Frank & Jim

Interview and English translation: Ulrik Hansen. Photos: Frank Madsen.

ne late summer day, I saw a post on Facebook from the cartoonist and writer *Frank Madsen*. He was cleaning up at home and in that context sold off old sketches, including sketches with Jim Spaceborn.

Jim who? there will probably be someone exclaiming. Wasn't that some comic in the 80s, which looked a bit like something LEGO from TLG (The LEGO Group, ed.), but still not quite? On the following pages, we will explore the phenomenon of Jim Spaceborn from the various angles that gradually emerged in the process. The magazine Brick Culture also carried an interview with Frank Madsen in 2016. It also resulted in a comment from the well-known Classic Space AFOL Peter Reid. At

first I would have just interviewed Frank Madsen, but at the last minute (just before the last Byggeblad* deadline) Frank drew my attention to Erik Dyhr Thomsen (former LEGO Futura) and artist Mads Rye (former model designer at LEGO Space) respectively., which also gets some words along the way on the following pages. But first, here's the interview with Frank Madsen...

Byggebladet: Your series about Jim Spaceborn is experiencing some interest from the LEGO fan community. Let me start at the very top with the last, my most pressing question. Would you in any way imagine reprising Jim Spaceborn if the opportunity presented itself?

Frank Madsen: If the economy and TLG allowed it, it could be a lot of fun. But it is probably doubtful. But it was a fun project and a great time while it lasted. TLG closed their publishing house in 1987, and the comic was just one of the many publishing projects they had shelved. Since then, they have taken up the idea again, only with boxed comics and books published in collaboration with existing book publishers.

Byggebladet: How long did each album actually take to produce?

Frank: The first one took a few years because there were many discussions and uncertainty about the audience's reaction along the way. But after that we did one a year, and it probably took about 10 months from when I started coming up with the story until Sussi had colored the last page. In 1987, LEGO Publishing even turned on the turbo and, in addition to the usual 48-page album, would also have produced 3 mini-albums of 24 pages each in half format. So I also had to write and layout them, but fortunately Gorm Transgaard and Niels Roland stepped in as designers for them. I think most of the Gimle design studio was occupied by Jim Spaceborn in the spring of 1987.

In the series
Jim Spaceborn
released only
two albums and
the first only in
Danish. Here is
the Danish one
test cover,
where Jim yet
is called Jan.



Byggebladet: In the two albums you can recognize different LEGO elements here and there. Were you given any elements to be inspired by, or were there existing presentations to build on?

Frank: Yes, already at the first meetings there were people from TLG's development department. Mads Rye, who later became a painter in Copenhagen, was one of them. There was also one who had the title of LEGO Construction Technical Supervisor, which I thought sounded very nice. The folks at TLG had some amazing Star Wars-esque robots with them, and they had also built Kazak's tower and the Spydspids spaceship, as well as the spaceship that Jim and Keko escape in on page 34 of The Galaxy's Secret. In the following albums I built the models I needed myself. Among other things. Duncan's walking swamp rover in "The Castle of the Dark Ones" and a small spaceship that Jim and Keko flew around in volume 3. I had the agreement with TLG that I would just call and ask for all the LEGO bricks I needed. One of the three mini-albums was about Duncan having installed a monorail on the





A page spread from the second album Mørkemændenes borg (in the German version).

^{*} Byggebladet (The Building Magazine), printed magazine of the Danish LEGO User Group Byggepladen (The Baseplate).





Spydspids*, with Mello as the train driver (much to the chagrin of Jim and Keko, who would have liked that seat). It was the year, 1987, when LEGO Space introduced the first monorail, so at the beginning of the year I got one of the first working models over to the drawing room, so that Niels Roland and I could draw it correctly in the series.

Byggebladet: The robot Keko seems to have aroused the interest of many fans. Many will be able to recognize its arms as two pieces. Hinge Plate 1 x 2 with 3 Fingers aka finger hinges. Who invented this and other characters as well as the stories themselves?

Frank: When we started in the spring of 1984 and held meetings inside the advertising agency ADVANCE, which managed the production of the series, LEGO Futura (as the department was then called) showed up with a large compendium describing the characters, their background and the idea for the first story. I would like to think that Erik Dyhr Thomsen has had a big hand in the game in the formulation. It was

then my task to design the characters visually and translate the story into text and cartoon images. From volume two, I wrote the stories myself after LEGO Publishing first approved a synopsis. Keko, I don't know who built it, but he is well thought out. He is built with the knobs downwards, which seems to have been very unconventional at the time. All in all, the developers at TLG are sure to come up with new uses for the elements, so that you could use a hinge joint for Keko's arms, so that he got 3 fingers. Well spotted.

