



ENTRE MANOS Y BARRO: INNOVANDO CON TRADICIÓN

Between Hands
and Clay:
Innovating with
Tradition

Jose Armando Mata

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A woman in traditional Zapotec dress, featuring a vibrant pink skirt with blue floral patterns and a green blouse, is seated and working with clay. She is holding a small, rounded clay object in her hands. The background is a rustic brick wall with various items hanging on it, including a red woven basket and a small wooden stool with a yellow bowl on it.

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Introduction

Introduction to the Handbook

First off, a big thank you for picking up this handbook. Whether your interest is sparked by curiosity or a deep commitment to ethical innovation within the Zapotec artisan community, this guide is designed with you in mind. It emerges from my personal journey into this field, serving as a reflection of my experiences and a roadmap I've created for myself. This handbook is tailored for artisans and collaborators to preserve the valued tradition of Zapotec ceramics for future generations.

The tradition of Zapotec ceramics is a testament to the resilience and creativity of its people. This craft is not merely a practice but a way of life, deeply ingrained from the earliest steps of its artisans. Women, the originators of this craft, pass down their profound knowledge and skills to their children, embedding a love for clay and its possibilities from a tender age. This dedication to ceramics is a full-life commitment, from sourcing materials in the mountains to mastering the art with patience and precision. As Amalia Cruz Martínez, from Las Mujeres Del Barro Rojo, eloquently stated, "El Barro es mi esposo porque el barro me da todo" - "Clay is my husband because clay gives me everything."

Despite its beauty and depth, this tradition faces threats from various fronts: cultural appropriation that strips away the history behind each piece, the modernization of practices that disconnect artisans from their heritage, younger generations turning away from their family crafts, tourists undervaluing their work, and the impact of gentrification in Oaxaca. This handbook establishes a framework for relationships between collaborators and Zapotec artisans, fostering an environment where tradition thrives alongside innovation.

It's crucial to clarify that the innovations discussed here aim to support the artisanal process indirectly. We're not looking to alter the traditional aspects of Zapotec creation but to enhance the artisans' comfort and recognize their autonomy and innovative spirit within their community. Although this handbook focuses on Zapotec ceramics, its principles and insights could apply broadly to other artisan practices.

Who Am I, and Why Am I Doing This?

My name is Jose Armando Mata, a 1st generation Mexican-American from Texas, currently deep into my Master's studies in Architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design. Born to parents who journeyed from the quaint towns of Ojuelos de Jalisco and Pozo Ademado in Guanajuato to the United States, I felt a deep connection to our Mexican heritage. This bond was nurtured and commemorated by numerous visits to our native land. These trips, often embarked upon with a truck full of gifts and hopes for family reunions, were more than just visits; they were pilgrimages back to the essence of our cultural identity.

Each journey back to Mexico was a deep dive into the country's rich tapestry of pueblos magicos and the vibrant world of artisanal crafts that each held. From the bustling Tianguis to the festive posadas, my childhood was filled with vivid experiences of Mexico's cultural wealth, where handmade crafts weren't just objects but stories of generational bonds and communal livelihoods. I remember the anticipation of arriving at my mother's town, signaled by the sight of outdoor ceramic markets—a beacon that we were close to Ojuelos, my maternal ancestral home. These markets, teeming with the creations of countless artisans, were my first window into the world of traditional Mexican crafts.

As an adult, my connection to Mexico has only grown stronger, fueled by trips with my fiancée Diandra to explore the country's diverse regions, with Oaxaca holding a special place in our hearts. There, amidst the state's overwhelming artisanal beauty—from textiles to ceramics—I find a profound sense of belonging and inspiration. Despite the physical distance from my current base in Rhode Island, this enduring connection was significantly bolstered by the support of the RISD Spur research grant. This opportunity allowed me to immerse myself in Oaxaca's rich ceramic traditions, marrying my architectural insight with a passion for preserving the artisanal heritage that resonates deeply with me.

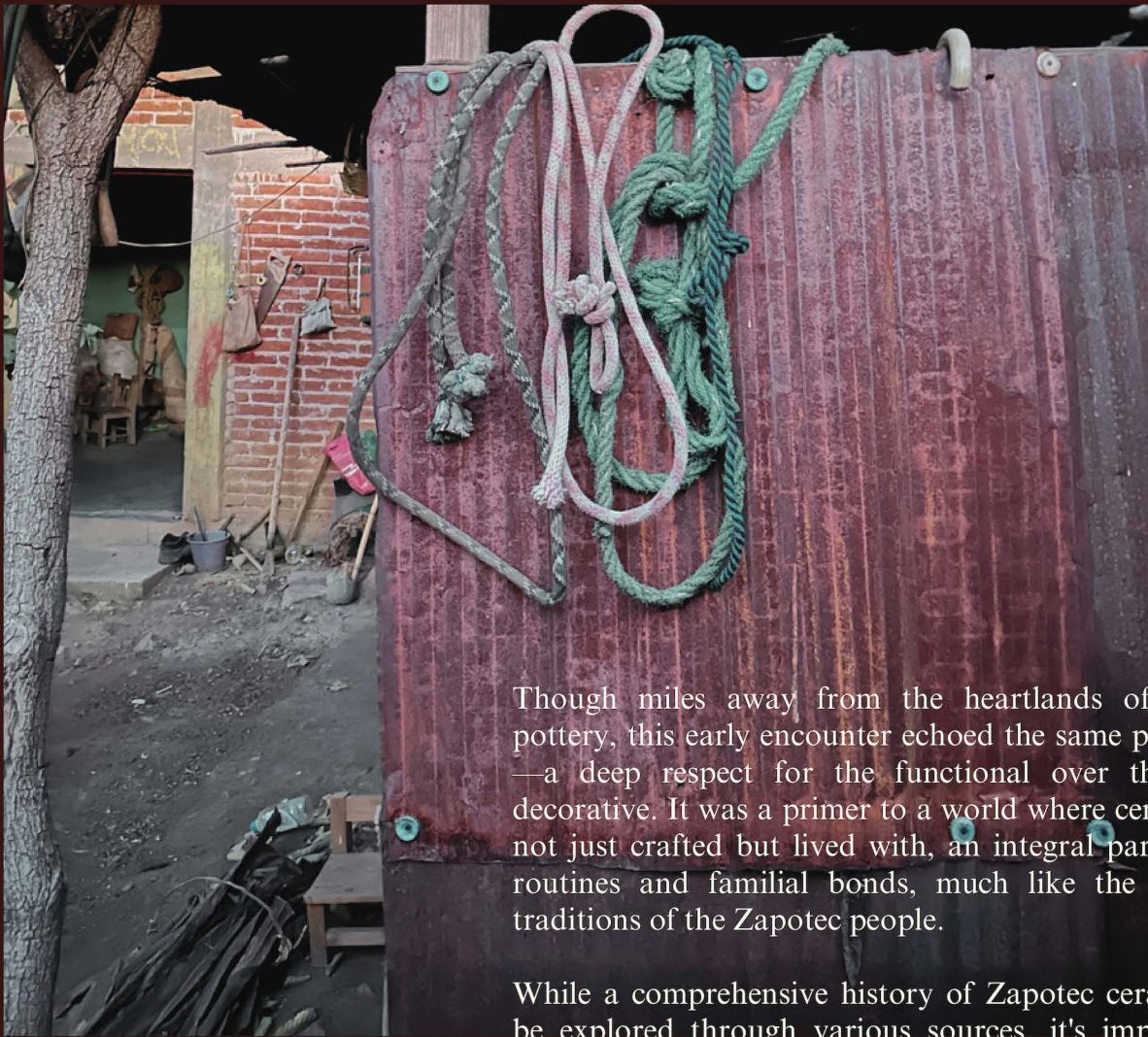
The narratives within this book are woven from the rich fabric of my life experiences—fueled by my travels to Oaxaca, underpinned by my design thinking as an architect, and, most importantly, inspired by the deep-rooted love for Mexico instilled in me since childhood. Through this lens of an insider with an outsider's perspective, I've come to appreciate the layered meanings behind each artisanal transaction, recognizing the vital role these crafts play in sustaining individual families and entire communities. In sharing this handbook, I invite you on a journey to understand, appreciate, and support the continuation of Zapotec ceramics—a craft that is not only an artistic expression but a lifeline for many. Together, we can ensure that this tradition, enriched by the contributions of artisans and collaborators, thrives for generations to come.

Understanding Zapotec Ceramics



Pottery, a cornerstone of Zapotec culture, masterfully marries function with form, spanning everything from pots and comales to mugs, bowls, and plates. Though my earliest brush with pottery was not rooted in Zapotec traditions, it was in Ojuelos de Jalisco, at my grandparents' home, where I first grasped the significance of ceramics in everyday life. Here, amidst the warmth of family and the stories embedded in every corner, I experienced the indispensability of pottery.

A vividly remembered memory is the ritual of drinking "agua del pozo" from an earthenware pot that stood tall in my grandparents' kitchen. More than just a container, this pot was a lifeline—the source of cool, refreshing water that sustained us. Filled weekly by a pair of men who traversed the village with their donkey, the pot was a testament to community and tradition. Each gulp of water carried an unmistakable earthiness, a flavor that I wondered was a gift from the well or a subtle impartation from the clay itself. Regardless, that water tasted like no other, rich in nuances and refreshingly pure, underlining the fundamental truth that pottery, in its essence, transcends aesthetic allure to serve life's most basic needs.

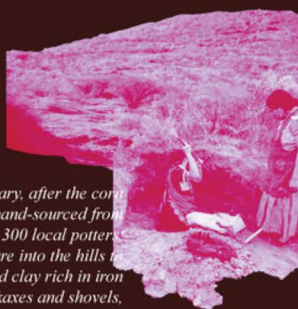


Though miles away from the heartlands of Zapotec pottery, this early encounter echoed the same philosophy—a deep respect for the functional over the merely decorative. It was a primer to a world where ceramics are not just crafted but lived with, an integral part of daily routines and familial bonds, much like the cherished traditions of the Zapotec people.

While a comprehensive history of Zapotec ceramics can be explored through various sources, it's important to acknowledge that each ceramicist in Oaxaca carries a unique legacy within this tradition. My conversations with Oaxacan alfareros revealed that this craft is not just a skill but a generational treasure, passed down from mother to child, from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. This practice is seen as a means of sustenance, with the aesthetic qualities of each piece playing a secondary role in its functionality—whether it's the perfect size for cooking beans for the family or a comal crafted for even heating.

