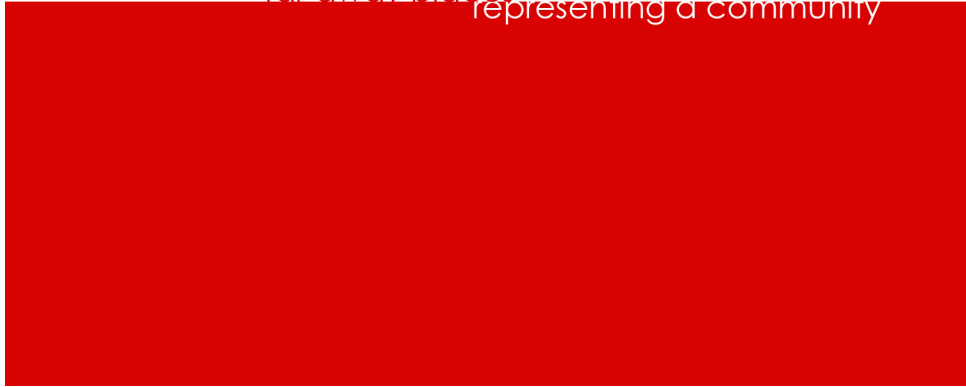far away places

representing a community

the tech model railroad club

The TMRC is a special interest group at MIT, with a rich history and identity.
Our initial thoughts were concerned with the social context of the group:
the diversity of their personal interests and their reasons for their involvement as members
We were fascinated with the nature of the group itself: their concern is to reproduce objects and recreate systems to closely resemble reality.
In this process, there is an interpretative synthesis of real space and a loss of functional intention.

designing the object

the initial thoughts on the design of the object were on how to best represent the community we chose to work with.
our first research was geared towards the history of the organization, their role within larger communities they might belong to (mit, other modeling clubs), the way in which they see themselves, and the way outsiders do.

through a series of interviews and some reading, we were able to respond to these questions, and identify the way in which the community functions.

the idea of the railroad spike sprouted out of the need for a very identifiable symbol. at the same time, a spike is just a small component of a larger network, as the club is within the realm of other clubs with similar interest and other groups at the institute. The nature of the club functions in an analogous manner: different people with different abilities and interests come together to create world in common. a railroad spike ties the whole network together.

in order to incorporate the methodology used by the community to perform their daily activities, we chose a mass production method which would not replicate, but 'model' the object. the spike, built up of several layers of chipboard, is clearly a representation of an actual object, without any pretensions of reproducing it.

finally, the object conceals a space within it. this space is designed to carry a message, transforming the object into a vessel. this idea came from the agreement of the members in the club about their interest in train modeling: 'trains remind us of far away places'.
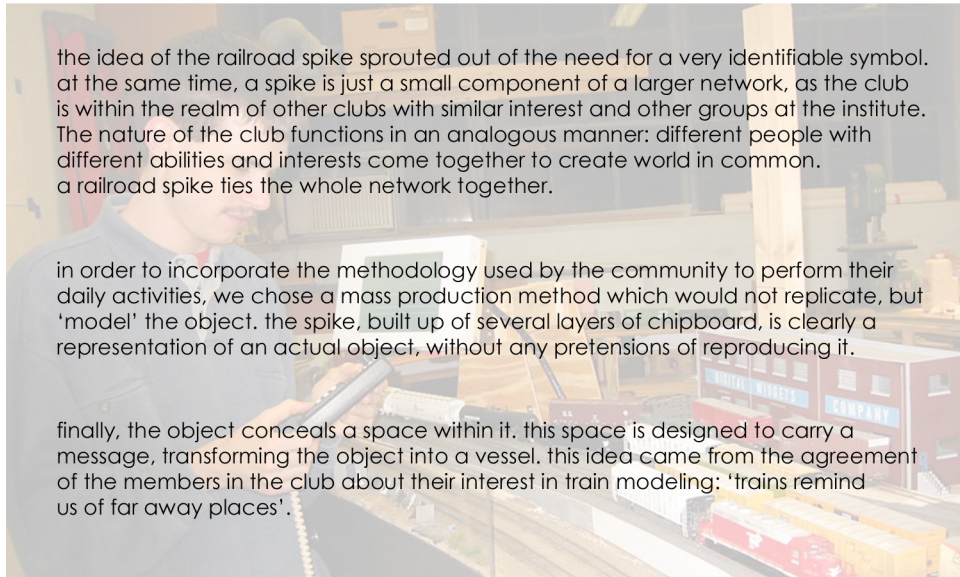
production

