Adapting the Death Star into LEGO

The Case of LEGO Set #10188

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When one of the world’s most famous toymakers decided to license one of the world’s most popular media franchises, a successful new line of products perhaps seemed inevitable. The first Star Wars LEGO set appeared in 1999 and, since then, over 230 different LEGO Star Wars sets have appeared, as well as LEGO Star Wars video games, books, pajamas, and other merchandise. Considering the importance of the Death Star within the Star Wars saga, it is not surprising that a LEGO set would be made of it, and set #10188 demonstrates how the film scenes on which it is based, the set’s audience, and the process of adaptation itself were all carefully taken into account during the design of the set.

Most of the work found in adaptation studies considers the adaptation of a narrative from one medium into another (novels to films, films into television shows or video games, and so forth), but in the realm of transmedial franchises set in imaginary worlds, we also find adaptation into toys and playsets, using other kinds of media, such as LEGO bricks. Adaptation into a physical playset is qualitatively different from narrative adaptation between audiovisual media, since it involves not so much the adaptation of a narrative, but rather the settings, objects, vehicles, and characters from which a narrative can be interactively recreated by the user. At the same time, this kind of adaptation still shares many of the same issues and processes and can be discussed in relation to them (for example, video games also deal with adaptation into interactive form, and the narrative recreation made possible by a particular playset may still require the adaptation of the original narrative on which it is based). The adaptation of the Death Star from the Star Wars movies into LEGO set #10188 (released in 2008) provides a good example of such an adaptation, and reveals many of the concerns in the processes involved.

Other traditional forms of adaptation also involve transformation into a physical form. When a novel or screenplay is adapted into a film, for

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1 This chapter is an edited version of my essay “Adapting the Death Star into LEGO: The Case of LEGO Set #10188,” in LEGO Studies: Examining the Building Blocks of a Transmedial Phenomenon, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2014).
example, descriptions must be fleshed out into visible designs and then into physical sets, props, and costumes, a process that can change an original conception due to its lack of practicality or level of vagueness in which specifics are lacking and have to be assumed or extrapolated. While stage plays and screenplays can be written with the constraints of adaptation in mind, making the process easier, the malleability of the end medium also aids the process. LEGO, the bricks of which have been produced in thousands of specialized shapes since their first incarnation appeared in 1949, is a far more versatile medium to use for adaptation than are other older building sets like Meccano (1908), A.C. Gilbert’s Erector Set (1913), the Tinkertoy Construction Set (1914), and Lincoln Logs (1916), which are more limited in the shapes one can construct with their elements and the ways in which those elements can be fit together. Thus, it should come as no surprise that while other building sets have appeared in dozens of different sets, the much-younger LEGO has appeared in several thousand different sets.

Concurrent with the rise and popularity of building sets was the development of the playset, the various elements of which are designed around a particular theme or location, and are usually complete in and of themselves, needing little or no assembly. While less flexible than building sets, playsets were often more representational than the abstracted versions of things built from pieces of a building set, and had more complete and detailed environments than those that one could construct with a building set. This would, of course, change once LEGO became developed enough to match the level of detail and functionality found in playsets, but this would not happen for some time. Thus, it is to the development of the playset that we must next turn.

Development of the Playset

While the creation of miniature scenarios dates back to the models found in ancient Egyptian tombs, such as that of Mehenkweatre (circa 2000 BC), which reveal what daily life in Egypt was like, the earliest commercially produced playsets were dollhouses. German companies produced miniatures for

2 Of course some sets, such as Tinkertoy, allows more flexibility if the models in question are built at much bigger scales, but the stick-and-spool nature of its elements, compared to the blocks used in LEGO, makes each medium better at one type of building over another, just as vector graphics and raster graphics in video games each have their own advantages and disadvantages.
collectors in the nineteenth century and, by the 1920s, dollhouses and their accessories were produced by American companies such as the TynieToy company, who made replicas of New England homes. After World War II, dollhouses and their furnishing were mass-produced, making them more affordable and available as toys, but, at the same time, they were less detailed and simplified due to the demands of mass production. Other playsets appeared around the same time, from companies such as Tobias Cohn Company and Remco Industries, and most notably from the Marx Toy Company, which became one of the largest toy companies in the world during the mid-twentieth century.  

