N-Circle Railroad Update – August 13, 2020

The N-Circle Railroad is a 3 x 9 foot oval built to T-Trak modular standards, with the one-foot wide hole in the center of the "doughnut" filled with modules with no track, to provide area for additional scenery beyond that in the very narrow one-foot depth of a T-Trak module. Operation is DC block control - the majority of my locomotives were built before "DCC Ready" was a concept, and this isn't really a multi-operator layout. I am building the control panel to allow two DC blocks, as two operators could work sections independently.

The N-Circle Railroad will model four scenarios:

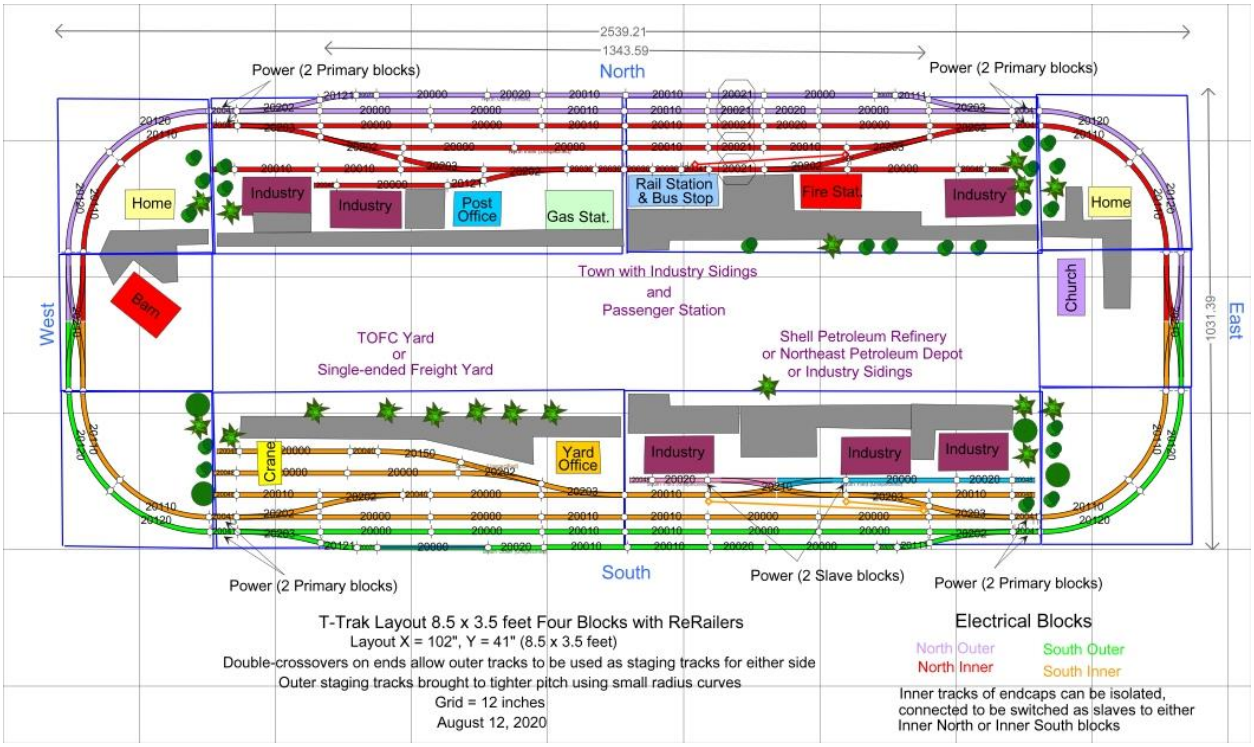
1980s Vermont
1950s Vermont
1980s Louisiana
1950s Louisiana

using one set of modules, track and wiring, by using modular scenery panels that lay on the bench work modules, but are not attached, and thus can be swapped around.

