The 6.270 Robot Builder's Guide

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This document may also be obtained in electronic form (in PostScript (R) files) via anonymous FTP to `cherupakha.media.mit.edu` (Internet address 18.85.0.47).

Section 1.1, "Electronic Assembly Technique," is based on a previous version written by Pankaj Oberoi.

Chapter 4, "LEGO Design," was co-authored with Randy Sargent.

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Foreword

These notes were first written for the students of an experimental class at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the *LEGO Robot Design Competition*. They were compiled into the current book form and distributed to the students of the 1992 class. This second version of the *Robot Builder's Guide* contains some minor corrections and reorganization from the first edition, intended to make the work more suitable for perusal by both robotic enthusiasts and teachers interested in robot design as an educational activity.

Appendix A of this edition explains the organization of the month-long course and also contains the 1992 contest specification. If the reader is interested in either of these two topics, it may be worthwhile to scan through this section first.

Chapter One presents assembly directions for all of the hardware in our robot building kit. Interspersed throughout the assembly information are brief introductions to each of the components. It's probably the case that most readers won't have the physical hardware in front of them when they read this section. Nevertheless it seemed the most appropriate chapter to introduce the materials. The reader may wish to skip over Section 1.1, which just discusses standard electronic components. Of course, if the reader has obtained a kit of materials, reading all of this chapter to learn how to assemble the kit seems like a good place to start!

The work documented in this manual is the result of contributions from many persons and in particular from a collaboration with two other individuals: Randy Sargent and Pankaj Oberoi. Most of the hardware described herein was co-designed with Randy, and he is the main author of the "Interactive C" environment described in Chapter 7. Pankaj has contributed to the project in many ways, including having played a steadfast organizational and motivational role. The enthusiastic participation of past students has also contributed to the development of both the technology and our ideas about how to best use it in an educational setting.

During the past year, the M.I.T. Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science and the M.I.T. Media Laboratory, who sponsored the development of the class technology, agreed to unrestricted and free distribution of the robotics technology described herein, including the printed circuit board artwork and software programming environment. While the material hasn't been placed in the public

domain (it's still copyrighted), this means that any individual or organization can use the works for whatever purposes they desire. Our hope is that people will use this work in the spirit of GNU software, which is distributed freely and is supported largely by a community of interested users.

The 1992 class used version 2.1 of the robot controller board; this manual is based on a newer version 2.11, which fixes several minor wiring bugs that were discovered in the 2.1 design. The two designs are identical in terms of functionality; version 2.11 is a replacement for the older design. Information on obtaining plans and/or kits for the board set may be obtained from `cherupakha.media.mit.edu` (Internet address 18.85.0.47), an anonymous FTP file server maintained at the M.I.T. Media Laboratory that is used to distribute this work, among other things. This information may also be obtained by writing to the author at the address provided on the copyright page.

The LEGO Robot Design course is an on-going educational experiment. The 1993 class is being organized mainly by undergraduates who were students of prior classes. They are taking on the tasks of upgrading the hardware designs and re-writing much of the course notes to suit their own sense of what's best for the next generation of students. To me this represents an important step in the evolution of the class. In attracting such dedicated leaders, the class is keeping alive the creative excitement that marked the years in which I was involved.

Fred Martin
December 1, 1992

Preface

Michael B. Parker, an undergraduate in MIT's Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (Course Six) department, had just taken MIT's famous "Introduction to Design" class (course number 2.70) in the Mechanical Engineering department. In 2.70, undergraduates use scrap parts—metal, plastic, and wood—to build machines that go on to compete in a head-to-head contest at the end of the course.

Mike liked the course so much that he was jealous: why should there be a course like this for Mechanical Engineering students, but not for the students in his department?

So in 1987, Mike organized the first 6.270 contest, as "Course Six's answer" to the 2.70 course. The contest was a programming competition in which students wrote programs to control computer-simulated robots. In the first two years of the contest, the goal was to design a simulated robot that tried to find and destroy other robots.

A couple years later, Mike saw a project at MIT's Media Laboratory (where I was working) called "LEGO/Logo," in which children build robots and other mechanized devices out of LEGO bricks, motors, and electronic sensors, and then write programs to control them using a special version of the Logo programming language. Mike wanted to provide the 6.270 students with similar technology, so they could build *real* robots, not just the computer-simulated robots that been done in the past.

