



Building a Layout: Keeping Things Clean

If you haven't already thought about it, once you get your layout finished (if there really is such a thing as finished), you will have quite an investment of time and money in its construction. That being the case, you will want to preserve its finished appearance for as long as you can.

Nothing makes a layout look old and ignored more than an accumulation of dust and dirt over a period of time. The problem is, most of us don't give that more than a passing consideration until we actually notice that the layout is starting to look old, dreary, and drab. By that time, it is already too late in far too many cases. The best time to think about how to keep a layout looking fresh is *before* you ever start building it.

The first sign that a layout is getting drab and a little seedy looking is when we begin to notice the accumulation of actual dust itself. Lots of layout owners say to me, "I never clean my layout because I want it to have that natural weathered and dusty look." Trouble is, real dust doesn't have that "natural, weathered and dusty look." That's because real dust doesn't scale down to believable *scale dust*. What the eye wants to perceive as a dusty old building at 1:48 scale is really a painted surface that is dulled down to a flat, softly textured color. Photo 1 is a picture of a general store that resides on my layout. Note that what looks like an accumulation of dust over the years is really a painted surface,

with Testors Dullcote applied over the top of the final paint color. The building itself is actually very clean, and as free as possible of train-room dust.

Real dust ends up looking like... well... real dust. It doesn't look like weathered buildings; it looks like dirty model railroad structures. Real dust gets full-scale human fingerprints in it, or ugly evidence of half-hearted attempts to remove same. Then it doesn't look like real anything.

The better modeling trick is to create the appearance of scale dust on a building surface, which won't come off, using Testors Dullcote or other equivalent gloss removers as a finishing touch. Even the shiny surfaces of things like automobiles and other machines should generally not look like they have shiny surfaces when viewed from a distance. The next time you are on a plane flight, notice when you are coming in for a landing that as you get close enough to the ground to make out cars and trucks easily, there is no real shine on the surfaces of these vehicles. The only thing that stands out is the color of the vehicle, not that it has a shiny surface. You can easily achieve the same effect with the models on your layout by simply spraying them with a light coating of Dullcote to remove the shine. Getting rid of the shine is, after all, the first step we are after when we try to weather our locomotives and rolling stock.

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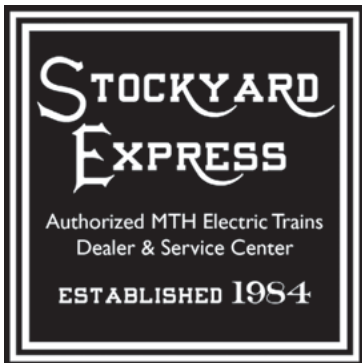
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Keeping your layout clean is really the most important thing to consider even before you begin to work on the room your layout is going to occupy, let alone the layout itself. Layout builder and friend Bob Bartizek tells me that he began preparing for the control of dust in his train room by giving a lot of thought to where dust actually comes from. In Bob's words:

Dust typically comes off the concrete basement floor. Just stamp your foot hard on a concrete floor and look at the dust cloud it creates. Dust also gets shed from concrete block basement walls. And, if the ceiling is unfinished, dust will sift down through joints in the flooring upstairs, or from where the flooring meets the floor joists just above the layout. I applied an epoxy stain/sealer to the concrete floor, installed sheet plastic vapor barriers on the inside of all the wall studs to seal off the concrete basement walls, and spray-painted the ceiling joists and everything above with a thick coat of black paint. The paint effectively sealed the sources of overhead dust. The floor of my train room was carpeted in all of the aisles. Tack strips were glued to the floor and standard wall-to-wall installation methods were used.

