High-Touch/High-Tech Charrettes

By Bill Lennertz

How social media and web-based tools are increasing the capacity for involvement.

Touch-table technology is one of the new tools that complement hands-on charrettes.

National Charrette Institute

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There is a saying that a charrette will succeed so long as people show up. Unfortunately, that's easier said than done because planners have always struggled to fill public meetings with people who represent all community viewpoints. Now new tools and strategies are getting a good result more consistently.

With social media and web-based participation tools, planners are increasing the number and diversity of people engaged in charrettes. These high-tech tools can also improve the traditional "high-touch" or hands-on charrette by gathering more information and providing more feedback—all in real time.

Even without the use of high-tech tools, the charrette process creates a foundation for successful public involvement. During a charrette—a multiday collaborative design workshop—a multidisciplinary team, consisting of consultants and sponsor staff, produce a physical community plan with policies and standards. Stakeholders include those people directly affected by the outcome, those with valuable information, decision makers, potential supporters and, yes, potential blockers. These stakeholders are all involved in key decisions through a series of feedback reviews. The goal is to create a feasible plan that will require minimal rework through approvals and implementation.

The intensive and productive work done in a charrette makes people feel that their time was well spent and that they are a part of something that isn't just planning as usual. They become coauthors in a design process that is engaging, meaningful, and fun—a process that asks participants what matters to them before starting design, and then involves them in the evolution of that design.

A distinct benefit of a charrette is that people may begin to change their perception of possible project outcomes—and therefore their position on the project itself—as they work through the process. That engagement fosters and maintains participation.

High-tech tools can help drive the right people to the charrette and make the experience rewarding, but the tools must be grounded within a sound public involvement strategy. A public involvement specialist with on-the-ground community knowledge works with the project team to craft a strategy for engaging all community viewpoints. This strategy should include a three-level meeting approach (one-on-one meetings, small group sessions, and large-scale community meetings) combined with traditional media, social media, and web-based media communications.

Ben Brown, communications director for the consulting firm Place-

The Slow Charrette: One Planner's Experience

In 2010, Speck & Associates was hired to complete a downtown master plan for Lowell, Massachusetts. Thanks to an unusual combination of opportunity, necessity, and desire, I was able to use this experience to develop not only a new vision for the downtown, but also a new method for achieving such visions.

My firm is essentially just me—and whomever I have the budget to team up with. At their best, traditionally organized charrettes require a platoon of designers who know each other like family. That's the secret at Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company, where I logged 40 weeklong charrettes over 10 years. The team leader is usually so tied up in meetings that there is little time for explicit instruction. Communication happens by osmosis.

Unable to clone myself into a larger firm, I wondered if there was another way to achieve the in-town presence, public participation, client input, and feedback loops of a standard charrette. That question dovetailed with a desire to spend some quality time in Lowell, one of the gems of the industrial revolution. Architect Victor Dover, AICP, once passed a summer in Port Royal, South Carolina, redesigning that downtown. I asked my wife if she was game to do something similar, and, with her enthusiastic response, the slow charrette was reborn.

After a preliminary visit to lay the groundwork, we moved with our toddler in April 2010 to an apartment in a converted mill on the banks of the Merrimack River. We spent an uninterrupted month there—the least I'd traveled in decades. The schedule called for four weeks of Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays filled with meetings booked by the client—The Lowell Plan, a local nonprofit—including a midweek meeting of the steering committee and a weekly two-hour lunch with the entire city planning staff. Traffic and artwork consultants dropped in as needed. There were three large public presentations.

Perhaps more importantly, I was a visible presence in the community for a significant stretch of time. This meant having people over for drinks, dining in private homes, and having dozens of unexpected "meetings" in cafes, bars, and on the street. Whenever I left the apartment, I had to schedule an extra 15 minutes for my walk because people would stop me to chat. Much of the plan's real intelligence was collected this way.

Living in Lowell also afforded me the luxury of time. I had a three-hour lunch with the newspaper editor, something that would never happen in a standard charrette. We walked our kid to day care, enjoyed the city's amenities, and got to play at being citizens—so important to the quality of the plan.

