine credit because she said, "You know what? Let's meet up, and I'll show you the archives." And that was just like such a beautiful thing. I can just remember all of our faces kind of going into a smile. We look at each other like it's going to happen, we're going to actually go to the archives. This is so cool.

Brian Crecente

Yeah. And the archives are well worth the visit.

Ethan Vincent

Absolutely, and you know, she told us to go to this certain address, and also not disclose the information about it, you know? It was a very exclusive experience, and man, I'm so grateful she allowed us to do that. So let's just listen to that experience.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

So this is very noisy now because we have this rolling shelves. This is manual labor.

Ethan Vincent

It sounds a lot like the archives downstairs in the LEGO Idea House.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Yes. Yeah, it's the same system. And when they ran out of these sort of rolling shelves, we had to give them some of ours, so that's why we have different shelves in there.

Brian Crecente

Oh yeah.

Ethan Vincent

That makes sense, that makes sense.

Brian Crecente

Reminds me of college.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Yeah, but it's a great way to store them because, you know, it's well looked after when the shelves are closed. And also it doesn't take as much space.

Ethan Vincent

You're about to cross the threshold into the Galidor research world.

Brian Crecente

I'm so excited.

Ethan Vincent

I can tell how excited (crosstalk and laughter). Look at Brian!

Tine Froberg Mortensen

We have some scripts for Episode 2 and 3.

Brian Crecente

Oh my God, scripts?

Tine Froberg Mortensen

You can have a look at it if you want.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, please. Yes. I'm all over that right here my friends.

Brian Crecente

Let's see what the scripts are here. Holy cow – look at this. This is amazing. This would have come straight from like when they were after they shot it maybe they would've –

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Or if they had kept it in the department and they were moving out or closing down the theme.

Ethan Vincent

We've got episode 103 here, Defenders of the Dimension, Galidor: Defenders of the Outer Dimension All for One –

Brian Crecente

– One for Nepol.

Ethan Vincent

That's right.

Brian Crecente

Yes. And it's got – yeah, this is – so I'm curious, as cool as this is, what I really would – I'm curious about is if you have anything about the Kek Powerizer, which is a specific toy, if there's any documents in here that might refer to this device.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

I actually think we have, but I didn't bring my computer today because we're going – so I can't look it up for you. That's it, but I can do it, well, next week, and then if I have something, you can have a look.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, yeah, I'm just fascinated because I bought one and I've been messing around with it and I think it's so neat.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Ah, yeah. You have the Galidor here as well.

Brian Crecente

And this is like, this looks like this is promotional stuff maybe.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Yes, I think so. We have sort of, you know, a press kit. "A hero will be revealed."

Brian Crecente

This is fantastic. This is amazing that you – and this is – and obviously it's not just paperwork you're keeping, it's – you have all kinds of all kinds of things.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

All kind of things, yes. In the building we are in now it's mostly documentation archives. We have, you know, documents and books, and anything that is not a LEGO product. When we go to the first warehouse that's connected to this warehouse, you can see our retail archive, because we have divided the product archive in a retail archive and an exhibition archive. So, you know, the retail archive, locked for legal purposes. And then we have the exhibition archive, if we could get more than five samples of each LEGO box, that would be in our exhibition archive, and we have that in another warehouse in another building, for safety reasons, yeah.

Brian Crecente

Right.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

When we file something, we only file what we know. If it doesn't say that this is the first sketch of a pirate ship, we will just write down "sketch of a pirate ship." We will not write that "this is probably" because we have to be absolutely certain of what we file because in 10 or 20 years times when new colleagues come along, if it says "this is probably the first sketch," then all of a sudden, it could be like "this is the first sketch" and we don't know that. So we are very, sort of – we have a strict rule that we only file what we know. So we don't make any assumptions when we file it in our database. We have two warehouses where we have just been. And in this hall, we have three warehouses.

Ethan Vincent

Oh, wow, OK.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

And they have numbers so we also file by building numbers. So -

Ethan Vincent

That makes sense.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

– this material is in building this, and this material is in building that. So we just have to take the entrance part of the way. The archives start in this building. (noise of electronic door)

Ethan Vincent

Wow, OK. Just, it just never ends.

Brian Crecente

Wow, this is like –

Ethan Vincent

This is amazing.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Building instructions and advertisement from 1949 up until this year.

