CoUrbanize's Online Community Planning Forum

AFTER KARIN BRANDT FINISHED HER MASTER'S DEGREE at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she noticed some frustration among her former classmates in planning. "The idea of creating change that we talked about in grad school wasn't being realized," she recalls. One of the reasons was that the process of engaging with the broader public often proved to be a challenge.

Meanwhile, she continues, friends from other MIT departments were "starting companies, solving problems, doing really interesting things" with technology. Perhaps, she concluded, there was a useful overlap in these two divergent trends. Maybe innovative technology could be used to improve some public-facing elements of the planning process. So in 2013, after leaving a position as a research analyst at the Lincoln Institute, Brandt founded coUrbanize along with data scientist and fellow MIT grad David Quinn. The venture-backed startup offers a planning-centric communications platform, designed to ease and enhance the way that planners, developers, and the public interact around specific projects.

The underlying challenge here was, of course, familiar to anyone involved in the profession. "The traditional planning meeting, with the microphone, and the signup list, and three minutes per speaker, is important," says Amy Cotter, a veteran of Boston's Metropolitan-Area Planning Council who is now manager of urban development programs at the Lincoln Institute. "But it's of limited value." In short, only some members of a community have the time or inclination to participate in such forums—resulting in a limited perspective on what a community really thinks about a development or planning initiative, leaving potentially useful feedback and input unexpressed.

In the past, some treated this step of the planning process as "a more technical exercise" that privileged expert data over community input, Cotter continues. "But the planning field has

been undergoing a transition. At this point, most planners feel their plans are richer and better if people are engaged." But securing that engagement is easier said than done.

Ken Snyder, founder and CEO of the Denver-based nonprofit PlaceMatters, observes that, over the past five or ten years, there has been a growing movement around innovation that increases community engagement, and it very much includes new technologies. Urban Interactive Studio's EngagingPlans platform is one example. Another is CrowdGauge.org—developed by Sasaki Associates and PlaceMatters. The latter is an "open-source, web-based tool for creating educational online games" that can help "summarize, communicate, and rank ideas that emerge from visioning processes and incorporate them into decision making." (Snyder has compiled an informal but highly useful list of creative planning tools and initiatives at bit.ly/placematters-tools.)

CoUrbanize provides a forum for people who can't show up for planning meetings: a worker with a night shift, parents who need to be home, or millennials who find the online context easier and more convenient.

Brandt says her own research led her to conclude that the three major actors in most projects—planners, developers, and the community at large—really all sought the same thing: more transparency from the other two parties. In other words, as much as planners wanted more public input, citizens often felt they weren't getting enough information in a truly accessible form.

CoUrbanize was developed with direct input from planners and developers, and the platform provides a central online home for public information on any given project. That means it serves as both a forum for community feedback,

and as a spot where plans and proposals are widely accessible. And importantly: This aims to be a flexible touchpoint that supplements, but does not mean to replace, real-world feedback mechanisms, both traditional and otherwise.

One of the most interesting examples so far has involved the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Plan in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Cambridge Redevelopment Authority and developer Boston Properties are collaborating on a public/private effort that will entail a million square feet of new commercial and residential development. Working with coUrbanize, the developer distributed poster-style signage asking real-world users of the relevant space for thoughts on its potential uses. This meant anyone could text in their answers, which were collected in an online coUrbanize community forum.

"People have much more interesting ideas when they're in a physical space," Brandt says. "And most people don't know what they *can* say. So prompting them with specific questions really helps." The exercise drew more than 200 com-

Signs invite pedestrians to text suggestions for how public spaces should be repurposed through the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Plan in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Credit: Karin Brandt.
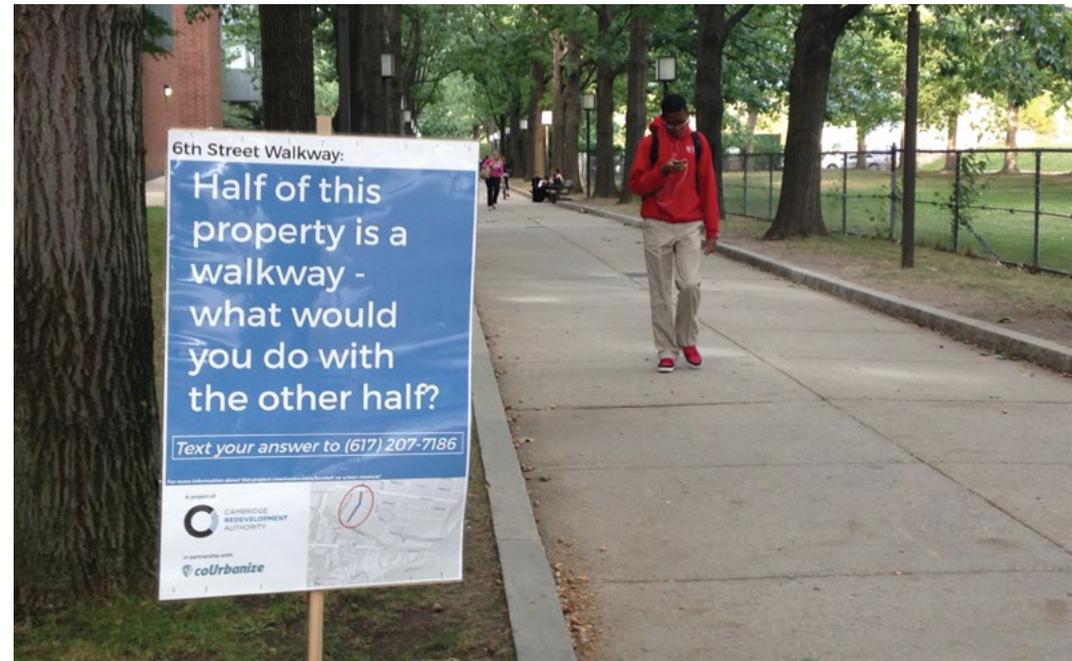
ments, plus additional data from forum users supporting or disagreeing with those comments. The planning and development team "made changes to their plan, based on feedback," Brandt says—including the addition of more substantial affordable housing, and the inclusion of "innovation space" that offered below-market rates to qualified startups. Work on some of the ideas for open space that evolved on the platform will be underway soon, she adds.