Begun in 1919, the Marx Toy Company made metal playsets during the 1930s and 1940s, like the *Sunnyside Service Station* (1934) and the *Roadside Service Station* (1935). After the development of plastics in the 1940s, production became easier and less expensive, and the number of playsets increased, as did their popularity. In the 1950s, Marx produced more generic sets, like the *Western Ranch Set* (1951), *Cowboy and Indian Camp* (1953), and *Arctic Explorer Play Set* (1958), as well as sets based on actual events like the Civil War and real places like *Fort Apache* (1951) and *Fort Dearborn* (1952). Other sets were adaptations of existing properties in other media, like the *Roy Rogers Ranch Set* (1952), *Lone Ranger Rodeo* (1952), *Walt Disney’s Davy Crockett at the Alamo* (1955), and *Gunsmoke Dodge City* (1960). The transmedial nature of these sets, which played on the popularity of existing franchises, encouraged the sale of playsets in general. The Marx Toy Company made even more playsets during the 1960s and 1970s, and the number of playsets based on transmedial franchises increased, including sets based on *Gunsmoke* (1955-1975), *Wagon Train* (1957-1965), *The Untouchables* (1959-1963), MGM’s *Ben-Hur* (1959), and more.  

Other companies realized the value of known franchises and hurried to buy up rights. During the 1970s, the Mego Corporation licensed Edgar Rice Burroughs’s works, and produced toys for the Planet of the Apes, Marvel Comics, DC Comics, and Star Trek franchises, and even *The Wizard of Oz and His Emerald City* (1974) playset. Properties that were not already known by the public were considered more risky, and in 1976 Mego turned down an offer to license toys based on an upcoming science-fiction film named

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Star Wars (1977). The license went to Kenner Products, who produced over 100 different action figures from the original Star Wars film trilogy, along with several playsets, including Death Star Space Station (1978), Cantina Adventure Set (1978), Creature Cantina Action Play Set (1979), Death Star (1979), Droid Factory (1979), Land of the Jawas Action Play Set (1979), and Millennium Falcon Spaceship (1979). Kenner sold over 300 million Star Wars action figures (rebranded by Hasbro, Kenner’s owner, after 1999) and became the largest Star Wars merchandiser of the twentieth century. But after the first decade of the 21st century, LEGO outgrew Hasbro, with the help of over 200 sets of LEGO Star Wars merchandise.

The Road to LEGO Star Wars sets

The genius behind LEGO was the combination of building sets and playsets into a single product, resulting in the introduction of the LEGO System in which every piece fit together with every other piece, the first “system” in the toy industry. When LEGO bricks first appeared on the market, building sets like Lincoln Logs and Tinkertoy could build specific kinds of things (e.g. log cabins and stick-and-spool structures or vehicles, respectively), but they generally were not used to build entire settings, nor did they contain characters that children could use as avatars to vicariously experience what they had built. Playsets, on the other hand, feature detailed settings and characters to inhabit them, but they were limited to what they already represented; everything was ready-made, and little or no new building could be done. LEGO, however, suggested settings that could be built (which determined what pieces came with each set), but children could build other things with the same bricks, and could even combine multiple sets together to build even larger settings.

The gradual merging of the playset and building set can be seen in the early development of LEGO. The first plastic bricks, Automatic Binding Bricks were produced by the company in 1949 and the first set in the LEGO system, Town Plan No. 1, appeared in 1955, along with other sets that could