Along with me, Mike recruited Randy Sargent, a fellow student of his, to be the technical consultants to the upcoming 6.270 contest (which was starting in just a few weeks). It sounded like a fun way to spend IAP.[1]

Randy and I spent most of our holiday break designing an interface board that connected to a PC or Macintosh computer, controlling motors and providing input from a few simple sensors. The budget was tight and time was short as we scurried about the local Radio Shack stores, buying electronic parts for the twenty teams of students who had preregistered for the course.

Everything went wrong that month: the LEGO parts showed up late; we were unable to obtain approval to use campus Athena workstations; mix-ups in room scheduling forced us, a group of students wielding soldering irons, to wander about

[1] MIT's "Independent Activities Period" is a one-month break between the fall and spring semesters.

campus looking for available classrooms. It was only the students' excitement that carried us through the month and into a competition at the end of IAP. The contest lasted about four hours—it was a long, drawn-out affair—but the students enjoyed it.

In October of the next year, Pankaj ("P.K.") Oberoi, who had been a student in the class, called a meeting of interested past participants. P.K. thought the class had great potential and wanted to help organize it for the upcoming year.

P.K. had already worked on key administrative aspects, like recruiting corporate sponsors. Microsoft had donated some money to the course previously and was willing to up the ante for another year. P.K. also got the support of Motorola, which agreed to donate valuable semiconductor parts.

So Randy and I again teamed up to develop technology for the course. We laid out artwork for a custom printed circuit board that used a new Motorola microprocessor with lots of control features. P.K. and I wrote handouts for the students, telling them how to build sensors, a battery charger, and other robotics components.

Eighty students took the course that year (organized into thirty teams). Even before the contest that year, it was evident that the course was a success. As students carried their robot kits around campus, interest and excitement spread. The contest itself was a hit.

By the end of that year, I was interested in the course not only from a technical perspective, but from a special educational perspective. Students at MIT were choosing to pull all-nighters building robots rather than taking ski trips. In doing so, they were learning about engineering design and robotic technologies from first-hand, experiential involvement in a project-based course. The course seemed to fill a gap in the students' education, providing them with a complement to the theoretical orientation of many MIT classes.

The course's approach to learning also fits closely with the educational ideas of the research group I am part of at the Media Laboratory. Seymour Papert, Director of the Epistemology and Learning Research group, has developed an educational philosophy called "constructionism." According to constructionism, learning and the acquisition of knowledge are active processes engaged in by the learner; i.e., knowledge is constructed by the learner. Also, this process can be greatly facilitated when the learner is building something real in the world, in addition to building knowledge inside his or her own head.

By providing the tools and materials for students to work with complex electronic, mechanical, and software ideas, 6.270 gives the students a place to explore and learn about key ideas in technology, engineering, and design. Teamwork, learning-by-doing, and learning from one's peers is primary. 6.270 provides a constructionist-style learning experience for MIT students.

The 1990 class was a big success but we wanted to make the class even better. The

class was hampered by a controller board that had to be programmed in assembly language and only had a small amount of memory. Afterward, we began work on a robotic technology that would be more powerful and more useful to 6.270 students, allowing them to get even deeper into robot design and other technological issues.

By the time of the 1991 class, we had developed a robot-building kit with the high degree the power and flexibility we had wanted. Students were able to develop software for their robot using the C programming language. The new embedded controller board we developed had numerous features, including a small display screen that could be used to print debugging messages. Students were able to use powerful Unix workstations (the MIT Athena network), located all across campus, to develop programs for their robots.

We put a lot of thinking into how to organize the class to maximize the students' learning potential. We scheduled the class activities so that students would have all the pieces of a robot functioning as early as possible into the course. At this point, students would be able to take charge of their projects, and enjoy themselves as they saw their robots become more and more functional.

This document, the course notes for the 1992 6.270 class, is the result of several years of work. They have evolved from a couple of pages of wiring charts in the first year, to a collection of diagrams and other assembly notes handed out in a piecemeal fashion, into this document.

I was motivated to transform the notes based on my observations from last year's class: it seemed that many of the students wanted more in-depth discussion of the class's technology and more theory than lectures alone could provide. I hope that these course notes satisfy this intellectual curiosity.

