



THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

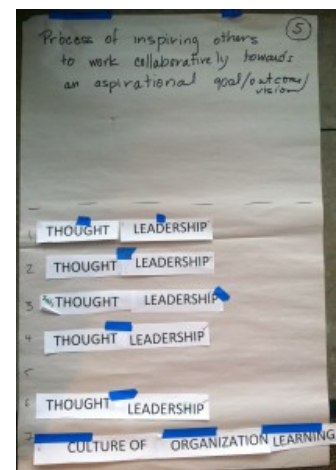
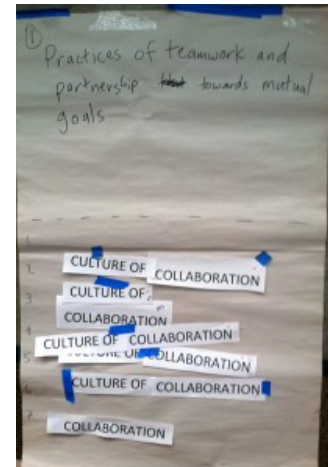
What the FREC? Two days in Detroit with Ford and the Sandbox

Scott Francisco — January 29, 2015

Over the past year, we've been doing more and more work in Detroit. It's a remarkable city on the edge of making an historic comeback as the next center of American manufacturing innovation, and we're always glad to be there. You can read about our work with the [World Policy Institute and Clinton Global Initiative](#) and about the burgeoning [Detroit Innovation Factory \(IF-D\)](#) on our blog. (You can also read our recent article in Harlem's [Black Star News](#) all about participatory design—exactly the kind of work we just did in Detroit!)

Earlier this month, we motored to Motown again, this time commissioned by [The Ford Fund](#) to lead a two-day workshop at the the [Ford Resource and Engagement Center \(FREC\)](#) in Southwest Detroit. We're exploring a partnership with Ford in the IF-D, and this was—among other great outcomes—a step toward securing that relationship.

It was great for Pilot Projects to be recognized by the Ford Fund as thought leaders in this endeavor. We were able to use the skills and services we offer to boost the collaboration effectiveness of the FREC "partner" organizations who are delivering best-in-class social services to this hard hit but resilient city and neighborhood. We believe Pilot Projects' greatest value lies in opening people's minds to new ideas and possibilities that are relevant and powerful for them—especially when coupled with collaborative, concrete, hands-on activities.





Many hands make much use of our Sandbox



Team competition got a bit fierce during our "Collaboration Balderdash" exercise

If you haven't heard of the book *Spare Parts*, check it out. "The story of four undocumented teens from an underfunded high school who bested some of the country's brightest engineers and created award-winning robots is a testament to the power of innovation and the importance of mentorship." Sounds a lot like what we envision happening at the Detroit Innovation Factory!

FREC is a young and ambitious organization, and they're taking time during their first full year in operation to evaluate and refine their vision and approach. Self-described as "a client-directed community center where people can learn new skills, obtain services, and develop talents," FREC brings select **area nonprofits** together to serve their neighborhood. In the two-day workshop we held there with the **Henry Ford Learning Institute**, we made terrific progress toward helping FREC achieve this mission.

Here's an overview of what we did, learned, and delivered:

1) Though FREC occupies a large physical space, most of their partner nonprofits are not permanently located in the building, so finding a rhythm for genuine collaboration has been tough. Using the **Sandbox**, our signature tool for collaborative design, we helped Executive Director Carmen Mattia, her staff, and FREC's partner organizations better envision the building's future from a space-planning perspective.

2) While the terms "innovation" and "collaboration" are used a lot these days, we believe a key third leg is missing from the equation: "craftsmanship." A big part of our discussion focused on these concepts and the balance between them: innovation is about adapting to new problems and creating new solutions to existing problems, whereas craftsmanship is about consistency, the pursuit of excellence for its own sake, and co-created values and traditions. Success in either requires dedication.

So how can these concepts overlap, and where does collaboration fit in? Our conversation shifted from abstract to concrete as we explored questions like:

- How would you define craftsmanship and innovation from your experience?
- How do innovation and craftsmanship factor in when developing a team?
- Should every person on a team be expected to excel at both?
- How do these concepts work together to make a business or other venture successful?

3) Coming back down to the ground with our diverse group of Detroit locals and recent transplants, we began working on a physical map of Southwest Detroit to identify particular features and possibilities: boundaries were re-drawn, and notes with phrases like "border patrol," "diversity", "high gang activity", "historic", and "industrial scrap yards" soon filled the page.