Brian Crecente

This looks like the world's largest comic book collection. (laughs)

Tine Froberg Mortensen

And they actually do come in very handy. The advertisements and the –

Brian Crecente

Catalogs.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Catalogs, yes. So the building instructions are on the shelves over there, from the very first set up until the present set. Yeah.

Brian Crecente

So these are all the toys. These are all the sets.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Yes. These are – this is our exhibition archive.

Brian Crecente

OK, and that means if you're doing something, this is where you come to pull a set –

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Yes.

Brian Crecente

– to put it on display. Gosh, how far back do you think that is? How wide, I wonder? Each of these panels are probably, what, six feet? Maybe? One, two, three, four, five, six.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Fifteen meters or something like that?

Ethan Vincent

Fifteen meters back and this is probably what? Fifty, maybe 60 meters? Yeah.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

Now you understand why we take up approximately six shelf kilometers.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, that's amazing. It's amazing. If you were to stack these all next to each other, it really is Raiders of the Lost Ark, isn't it?

Brian Crecente

It is.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

I also think that we are lucky that, you know, the owner family really wants to preserve the history. So that is why we can take up so much space, for example, also because, well, let's face it: The LEGO product is a popular product, and the history because, you know, 90 years family-owned based in a small city, it's such a special history. So that's why we're not asked to narrow our physical space down. But I know some of my other, you know, private company archivists, they are asked to digitalize everything because they have to take up less space.

Ethan Vincent

Now are these pictures then or frames, picture frames of something? It looks like this is maybe a frame of some sort, some kind of artwork.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

That's a good idea. I actually don't know, but my colleague will because they are sent to him. Maybe it's – I think it's boxes and wrapping and stuff like that.

Ethan Vincent

Are you saying there's things that you don't know about that happen in your archive?
(laughter)

Tine Froberg Mortensen

No. No. (laughter)

Ethan Vincent

You know everything.

Tine Froberg Mortensen

I try to know a little bit about everything, yeah.

(Tune break)

Chapter 5: LEGO Factory Tour – 39:00

Brian Crecente

The LEGO Group has manufacturing plants around the world. The latest one, in fact, will be in the United States in Virginia. But there's something special about being able to visit the LEGO Factory in Billund. Outside the glass and brick building directly in front of the front doors is a tiny plot of land where the grass has been allowed to grow unfettered and mixed with these sprays of wildflowers. In the center, there's this boy and girl, life-size, and made

entirely of LEGO bricks, facing each other as they create with LEGO bricks together. Inside the front doors there are, as always seems to be the case with the LEGO Group buildings, astonishing builds like this electric blue evening gown made of warped LEGO base plates, and a molding machine in miniature created with LEGO bricks.

Ethan Vincent

Once we don safety gear, guide Dennis Kikkenborg Pedersen led us into the heart of the mostly automated factory. Here, machines automate the process of injecting melted plastic into molds, snipping off those extra bits for melting and reuse, and dropping them into storage containers. Another robot of sorts rolls through the factory replacing filled containers with empty ones, and then taking the freshly molded parts to a conveyor belt.

Dennis Kikkenborg Pedersen

We're entering mold module two now. And in here, you will see we have our little AGV robots. So you can see one over there, the blue ones, they're constantly circling in here clockwise.

Ethan Vincent

Which?

Dennis Kikkenborg Pedersen

The blue robots, box-shaped robot, they're called AGVs. They are little autonomous, self-driving robots that go around and picking up these boxes. So when a box is full, the column will spin around, and then it will raise the full box up, and that will tell the robot to bring an empty box of the same kind. And then the robot will come and exchange the full box for the empty box. And there's a little conveyor belt there and behind there, you can just see a box coming down, that's a crane in there, takes the boxes up onto the ceiling and then we have a conveyor belt along the ceiling that takes everything down into the warehouse.

Dave Tach

I'm literally standing in front of the machine that makes LEGO hands. There's tens of thousands in a little box in front of me. That is riches beyond gold to 8-year-old me. And I'm just watching them come out of the machine.

Ethan Vincent

They're coming off this real fancy conveyor belt too, and they just drop like little droplets.

