DesignRevival24: An Example of Innovative Planning and Designer Volunteerism

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Whether referred to as the Great Recession, the Global Financial Meltdown, or the “Great Reset,” the net effect of the economic correction of the late-2000s was a strain on America’s psyche and self-confidence. DesignRevival24 is one group of planners’ and designers’ efforts to find inspiration during the economic downturn through development of an intensive, collaborative, 24-hour community design initiative. The article identifies the process established for DesignRevival24 and its application in the community of Bluefield, West Virginia during the spring of 2011. There is an increasing need in communities for ideas, inspiration, and early planning and design concepts to help jumpstart revitalization efforts that tap into a variety of public and private funding outlets. DesignRevival24 provides a unique avenue for achievement of these ends for the right community.
so many others in the U.S., we wanted to find something we could roll up our sleeves and fix.

Our goal was to organize a process to bring together volunteer professional designers to develop, over a short period of time, ways a community could jumpstart revitalization efforts and tap into a variety of public and private funding outlets. We felt if we could help a community identify and conceptually design even one small, financially attainable project, we might just set a neighborhood, town, or city on a new course toward long term revival. DesignRevival24 became our outlet to this end.

This paper will first provide an overview of the primary elements motivating volunteer planning and design efforts in the U.S. and the inspiration that led to the creation of DesignRevival24. The components of the DesignRevival24 process are then discussed. The concluding sections present the application of the DesignRevival24 process in Bluefield, West Virginia followed by a review of the lessons learned from this first volunteer effort.

Planning and Design Volunteerism

Over the past century, volunteer planning and design efforts led by citizens and professionals enjoyed increased prominence in U.S. community revitalization efforts. The social and legal shifts resulting from the City Beautiful, Garden City, and Progressive Movements, as well as nuisance and building regulation, gave rise to increased opportunities for substantive civic participation in the planning and design of cities and public places (Platt 2004). During the 1960s and early 1970s, new methods of guiding community development, which focused more on bottom-up, grassroots initiatives, and advocacy planning, further broadened public involvement in planning and design (Campanella 2011; P. Davidoff 1965). Today, citizens and professionals willing to donate their time to help shape communities and address social and economic needs are an essential part of the planning and design landscape (Eisner, Gallion, & Eisner 1993; Cary & Public Architecture 2010).

The impetus behind pro bono planning and design initiatives varies. Volunteer efforts afford planners, architects, landscape architects, and citizens the opportunity to address community needs; to create public spaces and architecture; to be entrepreneurial; to explore project types and problems not typically encountered or financially practical in a planning and design practice (Cary & Public Architecture 2010). Often, several of these motivating factors are present, propelling volunteer efforts forward from identified need into action.

From a review of planning and design literature, two primary elements are often at work in fomenting planning and design related volunteer efforts. First, the idea of social responsibility rings genuine for professional and citizen planners engaging in pro bono activities. These groups and individuals are motivated by personal values and beliefs in areas aligned closely with the purposes of planning: conservation and efficient allocation of resources; evening out the playing field of information and resources; and facilitating change and broadening choice (Davidoff & Reiner 1962). For planners and architects, having a responsibility to serve the public interest is codified as a core tenant for professional ethical conduct (American Institute of Architects 2007; American Planning Association 2009). For example, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) specifically calls out to its members to “…render public interest professional services, including pro bono services, and encourage their employees to render such services” (AIA 2007).

For citizens, social responsibility in the form of volunteerism often emerges from their day to day experiences and a feeling that something needs to change. For Van Jones, a community activist and leader in the Green Jobs Movement, the spark of inspiration came from an encounter with Julia Butterfly Hill and her two year battle to protect a redwood tree. This encounter motivated Van Jones to write, speak and volunteer to fight urban poverty and global warming through the promotion of green jobs and “…reclaiming thrown-away communities” (Kolbert 2009). For Mayor John Fetterman, a leading advocate of Rust Belt community renewal, social responsibility and stewardship came from his deep conviction that urban reinvention and regeneration can occur even in a town that had lost 90% of its population (Halpern 2011). Mayor Fetterman and a team of volunteers took a do-it-yourself approach to Braddock, Pennsylvania, transforming buildings and vacant parcels into venues for the arts, urban agriculture, and other new uses.

