



BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH “HEALTHY CHAOS”: AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN BINGLER

BY KALI SAPOSNICK

Imagine you own a candy store on Main Street and need someone to develop your web site. Whom do you turn to for help? In the 7,000-person town of Littleton, NH, the owner relinquished his store's basement to the high school economics program in exchange for the students' computer services. As a result, the school was able to use its then-empty classroom to house a NASA-sponsored geographic information systems program. That complex, yet simple, exchange exemplifies the kinds of connections that architect Steven Bingler encourages community members to make.

Authentic Economics

“It's authentic economics,” says Bingler, founder of Concordia, an award-winning planning and architectural design firm based in New Orleans, LA. In approaching the design of a new public building, the firm engages the whole community in systemically analyzing their resources, raising awareness of otherwise hidden issues, and engendering solutions that meet the needs of diverse constituencies. In particular, Bingler wants to center communities around their schools and vice versa. About the Littleton scenario, he says, “If you can locate a class of 60 students during the day on Main Street, then you can create \$100,000 worth of value back at the school site in the form of an empty classroom.” The basement redesign, supervised by the town's fire marshal, “took only two months, with the community raising \$500 and donating services to build that basement out.”

How does Bingler assure that all voices are heard during the design phase? “We have a two-month process to get the right people at the

table,” he says. The planning team's initial task is to identify individuals from every constituency in the community. If a stakeholder group is not initially represented, “We go get them and bring them in,” Bingler reports. Because of this commitment, a Los Angeles project required simultaneous translation in three languages. In Michigan, a project steering committee included 170 people because the community didn't feel that 100 participants could adequately represent all constituencies.

The representatives then identify the community's assets in six areas—physical, social, educational, cultural, economic, and organizational—and learn how to hook them together. When citizens, teachers, shop owners, students, and others work together to integrate these assets in innovative new ways, they reinvent the concept of community. “It's the same kind of participatory team-based planning ideas that have been developed through corporate structures in the last 30 years,” Bingler comments.

Local participants do most of the legwork to locate the community's resources. At their monthly meetings, connections abound: For instance, the Littleton town manager realized that the sewer treatment plant, which the state uses just twice a year, could accommodate a full-fledged science lab. Others envisioned developing an environmental academy; when the local college heard about the idea, they expressed interest in funding some of the curriculum development. “It's about controlled, healthy chaos,” comments the cutting-edge architect. “In the end, it's about relationships between people, places, and things, and constantly evaluating the best way of maximizing those relationships.”

Community as School, School as Community

Bingler imagines that, in the extreme, there would be no school building; the whole community would be the school and the school the whole community. “Learning is an integrated part of life, not something isolated at some school site with a chain-link fence around it,” he says. Naturally, students love the idea. In this process, they're treated with enormous respect and are deeply involved in developing and implementing ideas.

Another important outcome of this work, he adds, is the way it revitalizes democratic practices in local areas. This approach to planning empowers people; instead of relying on others, they do things for themselves. Soon they realize that the process is as important as the product. Democratic decision-making is something that most people can understand and agree with. But many local governments have lost their communities' trust because they establish policies that lack congruence. As communities engage in designing well-integrated systems that respond to diverse constituencies, they are simultaneously taking back the reins of governance.

Bingler favors keeping things simple. “And complexity can be made simpler,” he insists. “Large groups of people are capable of being enormously creative together.” They can handle complexity as long as they achieve some degree of harmony. “And you create harmony,” Bingler says, “through the process of involving an entire community—it's hard work and then all of a sudden it turns into fun.” ■

Kali Saposnick is publications editor at Pegasus Communications. Bingler will be a forum speaker at the 2001 *Systems Thinking in Action* Conference.