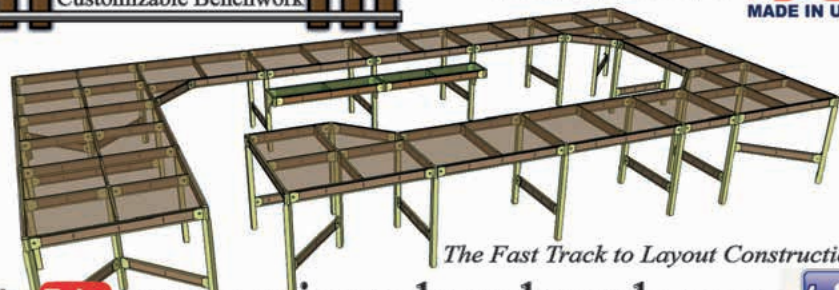
This system, Bob notes, effectively controlled the amount of general dust that made its way into the room. Frequent carpet cleaning in the aisles of his train room removed any newly tracked-in dust; and as a result, the amount of dust that settled on scenery and trains was kept to an absolute minimum.

Also give consideration to getting a dedicated vacuum cleaner just for your train room. Keeping the filters clean is much easier when you know what jobs the vacuum cleaner has been doing. Get one with a good air filtration system so that you are actually capturing the dust instead of simply redistributing it when you use the vacuum. It is much easier to depend on a good vacuum cleaner to do its job when you know that it hasn't been doing other jobs around the house, such as cleaning out the bed of the family pickup truck. I would venture to say that one of the most common sources of dust in train rooms is clogged filters, or even *no* filters, on the vacuum cleaner being used to clean the train room to begin with.

You may have areas on the layout that will allow you to use a vacuum cleaner with a hose attachment directly on the layout. The trick is to use a vacuum with a weak enough suction so that you won't end up damaging fine details. Some small shop vacs have a device on the nozzle fitting of the suction hose that will allow you to vary the amount of suction so you can use it around delicate areas. There's nothing worse than carefully vacuuming around a beautiful street scene and suddenly seeing the town's mayor and a couple of other townsfolk being sucked into purgatory!



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2

A mini-vacuum cleaner is handy; but because they are battery operated, they can't get much done without constantly changing batteries or recharging

The best of all worlds is a step-down kit like the one pictured in Photo 2. If you do a Google search for "Stewmac.com" and then enter "0523" in the "search for" box, you will see such a kit offered for as little as \$11.89. This mini-hose plugs right on to the end of a standard vacuum hose nozzle. The beauty of this system is that the additional small

hose included makes it much easier to control the brush end of the vacuum, thereby allowing you to get down into small places on the layout. At that price, it is less than a replacement mayor and one or two other townsfolk!

Consideration should also be given to why dust gathers on trains and layout surfaces in the first place. Depending on what part of the country you live in, humidity can be a constant problem for trains. It is already a significant problem when it comes to the operation and preservation of trains, but it also is a major problem in keeping layouts clean. Humid environments mean that trains and scenery live in an environment that constantly provides a fine, moist surface, which not only attracts dust, but makes it stick to the surfaces that it gathers on. Once that happens, the dust is not easily brushed off and with another cycle of drying and humidifying, will now attract an even more difficult layer of dust to remove. Humidity is probably the most common and annoying problem in attracting and retaining dirt and dust on your layout surfaces.

The most important device you can install in a train room (or your whole house, for that matter) is a dehumidifier to control humidity swings in the air in your train room. By controlling humidity changes, you not only control the expansion and contraction of materials used to build your train table, but you also manage your layout's tendency to attract and retain dust and dirt.

Dust also comes from loose scenery materials used to build your layout. In general, it's a good idea to make sure that there is nothing loose on your layout. I have a tendency to leave ballast around switches and operating accessories loose. Ultimately, that is another source of dust, so I now carefully make sure that *all* ballast, grass, gravel, and other loose scenery materials are fastened down to the layout using a dripped mixture of white glue and water applied over sprayed *wet water*, which is water mixed with a drop or two of liquid dish detergent mixed in. *OGR* Publisher Emeritus, Rich Melvin, pointed out to me that this technique

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also lets him clean all those surfaces with a mini-vacuum cleaner head without disturbing any of the fine details.

