

# Exploratorium Cookbook I

A Construction Manual for Exploratorium Exhibits  
Revised Edition

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by Raymond Bruman and the Exploratorium Staff

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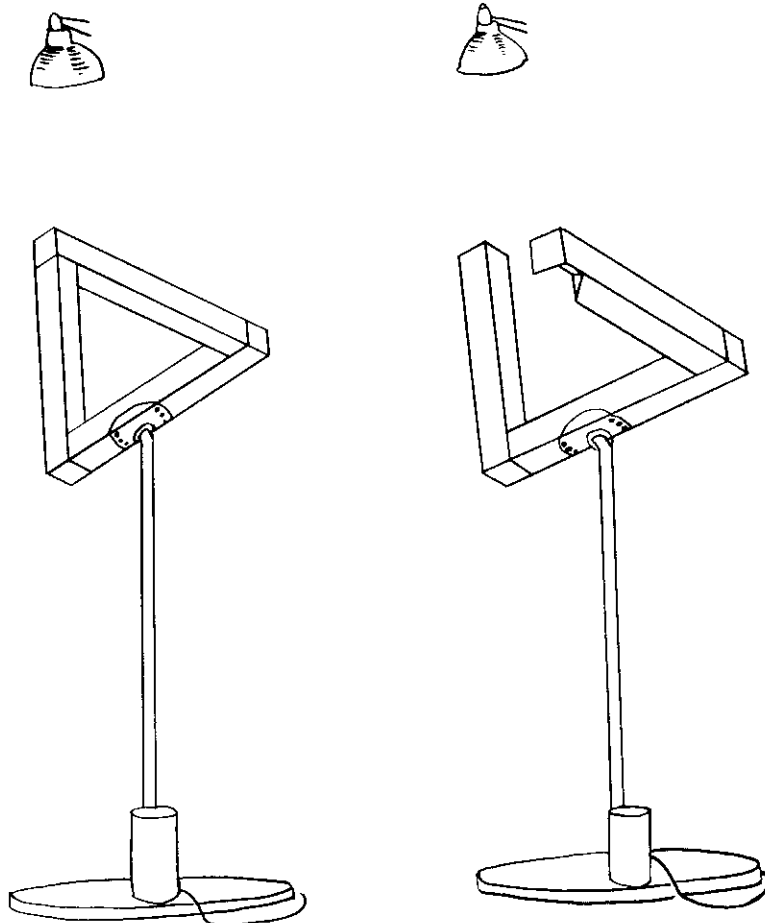
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# Impossible Triangle



## 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.

The **Impossible Triangle** evolved from an "impossible figure" devised by R. L. Penrose and S. Penrose. For more specific information, see their article in the *British Journal of Psychology* volume 49, number 31 (1958). R. L. Gregory, in his books *The Intelligent Eye* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970) and *Eye and Brain* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), discusses the impossible triangle at length.

## Construction

Our version is constructed of three lengths of wood measuring 4" by 4" by 29½". 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.

