Exploratorium Cookbook I

A Construction Manual for Exploratorium Exhibits
Revised Edition

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**Impossible Triangle**

**Description**

The **Impossible Triangle** is a startling, three-dimensional visual illusion. When you look at the exhibit from a particular vantage point, it appears to be a triangle in which all three sides meet at right angles, a form that cannot physically exist. Even after you view the exhibit from other vantage points and you know that it is not really a triangle, the form will still appear to be a triangle when you view it from the special vantage point.


**Construction**

Our version is constructed of three lengths of wood measuring 4" by 4" by 293/4". You can use our dimensions or adapt the structure to your needs. These instructions are for 4 by 4s (actual dimensions). Please read these instructions carefully and make sure you understand them before attempting to adapt the recipe to different dimensions. We recommend you use hardwood since it looks nicer than softwood and holds up better.

The 4 by 4s are attached to each other at right angles; you can think of them as forming three edges of an imaginary cube. (See Figure 2.) To perceive these 4 by 4s as a triangle, the visitor must view the construction looking along a line of sight that runs from one corner of this cube to the opposite corner. The 4 by 4 that is farthest from the viewer appears to fit into a notch in the 4 by 4 that is closest to the viewer. Cutting this notch is the trickiest part of constructing the exhibit.
**Cutting the Notch**

The exact geometry of the notch is complex, so you may have to read this description more than once. You may also want to practice on a piece of scrap wood before you cut the actual notch.

To get a visual picture of the notch, imagine that you are balancing the 4 by 4 on one of its long edges and looking down at the notch, as shown in Figure 3. The notch runs diagonally from one edge of the 4 by 4 across to another edge. The notch also runs at a diagonal relative to the length of the 4 by 4. The sides of the notch tilt outward so that they meet the floor of the notch at an oblique angle. The notch follows this complicated geometry because it must exactly match the end of the 4 by 4 that appears to fit into it, following the viewer's line of sight.

The most convenient way to cut the notch is to use a table saw with dado blades. You'll also need to make a jig that will hold a 4 by 4 at 45° so that the saw blade will cut across two faces.

Exactly 3\(\frac{3}{8}\)" from the end of the 4 by 4, make a mark on the edge of the 4 by 4. Set the table saw's angle guide to 35\(\frac{1}{4}\)°. Position the 4 by 4 in the jig so that the marked edge faces away from you.

Using your jig, set the dado blades to cut to a depth of 2\(\frac{3}{8}\)". (At this depth, the bottom of the notch should extend from one edge of the 4 by 4 to the other, at a diagonal.) Begin cutting your notch at the corner of the 4 by 4 and keep moving the wood over until your last cut falls just inside the mark. Be very careful not to overshoot these limits. When you are done, you should have a square-sided, U-shaped notch that runs diagonally across the wood as it sits in the jig.

To finish the notch, you must use a regular saw blade tilted to a 60° angle and trim one wall of the notch at 60° so that the wall tilts outward. (See Figure 4.) To trim the other wall, you'll need to rotate the wood approximately 180°.

If you don't have a table saw, it is possible to use a circular saw with a tilting blade to cut the notch. To do so, you will need to construct special jigs to set the angles.
Mounting and Lighting

The triangle stands 4' off the floor on a welded steel bracket. The bracket must hold the middle 4 by 4 at a 67° angle to the floor. The peephole, through which visitors view the triangle, is about 12 yards away. The peephole is 2" in diameter and about 4' above the floor.

A variety of lighting arrangements will enhance the illusion, as long as there is fairly balanced illumination on the two ends that join in the notch, and revealing shadows are avoided. The illusion is lessened, however, by lighting that is too uniform. Try to achieve the impression of a continuous object illuminated by a single light source.

Critique & Speculation

We have seen many interesting versions of this exhibit in other museums. England's Exploratory, for example, has a version in which two impossible triangles appear to be linked when viewed from the right location.

Related Exploratorium Exhibits

MONOCULAR ILLUSIONS

Ames Chairs; Distorted Room; Far Out Corners; Multi-dimensional Shadows; Old Woman or Young Girl; Reverse Masks; Trapezoidal Window
To do and notice

○ Look through the hole in the clear disk on your left and find what seems to be a wooden triangle several yards away. Look at the wooden figure from another angle to see its true shape.
○ Try to follow one face of the triangle all the way around to where it starts, and notice that you can't. Also notice that each face seems to change its orientation when it turns a corner. For example, an outside face becomes an inside face when it turns a corner.
○ Have a friend or an orange-jacketed Explainer put an arm between the two open arms of the wooden figure while you watch through the hole.