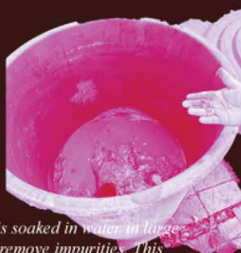
In Oaxaca, pottery varies distinctly from town to town, each style bearing a mark of its origin. In San Marcos Tlapazola, red pottery stands out. It is made from a special clay that is painted after the initial shaping. Santa Maria Atzompa is known for its green-glazed pieces, while San Bartolo Coyotepec's black pottery showcases the region's diversity in ceramic artistry. These regional variations highlight the rich diversity within Zapotec ceramics and the deep connection between these communities and their natural surroundings.

CLAY COLLECTION



Annually in February, after the corn harvest, clay is hand-sourced from nearby hills. About 300 local potters, all women, venture into the hills to collect beige and red clay rich in iron oxide. Using pickaxes and shovels, they excavate the clay and transport it back in sacks.

CLAY PREPARATION (SOAK)



The clay is soaked in water in large bins to remove impurities. This soaking process separates foreign particles like stones and roots, ensuring the clay's purity and consistency, which enhances its malleability and quality for pottery.

CLAY PREPARATION (FILTER)



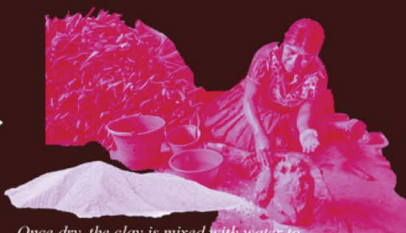
Once the clay reaches a slurry-like consistency from soaking, it is sifted through screens. This process filters out finer impurities, ensuring a smooth and uniform texture ideal for high-quality pottery.

CLAY PREPARATION (KNEADING/DRYING)



The cleaned clay is kneaded and spread out to sun-dry until it achieves the desired texture. This crucial step allows the clay to gradually lose excess moisture, ensuring it is pliable and easy to shape for pottery-making.

CLAY PREPARATION (MIXING)



Once dry, the clay is mixed with water to achieve a smooth consistency, and sand is added to prevent cracking during firing. Adding sand helps evenly distribute heat and allows the clay to expand and contract without fracturing, enhancing the durability of the finished pottery.

INITIAL SHAPING



Using traditional tools such as smooth leather, gourd shells, and corn cobs, the potters manually shape the clay—no potter's wheel is employed. Instead, a large stone and repurposed basketball material are used. This initial shaping involves stretching the clay into the desired form. At this stage, the clay is highly malleable and prone to falling apart under its own weight due to gravity.

STORING/DRYING



The pieces are stored in fabrics and plastic bags to help maintain humidity levels. Since the clay is kept outdoors, it's exposed to the elements and can sometimes dry out too much, requiring a piece to be restarted. After a day of storage, the clay reaches a leather-hard state, making it sturdier and easier for the artisan to handle.

FINAL SHAPING



After reaching a leather-hard state, the piece is precisely shaped and smoothed to its final form. This stage involves refining the contours and surfaces, smoothing out imperfections to enhance the piece's aesthetic and functional quality, and preparing it for further decoration or firing.

GLAZING & BURNISHING



Each piece is immersed in a glaze composed of red clay and water, then left to harden. During the burnishing stage, the hardened pieces are polished using smooth river stones, which are often cherished heirlooms handed down through generations.

FIRING



In a prepared area, bricks or stones are layered and capped with metal sheets or bedsprings to support the pottery. For the fire, twigs, logs, and broken pottery shards encircle the pottery, with additional metal placed over it. This is topped with organic matter and cow dung. Once set up, the fire is lit, and the pottery undergoes firing for about 45 minutes.

COOL & FINISH



Once the fire has extinguished, the pottery is left to cool down. The completed items are then cleaned, examined for quality, and made ready for sale.

Traditional Ceramic-Making Process of San Marcos Tlapazola

TRANSPORTATION



Transportation in San Marcos is limited, as most residents do not own cars and rely on walking to get around. For destinations that are farther away, there are two options: calling for either a taxi or a mototaxi, both of which are available in the neighboring town of Tlacolula.

MATERIAL SOURCING



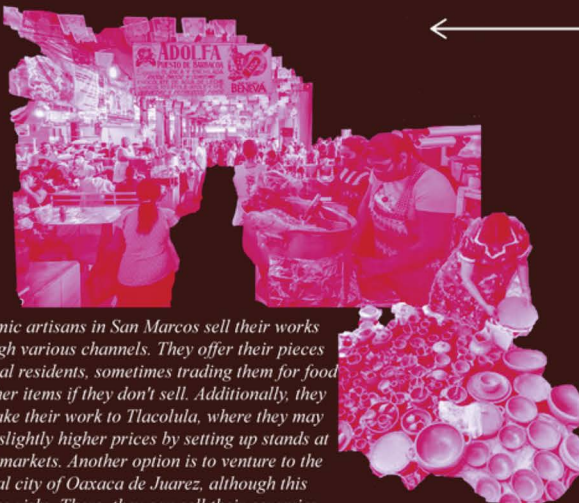
Clay is sourced by hand from nearby hills, with around 300 local female potters venturing into the hills to gather beige and red clay abundant in iron oxide. Using pickaxes and shovels, they extract the clay and carry it back in sacks.

Freshly sourced clay and sand can also be found in local markets in the nearby town of Tlacolula de Matamoros.



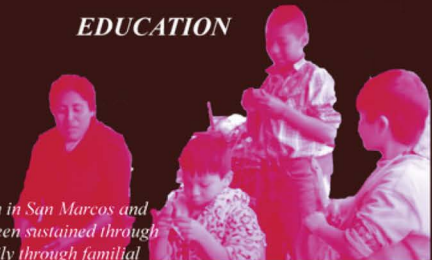
Maria is a talented ceramicist living in San Marcos, where she is part of a rich tradition of pottery-making passed down through generations in her culture. Her small studio is just one of many scattered throughout the town, each contributing to the vibrant artisan community.

POINT OF SALES



Ceramic artisans in San Marcos sell their works through various channels. They offer their pieces to local residents, sometimes trading them for food or other items if they don't sell. Additionally, they can take their work to Tlacolula, where they may fetch slightly higher prices by setting up stands at local markets. Another option is to venture to the central city of Oaxaca de Juarez, although this carries risks. There, they can sell their ceramics on the streets or at local markets, but setup costs are often high. While they may sell at higher prices to tourists, there's a challenge as tourists may not fully grasp the significance of their work and may try to bargain for lower prices.

EDUCATION



The ceramic tradition in San Marcos and much of Oaxaca has been sustained through generations, primarily through familial learning passed down from mothers. However, in recent times, younger generations are showing less interest in continuing this tradition and are choosing instead to relocate to larger cities for education and employment opportunities.

The Network of Barro Rojo Ceramicist in San Marcos Tlapazola



Principles of Ethical Innovation

Let's explore the importance of fostering innovation in places like San Marcos Tlapazola, where traditional crafts face various challenges. Recognizing each community's unique identity and the hurdles threatening their artistic heritage is vital. These challenges range from cultural appropriation and the push towards modern practices that may disconnect artisans from their roots to younger generations moving away from traditional crafts, tourists not fully appreciating the value of the artisans' work, and the effects of gentrification in Oaxaca.

When engaging with these communities, our approach must be grounded in ethics, primarily to benefit the artisans. It involves respecting and preserving their cultural heritage, encouraging active participation within the community, and emphasizing sustainability in our interactions. By adopting this thoughtful approach, we support the artisans and contribute to their craft's enduring legacy.

Respecting Cultural Heritage

Understanding and preserving the cultural heritage of artisan communities is paramount. This respect involves acknowledging each craft's unique history and value, ensuring that innovations do not dilute or overshadow traditional practices. Recognizing artisans' work as their property and seeking permission to use their work, voices, and names in projects helps maintain the connection between their crafts and heritage.

Promoting Community Participation

True collaboration necessitates the participation of craftspeople at every stage., ensuring their voices guide the innovation process. Community feedback sessions allow every community member to contribute, affirming that their perspectives shape the interventions. This inclusive approach ensures that the community welcomes and values innovations, reflecting a collective vision rather than an external imposition.

Emphasizing Sustainability in Innovations

Sustainability should be a core aspect of any innovation, considering environmental impact and the long-term viability of the craft and community well-being. Transparent financial practices highlighting how revenues support artisans and the community reinforce the value placed on their work. Clarifying ownership and profit sharing ensures artisans retain control over their creations, emphasizing sustainability's broad dimensions.



List of Principles of Ethical Innovation

To make it easy to synthesize, here is a list of principles you can follow to ensure that your involvement in this world follows an ethical manner of interactions. Remember, this is not just for outside parties looking to interact with Zapotec communities but also for members of the Zapotec communities themselves to understand what a good collaboration can look like.

Recognize and Preserve

Understand that each community has its cultural heritage and autonomy and aim to constantly recognize and preserve all aspects of their work throughout your whole process.

Community Involvement

Maintain a constant feedback loop with community members to ensure innovations reflect their needs and values. Involve artisans in the innovation process, allowing their expertise and preferences to lead the way.

Respect Above All Else

Respect artisans' work as their property, requesting authorization to use their work, voices, and names.

Transparency

Ensure transparency in financial dealings, openly discussing profit distribution and community contributions.

Artist Ownership

Establish clear ownership rights, recognize artisans' artistic ownership, and tie them directly to their creations.

Sustainability

Promote sustainability, aiming for innovations that support the community's environmental, economic, and social well-being.

By adhering to these principles, you will be able to foster ethical innovations that respect, support, and enrich the traditions of Zapotec artisans, ensuring their cherished practices thrive for generations to come.

Enhancing the Artisan's Workspace

Supporting Tradition through Ethical Indirect Innovations

In the heart of communities like San Marcos Tlapazola, the art of ceramics is a tradition carried through generations, where the value of ancestral tools and methods is immeasurable. The cherished jicara, a natural tool for shaping and smoothing pottery, exemplifies the artisans' deep connection to their heritage. Despite the availability of modern alternatives, these conventional tools are preferred for their alignment with the artists' established techniques, underscoring the importance of honoring and preserving these methods.

During my time with La Maestra Maria, the challenge of maintaining the right moisture level for ceramics caught my attention. It's a nuanced dance with the environment, where a day's weather can significantly impact the drying process. Maria's workaround with fabrics and plastics is a testament to adaptability, yet it also highlights a gap where innovation can play a supportive role.