The T-Trak modular standard is a double-track mainline along the outside edge of the modules, intended for public displays, allowing two trains to loop on the two independent mains. As can be seen in the following track plan, the N-Circle's outer loop has a passing siding on both the North and South sides, and a double crossover to the inner main on both the East and West ends. Thus, the outer loop can be used for a circulating train, but will mostly be used for staging yards. For example, when doing interchanging switching activities in the Northern town, trains can be staged on the two South outer sidings, then crossover to the inner track to approach the town. The two inner tracks also can serve as staging tracks, so effectively the South side can provide up to four staging tracks when operating on the North side, or vice-versa. I have not built the electrical control panel yet, so at this point the entire layout operates as one electrical block. However, the power routing Kato turnouts allow some parking of staged trains, though without block control, one of every group of two or three parallel tracks will be "hot."

The scenery details in the track plan are preliminary, and are already evolving.

N-Circle T-Trak_Layout_200812



My rather extensive collection of locomotives and rolling stock will allow interchange activities in the main yard between:

Vermont Division:

Central Vermont and Canadian National
Central Vermont and Canadian Pacific
Central Vermont and Maine Central
Central Vermont and Boston & Maine
Central Vermont and Vermont Northern/Lamoille Valley
Central Vermont and Montpelier & Barre
Central Vermont and Rutland
Central Vermont and Vermont Railway
Vermont Railway and Clarendon & Pittsford
Vermont Railway and Green Mountain
Vermont Railway and Delaware & Hudson
Amtrak Northeast

There is also "loaner power" from the Grand Trunk and Duluth, Winnipeg and Pacific to run in Central Vermont consists, and a pair of Bangor and Aroostook locos, just because...

Louisiana Division:

Southern Pacific and Union Pacific
Southern Pacific and Santa Fe
Amtrak Superliner

My locomotive purchases for the Louisiana Division have been much more focused and limited in recent years, though I have rolling stock for most of the railroads that came into New Orleans from the 1950s through the 1980s.

All power is four-axle diesels, except for a couple of Central Vermont steamers, as six-axle units are too large for the running lengths on this layout. The majority are Atlas units, as they run well, and are easy to maintain, though I have a few other brands where they made units for Vermont railroads. And most are EMD, as I never cared that much for the look of Alcos, except for RS-3s and RS-11s. (Sorry, Alco lovers!). Rolling stock is mostly limited to 50-footers, except for passenger cars and some single-trailer TOFCs.

Now, on to the "educational clinic" part of this dissertation: I am employing years of corporate experience preparing Power Point presentations to create temporary scenery for the layout! After creating a grid of scale dimensions to overlay a standard 8.5 x 11 inch sheet, I developed templates for paved roadways, etc. in N-scale. It is very easy to then add sharp, clean and even striping for roadways, parking spaces, sidewalks, etc., I have even overlaid occasional manhole covers, pavement patches and crack fills in the streets! For now the sheets are attached with double-sided tape to corrugated cardboard sections cut from shipping boxes. As you will see from the photos, my current panels are fairly crude where they meet. Eventually I will use foam board or particle board to achieve smoother surfaces and clean joints, but for now cardboard provides an inexpensive base for scenery sizings.

This approach allows lots of flexibility for sizing, visualizing and changing the placement of structures relative to each other and roadways. And it provides a place to display my extensive collection of vehicles in somewhat real settings, without having to commit to the permanency of glued ground foam and road fills. As I build structure kits, I will create more of these overlays to incorporate them into the layout, and things will move around.

The Kato UniTrack used on T-Trak modules includes a raised roadbed, so building the scenery on a foam board or particle board panel will raise it to the approximate rail level, making the scenery relatively level and realistic up to the track. Obviously at some point some careful measuring and cutting will be required to align the edges of the board to the contours of the track bed, for the creation of "final" panels.

A Power Point slide on 8.5x11 inch paper is about 100 x 120 feet in N-scale, so a single sheet can model an entire scene or a city block. Obviously this technique would not work as well for a larger scale. And HP printer ink cartridges are expensive, so creating piles of these overlays

could get pricey, but then so would ripping up modeling materials to redo poorly planned configurations!

