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Planning a shelf layout

Planning a shelf layout is much the same job as planning any other kind of model railroad, except a whole raft of restrictions, solutions, dodges, and approaches apply specifically to the shelf format. Those are the things I want to look at in more detail in this chapter. First, however, a word or two on the generalities of layout design—beginning with the prototype.

My own goals in layout design have always put realism and atmosphere alongside interesting operation at the top of the want list. And I've always found that marrying an appropriate subject with the space I have is the key to achieving that goal.

Picking the right “what” to model is a vital first step in achieving a happy marriage. In this context, I'm not defining the “what” so much in terms of prototype road name or era so much as the nature of the railroad subject you're trying to replicate.

For instance, modeling the Southern Pacific could mean anything from Cab-Forwards thundering over Donner Pass to modern six-axle units hauling lumber products out of Siskiyou country to vintage EMD switchers working street trackage on the Bay Area belt line. These could all be represented in shelf format, but not on the same size and shape of shelf!

To model Donner, shelf or no shelf, you'll still need a basement-sized site, but a little bit of the Bay Belt could pretty much go on the mantelpiece. The key to success would be to find an aspect of the SP that you like and that can be reasonably represented in the space you have. Trying to cram an unsuitable subject on a wrong-sized site is a recipe for frustration. Finding the right “what” can be tricky. One often has to look well past the obvious to find something suitable.

Site size and shape are always critical given in layout design, but shelf sites are generally more constricted than most. As I've already suggested, you're never going to place some aspects of the prototype on a shelf.

Which begs the question: What elements or styles of prototype railroading do happily fit the classic shelf footprint? Here are some more possibilities:

- typical lineside depots, lineside industries and industrial interchanges generally
- passing sidings
- smaller classification yards—six or eight tracks
- compact downtown terminal or through stations
- branchline terminals
- non-roundhouse engine terminals and shop complexes
- all manner of docks, harbors and waterfronts
- as general railroad subjects, some main lines, most secondary and branch lines

Mocking up a scene at full size with flextrack and crude structures is good way to check curves and clearances and will give you a good idea of how the finished scene will appear.

This Midwestern small-town scene, with its classic depot and wood grain elevators, can be captured on a shelf railroad. This is Baltic, S.D., on the Milwaukee Road in 1943. Henry J. McCord

Yards are modelable on shelf layouts, but they should be small, straight, and narrow. This is the New York, Ontario & Western Maybrook (N.Y.) yard in 1957. Jim Shaughnessy

This Midwestern small-town scene, with its classic depot and wood grain elevators, can be captured on a shelf railroad. This is Baltic, S.D., on the Milwaukee Road in 1943. Henry J. McCord

Flat prairie railroading, featuring a relatively narrow right-of-way and straight track, is easy to model on a shelf railway. This is the Burlington Northern Santa Fe in central Minnesota. Jeff Wilson
Logging power
Logging in the White Mountains started in earnest in the 1870s and lasted up to the World War II period, but was at its height around the turn of the 20th century. As a historical modeling proposition, much will depend on finding the appropriate motive power.

Geared engines apart, the characteristic locomotives were a few of the chunky 0-4-0 tender switch engines built by the Portland company, together with a host of Baldwin’s off-the-shelf 35-ton 2-4-2 saddle-tank industrial engines—a type which was built in the thousands for several gauges and powered mining, logging, and industrial railroads worldwide.

One of these logging Baldwins—the East Branch & Lincoln’s No. 5—survives in working order on the White Mountain Central Museum railroad in Lincoln, N.H. The 35-ton Baldwin has appeared from time-to-time as a brass model, but as far as I’m aware, the Portland never has. Pity.

Other rod engines mentioned or illustrated in the book include a Porter 0-4-0T switch engine (not unlike the immortal Varney dockside model) and the ubiquitous Porter Mogul (2-6-0), which has long been available in brass in the iconic shape of the Ken Kidder kit (there’s one listed on eBay as I write this). Taking a slightly more freelanced approach would suggest Mantua’s 0-6-0T switcher as a starting point.

Geared steam is far more straightforward, with a good selection of Shays and a smattering of Climax and Heisler engines having been used. Most common were the Shays: two- and three-truck examples of various vintages and weights up to 90 tons.