These examples also illustrate the second element at work in many planning and design volunteer efforts: resonance with a common cause. Citizens and professionals working passionately towards a common cause have set in motion some of the most significant shifts in planning and design over the past 50 years—the environmental movement, growth management, sustainable design, and
others serve as visible examples. On the project-by-project level, individuals motivated by a common cause dedicate time and resources to achieve often extraordinary results. The design and development of the Greater Boston Food Bank’s Yawkey Distribution Center was the result of hundreds of thousands of dollars in pro bono design services from firms motivated to support the food bank’s mission to alleviate hunger (Cary & Public Architecture 2010; Campbell 2009).

Making good design more accessible serves as a common cause in the formulation of multi-disciplinary confederations of design professionals. These Community Design Centers (CDCs), often perform design work for little or no fee for communities in rural settings and underprivileged areas as well as support activities undertaken by many nonprofit groups. Notable CDCs include Auburn University’s Rural Studio, Design Corps based in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the Community Design Collective in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Most architecture and planning schools also take an active part in small city revitalization and redevelopment efforts, using these opportunities to become extensions of the classroom. Mississippi State’s Carl Small Town Center is an excellent example of this in practice.

The Inspiration and Backdrop for DesignRevival24

Our initial source of inspiration for DesignRevival24 came from Cathy Monetti and Teresa Coles, founders of CreatAthon. The idea behind CreatAthon is to gather professionals from the marketing, advertising and communications sectors and provide pro bono marketing services for nonprofits over a 24-hour, work-around-the-clock creative blitz (CreatAthon). Since its start in 1998, 73 agencies have participated in the CreatAthon, conducting events in their respective markets during the designated CreatAthon Week. The idea of concentrated community giving by design professionals had great appeal. We wanted to see if a similar type of approach could work through bringing together planners, urbanists, architects, engineers, artists, and others in a collaborative burst of design energy for a community in need. We liked the idea of a single event resulting in a community “jump start,” reigniting dialogue about local issues and opportunities and providing quick win ideas the community could assess and potentially implement. The 24-hour duration of the event also held attraction. We surmised that working through the night would not only be an efficient use of time, but would also tap into the passion and camaraderie we often felt working through the night in design studio.

We established a statement of organizational purpose for DesignRevival24:

- DesignRevival24 seeks out community partners in need of a quick burst of design ideas, project concepts, redevelopment strategies, funding opportunities and other project stakeholders to advance community redevelopment and renewal aspirations.
- The process is principally focused around bringing together a diverse team of design professionals for an intensive 24-hour work session with the selected community.
- DesignRevival24 participants provide their time to selected communities free of charge and actively explore opportunities to defray any costs associated with transportation, venue booking, food and other materials.
- Ideas, plans, design concepts and other results derived from DesignRevival24 events are coupled with financing strategies and implementation suggestions following the event. All results are packaged and given to a partner community for their study, assessment and potential pursuit.

The DesignRevival24 Process

From this framework, a process was developed to move DesignRevival24 efforts forward. Five key steps were identified:

1. **Community Partner Identification.** During this stage, a community partner is sought out by the DesignRevival24 participants. While parameters for community selection are kept flexible, the event is felt to have the greatest applicability for communities and towns with populations of 30,000 or fewer residents and possessing a multifaceted list of community redevelopment needs. After initial interviews and discussions, an invitation to hold an event is issued by a Mayor, City Council and/or Manager to the DesignRevival24 organizers.

2. **Pre-Event Logistics.** The Pre-Event Logistics stage allows for all DesignRevival24 event details to be finalized. This includes a site visit by DesignRevival24 organizers, refinement of community objective statements and design priorities, establishment of the event venue and arrangement of other essential items needed for the event to run smoothly.