Byggebladet: The Spaceship Spydspids is an interesting design mix of the classic Wedge Plates and techniques that could well look like SNOT (*Studs Not On Top). Where did the inspiration for this spaceship come from?

Frank: As mentioned, Spydspids was built in Billund, and the developers were only present at the very first meetings in Copenhagen in 1984. But I believe that it was Mads Rye who had built Spydspids. I don't know what he was thinking, but the spaceship was about a meter long and very impressive.

Byggebladet: According to the article about Jim Spaceborn on comicwiki.dk, it is suggested that there is some inspiration from various other space series from the 60s and 70s. Are you a science fiction enthusiast yourself?

Frank: These years I am writing a children's book series in nine volumes, Gustav and the Rocket Brotherhood, where it is the aliens who come down to Earth, so I still have little interest in the subject. We are almost ready to go to press with volume 8. When I worked with Jim Spaceborn in the mid-1980s, it was probably Christin and Mézières' Valérian and Laureline in particular that I was visually inspired by. After all, it has also inspired the people behind Star Wars. And then I remembered Gerry and Sylvia Anderson's TV series Thunderbirds and Space: 1999 from my childhood.

Byggebladet: Have you followed the development in TLG's various Space series? And what do you think of their Star Wars series?



Frank: I have played a lot of LEGO Racers with my son when he was 2-3 years old. And the term hard rock from LEGO Rock Raiders still pops up in our conversations in the strangest places. I haven't followed the cartoons that much, but I have seen great drawings by Kim Hagen, Jan Kjær and others, who visually far surpass Jim Spaceborn. And the first LEGO Cinematic Movie from 2014 was brilliant. All in all, TLG has come a long way since back in 1984, when we were still debating whether the characters should bend their arms, have fingers, and whether they should have facial expressions other than smiling. Fortunately, we were allowed to do that, even though TLG had misgivings.

Byggebladet: Can you briefly tell us a little about Trapped In Space?

Frank: It was made before I joined. I think it was produced in 1982-83, when you still had children's books in mind and from the advertising brochures were used to collaborating with photographers. Some consumer test has probably been carried out, after which the idea has been abandoned. At the time, people had the perception that these kinds of books were mainly advertising (which they were, after all), and there was generally a lot of reluctance for children to be "exposed" to commercial influence. Instead, they chose to bet on comics and illustrated picture books.

Byggebladet: You have worked for TLG in several contexts. In which?

Frank: I have always worked for the advertising agency ADVANCE, which then had contact with TLG. While working on the Jim Spaceborn series from 1984 to 1987, I attended the meetings with TLG (often we could have 10 people in the room), but when I started working for ADVANCE from 1989 on TLG's brochures, ads and commercials, it was the agency's contact people and Art Directors who went to the meetings and we assistants just had to draw a lot of sketches for the environments in the brochures and storyboards for the films. It was fun and enjoyable freelance work. Among other things. I drew cartoons for TLG's large assortment brochure in the early 1990s. These are probably the ones of my comics for TLG that have gained the most circulation.

Byggebladet: Has all that in any way made you want to build yourself?

Frank: I built a lot as a child. I received the first two train sets as a Christmas present in the mid-1960s, and eagerly experimented

with how low a sports car you could build from the black bricks. While working with Jim Spaceborn, I also built quite a few, but when I finished the series, I gave all the boxes to my nephew, who was very happy with them. Since then I haven't had time to build.

Byggebladet: There are quite a few other LEGO-related comics (including Bionicle). Have you ever been asked if you would illustrate another comic for them?

Frank: No. I know Christian Faber of ADVANCE, who invented Bionicle, but he is a skilled draftsman himself and worked with Jan Kjær, so there was no need to call in people like me. However, I drew a simple storyboard with Bionicle for a long commercial because Jan and Christian didn't have time.

Byggebladet: What else are you working on at the moment?

Frank: When Jim Spaceborn stopped, I started working on Kurt Dunder, who has so far made four albums. The work on these stories was financed by the series, i.a. ran as a serial in HK's professional magazine and in the daily BT (tabloid newspaper).