Unveiled last fall, the Lowell Downtown Evolution Plan was strongly endorsed by public and private sector leaders in the city, and implementation has begun, led by efforts to expand the downtown streetcar system and enhance bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. Funding is now being sought to implement a dramatic reconfiguration of downtown traffic patterns—from one-way to two-way—which enjoys broad support from stakeholders.

The slow charrette process is not for everyone. What made it work in Lowell was a client who was willing to trust the downtown plan to an individual planner rather than a big firm. One motivation: The cost was about half of a typical master plan fee. My hope is to conduct one slow charrette a year for the rest of my career, with the caveat that it has to be in a community that needs help but is also a fun place to live. Sprawlville need not apply.

Jeff Speck, AICP

◼ Speck is the former design director at the National Endowment for the Arts and coauthor of *Suburban Nation* and *The Smart Growth Manual*.

Makers, reminds us about the fundamentals of public involvement, regardless of the approach: "It still comes down to creating trustful relationships," he says.

In Denver: keypad polling

At the Arapahoe Square Charrette, held in Denver last January, city planning manager Peter Park wanted to maximize community input during the wrap-up presentation of the plan alternatives produced at the last charrette public meeting. During the preceding four days the community participated in two workshops, first to create a set of vision elements and then to review the alternative plans in progress.

At the wrap-up, charrette team members from the National Charrette Institute, Urbsworks, SERA Architects, and PlaceMatters first presented the three alternative plans and then staff, using the PlaceMatters Brainstorm Anywhere tool, led small group discussions. On laptops at each table, staff logged the comments of the attendees—150 in all—and then participants ordered and prioritized their comments using the web-based application. Brainstorm Anywhere allows the capture and evaluation of ideas in a live meeting and reveals emerging concepts.

Following the discussion, a representative from each table summarized top discussion items for all attendees, who then used keypads and TurningPoint software, a PowerPoint plug-in, to vote on how each alternative performed according to transportation, economic, sustainability, and design measures. The voting results were instantly displayed on the main screen in the room, and the participants declared that there was no need for further discussion. The process was successfully completed in 45 minutes.

The Brainstorm Anywhere tool and keypad polling resulted in the efficient capture of hundreds of prioritized comments for use in

City Hall in Lowell, Massachusetts, where Jeff Speck spent a month-long "slow charrette."

Marc N. Belanger

future reports. It saved hours of transcribing flip chart notes, and the content was captured verbatim. An advantage of keypad polling is that people can participate anonymously, freeing them from any potential political risk of sharing their views publicly. In Denver, the keypad results provided the planners with a valuable list of community preferences for the three alternative plans. This list helped staff to validate the work of the charrette.

In some places, participants use cellphones, typing in a series of numbers to indicate each vote. One drawback is that the cell phone vote can be tracked back to the phone's owner.

Getting El Paso talking on MindMixer

El Paso used a virtual town hall website—created by the Omaha company Mind-Mixer—as part of its Plan El Paso comprehensive planning process. Looking at four small-area plans, including three sites for transit oriented development, the city and its consultant, Dover, Kohl & Partners, sought to create a citywide master plan for sustainable development.

Public outreach began six weeks before the June 2010 charrette. MindMixer and Dover Kohl promoted the website through fairly traditional means—a press release signed by a prominent official—and the University of Texas at El Paso's Communication Department also pushed the site address out to students via email.

As a result, the website attracted both high-quantity and high-quality participation: Thousands of participants offered great insight that otherwise would not have been possible.

During three two-week charrettes, the planning team talked to more than 1,200 studio visitors, meeting attendees, and hands-on participants. More than 35,000 people followed the project on its website or took part in online conversations and polling in the project's virtual town hall. Topics included transportation, public facilities, community health, sustainability, land use, economic development, housing, neighborhoods, and implementation.

One online participant complained that El Paso's new housing was "poorly designed" and asked the team to hire an architect to fix the problem. The team did just that. As a result, front porch homes with simple massing and context-sensitive local styles became a focus of subsequent workshops with local developers.

Discussions continued through the

week-long charrette, where the public could access the MindMixer website, view the uploaded plans designed by the charrette team, and contribute their ideas and critiques in real time. Online discussion remained active for weeks after the charrette, allowing the team to glean information while generating subsequent reports and plans.

