

Building a Village with Visual Impact



If you are reading this article, then you, like me, love building little lit villages. Further, you probably belong to a club or group where all the members build villages for the holidays. The catch is that you, me and everyone else all have the same buildings and figures to work with. Thus, all the displays look pretty much alike, the difference being simply the order in which the houses are lined up. Years ago I decided I wanted my village to stand out, to be something different that people would linger over when they visited my home during the holidays and at the same time be entertaining. So I started creating visual interest throughout the village and making sure that my village had features no one else would be including in their villages. This article will highlight some of my time tested and most popular tricks to simply add VISUAL IMPACT.

Let's start with LIGHT. All of the village houses come with little lights that are placed inside the house. Many of these houses have beautiful detail that does not show up well when the lights in the room are dimmed. Additionally, some buildings such as Westminster Abbey (shown above on the right) are just naturally dark buildings. My solution is to add spot lights. Both Lemax and Department 56 actually make little spotlight that work quite well, However, even without buying spotlights you can easily make your own. I cut a hole in my Styrofoam base then set an extra house light into the hole so the light shines on the front of the building. To hide the bare bulb I place village walls, or trees to hide the light from the view of the visitor. Sometimes I'll place the light behind a building that is in front of the building I want to light up. In the image at the top of this page there are lights installed to light the front of Buckingham Palace (shown on the left). An additional spotlight is positioned at the base of each of the tower on Tower Bridge (shown in the center of the above image) and another light is used to light the front of Westminster Abbey (on the right). The wires are placed under the Styrofoam, or run under or behind building or in a winter village I just cover them with snow. You can also cover the wires with landscaping. I use a lot of moss (it comes in bags that are purchased at Michaels).

Another of my favorite tricks is to display each building in its own setting and to make certain that everything is displayed on a different level thus visually separating every building from everything else.

Now let's study the image below carefully to see how this works:



The building on the right side of the image is the Grapes Inn and it comes with a beach (water level) front entrance. You can see the water of the harbor flows right up to the beach level entrance, so this is my first level. Next there is a handmade wooden walkway that is several steps higher than the beach. This is level 2. Right behind the man leaning on a barrel holding a cup of ale is a brick wall. The wall forms the edge of a plaza where a woman and her children are sitting. The plaza is level 3. Looking behind the woman sitting on the plaza you can see a short staircase leading to the Horse and Hounds Pub that sits on level 4. All the plazas and levels are made from pieces of Styrofoam. I use $\frac{3}{4}$ inch, one inch and 2 inch thick Styrofoam for the bases of each level. I can stack these pieces to create thicker layers if needed. As we continue through this article I'll point out the different levels in each image.

Adding a Boardwalk



The image above shows the location where the Grapes Inn was placed in the display (the building covered the purple 2 inch thick Styrofoam that is base for the entire display). The boardwalk was made from a bag of balsa wood of various sizes that I purchased from a hobby shop. I used an Exacto knife to cut the wood to size, then glued it together using a hot glue gun. The walkway lights came from Department 56 and I drilled holes in the walkway to stick the lights through. The walkway is higher than the beach front of the Grapes Inn and is thus the second level. The wires are hidden under the boardwalk.



The image above shows the back of the boardwalk as it passes behind the Grapes Inn with the walkway light installed. The walkway was custom built to fix the Inn and took just about an hour to make. I kept the walkway when I took the village down after the holidays. It has been used several times over the years.

Bricks and Pavers

Both Lemax and Department 56 make flexible plastic strips with either bricks or cobble stones imprinted on them. While these are useful they are narrow (about 2 inches wide) and about 18 inches long. It takes an awful lot of these strips to pave streets and sidewalks in a large village setting and it gets expensive and if I want a wide street they just aren't practicable. Therefore, I make custom pavers for most of the streets, roads and sidewalks. Look at the image below to see my paved Sea View Plaza.



To make the pavers I use the piece of Styrofoam that will be the base of the plaza. Then using a metal ruler as a straight edge and the Hot Wire cutting tool called the hot knife (see image below) I simply score straight lines the width of the paver I decided to create. After scoring the horizontal lines I just change the angle of the ruler and score the alternate row cuts to make the individual pavers..



In the Sea View Plaza there are a total of 12 rows of pavers and each row has 11 pavers for a total of 132 pavers. I had to be a bit careful cutting these pavers as I added a set of dark pavers to make a decorative cross but I don't do this extra feature very often. Once all the pavers are scored I just use a wide brush and a bottle of craft paint (from Michaels) and paint the pavers. Sometimes I'll use spray paint if the paver area is really large. It took only about 10 minutes to score and paint the entire plaza. The best part is I can custom fit the paved area to fit the area I need paved. Throughout the village I made a total of 1118 pavers for all the paved area including the Palace courtyard. I may own the largest brick yard in the entire village industry. But they make a huge difference in the appearance of the village.

