

Scott Francisco's Sandbox: He's Not Just Playing Around

by Brad Powell

Play is misunderstood and definitely underrated. Sure, it can and should be fun, but it is also a vital human activity for reasons we are only beginning to understand. Take away school recess because of budget cuts or an emphasis on academic success, and we wonder why we have an obesity problem or our kids have trouble concentrating and distorted values. (See also *Can the Right Kinds of Play Teach Self-Control?* NY Times, 9.25.09, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/magazine/27tools-t.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1)

Play is a valuable learning tool, and not just for socialization. It is an opportunity to experiment, exercise the imagination and develop awareness and discipline. And, of course, it is a well-known way to get everyone to participate, and to elicit information from everyone.

One application of productive play is the **Interior Design Sandbox** developed by **Scott Francisco**, who latched onto this idea while studying at MIT and pursued it while at DEG. Mr. Francisco, now with HOK Advance Strategies, NY, sat down with officeinsight to talk about his work with the *Sandbox*, and its application to the field of interior design.

OI: How long have you been doing this sort of thing?

SF: I graduated from architecture school in '96, but started designing workspaces in '94 while I was still at school. So I've done a lot of design work in residential and small-scale commercial, but my intensive workplace design really began with five or six projects with DEG during the last four years.

OI: Interior designers seem to have a particular interest in the future. Is that where you work?

SF: The future's such a slippery subject. We're always reinventing, you could say, and testing new ideas. But if we are smart, we're also protecting the cultures and contexts we've already built.

We use a variety of ways to understand what change are right. It's about talking to people, creating scenarios with them and testing these scenarios in real time. *Sandbox* is a tool that allows us to do that.

OI: The *Sandbox*. Why did you develop it?

SF: I was aiming to bring a few key ideas together in a single tool. Number one was peer participation, hands-on participation, people physically present in an environment where the conversation and visualization are happening at the same time. The physicality of the tool is critical. It's a physical exercise; if you're not in the room you don't see what's happening. The conversation among the ten or fifteen people that participate is a unique experience. Digital tools and virtual tools, with all of their capabilities, often fragment people, and decision making slows down considerably.

Getting people together is vital. We all want to use space as efficiently and effectively as possible. But what does that actually mean on the ground? With all the expertise that's available, we often don't really know what space utilization means to an organization until we actually start creating a plan and looking at the consequences.

A chemist or a drug researcher, a radio producer or a banker who has been working in an industry for the last ten or twenty years, will know more about their industry than I could

ever know. Who better to have in the room while we're moving tables around, someone who has a vision and can see a problem with putting a piece of furniture or equipment in a particular place, or point out that the person they talk to most is not going to be able to see them when they poke their head up from a phone call. These are the kind of subtleties that are instrumental in shaping a workspace that's going to function properly; yet they often fall through the sieve because they are too fine grain, or seen as backward looking.

We can use the *Sandbox* in a way that we can't use most other tools. It enable us to look at a space through the eyes of the leaders and staff who work in it. If we're just producing reports

>(a) most people don't look at them because the immediacy isn't there and

>(b) even when they do look at them they often don't understand them.

Another interesting thing is that, in so many cases that we've used the *Sandbox*, we've gathered people

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who have looked at each other and said, "We've never all been in a room together and had a conversation. This is incredible."

OI: How many people can you usefully gather together to use the *Sandbox*?

SF: Up to fifteen. This is part of what we call the "neighborhood design workshop." The *Sandbox* tool is part of a larger engagement process and we recognize that the only way to do use the *Sandbox* effectively is to limit the number of people around the table.

So we break larger groups up into subgroups that can each come around the table and have the conversation. Then everything gets melded with an oversight group.

OI: Well how do you introduce the process?

SF: It depends on the company. We've been doing this kind of thing for a long time so our visioning toolkit is pretty sophisticated. and we often open up with a little bit of history, of workplace strategy, and how important space is in creating a successful company. Then we talk about workplace culture and get people talking about their organization.