3. **The DesignRevival24 Main Session.** The 24-hour event generally follows a flow of site investigation in the late morning and early afternoon followed by team breakout sessions with community leaders and other project stakeholders. Once DesignRevival24 participants have a workable grasp of community issues, aspirations and opportunities, breakout groups are established and the all-night generation of ideas, strategies and design solutions begins. Projects are varied and can include park and streetscape initiatives, transportation and access enhancement design suggestions, redevelopment ideas, sustainable design schemes, public art opportunities, and many others. Motivational
Designers provide their best creative concepts with little additional community input. While some design notions and concepts are fully formed, others are often early project schematics that require follow-on community review, assessment, and design effort if deemed worthwhile. This arrangement also allows participating designers to have some degree of creative freedom to explore and express design ideas while still garnering valuable community input.

DesignRevival24 and Bluefield, West Virginia

Background on Bluefield

For the first DesignRevival24 event we selected Bluefield, West Virginia as the partnering community. The City of Bluefield is located in the heart of Appalachia on the southern edge of West Virginia. The growth and development of the City was directly linked to the discovery, removal, and transport of coal. Additionally, the geography of Bluefield made it an ideal place for the natural gravity switching of trains. Due to this geographic advantage, the City served as a transportation hub and headquarters of the Norfolk and Western Rail Company. At the height of demand during World War I, over 40 million tons of coal passed through Bluefield’s rail yards (Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau 2012). During Bluefield’s coal boom, the City’s Downtown developed rapidly. For a period, it became one of the first U.S. cities to have a noticeable skyline and five o’clock traffic congestion. Bluefield’s population peaked in 1940 at approximately 25,000 residents.

While the Great Depression nearly bankrupted Bluefield, the post-war period ushered in economic and population decline. The introduction and globalization of other fuel sources and the subsequent decline in the price of coal and need for rail transport had a significant dampening impact on the community. Today, the City’s population is less than half of its peak population, leaving much of its downtown vacant or underutilized. More than 20.4% of people in Bluefield and surrounding areas live in poverty and household incomes decreased throughout the later part of the 2000s (Coil 2011).

While the revitalization challenges apparent in Bluefield during our community partner identification stage were offset by several threads of opportunity. The City is a community with a relaxed atmosphere, inviting climate, and growing art scene. Its citizens are passionate about their City and surrounding natural areas. Bluefield’s growth period left behind a remarkable collection of buildings, architecture, and transportation infrastructure. Bluefield also has a number of dynamic leaders actively interested in the City’s renewal. Of note was City Manager Andy Merriman, who took an immediate interest in the DesignRevival24 concept and the potential for it to be a transformative event for the community. For these and other reasons, Bluefield became the perfect—and willing—candidate for DesignRevival24.

The City of Bluefield, West Virginia, was selected as the first DesignRevival24 partner community. One of the attractive features of Bluefield is its remarkable collection of downtown buildings and transportation infrastructure. Image courtesy of Lunch+Recess.
**The DesignRevival24 Process in Bluefield**

With the community partner identified, the DesignRevival24 team set about its pre-event logistical tasks. The dates of April 1 and 2, 2011, were established for the main event in Bluefield. Two meetings were held with the City Manager and other stakeholders during the early part of 2011 to select a venue space, coordinate transportation, collect background data on the City and region, and to organize a “wish list” of key focus areas and objectives.

The development of this wish list proved crucial to the success of the DesignRevival24 event as it provided an initial framework from which volunteers could select and study projects they were interested in advancing. The list generally centered on revitalization initiatives such as vacant building adaptive reuse, open space and streetscape enhancement, and expansion of offerings to bring people downtown. However, the list also touched on many broader, overarching objectives for the community. Officials wanted to find opportunities to grow their local economy, increase tourism, preserve historic assets, and to take care of its economically underprivileged.

Also during the pre-development phase, we approached volunteers to participate in the first DesignRevival24 effort. A total of 26 design professionals from three practices—LandDesign, 505Design, and Lunch+Recess—signed up to participate in the 24-hour event with others pledging support for follow-on activities. Volunteers selected and refined definitive projects under each of the wish list focus areas and set about doing initial desktop research. We also established three key managerial roles for the effort: an overall project leader (Dan Dodd), a project logistics manager (Kate Pearce), and production manager (the author).