MindMixer's virtual town hall requires participants to sign in and provide their names and e-mail addresses. The lack of anonymity discourages negative, heated, and one-sided discussions. Ideas with only one supporting vote get ranked very low in the results of the virtual town hall's ongoing idea tally. Ideas with many "seconds" rise to the top of the list reviewed by the consultants, municipal staff, elected representatives, and general public review. The end result is a well-rounded conversation that represents many points of view.

Although El Paso's comprehensive plan will take some years to complete, the charrettes already have informed several ordinances that will improve the quality of the city's open spaces, street design, and neighborhood design. For example, the plan has included more than 22 square miles of illustrative plans showing areas targeted for form-based coding, new communities, infill sites, and new civic spaces. Several of these plans are currently under development.

"New development in El Paso is more likely to be safer, greener, denser, more diverse, more lively and—thanks in large part to MindMixer's virtual town hall—more informed by local ideas," said Jason King, AICP, project director for Dover, Kohl & Partners.

Support in Calgary

In Alberta, Canada, planners went both high and low tech to create a plan for transforming Mission Road from an automobile-oriented thoroughfare to a pedestrian-friendly, mixed use, Main Street-style corridor by thoroughly exploring alternatives. They used an interactive website in tandem with social media and traditional media to engage the community before and during the Mission Road Innovation Charrette this past June.

The local newspaper ran a series of interviews with Andres Duany, the charrette leader, and the paper and public broadcasting station used the event as an opportunity to explain a broader city initiative that emphasizes retrofitting corridors and connecting neighborhoods with transportation alternatives beyond the car. Both outlets

drove people to a robust project website that included team biographies, the charrette schedule, news updates, interviews, and documents dating back several years.

The website allowed charrette participants to link ongoing charrette reports with their own social networks via Twitter and Facebook. That vastly expanded the project conversation, linking the Mission Road planning effort with audiences that charrette organizers might not otherwise have had access to.

Thanks to a high level of social networking between Calgary city staff and their constituents, Twitter became a valuable tool for keeping people plugged into the latest charrette news. PlaceMakers created a Twitter hash tag for the Mission Road project and encouraged Twitter users to continually tweet and retweet updates.

Because the website could respond immediately to changes in the charrette conversation—and because its interactive features were monitored for civility and relevance—the online discussion benefitted from quick corrections and clarifications. And as the charrette progressed, the regular reports and background data became an increasingly valuable archive and context-setter.

The success of the process, now in its implementation phases, owed much to the fact that elected officials and city staff had effectively engaged the community, achieving levels of trust that the planning team could build on before and during the charrette. Charrette team members from PlaceMakers, Ben Brown and Hazel Borys, emphasize that distance participation is effective only when that foundation of trust is achieved. "If consensus is out of reach," Brown says, "you can't close the gap by remote control."

Returning a civil dialogue to Ashland

In Ashland, Oregon, city councilors wanted to get community input before a public design workshop. In prior years, the city had used a public e-mail list to facilitate dialogue between concerned citizens and council members. But the topic of this public workshop—local homelessness—was decidedly more controversial, and online posts to the list quickly descended into personal attacks and discussion of irrelevant topics.

By the time a newspaper article surfaced documenting the controversy, hundreds of participants had already expressed their disgust with the erosion of the site and revoked their membership.

Rather than overhauling the online communication network entirely, the city contracted with Peak Democracy—whose announced mission is to broaden civic engagement and build public trust in government—to embed Open City Hall, a monitored online public comment process, on its home page.

With this platform, city officials can add topic threads and upload plans and documents for public scrutiny. Peak Democracy monitors the site, ensuring that the conversation remains dignified. By requiring a full name, address, and authenticating e-mail addresses, it heightens the accountability of each registrant and targets participants with news specific to their neighborhood. Open City Hall also limits comments to one per topic per person, making the comments more pertinent and effective than the previously unregulated system.

In an effort to increase the online dialogue, the city posted information about its Pedestrian Places project near publicly accessible computers at the library; a URL leading to Open City Hall appeared on the announcement flier. The city also posted fliers about the project in coffee houses, public buildings, message boards, schools, and businesses near the target intersections. Each flier included a QR code, giving people with smartphones ready access to the project page via Open City Hall.