The *Sandbox* approach is geared toward assigning space to a group, not to individuals, then giving the group some control over the design. We don't want a work culture of a fortresses, mazes or, heaven forbid, a cube-farm, and our clients usually don't either.

A great way to get started is to look at competing demands; these usu-

ally come to the fore pretty early on. A need for collaboration and a need for concentration; a need to be able to find people quickly and to feel part of a team, whether that's the whole organization or within a department. This often competes with the need for the flexibility to "work anywhere."

Almost instantly you see the conflict between the need for isolation and the need for transparency. Finding the appropriate balance is the Holy Grail in workplace strategy.

The *Sandbox* helps these conversations unfold. We can ask, "What about this?" Then we can move things around; we can look at a cluster of open workstations or workbenches versus a small ring of offices to share. Or perhaps some people need an enclosed office a couple of days each week, and we can find an arrangement that allows them all to share.

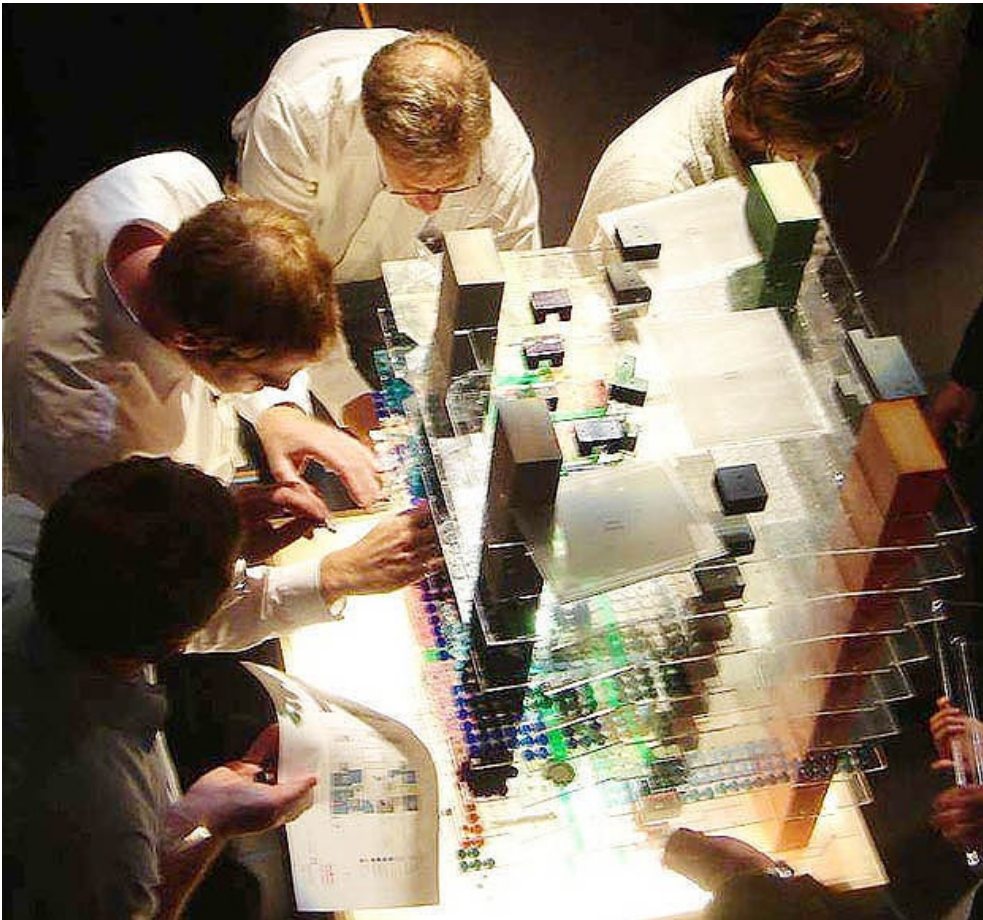
Participation is key. When people are part of creating a new idea, that idea is not as threatening, particularly when they have a way to bring constraints into their field of vision. Because of its visual aspect, it is easier for everyone to understand what is going on and to focus on specific aspects of the matter at hand, thus furthering communication and active participation.