Since 2010, together with my wife Sussi Bech, who is also an artist, I have created the comic Eks Libris for Weekendavisen's book supplement. It is a satire strip about hysterical writers, hypocritical politicians and a couple of cute cartoonists living in the town of Birkerød. It is really fun to make.

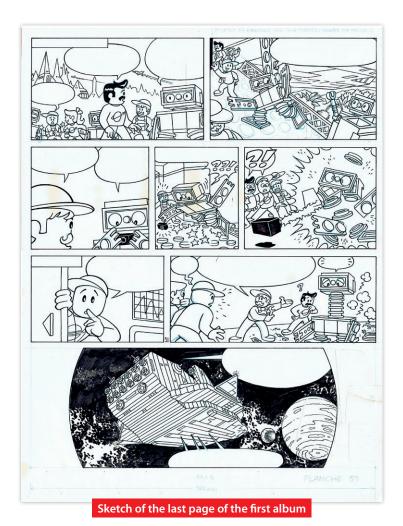
In addition, I make picture books about Snus Mus (which has been published in Chile) and, as mentioned before. Gustav and the Rocket Brotherhood, a series of science fiction books for children.

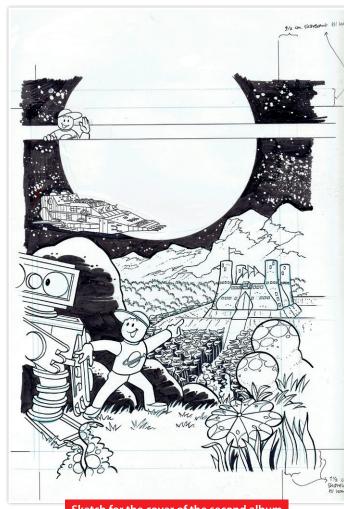
> www.frankmadsen.dk Frank Madsens on Brickshelf: https://is.qd/53R5z2

Here are various sketches from the three albums. Like mentioned, only one was published in Danish. On Frank's Brickshelf you can see various unreleased material.

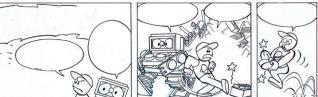


Sketch for the first album





Sketch for the cover of the second album







Frank Madsen

TEGNESTUEN GIMER 00 13-67-37 AMAKANgade 27, DK 1599 Kabanhara K PRINAT 01 52-8598 Natsemgade 56, Ser., DK 1366 Kabenhara K Panglindama 6-61 1770, Bank 50n 025-12-3005

Sketch for the third album

Peter Reid

Edited by Ulrik Hansen

o many AFOLs, Peter Reid is an very well-known British Neo-Classic Space AFOL. In addition to his many MOCs, he has published the book LEGO Space: Building the Future, as well as having the LEGO Ideas set 21109 Exo Suit published by TLG. Fortunately, he agreed to contribute a few words, not least because of his special relationship with this subject.

Peter on Jim Spaceborn:

I came across Jim Spaceborn and the Secret of the Galaxy around the time of its original publication in 1986. I was twelve years old and the comic was a fascinating insight into an exciting LEGO Space universe. I (still) like the characters, the drawings and the story a lot. Another interesting thing was this enemy that was so reminiscent of the evil Blacktron forces. In my book LEGO Space: Building the Future, I pay tribute to Frank's work with several Jim Spaceborn guest appearances.

Peter on Frank Madsen:

I've never actually met Frank even though we've been friends for over a decade. I first interviewed him for an article in Brickjournal about Jim Spaceborn way back in 2007, and then again in 2016 for Bricks Culture Magazine. Frank is a lovely guy and it has been a great pleasure to work with someone who has shaped my lifelong love of LEGO Space.

flickr.com/legoloverman





The draftsman (Frank Madsen) used them to look for when he drawings – first with a pencil and afterwards with a black felt-tip pen.





Erik Dyhr Thomsen

- product manager at LEGO Publishing

Edited by Ulrik Hansen

Erik Dyhr Thomsen was employed by TLG and thoroughly involved in the process surrounding Jim Spaceborn. When I contacted him, he was happy to send a little about his connection to the project.