The concept of a drying/storage rack emerged from observing such challenges firsthand. This concept isn't about introducing a radical change to the pottery-making process but offering a supportive solution that aligns with the artisans' needs. Imagine a tool that acts more like a silent partner, ensuring that each piece of pottery has the ideal conditions to reach its full potential. Using materials that are readily accessible in the community, the design of the rack is intended to be straightforward, allowing artisans to easily adopt and customize it to their specific needs.

Why This Approach Matters:

- **Respecting Tradition:** The rack serves to enhance, not replace, the traditional pottery-making process. It's about aiding the existing workflow, recognizing the value of methods passed down through generations.
- **Directly Addressing a Need:** By focusing on the environmental challenges artisans face, the rack aims to mitigate one of the critical variables in pottery making — climate control.
- **Community-Centric Innovation:** The design is rooted in practicality and accessibility, ensuring that it can be integrated seamlessly into the artisans' current practices without imposing undue burdens.
- **Sustainability and Simplicity:** Emphasizing environmentally friendly and easily available materials locally, the rack embodies principles of sustainable innovation.

Feedback from the community will be invaluable in refining this concept. Engaging in a dialogue with artisans, understanding their perspectives, and iterating on the design will ensure that the rack serves its intended purpose and becomes a valued addition to their workspace. Through collaborative testing and feedback, the goal is to arrive at a solution that truly resonates with and benefits the artisan community.

Caja Húmeda

Wet Box



Methodologies for Implementing Innovations

Engaging with the Community: Steps for Feedback and Collaboration



Engagement begins with genuine, respectful interactions, aiming to build trust within the community. My journey started by forming a bond with Maria, thanks to an introduction from Javier Reyes of rres. This friendship was built on clear intentions and mutual respect, laying the foundation for open dialogue about innovation. Creating relationships based on understanding and respect allows for meaningful exchanges. Whether through meeting artisans in workshops or chatting with pottery sellers in markets, the key is approaching these interactions with clarity about your intentions and seeking permission to use their insights. Recording their voices rather than taking notes has brought a personal touch to documenting their valuable feedback, making each recollection more vivid and meaningful.

Testing and Evaluating Innovations: A Step-by-Step Guide

Designing any innovation, especially the drying/storage rack for ceramics, required setting clear criteria that aligned with the community's needs and resources. The innovation had to respect the traditional crafting process, be simple to construct, use locally available materials, and offer flexibility to cater to individual needs. Prototyping involved extensive testing on different facets such as materials, dimensions, and assembly methods. Sharing these prototypes with the community for feedback was crucial, as was utilizing photos, drawings, and videos to communicate ideas. This iterative feedback process is essential, adapting the design to meet the community's needs and preferences as closely as possible.

1. Establishing Criteria for Innovation

- **Respect for Tradition:** Ensure the innovation aligns with traditional practices.
- **Simplicity:** The solution must be easy to implement using local resources.
- **Accessibility:** Materials required should be readily available in the community.
- **Flexibility:** Design must accommodate the varying needs of different artisans.

2. Prototyping

- **Material Selection:** Choose materials based on availability and suitability.
- **Design Iteration:** Create prototypes considering shape, size, and functionality.
- **Method Testing:** Evaluate different assembly and closure methods for effectiveness.

3. Community Feedback Loop

- **Initial Introduction:** Share prototypes with the community through photos, drawings, and videos.
- **Gathering Feedback:** Collect responses, noting preferences, suggestions, and concerns.
- **Permission for Use:** Always ask for consent to use artisans' feedback and personal stories.

4. Refinement Based on Feedback

- **Adjustments:** Make changes to the prototype based on collective insights or dominant feedback themes.
- **Re-evaluation:** Present modified designs to the community for further feedback.

5. Final Evaluation

- **Build and Test:** Encourage artisans to construct and use the final design in their daily work.
- **Long-Term Observation:** Plan for ongoing assessment of the innovation's impact, usage, and durability over time beyond the thesis project.

Iterative Design and Feedback: Ensuring Continuous Improvement



Adjustments are based on the community's feedback, weighing collective insights against individual suggestions to refine the innovation. Keeping the lines of communication open and expressing gratitude for their input helps maintain engagement and enthusiasm. Continuous improvement and long-term evaluation are envisioned beyond the scope of my current academic endeavors. This includes encouraging artisans to build and use these innovations monitoring their effectiveness, durability, and overall impact over time. Although the full impact of these innovations may unfold beyond my thesis, my commitment to supporting and documenting their journey will continue.

Through respectful engagement, thoughtful testing, and continuous iteration, this approach aims to support the Zapotec artisan community in preserving their rich traditions while embracing beneficial innovations.



Case Studies: Innovations in Action

Various groups have successfully implemented the concept of ethical innovation within Oaxaca's alfarero communities. These collaborations respect and enhance the artisan traditions while introducing sustainable improvements that benefit both the artisans and their broader communities.

Cooperativa 1050° & Innovando la Tradición



Cooperativa 1050° is part of Innovando la Tradición, a dynamic non-profit organization dedicated to revitalizing and sustaining pottery traditions. The cooperative, formed in 2019, brings together artisans from Oaxaca, Puebla, and Chiapas. It emerged from a decade-long partnership to share and preserve the rich clay heritage. The cooperative's principle is to merge traditional techniques with contemporary designs, effectively bridging the gap between the indigenous rural communities and contemporary urban markets. They focus on creating functional, elegant pottery that respects the past while embracing modern aesthetics. Their work supports a solidarity economy, emphasizing mutual support and cultural development through shared knowledge and collective action.

La Escuela Nacional de Cerámica



Mujeres del Barro Rojo on
Instagram: "Día de quema el
taller de mujeres del barro
rojo." Instagram. (n.d.).
[https://www.instagram.com/p/
CdLzg7YuwBN/?
img_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CdLzg7YuwBN/?img_index=1)

In collaboration with the Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca, La Escuela Nacional de Cerámica, they successfully constructed a smokeless kiln in San Marcos Tlapazola. This was the first such kiln in Oaxaca, designed to address environmental and health issues associated with traditional pottery firing practices. The kiln's design significantly reduces wood consumption and smoke emissions, creating a healthier working environment for artisans. During the construction, local artisans were involved in practical and theoretical training sessions, enhancing their skills and understanding of sustainable practices. This project exemplifies a commitment to improving the traditional pottery-making process while conserving local craftsmanship and environmental health.

rrres



Rrres, led by Javier Reyes, is a design studio that represents the integration of high design with traditional craftsmanship. The studio collaborates directly with artisans in Mexico, creating products that reflect a deep respect for the artisanal heritage while being embedded in contemporary design contexts. Rrres is particularly noted for its ethical approach to business — artisans are involved in the production process and benefit from the profits generated by their labor. This collaboration model ensures that the artisans are treated as equal partners, providing them a stable income and recognition in local and international markets. Reyes's approach is a blend of respecting traditional techniques and enhancing them with contemporary design insights, making each piece a testament to heritage and innovation.

rrres on Instagram: “The last show at designweek - Rugs, wall pieces and palm sculptures together with the new furniture series from [@los.tejedores](https://www.instagram.com/p/CdLzg7YuwBN/?img_index=1)” Instagram. (n.d.). https://www.instagram.com/p/CdLzg7YuwBN/?img_index=1

These examples underscore that ethical innovation within traditional artisan communities is viable and crucial for their sustainability and growth. By adapting traditional practices to contemporary economic and environmental contexts, these initiatives help ensure that artisanal skills are preserved and valued across generations, providing a model for others looking to support cultural heritage through innovation.

A heartfelt thank you to the incredible individuals who made this project possible. To Maria Gutiérrez Aquino, whose warm hospitality and inspiring stories became the cornerstone of my work. To Javier Reyes from rres, thank you for his invaluable guidance in navigating this space. And to my parents, whose unwavering support and love have exposed me to my rich cultural heritage and empowered me to pursue my dreams.

"Entre Manos y Barro: Innovando con Tradicion" (Between Hands and Clay: Traditional Innovation) dives into sustainable and ethical innovations of traditional Zapotec ceramics. It discusses how introducing thoughtfully designed tools, like a specialized caja humeda (wet box), can enhance artisans' workspaces while preserving the cultural essence of their craft. This initiative emphasizes innovations that honor traditional methods and focus on community involvement. The thesis is grounded in the principles of ethical innovation, which emphasize respect for traditional techniques, community participation in the innovation process, and the sustainability of both the craft and the environment. These principles shape the development of innovations aimed at improving the functionality of artisans' workspaces, in alignment with their cultural practices and community needs. This work is deeply personal, reflecting my connection to Mexican cultural heritage. It underscores a respectful and informed approach to supporting traditional crafts, aiming to ensure the relevance and sustainability of Oaxacan ceramics for future generations, and fostering an environment where tradition and innovation thrive together.

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Guide to the Construction of a Wet Box: Techniques for Zapototec Potters

Jose Armando Mata



Welcome to this manual on constructing a wet box, a valuable tool for Zapotec potters. In the world of ceramics, having control over the clay drying process is crucial. A wet box offers a controlled environment that slows down drying, giving you precision in your work and minimizing the risk of cracks and uneven drying. This guide is designed to help you build a wet box that fits naturally into your existing practice without altering the traditional aspects of pottery making.



Why Use a Wet Box?

A wet box serves not just as storage but as an instrument that elevates the ceramic crafting process. By maintaining humidity levels, the wet box enables potters to keep their projects moist and workable. This is particularly useful for pieces that require multiple sessions to complete, or during times when the climate might otherwise speed up the drying process too much. Whether refining design details or waiting for the moment to resume work a wet box ensures your clay stays ideal for sculpting.

Encouragement to Use Repurposed Materials

When constructing your wet box this guide encourages utilizing recycled materials. Zapotec potters are renowned for their ingenuity often making use of whatever materials are at hand.

When you use the materials you already have you not only support eco-friendly practices but also align with the sustainable values of your community. From repurposing boards, to utilizing recycled plastic sheets, each material you choose contributes to creating a wet box that is practical and eco friendly.

Flexible Sizing

The dimensions specified in this guide (60cm x 76cm x 200cm(Height)) are meant as a reference rather than a strict rule. We recognize that every potter's workspace is unique and its essential for your wet box to fit seamlessly into your space. Feel free to modify the size based on your requirements and limitations. The design principles discussed here are flexible ensuring that you can construct a box that complements your work without needing significant changes to your current setup.