Dave Tach

Yep, just a little – it's their last journey before the box I guess. They just fall down lightly. There's got to be like a – it starts liquid, at least, 10 feet that way. And then there's got to be a cooling process and they're just coming off and in the end dropping in. And it's what

looks like 30 billion little LEGO hands. It's unreal. I can't, I'm telling you I can't wrap my brain around it.

(Tune break)

Dennis Kikkenborg Pedersen

Billund kind of serves two purposes: It's the oldest factory we have, but it is also stuffed with the newest tech we have. So we have some of the new molding technologies – of course I can't show those, but they generally start here. We have our engineers here, development here, so it makes sense to start off that kind of stuff here. And then we have difficult stuff here because we have a lot of people who've been with us for 20, 30, 40 years. They know everything there is to know about making LEGO bricks. So if we have an element that is troublesome, that requires just the right settings and a lot of finagling on the machines, we tend to keep it in Billund because we have some operators here who have that expertise and that experience that they can make something work that would take too long to train in the other side's people to do. This is the this is the resin area, so this is where they are storing – you can see all the cylinders over there with different colors. You also saw them in the modules. So this is what we call the master batch, the color part, and you put those with the raw, white plastic, and that is the whistling sound you hear in the pipes, and then mixing with the color at the machine. So this is the area where they will fill the cylinders of color and bring them out to the machine so that it has the color component. OK, let's take the final part down to the high bay warehouse.

Brian Crecente

This is the LEGO tower. (chuckles)

Dennis Kikkenborg Pedersen

And this is the actually – this is the sm – we call this the high bay warehouse. This is the smallest we have in LEGO.

Dave Tach

The smallest?

Dennis Kikkenborg Pedersen

The smallest, yes. The one in in Czech Republic where we pack the bricks is around four times the size.

Dave Tach

This is the smallest?

Dennis Kikkenborg Pedersen

This is the smallest of our warehouses.

Dave Tach

The one that looks like I'm staring down a matte painting in a movie?

Brian Crecente

This looks like the scene from (crosstalk) Indiana Jones.

Dave Tach

Raiders of the Lost Ark (crosstalk), except it's three stories of – and all of these are filled with (crosstalk) 10s of 1000s of bricks and elements and –

Dennis Kikkenborg Pedersen

And you can see there's blank spaces in between, so it's not at full capacity, and right now it varies across the year from how much we are stocking up and (crosstalk) stocking down across the year.

Brian Crecente

So how are these used? Are these – do these eventually find their ways into sets that are sold or like –

Dennis Kikkenborg Pedersen

Yes, yes.

Brian Crecente

What's that process? How did they leave here?

Dennis Kikkenborg Pedersen

We have this principle of making stuff where it's needed. So you see in a lot of other industries, you would make the majority in the Far East and maybe do assembly locally. We try to do everything locally to where it's needed. Of course, we can do it in every country, but at least, like, as much separated out as we can so that you have the least amount of stuff that needs to go somewhere. Because from a planning perspective, one of the biggest problems is that, if you ship something continent-to-continent, you are committing something to a very long journey, and it'll be a while until it gets there. And if you find out you didn't need it anyway, well, it is on the boat, so it is coming. So having everything locally makes us more flexible, makes us better.

Brian Crecente

More efficient, yeah.

(Brief tune break)

Ethan Vincent

Amazing. What did you think, Brian?

Brian Crecente

Very cool. Very, very neat to see how automated everything is and to see – like for me, the image that's going to stick in my head for a very long time is a bucket filled with what had to be hundreds of thousands of Minifig hands, just packed with them, and them pouring out as they're making them. And then just watching just how, even though this has been around for 30-something years, this feels like something out of the future. Yeah, it's, it's stunning.

Ethan Vincent

All right, I'm going to cut here.

Brian Crecente

Yeah.

(Tune break)

Chapter 6: Mayor of Billund – 45:54

Ethan Vincent

It's odd that the interview most tightly connected to Billund actually happened outside of the town.

Brian Crecente

It is, and something definitely worth talking about as we shift into our chat with Mayor Stephanie Storbak. The town of Billund used to have its own town hall, but in 2007, the Danish Municipal Reform combined a bunch of municipalities into one. When that happened, the town hall essentially moved to nearby Grindsted.

Ethan Vincent

Right. and the Billund town hall was leveled, and the location was turned into what is now known as the LEGO House.

Brian Crecente

Actually, you know, this is a great place to start our interview. Stephanie can explain exactly what happened.