What's going on

Normally, you make assumptions about the shape, size, and distance of any object you see. When you look through the hole, the two upper arms of the wooden figure appear to line up and meet at the top of the triangle. Because the arms look as if they touch, you assume they do touch. This assumption is so powerful and fundamental that you can’t override it; instead, you see a figure that doesn’t and can’t exist. If you hold your hand or a piece of paper up in front of you to cover the top corner of the triangle, you may notice that it is easier to see the true shape of the figure.
Table of Contents for Cookbooks I, II, and III

Cookbook No. Recipe No.

**Mechanics**
- Balancing Stick 1-75
- Bernoulli Blower 2-85
- Bicycle Wheel Gyro 2-88
- Digester Driver 3-145
- Downhill Race 3-146
- Falling Feather 3-137
- Gyroscope 3-158
- Momentum Machine 1-74

**Electricity and Magnetism**
- Black Sand 2-87
- Batteries and Batteries 2-88
- Circles of Magnetism 2-89
- Color TV and Magnetism 3-149
- Daisy Wheel Dyno 3-140
- Earth's Magnetic Field 1-80
- Eddy Currents 1-82
- Electrical Fias 3-141
- Energy vs. Power 3-142
- Finger Tingle 3-143
- Generator Effect 1-81
- Giant Electroscope 2-90
- Giant Meter 3-144
- Glow Discharge 3-145
- Hand Battery 2-91
- Induction 3-146
- Jacob's Ladder 2-93
- Magnetic Lines of Force 2-92
- Magnetic Suction 3-147
- Magnetic Tinglepoo 1-79
- Ohm's Law 3-152
- Pacific Gas and Leather 3-149
- Pedal Generator 3-150
- Pluses and Minuses 1-78
- Short Circuit 3-151
- Son of Transformer 3-152
- Suspending 3-153
- Transformer 3-154
- Very Slow 3-155
- Electrical Oscillations 3-155
- Watt's the Difference 3-156
- Zero to Sixty 3-157

**Eye Physiology**
- After Image 1-37
- Blind Spot 1-46
- Blood Cells 1-42
- (Corpuscles of the Eye) 1-34
- Blood Vessels 1-33
- Eyeballs (Eyeball Machine) 1-31
- Macula 1-35
- Pupil 1-32

**Eye Logic**
- Fading Dot 1-38
- Floating Rings 1-47
- Frozen Hand 1-21
- Horse's Tail (Gray Step 1) 1-43
- Mondian (Gray Step 3) 1-45
- Motion Detection 2-94
- Moving Stripes 1-40
- Peripheral Vision 1-42
- Persistence of Vision 1-46
- Rotating Gray Step 1-40
- Shimmer 1-39
- Sliding Gray Step (Gray Step 4) 3-158
- Three Spinners (Benham's, Depth, and Palm) 3-141
- Whirling Washer 3-159

**Monocular Vision/Size and Distance**
- Changing Squares 3-160
- Distorted Room 1-56
- Far Out Corners 1-58
- Glass Camera 1-55
- (Perspective Window) 1-55
- Impossible Triangle 1-57
- Multi-Dimensional Shadows 1-60
- Reverse Masks 1-59
- Size and Distance 3-161
- Thread the Needle 1-54
- Trapezoidal Window 1-61

**Stereoscopic Vision**
- Binocular Vision (Eyes) 1-48
- Cheshire Cat 3-162
- Delayed Vision 1-52
- Delayed Images (3-D Dots) 1-51
- Reach For It 3-163
- Reverse Distance 1-53
- Stereo Rule 1-49
- Three-D Shadows 1-50
- Two As One 3-164

**Color Vision**
- Bird in Cage 1-30
- Color Reversal 1-29
- Color Table 3-165
- Green Tomatoes 2-106
- Orange Shadows 3-166

