

THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

Eating at the Edge of Architecture: A dinner conversation on the future of cross-disciplinary collaboration

April Greene — July 20, 2015

"Engineering is essential to architecture, but engineering can never answer the 'why?' " Pilot Projects' Scott Francisco asserted at a recent [American Institute of Architects](#) (AIA) think tank event.

"Design is distinct from science in that it begins and ends with human values and vision," he said. "Architects should cultivate great collaborative relationships with the sciences, with engineering and research. But we must not be distracted by the current obsession with measurement. This has become a real threat to our profession."

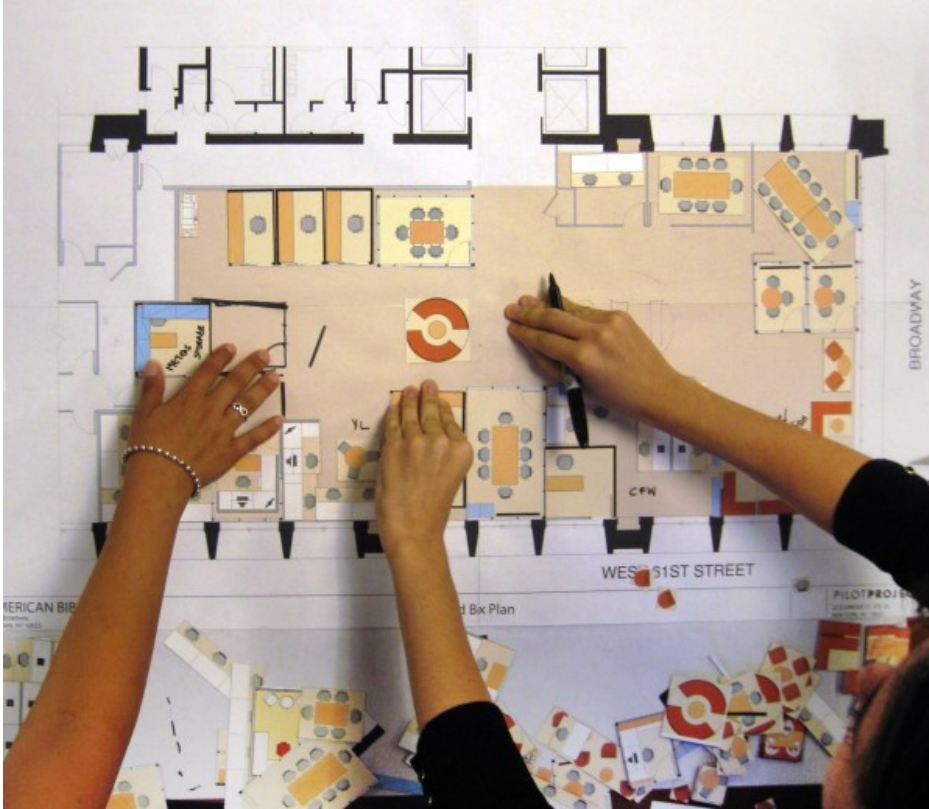
On July 16, a diverse group of 15 academics, architecture and design practitioners, anthropologists, and nonprofit and government leaders gathered at the AIA New York chapter's headquarters, the Center for Architecture in Manhattan, for a dinner, discussion, and debate entitled "Edge Collaborations: Creative Partnership with Social Science." The event was one in a year-long series of "Edge Dialogues" initiated by Tomas Rossant, the 2015 AIA New York chapter president. (The [public version of this program will take place on August 6](#); Scott will be speaking.)

The Center for Architecture is undergoing a major renovation, and the event was held in a large room currently under construction. The dinner table was, appropriately, decorated with centerpieces of brightly-colored construction materials: levels, drywall screws, cordless drills, and caution tape.

As framed by co-host Melissa Marsh, the evening sought to "map out new ground for novel architectural collaborations, particularly with practitioners and researchers in the social sciences."

"Architects have the opportunity today to tap into vast amounts of data and research that can improve design outcomes," she said. "New technologies allow insights into user behavior on a massive scale. It's time architects incorporated what has become default in many other industries."

"Scott and I share the idea that design starts from a very human place, but then we branch off," she said. "The way Scott practices is beautifully classic, reinforcing the tradition of connecting with people directly. But now we have social media, heaps of data, computer technology... And I see all of that as a way of scaling what Scott does, not manipulating or industrializing it."



The Sandbox is a participatory approach to decision-making. According to Scott, no amount of research can tell a team how their space should be laid out. It requires leadership, good design, and transparent constraints to arrive at that conclusion. Melissa sees the Sandbox as "a perfect representation of unmediated social research: people just put their things where they want them to go, and that's the data that's collected."

Beside Scott and Melissa, the evening's participants included Melissa's co-host Eve Klein, an architect and planner; Mindy Thompson Fullilove, a research psychiatrist and professor of clinical psychiatry; Susan Chin, Executive Director of the [Design Trust for Public Space](#); and Keith Jundanian, a behavioral researcher and building evaluator for the U.S. Department of State, among others.

