

Scratchbuild a Taxicab Office



BARRY SILVERTHORN "BRINGS ON THE UGLY" WITH A REPURPOSED BUILDING ...



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Model Railroad Hobbyist | October 2022



IS YOUR LAYOUT TOO PRETTY? HEAR ME OUT ON THIS. For years I’ve been wondering this about many model railroads, including my own.

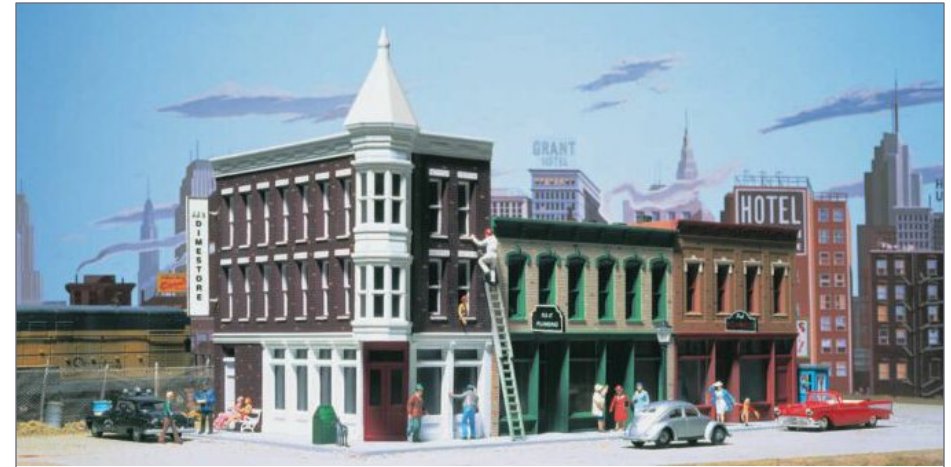
We spend hours adding weathering effects to create grimy, rusty locomotives and rolling stock, and duplicating the entropy and lack of maintenance seen along the right-of-way. And we usually get it right.

When it comes to structures, we often use weathering techniques, but I think we should be giving additional consideration to the aesthetics of building design, construction, and remodeling. Some structures need to be less attractive.

Many of us opt for a Norman-Rockwell-style “good old days” approach that leans heavily on sentimentality. We model the world as we like to remember it, or how we like to think it was during a certain era.

Model manufacturers show this tendency with their kit offerings for urban commercial buildings and homes. They are often perfectly symmetrical, with windows and doors ideally proportioned, and include architectural detail like corbels, bay windows, finials, and awnings. They are beautiful examples of the best of typical North American architecture [1].

Arguably our architecture was more charming a hundred years ago than it is today. New methods of construction and materials have made it possible to erect buildings in weeks, if not days. Whether it’s the time or expense, the bottom line is that designers and builders don’t embellish buildings as they once did.



1. The Walthers Merchants Row buildings are fine recreations of typical commercial structures that can be found in cities across North America. They look good on our layouts, but they represent the structures as built. They don’t represent the remodels and “remuddles” that many of these buildings have undergone since, especially in the last 50 years. *Walthers photo*



2. City Classics makes several storefront building kits. “The Modern Salon” is a typical example of a turn-of-the-century structure that was modernized with an art-deco-inspired facade. *Photo courtesy of City Classics*



B. Silverthorn

URBAN RENEWAL

Urban renewal projects offer lots of inspiration for updating older storefronts [3]. The law office at left had a new entrance added at some point, fashioned with brick that does not match the existing brick on the upper portion of the building.

Next door, windows recently have been replaced. The designer seems to have tried to keep some of the original character of the storefront facade. The corbels at the top of each building were saved, which rarely happens.

The third building appears to be under renovation, with the newly added weather barrier exposed and waiting for sheathing. The traditional sash windows were replaced with vinyl inserts that have horizontal sliding sashes.

The building on the far right is unrecognizable from its original appearance, being completely wrapped in steel siding. All these “remuddles” can be duplicated in scale model form using wood, styrene, printed paper, and even brick scraps from other projects.