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be combined with it to enlarge the town. The cars, trees, and especially the miniature people, however, were still like the plastic figures found in other playsets; each was a single piece that could be used during play, but not changed. LEGO wheels, and the bricks to which they attached, came in 1961, allowing children to build their own vehicles. But characters, so crucial to the playset because of their role as children’s avatars, would not become buildable for some time. In 1963, Master Builder Set #004 displayed on its box cover a human-like figure built of LEGO bricks, but as a construction around two dozen bricks tall, it was more of a statue than a usable avatar, and much too large to be used with typical LEGO vehicles and buildings. The following year, several small sets appeared that were character-based; Seesaw #803, 3 Little Indians #805, Cowboy and Pony #806, and Doll Set #905, and another set, Clowns #321, appeared in 1965. In all these sets, the characters had no faces or jointed limbs; yet were a step closer to a usable avatar in their design and smaller size. Over these years, dozens of vehicle sets appeared, and vehicles remained the main avatars for LEGO play. One set, Baggage Carts #622 of 1970, even had a few bricks that represented the cart’s driver, but only as a feature of the cart rather than a character that could be used separately. Six of the Basic Sets released in 1973 (#1, #2, #3, #4, #5, and #8), along with Building Set #105 and Building Set #115, show brick-built people amidst the scenes on their boxes, but still the blocky, faceless kind. It was not until 1974 that LEGO finally introduced specialized pieces representing people, which had round heads, faces, and jointed arms and hands, and which were scaled to fit vehicles and buildings. Nine sets were introduced that featured these human figures, and one set, Family #200, was made up entirely of people.8

While the introduction of human figures broadened the possibilities for sets, the scale of these figures was still large enough that they could not be included with some sets, which had smaller vehicles and buildings representing larger structures. In 1975, a new kind of LEGO figure appeared, one that did not have a face or jointed arms, but which had a specialized head, a torso piece, and a single piece representing legs and feet. These would be updated over the next few years, until in 1978 when the modern minifigure would appear, with a painted face, movable arms and legs, and

9 The other eight sets with people were Antique Car #196, Aeroplane and Pilot #250, Windmill with Miller and His Wife #251, Locomotive with Driver & Passenger #252, Complete Kitchen with 2 Figures #263, Livingroom with 2 Figures #264, Complete Bathroom with 1 Figure #265, and Children’s Room #266, according to Sebastian Eggers, et al., ed., LEGO Collector: Collector’s Guide (Dreieich: Fantasia Verlag GMBH, 2008), 94-95.
hand pieces that connected to the arm pieces. Although the minifigure would eventually replace the larger LEGO people, the two were produced contemporaneously, even appearing together in some sets (like Mother with Baby Carriage #208 and Nursery #297, both from 1978, and Bathroom #261, Family Room #268, and Kitchen #269, all from 1979), with the minifigures positioned as babies or children and the larger people as parents and adults.

Minifigures were featured in the sets for the new Town, Castle, and Space themes, allowing their structures to be populated with characters (minifigures would be an important part of set #10188, which included 24 minifigures and droids, the most to come with any LEGO Star Wars set up to that time). Along with the new application of themes, LEGO sets were now available that had all the features of other types of playsets, completing the merger between building sets and playsets. As the sets were designed at minifigure scale, the larger people no longer appeared in sets after 1979.

Themed sets meant that LEGO could be designed to connect with prevailing themes in popular culture at any given time, yet without licensing any particular property or franchise; the appearance of a space theme, in 1978, would certainly have fit in with the new popularity of science-fiction projects due to the continuing success of the Star Wars franchise. New space-themed sets would be released every year during the 1980s and 1990s, including subseries of sets known as Blacktron, Futuron, Space Police, M:Tron, Unitron, and U.F.O. The subseries designations grouped sets together into LEGO’s own in-house brands; despite the rise of franchising and merchandising tie-ins during the 1980s and 1990s, LEGO preferred to create their own original properties. But that policy changed in 1999, when LEGO licensed its first property since the early 1970s,10 and the first LEGO Star Wars sets appeared.