Stephanie Storbank

That came about because the center of Billund was very, you can say, boring. There was not many things to go and see there. And each year, a lot of tourists come to Billund, and when they went into the center, they thought, "Am I at the right place?" (laughs) because it didn't look like a center. And when we moved the city hall from Billund to Grindsted then the LEGO KIRKBI bought the old city hall, and together we made a vision for Billund for the next 30 years. And for the first five years, it was the center with LEGO House and all the buildings around that. It has changed extremely since – for the last five years. The first phase was the city center, the next phase is the travbyen where it's going to be a completely new area for living, urban living, area without cars, an area with a lot of green spaces, an area where people in different generations can live together. And that's also KIRKBI that is developing that together with the municipality. And in the third phase, we're going to look at the airport to develop that because formerly, we had a city where the workers went one place, and the people were living at different place, but nobody came to the center. So we want to mix everything up. And therefore we also want to make some of the people living nearer to the airport city, and also have some our small businesses going to the airport city.

Ethan Vincent

And those plans are coming together, of course, with help from the Capital of Children, which we talked a bit earlier about in this episode.

Stephanie Storbank

In the CoC, the Capital of Children, you work with three different programs, and one of the program is child-friendly spaces. And I think it's fantastic when our children say, "Oh, I live in a municipality where I can draw the roads, and later I can bike on them, and when I get old, I can buy a house on that road." And I think that's fantastic. But when you do that, you have to be very consistent about, when you ask children, that they have to feel that they have something to say. And we are very aware of that also in all other areas when we ask our young people and children – that, of course we make the frame. We decide. What can you decide, what in that frame? The rules have to be very free, because otherwise they won't do it the next time. Then they think, "You just asked me so you can make a tick and then everything is OK. " But we also have to make the frame because otherwise it's very difficult because they don't think about economic rules and all the regulation we have, so it has to be balanced.

Brian Crecente

Now, Stephanie was just elected mayor of the Billund Municipality starting her term on January 1. Before that, she was on the city council and headed up its youth and culture committee. Inherently, part of her job is also working with the LEGO Group and KIRKBI, the Kristiansen's family's investment company.

Stephanie Storbank

We have a very close relationship. Of course, we are two different sizes, with two different tasks and jobs to be done, but we have a lot of cooperation and as a municipality, we have an interest in collaborating with LEGO Group. For example, we have the Capital of Children, and 10 years ago we decided that we had so many things in common and we want to work together to make Billund Municipality the best place to grow up as a child, that we would get children that are curious and playful and ready to make mistakes and learn from them. And therefore, we decided that we want to make the cooperation about CoC, the Capital of Children. And that was the first start of working together.

Ethan Vincent

Stephanie said that part of that collaboration is driven by the immense impact that the LEGO Group has on Billund.

Stephanie Storbank

It has been very impactful especially on all our daycare and school system because when you have a vision about being the best city to be a child in, it demands actions, and not just fancy words. And therefore, in the beginning of 2018, we upgraded the qualification of all our permanent daycare employees and sent them to a course about play and learning and creativity. And all the daycare workers also were sent to that program. And that means that we have the same language on all our daycare institutions. They work in the same way, and they really experiment on how to play. For it to succeed, play has to be something that has a value in itself – also in our daycare institution. I think in a lot of countries, they work with play, but play should not become learning. You don't play to learn. But when you play, you learn. And that's a very big difference. You have to set the play free and not say, "Now you have to play with the alphabet," for example. It has to become a natural thing. And when we have sent all our daycare workers on the same course, they are very specific about doing that method.

Brian Crecente

The schools of Billund represent both a challenge and a great opportunity for the town. There is, for instance, an international school in Billund, because there are so many families living in the area from other parts of the world. Most of them, of course, work for the LEGO Group.

Stephanie Storbank

All our schools is very different. We have very many small schools and a couple of large schools. And then we have the international schools and another private schools, and all the teachers, they want to decide for themselves how they want to teach and everything else. I think that's very common in all other countries also. But we decided that if we had to do this, we had to have a program or frame to teach in. And that program is called Playful Learning, and we are doing that together with the LEGO foundation. And we started up on

one school, and they have been working on it in three years, and it has been a success, and now we are going to do it in all other schools also – all of the small schools and the large schools. And the whole method is that you work very project orientated. Of course, the teacher set the frame about choosing a topic, but when you have chosen a topic – it could be dragons – and then you put all the different lectures in that topic, and then let the children decide, "How do I want to work with that topic?" and use play as a method of learning, and accept that it's going to be a little bit different than it normally would be.