**Refraction**
- Chromatic Aberration 1-27
- Critical Angle 1-2
- Disappearing Glass Rods 2-104
- Glass Bead Rainbow 1-4
- Image Quality 3-167
- Jewels (The Jewel Box) 1-5
- Lens Table 1-11
- Optical Bench 1-12
- Rainbow Encounters 1-3
- Reflection (Room Window Optics) 1-6
- Telescope 3-134
- Water Sphere Lens 3-168

**Reflection**
- Anti-Gravity Mirror 3-169
- Corner Reflector 3-170
- Duck into Kaleidoscope 2-107
- Everyone is You and Me 3-171
- Hot Spot 1-18
- Look into Infinity 2-109
- Magic Wand 2-110
- Mirrors in a Window 2-111
- Parabola 1-15
- Shadow Kaleidoscope 1-20
- Shake Hands 1-17
- With Yourself 1-17
- Spherical Reflections 1-19
- (Christmas Tree Balls) 1-19
- Touch the Spring 1-16

**Pinhole Images**
- Holes in a Wall 2-108
- Pinhole Magnifier 1-14
- Sophisticated Shadows 2-112

**Interference**
- Bridge Light 1-9
- Diffraction 1-7
- Long Path Diffraction 1-8
- Soap Bubbles 1-10
- Soap Film Painting 3-172

**Polarization**
- Blue Sky 2-95
- Bone Stress 2-96
- Glass Catskill 2-97
- K.C.'s Window 1-24
- Polarized Light Island 3-173
- Polarized Radio Waves 1-26
- Polarized Image Mosaic 1-25
- Polarized Sunglasses 1-23
- Rotating Light 2-98
- String Analog 1-22

**Light and Color**
- Color Removal 3-174
- Colored Shadows 1-28
- Distilled Light 2-105
- Greasie Spot Photometer 2-130
- Inverse Square Law 3-175
- Iron Spark 3-176
- Laser Booth 3-177
- Light Island 3-178
- Spectra 2-131

**Heat and Temperature**
- Brownian Motion—Real 2-128
- Brownian Motion Model 2-127
- Cold Metal 3-179
- Convection Currents 3-180
- Curie Point 3-181
- Dry Ice and Take 2-125
- Heat Pump 2-129
- Hot-Cold 3-182
- Low Frequency Light 2-126
- Skillets 3-183
- Water Freezer 3-184

**Sound, Waves and Resonance**
- Bells 1-64
- Conversation Piece 3-185
- Earpiece 2-113
- Echo Tube 2-114
- Focused Sound 2-115
- Giant Guitar String 3-186
- Harmonic Series Wheel 1-66
- No Sound 1-66
- Through Empty Space 1-65
- Organ Pipe 3-187
- Pendulum Table 3-188
- Pipes of Pan 3-189
- Resonant Pendulum 2-85
- Resonant Rings 2-86
- Resonator 1-63
- Vibrating String 2-116
- Visible Effects 1-66
- V of the Invisible 3-190
- Walking Beats 2-117
- Watch Dog 1-67
- Wave Machine 1-62

**Music**
- Circular Scales 1-71
- Multiplied Glockenspiel 1-73
- Piano Strings 1-72

**Speech and Hearing**
- Delayed Speech 3-191
- Hearing Meaning 3-192
- Hearing Range 3-195
- Language Wall 3-195
- Selective Hearing 1-70
- Stereo Hearing 1-69
- Tone Memory 1-68
- Vocal Vowels 3-194

**Animal and Plant Behavior**
- Brute Shrimp Ballet 2-99
- Microscope Projector 2-100
- Mimosas House 2-101

**Neurophysiology**
- Crayfish Eye's Response to Light 2-118
- E.M.G. 2-119
- Garden of Smells 3-196
- Greaser Leg Twitch 2-120
- Heartbeat 2-121
- Reaction Time 2-122
- Sweat Detector 2-123
- Watchful Grasshopper 2-124

**Patterns**
- Harmonograph (Drawing Board) 1-76
- Horse and Cowboy 1-39
- Moire Patterns 2-133
- Non-Round Rollers 3-198
- Relative Motion 1-77
- Sun Dial 2-134

**Mathematics**
- Bouncing Ball 3-199
- Catenary Arch 2-102
- Cycloid Pendulum 3-200
- Fading Motion 2-103
- Square Wheels 3-201