

PHOTOS BY BILL SCHAUMBURG

Even if your layout is far from complete, open house visitors can see where you are going if you put down temporary scenery.

Exhibition tips for unfinished layouts

by Edward Loizeaux

Nearly everyone has heard the old cliché: "There is no such thing as a finished model railroad layout." We accept this as gospel truth since there is always room for another tree, one more boxcar, a small structure like a telephone booth, or more scale figures. Layouts are never really finished—they simply reach a state of "good enough."

With the NMRA's 2000 National Convention approaching, attention in the San Jose, California, area has recently turned to making significant progress on layouts in preparation for tours and friends from all over the world. As the pressure builds, some of us are beginning to realize that our layouts will really not be completed in time for the event. Rather than simply becoming frustrated, perhaps considering how to display an incomplete layout is worth some thought. With low cost and minimal efforts, considerable improvement in the appearance of any model rail-



road is easily achieved. It is not difficult to show past accomplishments and future projects in a way that greatly increases viewer interest and satisfaction. These ideas and tips are suitable for any layout in any scale and have been proven in actual use over the years.

One logical place to begin is with the area closest to being finished. In the lead photo, the track has been laid but is not operational yet. Background scenery has yet

to receive its final details. No structures are yet installed and the foreground scenery hasn't even been started. So how did our roving photographer obtain such a neat photo, showing what appears to be a complete scene?

Before climbing a tall pine tree to obtain the desired perspective, the photographer scattered some ground foam all over the tracks and spread it around with a dinner knife. Then he plunked down a few structures that didn't even sit flat on the rough terrain. The structures' foundations were hidden with a few strategically-placed pieces of rolling stock so the gaps and tilts would not be apparent, then the foreground trees were mounted on a piece of 1"-thick foam insulation. I call this a "tree curtain" since it visually blocks out unfinished areas of the layout and can easily be moved.

Visitors and photographers alike rarely notice the incomplete rigging on the spar

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poles and steam donkeys, or the total lack of people anywhere. However, they inevitably comment about the nice pine trees. This entire scene took about 20 minutes to set up. After the photographer left, I vacuumed up the foam, put away the structures, moved the tree curtain and got back to work making some real progress.

Another look at a tree curtain may be found to the left of the station and above the interlocking tower in the next photo. Note the trees are simply stuck into some foam placed on upside-down yellow and blue plastic buckets. The buckets are ignored by most viewers, and when a train comes through, the effect is even more successful—their minds fill in the scene. The tree curtain, in this instance, hides bare benchwork and a nonexistent tunnel portal. Have you ever tried to hide something that doesn't exist? Think about it for a minute.

Another technique, believed to be invented here in Silicon Valley, is the latest technological advance, a wireless control panel. With wireless DCC becoming quite the rage these days, can a wireless control panel be far behind? In this instance, the control panel artwork was designed and mounted in place to show visitors how the panels would look and provide a visual aid to explaining how they would function. A careful peek behind the panel's artwork reveals that no wires are yet hooked up. No one really cares about the lack of wires, since they can easily visualize how the panel will ultimately work. In this instance the control panel is mounted on a hinge and will be tipped back at a 45-degree angle. It is positioned vertically here simply to illustrate its wireless status.

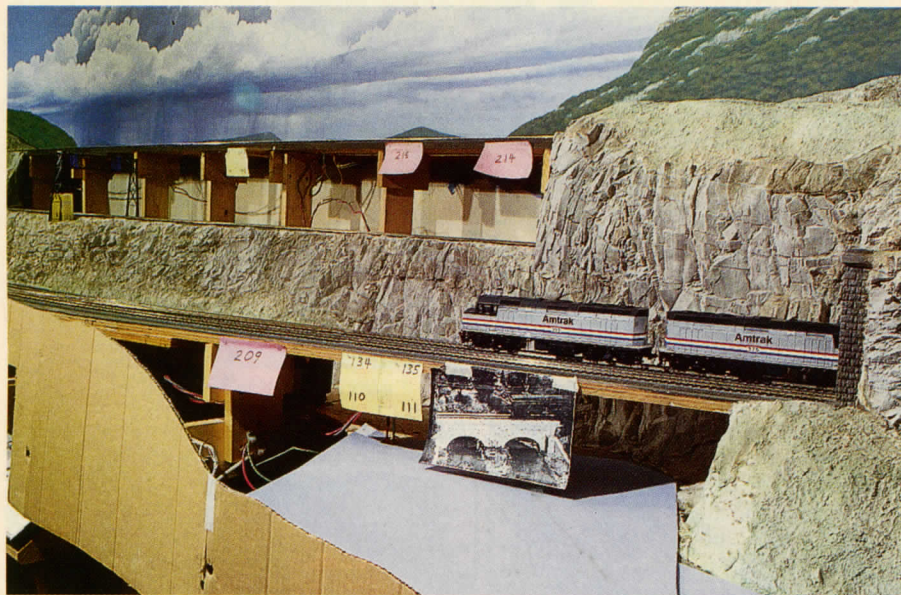
Can you figure out what the pink and yellow 3"×5" cards represent? Well, you are not alone, and these cards cause the visitor to ask questions pertaining to future turnouts and signals, which are not yet installed. The numbers refer to wires and cables that have yet to be hooked up. Most viewers are very interested in understanding what and how and why something will be accomplished, and these cards provide a visual means to explain it more thoroughly.