Fred Martin
January 3, 1992

Sponsors

Many companies both large and small have contributed generously to the 6.270 project. We are grateful to both the corporations who have supported us, and for the encouragement given to us by many individuals who have worked for them.

Microsoft Corp.

Motorola Semiconductor Inc.

Polaroid Inc.

LEGO Systems Inc.

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Abrams-Gentile Entertainment Inc.

Introduction to this Guide

These course notes contain a lot of information that should be valuable in your robot-building endeavor. Here's a brief synopsis of the organization of these course notes:

- Chapter 1 is the assembly manual for nearly all of the components used to construct a 6.270 robot—including the printed circuit boards, electronic sensors, motors, and battery packs.
- Chapter 2 introduces robot motor technology.
- Chapter 3 discusses battery technology and battery charger operation.
- Chapter 4 discusses secret construction methods using the LEGO Technics (R) building materials.
- Chapter 5 delves into robotic sensors, explaining the principles of operation and applications of various sensors in the 6.270 kit.
- Chapter 6 investigates how to program a mobile robot to face up to the uncertainties and challenges of practical operation.
- Chapter 7 is a reference manual for the C language software that has been developed for the 6.270 contest.

Four appendix sections provide additional material:

- Appendix A is the student's introduction to the 1992 class, covering administrative information, the month's schedule, and the contest rules.
- Appendix B explains the workings of the 6.270 hardware, including the microprocessor board, the expansion board, and the infrared circuitry. This section is written with the assumption of some prior background in electronics.
- Appendix C provides reproductions of the printed circuit board layouts, handy for reference when debugging.
- Appendix D contains an introduction to ordering electronic parts from both the retail and surplus markets, and a listing of more than twenty top suppliers.

Contents

1 Assembly Manual **1**

1.1 Electronic Assembly Technique 1
1.1.1 Soldering Technique 2
1.1.2 Desoldering Technique 4
1.1.3 Component Types and Polarity 4
1.1.4 Component Mounting 9
1.1.5 Component Value Markings 10
1.2 The Microprocessor Board 11
1.2.1 Assembling the Microprocessor Board 12
1.2.2 Testing the Microprocessor Board 20
1.2.3 After Board Checkout 22
1.3 The Expansion Board 22
1.3.1 Assembling the Expansion Board 22
1.3.2 Testing the Expansion Board 26
1.3.3 After Board Testing 28
1.4 The LCD Display 28
1.5 The Battery System 28
1.5.1 The Battery Charger 29
1.5.2 Battery Pack Construction 31
1.6 The Infrared Transmitter 33
1.6.1 Assembly Instructions 34
1.7 The Motor Switch Board 36
1.7.1 Assembly Instructions 36
1.8 Cable and Connector Wiring 39
1.9 Sensor Wiring 39
1.9.1 Touch Sensors 43
1.9.2 Photocell Light Sensor 44
1.9.3 Infrared Reflectance Sensor 45
1.9.4 Single Bend Sensor 46
1.9.5 Dual Bend Sensor 47
1.9.6 Sharp Infrared Sensor 48

1.9.7 Potentiometer 48
1.9.8 Slotted Optical Switch 49
1.9.9 Hall Effect Sensor 50
1.10 Motor Wiring 51
1.10.1 The Polaroid Motor 51
1.10.2 Servo Motor 54
1.11 Computer Cable Wiring 56

2 Motors **59**
2.1 DC Motors 59
2.1.1 Ratings and Specifications 59
2.1.2 Measuring Motor Torque 61
2.1.3 Speed, Torque, and Gear Reduction 62
2.1.4 Pulse Width Modulation 63
2.2 Stepper Motors 64
2.3 Servo Motors 64
2.3.1 Control 64
2.3.2 Application 65

3 Batteries **67**
3.1 Cell Characteristics 67
3.1.1 Voltage 67
3.1.2 Capacity 67
3.1.3 Power Density 68
3.1.4 Discharge Curve 68
3.1.5 Internal Resistance 68
3.1.6 Rechargeability 69
3.1.7 Cost 70
3.2 Battery Packs 70
3.3 6.270 Battery Charger 71

4 LEGO Design **73**
4.1 Fundamental LEGO Lengths 73
4.2 LEGO Gearing 76
4.2.1 Gear Reduction 78
4.2.2 Chain Drives 79
4.2.3 Testing a Geartrain 79
4.2.4 Low-Force Geartrains 79

