



## THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

### Wood at Work 2016

Scott Francisco — November 21, 2016

On a bright and chilly October morning, 120 leaders in the diverse fields of forest conservation, public policy, architecture, wood industry, and urban development gathered in Brooklyn's historic waterfront Navy Yard to talk, listen, learn, connect, and plan for the future of our global environment, economy, and culture.

At a time when bridge-building between urban and rural cultures and communities—as well as between producers and consumers, materials and infrastructure, and yes, even political parties across the nation and the world—is needed more than ever, this group was actively forging those connections.

#### Wood at Work 2016



*Watch a short video of conference highlights (go full screen!)*

In a vast 220,000-square-foot ship-building shop, recently renovated to become a green manufacturing center for [Mast Brothers chocolate](#), this international group of experts met for a full day of talks, demonstrations, and roundtables. Over cups of locally-roasted single-origin coffee from [Brooklyn Roasting Company](#) and direct-source chocolate from Mast, they presented, discussed, and debated the latest research, experiences, challenges, and ideas from the trenches of a wood renaissance. The smell of fresh sawdust rose from the entryway as a [Wood-Mizer](#) portable sawmill cut planks from local logs and reclaimed barn timbers. This wood was then transformed by master craftsman Chuck Heydinger as he planed paper-thin name tags for participants and carved a canoe paddle from a freshly-sawn ash plank.


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Wood at Work founder Scott Francisco welcomes participants to the 2016 conference

This was **Wood at Work 2016**, the second convening of the Wood at Work **community of practice** and conference series.

Our mission is to advance the role of wood globally in urban construction, forest conservation, and climate discourse by linking sustainable wood use with global conservation efforts and human well-being.

Our inaugural conference in 2015 centered on the idea that “think globally, act locally” has never held more promise or urgency to solve both social and environmental challenges, and that global cities (like our home base, New York) are in a unique position to positively impact climate change, human health, globalization, and biodiversity—by changing the materials we use to build them.

This year’s conference centered around the idea of “wood as connector,” tying together four timely and vital themes represented by a series of speakers and breakout roundtables:

- Tropical Forests, People, and Wood: Sustainable-use models, procurement policies, and certification schemes that support forest conservation
- Small Forests, Big Impact: Innovation and entrepreneurship in “glocal” wood supply chains
- The Mass Timber Movement: Changing the way we build cities and fight climate change
- Upcycling Trees: Cities and the urban wood reclamation revolution



Left: Wood at Work participants talk during a break; right: a Wood-Mizer sawmill cuts ash planks on site

Formally kicking off the conference was Scott Francisco, founder of **Pilot Projects Design Collective** and Wood at Work. Scott set the stage by framing the crucial role of culture-building in fulfilling Wood at Work’s mission, and by sharing some of his inspirations for founding it. He began by reading a poem, **Essay on Wood** by James Richardson, an ode to the relationship between trees, wood, and people. Quoting Richard Sennett’s book, **The Culture of the New Capitalism**, Scott also emphasized that “narrative,” “usefulness,” and “craftsmanship” are the necessary anchors of a thriving culture—and also fundamental to the Wood at Work story. He illustrated this with stories of his own family’s culture, dedicating the event to his father Bruce Francisco (in attendance), who taught by example the connections and passion that wood can inspire in people from all walks of life. Scott grew up in a home where wood was beautifully present and imbued with creative potential: a slate for invention, craftsmanship, and stories that connect people to one another as well as to their built and natural environments.

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#### Thoughts on Wood at Work 2016:

“There is no convening of this kind as good as Wood at Work—and we go to a lot of them! Timber, because it comes from nature, is about more than commercial values, and Wood at Work understands that.”

—Jeff Spiritos, Principal of Spiritos Properties

“For us, the most valuable thing about Wood at Work is that we’ve had discussions with probably half the people in this room at one point or another, but to have everyone in the same building at the same time is really invaluable and a really great opportunity that we would be hard-pressed to find otherwise.”

—Andrew Ruff, Gray Organschi Architecture and the Timber City research initiative

“I love what Wood at Work is doing and it’s incredibly promising. It’s been more or less under the radar until now, but it’s beginning to surface.”



The cultural significance of the long-standing relationships between people, trees, and wood was further explored by keynote speaker **Robert Penn**, author of *The Man Who Made Things Out of Trees*. Robert traveled to New York from Wales to deliver an inspirational talk based on his two-year odyssey with a single ash tree. Beginning with, "Trees have never needed their stories to be told more than now," Robert went on to explain that the close ties between humans and wood—most particularly wood from the ash tree—go back as far as 5000 BC. Today, our attitudes toward environmental stewardship at large are still deeply linked to the relationships we have with the natural materials found in and around our homes. "We live in an age where we judge ourselves by the developments we make, by our perceived newness," he said. "But really, our future may lie in continuity; in deepening our relationship with nature."