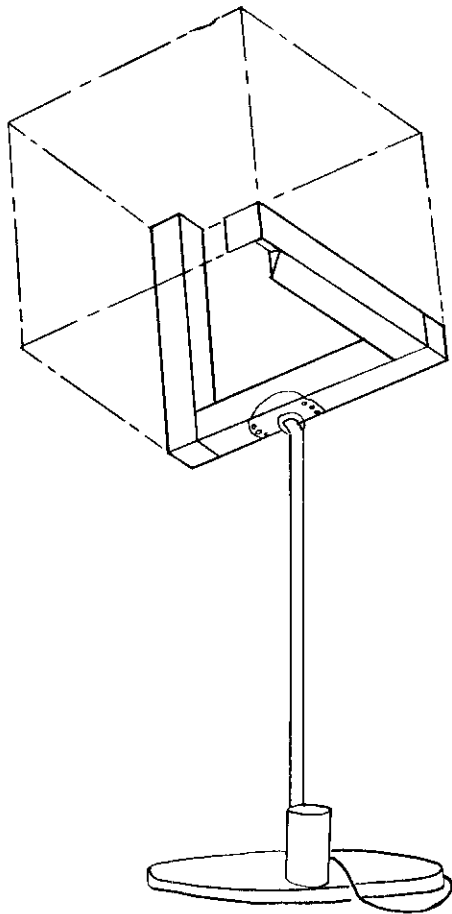


Figure 2 — Imaginary Cube

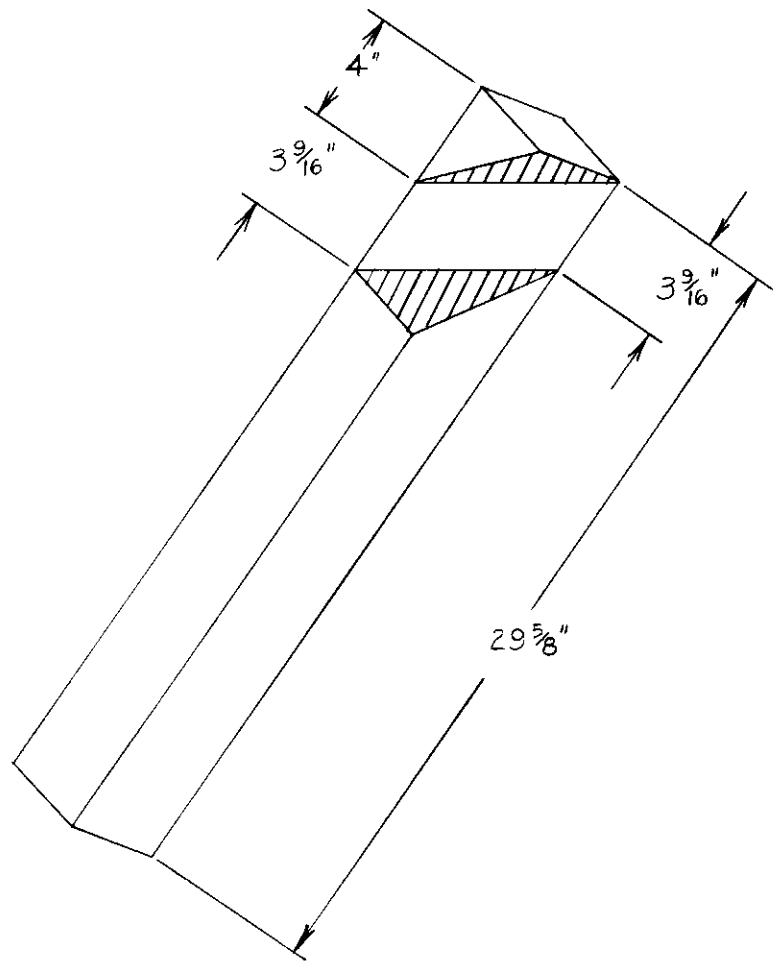


Figure 3 — Notch

## 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.

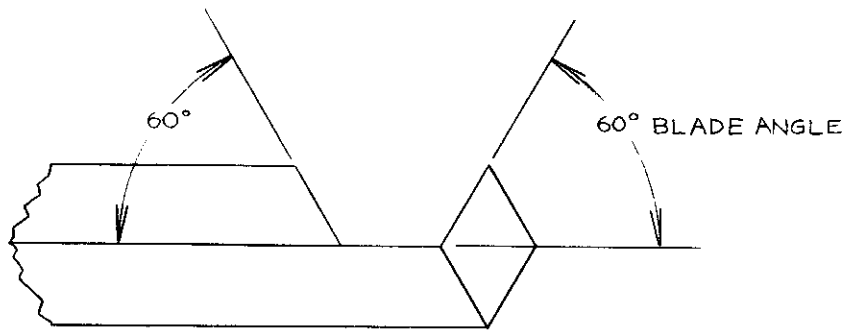
Exactly  $3\frac{9}{16}$ " from the end of the 4 by 4, make a mark

on the edge of the 4 by 4. Set the table saw's angle guide to  $35\frac{1}{4}^\circ$ . 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  $2\frac{3}{16}$ ". (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.

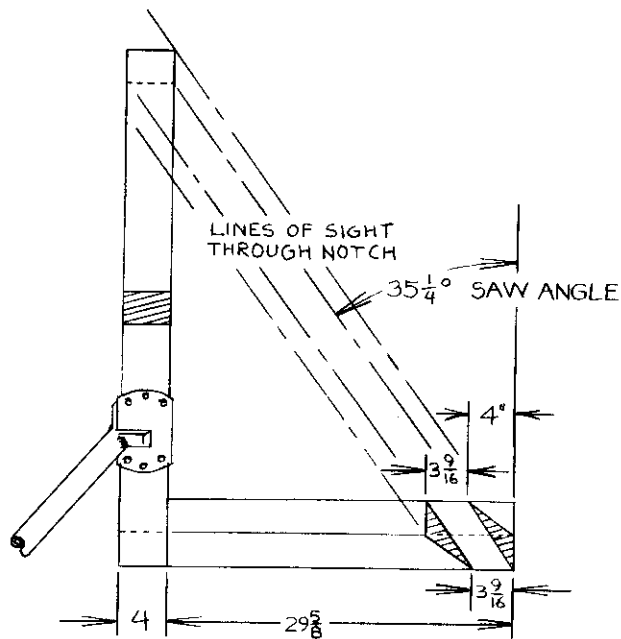
To finish the notch, you must use a regular saw blade tilted to a  $60^\circ$  angle and trim one wall of the notch at  $60^\circ$  so that the wall tilts outward. (See Figure 4.) To trim the other wall, you'll need to rotate the wood approximately  $180^\circ$ .

