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Freelanced railroads can allow for a great deal of creativity, but are there guidelines that could help make these layouts more realistic in appearance and operating scheme?

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With a wealth of information at our fingertips about how real railroads work, many modelers choose to model prototype railroads. Using a variety of methods and a little creativity, realistic operations can be an attainable goal.

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It's possible to build and operate a model railroad alone, but sharing it with others on a regular basis can be rewarding and can also foster creative solutions to roadblocks.



Fig. 1-2: Prototypes might include the “European-style” ziggerat architecture that’s commonly seen in some regions of North America. This building in Claremont, New Hampshire, falls into that category. The intersection it fronts features a Claremont Electric Railway diamond.



Prototype or freelanced?

I don’t intend to take sides in the debate about whether it’s better, or trendier, to model a specific prototype than it is to freelance. I spent 25 years planning, designing, building, and operating a freelanced model railroad (fig. 1-1) and enjoyed that process thoroughly. I know, too, that a mythical railroad can be plausible enough that observers come to regard it as a prototype in its own right.

Conversely, I am now enjoying the chance to re-create in miniature a portion of a long-time favorite: the Nickel Plate Road, including scenes in the Indiana town where I spent much of my youth (fig. 11-3). I’ve found this experience dramatically different from freelancing—yet not necessarily better.

In this chapter I will look at the opportunities and challenges of the freelancer, then consider the potential of prototype modeling.

Challenges of freelancing

The dean of American track planners, John Armstrong, is well known as the architect of the O scale Canandaigua Southern. The CS is a freelanced railroad, so John speaks from experience when he states that coming up with a plausible concept for a freelanced railroad and executing it well is harder than designing an equally good prototype model.

John’s premise is that a prototype modeler has clear benchmarks against which to

measure success. Paint a Baltimore & Ohio Geep or F unit the wrong shade of blue and it will stand out like a dandelion on a putting green. But how do we measure the “quality” of a freelanced paint scheme or structure? What pulls the parts into a cohesive whole?

As it turns out, evaluating freelanced paint schemes on most first-generation diesels is remarkably easy, as I’ll discuss in chapter 5. Each major builder’s diesel liveries usually had a distinctive flavor that displayed traits of only a few graphic designers.

Similarly, architecture tends to be regional. Many older commercial structures in eastern cities, for example, reflect the European heritage of the immigrants who designed and built them (fig. 1-2) This makes adapting commercial kits of European heritage for North American usage not too difficult, although they’re not suitable for all parts of the continent. The main feature of European structure kits that will need alteration is the distinctive window glazing pattern of a large single pane below with two smaller ones above. In North America—with the primary exception

of the Province of Quebec and many structures of French heritage—windows tend to be divided in half.

Many of the commercial structure kits are freelanced. This approach differs from that of selective compression, where a modeler reduces all dimensions to allow a huge prototype structure to fit into a typical model railroad scene without losing the visual characteristics of the original. My guess is that many who manufacture such kits enjoy demonstrating their skill as architects-in-miniature, while many modelers appreciate the more fanciful or ornate look that results.

Model rule, not exception

The look of the railroad in the region and the era being depicted guide a prototype modeler. A freelancer, on the other hand, needs to look around the region he or she plans to model to discover what is typical without being unduly influenced by the eye-catching exceptions. A typical general observation might be that white-painted structures predominate in many areas of North America in the mid-20th century (fig. 1-3). Residences and businesses made of brick

or those painted in a color typically feature white trim. The trim on brick industrial buildings, however, might be painted green, black, or gray as an alternative to white.

The complete scene

Some modelers focus on a handful of key structures rather than the complete scene. When doing so, they build layouts that tend to look more like showcases of architectural oddities than scenes that look familiar and ordinary. This may be by design. After all, who needs more “ordinary” than we face each day?

Like many other modelers, however, I’ve found that a lot of ordinary can add up to something extraordinary. If a scene looks right, which is to say it looks like what we expect to see, it looks realistic. But if it looks like an idyllic painting with the blemishes edited out, it will fail to convince us that all is well. All may be pretty and pert and factory-new, but that’s not how the real world looks. Modelers who present a squeaky-clean Disneyland in lieu of reality may regret that choice when the time comes to share their efforts.

Except for mantelpiece

CHAPTER ONE

Freelancing within limits

Fig. 1-1: Freelancing within the guidelines furnished by base prototypes—the approach called “prototype freelancing”—was the method followed to create the HO scale Allegheny Midland layout referenced here. Parent Nickel Plate Road equipment was freely intermixed, as shown by the two lead units on the coal drag.

In model railroad terms, “freelancing” means designing a layout that isn’t based on a specific actual railroad, called a “prototype.” Freelancing may perhaps be too broad an approach for the purposes of this book. We can’t assume that “anything goes” when the aim is a realistic appearance or operating scheme. I therefore recommend that freelancers situate their railroads in time and space, and give them plausible names and paint schemes to help viewers understand their era, locale, and mission. We should look for creative ways to ease the communication needs that are a part of any successful layout as we share our goals and accomplishments with others.