The exercise gave us a much more vivid overview of the area, and even some life-long Detroiters were surprised by what they learned. Practical as well as fantastical ideas for potential connections and interventions abounded. (The slogan "What the FREC?" was coined by one participant in an effort to advertise the organization in an enticing way. We thought that was pretty catchy.)



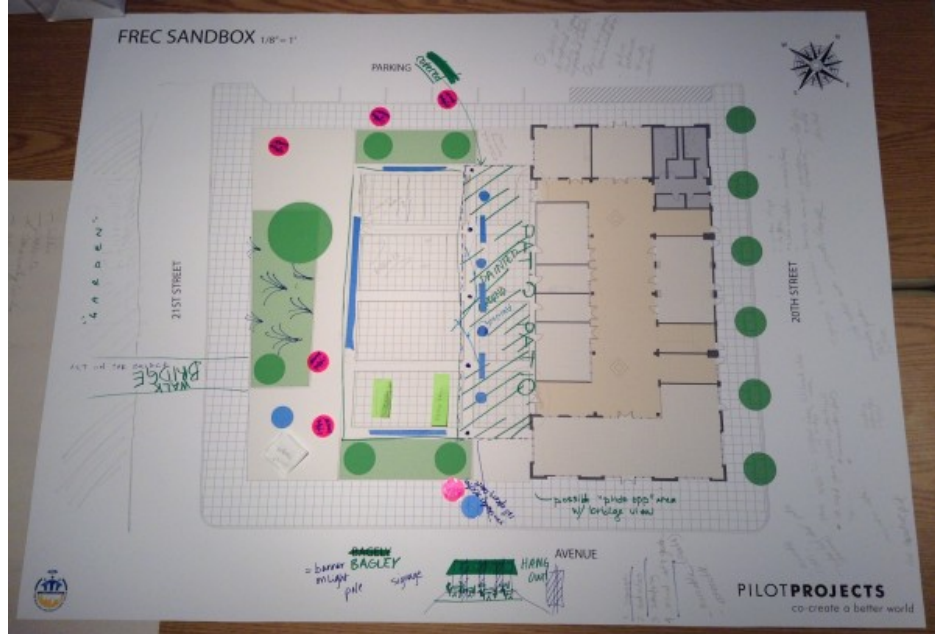
FREC's annotated map of Southwest Detroit

4) Next up was a Sandbox deep dive into the building itself and the urban spaces around it. Some key ideas that emerged:

- Inside the building: using signage, murals, and an entry sequence to showcase the services within; installing a sound/video micro studio; creating a co-working mezzanine loft space; and obtaining more flexible furniture that would allow spaces to meet multiple needs without having to call in a mover
- On the exterior: different ways the space could be used for neighborhood events; how to optimize it in every season—as well as throughout a typical day; and designing conversation zones for the atrium

It's always tough to summarize the takeaways from an intense time working alongside many passionate and talented people. But we can confidently say that the FREC crew left with an enriched understanding of design thinking, a better grasp on the ingredients and commitments needed for successful cross-organization collaboration, and a renewed belief that limitless opportunity is all around them.

While the tangible outcomes of our days together won't be seen for a while, we're satisfied that we tackled many of FREC's most important and immediate issues. The organization was granted \$2 million by the Ford Fund to use over the next five years, and they're just getting started. There's much to do, but we think they're off to an impressive start.



FREC Sandbox showing exterior space

Another inspiring part of the trip was my invitation to attend the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the [American Lightweight Materials Manufacturing Innovation Institute's \(ALMMII\) Innovation Acceleration Center](#). Detroit is positioning itself to take a leadership role in innovative American manufacturing again, and the opening of this center is a huge forward step (particularly as the city won the project over from its previously planned home, Columbus, Ohio).

At the event, World Policy Institute fellow [Greg Lindsay](#) and I spoke with some of Detroit's key political figures about how ALMMII could be a key partner with IF-D: they have the ability to provide unbeatable mentorship to youth working on projects there, to allow entrepreneurs an unparalleled level of access to cutting-edge manufacturing techniques, and to offer many other forms of support—all right around the corner from the Factory's proposed site.

Pilot Projects' work with the Ford Fund and FREC has been dynamic and meaningful so far, and we're confident the trend will continue. Our plan, as outlined with the Clinton Global Initiative, is proceeding seamlessly, and as we delve more deeply into its partnership building and fundraising stages, we'll look forward to issuing more updates.

Tell us your thoughts on the relationships between innovation, craftsmanship, and collaboration. Can anyone be a craftsman in his or her field? What conditions must exist for meaningful innovation to occur? How should a team be encouraged to be entrepreneurial while collaborating?

Tags: [detroit](#), [detroit innovation factory](#), [sandbox](#), [workspace design](#), [collaborative design](#)

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