3. This photo shows how urban renewal can bring on the ugly.

That approach is even more obvious when it comes to updating older structures. Anyone who models the mid-twentieth century or later should include examples of remodeled – or even “remuddled” – buildings. Jim Sacco of City Classics offered us good examples of less-than-aesthetically pleasing modified storefronts with his Main Street Cafe and South Side Salon kits [2].

There’s a lot of ugliness on the streets, and if our aim is to create realistic miniatures, we need to model more of it. As someone who models the late ‘80s, I consider myself lucky that there are still lots of examples of buildings around that haven't changed since then.

They were designed ugly or became that way as they were updated over the years. Just a few blocks from where I live is one of my favorites: the Bluebird Taxi office [4].

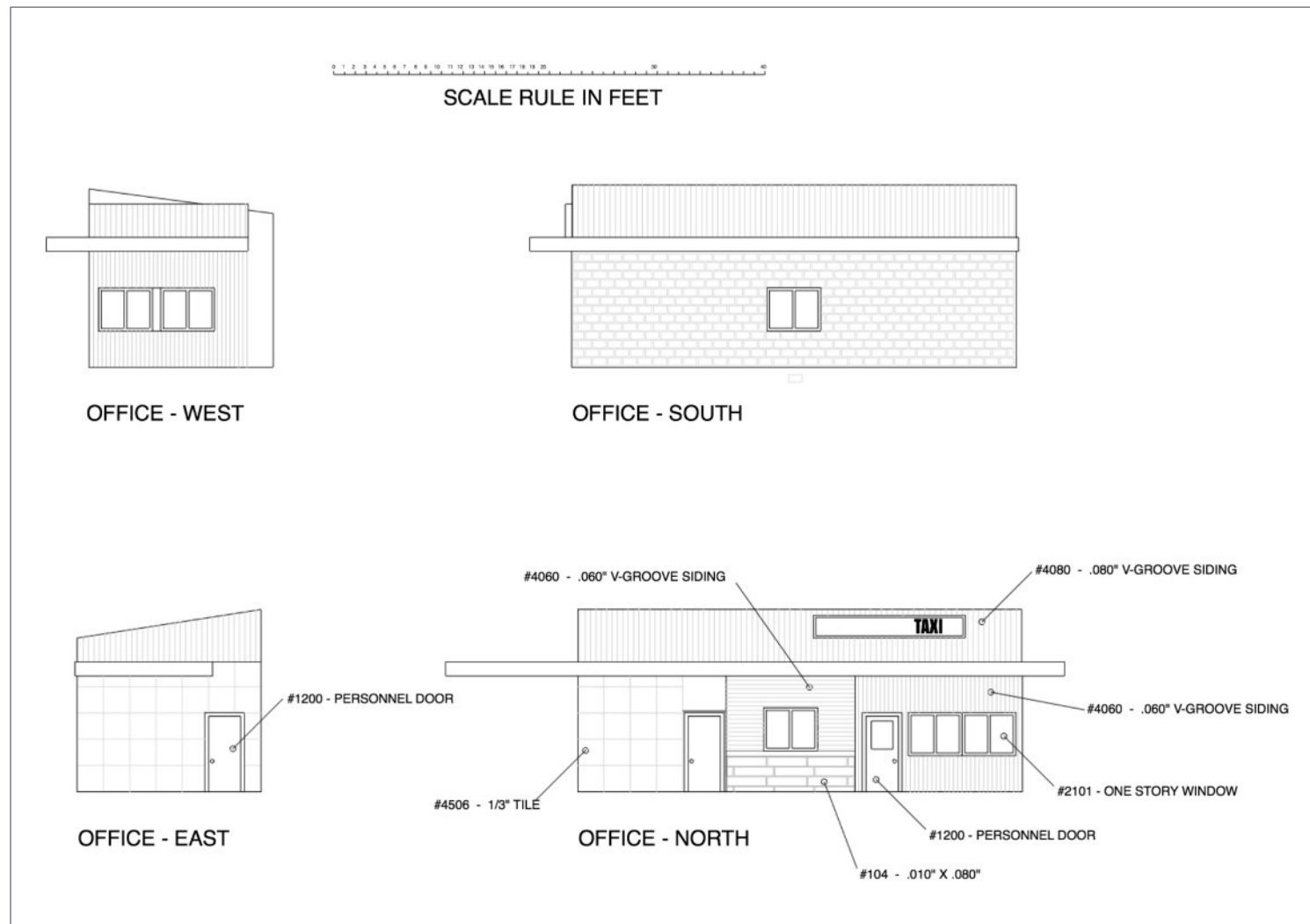
The Bluebird Taxi facility was once a gas station and auto repair business. Over the years, the concrete-block building was remodeled with a facade of architectural panels, aluminum siding, and artificial stone. The resulting mash-up is a building that few citizens in this town really care about, but it looked like an interesting scratchbuilding project.



