

The Joy of Scratch (and Kit) building

In this day of shake-the-box kits it would appear that scratchbuilding is becoming a lost art. We do not believe this for a minute. Although the percentage of hobbyists who build most of their models is becoming a small minority, the hobby has grown so much over the past forty years that it is very likely that there are actually MORE hobbyists interested in model building now. Sales of building materials and detail parts appear to bear this out. We may no longer have to scratch build anything, but there comes a time when no manufacturer makes what we really want to fill that space or makes that freight car we just have to have. And with all the time saving kits available to us now, before we know it our layouts are finished enough that we look for new building projects to work on. It may be that we had enjoyed the construction enough that we miss the work, or it may be that we would like to improve the quality of some of our present models. Or maybe it's just the challenge of trying something new, of actually making something with our own hands. Visitors love to see a few models that they don't recognize as being built from such and such a kit. And a kit can be transformed into something altogether different with a scratch built addition or two. Kit bashing offers another option. Many structures can be built more easily and rapidly with parts from kits, but this is not always true. Accurate models of specific prototypes are usually best not built from kit parts, but often close approximations can be.

As is usually the case, practice makes for improvement. Using a construction article or a craftsman kit for a first model is an excellent idea, since much of the thinking has been already done for you; the kit even provides the materials. The first models you build may be crude, but this is how you learn to build better models. The contest winners had to start somewhere too. It's wise to start with small, simple models to build confidence and technique. But remember that larger is not always more difficult. Buildings with square lines and few windows are usually the simplest, as are box and refrigerator cars. There are commercial models of every imaginable type of rolling stock, at least in HO scale, so first time modelers may wish to start with a structure. Modelers who are interested in scratching or kit bashing rolling stock often turn to traction or narrow gauge for this reason. Since structures do not have to operate; there is also a great deal more leeway in construction.

Many fine pieces are built exclusively from styrene, but plastic is not always the best choice for a building material. Very strong models can be rapidly built from styrene with a minimum of interior bracing, but there are often times when the textures of wood and paper lend themselves to easier finishing, saving enough time and improving the quality sufficiently to offset the benefits of rapid construction. The adhesives and scrap from wood and paper have the distinct advantage of being non-toxic and. These materials can often be found around the house for free. While nothing looks quite so much like wood as wood, nothing resembles metal as closely as styrene. In some instances only metal is malleable enough, and it's hard to duplicate a metallic finish with any other material.

Often models are built from hybrid materials, and over time you will learn your preferences for the task at hand and the adhesives and paints you are most comfortable with. The same task may often be approached in several different ways.

While it may be prudent to base your first attempts on published blueprints or construction articles, there is no reason to limit yourself to only the designs of the prototype or others. With a little experience, it's no big deal to draw your own from photographs or from your imagination. They don't have to be publishable- just neat enough to show you how to lay out the sides, openings, and roofs. And there is nothing wrong with changing your design in mid-stream. After all, you are the architect; you're not limited to what is available commercially. If a better idea comes along, go with it. You can be sure if you thought of a design for a structure, someone somewhere has already built a full scale version of it.

. Other than pride of ownership, scratch and kit part building can provide many hours of enjoyment at a creative, manual avocation, and the intangible rewards of being able to say "I made that myself". Plastic kits can be quite inexpensive and scratchbuilt models are often completed for pennies: a good way to have hobby fun between paychecks. Who knows? Maybe you'll grow enough to consider writing an article yourself, giving a clinic. Or perhaps entering the convention contests and gaining points towards an achievement award.

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