

# A word...

By **Tim Waterman**

## Crowdsourcing



Like earthquakes or tsunamis, development can often strike communities with a cataclysmic force that can make neighbourhoods unrecognisable seemingly overnight. Often communities never recover. We have tried for a long time to reconcile Jacobsian ideals of incremental growth and a desire for genuinely mixed-use cities with contemporary urban design without much success.

The problem lies primarily not in our hearts and minds, but rather in our wallets. The market logic of nearly all real-estate development is and has been for some time at odds with good urbanism, putting profit and speculation over, for example, quality of life or aesthetics. Finance is also international, but urban experience is local. The results are grossly scaled developments on massive, cleared sites. We cannot fix what is wrong with urban design until we find alternative economic rationales for urban renewal. As a profession, we have clutched the marionette strings that tie us to this market logic, because despite the mad puppeteer, we cannot imagine a way out of the puppet show.

An alternative may be coming into existence, however, and intelligent and articulate young professionals may very well be able to take the lead. The emerging market model that has the potential to renew practices in development

and procurement is crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing, according to Wikipedia (itself crowdsourced), is 'the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people, and especially from an online community, rather than from traditional employees or suppliers'. The idea of web-based collaboration on this model has stretched into almost all realms of human endeavour, and has moved into the lived space of our landscapes. Crowdsourcing may be used to map urban possibilities, from brownfield sites to vacant shops, to coordinate planning and design efforts, and to raise funds. Crowdsourced funding may comprise direct and voluntary donations to provide for a project or investments.

Crowdsourcing for new designs of all types, particularly new products, has been breathlessly hyped by media and technology journalists. It's hard to care much about more new products, when most just become clutter in our homes and in landfill, but it is genuinely exciting to think that we could be more thoughtful and collaborative in how we redesign our cities. This approach could renew development practice and refresh tired neighbourhoods without destroying them, 'decanting' them, or imposing alien tastes upon them. Well-designed crowdsourcing could bring communities into the design process from the beginning in more real

ways than mere consultation.

Small and/or young practices should (carefully, as the path is slick with snake-oil) explore the possibilities of crowdsourcing and become involved in the creation of new collaborative processes for urban design. It's a way to create interesting, positive, and meaningful work that cuts development capital out of the picture altogether. It's a way to encourage activism and proactive behaviour in the architectures so that we may become more ethical. It's a way to give communities back a large measure of involvement and control in development processes. It's a way out of the concentration of capital and resources in London and a redistribution of ingenuity and optimism to the rest of the country.

Crowdsourcing, finally, needs to be owned and managed by the public, and not by private interests. In this way we achieve not urban renewal, but development practice renewal, development economics renewal. It's not our cities that are broken, but our systems for making them, and crowdsourcing could help us renew those systems, and thus our world. •

**Tim Waterman** is a landscape architectural writer, speaker and critic, who lectures at the Writtle School of Design and is a studio tutor at UCL Bartlett School of Architecture. His books on landscape architecture have been translated into seven languages. He is the honorary editor of *Landscape*.

Photo ©: Agnese Sanvito