4. An unassuming concrete-block building clad in a combination of disparate building materials, the Bluebird Taxi office blends in with a dull winter sky.

Rapido Trains' 2022 release of an early-'80s Chevrolet Impala taxi in HO scale motivated me to get started. Most of the parts would be available at the hobby store, so I realized it would be easy.

The wall sections can be made using Evergreen Scale Models styrene tile and V-groove sheets, and the windows and doors are



very close to those offered by Rix Products. The rest of the parts can be fabricated from strip styrene and wire.

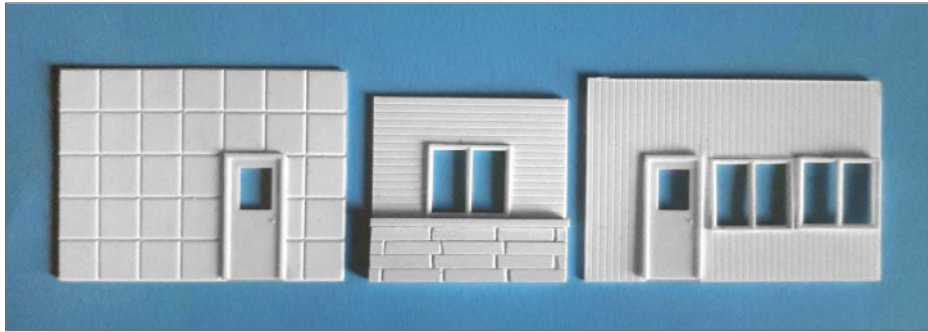
Rather than measuring the actual building, I estimated the wall sizes from photos. This allowed me to base the walls on the spacing of the styrene tile panels instead of the actual size. That way I wouldn't be left with a fraction of a panel at the end of a wall.

I used two sizes of Evergreen tiles: 1/2" and 1/3". For the upper walls 0.080" V-groove siding seemed like a good match for the metal siding.

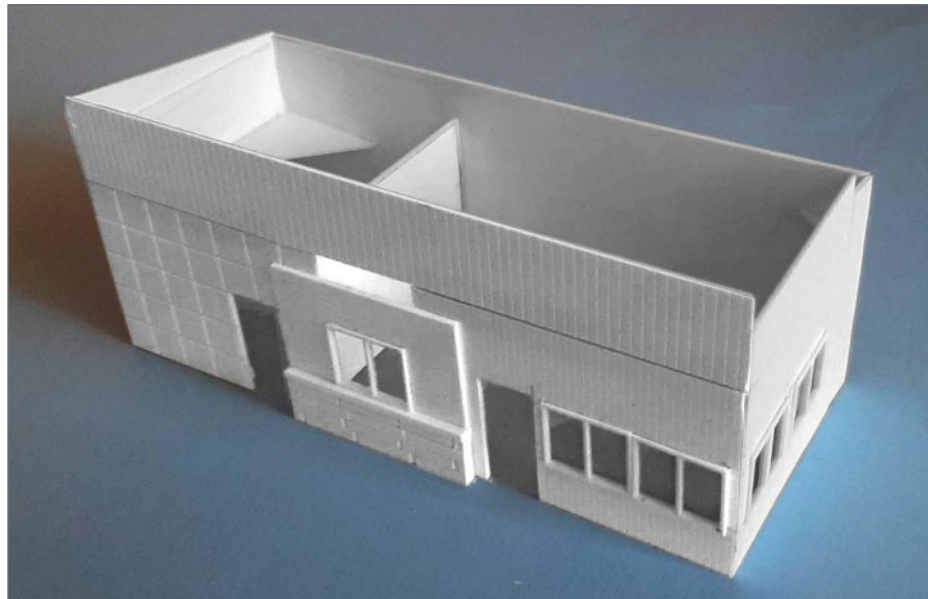
I started with the office, building the walls in sections. The paneled walls are five tiles high, and this became my reference for the height of all the walls. In the drawings, the roof that wraps across the front of the building will hide the joint between the tile wall and the V-groove siding above it [5].

