



THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

A whirlwind NYC day with MAS, the LES Ecology Center, and local menswear designer Robert James

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Wednesday was a genuine whirlwind for Pilot Projects, filled with conferences and cargo bikes, bioswales, sewing machines, and streetscapes, all underscored by gale-force gusts off the Hudson.

We started the day at [New York Ideas 2015](#), an annual event hosted by The Aspen Institute and *The Atlantic* that "highlights the biggest people, ideas and trends that will change the future."

We were there to support [Municipal Art Society](#) (MAS) Board President Vin Cipolla in conversation with Carol Coletta, Vice President of Community and National Initiatives for the Knight Foundation. Their talk, "Keeping the New York in New York" focused on the ecosystem of our urban community and entrepreneurship.

Vin came out strong on one of our favorite themes: rethinking how New York City envisions and plans our neighborhoods holistically, coupling an appreciation for what we already have (such as historic buildings and industrial districts) with an awareness of what's happening now and what's to come (such as a rising small business sector and population growth). This "systems thinking" view would help us balance our commercial and residential densities, and encourage diversity and resilience by valuing what's happening at the "sidewalk level" as well as what's going on 15—or 50—stories up.



Carol and Vin talk at New York Ideas 2015

We've been working and learning alongside MAS for some time, and we're very excited to be joining them and their [Committee for Urban Entrepreneurship](#) (CUE) to help develop and sustain a diverse entrepreneurial

ecosystem in Midtown West that will coincide with the advent of the new Penn Station. MAS and Pilot Projects agree it's more important than ever to think about the kind of neighborhood that's possible in this area, which plays host to one of New York's biggest transit hubs and serves as a gateway for residents and visitors alike to all other parts of the city.

We're gearing up for this tactical, transformative project that will involve many of our favorite concentrations —physical spaces, cultural shifts, entrepreneurial ideas—and look forward to sharing more about our progress in the coming months.

We took an afternoon break from the Ideas event to get our hands dirty with the [Lower East Side Ecology Center](#), organic apparel company [Loomstate](#), and their volunteers, who were installing four new bioswales on Allen Street in Chinatown. Last year, [the two groups partnered to build a bioswale](#) on public land on the Lower East Side waterfront. (A bioswale is a bed of dirt, plants, and other filtering materials designed to absorb excess rainwater and pollutants which might otherwise trigger an overflow of a city's water treatment systems during heavy rains and floods.) Following that bioswale's great success, they endeavored to repeat the process on this lengthy bike and pedestrian mall that's often overwhelmed with water during storms.



Getting down with a new bioswale!

It was good clean fun helping dig holes for cobblestones and plant resilient native seedlings with some cool people. Now we're looking forward to the next downpour so we can go see these 'swales in action! Our thanks and hats off to our friends at these great organizations, who always do good work.

Last but certainly not least, back at New York Ideas, Pilot Projects founder and director Scott Francisco and Jonathan Gouveia, a member of CUE, led a walking tour focused on urban entrepreneurship. Stops included the iconic Starrett-Lehigh Building, now home to the [Centre for Social Innovation](#), among many other entrepreneurial concerns; [The High Line](#) linear park, which has helped to revitalize West Chelsea; [Revolution Rickshaws](#), the human-powered transport company founded and owned by our friend Gregg Zuman; and a visit to the manufacturing headquarters of [Robert James](#), a New York City fashion designer and entrepreneur.



Clockwise from top left: Scott discusses aspects of the Starrett-Lehigh Building with the tour group; on the road with Gregg of Revolution Rickshaws; outside and inside Robert James' Garment District studio

Robert gave us an up-close and personal tour of his clothing operation, located in the heart of the Garment District, and illustrated for us all the love and passion that small garment makers put into their businesses. From sourcing material to finishing samples to stocking items in the shop, Robert and other boutique fashion entrepreneurs manage every aspect of their businesses with care and devotion. We also got a sense of the continuing importance of the Garment District itself to the success of today's small fashion enterprises. "It's like a family here," Robert said of his neighborhood. "We all take care of each other."

Robert has three retail locations in NYC, but we learned so much from visiting his home base that we never would have in a store. We are grateful to him for giving us this glimpse into the lives of some of New York's most committed and hard-working creatives. (He also makes beautiful clothes—[check him out!](#))

Every day at Pilot Projects, we're lucky to connect with New Yorkers who embody what NYC is all about: vitality, good ideas, energy, openness, collaboration... But yesterday, we got a particularly good dose.

Thank you to all our friends and colleagues for continuously enriching our lives and our city.

Tags: [municipal art society](#), [nyc](#)

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