On April 1, 2011, the main team of volunteers departed from Charlotte, N.C., on a Bluefield Area Transit bus organized by the City. Upon arrival in the City, the team quickly established their work spaces and materials in a venue room at the historic Commercial Bank Building. Following a brief welcome statement by Bluefield’s Mayor and City Manager, a series of pre-arranged morning and early afternoon sessions with city leaders and area stakeholders commenced, with members of the public also dropping in to meet with designers at designated “topic” tables. At 2 PM, design volunteers fanned out across the City and into adjacent neighborhoods to photograph, measure, and sketch initial thoughts on placement of a farmers market, urban infill opportunities, streetscape ideas, and others. By 5 PM, designers were back at the Commercial Bank Building holding a second round of meetings with community leaders and residents. Many of these meetings turned into small design sessions where community members and designers started to explore initial ideas and sketches with their respective topic groups. By early evening, members of the public left, and design teams started their round-the-clock effort to explore, enhance, and detail ideas and concepts. Event organizers punctuated the evening with presentations by local community members, a live music performance, and other activities, all in an attempt to keep participants motivated and working hard.

By 5 AM on April 2, volunteers began to wrap up design ideas and proceeded to assemble work into a uniform presentation and drawing pinup area. At 8:30 AM, the public returned and volunteers presented their work to those in attendance for feedback. The presentation and project work were organized into ten sections, recounted below:
1. **The Big Picture.** Review of small town revitalization efforts and the successful clues they leave behind of applicability to Bluefield.

2. **Down Town Revitalization and Infill Opportunities.** Overall challenges and opportunities for Bluefield’s revitalization. Key redevelopment parcels were identified for infill and open space creation with the goal of improving the connectivity and quality of the pedestrian realm and redefining the street hierarchy and traffic pattern.

3. **Downtown Residential Concepts.** Five residential typologies were recommended for various locations around the Downtown core. The East End and Artist Row typologies explored ways to use existing infrastructure to create small, walkable residential neighborhoods with shared open space. The Elder Housing typology sought to create an age-in-place, cohousing development node on City owned parcels and close to community services. The Urban Student typology explored opportunities within underutilized medium density buildings to meet growing affordable housing demand by students enrolled at Bluefield State College and other area academic institutions. Finally, an Infill Housing typology attempted to create a design standard and address smaller, one-off Downtown parcels in need of transformation.

4. **Farm to Marketplace.** This design team focused on opportunities to embrace the local food movement, support local health, and create a food distribution point by creating a mixed-use, adaptive reuse development at a collection of parcels in Downtown. The designers prepared a series of concepts that sought to integrate a farmers market, a small collection of permanent and rotating dining establishments, and a community kitchen preparation and distribution space. They also explored the potential of using the project’s favorable proximity to main rail lines as a means to ship agricultural products and prepared foods to the broader marketplace.

5. **Downtown Streetscape Strategies.** The focus of this group was to explore opportunities to create new gateways into Downtown as well as ideas for streetscape enhancement. They also explored the enhancement of Chicory Square and the creation of a new public space for trainspotting enthusiasts—an important source of visitors to Downtown Bluefield.

6. **Princeton Avenue Promenade.** Princeton Avenue is a major east-west corridor linking Downtown to the surrounding regional roadway network. For this group, concepts were explored to redevelop the Downtown section of the roadway and create space for an urban greenway and park overlooking Bluefield’s rail infrastructure.

7. **Public Art.** Several groups and artists are working throughout Bluefield to create important spaces for invention, exploration, and celebration of the arts. This design group explored new temporary and permanent art installation locations. They accompanied this work with examples of other U.S. cities and their respective art in public places efforts.

8. **City Park Renovation.** City Park is a forty-acre regional park offering trails, ball courts and other passive and active recreational amenities. A volunteer landscape architect worked on a new concept plan to enhance facility linkage and integration and form a stronger hierarchy of natural, passive and active open spaces.