I extended the walls above the roofline to provide a surface for gluing V-groove siding to the building later. I needed to paint the windows and doors white, so I left installation until later to make painting them easier.

5. The walls of the office were fabricated using Evergreen Scale Models sheet styrene.



6. The front (north) wall sections of the office are an unappealing combination of four different siding materials.



7. The assembled office shows the upper wall of vertical siding glued over the lower walls. The roof that wraps the façade will hide the seam. The center “bay” section is glued over the other two sections to make it stand forward.

I used 0.010" x 0.080" strip styrene to fabricate the imitation stone wall on the front of the office “bay” wall by cutting vertical grooves into it with a razor saw. I created a rock texture by adding some filler putty to the surface of the rows. The siding above the stone is 0.060" V-groove. The ledge separating them was cut from 0.060" X 0.125" strip [6].

This center bay section of the office front wall was glued over the other sections so it stood slightly “proud” [7]. I’m not sure why it was built this way on the prototype, but it adds visual interest to an already inconsistent design.

The garage is a separate building from the office, connected by a breezeway roof. It is of similar construction to the office, with the same tile below and the v-groove siding above. A blue band separates the two [8].

Cutting and assembling the remaining wall sections for the office and garage buildings was simple [9]. Since my model would be viewed only from the front, I used plain styrene for the rear walls. Once the walls for both buildings were assembled, I made roofs from sheet styrene.

