## T H E **S A N D B O X** B L O G

### Craftsmanship meets innovation at Eigenworks

April Greene — March 29, 2016

"It was so clear to me how important a vision for this space was, but it was hard to know what form that vision would take, and how to get everyone on board," says Alan Armstrong on the office of his Guelph, Ontario-based data analysis company, Eigenworks. "Scott and Pilot Projects helped develop and affirm this vision, and take it further than I could have on my own."

A strong vision is at the heart of every successful business, and Eigenworks is no exception. As founder and CEO, Alan's vision for his company has grown and reshaped since its beginnings in 2008, when it was 100% virtual: he and his employees all worked in different offices. As the business grew, Alan brought a few members of the team together in one of Guelph's tech-oriented co-working spaces—an arrangement that began to hint at the power of working all together in one place. Within a few years, Alan realized that "if we were going to accelerate and grow, we would all need to be in the same space a lot more. We needed to talk to each other more, have water cooler conversations, capture a few humanizing seconds together here and there amid the busyness of work. That's almost impossible to do when you're in different places."


*Alan expresses his vision to his team in the raw space*


*The Eigenworks team creates a workplace plan in the Sandbox*




*Locally-reclaimed wood, windows, and doors help set the tone for a workplace that's about people and place*

Alan began looking for a space he could make Eigenworks' own. He found a 1,300-square-foot storefront in Guelph's historic downtown, and asked Scott to help him envision what his company's new home could look like. The twenty-year veteran of the software industry explained that his line of work can feel "invisible, and hard to put your hands on." People don't use software in a tactile way, and the absence of that

connection to the work (as opposed to, say, a vocation like carpentry) was something he felt at Eigenworks and wanted to address.

Alan engaged Pilot Projects to help him take the next step in this more physical, personal direction. He explained that he loved the raw space, but understood that how he designed it could either fit, benefit, and elevate Eigenworks, or reduce it to a "normal," bland, unexciting office that didn't have much to do with his unique company. And he was concerned not only with making the best use of the space for his employees and clients, he also wanted to make sure that Eigenworks' personality and values were clearly expressed in the way the office looked and functioned. "I wanted to brand the Eigenworks experience here," he says.
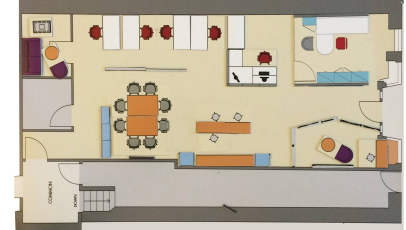

A variety of strategies are explored






Industrial steel sash windows add a sense of grounding while maintaining a modern aesthetic

As the Pilot Projects team got to know Eigenworks better, it became clear that Alan's vision to enrich the physical identity of his company came from many places—not just from the understanding that teams work better when they work face-to-face, and a desire to make their work feel more hands-on, but also from a respect for the value of craftsmanship, a commitment to the efficacy of the co-creation process, and the understanding that investing in a company's culture through its environment pays great dividends over time. These are all values at the core of Pilot Projects' work as well.

In our approach to design, we're always looking for ways to bring people together to enrich their interactions, and to help our clients co-create better spaces that effectively build their workplace culture. To help achieve this, we begin every workplace design project by bringing in the Sandbox, our signature collaborative design tool. The Sandbox gets as many as possible of an organization's stakeholders around an actual table to talk—in real time and using moveable models that represent their shared space—about the needs, goals, and problems they see in their working environment. When all staff members participate in the co-creation process, everyone is exposed to each other's ideas, feels like a part of the workplace culture, and takes more ownership of and buy-in over "what happens next," even before the space is built out.
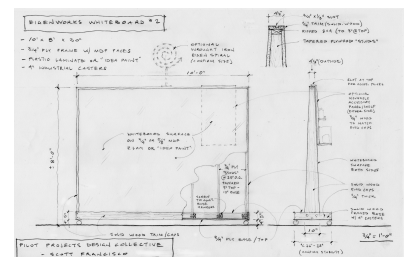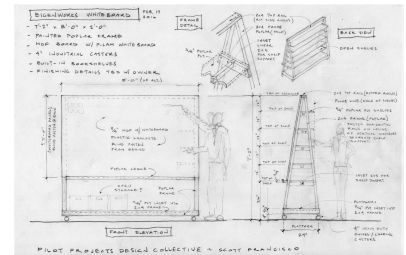

Digital models and drawings detail out the concepts




Top: Eigenworks' office; employees participate in a Sandbox session. Bottom: the raw space


Reclaimed wood used to construct office enclosure

In the case of Eigenworks, the Sandbox dealt with an additional concern: what does it look like when a tech company that's always been virtual seeks to become more physical? How does the concept of innovation—a theme so central to the development of technology—meet craftsmanship: the concept of doing a job well for its own sake? How can efficiency—one of the hallmarks of innovation—work effectively with the values of

craftsmanship, which are staked to the more social ideas of mentorship, learning, and demonstration? Scott and Pilot Projects often explore the dialectic between innovation and craftsmanship to better understand and create a balanced perspective from which to work.