The change in this decades-long policy may have been in part due to financial concerns. In 1998, the company had experienced a decline in profits for the first time since 1932, signaling that changes were needed (the company would experience further losses in 2003 and 2004).11 Apart from selling some foreign properties and reducing their staff and the variety of

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10 Some of the earliest LEGO sets included brand names, though they were typically from the automotive industry, like the Esso Trailer #252, VW Beetle #260, and Esso Filling Station #310, all of 1958, or the Citroën DS 19 #603 and Fiat 1800 #605, both of 1965, or the Shell Service Station #648 of 1971. LEGO also produced some bathing rings and a wooden pull-toy featuring Disney characters in 1956. Lipkowitz, The LEGO Book, 156.

brick components produced (both about by half), LEGO also changed its thinking about the kinds of toys it produced. According to reporter James Delingpole,

What Lego's staff also had to do was abandon their high-mindedness. Typical of this was the internal row that had broken out in 1999, when a product tie-in with Star Wars was first mooted: the older company hands had objected on the grounds that any product with 'wars' in the title set a bad moral example. The Star Wars series went on to become one of Lego's biggest sellers.12

Aside from helping the company’s sales, the success of these licensed sets led to the production of over 200 different LEGO Star Wars sets, as well as the purchase of other licenses, including ones for the Harry Potter, Pirates of the Caribbean, Batman, Minecraft, and Lord of the Rings franchises. But Star Wars would remain the company’s most lucrative license.

Adapting Star Wars into LEGO

Adaptation into a physical playset differs from other forms of adaptation, particularly due to the kind of open-ended play that a playset encourages. Even adaptation into a sandbox-style video game, which may be the form of audiovisual media closest to a playset, generally restricts what the player can do more than a physical playset will (although a video game can offer kinds of interaction that a physical playset cannot, in return). Instead of merely adapting a narrative, a playset will be designed to provide its user all the elements needed to reenact a particular narrative, without requiring that the narrative be reenacted. Star Wars playsets (LEGO and otherwise) include models of characters, vehicles, props (such as weapons), and locations, with which particular scenes from the movies can be recreated by the user. Typically, these characters, vehicles, props, and locations will be simplified, with their recognizable and distinct features exaggerated, resulting in caricatures that still are able to evoke their original versions. Thus their overall shapes, color palettes, and distinctive details, particularly those clearly shown in the films, become the criteria behind the design of a LEGO Star Wars set.

12 Delingpole, "When Lego Lost Its Head."
In the world of LEGO, the least caricatured sets are those that are models intended for display purposes (which are usually not playsets to be used with minifigures), including the models of the LEGO “Architecture” sub-brand (made up of the “Architect” and “Landmark” series), sets #21000 to #21021 (as of 2014), as well as the LEGO Death Star II set #10143, which depicted the unfinished second Death Star from Return of the Jedi. Set #10143 was not nearly as popular as set #10188, according to online customer reviews, and its “unfinished” nature gave it a much more detailed appearance and silhouette, rendering it more difficult to adapt into a recognizable LEGO set.

Nor is the Death Star the only setting or vehicle to be featured in multiple LEGO incarnations. The Millennium Falcon has appeared four times (see figure 11.1), as set #7190 (released in 2000) at 663 pieces (and 12” across); set #4504 (released in 2004) at 985 pieces; set #7965 (released in 2011) at 1238 pieces; and set #10179 (released in 2007) at 5195 pieces (by far the largest size, at 33” long, 22” wide, 8” tall). While minifigures can be used inside all four sets, only set #10179 is actually scaled to match the minifigure size, and is the least caricatured of the four sets; it features the most details on the ship’s exterior, as well as recreated spaces within the ship’s interior.

Of all the Star Wars models, the first Death Star is one of the most iconic designs found in the franchise because it can be recognizably represented with the simplest of graphics: a circle with a line across its diameter, with a
smaller circle inside the upper half of the larger circle. These lines represent the two distinctive features on the Death Star’s otherwise nondescript gray spherical exterior, the equatorial trench and the concave crater-like depression which focuses the multiple beams of the superlaser into one large planet-destroying beam (never mind that such a beam ought to simply burn a hole into a planet, rather than make a planet explode immediately the way Alderaan does, as though it were made entirely of flammable material). Thus the first Death Star is, in one sense, a good candidate for adaptation, since it has so few distinctive features needed for identification, making it so easily recognizable. And indeed, the Death Star of set #10188 does have a spherical shape, equatorial trench, and superlaser crater, although each of these features is reproduced to a different degree.

