



The New Planner — Summer 2011

Crowdsourced in Connecticut

By Elaine Clisham

On April 28, 2011, representatives from Long Island, New York-based developer **Renaissance Downtowns** presented to the City Council in Bristol, Connecticut, a concept plan for development of a vacant 17-acre parcel in the heart of the city's downtown. While this by itself might not have been unusual, the road leading up to it certainly was. In what Renaissance claims is the first such process in the country on this scale, the residents of the city of Bristol engaged in something called "crowdsourced placemaking" to develop the plan.

What Is Crowdsourcing?

Cooltown Beta Communities of Washington, D.C., retained by Renaissance to lead the effort, defines **crowdsourced placemaking** as "the act of taking development traditionally performed by real estate institutions and sourcing it to a large, undefined community with shared values in the form of an open call, to transform the places we find ourselves into the places where we live, as 'places of the soul' that uplift and help us connect to each other."

For developers, crowdsourcing is a way of allowing the public to participate in the design of a project more specifically and intimately and in a more sustained manner than in the past. For planners, crowdsourcing means new forms of citizen participation using the latest social networking technology, with the public playing a greater role in shaping the planning and design process.

Comprehensive Redevelopment

Cooltown has crowdsourced smaller projects, but this is the first time it has been involved in crowdsourcing the redevelopment of so large a section of a city's downtown. The parcel to be redeveloped is owned by the City of Bristol. It is located directly across from City Hall on a prominent corner and currently is used for parking. In 2008 the city completed a revision to its zoning code that created a downtown zone, allowing for multiple uses and flexible building forms and laying the groundwork for redevelopment of the site. It then issued a Request for Proposals for the project.

Renaissance is a company with a 35-year history in traditional commercial and single-family residential development. Recently, however, it has changed strategic course to take advantage of emerging demographic trends showing that young people and empty-nesters are moving back into urban areas. It turned its sights to what it calls "boutique cities," which it defines as having a maximum population of 150,000, with a base of assets capable of attracting a creative class. In Bristol it found such a city: 60,000 people, situated on a small river, accessible to Hartford and other larger employment centers, with the sports media company ESPN among its employment assets. Bristol also had another development asset: a contiguous 17-acre parcel, city-owned, virtually vacant, ready for redevelopment and supported by friendly zoning, providing a rare opportunity for comprehensive rather than infill redevelopment. Renaissance submitted what turned out to be the winning proposal, and the development agreement was signed in May 2010.



The 60-acre proposed master plan that Renaissance Downtowns submitted as part of its proposal to the City of Bristol. The 17-acre vacant parcel that will be developed first is at the center. Image courtesy Renaissance Downtowns.

Renaissance executives and Cooltown's founding director and CEO Neil Takemoto had met at a Congress for the New Urbanism conference and had talked about the possibility of crowdsourcing a large-scale redevelopment project. Takemoto was one of the first people to be brought into the project. His assignment: To deliver a supportive market to Renaissance Downtowns. His approach: To enable the residents themselves to determine the uses and some of the design aspects of whatever ultimately got built.

Two Key Pieces of Technology

How do you crowdsource at the city level? For Neil Takemoto, two interrelated pieces of technology were key. First, using the Ning platform he built a complete social network, called **Bristol Rising**, for the initiative. Members of the Bristol community who register at the site may link to other registered users, send messages, start interest groups, schedule events, post photos, start a blog, start or respond to discussions in the forum, participate in live chats — virtually everything membership in a network like Facebook permits, but focused entirely on Bristol. As part of the registration process all members are asked to acknowledge their support of Renaissance Downtowns' **triple-bottom-line principles** — any development effort must be good for people, planet, and profit — and must acknowledge the **crowdsourcing agreement** between Cooltown and Renaissance. In essence, they commit to being reasonable, responsible, and realistic, or the plan wouldn't work.