Designed with Zapotec Potters in Mind

This wet box is designed with the resourcefulness and traditional practices of Zapotec potters at heart. It aims to support your craft indirectly, allowing you to continue making pottery in the ways that have been passed down through generations. By incorporating this wet box into your practice, you enhance your ability to control the ceramic process without altering the essence of your traditional techniques.

Tools Needed

Hammer



Scissors



Saw



Measuring Tape



Stapler



**not required*

Materials Needed

Wood



Plastic



Sacks



Nails



Staples



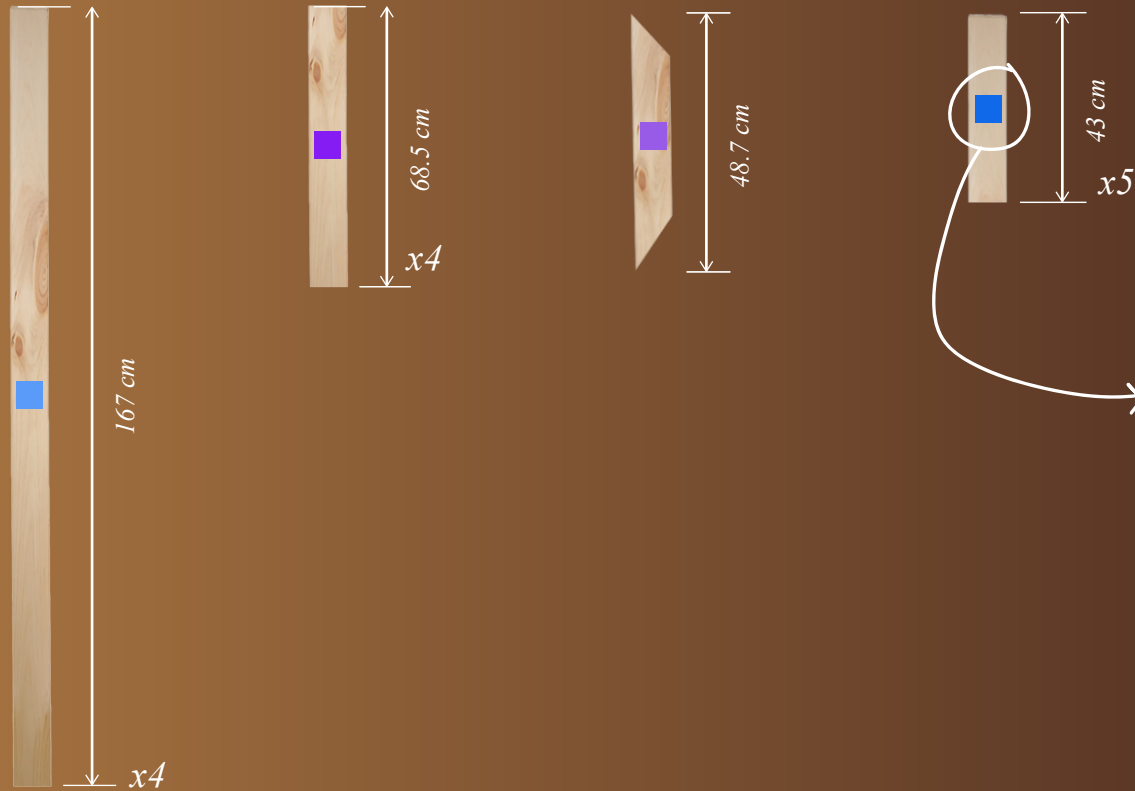
**not required*



*No Staples? No worries.
Recycle old cans or
plastic bottles by cutting
them into strips and
attaching nails to use
as a similar solution!*



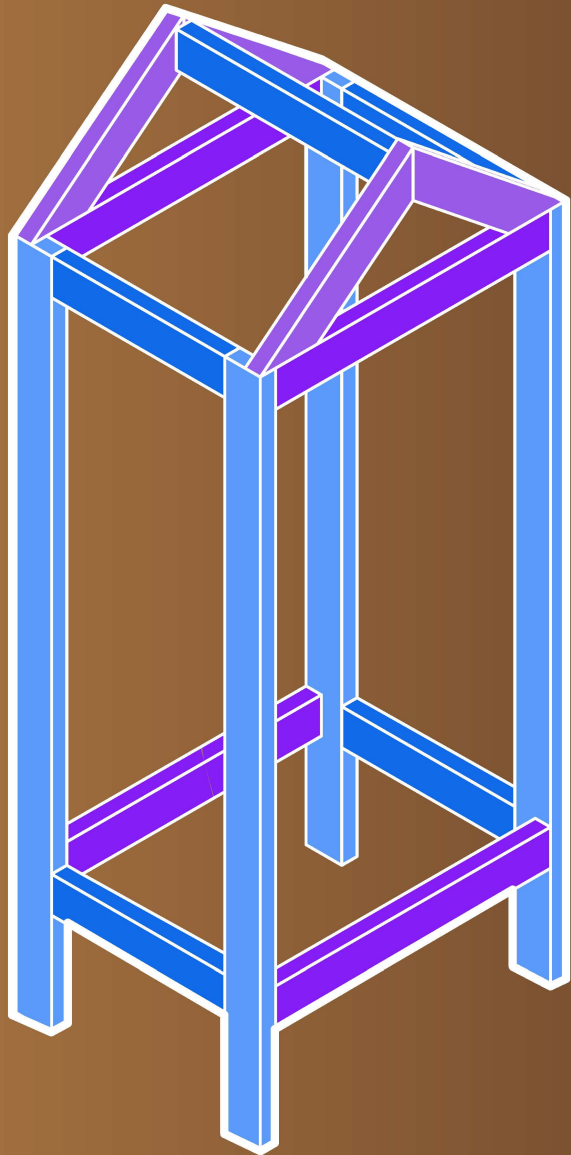
Wood Measurements



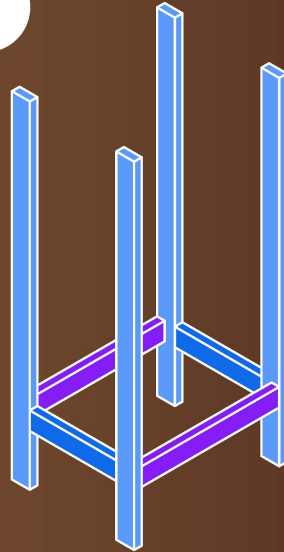
We'll use these colors to easily identify different wood pieces moving forward.

These measurements are just for reference, so that you know approximately how much wood you need! The pieces with angled cuts don't need to be precise, later on we will discuss how to make these type of cuts.

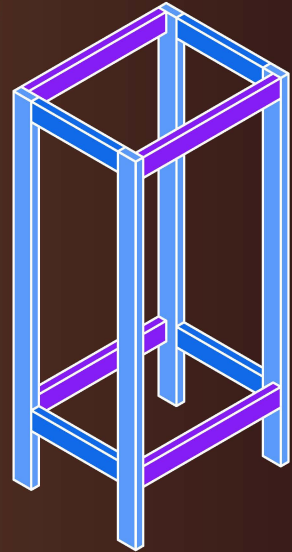
Building The Frame



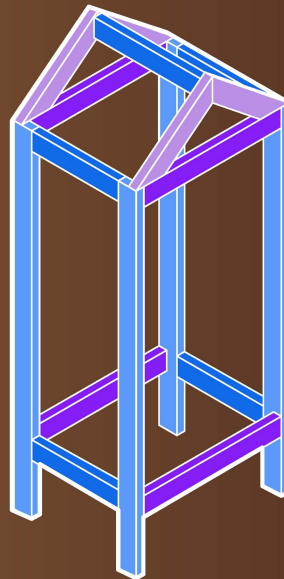
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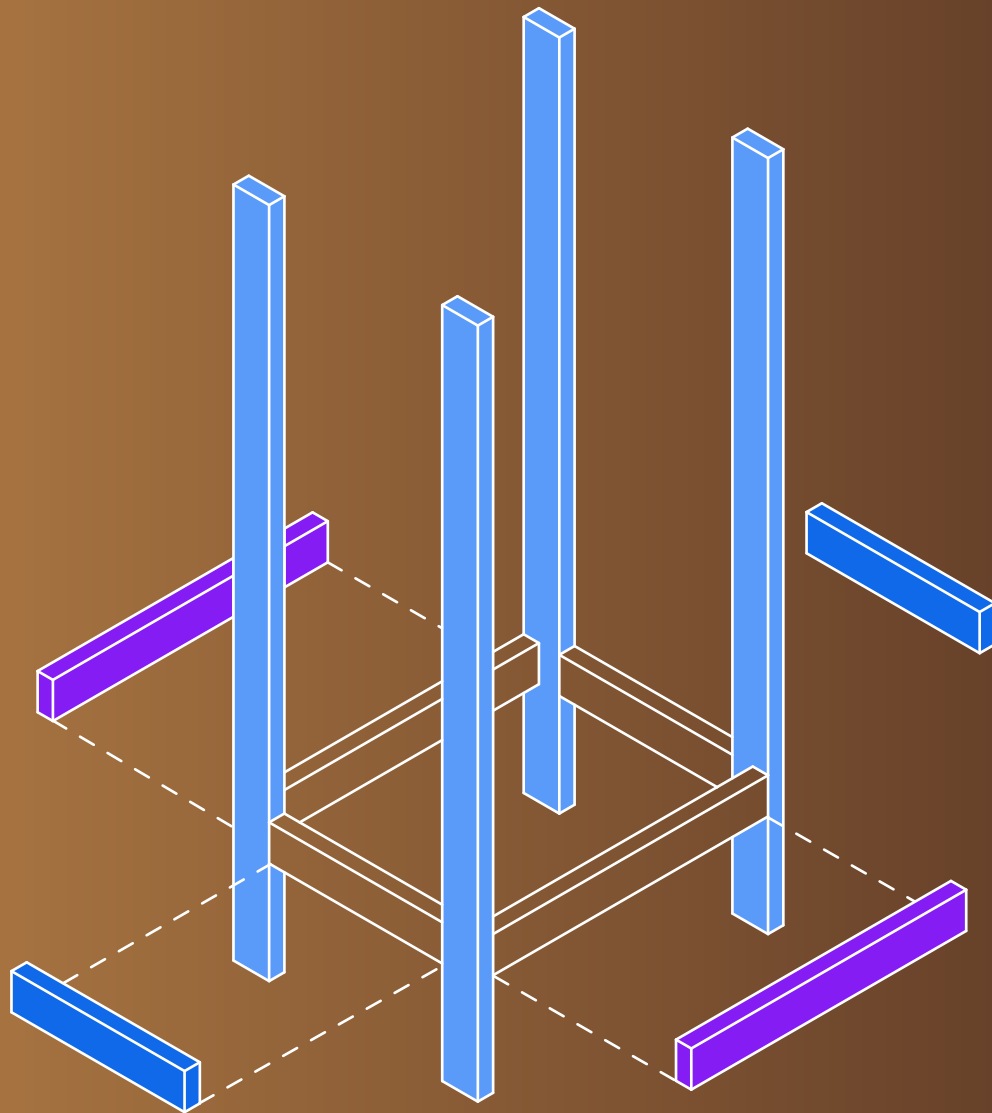
2



3

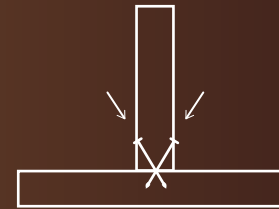


1



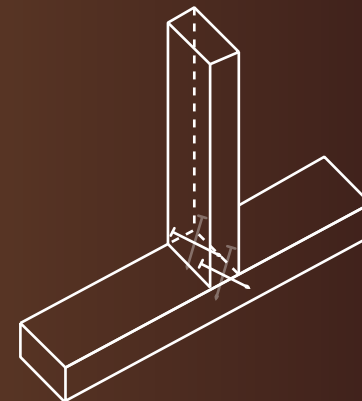
Tip!

