



# Size isn't everything

A dream NZ120 layout in a small space?

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FOR AS LONG as I can remember, I've always wanted a dream layout. You know, the ones you see in *Model Railroader* that fill a huge room with miles of mainline, yards and loco depôts. Unfortunately for most of us in the real world, that dream layout will always be just that, a dream.

Since leaving NZ almost five years ago, my idea of a dream layout has been reduced to simply having a layout.

In Sydney, I began 'Wellington', which started as an elegant idea for a two to four

module scenic and operating bonanza. However somewhere between concept and construction, 'planning' slipped through the cracks and an overcomplicated, tightly curved monstrosity evolved before being quietly dismantled for a move to the US.

### Inspiration

Fast forward to early 1999. Day one of three doing some work in the mid-western backwater that is Maumee, Ohio. I'm on my way to get some lunch when I spot an unassuming hobby shop and stop for a look. As we all do. Even though we know there will be nothing in it that (a) interests us, or (b) we haven't seen a million times

before, or (c) we can afford. But inside we must go, drawn by some irresistible force aware that the Visa isn't quite at the limit and it's payday next week anyway.

Inside they had a layout for sale – a wee six by three foot N scale layout they could build and ship to you, with cookie-cutter benchwork, roadbed and track. I fell in love with it and returned the following two days to peruse its shapely curves. The benefits of modular – simple, portable and small enough to be finishable, – with the plusses of a larger layout – once you have

**Top: Two DJs and a DF work a long goods train down through the gorge.**



track down, you can get down to some serious railway runnin'!

But a six by three foot layout?! Where would the hump yards, loco depôts, and industrial complexes go? The ports, mines, sweeping curves and towering viaducts? What happened to the dream!?! But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Simple. So why, of all simple people, had this not crossed my mind before.

On my last day in Maumee, man of steel that I am, I resisted buying the layout, but did give them the smug satisfaction of selling me the book containing the plans: *Nine N Scale Railroads you can Model*. So a few dollars lighter, I left . . . inspired.

### Construction

As tradition demands, a layout starts not with planning and design, but with construction.

After briefly flirting with the idea of super-sizing to four by eight feet to keep the curves more manageable, I concluded that by making compromises before even starting, I'd end up with another unfinished monster. Stick to the vision, man.

The layout benchwork had to be light yet strong. Brian Cross once showed me some modular benchwork constructed entirely from thin plywood, which fitted the bill, but was well beyond my carpentry skills. So I tried the thin ply top braced instead with two by one inch timber.

### Planning – seriously

In a moment of weakness, the book's plan was scanned into Microsoft Paint on the computer and adjusted to taste. I figured the sidings, coal mine and two stations would keep me amused, while still leaving room for some scenic bits.

### Tracklaying

Remember the first law of Train Physics: smooth track = no derailments. Track was marked out on the boards, another first for me, but necessary where some curve radii is down to 30 cm. For some curves I joined two pieces of flextrack and soldered them togeth-

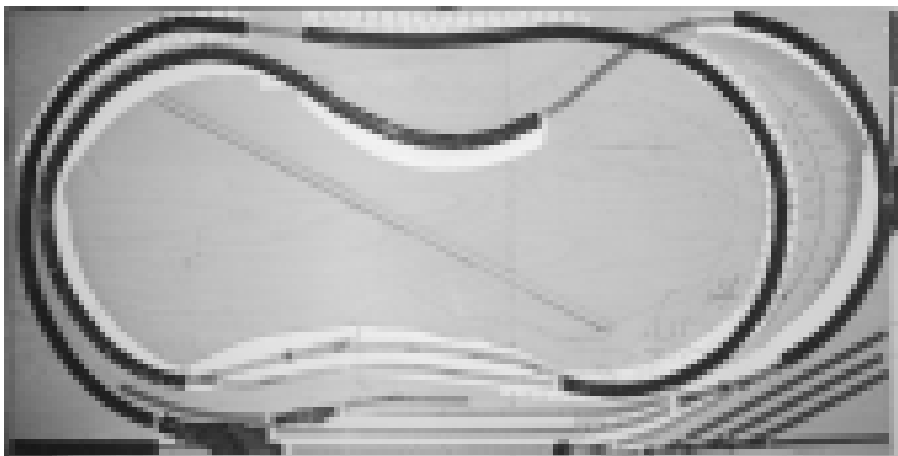
er. After pinning these down to a foamboard template with the curvature plotted on it, they were sprayed from the sides with rust-coloured paint. Once the paint set, the track kept its shape for the gentle trip up to the layout. This technique has given me some tight, but super smooth, curves.