5 Sensor Design **81**
5.1 Sensors as Tranducers 81
5.1.1 Analog and Digital Sensors 81
5.2 Sensor Inputs on the 6.270 Board 82
5.2.1 Analog Inputs 82
5.2.2 Digital Inputs 82
5.2.3 Connector Plug Standard 83
5.2.4 Sensor Input Wiring 84
5.2.5 The Voltage Divider Circuit 84
5.3 Tactile Sensors 85
5.3.1 Touch Switch 86
5.3.2 Bend Sensor 88
5.3.3 Potentiometer 89
5.4 Light Sensors 89
5.4.1 Photocell 91
5.4.2 Infrared Reflectance Sensor 91
5.4.3 Infrared Slotted Optical Switch 93
5.4.4 Modulated Infrared Light Detector 94
5.5 Other Sensors 94
5.5.1 Magnetism Sensor 94
5.5.2 Motor Current Sensor 95

6 Robot Control **97**
6.1 Basic Control Methods 98
6.1.1 Feedback Control 98
6.1.2 Open-Loop Control 100
6.1.3 Feed-Forward Control 101
6.1.4 Summary 102
6.2 Sensor Calibration 102
6.2.1 Manual Sensor Calibration 102
6.2.2 Dealing with Changing Environmental Conditions 103
6.2.3 Using Persistent Global Variables 104
6.3 Robot Control 104
6.3.1 Sensor Unreliability 105
6.3.2 Task-Oriented Control 106
6.3.3 Coordination of Tasks 110

7 IC Manual **115**
7.1 Getting Started 116
7.2 Using IC 117
7.2.1 IC Commands 117

7.2.2 Line Editing 118
7.2.3 The `main()` Function 119
7.3 A Quick C Tutorial 119
7.4 Data Types, Operations, and Expressions 121
7.4.1 Variable Names 121
7.4.2 Data Types 121
7.4.3 Local and Global Variables 122
7.4.4 Constants 123
7.4.5 Operators 124
7.4.6 Assignment Operators and Expressions 125
7.4.7 Increment and Decrement Operators 126
7.4.8 Precedence and Order of Evaluation 126
7.5 Control Flow 127
7.5.1 Statements and Blocks 127
7.5.2 If-Else 127
7.5.3 While 127
7.5.4 For 128
7.5.5 Break 128
7.6 LCD Screen Printing 128
7.6.1 Printing Examples 129
7.6.2 Formatting Command Summary 129
7.6.3 Special Notes 130
7.7 Arrays and Pointers 130
7.7.1 Declaring and Initializing Arrays 130
7.7.2 Passing Arrays as Arguments 131
7.7.3 Declaring Pointer Variables 131
7.7.4 Passing Pointers as Arguments 132
7.8 The IC Library File 133
7.8.1 Output Control 133
7.8.2 Sensor Input 135
7.8.3 Time Commands 140
7.8.4 Tone Functions 141
7.9 Multi-Tasking 141
7.9.1 Overview 141
7.9.2 Creating New Processes 142
7.9.3 Destroying Processes 143
7.9.4 Process Management Commands 144
7.9.5 Process Management Library Functions 144
7.10 Floating Point Functions 144
7.11 Memory Access Functions 145
7.12 Error Handling 146

7.12.1 Compile-Time Errors 146
7.12.2 Run-Time Errors 146
7.13 Binary Programs 147
7.13.1 The Binary Source File 147
7.13.2 Interrupt-Driven Binary Programs 150
7.13.3 The Binary Object File 154
7.13.4 Loading an `icb` File 154
7.13.5 Passing Array Pointers to a Binary Program 154
7.14 IC File Formats and Management 155
7.14.1 C Programs 155
7.14.2 List Files 155
7.14.3 File and Function Management 156
7.15 Configuring IC 156

A Introduction to 6.270 **157**
A.1 Registration Policy 158
A.2 Kit Fee and Toolkit Fee 158
A.3 Team Organization 159
A.4 6.270 Alumni 160
A.5 Credit Guidelines 160
A.6 Schedule 162
A.6.1 Important Dates 163
A.6.2 Detailed Schedule of the Month's Activities. 165
A.7 Robo-Cup Contest Rules 169
A.7.1 Object 169
A.7.2 Balls 169
A.7.3 The Goal 172
A.7.4 Period of Play 172
A.7.5 Control 173
A.7.6 Infrared Beacon 173
A.7.7 The Contest Playing Table 174
A.7.8 Structure 175
A.7.9 The $10 Electronics Rule 176
A.7.10 Scoring 177
A.7.11 Organizers 177
A.8 Parts List 177