Model saw mills, magazines, and wood-focused books on conference tables

Keynote speaker **Frances Seymour**, Senior Fellow at the Center for Global Development, opened the first theme: "Tropical Forests, People, and Wood" by asserting, "The conversations taking place today are important, urgent, and personal." She spoke about the urgent need to conserve forests in the context of climate change, and the importance of connecting local initiatives to global policies and goals, including improving results-based financing for **REDD+**. These topics are more deeply explored in her forthcoming book *Why Forests? Why Now? The Science, Economics and Politics of Tropical Forests and Climate Change*. Frances led listeners through her own storied experience of the challenges—even for a relative "insider"—of sourcing sustainably produced wood products for her "green" house in Washington, D.C. Her quest for sustainable wood ended when she discovered Wood at Work and our sourcing partnership with Uaxactun, a community-managed forest concession in Guatemala that harvests **Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)**-certified timber. Manchiche, a hardwood species excellent for exterior uses, can now be found on her deck.

Talks followed by **Sarah Jane Wilson**, postdoctoral fellow at International Forestry Resources and Institutions (IFRI) on "The Future of Forest Work;" **Jeff Hayward**, Vice President for Programs at Rainforest Alliance on "Mobilizing Markets for Community Forest Enterprise;" and **Jeremy Radachowsky**, Director of the Mesoamerican Program at **Wildlife Conservation Society**, on "More Trees, Fewer Cows: The Battle Against Cattle in Central America's Forests." Collectively, these talks illustrated how sustainably harvesting from forests can help conserve them by adding value, and provided strategies and ideas to support this.

Beginning the day's second theme, "Small Forests, Big Change," was **Chad Oliver**, a professor at the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies and Director of Yale's Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry. Chad set the scene by presenting the potential of small-scale forestry enterprises to meet global construction needs while supporting local economies and communities, sequestering carbon, and conserving biodiversity. Chad was followed by his student, **Maxwell Webster**; **Sean Mahoney**, a Wood Utilization Forester with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation; **Marie Zahn** from the University of Victoria; **David Kennedy** of the College of Architecture, Design and Construction at Auburn University; **Jonathan Boelkins** of the Fay Jones School of Architecture & Design at University of Arkansas; and **Emily Kingston** of the New England Forestry Foundation. **Corey Brinkema**, President of FSC US, concluded the session by presenting an overview of forest certification processes and a **hot-off-the-press film by FSC** that challenges consumers to choose wood from sources with sustainable forest management practices that support people and forests.

—**Chad Oliver**, Professor of Forestry and Environmental Studies and Director of the Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry at Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies

"There is tremendous potential in this room for us to look at the social contract and grow together with the timber industry."  
—**Jean-Marc DuBois**, Director of Business Development for Nordic Structures

"The conversations taking place today are important, urgent, and personal."  
—**Frances Seymour**, Senior Fellow at the Center for Global Development and Senior Advisor to the David and Lucile Packard Foundation

"New York City—like Wood at Work—is very focused on the new forest economy: generating new expertise and new jobs to restore nature for prosperity instead of using nature for prosperity. It is the city's ultimate goal to recycle all our wood in some way, shape, or form."  
—**Bram Gunther**, President of the Natural Areas Conservancy and Co-Director of the Urban Field Station, the science and research hub of Forestry, Horticulture, and Natural Resources of the New York City Parks Department

"Groups like Wood at Work can start to connect the dots and make wood more interesting to international policy makers. The future of building with concrete and steel is pretty bleak, and now is the time to move forward with wood."  
—**Alan Organschi**, Timber City research initiative, Yale School of Architecture, and Gray Organschi Architecture

"It's good to see what's being done, and to meet people from these companies and organizations that are making a big difference—even if you don't always know about it."  
—**Marie Zahn**, Columbia University and the University of Victoria

"I learned so much today; it was well worth the trip across the Atlantic! If I take anything away, it's that there's a huge amount to be hopeful about. I normally reflect on the ash tree's plight, but yet here in this room, you have 100 people thinking about the future of trees and how we're going to work with them. That future looks bright."