The two Kenner Death Star models, the plastic *Death Star Space Station* (1978) playset, and the cardboard *Death Star* (1979) (see figure 11.2), could be used with Kenner’s action figures, but both represented only a section of the spherical shape. The 1978 set was wedge-shaped, standing four levels high, extending from an elevator shaft connecting the floors out to a section of the station’s curved hull. The station was open on both sides between the shaft and hull, and its floors, from bottom to top, represented the garbage...
compactor level, a control room, an elevated walkway and bridge, and a laser cannon at the top level. The 1979 set used cardboard dividers shaped into a two-level hemisphere, with images on walls and floors depicting the various locations, similar to the rooms of a dollhouse, although the rooms opened all around the hemisphere, leaving no room for an exterior except at the very top where a large gun was mounted. The design of the 1979 set was the closest to set #10188, which would add the bottom hemisphere, completing the Death Star's shape, and include more exterior features, making it more recognizable as the Death Star. Both Kenner sets were designed for the company's 3.75-inch action figures, which required a scale much larger than the typical height (1.5 to 2 inches, depending on headgear) of LEGO minifigures. Thus, the smaller scale LEGO minifigures made larger-scale adaptations more practical than the earlier Kenner action figures, giving the Death Star a better chance of being adapted in more detail.

The LEGO Death Star Set #10188

The LEGO Death Star set #10188 was released in 2008, the year after the other LEGO Death Star, set #10143, was retired after only two years of production. Whereas set #10143 was not designed to be used with minifigures, set #10188 was (and included 24 minifigures), leading to its greater success and desirability. Its design, like a spherical dollhouse, features four levels, with four small areas at the top level: the Imperial Conference Room, a droid maintenance facility, the Overbridge Control Room (with its viewscreen), and a gunnery area with two rotating gun towers; four larger areas on the second level down from the top, including Docking Bay 327, the Superlaser Fire Control room (with the Docking Bay 327 Control Room up in the corner, where it can overlook the Docking Bay), the Detention Block, and the Emperor's Throne Room; five areas on the third level down, including the Garbage Compactor Room, Tractor Beam controls, the chasm that Luke swings across (extending down to the bottom level), a garage-like work area, and a Laser Cannon room; and four small areas of hallways and storage on the very bottom level, which is harder to access due to the overhanging level above (these areas contain very little and are not themed to specific locations in the films). Finally, an elevator shaft is set vertically into the center of the model, connecting all the levels together with an open-sided elevator. The inclusion of the Emperor's throne room, along with minifigures of two red-cloaked Imperial guards, the Emperor, and a black-suited short-haired Jedi Luke, and images on the box showing Luke in a lightsaber fight with
Darth Vader, indicate that the set was designed for the reenactment of scenes occurring on both Death Stars, though all the other areas are from the first Death Star (a similar conflation appears in the set *Unexpected Gathering* (#79003), which combines things from before and after Bilbo’s adventure in Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit* trilogy).

Despite the small size of LEGO minifigures, Death Star set #10188 is still by far the most out-of-scale of all the Star Wars LEGO sets (see figure 11.3). British astrophysicist Dr. Curtis Saxton has assembled detailed analyses of various Star Wars-related topics on his webpages at TheForce.net, including a discussion of the size of the first and second Death Stars, based on evidence from the films, books, magazines, and other sources, which can be vague or even appear to conflict.\(^\text{13}\) According to these sources, the first Death Star is said to have 84 internal levels, each composed of 357 sublevels, for a total of 29,988 sublevels, and the diameters of the first and second Death Stars are, according to official figures, 160 kilometers (99.4194 miles) and 900 kilometers (559.234 miles), respectively. Assuming the typical minifigure height (4 bricks tall, about 1.5 inches) is scaled to about six feet (a ratio of 1:48), scale models of the two Death Stars would have diameters of 3.3333 kilometers (about 2.0712 miles) and 18.75 kilometers (about 11.6507 miles). Thus, set #10188 is out-of-scale by several orders of magnitude, even for the smaller of the two Death Stars.