Open City Hall has been far more successful in its goal of generating useful ideas from the public than the e-mail list had been. The public, too, has been vocal in its support of the new system, which accommodates those with busy schedules—especially single parents and elderly residents who are not inclined to attend late-night meetings.

"Walkshops" in Somerville

As part of their ongoing work in Somerville, Massachussetts, consultants PlaceMatters and Goody Clancy this spring conducted "walkshops" using Flickr, Cool Iris, and Brainstorm Anywhere for the Somerville Inner Belt Brick Bottom Plan. Community members walked through the city on a guided tour taking cell phone pictures of perceived strengths and weaknesses in the built environment. Using e-mail or multimedia messaging, they uploaded their photos on-site to a group Flickr feed, which also recorded the location of the image.

After the exercise, the community gathered for a presentation by the consultant team, browsing through the photos using Cool Iris, an interactive Flash-based web plug-in for flipping through photos, to discuss each as it related to sustainable development. The team also showed a map displaying dots at the location of each photo, adding visual impact and giving viewers a sense of the bigger picture.

Walkshop participants identified key priorities and reinvestment opportunities in five subsectors of the district, sharing them with the group using PlaceMatters Brainstorm Anywhere tool, and then prioritizing plan elements through keypad polling.

Today, the plan is still in the initial stages, with Goody Clancy using the feedback from the walkshop and other information sources to construct a plan framework for future public meetings.

Touchscreens in Cape Cod

In August 2010, the Volpe Center—part of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Research and Innovative Technology Administration—began a project to foster new technologies that assess the impacts of various land-use and transportation schemes on climate change and sea-level rise. PlaceMatters and Placeways used CommunityViz during the stakeholder design workshops to illustrate the impact of various development scenarios.

Community members sat at tables of nine or 10. Each table had a touch screen that was projected onto the tabletop. Participants used infrared pens to place population and employment "chips" representing different amounts of growth on the CommunityViz map. The GIS-based software then provided quick feedback on the environmental impacts of the choices. One example of a participant-generated scenario did well at decreasing emissions due to VMT, but put people in areas vulnerable to sea-level rise. This led to a discussion on the tradeoffs between adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Participants used keypads and TurningPoint software to vote on various policy choices. They also provided demographic information—allowing them to identify the gaps in representation and to discuss needed outreach methods.

Finally, to help reach a "refined" scenario based on the several workshop scenarios, PlaceMatters and Placeways hosted a WebEx conference that allowed participants in Cape Cod to interact with a computer running CommunityViz in Denver—thereby saving travel costs.

Although this was a pilot process, the Cape Cod Commission will be using what it learned to help inform future planning. The Volpe Center released a guidebook on the process with a companion technical report, available online through the Volpe Center website.

Lessons

The common thread between these projects is the use of high-tech tools to support the high-touch meeting. Everyone we spoke to, from the veteran planners to young techies, all agreed that electronic communications cannot replace the power of face-to-face meetings. The high-tech tools are best used to attract informed people and to bring more useful information to the charrette.

Jennifer Hurley, AICP, from Hurley-Franks, says that the web is at best "thin communication" while the in-person meeting provides "thick communication," where body language and spontaneous feedback provide the richest form of human interaction.

It is easy to be charmed by these tools because they can link everyone together, but the basics still apply. Successful public involvement requires the building of relationships between people, eye-to-eye and smile-to-smile.

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RESOURCES

CONSULTANTS National Charrette Institute: www.charretteinstitute.org; PlaceMakers: www.placemakers.com; PlaceMatters: www.placematters.org; Placeways: www.placeways.com; Urbsworks: www.urbsworks.com; SERA Architects: www.serapdz.com; Dover, Kohl & Partners: www.doverkohl.com; Hurley-Franks & Associates: hfadesign.com; CommunityViz: www.orton.org and www.communityviz.com; MindMixer: www.mindmixer.com; Goody Clancy: www.goodyclancy.com; Peak Democracy: www.peakdemocracy.org; Volpe Center: www.volpe.dot.gov.