The key here from a planning perspective is to broaden the range of input. Maybe that means hearing an idea that would never have surfaced in a traditional community meeting. But arguably more important is a clearer sense of what "the community" around a particular project—not just the people who turn up at a public meeting—really wants, supports, or objects to.

Cotter points out—and Brandt emphatically agrees—that those in-person hearings still matter. But a platform like coUrbanize provides a forum for people who can't (or just don't want to) show up for such gatherings: a worker with a night shift, parents who need to be home during a scheduled meeting, or millennials who just find the online context easier and more convenient.
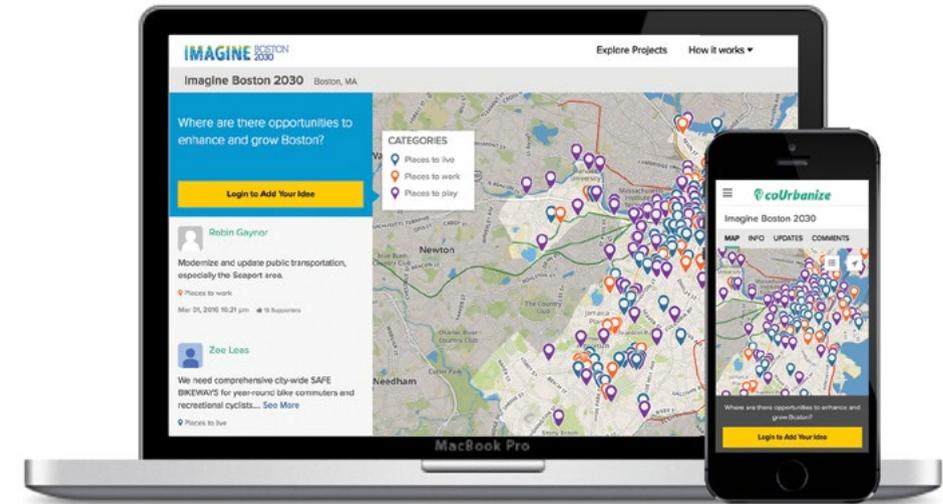
The City of Boston is using coUrbanize's coMap to digitally engage community members in development of the city's first master plan in 50 years. Credit: Karin Brandt.

"One of our clients," Brandt says, "calls us a 24-hour community meeting." (Notably, coUrbanize includes "community guidelines" that require citizen-users to register with their real names, which has minimized the planning-feedback equivalent of spam. "We hear from our municipal partners that the feedback they get on coUrbanize is often a lot more on point," Brandt says.)

To make the most of this accessibility, cities or developers using coUrbanize or any such platform must give some fresh thought to how they present their ideas. As Cotter notes, even basic terms like "setback" or "density" may mean little to a layperson. (As a prompt for community feedback, PlaceMatters has used such creative means as a "pop-up" installation to demonstrate the benefits of a protected bike lane in Portland, Oregon, in real, physical space.) CoUrbanize offers planners and developers an intuitive template for presenting ideas in both images and words—almost like a Kickstarter campaign's home page.

Of course, it's really up to users to make the most of the platform. And because the coUrbanize business model depends in part on developers signing on, Brandt emphasizes that this sort of platform can more quickly and efficiently reveal problems that under normal circumstances could have led to costly project delays. Most of the firm's early clients and projects are concentrated in Massachusetts, but it has also worked with others in Atlanta and elsewhere who have

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sought out coUrbanize. This year, the firm will expand its focus to New York and San Francisco.

The ideal is a "win win win," as Brandt puts it—benefiting all players. Certainly, the potential payoff for actual community members—users of coUrbanize, but also of other efforts to broaden the planning process with technological tools—is particularly intriguing. And, as Cotter says, that is something planners have sought for years, and it's becoming more plausible as technologies improve. The key, she says, is to "give people the confidence that they've been heard, and that their input will be considered." Even if that input isn't followed, it should be made clear what tradeoffs were involved and why.

"So many people don't know that they can shape their neighborhoods," Brandt says. "They don't know what planning is, and they've never been to a meeting." Maybe the current wave of tech-driven platforms can help change that: "A lot more people are online," Brandt argues, "than those who are available at 7 o'clock on Tuesday night." ☐

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