But a playset, of course, is judged by what it enables its users to do; and in the case of a playset licensed from a movie, it is also judged by how well it

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allows scenes from the movies to be reenacted. So how well does set #10188 represent the Death Stars, as seen in *A New Hope* and *Return of the Jedi*? First, we must determine the importance of the Death Stars in each film, and the relative importance of the various locations found within them. *A New Hope* has a running time of 2 hours, 4 minutes, and 38 seconds (2:04:38), according to the 2004 DVD release. Of that time, the Death Star, or part of it, is onscreen for 40:37, which is almost a third of the film’s running time. Of the 40:37, the majority of the time, 34:11 consists of interior shots, while exterior shots take up 6:26.

With a design like a spherical dollhouse, set #10188 lacks an exterior shell, and thus has few exterior features. The equatorial trench is only represented by a layer of gray bricks separating the upper and lower halves, but the superlaser crater is present, and firing. The crater’s disc is attached to a gun mount, making it movable and positionable, unlike in the film, combining its properties with those of a laser cannon. The other surface features represented in set #10188 are the two gun towers on the top level (see figure 11.4); while the other three areas of this level represent interiors, the gun towers are exterior features, and are designed to move together in unison. Together, these two features represent about 20 seconds of actual screen time (2 seconds of the superlaser crater firing, and 18 seconds of various shots of the gun towers), but as weaponry, they are memorable and important to the story. Thus set #10188 represents the Death Star’s exterior to a degree (Darth Vader’s TIE fighter is also included, which appears in scenes on the Death Star’s exterior).

The Death Star’s interior is represented by a number of locations in the film: the most time (8:51) is spent on the connected areas of the Detention Block, made up of a reception area (2:05), hallway (1:47), and Leia’s cell (49 seconds), and the Garbage Compactor Room directly below it (4:10) (see figure 11.5). These areas are all represented, and likewise connected, in set #10188. The next largest amount of time (8:39) is spent on the connected areas of Docking Bay 327, where the *Millennium Falcon* is docked, and the Docking Bay 327 Control Room which overlooks it; 2:26 is spent in wider shots of Docking Bay 327, while 1:06 is spent showing a side area where R2D2 and C-3PO are hiding, and 5:07 is spent on scenes in the Docking

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Not including the 1:09 of wireframe graphics representing the Death Star, 12 seconds of which are the wireframe trench graphics viewed by the X-wing pilots, and 57 seconds of the wireframe graphics presented at the briefing that occurs on Yavin 4 before the attack (in these graphics, the Death Star’s superlaser crater is drawn over equatorial trench, not above it). A detailed list of the appearances of the Death Star in *A New Hope* and *Return of the Jedi* can be found in the longer version of this chapter: Wolf, “Adapting the Death Star into LEGO.”
Bay 327 Control Room. Both areas are present in set #10188, and one overlooks the other as well. The third most-appearing interior location, the Imperial Conference Room (4:39), is present in set #10188, as is the fourth, the Overbridge Control Room (2:16; includes 18 seconds of close-ups of its viewscreen, which is represented in the set by a double-side piece depicting the unexploded Alderaan on one side and the approach to Yavin 4 on the other). The Overbridge is also located directly above the superlaser crater in the set, even though the spatial relationship between the two is only indicated in sources outside of the film.15 The next two locations, the Chasm that Luke swings over with Leia (1:17) and the Tractor Beam Controls (1:16),

are also represented in set #10188, as are the Superlaser Fire Control room16 (0:21), the Elevator interior (0:12), and Laser Cannon Bay (0:06). Death Star locations not represented by the set include the Elevator balcony by the air shaft where characters wait for the elevator (0:35), the stormtrooper room

16 The Superlaser Fire Control Room is perhaps the most questionable representation, however; although the superlaser of set #10188 does have control panels on its swiveling base, they differ somewhat from those seen in the film. The film, however, depicts the control room as mainly as banks of lights and switches, with little other detail.
and TIE fighter bay that Han Solo almost runs into (0:02), the TIE Docking Bay that Darth Vader's TIE fighter and two other are seen leaving (0:02), and the Particle Accelerator Tube used when the superlaser fires (0:02). Finally, there are shots of various Death Star hallways (5:53), which could be represented by the lowest level of set #10188, but are little more than passageways. If this is allowed, then out of the 40:37 of Death Star interiors onscreen, only 41 seconds’ worth is not represented; which means that set #10188 enables 98.31% of the interior scenes to be reenacted with the playset’s locations.¹⁷