The last tip illustrated in this photo is the use of photographs showing future plans. For years this scene merely had the picture of the station taped to the benchwork to indicate what goes where. Eventually, the depot was built and mounted temporarily on some boards held up by C-clamps. I left the photo so visitors could see how the actual model resembles the inspirational photo, and everyone enjoys seeing the comparison between the two. I am quick to explain that I am not trying to duplicate the photo but only capture the "flavor" reasonably well. So far, no one has criticized my efforts.

In the same way, the interlocking tower



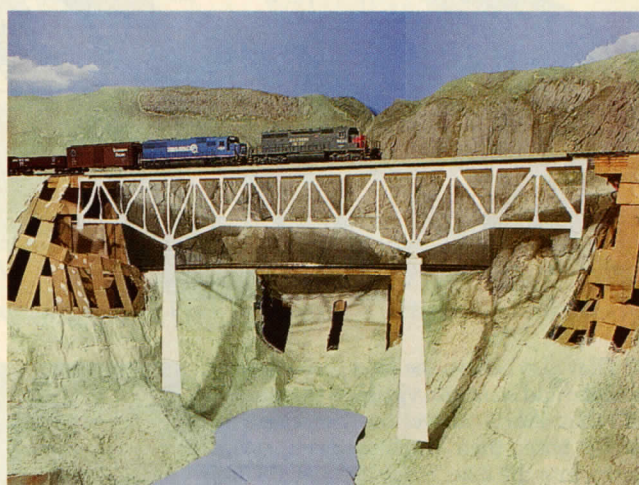
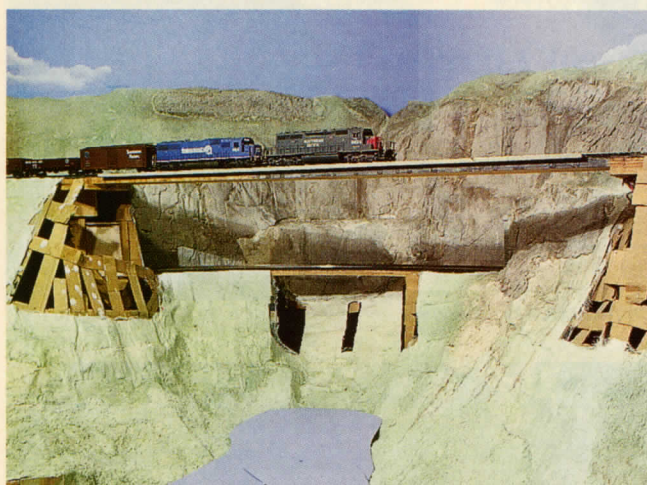
A tree curtain can imply future forests as well as hide things that should not be seen. They can sit on any kind of supports, too (top). Note the tip-out control panel, color-coded wiring tags and photos of the station. The large stone bridge has a photo to show what type of viaduct will be built, and to further tell the story, a piece of stone sheet is next to it.



supply the region's watershed.

Just a little farther down the tracks there is another bridge site with another unbuilt bridge. With trains and track held up by thin air, the scene is very uncomfortable, rather un-nerving actually. (The idea was to finish the mainline and get the railroad running, rather than wait until the large bridge was done.) Can you imagineer the intended bridge? Perhaps a through truss, maybe a steel viaduct? Do you really know what the owner is planning for the

Another example of a photograph to show an intended bridge and mock-ups of the fascia are shown at left. The effectiveness of the "paper bridge" is remarkable. Instead of thin air, a viewer's eye sees a massive steel bridge and accepts it as "real." For future waterways, the author uses blue cardstock cut to fit and laid flat.



is merely placed on the plywood near the switches. When the terrain is completed, the tower will be permanently installed, but for now it provides a viewer a much better idea of what the future will bring.