—Robert Penn, author of *The Man Who Made Things Out of Trees*



watch: *The Uxactun-Brooklyn Bridge Forest connection*  
a film by Robert Moass, presented at W@W 2016

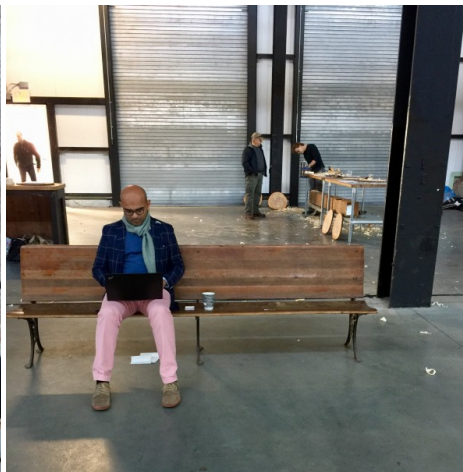


Left: The Forest Stewardship Council's "One Simple Action" video; right: Corey Brinkema, President of FSC

At lunch, over hearty bowls of homemade lentil soup, participants debated and discussed our **four core themes** in roundtable discussion groups. The "Mass Timber" roundtable discussed the growing body of fire test data that supports using wood in urban construction, and how the energy efficient properties of wood buildings make them great candidates to help meet governments' environmental mandates over alternatives like concrete and steel. **Alan Organschi** of the **Timber City** research initiative and the Yale School of Architecture stated, "Groups like Wood at Work can start to connect these dots and make wood more interesting to international policy makers. Mass timber construction has been cooking in Europe for 40 or 50 years; this hasn't happened overnight. The future of building with concrete and steel is pretty bleak; now is the time to move forward with wood."

**Bram Gunther**, President of the **Natural Areas Conservancy** and Co-Director of the Urban Field Station, the research hub of Forestry, Horticulture, and Natural Resources of the New York City Parks Department, summarized the "Upcycling Trees" roundtable by saying, "It was evident that there is a great hunger from local and regional woodworkers to have access to NYC wood to make their goods. In fact, several woodworkers approached me to help advance a milling operation here. The excitement at the table was palpable and increased my energy to get this done here in NYC."

The "Tropical Forest" roundtable focused on the main drivers of deforestation (today: cattle ranching and palm oil) and how small scale, sustainable forestry can counteract them. Jeremy Radachowsky noted that to combat these drivers, "On the ground, in-country, market-based actions can have a real impact," but that this must be combined with changing global cultures around the consumption and procurement of products—like beef and palm oil—that are currently "forest unfriendly."



Speakers Emily Lowenstein of the New England Forestry Foundation and Pratik Raval of Transsolar KlimaEngineering

In the "Small Forests" roundtable, Chad Oliver posed a question that he often asks of industry: "Why not go small, efficient, and high tech?" Smaller trucks, smaller equipment, crowdsourcing, and stronger linkages between consumers and producers could go a long way toward harvesting timber in a way that supports local economies, reduces impact on forests, and creates highly specialized, meaningful work for people in rural and forest communities.

After lunch, **Tanya Luthi**, Structural Engineer with Fast + Epp, opened the afternoon speaker session with a keynote on the "Mass Timber Revolution" theme. Tanya guided the audience through the process of designing Brock Commons, an 18-story mass timber building currently under construction at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Having recently "topped-out," it is currently the tallest wood building in the world, and was erected in just nine weeks with a small crew of laborers. Tanya believes its success can help pave the way for future mass timber buildings in urban environments. "If we've done our job properly," she



said, “we’ve helped to fuel an evolution in wood building. We’ve given other people the tools to go out and do it better.”

Tanya was followed by speakers Alan Organschi; Jeff Spiritos, Principal of Spiritos Properties; **Pratik Raval**, Associate Director of **Transsolar KlimaEngineering**; **Jean-Marc DuBois**, Director of Business Development for **Nordic Structures**; **Marc Rivard**, New England Regional Director, Design & Construction Services for **WoodWorks**; **David Cook**, Associate at **Grimshaw Architects**; and **Robert Maass**, filmmaker and photojournalist, who presented a short film on the **Brooklyn Bridge Forest** and Uoaxactun, a case study in successful community forestry in Guatemala.