Bricks, Levels and Stairs



Look carefully at the image above that shows part of Sea View Square. In this image you can see the pavers that cover the base of the Square. In the right corner is a portion of the garden in front of Bob Cratchit's house, the house sits on a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick piece of Styrofoam that raises the house above the plaza base. Next on the right you can see a Styrofoam staircase leading to the Counting House of Scrooge and Marley that sits on a 2 inch Styrofoam base raising it above the Cratchit house. On the left side is a handmade stone staircase leading to the square where the Horse and Hounds Pub is situated. Look closely at the top of the stone stairs and you will see two gray stone steps creating another level where the cemetery that is home to Jacob Marley's crypt stands. In this way, every building is on a different level.

Now look carefully at the image below that shows the right side of the village. As you look start with the Grapes Inn on the lower left corner and work your way around the image. Note that no two buildings are on the same level. In fact the only building in the square that sits directly on

the base of the square is the Wellbourne Lamp Seller in the left corner. As you work your way toward the back, each building is at least slightly higher than its neighbors. This makes it possible for the viewer to see the grounds and landscaping that is set up around the various buildings. My plan is to actually make a mini, individual display for each building. This creates greater interest and makes the viewer pause and look carefully at every part of the display.



Pay Attention to Details

The image below shows the cemetery where Jacob Marley was put to rest in his crypt. Along the bottom edge you can see two craved Styrofoam steps that lift the cemetery above the grounds where the nearby church is located. Behind the wooden gate Scrooge stands on one of several round stepping stones that lead from the gate to the crypt. The steppingstones were cut from a strip of the Lemax walkway material that I mentioned earlier making for a different type of walkway. Please also note the “ghost” of Marley standing next to the crypt. The ghost was borrowed from my Halloween display and adapted to play the role of Jacob Marley. Also in the frame is Marley’s crypt. His name and the dates of his birth and death are carved into the stone above the crypt door. Marley’s crypt is also borrowed from my Halloween display. I used my computer and Photoshop to create a label with Marley’s name and dates on it and then printed

the label. The label was attached to the crypt using tacky wax. Now the crypt looks like it actually belongs to Jacob Marley.



Making Matching Stone Walls

At the back of the cemetery is a stone wall that hides the Styrofoam supports that raise High Street where Westminster Abbey stands. At the top of the image there are some Department 56 fieldstone walls and stone planters containing decorative trees. These items form a decorated

wall forming is the border of the plaza where Westminster Abbey stands. Matching the colors of the Department 56 walls as close as possible I carved and painted a Styrofoam wall to mimic the walls I bought.



Building a Custom Staircase

The problem with including all the different levels is getting my village residents up to the various levels. The answer of course is to make custom staircases. Earlier in this article I showed two different styles of stairs one leading to Scrooge's Counting House made of Styrofoam and one made from actual black river stones I collected from a mountain stream. The image below shows the flanking walls that encase one of my taller staircases. These walls are made from Styrofoam trays grocery stores use when they package meat. I use my Styrofoam cutting Hot Knife to cut the sides off the trays leaving me with the flat bottom. Then using my metal ruler and Hot Knife I score the foam to make bricks in the same manner I made pavers for village roads. Over the course of the calendar year I collect and make bricks on several dozen

meat trays of various sizes. I then paint some of these trays in a variety of shades of brown, tan and gray. One of the trays painted tan is shown below. When building my village I can cut these up to make walls, sidewalks, and walkways leading to a house or park monument. The beauty is these are quick and easy to make and are easily cut into any shape I need. I can cut circles, winding pathways in a gardens and paved entry ways to any building. They are also used for the flanking walls on staircases.



Shown below is the staircase that begins at the back of the square where the Horse and Hounds Pub and the Old Camden Church are located. The staircase leads to High Street where Westminster Abbey stands. The actual stairs are cut from a two inch thick piece of Styrofoam with one bricked meat tray used for the back of the stairs and another meat tray used for the front facing side of the staircase. Stairs such as these can be made quite quickly.

In the image above is a small fish pond that sits in the cemetery where Marley is buried. The base is a piece of a meat tray painted blue/green. The sides are bits of river rocks collected from a mountain stream and glued around the edges. The water is imitation water from a company called Woodland Scenics that makes scenery for model railroads. The Imitation water was just poured into the pond and allowed to dry overnight. I use the pond in most of my villages to fill in any area where I feel a pond will add some interest to the scene.



This article is getting fairly long for file size so I'll end Part 1 here. I have a few more tips that will be in a second part that will be available later this week. Thanks for checking out my building tips. Should you have any questions drop me a message at treadwl@comcast.net.

Merry Christmas and Happy Villaging!