For securing pieces of wood using nails, a toenailing technique is the best method to achieve the most robust joint.

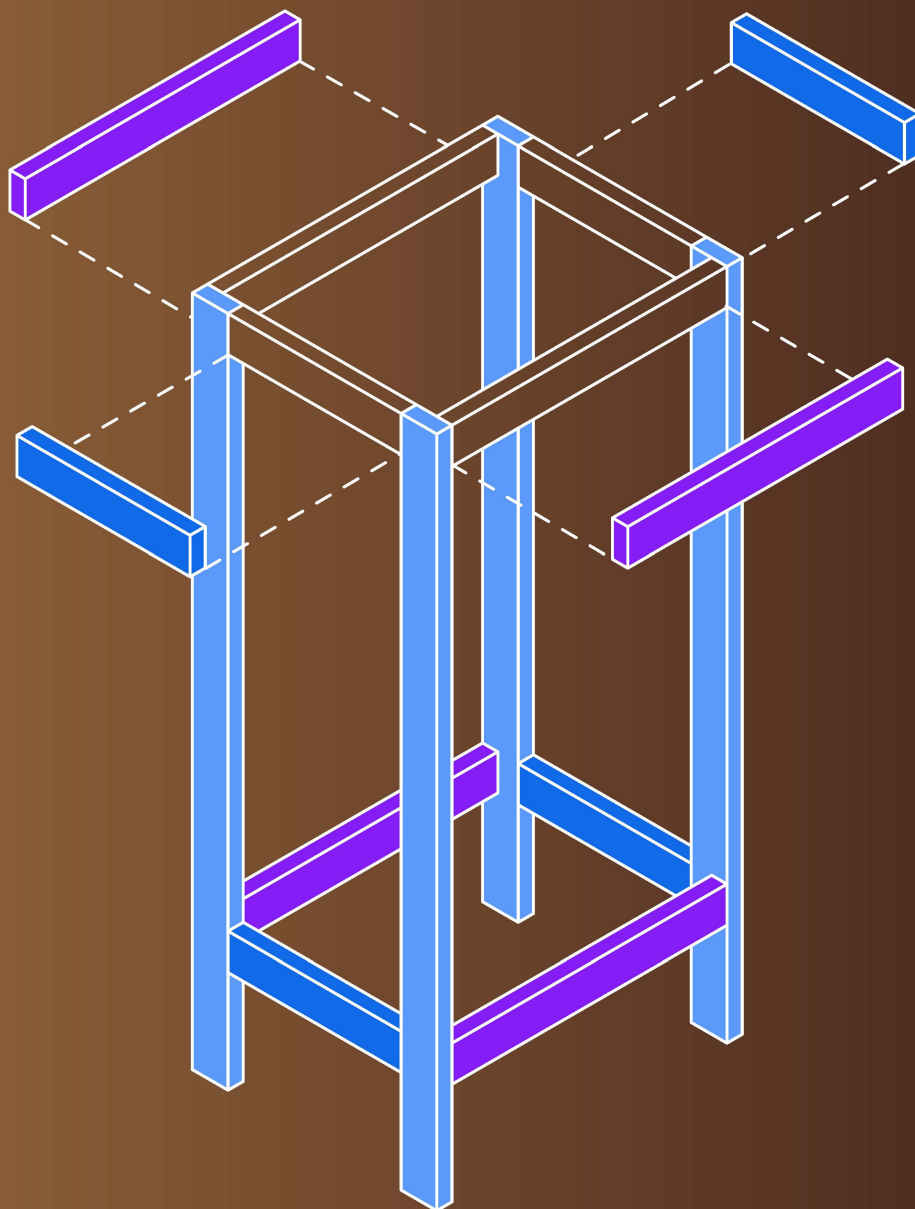


Tip!

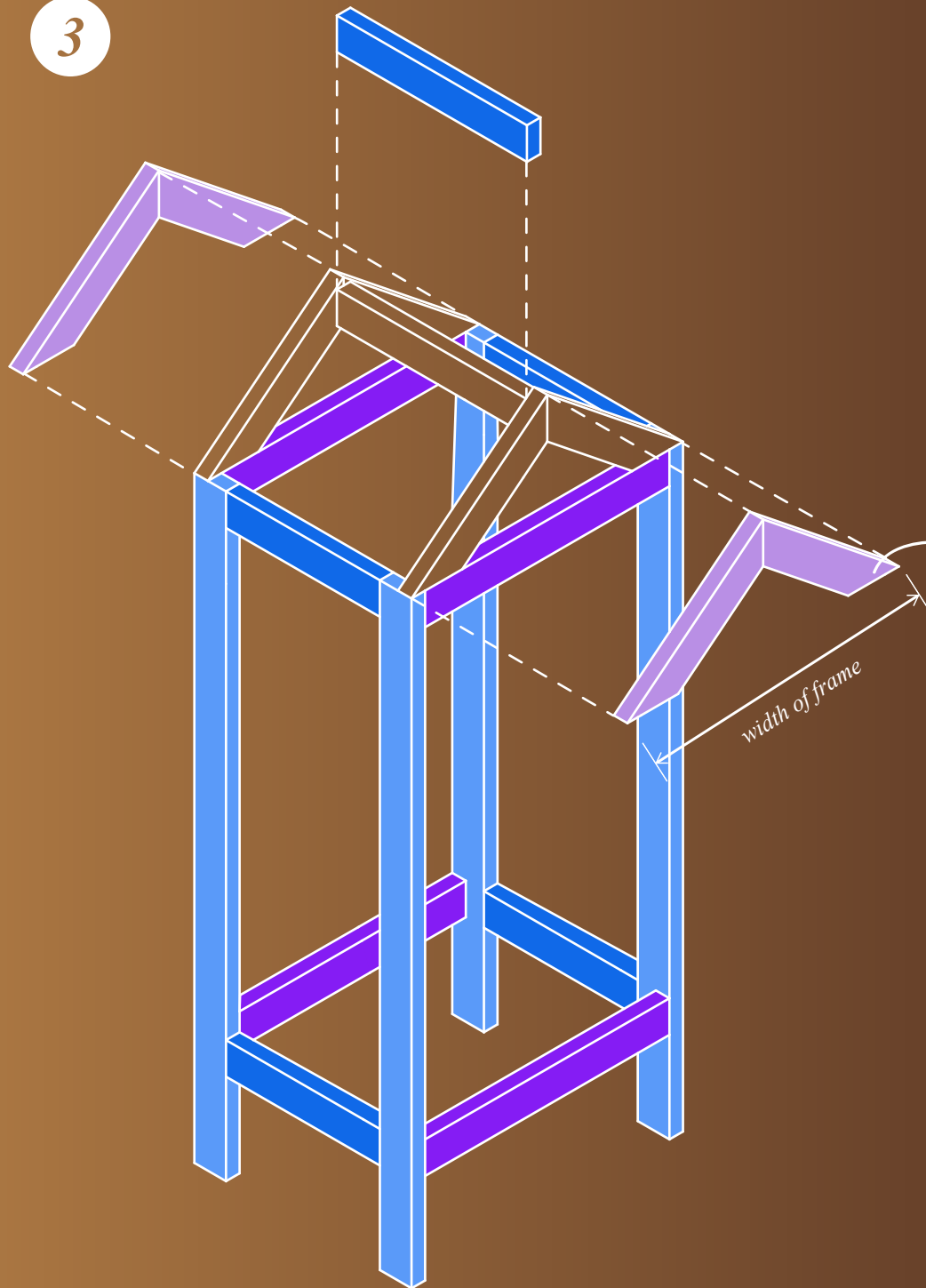
For the best hold, secure each connection with a total of 4 nails



2



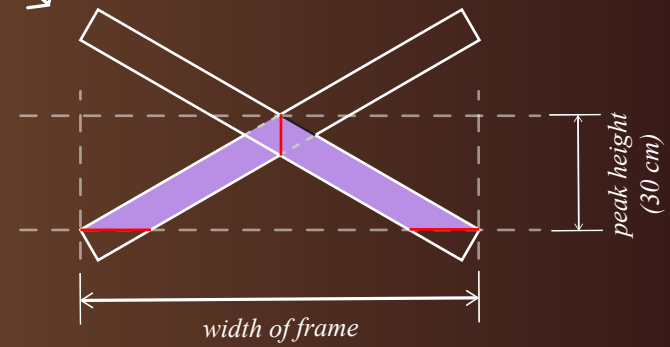
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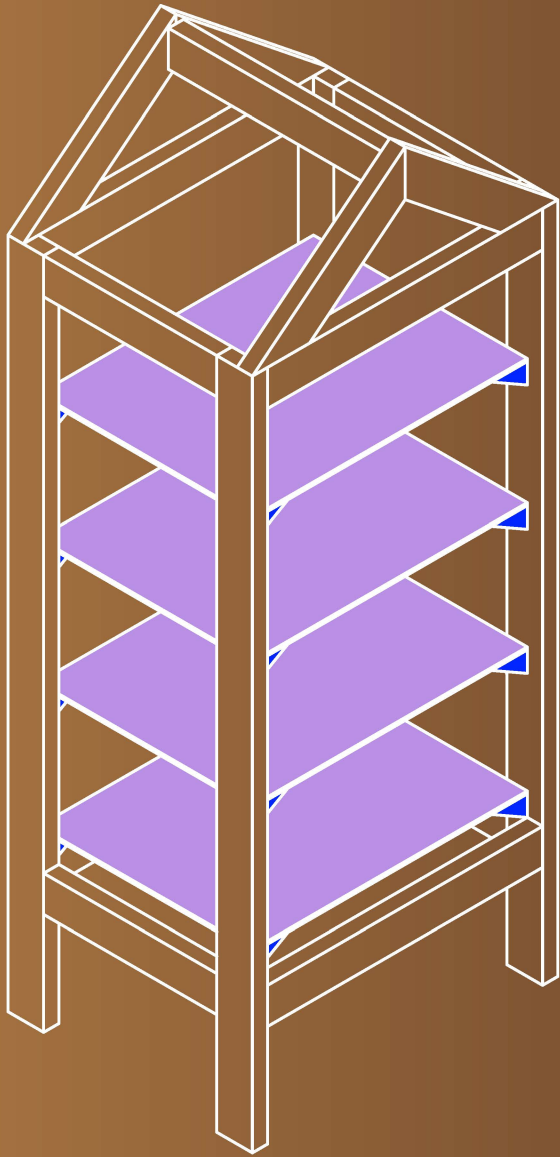
Tip!