Erik Dyhr Thomsen: I was employed by the LEGO Group from 1970 - 1988. I started as an advertising assistant, but quickly got my own department as Merchandising and Promotion Manager. After being in charge of TLG's in-store advertising for a number of years, I wanted to change tracks, and in the early eighties I became product manager at the newly started LEGO Publishing. My final position here was head of development. When I started at LEGO Publishing, which was part of LEGO Futura (TLG's development company), we were only three employees. Our task, given to us by Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, was to create some extra legs for the LEGO giant. Understood in the sense that if the toy started to fail, then you had more legs to stand on.

TLG had just launched Fabuland and here it was an obvious task to create books and films about the characters.

I took over the project of making stories with LEGO Space. Before I came, they had already started making dramatic photos of the minifigures with smoke and light effects, so that you sensed the drama in the stories. The first story, written by an English author Douglas Hill, was ready and together with Plan Design in Copenhagen I had the first test books made.

The test result was not particularly encouraging. The pictures were nice, but they didn't lend any credibility to the story. They were simply photographed plastic blocks and did not give the children any experience. Also part of the story is that it was not allowed to change anything about the figures - at most a little on the mouth and eyebrows.

Instead, I suggested that we make a cartoon with the characters. I presented this to the management and I was practically scolded. - Something trivial like comics didn't belong in the LEGO universe. In the end I was allowed to make a test album of 12 pages which was created in collaboration with the agency ADVANCE and with Frank Madsen as artist. I helped make the characters myself and when my son was called Jan, the first album was called Jan Spaceborn (we later changed it to Jim).

The test album, which was completely without the LEGO logo and the like, went down well with the target group. They loved it and couldn't wait to hear the rest of the story. That made the management bow down and we started work on the albums. The publishing industry was very different from the toy industry and we could not decide the selling price ourselves. It had to follow the market. Therefore, it also became difficult to get good finances in the projects. It also didn't help that the toy part did extremely well, so we became a bit of an annoying cost and you didn't see the promotional effect at the time. In return, we had created the basis for future initiatives such as games, films and much more, when LEGO Publishing closed around 1989. y



After TLG, Erik was head of development at SmurfitKappa for 20 years. Today he contests various local chairmanships in the Varde region and also has his own lecture company never2late.dk

Mads Rye – LEGO Space Designer

Text, interview, photo and Keko rendering by Ulrik Hansen

ow it's time to meet Mads Rye, a science fiction entusiast who was employed in model design and concept development at LEGO Space, who in that process put his distinctive stamp on the LEGO legend Jim Spaceborn.

It suddenly dawned on me that Mads Rye was not only the original designer behind the spaceship Spydspids and the robot Keko, but the entire concept of SNOT spaceships. His experiments also provided inspiration for the later LEGO®

Space series. In his young years, Mads was a substitute teacher and at the same time made all kinds of things on the side - especially models in cardboard of spaceships. One day he came across a job advertisement as a model builder at TLG, and out of 1100 applicants, three were finally offered employment, and Mads specifically as a developer of models for Space. In 1997, Mads went full-time with painting, which was already his great passion early on and had had an influence on his employment. I had a long talk with him in his studio in Copenhagen one day in August, getting to know each other well.

Mads Rye: After I was employed by TLG, I moved into a 200 m2 rental apartment in Vejle with a view of the city. At TLG, they were a bit upset about my choice of accommodation, as they think you should live in Billund, Grindsted or somewhere else nearby. Every day I went by motorcycle to work, or rode with some of the others.

LEGO Space had a design department in the old town hall (where LEGO House is today, ed.). It was very secret and we had to sign in with timestamps, but then someone came in the early morning and went to bed so they could sign in early. TLG had a pretty hard time with designers, because we were crazy people - that's what was needed and they didn't understand that. They probably understood it well in reality, but they couldn't really handle it... and Copenhageners (laughs). As soon as I did something crazy,

they said: It's not space - it's science fiction.

When I started, they made those white, blue and gray buildings, which they called satellites - they were rockets, satellites and a little moon craft. And I started out building black and yellow – jet black with yellow stripes and everything was inspired by insects with moth wings and everything. They were shocked, especially their marketing people. The other designers could see that there was something in it, but those marketing people were first and foremost trained in the Jutland men's readyto-wear industry - they didn't understand a thing. Some of them were then trained to communicate with creative people. We had a boss called Jørgen Brun - we called him Søren Brun* and he had attended some courses where he had to learn how to communicate with creative people, because

we spoke a completely different language, they had found out.

