

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

A Visualization of hillmancurtis.com

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IDEATION

“I’ve given you an artifact that contains complex information... your goal is to clearly explain the content, structure, and navigation of your information piece in an engaging manner.”

My assigned artifact was hillmancurtis.com, the website of hillmancurtis, inc., a design firm in New York City that produces short films and site designs. The firm is led by David Hillman Curtis, a filmmaker, designer and author.

The first step was to explore every aspect of the website, following all the links and cataloguing every page. The site has a relatively simple site structure, which freed me to consider unconventional forms for my project. A website is an interactive design and I wanted to retain an interactive quality in my piece. So often when we think of interaction, we turn to the digital realm, but there is a richness that can be found in the way someone uses their hands to interact with a physical object. So early on, I had the idea to create a three-dimensional physical representation of the site, rather than a poster or digital piece.

To decide the form, I turned to the design of the site itself. I was struck by the simple clean layouts and the use of boxes to contain content. This led me to think of actual physical boxes to represent the hierarchy of the site. And my odyssey into box-making started from there.

DESIGN

The mapping of the site's structure to a box structure was clear: nested boxes would represent the levels of the site's hierarchy. But what would go into the boxes to represent the content of the site? There were four sections to consider: Films, Site Design, Store, and About. I began to think of physical analogs to the content in these sections.

Films formed the bulk of the website. I decided to create a puzzle for each film. The viewer would have to engage with the object over time and decipher the message for themselves, much as if they were watching the short film.

The Site Design pages simply had screenshots and a short description of each design. I used a small triptych to mirror the way the information was laid out on these pages.

For the Store section, I created a small representation of each product being sold, complete with a price tag that had information on each item. For example, I folded small origami t-shirts to represent actual t-shirts being sold on the site.

The About section contained mostly miscellaneous information. Accordingly, the About box contained a mishmash of objects to represent this information, including business cards for contact details and a small certificate for awards won by the company.

PRODUCTION

With this project in particular, I found that the process of designing was greatly connected to the process of making. Perhaps it was more emphasized because of the amount of time and patience it took to craft every piece. Design decisions I had planned early on shifted as I learned more about what was possible and practical when working with the materials I had.

I made most of the boxes out of railroad board, only the largest box was made from foamcore. I learned a great deal about box-making, including the patterns to cut for various types of boxes, and the way to place multiple patterns side by side to use the material efficiently. Various labels and images for the boxes were printed and glued. I worked from the inside out, creating the smallest boxes first to ensure that they would fit into the larger boxes.

It actually became an enjoyable experience to immerse myself in the production of these boxes. The singular focus on the details of each box put me in a sort of flow, and it felt good to create something I could hold in my hand and feel the weight of.

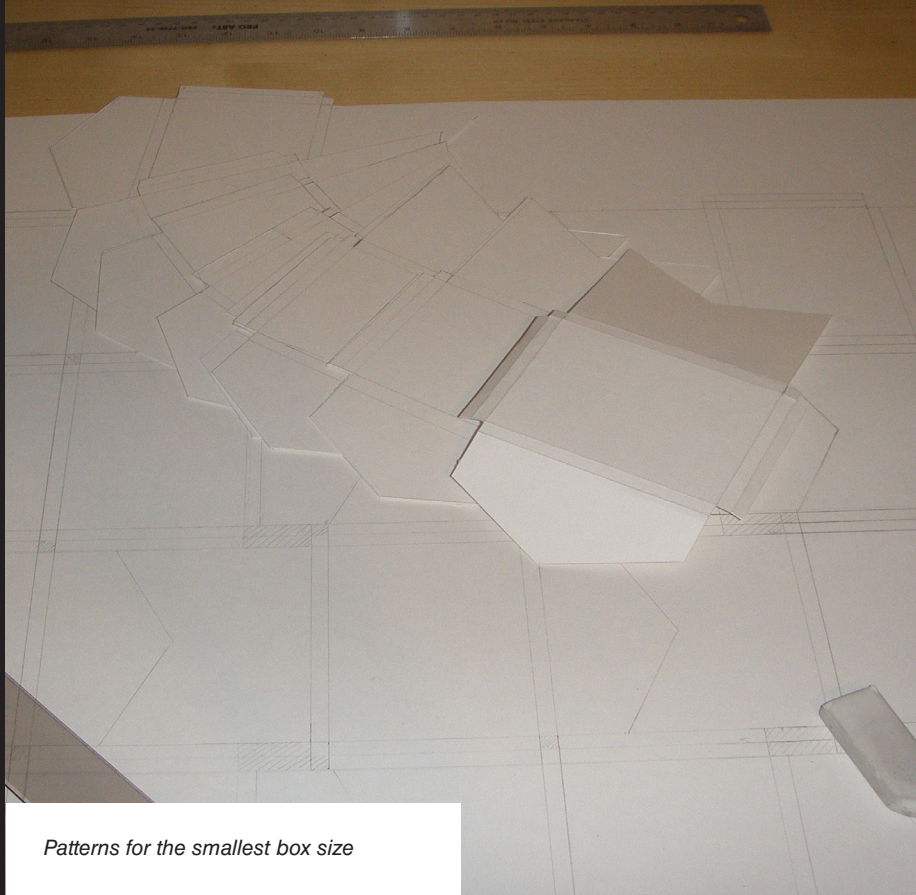
In the end, there were 52 boxes of various sizes made. I created content for many of them, but not all. Each of the film categories and the site design section only have two or three boxes with content inside them to serve as examples.

