

Alex Bandar fosters creativity at the Idea Foundry



By Emily Williams

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Alex Bandar doesn't waste time.

He skips steps on staircases and talks with semicolons instead of periods — one clause leading right into the next. This idea, no that idea, now this one. He makes bold statements (Columbus can be a model for cities all around the world) and just shrugs when someone calls out their grandiosity.

His energy flows through the Columbus Idea Foundry, a collaborative makerspace he created.

“Everything cranked to 11 — this does it for me,” he said of his job as founder and CEO of the Idea Foundry, housed in a 60,000 square-foot refurbished factory in Franklinton.

He likes to describe the Idea Foundry as a “machine shop with a maître d’.” Rather than a jack of all trades, he’s a facilitator of them all, putting all the literal and figurative pieces in place for the Idea Foundry’s members to do whatever it is they do — jewelry-making, video game design

or drone racing.

Bandar has so many ideas that, even though his initial goal in founding the business was to make more with his own hands, he's only crafted a couple items in the workshop.

He's the maker of the makerspace, which really is more conceptual than physical.

Thriving on interaction

Bandar's father worked as a civil engineer, but when Bandar was still a kid, his father left that job and bought a Greek restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It had family-style seating, live music, even belly dancing.

Bandar said his father was too social to be an engineer. All these years later, Bandar has found a way to make being an engineer a social affair.

Bandar was introverted and bookish as a kid, opting to work as a barback in his father's restaurant rather than interact with customers. Now, his job thrives on interaction.

"If the apple did fall far from the tree, it's been rolling back ever since," he said.

The 44-year-old describes himself as being on the creative end of the technical spectrum and the technical end of the creative spectrum, a range illustrated by the list of descriptors he offers on his personal website: metallurgist, programmer, transformed maker and accidental entrepreneur.

Accidental because he didn't set out to be a business owner. He just wanted to make stuff.

With undergraduate and graduate degrees in materials science and engineering and a Ph.D. in what he calls the "ridiculously narrow" field of computational metallurgy — essentially, predicting the properties of metal parts based on how they're formed — Bandar started working as a research scientist for the Scientific Forming Technologies Corporation in Columbus in 2005.

Originally from Boston, Bandar took to Columbus quickly. He appreciated its affordability but also the fact that he could still buy sushi at night — his personal measure of an urban area. His sister, Leila, a Vermont-based artist and metalsmith, invited Bandar to give a guest lecture at a college where she was teaching jewelry-making. He realized that not only did he not have anything useful to teach those art students, but also that they were skilled welders, machinists and blacksmiths.

It made him want to get his hands dirty for once, to be a maker.

The first iteration of what would become the Columbus Idea Foundry was a garage off Leonard

Avenue. The space was mostly empty except for a couple tables and a hand-me-down CNC machine — a computerized cutting machine.

Outside of posting in the arts section of Craigslist, Bandar didn't advertise. He was certain that once he opened the doors, the people would come, but for a while, it was "just me, the wind and the mice," he said.

Slowly, though, early adopters discovered the space while Bandar chugged away at his full-time job, squeezing Idea Foundry work into evenings and nights and putting in 35-hour work-weekends.

The fledgling business stretched to fill a larger space on Corrugated Way, and though the business wasn't profiting, at least membership fees were covering costs.

Then, in 2012, Jim Sweeney, the former executive director of the Franklinton Development Association gave Bandar a call. Would he consider moving again?

The building in question, a former shoe factory, would more than double their space and plant them right in the middle of Columbus's oldest neighborhood, whose growing arts community had already piqued Bandar's interest.

It was the ideal formula for his makerspace.

Knowledge, talent & mischief

Early this year, the Idea Foundry's Franklinton headquarters opened in full: half noisy, gritty workshop and half sleek, industrial office space.

There's an aspect of play in the workshop's set-up, like an adult version of an arts-and-crafts station where two-by-fours replace popsicle sticks and makers use power saws instead of colored pencils.

The second-floor offices and coworking spaces, which, like the workshop tables, can be rented out to members, are decorated to Millennial tastes: high ceilings, wood floors, sparse mod furnishings. On weekday mid-mornings, the area is relatively quiet, people walking around with coffee and tapping away at laptop keyboards, with the occasional hammering or drilling sound wafting up from the workshop.

Aubrey Roberts joined Bandar's core team of employees before the second-floor office space renovations, so her first desk was packed in right alongside the workshop tables. Even after the upstairs additions, though, she opted to stay in the workshop, even if that meant adding some extra noise and a little sawdust to her workday.

“I didn’t come here to work in a traditional office,” Roberts said.

The work she and the other team members do at the Idea Foundry tends to make people excited, Roberts said, and for a very simple reason. They enjoy doing it.

The motto of the Idea Foundry — knowledge, talent, mischief — also applies to its founder’s personality, said Dylan Paul, who’s worked with Bandar since the Foundry’s move to Corrugated Drive.

Paul first met Bandar when he took a knife-making class through the Foundry eight years ago. At the time, space was so limited the class was taught at the instructor’s house. He and Bandar still have to pinch themselves, Paul said, when they come to work every day to the warehouse-sized building and a parking lot full of office tenants, makers and the business’s dozen core team members.

As much as Alex is wrapped up in every aspect of the Idea Foundry, he’s always been very cautious to not be too essential to the success of the business, Paul said.

“He doesn’t want this place to be dependent on him,” Paul said. “It’s very important that these things can function without Alex.”

That’s good, too, since Bandar is often out of the office now, traveling nationally and internationally to consult people opening their own makerspaces who hope to find out: How did he make this thing?

How to be a human

When it comes to the Idea Foundry’s future, Bandar isn’t thinking about any more physical expansion. He imagines the Idea Foundry might become more of a media company or an e-learning resource that streams the kind of blacksmithing, 3-D printing and woodworking classes they offer now.

Only so many people can use the tools at the same time, so, Bandar thought, the next way to expand, to take the Idea Foundry to the next level, is to go more virtual.

“First, he was Alex the visionary. Then, he was the man running around like a crazy person trying to make all these things happen,” said Chris Volpe, founder of Multivarious Games. The Columbus game and app company is one of the Idea Foundry’s anchor tenants.

“Now that things are getting in the groove, Alex is moving back to that visionary side,” Volpe said. “He’s thinking about how we start actually doing the cool stuff we talked about two, three years ago.”

Bandar recently purchased a web domain: howtobeahuman.org. The way Alex sees it, it's something we're all trying to puzzle out, being humans — happy ones, especially — and the Internet is a tremendous tool for cluing one another in on whatever we've figured out about it.

He believes humanity should have a common motto: "If you're doing well, let's keep you doing well, sustainably. If you're not doing well, let's help you do well."