B 6.270 Hardware **183**
B.1 The Microprocessor and Memory 183
B.1.1 Multiplexing Data and Address Signals 184
B.2 Memory Mapping 185

B.2.1 Memory-Mapping the RAM 187
B.2.2 Memory-Mapping with the 74HC138 Chip 188
B.2.3 System Memory Map 191
B.2.4 Digital Inputs 191
B.2.5 Digital Outputs 191
B.2.6 6811 and Memory Schematic 193
B.3 The Motor Drivers 193
B.3.1 The H-Bridge Circuit 195
B.3.2 The H-Bridge with Enable Circuitry 195
B.3.3 The SGS-Thomson Motor Driver Chip 196
B.3.4 Power Considerations 199
B.3.5 Expansion Board Motor and LED Circuitry 201
B.4 Analog Inputs 201
B.4.1 Motor Current Monitoring Circuit 202
B.4.2 Analog Input Multiplexing on the Expansion Board 203
B.5 The Serial Line Circuit 204
B.5.1 Serial Output 204
B.5.2 Serial Input 206
B.6 Battery-Backing the Static RAM 207
B.6.1 Powering the Memory Chip 207
B.6.2 The Power-Off Interrupt 207
B.6.3 The Power-Up Delays 208
B.7 The Infrared Transmission Circuit 209
B.7.1 The IR Beacon 211
B.8 The LCD Display 212
B.9 The Low-Battery Indicator 214

C Printed Circuit Layouts **215**
C.1 Microprocessor Board 216
C.2 Expansion Board 217
C.3 Battery Charger Board 218
C.4 Motor Switch Board 218
C.5 Infrared Beacon Board 219

D Electronic Suppliers **221**
D.1 Introduction 221
D.1.1 Retail Suppliers 221
D.1.2 Surplus Suppliers 222
D.1.3 Ordering Catalogs 222
D.2 The Surplus Companies 223
D.2.1 Surplus Company Listing 223

D.3 The Retail Companies 228

List of Figures

1.1 Proper Soldering Technique 2
1.2 Improper Soldering Technique 3
1.3 Resistor Pack Internal Wiring 5
1.4 Typical Diode Package 6
1.5 Identifying LED Leads 6
1.6 Top View of 14-pin DIP 7
1.7 Top View of 52-pin PLCC 7
1.8 Summary of Polarization Effects 9
1.9 Flat Component Mounting 9
1.10 Upright Component Mounting 10
1.11 Resistor Color Code Table 11
1.12 6.270 Microprocessor Board Component Placement 13
1.13 6.270 Microprocessor Board Header Placement 16
1.14 Motor Chip Stacking Technique 19
1.15 Expansion Board Component Placement 23
1.16 Expansion Board Female Header Mounting 25
1.17 Mounting Method for Male Header Pins 26
1.18 Expansion Board Male Header Pin Placement 27
1.19 LCD Connector Mounting 28
1.20 Battery Charger Component Placement 30
1.21 Two Battery Pack Configurations 32
1.22 Battery Plug and Cable Wiring Diagram 32
1.23 Battery Pack Wiring Diagram 34
1.24 Infrared Transmitter Component Placement 35
1.25 Motor Switch Board Component Placement 37
1.26 Standard Connector Plug Configurations 38
1.27 Step One of Connector Wiring 40
1.28 Step Two of Connector Wiring 40
1.29 Step Three of Connector Wiring 41
1.30 Step Four of Connector Wiring 41
1.31 Motor Housing with Tubing 52

1.32 LEGO Jig for Mounting Polaroid Motor 53
1.33 Servo Motor and Integral Connector Plug 55
1.34 Servo Motor Cable Wiring Diagram 55
1.35 VAXstation 2000 Computer Cable Wiring Diagram 57

2.1 Polaroid Motor Specifications 61
2.2 Experiment to Measure Motor Torque 61
2.3 Example of Several Pulse Width Modulation Waveforms 63