9. **Virtual Storytelling.** This team charged itself with finding new and unique ways to engage visitors in Bluefield’s history and other local and regional offerings. The team also focused on new modes of storytelling, including devising a complete program for “online and on-street” interaction with key locations and historic sites.

10. **Recycling Program.** Participants of this team designed a financially feasible plan for Bluefield to start its own Citywide recycling program.

“I had no idea I was going to see what I saw this morning. It just far exceeded any expectations we could have had for what was going to go on. There is a lot of excitement and enthusiasm for going on into the future.” (Sternloff 2011)

Following this community presentation, the volunteers returned home. After a few days of rest, the volunteers assembled all their prepared work and made any needed refinements and adjustments requested by community participants to improve the communication and clarity of design ideas. A handful of volunteers also spent time researching all possible public and private funding opportunities available locally and at the state and federal level. Funding and implementation ideas were packaged as a printed toolbox of resources and information that the community could use to help prioritize and advance projects. On May 17, 2011, the DesignRevival24 team presented the final package of volunteer work to an audience of approximately 150 citizens.
Lessons Learned

We look back at our first DesignRevival24 event as a laboratory from which a number of experiences and outcomes can be learned from and applied to future efforts. The DesignRevival24 Main Event and follow on community meetings were well received by the leaders and citizens of Bluefield. Since the Bluefield effort, the City used many of the materials and implementation strategies to apply for grants and prioritize three projects for further exploration and funding. These projects include improvements to City Park, public art installations, and the farm to marketplace center. Private sector interests are also looking into implementation of DesignRevival24 project suggestions and elements.

Design volunteers provided significant feedback on the event, the results, and how such events can be enhanced for future engagements. All participants felt they received back far more than what was put into the effort. Part of this feeling resulted from the positive chemistry between participants and the appreciation shown for the work that was produced. Design participants also felt invigorated by the event’s high degree of creative freedom and opportunity it afforded to use their professional skills as part of a volunteer initiative. This second point seems to track closely with other studies and research on volunteering in the U.S. that found that those who use their professional skills when volunteering are far more satisfied and likely to continue those efforts in the future (Corporation for National and Community Service 2008; Cary & Public Architecture 2010).

Volunteers also commented that the time invested in pre-event logistics and the hands on attitude by the City Manager allowed DesignRevival24 to run smoothly. This freed participants to focus their energy on community analysis and development of design ideas without any prolonged down time awaiting direction on what tasks to work on next.

Despite the time limitations on public participation leading up to and during the first eight hours of the DesignRevival24 Main Event, participants felt their contribution could be furthered through the matching of key community members to design teams. One suggestion was to have community members serve as “tour leaders” during site exploration, allowing them to provide additional understanding of community elements and issues as they explore and conduct photo documentation. Matching would also allow designers to follow up with key community members and leaders to provide guidance on implementation and stay connected with revitalization efforts.

Volunteers from Lunch+Recess prepared a five minute documentary of the Bluefield DesignRevival24 event. This documentary effectively captured the spirit and emotion of the day, allowing it to be recounted to volunteers and the community at a later time. Participants felt this documentary became an essential deliverable and
that future events should be filmed and encapsulated in a similar fashion.

Other insights received by DesignRevival24 participants include:

- Future DesignRevival24 events should broaden the types of professional volunteers to include economic and real estate experts, branding and graphic identity designers, and local and regional artists.

- With one DesignRevival24 initiative in hand, volunteers should seek out corporate sponsorship and 501(c)(3) status funding sources to assist in defraying event costs to volunteers and the recipient community.

- DesignRevival24’s applicability in post disaster community rebuilding efforts and community revitalization efforts outside the U.S. should be explored.

The Future of DesignRevival24

Design participants are motivated to hold another DesignRevival24 event in the fall of 2012. Community selection is ongoing. For this next event, the number of design firms and participants will be expanded. For the 2012 DesignRevial24 event, the hope is also to modify the approach to include a group of aspiring design professionals from high schools and colleges. The intent is to pair these students with a design professional through the course of the DesignRevival24 event to provide mentorship and experience with multi-disciplinary design work sessions.

For more information: http://www.designrevival24.com/

References