Ethan Vincent

Like Charlotte, who heads up the Capital of Children, Stephanie believes the work Billund is doing with the LEGO Group, in terms of urban development and teaching, will expand beyond the town.

Stephanie Storbank

A year ago, we started a new experiment together with the LEGO Group about Playful Working. We were very curious about how could we develop our work/life balance, also here in the office and in the city hall? And therefore we are very curious about some of the characteristics there is in playing. Could you use them also in a work team? When do you think at your work that you're enthusiastic? And when do you feel that you have something to say? When does it give meaning? And that we are now very curious about, together with the LEGO Foundation. And I can hear that many of the other municipalities, they are looking at us now and think, "Oh, maybe they have found something that we can do also." It has been a very interesting journey because we didn't know if it would work. We of course know that it is some of the same things other universities have worked on earlier about flow theory and making meaning and everything else. Maybe you can say it's new wine in old bottles. (laughs) But I can experience that our employees are taking it in because we have let it start from the bottom and sent all our leaders in all the sections on a course together with the LEGO employees to develop this, and then they go back and develop it together with the employees. And we also doing it in the political level. We have had a strategic day where we were playing a game instead of doing it the normal way. And when we had our economical review, we also did it a completely different way to see how we can involve the political in a new way. And we have signed up with two play agents, we call them, from university who is educated in play to help us with this process. It is – yeah. It is new, but it's really interesting.

Chapter 7: Final Thoughts – 55:29

Ethan Vincent

When we started our research into the history of LEGO games and the dawn of the digital era at the LEGO Group in the '90s, we spoke to several former employees and early digital pioneers about their time in the city of Billund. Folks from the Strategic Product Unit Darwin

days – so from the years 1997 to 1999 – they described this small town as flat, isolated and isolating, sometimes even lonely and boring. Besides working for the LEGO Group, there was little for them to do because back then the way the city was built, well, you could only go to LEGOLAND so many times. But the contrast of how Billund has flourished and developed as a city today, even within the last five or six years, is truly remarkable. With the LEGO House now at its center, this building sets the tone as the heartbeat of the city and beckons visitors, fans, and families full of passion and joy for the LEGO brick to congregate, play, and engage on a level maybe much more meaningful than any city hall could have ever hoped for.

Brian Crecente

It's hard to get a good sense of a place in a week, but I did my best to understand Billund in our weeklong visit. I meandered down a wooded, slightly overgrown path happening upon a lonesome art display scattered among towering trees and brambles, seemingly on display for all of nature. I spotted a clutch of tiny white LEGO brick bunnies sitting in a garden plot, there apparently to amuse the observant. There's the nearby Teddy Bear museum, the signs in the fields warning pedestrians to come play in the grass, and of course all things LEGO Group – museums offices, campuses, hotels, theme parks – coexisting in a town that still manages to be more than its LEGO brick parts. In my short time there, Billund struck me as a playful place, a town that while overwhelmingly shaped by the LEGO Group, its founder, and his principles, still retains a unique identity. I was also left with the distinct feeling that Billund, perhaps, has had as much an impact on the LEGO Group as the other way round. Suddenly, those early LEGO sets with their seemingly odd color choices and distinct definitely-not-American architecture made sense and were familiar. The feel of that place too, the overwhelming sense of friendliness, compassion, family felt reminiscent of the LEGO Group. But perhaps it was really reminiscent of Billund, a town that is slowly reshaping the way people work, play, learn, spend time together and live to become a model of not LEGO Group philosophy or Billund politics, but a magic mingling of the two.

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 58:19

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Producing by Dave Tach. Our executive producer is Ronny Scherer. Creative direction and editing by Ethan Vincent. Research and writing by Brian Crecente. Art direction by Nannan Li. Graphics and animations by Manuel Lindinger and Andreas Holzinger. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Disclaimer voice is Ben Unguren. Opening's child voice is Milo Vincent. Music by Peter Priemer and foundermusic.com. A special thanks to the LEGO Idea House and Tine Froberg Mortensen their help on this

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