REFLECTION

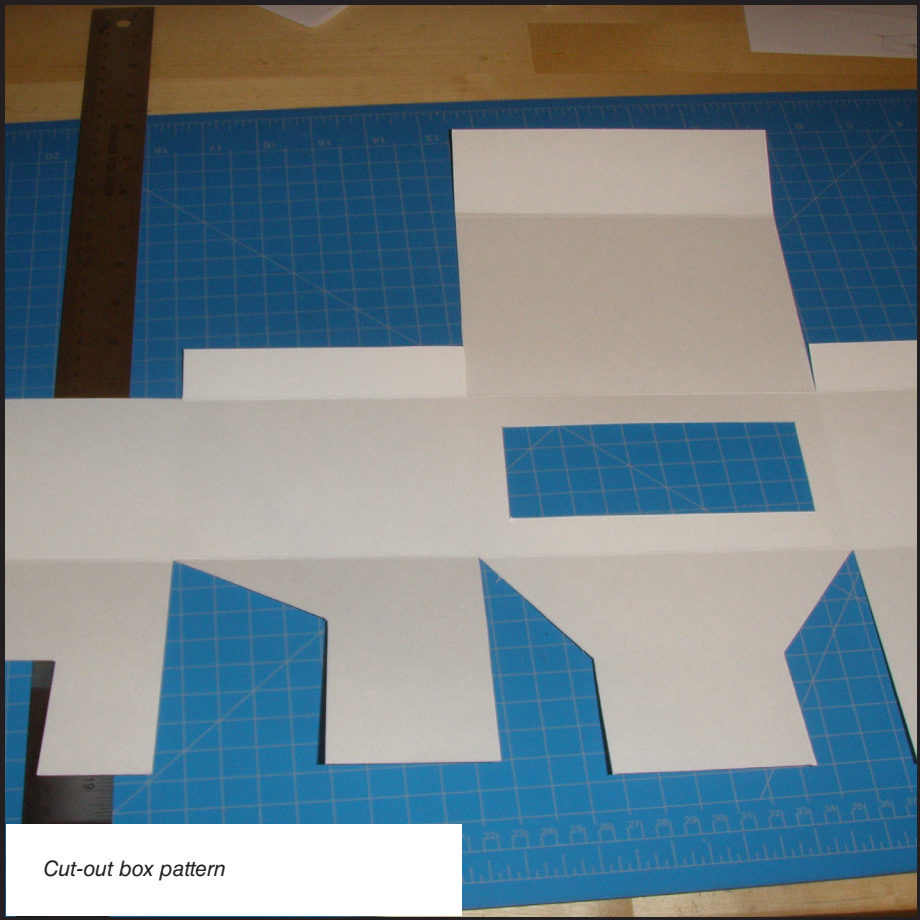
Obviously, the decision to make a physical object for this project was not typical; the assignment did call for a print or digital piece. But I'm very glad I was able to go through the process of actually making something with my hands. Especially coming from a non-design background, I've had few opportunities to practice any physical craftsmanship and that formed part of my desire to go with a three-dimensional object. With the large time commitment involved, it is understandable why physical objects are usually not made for projects like this. But I believe there is a lot of value in the thought processes that one goes through to create an actual object in the world.

By making physical analogs to the digital artifacts of the website, I wanted to do something that would make people smile, but also show that our digital technologies are not our only options. There is great power in the computer tools we have access to now, but they shouldn't be our limitations as well.

I am happy with the quality I was able to achieve for most of my boxes. The largest box, made of foamcore, could be better, but foamcore in particular seems difficult to work with. In the end, the product itself is meant really as more of a paper prototype. For both me and the viewer, the real value is in the intangible qualities, whether it's the experience of craft or the exploration of the concepts behind the boxes.



Patterns for the smallest box size



Cut-out box pattern



Collection of the finished boxes