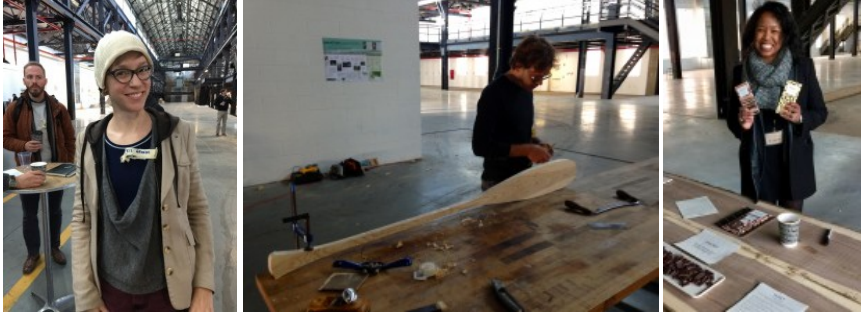
Jeff Hayward of Rainforest Alliance and Sarah Wilson of International Forestry Resources and Institutions

Bram Gunther began the fourth and final session theme, “Upcycling Trees,” by describing NYC’s latest plans for upcycling the 20,000 - 40,000 tons of wood the city disposes of annually. Bram was followed by **Ron Anthony**, a wood scientist with Anthony & Associates, Inc. who outlined the “decision tree” concept for choosing the right wood for a project; Xuemei Li, Adjunct Professor in the **Department of Architectural Science at Ryerson University**; **Jim Birkemeier** of Timbergreen Farm; and **Mike Galvin**, Director of SavATree Consulting Group. **Tian Li**, postdoctoral researcher at the University of Maryland, concluded the session by presenting about the new technology of “transparent wood.”

The conference concluded with an inclusive group discussion led by Scott Francisco and Chad Oliver. Participants and panelists representing each roundtable identified several important and recurring themes from the conference:

- Harnessing the power of supply and demand to shape policies and promote more holistic forest enterprise, specifically in urban forests and small forests.
- Identifying major threats to tropical forests—namely, the beef and palm oil industries—as a starting point for understanding how to help local people and governments conserve them.
- Engaging the big timber industry on issues of employment and sustainability, specifically in the context of the mass timber movement.
- Connecting tradespeople at a range of skill levels with new wood supply chains.
- Tapping into new timber-harvesting technologies that are less invasive to forests.

**Benjamin Walmer**, Founding Architect & Creative Director of BROADLOOM, noted that there are many commonalities between the local food movement and the “good wood” movement, and urged that both seek to collaborate and learn from each other. Jim Birkemeier agreed, saying, “Local food is way ahead of us; let’s get local wood going, too!” Lessons to be learned include the value that small-scale, labor-intensive practices can add to the quality of a product, and the many benefits of a producer-consumer relationship based on shared values and trust.



Left: Participants get wood shaving name tags; center: a woodworker crafts a canoe paddle from ash sawn on site; right: a staffer hands out sustainably-produced coffee and chocolate

As wine was served to participants on cross-cut log “trays” fresh from the Wood-Mizer, Scott wound down the discussion by announcing Wood at Work’s next steps. These included creating a wood-sourcing database that would connect producers with consumers and provide information about sustainable wood products (“If you can buy single origin coffee,” he asked, “why not single origin wood?”), and a special issue in a peer reviewed journal, to feature expanded versions of speakers’ talks.

Finally, and most urgently, Scott said Wood at Work will create a resolution that builds on its original one, drafted last year ([detailed in the sidebar here](#)). This revised resolution will serve to galvanize the group to act, and can be used to further the cause by stating clearly to government officials and policymakers that a diverse group of international experts support, endorse, and have evidence to prove the power of using responsibly-sourced wood in city building projects and infrastructure as a way to conserve forests globally and empower local communities.

These are only some of the fruitful collaborations the Wood at Work team will strive to achieve in the coming year, with the continued engagement and support of our committed community of practice, and through new and ongoing fundraising efforts.



Participants at a lunchtime roundtable discussion

Scott wrapped up with a renewed thanks to the [Wood at Work 2016 sponsors](#): [Wood-Mizer](#), [Mast Brothers](#), [WoodWorks](#), [Nordic Structures](#), [Spiritos Properties](#), [New York Heartwoods](#), [Structurlam](#), [DR Johnson](#), [Brooklyn Roasting Company](#), and [Brand New Industries](#). He asserted that that these companies offered “a different kind of sponsorship,” since all of their work comes from many of the same values and goals as Wood at Work’s. Their support and kinship are greatly appreciated.

Robert Penn closed with these words about his experience of the day:

“I learned so much; it was well worth the trip across the Atlantic! If I take anything away, it’s that there’s a huge amount to be hopeful about. I normally reflect on the ash tree’s plight, but here in this room, you have 100 people thinking about the future of trees and how we’re going to work with them.”

“That future looks bright.”



Chuck Heydinger presents the completed canoe paddle made from the ash log sawn by Dave Scott on the Wood-Mizer mill

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