I model the East, where stone was used to construct many substantial bridges prior to the Civil War. While a stone arch bridge makes a good "identifier" for the locale, mine is nowhere near being finished. Consequently, several photos and a sample of the embossed styrene sheet which will be used for the stonework are placed nearby. There are photos of Starrucca Viaduct, stone arch bridges from England and Scotland, and copies of stone arch bridges from various publications. When visitors understand what my ultimate goal is, they become more appreciative of the progress already made towards it.

Another use of a photo helps to explain an intended bridge, one which only exists in my mind at the present time. To reinforce the idea that this is a bridge across a stream and not just some plywood roadbed, blue poster board has been cut to

shape and placed under the bridge site. A visitor "reads" the blue cardstock as "water," and so do I, and it looks much more attractive than bare benchwork. This is really noticed by visitors and the minimal effort is well rewarded by their comments.

In the same photo, note the simulated fascia made from cardboard held in place with masking tape and thumbtacks. Visitors will undoubtedly comment on how they would have done it. The location and design of control panels is another favorite topic of conversation and the flow of new thoughts and suggestions is endless. Free consulting is one of many benefits of exhibiting an unfinished layout on open house tours, and the partially finished scene here is a vast improvement over naked lumber.

Moreover, things can be tied together by the "power of assumption." Presumably, not only does the water under the missing bridge come from the higher elevations painted on the background, the rainstorm painted on the backdrop helps

future? Trust me—folks will want to know what is planned for a location like this. A good technique for communicating your plans to visitors is necessary.

A big difference can be made with just a piece of paper cut to the shape of a bridge. Paper dolls never worked for me, but paper bridges are another matter altogether. By the way, this is the prototypically correct bridge solution for this specific site. Since there are no close clearances under the track, a through truss bridge is not required. Since through truss bridges are more expensive, the railroads choose deck truss bridges when clearance problems are not an issue. Neither is a steel trestle the most economical solution for this site, and the length of the bridge just barely exceeds what is considered the limit for a girder bridge of some sort. How did I know this? I didn't, but a friend of mine does this sort of thing for a living and we worked out the options for the site. Neat.

Visitors accept the paper bridge instantly, and their eyes say it must be strong enough to hold up a train. Amazing, isn't

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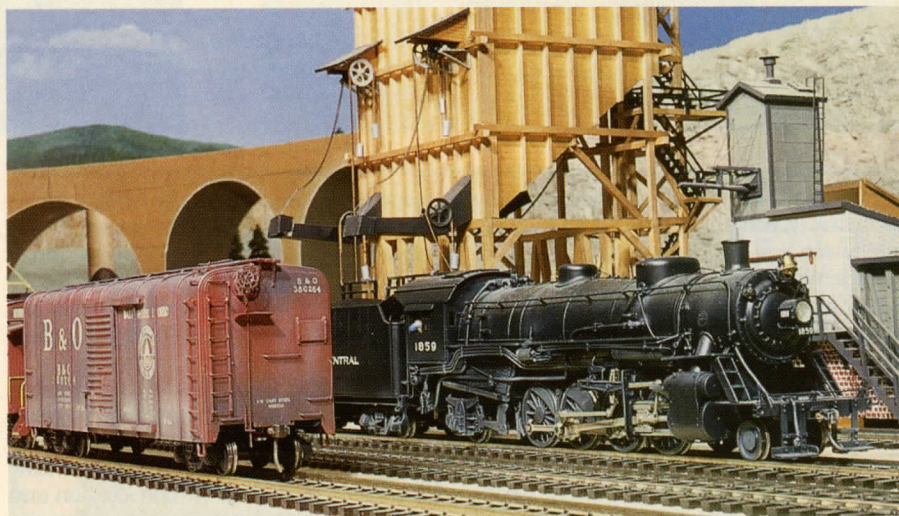


it? They also believe the blue poster board is a lake and some can visualize the waterfall that starts above the SP engine's bloody nose, then tumbles down steep rapids into the lake. Some additional blue poster board would probably have communicated this more completely.

For those interested in statistics, this mountain is in a corner, visible directly above the diesel's front coupler. The uppermost point is eight feet high and the sides extend about ten feet in both directions away from the corner. The depth of the scene from the corner to the front edge of the lower lake is about seven feet, and nearly 300 pounds of Hydrocal and casting plaster were used in its construction. The bridge is being scratchbuilt and is over four feet long.

Since white plaster is so stark, it always looks unfinished. Note that this is an "eye-ease mountain." Spraying on a thin wash after the plaster cures makes the mountainside less foreboding to visitors (and me), and the tint helps show the shape of the terrain for further work. The train is S scale, and the scene will be completed in time for the NMRA 2000 home layout tours. I hope you'll come by for a visit.