To shape the wooden pieces for a peaked roof:

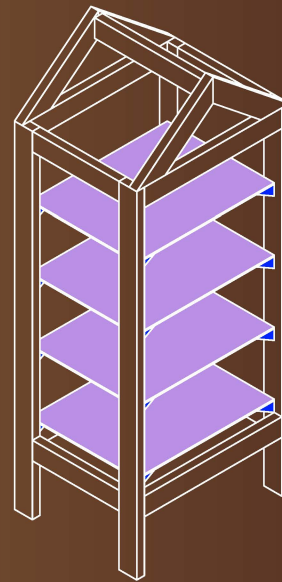
1. Start by measuring the width of your frame on the wood.
2. Place the two pieces of wood over each other in an X shape.
3. Decide how tall you want the peak, for example, 30 cm.
4. Tilt the pieces until they cross at your chosen height.
5. Where they intersect, mark the spots to cut.



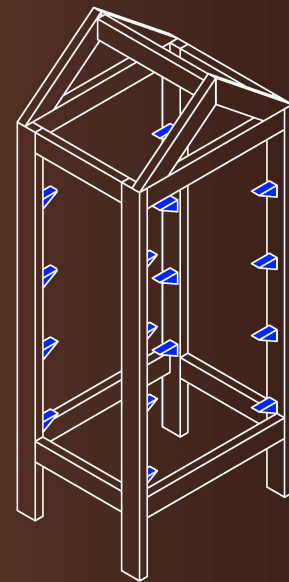
Making the shelves



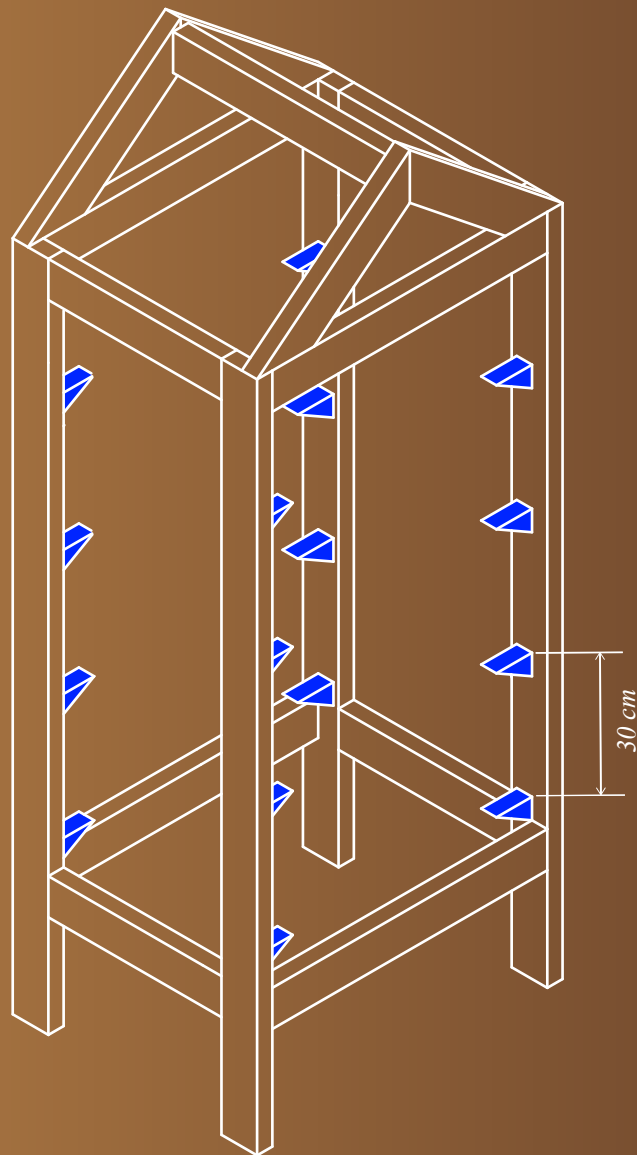
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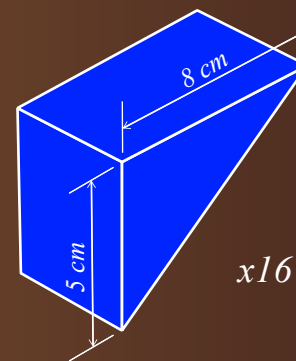
2



1



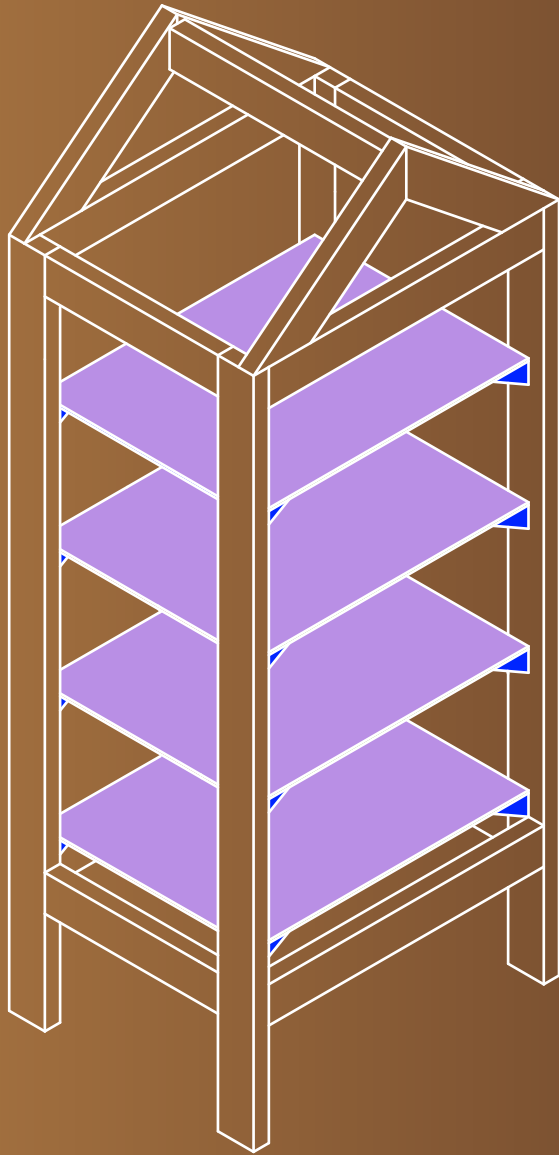
Wood Shelf Supports



Tip!

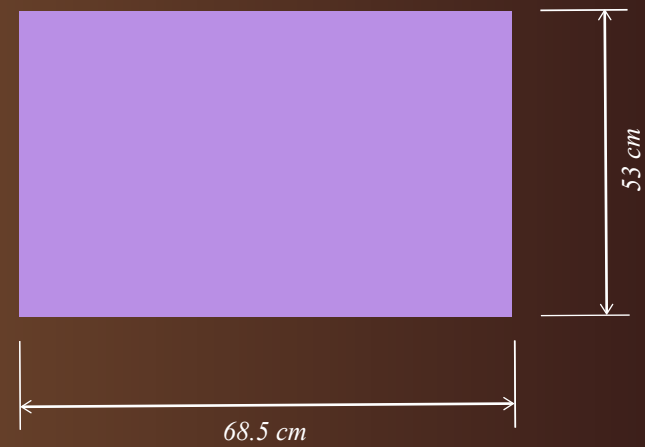
For this example, we are placing the brackets 30 cm apart. We suggest measuring your tallest ceramic work to determine the space you need. Of course, feel free to variate your spacing to fit multiple needs.

2



Tip!

For the shelves, choose any strong material that is easy to cut. In this instance, we will be sizing plywood sheets to fit the wet box. Below is the size that fits our wet box!