At this point my structures are mostly limited to Ready-to-Run solid resin buildings from IMEX for the Woolworth and W.T. Grant stores and suburban houses and mobile homes. The two restaurants are from CBC models - assembled detailed DPM kits, and the A&P store and school were assembled by others, and purchased on eBay. The two freight transfer buildings are Micro Engineering kits assembled years ago for an IBM Open House display. We have many more kits under the layout to assemble to complete the city, a farm, and an oil refinery!

And at this point, things look very barren with no trees or shrubbery. I have a few pre-fab trees, and need to determine if they can be used on these temporary scenery panels without damaging them for future permanent use.

Onwards to show the results achieved so far with this technique, these photos are taken from the North side, progressing from East to West. Photos were taken with my iPhone 5s, so they are not great quality. Someday a better camera for modelling stills and videos is in order!

N-Circle_200811-1_EastSide

The W.T. Grant store, Cafe Gumbo and Crab Shack define the Main Street intersection on the East side. Two pre-fab Shell oil storage tanks loom in the distance, defining the eventual site of the Shell refinery in the south east quadrant for the Louisiana Division, or a Burlington Waterfront fuel terminal for the Vermont Division. A green Mercedes waits to cross the main yard - not a very realistic placement for a main road crossing, but options are limited in a small layout, and this is where I wanted the re-railers for building new trains in the yard, and re-railing errant wheels of passing trains before they create further problems.

N-Circle_200811-2_MainStreet

Taxis and the city bus wait by the platform for the next passenger train, but it may be a while, given the CV switcher occupying the main line! The F.W. Woolworth and A&P stores serve the needs of this small town. The north-south cross street will connect to the petroleum facility on the southeast side, or the TOFC terminal on the southwest side. The Bachmann passenger platform with eventually be replaced with a full passenger station kit.

N-Circle_200811-3_WestSide

Scanning further west, we find more CV power, and our first glimpse of the "Town Square" area separating downtown from the suburbs. Locomotives are:

CV 1509 - Con-Cor SW1500 with custom paint by N-Rail (Owen Jarvis, late 1980s)
CV 4558 - Arnold GP9 with custom paint by N-Rail
CV 3614 - Life-Like GP18 with custom paint by Concord Car Shops - *our own Alan Belcher, from 1995!*

N-Circle_200811-4_TownSquare

An aerial view of the Town Square area shows the school with a bus and a delivery truck, within easy walking distance of the homes in the 'burbs. This currently empty area will be the site of future urban renewal, with eventual additions of a Shell gas station, Post Office, etc. And we find another CV lashup:

CV 3603 - Atlas Classic RS-11, a standard release
CV 3611 - Atlas Classic RS-11, a standard release

N-Circle_200811-5_Suburbs

As noted, the kids can walk to school from the mobile home park and suburban homes, but they better watch out for the semi trucks from the freight terminals across the street! It is hard to see in these photos, but the sidewalks have transitioned to gravel shoulders between the pavement and grass in these scenery overlays. A Hi-Jack TOFC/COFC crane looms in the distance over the three single-ended tracks for the eventual TOFC facility in the southwest quadrant. (I sold all of my containers and COFC stack cars recently, as they never ran in Vermont, and the Louisiana Division will just run Southern Pacific TOFCs.) This Walthers Cornerstone crane kit was purchased from Green Mountain Trains (Paul Allard & Dick Merriam) in 1994, and I built it some years ago, in a rare moment of motivation to actually build something. For 1950s operations, the crane will be replaced with TOFC loading ramps and loading platforms for boxcars to transfer freight to nearby freight houses.

N-Circle_200811-6_FreightTerminals

This final view of the N-Circle reveals an Athearn St. Johnsbury semi exchanging merchandise with the D&H boxcar spotted on the other side of the brown freight transfer building, while a busy Roadway terminal offloads freight from the VTR boxcar! From here you can see all the way back down Main Street, and the gravel road shoulders and brick sidewalks to the homes are a bit more discernable. Unfortunately, also are the poor alignments between the scenery panels, but those can be improved with a little more care and tape!

I hope you enjoyed this tour of the N-Circle Railroad, finally coming to life after 30+ years of buying equipment and drawing track plans!