An overall photo of the layout's west end shows how incomplete things really are. Note in particular the bare white plaster on the left wall just above the tunnel por-

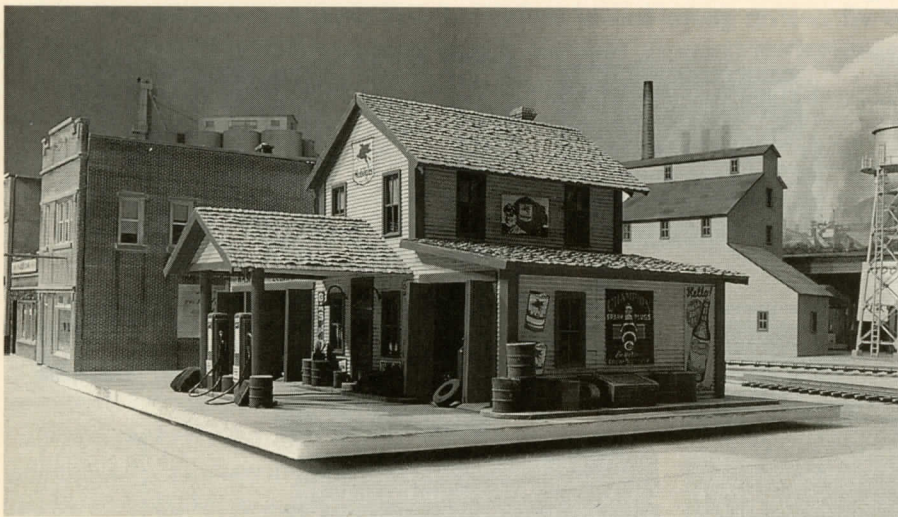


An overall view of the layout room shows how incomplete things are on the layout; however, buildings propped up on pieces of plywood, lengths of flexible track to hold finished cars and locomotives, and similar things provide interesting models for visitors to see. The painted backdrop is finished behind most of the railroad, which is S scale.

tal. To put it bluntly, bare white plaster is to be avoided at all costs for an open house, and this area definitely needs the eye-ease wash. (More realistic, darker colors can be used later when finishing the scenery. Remember that it is easy to darken the colors later, but difficult, if not impossible, to

lighten them.) The light gray rocks and green terrain will all be covered with paint, ground foam, real soil, trees, etc., as work progresses.

While the unfinished yard is just bare Homasote at this point in time, placing flexible track, structures, and rolling stock



in their approximate positions provides a rough idea of the intended scene. The same is true for the distant city (see the smog and smoke on the wall). Viewers will not complain about the temporary nature of structures placed on flat surfaces but will imagine a complete locomotive servicing facility and a bustling city. Visitors are like that. Trust me.

Which would you rather see on a layout tour: an incomplete coaling tower needing numerous nut-bolt-washer details, improved coal chute chain rigging, weathering, larger concrete footings and a few more things, or scale acres of empty real estate? Fill the expanse with the models you have built so far, rather than leaving them in boxes. Since my city area is at chin

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height, it is easy to get some realistic views even now. Later on, with a street, curbs, people, telephone wires, vehicles, sidings, debris, signs, etc., it will be a major focal point, but why wait to share the structures and vehicles?

Conclusion

It should be clear by now that unfinished layouts at any stage of completion will benefit from some efforts to communicate the owner's plans and intentions. The use of temporary mockups, color, paper cut-outs, tree curtains, partially-completed models, photographs and verbal descriptions of future projects will satisfy the curiosity of most viewers. I have been showing my incomplete layout for six years

City sidewalks are yet to come, but finished structures, scale figures and a few autos say "city" to anyone who sees these scenes; missing details are provided by the experiences and memories of viewers.

now, and it is interesting to see people come back year after year just to see the progress since last time.

My first open house was just benchwork and sub-roadbed without any track at all. Can you believe that? Yet, numerous folks read the description in the convention program and came since they wanted to learn about benchwork. So, cast aside your concerns, vacuum the train room, and invite other modelers in. You'll enjoy it even more than the visitors. I can guarantee it!

As with nearly all large model railroad layouts, this one is not the result of just the owner's efforts. Several good buddies have helped create this miniature world and I'd like to thank them for the inestimable hours of assistance in the following areas: Mike Mercer's benchwork assistance and control panel construction; Mike Kotowski's painted backdrop and scenery detailing; Michael Starkey's logging structures and rolling stock; Don Ledger's pine trees and truss bridge; Keith White's rock castings; Ray Sadler's structures; and Mike Birmingham's willingness to do anything. Please come and meet these talented modelers during our open house at the NMRA's 2000 convention, the 21st Century Limited, July 30-August 6, 2000, in San Jose, California. Access more information on the website at www.nmra2000.org.