When a group takes ownership of its space and participates in figuring how the group is going to use it, it produces a completely different mindset. Do we need any desks at all, can we just work on library tables? What if we were all in one big "war room" The feeling of ownership over the space is paramount because it's about the team developing an identity around a particular type of space, and making compromises that they can live with.

OI: You're designing around people and their concept of how they want to work. Are current furniture products sufficiently flexible for this approach?

SF: It's a challenge. The whole idea

people



of the *Sandbox* is about understanding constraints. Getting participants to understand constraints is critical. The number one constraint is the space you have to work with. The number two constraint is the kit of parts: furniture equipment etc.

The *Sandbox* as a tool can really test and enliven almost any kind of workplace design exercise. You can actually set up your design concepts. You can set up a cube farm in the *Sandbox* and say, "Here's the space that you guys are going to get, what do you think?" The fact that people can move things around and ask, "What if we did this, what if we did that," is very helpful? People can immediately see when solutions take up more or less space.

There is now an incentive to be efficient because it may free up space for an important functional area you thought you couldn't afford. It's like "Hey, if we use these workbenches, we can fit a dedicated team room in here!" You can always say, "Sorry, can't do it," but at least you've given people the opportunity to confront the issues in an open setting and to get a better understanding of what is and isn't possible.

OI: I get the feeling that this type of exercise may be the first time that some people have thought in-depth about their workplace?

SF: Absolutely, yes. But, how much time would you give to thinking about something unless you felt that you can do something about it. That's the point of this.

One of our core concepts is to generate a sense of ownership of a workspace. It's not about elevating a hierarchy, but rather about how people at any level feel some sense of ownership about their space; that's not common in the American workplace.

OI: Does that boomerang over time? Do you hear, "We can't afford to do this," but come back a year later when the client has the budget?

SF: Yes. The biggest measure of success in my book is the change in vocabulary, which is a cultural change.

Here's a real test: Has the language that people use to describe their space changed?

How does cultural change happen? It happens when people reflect on where they're at currently, reflecting on the space in which they work as an integral part of their identity, something that shapes their behavior. If that conversation percolates through a group, suddenly they've got new words, and new concepts.

OI: What kind of language changes do you see?

SF: One of the tests was how people in an organization talk about their workspace. In a project we do a survey before we start and a slew of interviews along the way. Before we start, almost universally, people use a set of negative terms to describe their workspace. The conversation is all about the constraints, the limits, and, generally, what the space is stopping them from doing.

Later in a project, people talk with a very positive sense of what can be done, even though they might know that change could be a year or two away.

OI: In looking at the *Sandbox* you've had to consider whether you could do the same thing digitally or virtually with people patching in from remote locations

SF: We confronted this very directly in a few cases because the temptation was always there. The *Sandbox* tool has a completely parallel digital universe. In fact, we turn the physical *Sandbox* results into digital models and can very quickly create digital outputs

that show what the space will look like.

But we find that the physicality of the *Sandbox* interface creates a much less-threatening tool to test peoples ideas because it's as simple as pushing something around on a tabletop.

OI: At what point do you bring the facilities people in?

SF: We have a very clear sense of roles and responsibilities and it's important to have facilities involved from the beginning. The way that they participate in these sessions needs to be carefully controlled. We are facilitating the meeting generally, but we need to have the proper representation from the client, and we have to take into account that there has been a whole series of conversations, usually with the facilities management staff, that occurred before we get to the *Sandbox* exercise.

These preparatory conversations are very important and allow facilities managers to set the parameters and, then, to back off during the *Sandbox* exercises. It's very important to have them there, but it's also very important to structure the conversations appropriately. We developed a handbook for a long-term engagement for this purpose.