3.1 Table of Cell Characteristics 70
3.2 Battery Charger Schematic Diagram 71

4.1 The Unit LEGO Brick 74
4.2 Perfect 2-Unit Vertical LEGO Spacing 74
4.3 Clamping Two Beams at Perfect Vertical Spacing 75
4.4 Meshing of an 8-Tooth Gear and a 24-Tooth Gear 77
4.5 Diagonal Meshing of an 8-Tooth Gear and a 16-Tooth Gear 77
4.6 Diagonal Meshing of a 16-Tooth Gear and a 24-Tooth Gear 77
4.7 LEGO Gearbox Example 80

5.1 Wiring a Generic Sensor 83
5.2 Sensor Input Wiring, One Sensor 84
5.3 Voltage Divider Schematic 85
5.4 A Typical Microswitch 86
5.5 Robotic Platform Employing Bumper Coupled to Touch Sensor . . . 87
5.6 Touch Switch Circuit 87
5.7 Potentiometer Circuit 90
5.8 Two Optical Shaft Encoder Wheels 92
5.9 Phototransistor and Infrared Emitter Circuit 93

6.1 Driving along a Wall Edge 98
6.2 Using a Bend Sensor to Measure Distance to a Wall 99
6.3 Wall-Following Function 99
6.4 Negotiating a Corner 100
6.5 Negotiating a Corner with Touch Sensor Feedback 101
6.6 Wall Following Function with Exit Condition 107
6.7 Wall Following Function with Exit and Timeout Conditions 109
6.8 Task Analysis of Wall Follow Function with Sensing and Timeout Capability. 110
6.9 Wall Following Function with Exit, Timeout, and Feedback Monitoring Conditions, Page 1 111

6.10 Wall Following Function with Exit, Timeout, and Feedback Monitoring Conditions, Page 2 112

7.1 IC Command-Line Keystroke Mappings 119
7.2 Sample IC Binary Source File: `testicb.asm` 148
7.3 Interrupt Structure Before User Program Installation 150
7.4 Interrupt Structure After User Program Installation 151
7.5 `sysibeep.asm`: Binary Program that Installs into System Interrupt . 153
7.6 Sample IC Binary Object File: `testicb.icb` 154

A.1 Pictorial Schedule of the Month's Activities 164
A.2 Robo-Cup '92 Contest Playing Field Specification 170
A.3 Robo-Cup '92 Contest Goal Specification 171
A.4 6.270 Parts Listing, Page One of Four 179
A.5 6.270 Parts Listing, Page Two of Four 180
A.6 6.270 Parts Listing, Page Three of Four 181
A.7 6.270 Parts Listing, Page Four of Four 182

B.1 Block Diagram of Microprocessor and Memory 184
B.2 Block Diagram of Microprocessor and Memory with Latch 185
B.3 6.270 System Block Diagram 186
B.4 Enabling the Memory 187
B.5 The 'HC138 Address Decoder 189
B.6 Wiring the 'HC138 Address Decoder 189
B.7 6811 System Memory Map 192
B.8 Digital Input Circuit 193
B.9 6811, Memory, Address Decoding and Miscellaneous Circuitry 194
B.10 The H-Bridge Circuit 195
B.11 The H-Bridge with Left-to-Right Current Flow 196
B.12 The H-Bridge with Enable Circuitry 197
B.13 The SGS-Thomson L293 Motor Driver IC 198
B.14 Motor Driver Circuit 200
B.15 Power Filtering and Switching Circuit 201
B.16 Expansion Board Motor and LED Circuitry 202
B.17 Expansion Board Analog Input Circuitry 203
B.18 Host and Board Communications over 3-Wire Serial Link 204
B.19 Serial Line Circuit 205
B.20 Square Wave Consisting of Bursts of 40 Khz Signals 209
B.21 Sharp IR Sensor Decoding IR-Encoded Square Wave 210
B.22 Block Diagram of Infrared Circuitry 210
B.23 Infrared Transmission Circuit 211
B.24 Infrared Beacon Circuit 212

B.25 Low Battery Indicator Circuit 214

C.1 Microprocessor Board, Component Side 216
C.2 Microprocessor Board, Solder Side 216
C.3 Expansion Board, Component Side 217
C.4 Expansion Board, Solder Side 217
C.5 Battery Charger Board, Component and Solder Sides 218
C.6 Motor Switch Board, Component and Solder Sides 218
C.7 Infrared Beacon Board, Component and Solder Sides 219