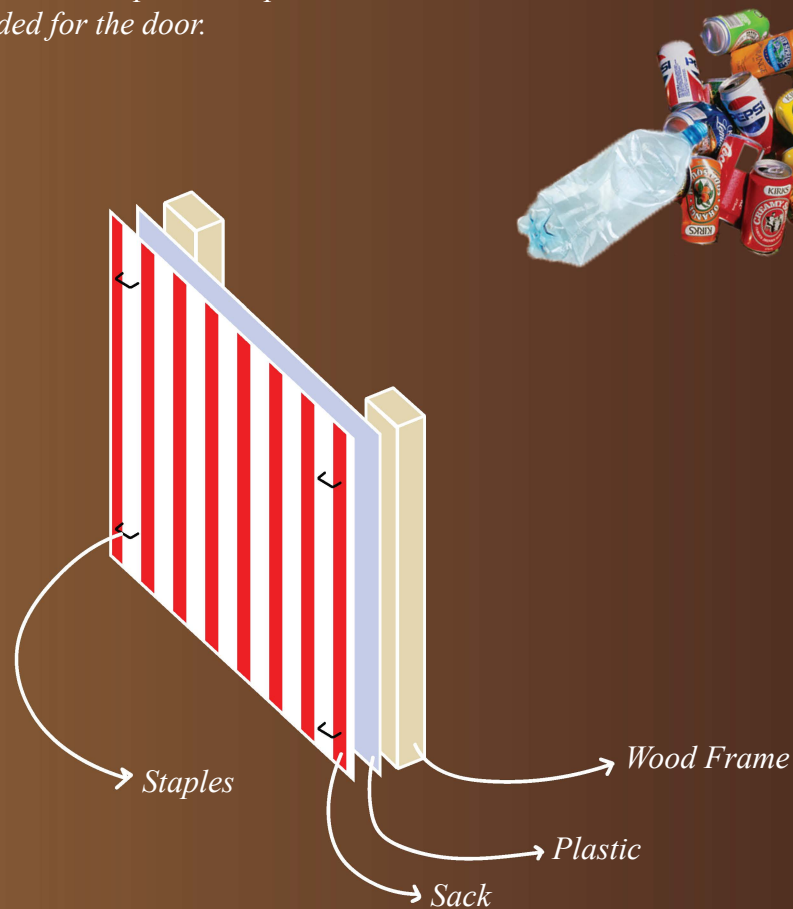


Wet Box Lining

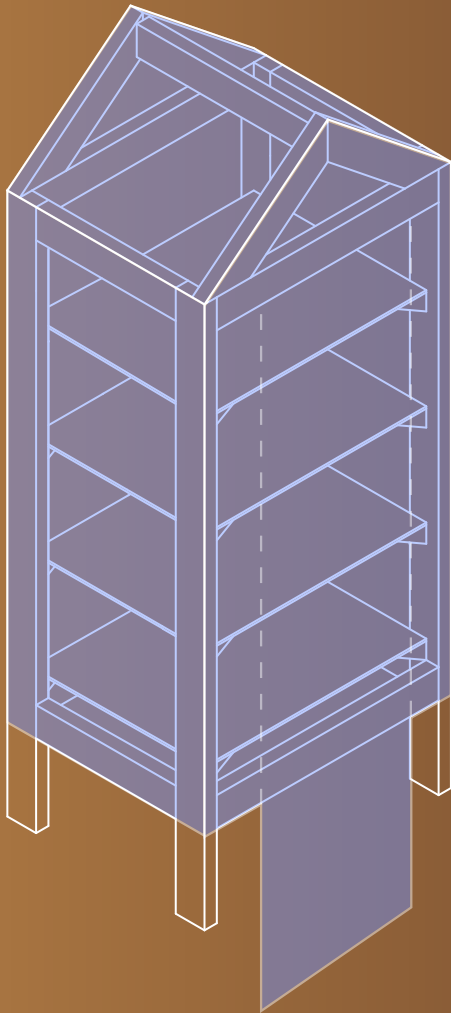
The lining of our wet box consists of two layers: plastic and sacks. These will be secured to the frame using staples. Start by measuring the frame to figure out the size for the lining. For the front of the box, add extra to the measurements to account for the additional material needed to create a door. Cut the plastic sheets according to these measurements, using the plastic cutout as a template to then cut the sacks for the second layer. Secure the plastic to the frame with staples, making sure to add the additional length for the door at the front. Lastly, place the sack layer on top of the plastic and staple it into place, ensuring the front has the extra material needed for the door.

Tip!

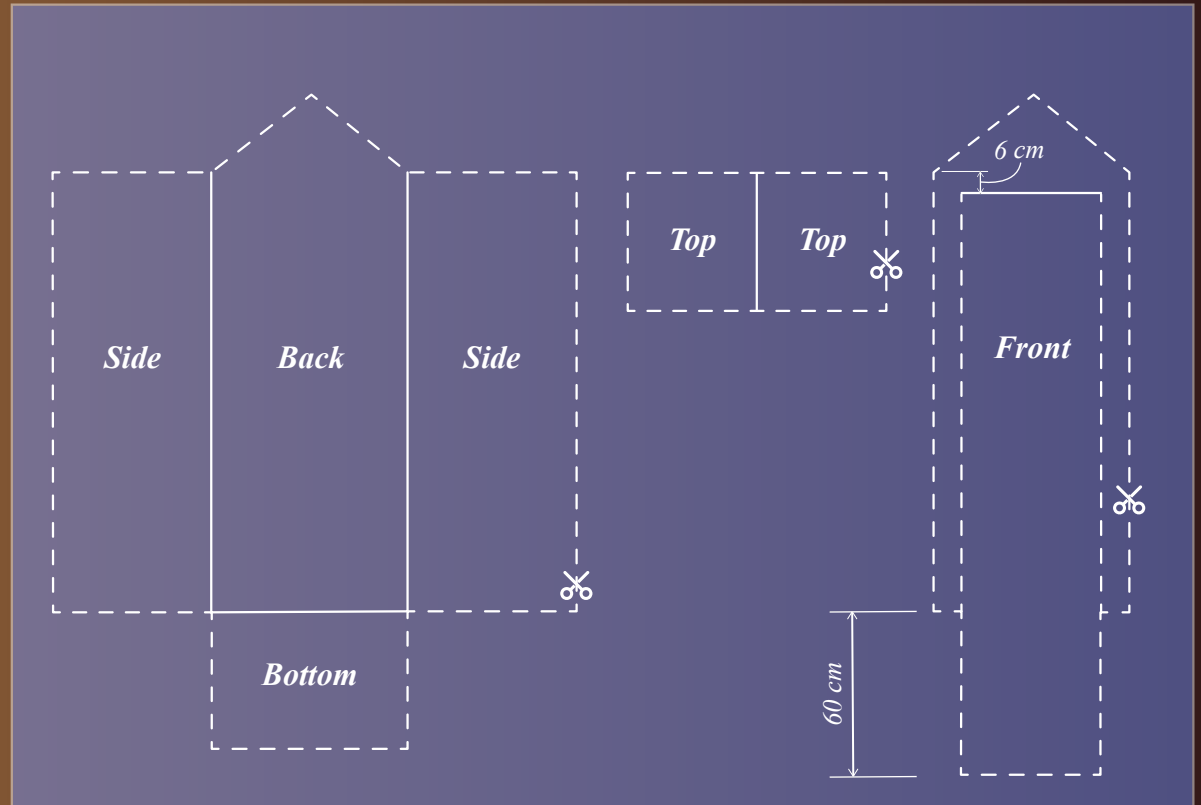
No Staples? No worries. Recycle old cans or plastic bottles by cutting them into strips and attaching nails to use as a similar solution!



Making the Plastic Lining



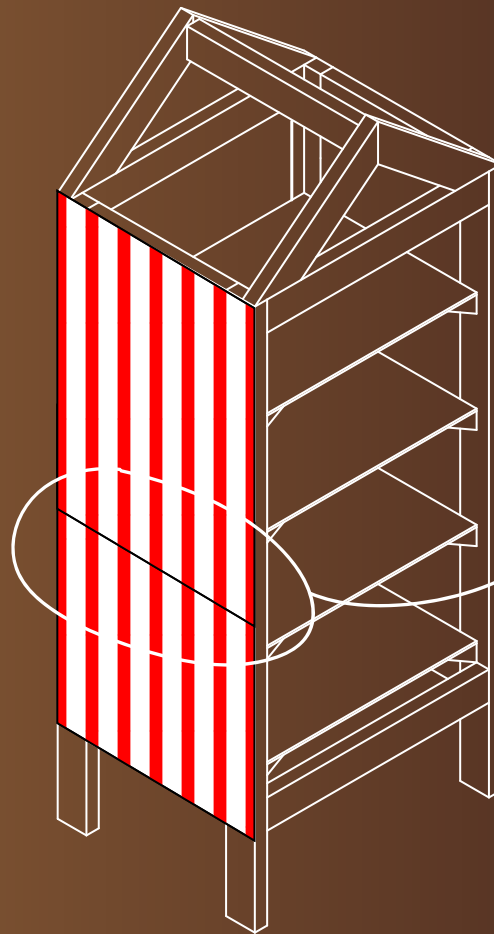
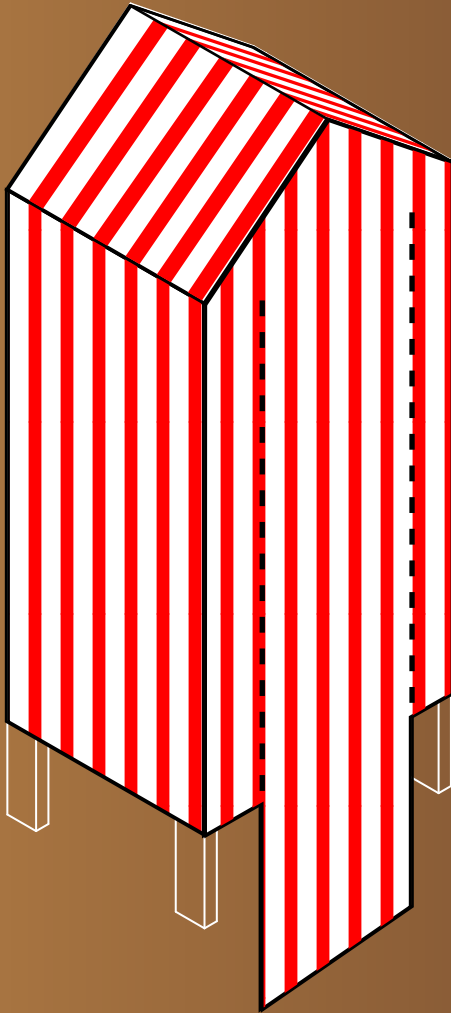
Plastic



Cut along the dotted line — ✂ — — — —

Making the Sack Lining

Because we're repurposing old sacks for our lining, we'll need to cut them open along the seam to create a single flat piece of material. After that, use the plastic lining you've already shaped as a template to cut out the sack pieces.