Woodland Scenics 'EZ Terrain' flexible polystyrene slopes were used for consistent

**Top: DA230, built from a Chosen Scale EtchCetera kit, on a work train.**

**Bottom: A ballast train in the gully where the coal mine was supposed to go. The rear hill now covers the 'loco depôt'.**





**Top: DXR, DJ, DC and DF locos in a 'wandering around the loco dépôt' scene. This area now hides under a mountain.**

**Centre: The original track plan.**

**Bottom: The 'new' loco, DBR1267 on a shunt.**

grades together with foamboard for elevated sections. Mental note for next time: cover all the slots in the polystyrene gradients with paper before laying the underlay and track. Only later when pouring ballast into what appeared to be a bottomless black hole did I notice these!

Woodland Scenics spongy foam underlay was intended to give a quiet roadbed, but it gave funny curve cambers due to the tight curves. Later changes to track alignment were also a pain as I had glued the lot down. Don't know if I'd bother next time.

### Scenery

Hills were formed with wire netting or cardboard strips covered with Woodland Scenics plastercloth. What a great invention for the mess-averse. After painting the plaster with an appropriate shade of brown or dark green, scenic cover was applied.

Bushes are clump foliage of the 'Burnt Grass' varietal, usually planted onto either a Conifer Green foliage mat or grass flock. Taller trees are a real mixture with some Woodland Scenics and some dried trees covered in fibre, foliage, flock or anything handy. A sprinkling of pungas, cabbage trees, Nikaus and flaxes provides some NZ flavour.



Mirror-like lakes are (of course) mirrors and I bought snow for the short-lived snow scene at a Sydney model shop where, not surprisingly, it wasn't selling well to their modelers!

Unfortunately, now that I've been away for a while, I'm not too sure if the scenery looks more like NZ, northern New South Wales or Tehachapi...

### Scenes and a change in thinking

Despite the layout's small size, it had plenty of scenic potential and building a number of different 'scenes' for trains to run through would make it seem larger and more interesting.

I've always liked the idea of a snow scene and Rand Hood's articles in *Model Railroader* made it look easy. I also wanted a plate girder trestle on wooden piles, an Otago-style 'Mihiwaka tunnel' scene, a swampy lake and Westland bush with a coal mine. I would have liked a sunburnt 'Dashwood Pass' scene also, but seemed to have run out of room!

OK. The scenery was showing promise! Hmm... was I making things a lot more complicated than they need be? Did I really need a loop at the upper coalmine station? If I removed the loop, I could fit that 'Dashwood' scene in, and eliminate two sets of tight points that would probably just end up as derailment magnets anyway. Did I really need the coalmine at all? Lets face it, if I wanted shunting, I'd

have dusted off my S scale DE and built an industrial layout.

As you can see comparing the finished layout to the photo of the semi-naked baseboard opposite, things got simpler as trains-in-scenery became the modus operandi. Covering the mine and the yard with hills formed a nice valley and the other side of the layout was simplified by removing the snow scene.

Scenic backdrops were planned to separate scenes and further stiffen the benchwork, but a few well-placed tunnels and trees together with a fairly high layout (1.6 m from floor) have made them unnecessary.

So there ya have it. OK, so it's not everybody's idea of a dream layout, but hey, I managed to suppress my natural urge to build a busy layout long enough to have somewhere to watch and photograph NZ trains running through NZ scenery in New York.

P.S. more pics at <http://members.tripod.com/~kiwibonds/trains.html>

**Top: DG2330 beside the fern bank.**

**Bottom: Darryl's Managing Director keeps a close eye on progress.**

