



Scott talks about the BBF project with Uaxactún residents

## THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

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### Running the participatory design marathon in Central America

April Greene — March 24, 2015

What do running a marathon and creating lasting change in global systems have in common?

For one, neither is quick or easy. But both are complex and inspiring challenges, and those who tackle them stand to reap benefits of many kinds.

Right now, **Pilot Projects** is **grappling hands-on** with one of the most difficult problems facing the future of humanity, and we're learning these lessons first hand.

If that sounds like an ambitious claim, well, that's where we like to find ourselves.

We believe the **Brooklyn Bridge Forest** (BBF) project we're undertaking in partnership with the tropical forest community in Uaxactún, Guatemala is truly revolutionary and stands to change the way the world sees the relationship between supply chains, the environment, and human culture.

Here's why.

#### **Community forest management: The heart of the matter**

Fortunately (and perhaps surprisingly to some), Uaxactún's natural reserve is already being stewarded with world-class forest management practices, a state of affairs that is sadly not the same in many other of the world's major forests. OMYC, the forest management cooperative in Uaxactún, makes and utilizes amazingly detailed maps which illustrate where they should harvest a small number and species of trees in a relatively small area each year.



The Uaxactún forest from above, and Jeremy with Marlin, the tech lead at OMYC

These annual management plans are based on painstaking recordkeeping that identifies all the trees above a certain size, records exactly where they are on a GPS, and takes into account all kinds of site details like nearby bodies of water; the presence of allspice or xate, two other indigenous exports; and archeological

ruins. OMYC even earmarks the very best tree specimens as “seed trees,” which will never be cut down so that they can continue to reproduce.

Uaxactún is already putting thought, heart, and planning into maintaining their forests. What we can offer them is a bigger international platform from which to show their successes and a better market for their ultra sustainable products—the world should know! (We must admit, even we are impressed every time we visit.)

The community could also be teaching others around them these best practices, but they’re not all that well-connected. By investing in Uaxactún, we’re raising their profile locally so that neighboring forest communities can learn from these successes.

## Education

For a rural community in a nation not known for its affluence, Uaxactún has a methodical and functional education system. But when we met with their teachers and education council to ask how the BBF project might contribute, they were interested in getting help integrating curriculum about their amazing natural context into the mix, and in how we might bring their forest more international exposure.

As it is, students draw trees and forests in their art classes, as that’s what they’re surrounded by, but it’s evident there’s a great opportunity here for more formal education—and publicity—about their unique natural setting.

And for us, there’s a great opportunity to develop our integrative thinking skills as we look for ways to inspire these students with ideas from both close to home and far away.

Scott led a suspension bridge building class as an after-school elective to tie in an explanation of Pilot Projects’ work and presence in Uaxactún with a lesson about the amazing material that grows all around the kids’ homes and school. Happily, the string-and-planks exercises, meant to illustrate strength testing and the principles of geometry used by the Brooklyn Bridge, kept the kids engaged and excited from start to finish.

In the same spirit, Sarah Wilson led a tree-banding workshop to show students how to determine the age and other characteristics of trees with this simple procedure. We’ll write more about the merits of tree banding in a future post.





We didn't go to Uaxactún with many answers; we just know that education is most people's bridge between local culture and the global economy, and we wanted to see how we could help encourage a love of the forest on that front.

The teachers told us, "Whatever you need to continue what you're doing, just let us know."

## Local industry

There's a small woodshop in Uaxactún that turns out impressive furniture, inlays, and other wood products using scraps from the 13 species of hardwood processed at the local timber mill. We were really impressed with the craftsmanship there, and with the reuse angle, but knew the workers must be facing challenges of some kind, and asked for their thoughts.

They said they just don't have a large market for selling their wares, and therefore aren't making much money. So we're now thinking of ways we could help introduce the shop to the NYC market—which we're pretty sure would fall for gorgeous, handmade, recycled wood furniture from Central America.



*The team at the local woodworking shop*

The woodshop already employs a dozen craftsmen with no shortage of skills or environmental awareness. But this small craft industry could be having a bigger, better financial impact on Uaxactún, as well as benefitting other communities in the region.

We're excited to begin working with the shop to determine the best ways to refine their products and process for a wider audience. We also might be able to offer them some new design thinking as they consider expanding their product line.