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.

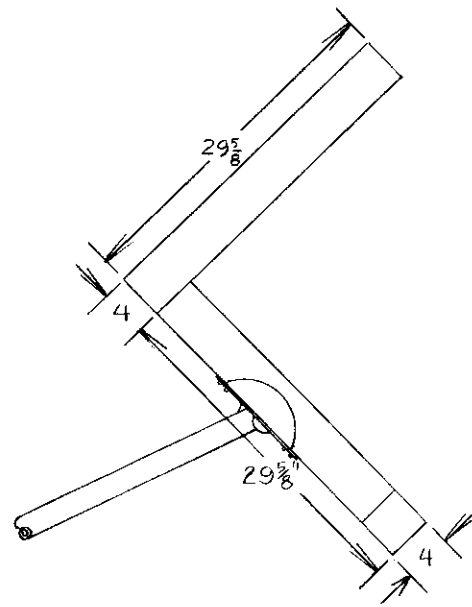


DETAIL: END OF NOTCHED ARM  
(HELD IN A 45° JIG WHILE NOTCH IS CUT)

Figure 4



ORTHOGONAL VIEW, LOOKING DIRECTLY AT NOTCH  
(CROSS-GRAIN CUTS SHAPED FOR CLARITY)



ORTHOGONAL VIEW, LOOKING  
DIRECTLY AT END OF NOTCHED ARM

Figure 5

### 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 Exploratorium, 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 assump-

tion 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	2-83
Bicycle Wheel Gyro	2-84
Descartes Diver	3-135
Downhill Race	3-136
Falling Feather	3-137
Gyroscope	3-138
Momentum Machine	1-74

## Electricity and Magnetism

Black Sand	2-87
Bulbs and Batteries	2-88
Circles of Magnetism	2-89
Color TV and Magnetism	3-139
Daisy Wheel Dyno	3-140
Earth's Magnetic Field	1-80
Eddy Currents	1-82
Electrical Fleas	3-141
Energy vs. Power	3-142
Finger Tingler	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 Tigh trope	1-79
Ohm's Law	3-148
Pacific Gas and Leather	3-149
Pedal Generator	3-150
Pluses and Minuses	1-78
Short Circuit	3-151
Son of Transformer	3-152
Suspense	3-153
Transformer	3-154
Very Slow Electrical Oscillations	3-155
Watt's the Difference	3-156
Zero to Sixty	3-157

## Eye Physiology

After Image	1-37
Blind Spot	1-36
Blood Cells (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
Mondrian (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 (Gray Step 2)	1-44
Shimmer	1-39
Sliding Gray Step (Gray Step 4)	3-158
Three Spinners (Benham's, Depth, and Palm)	1-41
Whirling Watcher	3-159

## Monocular Vision/Size and Distance

Changing Squares	3-160
Distorted Room	1-56
Far-Out Corners	1-58
Glass Camera (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 (Eyeballs)	1-48
Cheshire Cat	3-162
Delayed Vision	1-52
Lenticular 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 (Rainbow Edges)	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
Refraction (Bathroom Window Optics)	1-6
Telescope	1-13
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
Mirrorly a Window	2-111
Parabolas	1-15
Shadow Kaleidoscope	1-20
Shake Hands With Yourself	1-17
Spherical Reflections (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 Catfish	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 Analogy	1-22

## Light and Color

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

Stored Light	2-132
Sun Painting	1-1

## 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
Give 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 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 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	3-193
Language Wall	3-195
Selective Hearing	1-70
Stereo Hearing (Stereo Sound 1)	1-69
Tone Memory	1-68
Vocal Vowels	3-194

## Animal and Plant Behavior

Brine Shrimp Ballet	2-99
Microscope Projector	2-100
Mimosa House	2-101

## Neurophysiology

Crayfish Eye's Response to Light	2-118
E.M.G.	2-119
Garden of Smells	3-196
Grasshopper 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	3-197
Moiré 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
Chaotic Pendulum	3-200
Fading Motion	2-103
Square Wheels	3-201