For example, in Scott's paper "The Innovation Paradox: How Innovation Products Threaten the Innovation Process" (originally published in the journal *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*), he reasons:

"...the cognitive and cultural attributes that are vital to innovation, creativity, risk-taking, and complex problem solving are actually increasingly at risk the more 'innovative' (and hands-off) our products, gadgets, and environments become. Research on the core skills and mental structures necessary for innovation find that they are best cultivated in hands-on, socio-spatial environments. Yet much of our current design thinking sees advancement as removing 'man' further and further from 'machine.' This conflict between innovation products and process is the innovation paradox."


*Industrial reclaimed windows for office enclosure*

| Values of Innovation | Values of Craftsmanship |
| --- | --- |
| Exploring new ideas | Mentorship |
| Replicability / scalability | Peer to peer learning |
| Standing out in the market | Good work for its own sake / satisfaction |
| Efficiency | Culture |
| Power of data and information | Hands on experience |
| Exponential growth | Stability |
| Transforming the context | Protecting the context |

When we "Sandboxed" the space with Eigenworks' team members, we were seeking to design an environment that would stimulate innovative thinking rather than stifle it. Here are just a few of the schemes we developed as a result; all have been brought to fruition:

■ Because many of Eigenworks' clients communicate with the company via video conference, "we wanted them to have the experience of seeing us in a physical space and getting a sense of who we are from that," says Alan. So we made an attractive glass "iconic interview studio" central to the office's new layout. It gets great natural light and has a polished, modern feel. Eigenworks' clients are central to its business; why shouldn't they take center stage in the office, too?


*Custom whiteboard construction in the shop*

■ We decided to expose and refurbish the original maple floors that had been covered for years by layers of linoleum, and to source as much other wood as possible from the local salvage yard, including several beautiful vintage doors. All of it was hand-picked (and some of it much-discussed!) by Alan's dedicated team of builders. Industrial steel sash windows contributed another element of historic, hands-on energy.

■ To stay true to its identity as a tech company, we also wanted to keep Eigenworks' space sleek and modern-looking, while letting some nods to its historic surroundings keep things grounded. "Now clients who walk into the space get the feeling that they're not at some humdrum local company," Alan says. "They get the impression that we're tuned in, serious, stable—and cool."


*Wheeling in the moveable whiteboard wall*

*Kitchen cafe area in the new space*

Today, many organizations are shying away from investing in their workspaces on Eigenworks' level. But our physical work environment is one of the indispensable tools of our trade—whether that trade is carpentry or software—and to invest in it wisely is to make a sound investment in a company's greater future. Scott's paper "A Tale of Two Hammers: Workplace as a Tool for Organization-Craft" poses this question: "How would our lives be different if our organizations (our own and our clients') thought about the workplace like craftsmen think of their tools?"

We're lucky to work with clients like Alan, who—no matter their industry—are building companies driven by a culture of innovation, participation, and craftsmanship.

"We have a real presence now in this town now," he says. "Our beautiful sign hangs out over the city and lets people know we're here."
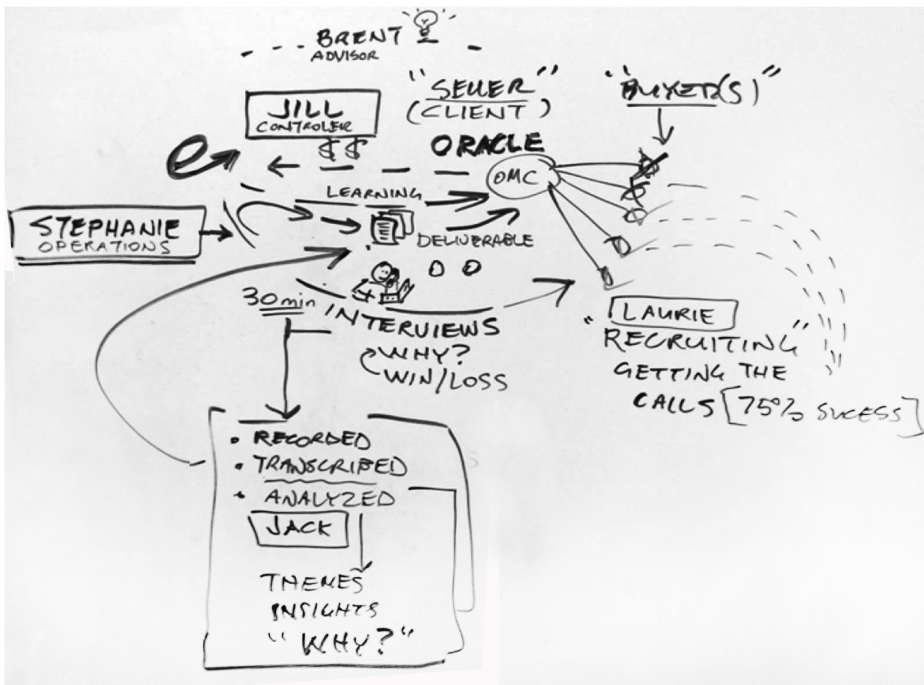

*Eigenworks' Team Diagram*

Tags: participatory design, workspace design, innovation, collaboration, sandbox

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