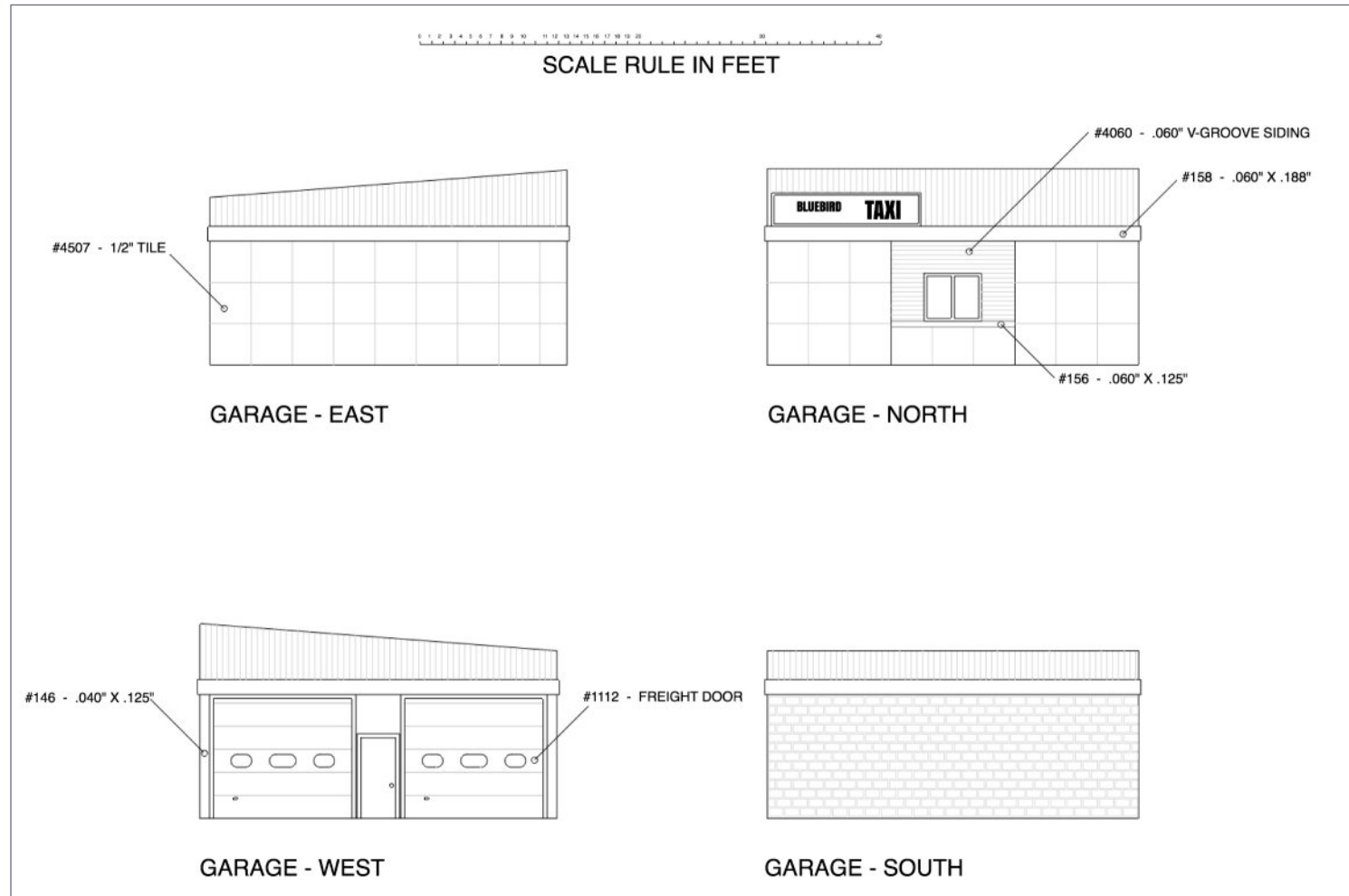
The soffit roof across the front and side of the office, and between the two buildings, was cut in one piece from a sheet of 0.060" styrene using the drawing as a template [10, 11]. The V-groove siding was added to the top of it to match the rest of the buildings, and a fascia was added using 0.060" X 0.188' strip styrene.

I toyed with the idea of adding LEDs to the signs to make them look like they are backlit with fluorescent tubes. This would require cutting holes in the siding and building light boxes on the back of the wall to house cool-white LEDs from Woodland Scenics [12].

This part of the project went a bit overboard, as it took eight stick-on Just Plug LEDs to do the job, but in the end the lighting effect is impressive. I plan to power them with a Model Train Technology LED scene controller so I can add effects like fluorescent flicker. The exterior frames for the signs were built using 0.040" X 0.060" strips.

The barrier in the rear of the parking area between the two buildings is a unique steel fabrication on the prototype. I cut a 0.350" strip from a sheet of 0.020"-thick sheet styrene and chopped up pieces six scale feet long. These were mounted on two 0.020" x 0.020" strips.

The concrete base was made by laminating two strips of styrene to get the required height [13].



I airbrushed the buildings with primer, followed by Tru-Color light gray stucco. The fascia strip was painted in Georgia Pacific blue.