Set #10188 also contains the Emperor’s Throne Room from Return of the Jedi, and the characters necessary for the film’s climactic scene. The second Death Star has less screen time than the first one (28:01, which is 20.8% of Return of the Jedi’s running time, according to the 2006 DVD release), even though Return of the Jedi is longer than A New Hope. Of that time, interiors have far more screen time (23:43) than do exterior shots (4:18), while the second Death Star has a number of locations similar to the first (a Superlaser Fire Control Room, an Overbridge, docking bays, hallways, and so forth), and the new location, the Emperor’s Throne Room, is where most of the interior scenes are set (15:16 of the 23:43). The Throne Room in set #10188 has everything needed for the film’s climactic scenes: the raised dais with the throne by the window, the collapsing walkway for the fight scene, and the walkway with railings that overlooks the chasm into which the Emperor is thrown (this chasm connects with the one below it that Luke swings across). Most of these locations also contain moveable elements, like doors that open and close, elevators that can be moved from one level to another, guns that can be repositioned, and so on. The tractor beam can be turned off and the walls of the garbage compactor can be made to close inward. In the docking bay, Darth Vader’s TIE fighter hangs ready to be used, and is large enough to seat the Darth Vader minifigure inside.

As stated earlier, the LEGO versions are like caricatures of the film’s locations, simplifying them and exaggerating their salient features. Design elements from the overall architectural style and color palette to such things as the shapes of light fixtures, windows, doorways, and control panels all evoke a feeling similar to the original, yet their disproportionate sizes give them greater emphasis and make the viewer more aware of the style that they represent and embody (see figure 11.6). After examining set #10188, one becomes more conscious of these elements in the films, despite the

¹⁷ Of course, some scenes would require the Millennium Falcon to be present in the docking bay, but none is provided, since a scale one would be too small for the minifigures to enter.
fact that they mainly occur in the background. The design also has a way of compartmentalizing the film's action, even though, as mentioned earlier, a number of locations are adjacent just as they are in the film (for example, Leia's cell connects to the Detention Block corridor, which is also above the garbage compactor).

Aside from active play, the set is also designed to reenact film scenes through the staging of vignettes, as is shown on the set's box. That this is encouraged seems evident due to the inclusion of multiple minifigures representing the same character; for example, the three representing Luke Skywalker in his original desert garb, in a stormtrooper uniform, and in black clothing as a Jedi (along with one black hand, representing the black-gloved mechanical hand he has in Return of the Jedi). Thus, the set is designed to be put on display (like set #10143) by adults (originally priced at $400, it is hard to insist that the set was intended only for children). At the same time, however, the dollhouse-like nature of the levels of open-walled rooms encourages, or at the very least allows, a dollhouse approach to play. When two of my sons (then aged 8 and 9) were playing with the set with two girls from the neighborhood, I happened to overhear their play, in which the Death Star was a home where Luke and Leia had bedrooms and referred to Darth Vader as “Daddy”; thus the children used the familial relationships that the film's characters already had, along with the dollhouse design of the set, to create domestic play scenes that blended Star Wars with family dollhouse play. Set #10188, then, appears to have been designed with a number of potential uses in mind.

The adaptation of the Death Star into LEGO, then, successfully combines a display model with a playset, just as LEGO itself combines building sets with playsets, and combines the two Death Stars of A New Hope and The
Return of the Jedi into one set. It represents the films’ locations while also changing them, offering greater interactivity than a video game while at the same time changing the way one sees the film locations, emphasizing their production design as well as caricaturing it. The set exhibits an intriguing balance between compactness and economy of the design and the level of detail and recognizability of the film sets’ salient features, resulting in a model that can be admired by young and old alike, allowing the set to interest an audience that includes children and adults, and spans multiple generations. A transgenerational audience is something that both LEGO and Star Wars were both able to attain on their own, and this is strengthened even further by their combination, as demonstrated by the clever way in which the Death Star has been adapted in LEGO set #10188.