



Riviera Blue Train, from 1928 Hornby Catalogue. Nord Locomotive plus two CIWL cars. Reproduced from Michael Foster, *Hornby Dublo Trains* (London: New Cavendish Books, 1980) with kind permission of New Cavendish Books.

Hornby trains, Chinese gardens, and architecture

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I

I think I became an architect because of toy trains. As a child, I had some Hornby tinsplate track and a couple of locomotives and wagons. Nothing very ambitious, really just enough to run the trains around your room—and the following day, perhaps change the layout so that they could run into the next room, under a table, and back again. That was the marvelous thing about those old tinsplate rails. They had flexibility. Every time one finished playing, back they went into their wooden box—to be reincarnated the next day in a totally new formation.

Ah, to have more rails—and more trains! But since World War II was on, there was no way my layout could possibly be augmented. All I *did* have was catalogues (the mythic Hornby Book of Trains, Basset-Lowke's Model Railways, and so forth), which I would pore over. I drew out on graph paper the most elaborate layouts: straight rails, curved ones, sidings, crossovers, the works. Trains moved through tunnels, stations, and over bridges in one direction and then, through cunningly placed figure eights, came right back through the same

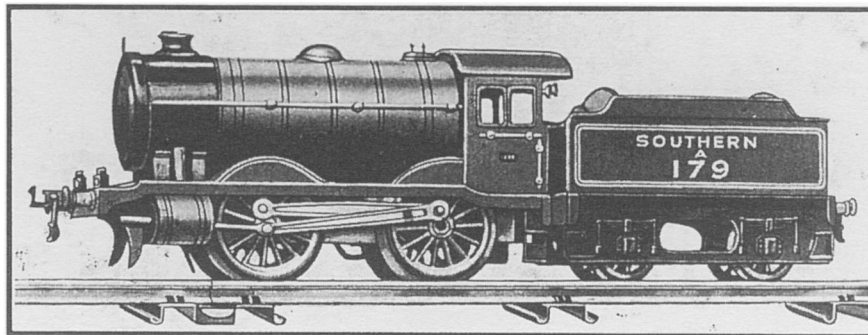
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stations and tunnels—but now in the *other* direction, setting up a brand new sequence!

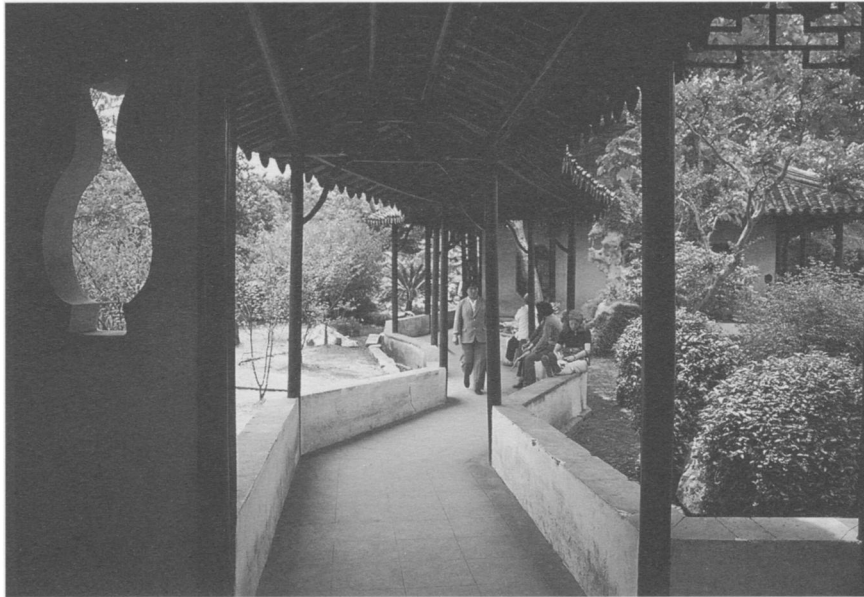
Anyway, that's how I spent many of my classroom hours: drawing up these hypothetical layouts in an exercise book. Years later, at age fifteen or so, coming across an architectural journal for the first time, I felt I could read the various plans and sections—and what the designers were trying to do. That much I owe to Hornby.

II

Now we jump to many more years later. As a young architect, I find myself perplexed by two quite contrary thought processes. The first produces an architecture that has very strong conceptual ideas—but on which your eye does not really linger beyond the first five minutes. An example might be Eero Saarinen's three-pointed dome at MIT: a wonderfully holistic concept, detailed with great finesse—but also something you might feel you have digested in one scanning. On the other hand, there is another kind of process that does not involve any holistic *schema* at all. Many buildings (and most interiors) are designed this way. They present you with a series of spellbinding effects, one after another, perhaps without any real interrelationship—except, of course, that one set-piece follows the previous one in a knockout sequence, rather like the way "Gone With the Wind" is structured around a series of unforgettable



Southern E120 20V Electric Loco and tender, from circa 1930 Hornby Catalogue. Reproduced from Michael Foster, *Hornby Dublo Trains* (London: New Cavendish Books, 1980) with kind permission of New Cavendish Books.