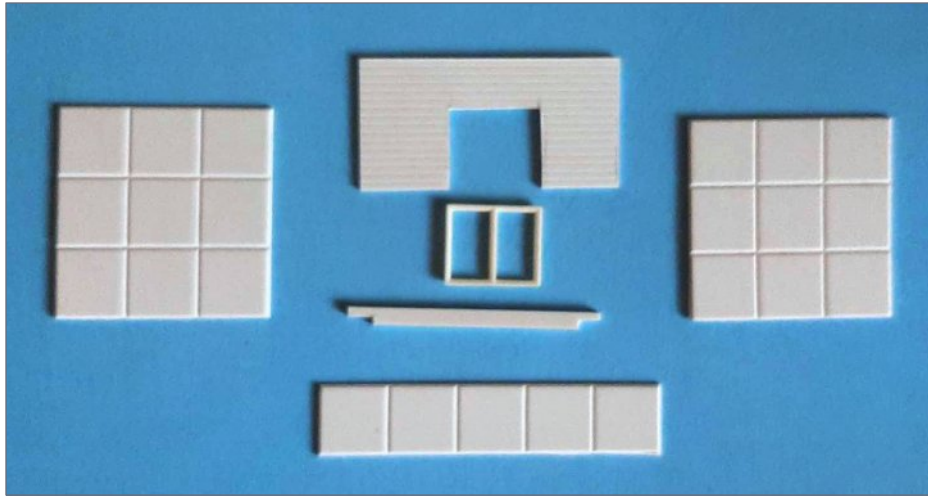
Some of the paint peeled away as I removed the masking, leaving a patch of white on the tile. I decided to take advantage of this as a weathering technique, since some of the paint had peeled on the prototype in the same manner [14]. I removed the rest of the tape with less care about whether it lifted the paint.

I painted the windows and doors white, and installed them. I gave the building a thinned wash of alcohol and India ink to weather it, and then glued the clear plastic "glass" in the windows.

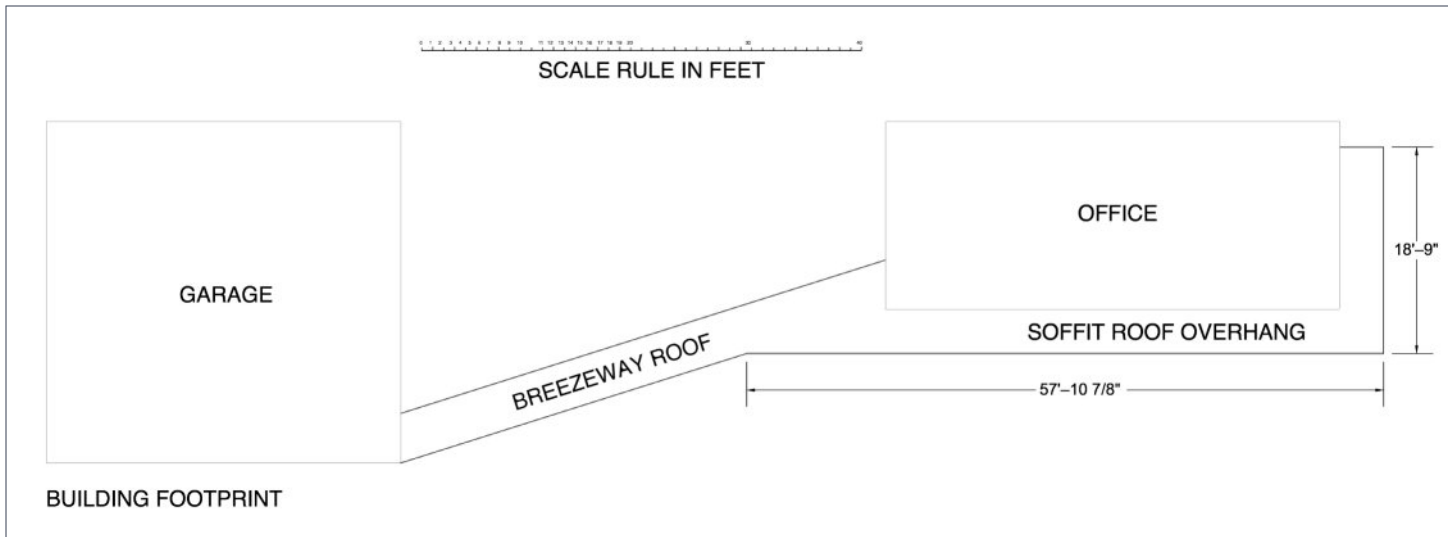
Using the unimaginative prototype designs as a guide, I created signs in a graphics program on my computer and inkjet-printed them on plain paper. These were cut out and glued to the backside of the walls inside the light boxes.

