Confessions of a miniature nerd...

I wouldn't be completely fair on myself if I suggested that it's actually taken me until my early thirties to own up to being a fully-fledged miniatures nerd. If it ever comes up in passing, I'll happily admit to it. That said it's not something I've ever shouted from the rooftops: oddly, it's probably the only proper hobby I've ever had.

My mum remembers the time, at about 15 years old, when I went upstairs to 'play with my soldiers' (no innuendo intended, I assure you) and came back down twenty minutes later, forlorn, having realised that I had finally out-grown my little companions of so many happy (if warlike) years.

For the benefit of you cool kids who don't know what a 'miniature' is, it can be almost anything from real life converted

in reality). It must be scaled down in proportion with every detail. Although mass produced, most figures and much of the scenery paraphernalia are left to be painted by the 'nerd' (I can't bring myself to say 'gamer', the technical term. Apparently I'm still slightly scarred after all).

As an indication of scale; an average, old fashioned dolls' house (scale 1:18), a traditional train set (between 1:45 – 1:76), dinky cars (scale 1:45) or Micro Machines (scale 1:150) all classify in size terms as miniatures, whilst Barbie, Action Man or a teddy are too big.

Admittedly, age fifteen was already far too old in most of my friends' eyes to be playing with soldiers, I'm glad to say this never really bothered me. My miniature experience was an insular

now. Whether you've ever used an architect or been involved in a building project or not, you probably know that, in architecture, the model, the miniature scale model primarily, is fundamental. Architectural scale models, once built, are often populated with rather serious and business-like miniatures in various attractive poses. Personally, I don't bother to paint-in their suits and ties and they are lacking swords and guns but they are miniatures, and architects secretly get very excited about them.

The scaled down architectural model is primarily a visualisation tool for the client but it is also another way for the architect to develop their design.

Consider architecture as enormous product design. No other product of any similar complexity would ever be

into something tiny enough to play with. In even more simple terms (and here's the part that's a bit nerdy) 'miniatures' are mostly tiny little historic military figures or sometimes fantastical or mythological creatures. The fantasy branch of miniatures is known as Warhammer, you've probably seen shops called The Games Workshop which specialise in these. These shops seem to be on the periphery of most town centres nowadays; often alongside the adult bookshops. The miniature figures themselves require 'worlds' in which to exist, with all the paraphernalia which goes along with that; it's a time consuming, labour intensive, predominantly male hobby and is not exactly the height of cool.

To be classified truly 'miniature', whatever you're dealing with, (figures or accessories) really has to be a maximum scale of around 1:20 (i.e. 1/20th of its size

thing and for some years ran in parallel to an otherwise rather un-nerdy growing up process. I can count on one hand the number of friends who ever really 'got' how to play. There were those who tried of course (my sisters against their will, when I required extra hands) and various mates too, but few with success.

Mine was a solitary experience, my narratives working best un-queried and safe firmly within my own head, expressed to the world only via exclamations or war-related sound effects. I remember those days so fondly; it actually gave me a big lump in my throat, when I got the box out of the attic to photograph some of my old figures for this article.

Given that said article is loosely of the architectural persuasion, I suppose I ought to drag it in its logical direction

built without first producing a prototype. Yet in building design (the most costly mega-product most of us are ever likely to invest in) the end result is often sought un-prototyped, un-seen and un-tested. Of course, in practice, this is not usually a problem; we have endless codes, regulations, years of training (7 minimum! To become a full Chartered Architect) and knowledge to inform the design plus people on-site with experience and knowledge in how to build the end product, but you get the point.

If you're lucky enough to be one of those actually able to commission a new bespoke building (or part of a building) the options are technically limitless and in many ways your product could be absolutely unique. Full prototyping is normally impossible for obvious reasons

of size. Miniature (Scale) modelling is thus the perfect solution, a way to see the unseen product in miniature before agreeing the final design.

As far as I can find, the first recorded reference to an architectural model is all the way back in the fifth century BC. Herodotus refers to a model of a temple in Book V of the Terpsichore. Then throughout the Medieval period but primarily during the Renaissance, architects created mini replicas of classical buildings that they travelled to visit. They'd take these home and show them to their clients as sales pitches but also use them to develop their own designs and then to help calculate likely construction costs and materials. Much as is still done today using 3D computing technologies.

existed within the confines of a wooden border surrounding the rectangular, green, felted surface of a large, cork notice board (around 2 metres x 1.5 metres), requisitioned at some point from a grandparent's skip... I think.

On this green 'landscape' I glued vegetation, painted and carved out rivers and streams, amassed various castles, cottages, bridges and towers (often only roughly to scale). There were woods of apple trees (from train sets), hedgerows, tracks and roads. I sculpted hills when necessary, made of contoured cardboard and covered with green felt or powdered modelling grass. I even dug trenches into the cork and sometimes lined them with the low level 'gun powder' found in mini firecrackers (still legal at that time), to explosive effect. Worryingly, I actually used to pour small amounts of

whilst lollipop sticks become aged timber cladding.

Seeing that miniature model become reality is something that as an architect I'm lucky to have regularly (thankfully not the case with the Napoleonic battles).

The charm and intrigue which a good miniature model can provide is something that artist Slinkachu has been picking up on for the last few years, in my eyes with great success (go to www.slinkachu.com). You might also be interested in my friends C.A.N and their 'QR Island' project (website is being updated but you can see their project at www.dezeen.com/2011/09/18/today-at-dezeen-platform-c-a-n).

I suppose architectural models are sort of the 'cool' side of the miniature

As I've explained a key part of any miniatures enthusiast's or indeed architectural modeller's repertoire is the canvas, the setting, the context, the world within which the figures are able to come alive.

As a child I had a multitude of 'worlds' that I created for my miniature purposes, certain types of miniatures suited certain different scenery. For the Warhammer figures the world was often formed from polystyrene packaging from a new TV or toaster, powdered 'grass' was glued in place and 'walls' were painted to look like post-apocalyptic bunkers.

My favourite of these worlds, and if I'm honest my favourite of all my miniatures, were the Napoleonics. Tiny military figures from the years of the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815) (scale 1:70 so about 28mm high). My Napoleonic world

Zippo lighter fluid where 'required' to really add authenticity to the Waterloo-like battles.

Other than revealing the habits of a juvenile arsonist and perhaps some fairly 'chilled' parenting (I come from a big family!), my point is that, in playing these games, I created a microcosmic reality that I could control and test notions out within (at that age mostly fundamental notions of friendship, betrayal, good & bad and obviously military strategy!)

In many ways it's similar with architectural models. They're not just useful tools to help a client 'visualise' a project, they're actually invaluable ways to look at a project at a multitude of scales, as a mode of decodification of the world around us in miniature. Crumpled tin foil becomes a shimmering façade,

modelling industry, in essence there's not a vast difference though. Watch anyone involved in making or using one and that same element of escapism and fantasy will be apparent. It's not to be shunned and in architecture can be a huge benefit to a really great project.

Done. If anyone needs me I may very well be up in the loft...

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