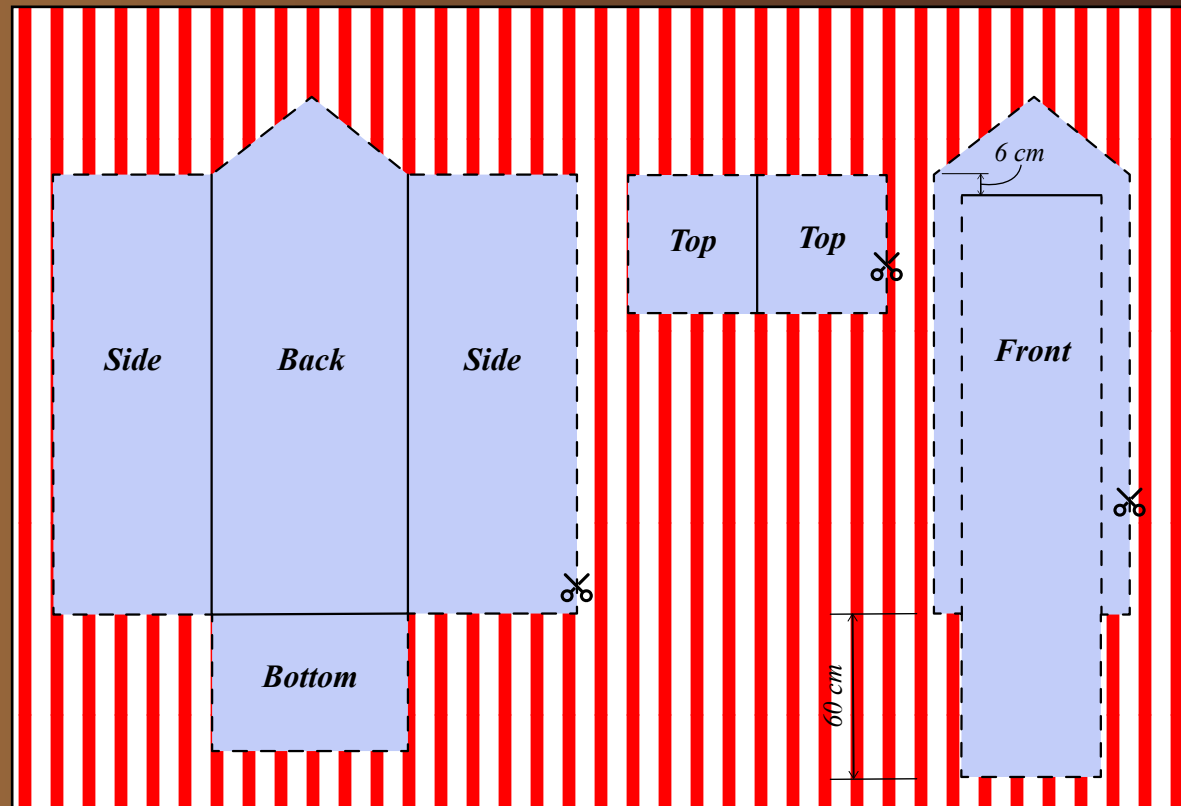


Tip!

If your sacks are not long enough to cover a whole side in one piece, feel free to overlap them!

Making the Sack Lining

Sack

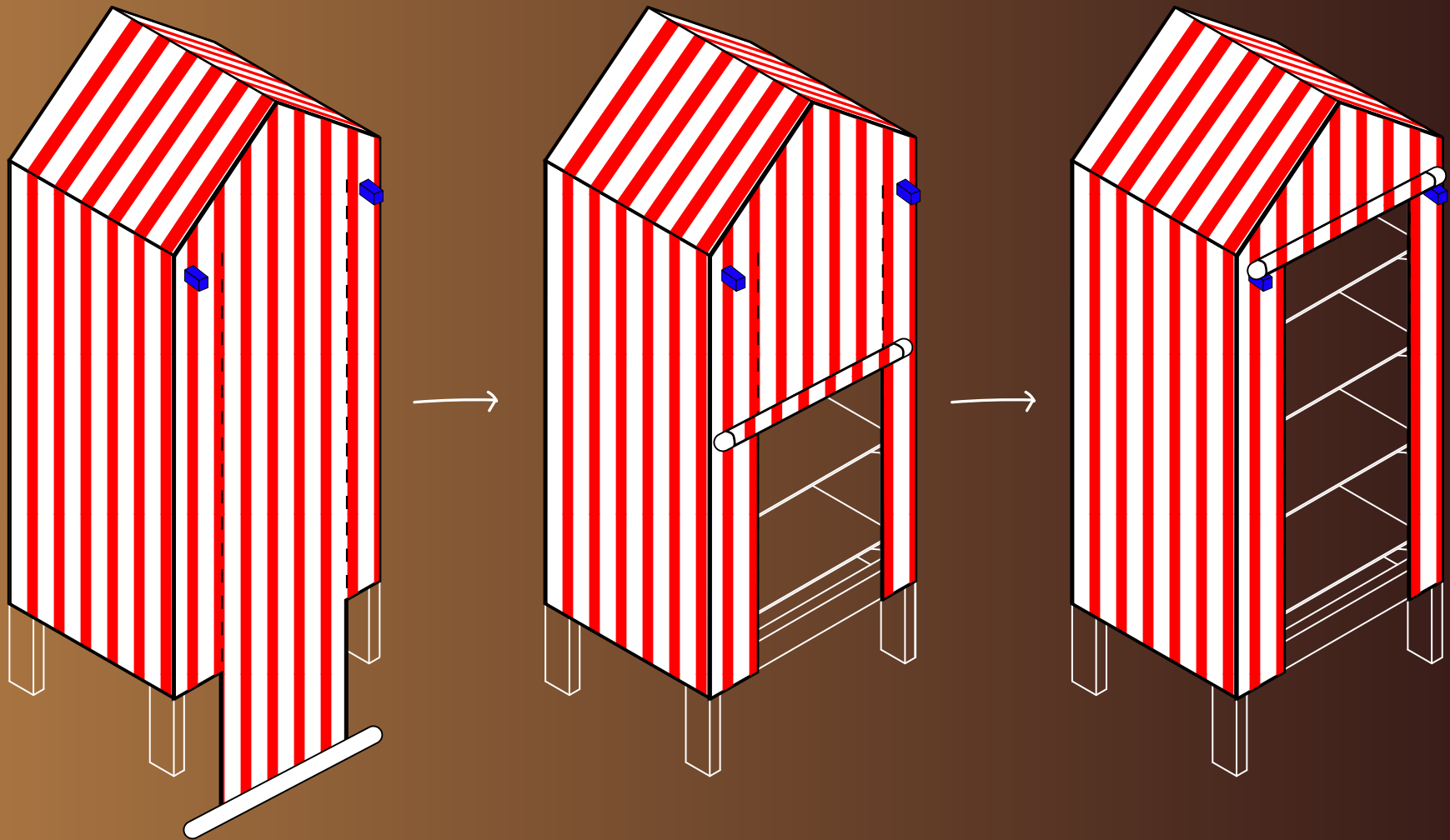


Cut along the dotted line — ✂ — — — —

Tip!

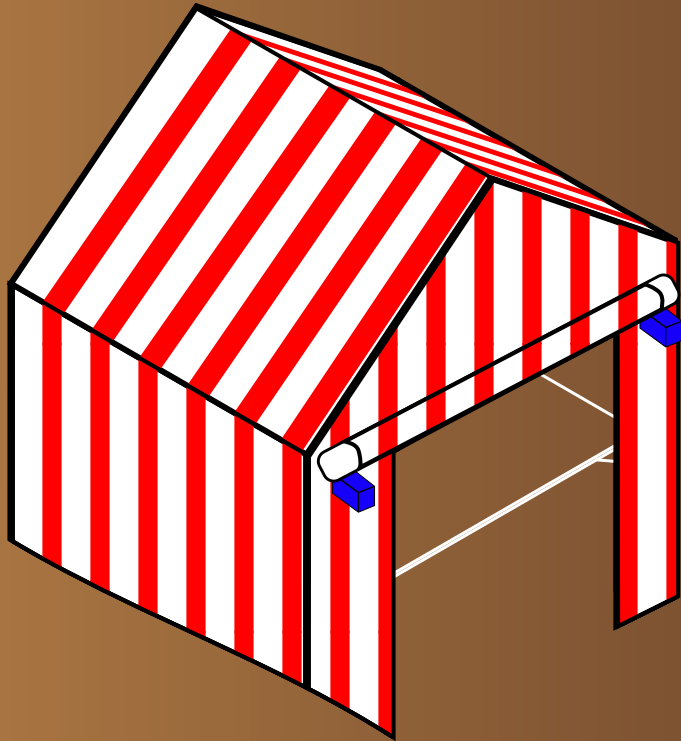
Use your plastic cut out to trace out your sacks

Making the Flap Door

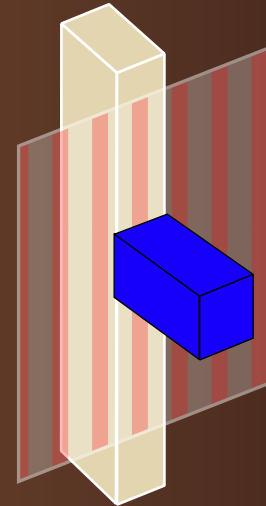


Making the Flap Door

The flap door works by attaching the end of the lining to a relatively heavy bar. This bar needs to be hefty enough so that when lowered, its weight is sufficient to seal the door shut. You can make the bar from any material, as long as it allows for the lining to be securely attached to it.



In addition to attaching the bar to the lining, we will also provide a wooden support to hold the bar in place when it's rolled up. Attach the support to the wooden frame as shown below.



Tips for Maintaining Humidity Levels

Congratulations on finishing your new wet box! This great tool will help you maintain the ideal humidity levels for more control over your ceramic projects. To enhance the humidity inside your new wet box, here are a couple of easy tips:

Place a cup of water with a sponge in it at the back of your wet box. The water will evaporate slowly, adding moisture to the air.



Also, having a spray bottle nearby is quite handy. Periodically mist the inside of the lining with water—just be careful not to spray your ceramic pieces directly. This will help to boost the humidity inside the box.



With these simple additions, you'll create the perfect environment for your ceramics to thrive. Enjoy your crafting!

In the heart of Oaxaca, the rich tradition of Zapotec pottery thrives, shaped by the hands of masters whose skills have been honed over generations. "Guide to the Construction of a Wet Box: Techniques for Zapotec Potters" is more than just a manual—it's a key to preserving these age-old techniques while embracing the needs of today's ceramic arts. Inside, you'll discover a step-by-step process to construct a wet box using materials you already have, ensuring your pottery remains as timeless as the culture it comes from.

With this guide, you'll be able to maintain the perfect humidity to control the drying process, protect your pieces from cracking, and keep the clay pliable for your creative touch.

Join us in a journey back to the roots of pottery, where tradition meets innovation, and every potter finds new ways to let their art flourish. Let this guide be your companion in crafting ceramics that are not only beautiful but also a testament to the enduring spirit of Zapotec pottery.