The LEDs were mounted inside the boxes using the adhesive strips attached to them. If you find the light cast on the signs is uneven, try using a piece of Woodland Scenics Light Diffusing Window Film. Paint the backs of the walls black to prevent light leakage [15].

8. The garage walls are made from similar materials, with a band of styrene separating the upper and lower panels. Pikestuff doors, and windows from Rix are a good match for the prototype.



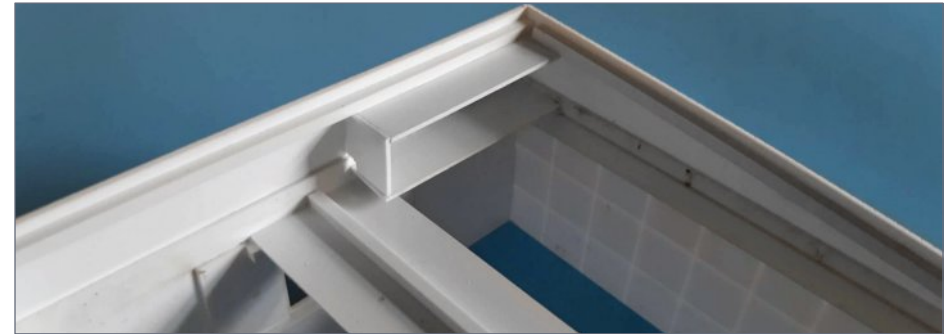
9. The sections that make up the north wall of the garage, ready for assembly.