Before starting their own firms, Melissa and Scott both worked for renowned architect and strategist Frank Duffy at DEGW, the international consultancy Duffy co-founded and largely led for over 40 years. After initially meeting at MIT in 2003, Melissa and Scott became good friends at DEGW, and remain so today, though they have taken somewhat diverging professional paths.

Melissa is a workplace strategist and founder of the design research consultancy [PLASTARC](#), while Scott is the founder of [Pilot Projects Design Collective](#). These two small New York City-based firms share a common vision for human-centered design problem solving, but while PLASTARC adds value by integrating quantitative research, Pilot Projects bases its work on participatory design and [Actor Network Theory](#).

"All the participants brought a great depth of experience from different professional perspectives," Scott said. "But I noticed that a lot of the conversations still centered on the notion of 'optimization'—a term I've become increasingly wary of.

"The things that are easiest to 'optimize' are often the things that are least important to the human project. But metrics and 'measurable outcomes' tend to pay the bills. This fuels the idea that designers should behave more like scientists. When designers reduce their work to quantifiable research, though, I often wonder what kind of interests and outcomes are really being represented: end users' or facilities managers'?" This concern has been a theme in Scott's writing, [speaking](#), and design practice for the last 10 years.

Melissa sees the power of data as something that should be integrated into architecture: "I think that through rigorous observation, designers can discover things that are missing from the world," she said.

She has written about the "[social data era](#)," "in which people are increasingly creating their own data. Architects now have the ability to incorporate all this new information into our work, and if we don't, I think we're in big trouble," she said. "If our definition of architecture doesn't expand to include the social sciences, we miss an opportunity to be a discipline of the next generation."

Before Scott entered NYC's burgeoning design strategy field in 2005, he had practiced architecture and was the first-year director at the University of Kentucky College of Architecture. Returning to study at MIT in 2003, he explored the relationship between architects and engineers in an academic paper for then-professor Frank Duffy. In [A Dialogic Tectonic \[2004\]](#), he questioned the tendency to meld or merge the two professions. Instead, he argued for greater distinction, understanding, and mutual respect, three factors he believes lead to exciting and productive dialogue.

"Is there an ideal relationship between an architect and engineer?" Scott asked in the paper. "Should architects, through the logical tutelage of the engineer, begin to design in a way that is 'rational', 'efficient' and infused with structural order and economy? Or perhaps the engineer, under the charismatic spell of the architect, should discover 'spatial complexity', 'plasticity', 'formal freedom' 'process' and 'conceptual intent'?"

His answer: diversity and dialogue can produce higher-level outcomes than either profession is capable of attaining by working alone—or by working from inside an all-assimilating professional melting pot.



The Center for Architecture (image credit: Redesign Revolution)

Not long after his guest lectureship at MIT, Frank Duffy also weighed in on the confusion between design and research in a 2005 paper he presented to the Royal British Institute of Architects, titled *Research, practice and architectural knowledge*:

"Of course, both 'Design' and 'Research' are vitally important to the profession and teaching of architecture," he wrote. "However, conflating these two essentially different activities is, to say the least, confusing and unhelpful."

"Compared to the skills that an architect needs to be successful in 'imaging', 'presenting' and 'testing' a design project, those that are required to conduct valuable research within a building type, such as the office, are very different. ... Being a successful designer doesn't necessarily guarantee the discipline to carry out a research project. And being a successful researcher certainly does not give instant access to the wonderful gift of design imagination."

The lively dinner discussion went past its allotted time and was taken to the sidewalk outside the Center for Architecture, then continued over drinks nearby.

"My 'closing remarks' raised what we might be losing if we continue to confuse design with research," said Scott. "I think designers need to more fully embrace their role as advocates and cultural leaders. We need to drive at the questions: What is the good life? What do we want for ourselves and each other? We should embrace the fact that these are subjective questions."

"We shouldn't be distracted from our core mission: to understand and advocate for things that are good, worth pursuing, worth fighting for," he said. "This advocacy requires dialogue, and dialogue is an approach to building community that is not a research activity; it does not result in a report of quantitative outcomes and measurements."

The organizers of this Edge Dialogues event are already planning the next.

"The dinner and panel are just the beginning of a larger and ongoing discussion that we expect will take root in the field of architecture and research," they said in a follow-up email to participants.

"In order to jump start program ideas, we would like to ask each of you to share projects, initiatives or even anecdotes and ideas which you find to be exemplar of our discussion. We are aiming to start the program by capturing the attention of our audience, demonstrating the power we know to be the impact of social research on design."

A public forum on Thursday, August 6 will further explore the topics covered at the dinner. You can find [more](#)

[information and the registration details here.](#)

Your turn: How do you see the potential for architecture and the social sciences to intersect?

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