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South Station offers up New England in miniature with holiday model-train display

By Jeremy C. Fox
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(Jeremy C. Fox for Boston.com)

Commuters gathered around an expansive model train set in the center of South Station.

By Jeremy C. Fox, Town Correspondent

Some commuters passing through South Station are moving a bit more slowly this holiday season, their eyes, and often feet, drawn inexorably toward a massive model train display.

Inside, a commuter rail train and a Green Line trolley zoom past weathered red-brick structures. Men in suits and fedoras step from the front stoops of bow-front row houses. Cranes hoist cargo containers along the waterfront, and across the harbor lamps slowly spin in a lighthouse.

A set of nearly identical cottages line up neatly along a beach. In the nearby mountains, ice skaters zip across a small pond in a snow-dusted valley. In the foothills, a covered bridge spans a dry creek bed near a country church and small cemetery.

Here, in roughly 500 square feet, is much of New England in miniature.

There has been a model train inside South Station each holiday season since at least the late 1990s, but it was never as big or ambitious as this one, said Ted Fürst, a project manager at Biederman Redevelopment Ventures who designed the new landscape.

Fürst said he and colleagues decided late last year to revamp the entire display and create something that could become a holiday staple, “reminiscent of Macy’s windows” in New York City, “so extraordinary ... that people couldn’t wait to see it.”

So he set out to create a landscape that would include some of Boston and its waterfront, with the Boston Light in the harbor, but also a bit of Cape Cod, the mountains of Vermont, and quaint colonial churches and rustic barns.

To execute the plan, Fürst called on three-dimensional designer Mark Damien Carroll, who shared his vision for a landscape that would start in Boston and then move north to encompass a wide swath of the region.

For Carroll, who grew up in West Roxbury, the display was a way to honor to the city and the region he has called home for 50 years and the transit systems he has used since he was 8. In the Boston portion of the display, visitors will find Carroll’s tributes to the Harry the Greek bargain store in the South End, the Joe & Nemo’s hot dog chain, and Kenmore Square’s Rathskeller.

The display also provided a chance for Carroll to indulge a lifelong love of toy trains and all things miniature.

“The real story is that I always wanted to be a toymaker,” Carroll said.

Previous sets were dismantled and thrown away after the holidays each year, but Fürst plans to store this display and expand it over time. In future years, he hopes to incorporate a subway line and more interactive elements.

“This is the base, and every year we’re going to add more and more to it,” Fürst said. “We don’t want a stale train set.”

Already, Fürst said, passersby appear to treat this set differently than.

“This time last year, we were already removing Dunkin Donuts cups and other trash,” he said. “But this year people seem more respectful.”

Commuter Emily Bright of Natick said she passes through South Station every day and has seen previous train displays come and go, but none were like this.

“I liked it last year, but it’s bigger and it’s got more components to it,” she said.

For Bright, passing by the display brought more of the spirit of the season into her walk to the commuter rail.

“I like model trains around the holidays. They definitely are part of the Christmas spirit for me,” Bright said. “I have one at home.”

The display is sponsored by Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, Equity Office, Durgin Park, the Massachusetts Bay Commuter Railroad Company, the Boston Children’s Museums, and the Girl Scouts. It will remain in South Station through Jan. 13, 2013.



(Jeremy C. Fox for Boston.com)