The second piece of technology was a separate survey site called **GoBristolSurvey**, running on a platform called Bubbly. It requires separate registration and has the additional requirement that survey respondents live or work within an hour of Bristol. (Registration on the Bristol Rising site is not required to register on the survey site.) Registered users may submit ideas for what they want to see built and vote on ideas already submitted. This, says Takemoto, is the key to crowdsourcing that makes it different from community involvement tools like charrettes — everything happens

organically, over time, from the ground up. Although Renaissance is funding Cooltown's work and hosting the sites, all the ideas, discussions, plans, and meetings are driven by the residents themselves, not by the city or the developer.

To get things moving, the first ideas — a skating rink, a live music venue, and artist-oriented green mixed-use buildings — were posted to the survey site by Takemoto and Renaissance Downtowns's local representative, Mark Walerysiak, in December 2010. Within days, local residents were adding ideas such as a piazza and a river walk. Renaissance had set a March 15, 2011, deadline for submissions and voting, and had agreed to begin feasibility studies on any idea that had garnered 300 votes by that date.

Renaissance representatives held regular online chats and informational public meetings to update residents on the project and to encourage them to become involved, including a meeting in early March 2011 at a local catering hall that drew 400 attendees.



Supporters donned Bristol Rising t-shirts for Renaissance Downtowns's presentation of the crowdsourced concept plan to the city. Photo courtesy Renaissance Downtowns.

By that time the Bristol Rising site had almost 300 registered users. Renaissance representatives had established an office in City Hall where they made themselves available to work with residents who were hesitant about the technology, getting them registered and helping them vote on their preferences. Interest groups and committees formed on the site to focus on everything from offline marketing to establishing temporary uses in some of the empty storefronts in town to planning a "pop-up piazza" when the weather got warmer as a test run for a real one. Enthusiasm among site users was high.



The idea that received the most votes on the Bristol Rising survey site was for a piazza, shown here in a rendering produced by Renaissance Downtowns as part of its presentation to the city. Image courtesy Renaissance Downtowns.

Involving Generation Y

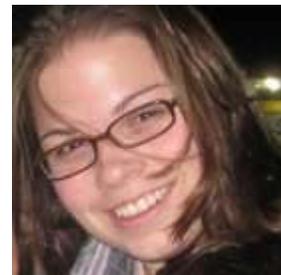
Among those site users are Bristol residents Lindsay Vigue and Robin Messerli, who are perhaps exemplars of the creative-class demographic that Renaissance hopes to attract to a revitalized downtown. They both classify themselves as Generation Y, born in the 1980s. Both women are originally from Bristol and returned there as adults after college. Takemoto recruited Vigue for the Bristol Rising project at a panel discussion on the future of Bristol. Hearing how much the city was losing as its residents shopped elsewhere and what Bristol could gain if it could keep some of that spending local, Vigue was in — and Messerli wasn't far behind.

The problem for their generation, they both say, is that most of their peers are not animated by local politics and do not see another mechanism for getting involved in the civic life of the city. Both women are enthusiastic about the Bristol Rising initiative, in part because it doesn't feel like a traditional developer coming to town and telling the community what will work. They are tired of big redevelopment ideas being floated and then nothing happening. This, they say, feels different. For the first time, it seems they have found a place where they can get involved and their efforts are welcome. They believe that if they can encourage their peers to stay and run local businesses and raise families, the economic impact on Bristol will be significant, and they see Bristol Rising as the most realistic avenue by which to do that.

In addition, Messerli says, Bristol Rising has allowed groups with a common interest to assemble and do something quickly, with almost no notice. Ideas can be floated, tested, tweaked, and adjusted on the fly, and willing participants can be called to take action almost immediately. She sees this rapid-deployment capability as a critical tool in helping to test which potential uses for the downtown site are really viable before a lot of investment is made.



Lindsay Vigue



Robin Messerli

Vigue, a photographer, says Bristol Rising has helped her connect with other artists in town, most of whom she did not know before signing up for the site. They can band together as a unified creative community in support of redevelopment initiatives that will benefit them. She sees it as an opportunity for creative people in town to network and learn together how to grow their businesses — something like an artists' digital incubator.

