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# Building blocks

*This architect's wood models more than just child's play*

By **ROB O'CONNOR**  
Log Cabin Staff Writer

Steve Hurd still plays with blocks. But rather than an army fort or spaceship or other emblem of American boyhood, the 42 year-old architect builds cathedrals with his simple wooden blocks.

It's equal parts second childhood and second occupation for Hurd.

Shortly after he and his wife Amanda were married, Hurd's mother-in-law, Anzolette Cheatham, told him how her father, an architect, would build models of castles and cathedrals for her when she was a child.



Architect Steve Hurd discusses a model of a cathedral built with building blocks he designed. MIKE KEMP PHOTO

For Christmas, she gave her new son-in-law a set of large building blocks and the two spent Christmas day playing together with blocks, Hurd remembered.

Anzolette's gift was the seed for Hurd's blocks.

"The architect in me kicked in," he said.

Soon, Hurd came up with plans for Cathedral Blocks, a block set for children who aspire to build and builders who might aspire to be children again.

"They're just building blocks. They build anything," said Hurd. "It's just the unique pieces help you build cathedrals."

In 1989, Hurd met, by chance, a woodworker in Little Rock who made him the first set of blocks for him out of maple and walnut.

Hurd was encouraged to enter the Arkansas Arts Center's Decorative Arts Museum annual Toys by Artists show and it was

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accepted.

The feedback was invaluable. Hurd started the copyright and patent process and, over the next few years, pursued manufacturing for the blocks.

The acceptance also tapped a wellspring of creative educational toy designs, including other architectural theme building blocks and word game sets. He also designed a couple of architecturally sophisticated birdhouses and painted the smaller balsa models to use as Christmas ornaments. There is also a wooden lamp of Hurd's design in his house.



Architect Steve Hurd looks at a cathedral he built with a set of building blocks he designed. MIKE KEMP PHOTO

Three years ago, while he was in a toy store, Hurd saw a promotion for the Great American Toy Hunt, a competition to help inventors break into the toy market. Hurd entered his blocks and a plastics manufacturer who was judging the entries told him, "You've got a market for this."



Christian Hurd demonstrates how to build a cathedral with a set of blocks designed by his father, architect Steve Hurd. MIKE KEMP PHOTO

Conway Copies. There will also be a list of pieces and 3-D visual instructions, and Hurd is toying with including an abridged architectural history lesson.

Though the clerestory windows, towers and finial pieces are hallmarks of Romanesque cathedrals, Cathedral Blocks are not modeled after a specific cathedral.

"This essentially is a model. I didn't design it after a particular cathedral," explained Hurd, who has been told by architecture enthusiasts that the blocks remind them of certain cathedrals in France and Italy. "It's a stylized version of a cathedral."

For now, he plans to sell the blocks in person and through his Web site, which will be complete in a few weeks. Several sets have already been spoken for by

With manufacturing secured and a late August ship date for the first 100 sets of blocks set, Hurd thinks there is indeed a market.

"I've not found anything like that out there," he said.

The 145-piece Cathedral Blocks set will retail for about \$95.

Hurd purposefully kept as much of the process as possible in Conway. Wonder State Box designed and produced the 19 in. by 8 in. by 10 in. box for the blocks, and the floor plan was produced by

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friends and colleagues he said. He will also donate a block set as a prize for the American Institute of Architects state convention in November. Also, he plans to give a set to his mother-in-law to repay her early inspiration.

"I'm not a salesperson but I would love for it to be a toy that's popular," said Hurd.

To test his product's potential, Hurd showed it to the most demanding market segment, children.

For the last couple of years, Hurd has used the blocks as a part in a program he presents for Enrichment Day at local elementary schools. Hundreds of school kids have seen the blocks, he estimated.

"That feedback was as good as anything," Hurd said.

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Hurd, a Little Rock native, showed an affinity for designing and building at an early age.

"The idea of creating space is something I've always been enamored with," said Hurd, whose father Bill was an artist.

All comments are regarded as non-public. Nothing this form will be considered for publication unless c

"I did erector sets for fun," admitted Hurd. "The parts and pieces going together was always fun."

In high school, Hurd developed a love for architecture.

His interest was heightened at the University of Arkansas School of Architecture, where he fell in love with medieval history and the Romanesque style with its arches and flying buttresses.

"That time period is what I latched onto in school," said Hurd, who admitted that his first college all-nighter was spent building a model of a cathedral.

After he graduated in 1985, Hurd worked for firms in Little Rock for seven years. In addition to design work, Hurd also continued to build architectural models, a task he enjoyed.

"It's a nice little break," said Hurd.

Architectural models are important, Hurd said, because clients see what they're getting before a building is built. Models are also persuasive sales tools, he added.

One of Hurd's models for the Falcon Jet company is on display in the company's offices in France.

Twelve years ago, while he was working on an addition for First United Methodist Church in Conway, he noticed an American four square home with Colonial and Prairie influences. Before long, the couple moved in and began restoring the historic home, adding their art and, later, their children, daughter Emily, now 11, and 7-year old son Christian.

For two years, Hurd commuted to Little Rock, but now he works out of Conway, in conjunction with his Little Rock-based partner Wayne Long, designing residential housing, as well as general commercial and health care buildings.

Hurd also serves on the recently approved Conway Historic District Commission for the Asa P. Robinson Historic District, a role he is quite

passionate about.

"I have a leaning toward preservation architecture," he said.

American architect Frank Lloyd Wright credited a set of tactile blocks that he played with as a child for inspiring his love of design.

The blocks Wright played with were designed by German educator Friedrich Froebel, best known as the originator of the kindergarten system, and used simple shapes, such as cubes and triangles. Like Hurd's Cathedral Blocks, the pieces don't lock together but rather rely on the creativity of the young builder.

Though there's not a video game to be found in the family's home, Hurd insists the blocks are not a stubborn Luddite's statement against technology or a plea for a return to simpler times.

"I wasn't trying to answer a grand societal question, 'What makes a good toy'," Hurd said.

Pointing to his son Christian playing with the blocks in the living room floor, Hurd said "That is why I did this."

"I still love playing with building blocks. Having kids makes you that way," he said. "I want a set for myself and my kids to have and my grandkids to play with."

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