View of Yi yuan (Garden of Harmony), Suzhou, Jiangsu province, China. Photo: Jonathan Hay.



View of Shizi Lin (Garden of the Forest of Lions), Suzhou, Jiangsu province, China. Photo: Jonathan Hay.

scenes. Or like the stories of Scheherazade.

So agreed—once the sequence starts, you're hooked. But can such an experience ever provide a legitimate basis for serious architecture? Can such arbitrary and episodic narrative ever express the control, the rigor, the discipline, so fundamental to holistic thought?

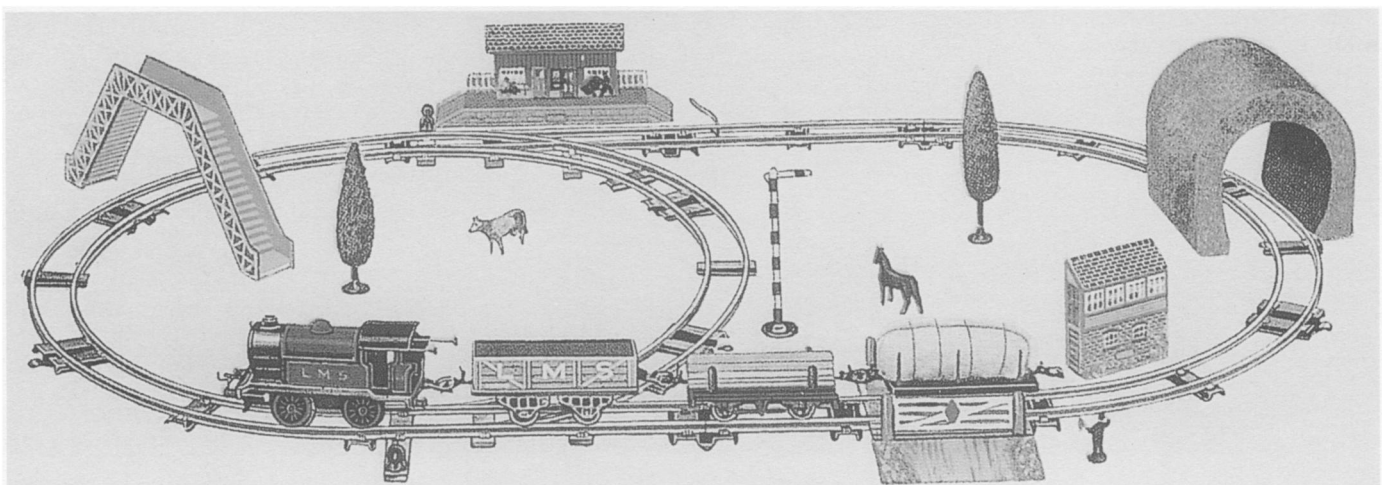
III

Jump-cut again, to China. Before I visit my first Chinese garden, I am confused. Photographs show only some rather overly coy scenographic effects: the little bridge, the dragon wall, the pond of water, and so forth. Yet when you actually get there and start walking through the garden, it gradually builds and builds until it finally overwhelms you. Hornby all over again! First you go through the sequence of pond and bridge and dragon wall in one direction, then you find yourself coming in from another direction, experiencing them all in another sequence, in another order, from another height, and so forth. The same handful of props are used and reused, again and again. And each time, because of a slight change of angle, sequence, or order, they carry a new significance.

Restricting the number of elements, and using them over and over, is the key. It confers on the Chinese

garden the rigor that the mandatory square piece of paper generates in origami. By making the number of set-pieces finite, but the variations in your perceptions of them seemingly infinite, the garden becomes both rigorously disciplined and wonderfully episodic. Perhaps the repeated tales told in *Rashomon* (the bandit, the husband, the onlooker, the wife) also stem from this same paradigm. With each narration of the identical events, Truth is reborn again in a new form, transforming the lyrical, openended narrative tales of Scheherazade into the refracted and imploded metaphysics of Kurosawa's masterpiece.

This is what toy trains are really about—those wonderful tinplate rails that make patterns across the bedroom floor (the way the real thing makes patterns across a landscape, or across a nation), abstract patterns that recall in the mind's eye the *true reality* of railway journeys. Today, these toys are no longer available. What killed them off? The banal quest for "Scale Model Railways," those stunningly prosaic attempts at so-called "realism." Instead of the continuously changing patterns of demountable rails, we have today scale-track, nailed down permanently onto a baseboard—in the process fatally maiming that extraordinarily sophisticated level of abstraction and imagination that children brought to their tinplate layouts.



M11 goods set with Clockwork Tank Locomotive, from 1937 Hornby catalogue. Reproduced from Michael Foster, *Hornby Dublo Trains* (London: New Cavendish Books, 1980) with kind permission of New Cavendish Books.