10. Soffit roof template.

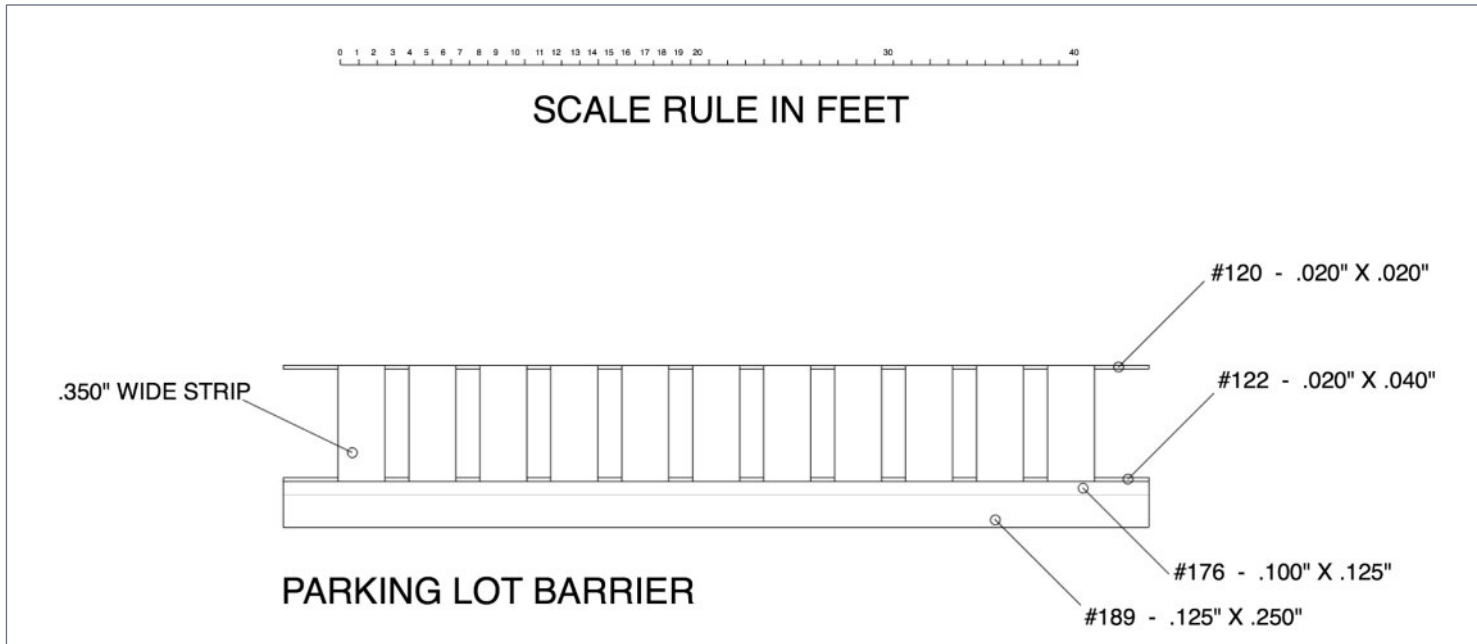


11. These views show the orientation of the soffit roof that lines the front and side of the office building, and extends to the garage to create a breezeway between the two buildings.



12. Light boxes were created on the interior walls to contain the LEDs.





13. The steel parking barrier is a simple fabrication using strip styrene.



14. Sometimes accidents are happy ones! Some of the paint was removed with the masking tape, but it simulated the peeling paint on the actual building.



15. Backlit fluorescent signs are uncommon on model railroads because they're difficult to simulate. The soffit roofing of the taxi company's buildings provided good hiding places for the light boxes.

I used common black pepper from the kitchen pantry to texture the roofs. It has a natural granular look that is finer than commonly used gray ballast. I painted the roof with black craft paint and sprinkled on the pepper. Once it dried, I used Pan Pastels to tone it down and add other hues.

I bent 0.032" piano wire to create the gas line on the top of the building. After painting it yellow, I glued it to the wall using CA.

A building like this offers a perfect excuse to pull out the box of detail parts [16]. I tarted the scene with a dumpster, car ramps, a trash can, and tires. I also added interiors with figures.

Of course, the yellow cabs were a must-have to complete the scene. I can go back and add many more details such as a chain-link fence and weeds once it's installed on the layout.



Consider adding more ugly and nondescript buildings to your layout, especially if you model modern scenes. Bluebird Taxi is not the kind of structure a manufacturer will offer anytime soon, but it is a simple, low-cost scratchbuilding project that adds a lot of character. What buildings like this lack in charm, they make up for in visual interest. ☑



16. Don't forget the details. Chain-link fences, electrical conduit, weeds, and used tires are a good start, but there's no limit to how much "stuff" you can have lying around the parking lot in a building like this.

MATERIALS LIST

Evergreen Scale Models

- 4506 1/3" square tile
- 4507 1/2" square tile
- 4060 .060" V-groove siding
- 4080 .080" V-groove siding
- 9060 .060" plain sheet
- 104 .010" X .080" strip
- 120 .020" X .020" strip
- 122 .020" X .040" strip
- 143 .040" X .060" strip
- 146 .040" X .125" strip
- 149 .040" X .250" strip
- 156 .060" X .125" strip
- 158 .060" X .188" strip
- 176 .100" X .125" strip
- 189 .125" X .250" strip

Rix Products/Pikestuff

- 1112 Freight Door 12x12, 2 per pkg
- 1200 Personnel Doors - Assorted, 6 per pkg
- 2101 One Story Window, 3 per pkg (2 packages required)

K&S Precision Metals

- 501 .032" piano wire

Woodland Scenics Just Plug

- JP5715 Light Diffusing Window Film
- JP5741 LED stick on lights, cool white, 2 per pkg (5 packages used)

Rapido Trains

- 800007 Early 1980s Chevrolet Impala Taxi

Tru-Color Paint

- 101 Georgia Pacific blue
- 413 matte light gray stucco
- 431 matte white

BARRY SILVERTHORN



Barry got his start in the hobby at age four and has built models in N, HO, S and O scales.

He formerly produced content for TrainMasters TV, and now designs and markets interior lighting kits for model railroad structures.

He lives in a replica train depot on Canadian National's busy mainline between Toronto and Montréal, Canada. ■

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