

Scenery in tight spaces

Michael Tylick

We were asked to deliver this clinic by Larry Cannon who felt that, while there were many ways make scenic effects appear larger when modeling an urban area, it was very difficult to accomplish the same deceptions with rural scenery. After viewing the prototype slides (made by Jim) for this show, it occurred to me that the techniques were really the same. A train ducking out from under a bridge does so anywhere, and isn't a great stretch of one's imagination much to have track curve behind a hill instead of a structure. Track must avoid both natural and manmade obstacles; an arc always travels a



longer distance between two points than a straight line.

Although tunnels may be more prevalent in large cities, a number do exist in remote areas. Roadways also disappear behind bridges and hills. Their sharp curves consume little space and they can change elevation very rapidly to present additional opportunities for bridge models. Waterways can appear and disappear in much the same way. Background mountains present much of the same

vertical aspect of tall buildings and can have as varied a skyline. Rock cuts and cliffs can be as much of a space saver as an urban retaining wall. Although the hilly terrain most of us choose is likely more suitable for scenic trickery, there is a surprising amount of undulation even in the flatlands. Virtually all railroads follow water and are built on a series of cuts and fills with frequent bridges.

At least in the Northeast, it is difficult to find locations where a whole train can be seen. Model trains are short, and it is helpful to have them disappear and reappear within the scenery, much as if we were pacing a full scale train. Nothing makes a layout appear smaller than a long tangent track with the same scenic treatment throughout. Make the terrain rise and fall



both in front of and behind the track. Make roads and water following the track appear and disappear as well. Add a highway or waterway bridge. A long retaining wall may be built with different materials and can include earth embankment and rock ledge. . Foreground trees or detailed scenes can draw attention. The more we can vary out scenic treatments and the longer we can occupy a visitor's visual attention, the larger our small spaces will appear to be.

Considerations for scenery design

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No model railroad is complete without detailed scenery. Otherwise, your best efforts are no more than wood and track and wire to most visitors. It's a safe assumption that many of your guests will be non-hobbyists who could care less about how accurately this particular expensive tiny brass object duplicates some fifty year old locomotive, or how closely the operation of this miniature empire replicates a specific day on the PD&Q Railway on groundhog Day in 1602. But they will want to see your trains running around in a miniature representation of the world. It's also a safe assumption that the majority of hobbyists who come for a visit will really want to see the same thing, especially if the occasion is an open house. It's only natural- everyone enjoys looking at a beautiful model railroad, and a plywood prairie doesn't hold anyone's interest for long, no matter how great the models are or how smooth the trackwork is. Nor should we dismiss casual visitors- we all start out as novices, and we were fortunate that some advanced hobbyist was kind enough to show us his work and help get us started. We may not have a legal or moral obligation to help newcomers, but doing so will make it

better for everyone. Ask any operations buff if train running improved when scenery was added.



Although scenery building costs considerably less than any other phase of layout construction, it's the most neglected part of layout construction. Hobbyists who have no trouble charging into complex electronic or mechanical projects they've no prior experience with are terrified of getting dirty and being creative. A common

answer is "But I'm not an artist!" This may be true, but neither are most of the people who have built the beautiful railroads you've been fortunate enough to enjoy. There is no denying that formal training in the arts goes a long way to making scenery building

easier, but many people discover talents they never knew existed before they attempted a scenery project. Materials, publications, and supplies that are now available at hobby shops have turned the coloring and texturing into straightforward techniques- with a little common sense and some observation of the real world, a great deal of artistic talent isn't really a necessity towards making attractive and realistic scenery. And remember the the word "art" comes from "artifice"; we're not trying to duplicate the world, just give an illusion that we are.

Scenic effects do take time. Probably scenicking a layout takes more time than all the other construction steps put together. And unlike the ready to run styrene products that now proliferate model railroads, scenery must still be built from raw materials. But herein lies the chance to be creative, to make your little world different from everyone else's little world, to make at least some part of your layout built by you.



It's not necessary to plan out the scenery for an entire layout, but a general idea of what will go where will help prevent false starts and ripping out completed work. Many hobbyists start in one little place without any idea of what will come next. The longest journey starts with the first step, and ideas flow much more freely when you are not looking at a blank canvas.

But you have to START- sitting around dreaming and planning and worrying about making everything perfect and being certain that every contingency is planned for really won't help all that much. There are as many scenery techniques as there are model railroaders- books and magazines will eventually describe most of them if you read long enough. But just because you admire someone's work, it doesn't follow that you should use their methods. I've tried many different techniques, and the results always seem to come out about the same. But there are definitely materials and methods I feel more comfortable with. Start with one YOU feel comfortable with and soon you'll develop your own techniques. Avoid formulas and recipes- you're better off selecting your own colors and playing with the materials on your own. And don't let someone else build your scenery for you. It may turn out "better" but by doing so you're depriving yourself of one of the most rewarding achievements that can be derived from building a model railroad. In a very real sense it isn't "yours". If you really dislike what you've built, remember that the materials are cheap and the time spent is leisure time. But before you tear it out in disgust, look at it and try to figure out WHY you don't like it and how you could do better the next time. Everyone improves with practice so look on every effort as a learning experience.

I really didn't understand this when it was said to me as a college freshman and perhaps you won't now, but "I wish you the joy of a difficult search."



These essays were written as virtual handouts for NMRA Convention clinics. "Tight Spaces" was first delivered at The Downeast Special for (NER Spring 2002, Portland, ME) "Considerations" was prepared for Juniata Junction (Tri-region Autumn 2000, Altoona, Pennsylvania) We feel that the attitude and disciplines necessary for scenery building are much more important than techniques which can be readily learned from books or periodicals. In particular, we like the classic Kalmbach publication "Scenery for Model Railroads" by Bill McClanahan since this describes many, many methods for scenery building. Kalmbach also publishes Dave Frary's scenery book, which shows his highly workable system which has become today's standard text. Most scenery builders use some variation of at least some of the techniques described in Dave's book. Tips also appear in hobby magazines and on our web site. We have tried to address what we feel is most important towards building attractive scenery, but in the end, the hobbyist must bite the bullet and get messy and build scenery if the plywood is to be covered. We [welcome](#) your suggestions for additions and your techniques, both successful and unsuccessful.

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