TLG had this development department called Futura (established in 1959, ed.), where Erik Dyhr Thomsen was the manager and Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen wanted to boost it. Godtfred was still in the company and I once had the pleasure of throwing him out of my office. I had been given strict orders that no strangers were allowed - that it was a secret - and one day there was an older, rather thinhaired gentleman with red suspenders and clogs in my office, and then I said: I'm sorry, but this area is restricted - now I'm going to follow you down to the door, and he smiled all over his head and said, well, he was sorry about that, and then we left. But on the way out, Jens Nygaard Knudsen came running and "Mads, Mads, Mads...". Godtfred was quite amused that I had done it so politely.

Mads Rye in his studio with one of his buildings for a project that was shelved.

Futura decided to develop films and books. Erik Dyhr Thomsen was looking for inspection as they wanted to add something to LEGO Space. I was relatively newly hired and not quite as LEGOfied yet, but very quickly I was invited over to some meetings and they set out with a book project where they had engaged a Canadian author who had won some children's book awards. When TLG does something, then do they do it properly, whatever it takes. The Canadian wrote the presentation for the books and I built all the models for it. Since my younger years with cardboard models of spaceships (extra terrestrial vehicles, we called it), me and friends were very inspired by Chris Foss (20th Century Foss), and the reason I built the models sideways (SNOT, ed) was because Chris Foss stylized his starships with stripes and checks across, and to hit that feel, the smoothness, I could best achieve that by building sideways. At the same time, I

^{*} Søren Brun is the Danish translation of Charlie Brown in the comic strip Peanuts.



Space Dictator Kazak's grim spaceship – another one of Mads' pioneering SNOT designs, specially made for the Jim Spaceborn production. Here it is immortalized as a large slide, photographed on a painted background.

Photo: Ulrik Møller

wasn't big on visible buds, and the sideways technique made it look wild — look right.

In Futura, I quickly settled in and had many fruitful meetings with Erik (we were very spaced out then) so I was quickly accepted and was thus loaned to the project. I was still sitting in my usual place, but could work on multiple projects and I got to do some wild things – all the visuals for the book Alien Stone (second test book after Trapped in Space, for which Daniel Krentz built most of the models) and later the Jim Spaceborn comic. All the models that the advertising agency ADVANCE later took photos of and had drawn after were my designs. When you see some scenarios in the comics, e.g. a space shuttle where they drive, then the tunnels themselves were also built. Everything had to be correct LEGO style. There was also a black tower that reached all the way to the ceiling where there was light in it. And I built some walkers, kind of like the ones in Star Wars. Some of them were fitted with motors so that they could move, because we were supposed to later make films as well.

The books Trapped in Space and Alien Stone were made in approx. 20-30 copies to be tested in both Germany and Denmark. The back pages revealed that they were not real releases – they cost a fortune to make at the time (laughs). However, me and another designer, Niels, were not very sure about the direction of the whole thing.

Our constructions went first to Plan Design and then to Ted Bates/ADVANCE. Every Tuesday we flew over to them by private plane – there were advertising directors and ADs and even the receptionists (who looked so damn good) and everyone had to hug – sigh, the world of advertising – and there was Gammel Dansk* and you managed to get damn drunk – all we need is Gammel Dansk (laughs). I was there to make sure the stories were LEGO correct. If, for example, it read that Jim Spaceborn gets a stomach

ache... "no no, stop – LEGO figures can't get a stomach ache. They cannot get sick." And if something were to break, it could only break in a certain way. There was always something to watch out for. Nothing to do with dying – TLG had an image to protect. It was a little boring. The layout they ended up with in those books, they were quite terrible. ADVANCE and PlanDesign made something that looked like catalogs and we said it couldn't be sold - no one wants to buy an advertisement. And sure enough, with studies in Germany where they tested it, it turned out that people didn't want to buy it. Reasonably quickly, the project folded and changed into the idea of a cartoon instead, where Frank Madsen was chosen as artist.

Again, however, it was problematic, because it could not become very vivid. It must not be drawn too loosely, and the combination of having planets and nature mixed with LEGO elements... Niels and I ended up making the story board. I was very much into comics, so we wanted to think out of the box. Once presented they kind of understood, but otherwise they were mostly used to thinking in brochures. In reality, in that context it was wrong to bring the two agencies in, but TLG chose them because they were already so good at other things

Byggebladet: ADVANCE nevertheless retained a prominent position at TLG, where as one example their work with Bionicle became extremely successful.