Stumbling Blocks

As with any pilot project, not everything has gone smoothly. The fact that the survey site requires a separate registration has been a consistent stumbling block for new users. Renaissance representative Walerysiak says they are looking at whether to allow one registration for both sites, although he does want to keep survey participation limited to those who live or work within range of the city. The survey site also displays by default the most popular ideas, which means the ones lower down on the list, often the newer ones, never get the visibility that might garner them additional votes.

The lack of some functionality on Ning has also hindered the effort. The platform cannot broadcast text messages, which could have been a good way to strengthen engagement among younger participants. The site could also use more outreach tools to get people to visit more often. Users can set up e-mail notifications for individual activities and RSS feeds for new updates, but there do not appear to be enough global push messaging tools that could encourage occasional or infrequent visitors to become more engaged.

More importantly, some participants note that Cooltown did not seem to have a comprehensive outreach strategy beyond building the site itself, and the community has wound up figuring its way through its outreach efforts with little expert guidance or knowledge. Cooltown also seemed to have underestimated the amount of offline marketing it would need to do. By many accounts it made virtually no offline effort beyond announcements at public meetings to recruit site participants. As a result, by mid-May about one percent of the market's population had registered on the sites, and none of the ideas on the survey site had garnered the targeted 300 votes. When the March 15, 2011, deadline came for determining which uses would get feasibility studies, Renaissance was forced to settle for studying anything that had gotten 200 votes.

In particular, Cooltown seems to have had no strategy for engaging the youth constituency, a key missed opportunity. One high school student stood up at the March public meeting to implore Renaissance to come to his high school and explain to his classmates what the initiative was about, because he was sure they would want to be involved.

And finally, it's not clear that the enthusiasm of the Bristol Rising community will be sufficient to sway the skeptics. Any time a story about the redevelopment effort runs in the local newspaper, online comments are overwhelmingly negative — not about the crowdsourcing effort, but about the prospects for Bristol's future. Some participants believe that the site has provided some small inoculation against the naysayers, but they know that winning the battle for the hearts and minds of their neighbors will take more than just a social network.

A Viable New Mechanism, or Just Marketing?

So does Bristol Rising represent a viable new mechanism for community engagement in the redevelopment process, or is it merely a way for the community to do for free some of the marketing work a developer would normally do? Perhaps it's both. Takemoto and Walerysiak note — and some citizen participants agree — that while members of the community may be doing the work, that means they will also be more invested in the outcome, the outcome will reflect their aspirations more completely, and their voices in the community will be more convincing. "When an informed crowd is given a chance to campaign for what they really want to be developed, we see extraordinary places envisioned," says Takemoto.

The process also has engaged younger people like Vigue and Messerli, who have not previously been involved and who want to stay in the city. It has provided a dedicated platform for people to engage peer-to-peer and it has enabled ongoing two-way rather than one-way communication about the project. These effects stand to be amplified as the site garners more users, even though the current scale is not sufficient by itself to ensure the project's success.

For the moment, the City of Bristol has taken a back seat in these early stages of the process, but Director of Planning Alan Weiner considers the crowdsourcing initiative an important new tool for engaging an audience whose interest he says has been very difficult to spark using traditional methods. He acknowledges it cannot be the only tool employed, but its ability to reach the people who want to spend the next 50 years in Bristol is key for him. After all, he asks, "for whom are we planning the downtown?"

What will become of Bristol Rising 10 years from now when the project is finished? Dave Fortier, a

columnist for the weekly *Bristol Observer* newspaper, thinks it has the potential to remain the platform through which anyone can become involved in some aspect of making the city better. He sees it as the provider of a coordinating framework for people who want to start a business, or get a mural painted on a wall, or plan an event or try out an idea. In short, the platform will become the central nexus for much of the city's civic activity, and will continue to build the community. "It's always going to be rising," he says.

Resources

The Renaissance Downtowns project was recently featured in *The New York Times*:

www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/realestate/a-downtown-revival-with-online-roots-in-the-regionconnecticut.html?_r=2



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