Air ducts are a source of dust from other areas of the home. OGR Publisher, Alan Arnold, has a layout built in his spacious room—a former church—with the layout room separate from any part of his house. It has no windows that can be opened, and it has an installed heating/cooling unit that uses the air in that room exclusively. The system is called an inverter. It sits on the wall, up near the ceiling of this cavernous room, and requires no ductwork. The unit has an outside sensor that senses the outdoor air temperature, determines what to do inside, and adjusts the temperature of the large room inside by heating or cooling the room air. It gently circulates the air in the large, cavernous room, past the device, without using any air ducts. Alan says that it has internal filters to filter the air. They are small and easy to replace; but because there is no ductwork, the air stays very clean.

Another consideration is, sadly, smoking locomotives. Active smoke units in locomotives deposit a fine vapor mist on *all* surfaces. If you are like me and love to see those steamers emitting monstrous smoke plumes as they exit the tunnel portals, then you will likely have to do a great deal of extra cleaning on the layout. Removing the dust that accumulates from smoke unit residue is a major problem that must be attended to, or your layout's wonderful scenery details will soon become drenched in dust and dirt that is virtually locked into the scenery. I use smoke units sparingly only when new visitors are over to see the layout, and I shut them off after a very short time.

The final dust prevention element to add into your home and train room is a very good air cleaning system. The majority of homes and train rooms are heated and/or air conditioned with a duct air handling system. Typically, these systems recirculate air that is already heated and/or cooled and combine it with some minimal amount of outside fresh air. These duct-equipped air systems are frequently already outfitted with air filters and air cleaning systems, which if you haven't looked into it in the past five or ten years, have come a long way. Check with your preferred

HVAC (heating, ventilating, and air conditioning) professional to see what is offered now compared to what you have currently in your existing system. Upgrading your existing system to a new and more efficient system with easily replaceable filters definitely will reduce the amount of dust in your whole house to near nothing.

I had a new air cleaning system (Photo 3) installed into the




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duct work of my house when I moved in six years ago, and it has practically eliminated the need to routinely clean the house. Train layout dust has all but disappeared.

There is no new miracle cure for dust, but there are much improved filters that do a far better job of removing dust particulates as the air is being circulated throughout the home. As you can see in the photo, it can be added to any existing system and requires little or no additional space in the duct work. In my case, they put the entire filter system in the space between the lower end of the cold air return duct (shown on the right) and the furnace. I took one additional step: recommended filter changing times were every six months; but when I increased that to every four months, it was well worth the effort. Replacing the filter cost \$25 and takes ten minutes. Once I had done that, it seemed like the last remaining dust in the house disappeared.

Another tip offered by Bob Bartizek was a system for removing dust that he brushes off the roofs of passenger cars and other rolling stock, as well as the roofs of small scenery structures on his layout.

I use a new, small paint brush (about 2" or so), or sometimes a shaving brush, and dust the roofs of passenger cars and any flat rooftops on structures. I brush the dust into a paper towel that I have sprayed lightly with Endust or a similar product. The sprayed paper towel acts as a dust magnet to capture and retain the dust removed by the dusting brush. In 15 years, using this method I never have had much of a dust buildup.

I thought Bob's idea was so good that I tried one little modification to it when attempting to remove dust from detailed steam locomotives and tenders. I sprayed some Endust on a 3x5 index card and kept it close to the locomotive (buted right up against the edges of the model) as in Photo 4. As I brushed cervices and small crannies around detailed parts of the locomotives, tenders, and cabooses—using a new, dedicated artist brush—sure enough, the dust was captured by the index card, and the model was thoroughly and easily cleaned. Remember, the trick is to capture the dust, not rearrange it to some other place.

These are only a few examples of good cleaning ideas. Let me hear from all of you on the tricks that you have learned. Send me an email describing your own tried-and-true dust cleaning/containment methods, and I'll be happy to share them with *OGR* readers in future Backshop Letters. 



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