Mads: It is of course something completely different today. All the ideas we put foreward, - at the time it was recieved as "This is science fiction, and those colors..." – it was perceived





6882 Walking Astro Grappler

- one of Mads' most distinctive official

LEGO Space sets. Photo: TLG

as something terrible. Then when they tested my models on children and observed them through mirrored glass, the children were extremely interested in playing with the models. We couldn't call it a gun, but they could see that it was the type of model that made the kids want to play with. The black/yellow had something a little more aggressive about it - just like in nature.

However, many of my designs appeared more or less in the subsequent series, since they had it all in stock. Many of the things I tried to introduce came up later. Among other things. I suggested the aliens, because why do the even explore space if they don't meet anyone to interact with. I even did some figures with six arms, which were also introduced later.

Additionally we told the people at Futura: Comics are fine, but you have to make computer games. Back then, computer games were more square like LEGO bricks. We adviced them to hire the best in the world to make games - being at the forefront. But for them computer games were just worse than science fiction – it was almost heroin (laughs). Us designers always had such conflicts with them — some of us in particular. Not that we were unfriended, but we thought they were a little foolish.

Mads: Then there were the movies. As mentioned, we were also supposed to do that at some point - with Erik Dyhr Thomsen. They got hold of the English company ClearWater, which made great commercials, Martini, etc. We were supposed to meet them at the Falsted Inn and then our management pleaded us to dress up for the occation which made us want to definitely not dress up. Erik Dyhr was like "oh no". But then the film company came and they wore cowboy hats and such and the LEGO people were totally overdressed. The rest of us had a blast (laughs). However, we never really got started on films. Some storyboards were written for ClearWater and we made some models that had movement. At one point there was talk of getting Ringo Starr to narrate. Imagine meeting a real Beatle. I quit though, after working at TLG for approx. a year and a half. My girlfriend studied psychology in Aarhus and we spent every weekend in Copenhagen. I think it was too circumstantial to work at the LEGO Group constantly having the feeling that those who had the final say thought we were too weird. It was impossible to penetrate. It wasn't just that you had some crazy ideas - you could clearly see what was wrong. LEGO also had a period where they changed everything. In the end they also got themselves a singing/dancing CEO (Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, ed.). Back then, we just struggled all the time with the fact that when we came up with some new ideas, they said: "We have a turnover of 3.6 billion, so why should we change anything?"

Byggebladet: Now, tell us a little about the robot Keko.

Mads: I built Keko completely upside down, because that's how it worked best. At the end of the Spaceborn comic, There are instruction on how to build robots in different ways where they show 2-3 examples of robots built correctly, with the knobs up. They weren't facilitated, more a la "This is how to correctly build". Speaking of which, I still remember clearly exactly how Keko was built. LEGO just wasn't very keen on a robot that was built upside down.

While I was at TLG, Star Wars no. 3 (Episode 6) arrived in the cinemas and we went in to see it. I remember that Jens Nygaaard Knudsen fell asleep during screening. After that I started building X-Wing Fighters and stuff like that, and I hung them above my desk in my office - but I was just bullied for them. I tried with "Can't you do a collaboration? It would be great." But no, that would be aping - it had to be something TLG came up with themselves. When it came to doing the film, there weren't any television networks interested in buying a LEGO film, because of the nature of advertisement on TV. They did try in Germany, etc. I my mind, in order to get exposure for a LEGO movie, you start out creating the underlying universe and then sell merchandise. It's no use saying "Here's a toy, let's put it in a movie." – it had to be the other way around, like Star Wars, where you start with the movie and then sell merchandise.

After TLG, Mads Rye became head of design at 3M. Since 1997, he has made a living as a painter and has, among other things, portrayed former Danish politician Marianne Jelved and Dano-Faroese BitCoin investor Niklas Nikolajsen von Karlshof.

www.madsrye.com



Keko

nd that's it. All that's left is for us AFOLs to send our warmest regards to Frank Madsen, Erik Dyhr Thomsen, Mads Rye, The LEGO Group and everyone else involved, for having been bold in their own way - in good times and

bad. Who knows what the AFOL landscape would have looked like in its present day incarnation. So many people have contributed with MOCs and arrangements, and luckily things are going great for our favorite Danish toymaker.