## Community process (local and worldwide) & research

How do you hold a community meeting in Uaxactún?

You start with a soccer tournament—which you lose—then you take over the basketball court, rig up a generator, run a bedsheet between a couple of goal posts, plug in a projector, and ask everyone in the community to come down and join in a conversation.

And, of course, you serve food!



*Jeremy Radachowsky takes center court at our community meeting in Uaxactún*

We had been planning this event for some time, but things "in the field" often have a way of winding up differently than outlined in emails.

We were surprised and delighted to be joined by about 100 adults and 100 kids from Uaxactún. We wanted to introduce ourselves formally, and to make sure everyone knew our names and felt comfortable

coming to us with any questions or thoughts throughout the trip. It definitely worked—at least in that everyone seemed to remember our names (the teenage boys were particularly good at remembering Sarah's).

And after the formalities, we were treated to a demonstration of the historic Mayan ball game in which young men traditionally competed for their lives. (But in this case, perhaps, for their reputations among the teenage girls.) We were impressed.



Play ball! (Did we mention no hands or feet allowed?)

In a project like this (well, in most any project!), good personal connections are essential. For the BBF project, one reason why is that there's still tons of research to do, and good research can only take place when there's a solid foundation of trust and intelligence on both sides.

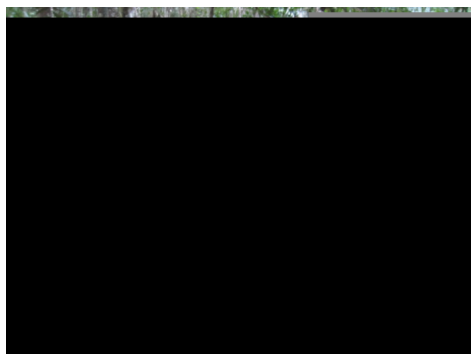
We're engaging institutions like the [Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy](#) to help us collect new data, test our assumptions, and generate more buzz within the worldwide environmental community. We're also bringing conservation leaders like [Rainforest Alliance](#), New York City government, and [World Monuments Fund](#) (now an official partner with Pilot Projects) into the conversation.

We're proud to be garnering attention from activists ranging from venerable players like these to individuals like [Jungle Bird!](#) They're all seeing the value in what's happening here.

### What's a trip without a trek?

We couldn't write about our time in Uaxactún without mentioning our forest treks.

It's vital to note that the BBF project is by no means only about timber production. To give ourselves a real-world reminder of that, we took a break from conversations about the economics of it and delved into the forest—without a guide—for three days of unfiltered natural wonder.



A jungle hammock and two trees make a nice bed; making coffee is a breakfast necessity, even in the rainforest

It was a very challenging trip. We navigated through difficult terrain, camping where we could and keeping a close eye on our water supply (as water is scarce this time of year). We also got an intimate introduction to chiggers and ticks, but were more pleasantly surprised to see fresh tracks left by jaguar, tapir, and peccaries, and to glimpse snakes, monkeys, birds, and scorpions live and in person. The local maps of this area were of varying reliability, and in many cases we went off the trail anyway, but a compass and GPS were able to provide enough guidance.

The BBF project celebrates the greater value of forests—beyond their extractive and economic resources—and we were so lucky to have a chance to experience some of that value in a very personal way. We hope others will be able to join us on a future trip.

## To sum it all up...

This is a participatory design marathon, and we're making great strides and learning through hands-on immersion.

We're engaging directly with the people and forests of Uaxactún through culture, technology, markets, and regulation—the four systemic pillars of participatory design, according to Pilot Projects.

Leaders from around the world are already looking to the BBF project and the Uaxactún story as living examples of best practices in community forest management.

Taking on this challenging partnership in another hemisphere is making us better designers.

We purposefully say yes to complex projects like this to hone our chops for world-class work. We're building our capacity, challenging ourselves, and helping to ensure the long-term viability of tropical forests—one of the world's most important resources—for generations to come.

BBF has plenty left to accomplish. Yet we know there's one goal we've already met: We've brought people together from across continents who can help each other transform the way we treat one another and our environment.

We're inspired to keep running.

Tags: [brooklyn bridge forest](#), [participatory design](#), [wildlife conservation society](#), [guatemala](#), [rainforest alliance](#), [world monuments fund](#)

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