Bachmann’s 80-ton three-truck Shay is right on the mark for a White Mountain logging road set in the 1920s or later; the wood-cab version would be more typical. The old Roundhouse/Model Die Casting kit Shay would also be a good basis to work on, and quite a few of those can be found second-hand for not much money. A bit more out-of-the-way are the older, smaller Shays. One of my favorites (if you like a bit of a challenge) is Keystone’s long-running cast-metal kit for the diminutive 20-ton two-cylinder class A, for which North-West Short Line makes a drive-line kit. This would be perfect for a New England logger from about 1885 on; I’ve got one of these laid by for my own someday logging line.

In modeling terms, Micro-Engineering’s code 70 and code 55 flextrack would work, although you’ll need to look to Shinohara for a lot of the turnouts. The company’s code 70 range has some useful short-number switches including a No. 4 in standard and wye versions. Walther’s code 83 line also has useful wye switches, including a dinky No. 26. Although it’s OK for yard track and the logging main line, flextrack is a little too tidy for true backwoods logging iron. Here, a spot of hand-spooling works wonders—and if you’re not too good at it, that will look just fine.
Right now, there’s a bit of a stumbling-block when it comes to practical, authentic Tweetsie modeling in On30: no engines. Bachmann does make a fine model of the charismatic little Baldwin Ten-Wheeler, but only in its G scale range—a little large for indoor shelf-based railroads. That said, the smart money says it’s got to be a strong contender for the On30 range soon. Temptation to indulge in any missing link, and the Baldwin is the ideal prototype. But that’s then and this is now: What’s out there to facilitate the creation of a model based on a similar—but freelance—slim-gauge prototype?

There’s enough. Bachmann already lists two delightful small narrow gauge engines that fit the bill nicely: the diminly 2-6-0 Mogul and a charismatic 4-4-0. Both of these are available in an “Eastern” straight-stacked coal-burning version that would suit a Tweetsie-style layout, well—to a “T.”

A return to old haunts?

In the notes describing the Virginia and Truckee-based plan in my last Kalmbach layout design book (Mid-Sized & Manageable Track Plans), I confessed to an early attempt at U.S.-style model railroading allegedly set in the Blue Ridge mountains. The whole thing came about through ignorant schoolboy Rice confusing Virginia City, Cole, with Virginia the state—a geographical mish-mash that resulted in some of the world’s more improbable model railroad scenery. Almost everything about this layout is best forgotten, except its name: the Blue Hills and Yonder. That seems to chime in nicely with the sort of theme I’m setting out to explore here.

So what we have is an end-to-end “route” layout depicting a true back-country short line on the western side of the Blue Ridge. The BH&Y runs from an interchange with the standard gauge (Southern or Louisville & Nashville) at Yonder, where the yard features a shared freight house and stock pen and a ramped high-level track to allow coal to be transferred between narrow- and standard-gauge cars. The depot also serves both the standard and narrow gauges, although to ease the track-laying, only the narrow tracks are live.

For the same reason, I’ve resisted the temptation to use the Ten-Wheeler as the real missing link; it would be easy enough to introduce if you’re happy to spike your own idea. There is a crossing between the standard and narrow gauges, but as the standard gauge is dummy, this could be plain track “fudged” cosmetically.

Opposite the depot, the last few feet of a car-shed built to shelter the BH&Y’s passenger equipment serves as a viewblock to disguise the point where the standard gauge meets the wall. A single-track enginehouse, turntable, and water tank make up the locomotive facilities.

After threading the badlands behind the basement furnace and water heater (chastely concealed by appropriate cabinetry), the line passes through a separate, self-contained scene inspired by the Doe Gorge section of the Linnville Branch, complete with tiny flagstop depot and a refined Temperance Tea Room for the use of trippers to this scenic attraction.

The gorge takes up one side of the peninsula allowed by the T-shaped wall on the other side of which is the mine, really just a small coal ripple and washery with its associated dump. The line then runs into the intermediate passing place at Halfway (which it isn’t), where there’s also a spur serving a seed merchant and stock pen.

A last jog past a whisky distillery brings the panting train to the terminus at Blue Hills, Tenn., passing a small feed mill and crossing main street before reaching the depot. There’s another one-road engine house here; normally, one locomotive lives at each end of the line. Any third, spare engine would slumber at the rear of the Yonder enginehouse, which is just long enough to house two engines.