OI: Did you have a flash of inspiration in developing the *Sandbox*?

SF: There were a few flashes there and quite a lot of development. The *Sandbox* was developed working with clients, so we were testing our ideas as the tool was being developed. We started with cutouts. This is a fairly common way of talking about space design and people have been doing it probably for hundreds of years. Cut pieces of furniture and move them around.

But taking that to the level of organizational space was something that we had never seen done before. Because we were committed to the physical tool, we had to put quite a bit of effort in to its design. We – and this was very important to me – seduced people into

people

the conversation, people who wouldn't necessarily be inclined to talk about workspace. We got them to the table and they naturally wanted to play with the tool, to be part of the process.

That's very significant. When someone is at a computer screen, even if it's very large, and even if you have a sophisticated interface, it's very easy for someone to fold their arms, stand back and not participate. But when you've got something that's simple, non-threatening, something that has a bit of mystery to it, we find that everyone who's there wants to roll up their sleeves and join in.

The connecting thread is that people are fundamentally creative and, given the right opportunity in the right environment, almost everyone has something to offer and something to say. Understand that the subject that your participants are dealing with is unfamiliar, and they are being asked to give their practical impressions and input to workplace experts. There is a natural reticence that we have to overcome if we are going to elicit the information we need. Otherwise, we're going to end up with a generic space solution.

There's a classic problem for designers and probably for experts of all types: It's often easier to just give the solution? I've been doing this for twenty years, and I can frequently see a solution before I even start. My temptation as a designer is to get in there and move the pieces around and say, "look, there's your space set up in the most efficient way. I've done this a hundred times before; I know it's not going to get any better than this!"

But what you've lost is what comes out of people creating that solution themselves. Sometimes the end result isn't exciting and it might just be a fairly conventional layout of desks and offices. But what is exciting is when a group has worked through the problem-solving and arrived at the solution. Having tested various scenarios, they

are able to say to their peers, "Look, this is what we came up with based on this and this and this and yes, we heard about John's this and that and yes, we heard about Sally's concern with noise and yes, we did talk about where the pictures are going to go and this is what we came up with."

OI: While you've been using the Sandbox, have you found that your projects are better? And what do you mean by better?

SF: It's like you're in school all the time because you're learning. I'm learning about organizations that I never would have had access to, apart from the projects I've worked on, and I'm seeing deeply inside very complex organizations with unique space problems. But I'm always getting better, I think. This tool for many who have used it has just given us another more direct way to sketch out and test our ideas in real time, and to engage the people who will be using a space.

I'm a big believer in drawing and sketching. I was a professor for a few years at architecture school and drawing was one of the subjects I taught. I'm a passionate believer in the importance of drawing, but this offers something that drawing doesn't: a very direct connection between the way people use space and furniture. This relationship between the fixed and moveable elements is fundamental to workplace design and its use over time.

OI: Would you modify the academic curriculum to shape the attitudes of the people who are being trained?

SF: That's a good question and I'm not going to have a speedy answer. When I was teaching I very rarely thought of the sociology of the workplace as a key component of design. Now I see it as instrumental and a great area for design in exploration. My emphasis was probably 50% on drawing and 50% on model building

while I was teaching architecture. Creating new tools for exploration wasn't really on my radar. But the *Sandbox* has enabled me to see that there are opportunities for creating new unique areas for dialogue.

OI: Have you ever done any ethnographic studies or films with your tool?

SF: We did a short film with one of our clients, a broadcaster, of the engagement, a *Sandbox* workshop. Twenty executives, some from each of the departments, came together for three full days to re-stack an entire building, a million and a half sq.ft. of space. It was a super *Sandbox* project. We had a huge space; we locked the door to work the project out together.

We came away with every single person there saying, "This is where we want to work." It was jaw-dropping. No one could believe it, including us. We were shooting for 75% approval and we got a 100%.