the mass production of the object was done in a similar fashion to the way in which
the tech club models their sets: this is, creating a three dimensional object from a
series of cut planes. we used CAD to model the objects and a laser cutter to obtain
the layers. all assembly was done by hand.
there were a total of 75 objects, each one made of 28 pieces.

distribution

the distribution took place the day of the club's open house on saturday, april 30th.
part of the project was identifying a latent need in the community we would be working with.
the tmrc wanted to raise awareness of their activity on campus. at the same time, they were very reluctant to make any reference to their early affiliation to the 'hacker' culture at mit and its beginnings.
the 'hacking' aspect of the club was one of the reasons why we chose to work with this group. we wanted to incorporate this into the project in a very understated manner.
we placed information inside the objects, and distributed them without informing the recipients. the 'hack' is that they would discover this information on their own.

the objects were distributed on campus by inviting people to take an object, without revealing its significance.
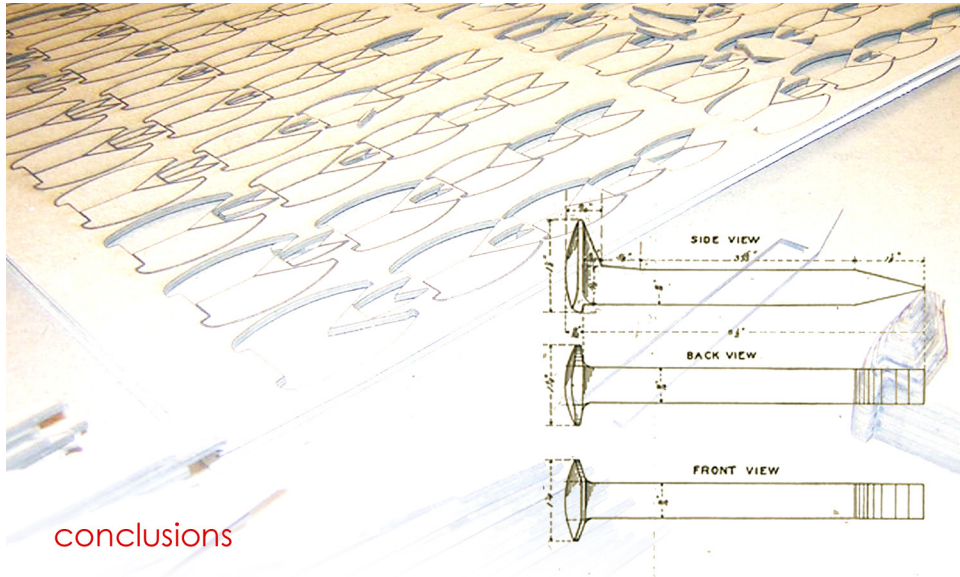
conclusions

working closely with this community showed us the difficulties of translating meaning
on to a single object.
the first article of compromise was the definition of the group's identity itself, and
hence, the direction in which the whole project would be directed.
once this was determined, the approval and support of the group was key in
delineating not the aesthetics of the object, but of the signifier embodied in it.

the goal of bringing awareness to the greater mit community was achieved, and
many of the recipients attended the tmrc's open house.

as it turns out, some recipients have discovered the hidden space in the object and
have found a way to use it as a container.

far away places

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