Building a Culture of Generosity:

Activity, Participation, and Sustainability in an International Design Community

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Abstract. ArchNet is an international professional web-based community of architects, planners, and designers. From one perspective, it has been very successful with more than 27,000 members, 5,000 visits per day by members and non-members, and extensive resources. However, the level of contributions from the membership has been less than expected. A survey is in progress that will help us better understand the issues. Language and culture are likely obstacles. In addition, a greater problem may be that members are not aware of each other and there is little or no feedback when they do contribute, which would lead to a weak sense of community. The goal of ArchNet is to find ways to motivate members to participate more actively in the community and support a culture of generosity rather than consumption.

Introduction

ArchNet <http://archnet.org> is a web-based online international community made up of architects, planners, and designers with a special, but not exclusive, focus on the Islamic world. The project began in 1999 with the public launch in the fall of 2002. The membership is currently over 24,000 and continues to steadily increase. In addition to registered members, there is a relatively high access rate from non-members with over 5,000 visits from unique IP numbers each day.

More than 29,000 members have joined since the project began. The current 24,000 members are considered to be relatively active because ArchNet's policy is to send an email to members who have not visited the site for more than 12 months asking if they would like to delete their accounts, or continue as members. If there is no response within a certain time period, the account is deleted. Approximately 64% of the membership are male and 36% are female. Students make up 41% of the members, 31% are practitioners, 9% are educators, 8% are researchers, and the remaining 11% are "other" and range from judges to journalists to artists. The retention level is also quite high with a less than 5% "departure" rate per year.

The ArchNet membership represents 157 countries, but five countries make up almost 53% of the membership (US, India, Egypt, UK, and Turkey). Another 25 countries represent another 34% of the membership (Canada, Pakistan, Iran, Serbia and Montenegro, Australia, Malaysia, Italy, Germany, United Arab Emirates, France, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, China, Syria, Netherlands, Brazil, Spain, Israel, Palestine, Nigeria, Switzerland, Singapore, and Belgium).

The site provides a wide range of resources, tools, and spaces where members can communicate and collaborate. Access to the site is free, non-commercial, and open to anyone who is interested in the built environment. It strives to maximize accessibility in terms of bandwidth, platform and browser. Only registered members can contribute to the site and use the collaborative tools, but non-members have read-only access to the entire site.

Understanding the role of motivation and incentives is made more complicated because ArchNet is not a standard website or portal or discussion forum. It is a combination of an online library, image and document repository, content management system, and collaboration spaces. There are personal tools, group tools, institutional and public tools, all with multiple levels of roles and permissions.

High Level of Browsing; Lower Quantity of Contributions

Though the daily traffic to the site and usage is high, and membership is steadily increasing, the designers and managers of the site have been less satisfied with the quantity of contributions by the membership. Like many online communities, the original hope was to have a significant amount of content generated by its members, rather than the ArchNet editorial office. This goal has been difficult to achieve. Though members contribute over 90% in some areas

such as the Discussion Forum, other areas depend much more on ArchNet staff for content.

For example, staff contributed 60.1% of the postings in the Digital Calendar, 67.8% in the Careers section, 68.6% in the News, but only 9.4% in the Discussion Forum. Participation in the Personal Workspaces is much lower, however, with only 4.0% of the membership posting images in their image collections, and even fewer making them publicly available (Beamish 2005).

Why it Works

ArchNet has been very successful in attracting and retaining members as well as visitors. Activity on the site is high and increasing. I would propose that there are at least five reasons why it has been successful: investment, reputation, content, focus, and uniqueness.

The funders of the project, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, have invested significant amounts of funding into the project. Full-time staff manage and oversee the development of the project and graduate student research assistants continually add new content to the Digital Library. The funders were aware from the beginning not only that this project was experimental but that they would have to make a long-term investment in it. Though the budget for ArchNet is far from lavish, it is adequate for maintaining the site and continued modest development.

Reputation and expertise also play a role in the project's success. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture has a long history of supporting the built environment and architectural education. It has funded the Aga Khan Program in Islamic Architecture at MIT and Harvard for more than 25 years, which has supported a large body of faculty and graduates that the project draws on. In addition, there are extensive slide collections at the two universities that focus on historic and contemporary architecture in the Islamic world. ArchNet has complete access to both slide collections and the faculty often serve as advisors to the project. As a result, the range and quality of the resources on the site are high.

Not only is the quality of the information dependable, but the resources on the site are extensive. The Digital Library has over 37,000 images and 3,000 publications. The Calendar contains over 1,400 international events that range from competitions to conferences. More than 900 jobs have been posted and the Discussion Forum is lively with more than 7,500 postings. In addition to the content, the site offers a Personal Workspace to every member, and Group Workspaces for collaborative work among members.

The focus of ArchNet is on architecture, design, urban planning, and landscape, principally in the Muslim world. The site managers work hard to maintain this focus and a high level of professionalism by closely monitoring the content on the site. They try to emphasize this focus to visitors by maintaining consistency of subject matter and ensuring that topics on the site are related to the

built environment. Other topics are acceptable as long as there is a strong and logical connection to the subject focus of the site and the professional interests of the members.

And finally, ArchNet has been successful because there is a need and there is no other site quite like it. Schools of Architecture, especially those in developing countries, struggle to provide adequate resources to their students. ArchNet provides reliable and high quality content that is free for academic use or personal use. In addition, architects and planners in Islamic countries have very few outlets to publish or discuss their work because the overwhelming majority of scholarly journals and design-oriented magazines focus on North America and Europe. Extremely few address the issues and realities of the rest of the world. The aim of ArchNet is not only to give practitioners, educators, and scholars a venue to discuss among themselves, but a platform for those in Europe and North America to learn about the work of their colleagues in the Islamic world.

What Doesn't Work

Though in general the developers of ArchNet have been pleased with the strong response it has received and its apparent popularity demonstrated by the activity it generates, the level of contribution from the members to the site has been disappointing.

We do not know exactly why members are either reluctant or not motivated to contribute to the site and a member survey is currently in progress to increase our understanding of this issue. Preece et al (2004) list a number of reasons that could be relevant to ArchNet, but I would speculate that there are three important reasons why members may be uncomfortable or unwilling to contribute content to the site. (The survey results will certainly confirm or refute my hypotheses.)

Language must be a barrier in many cases. English is the primary language on the site, and our members come from over 157 countries, many of which are not English-speaking. It would be reasonable to assume that at least some of our members feel less than confident in their writing fluency. For a site that serves an international community, this certainly is a challenge. Originally, we had hoped that reliable and good quality translation software would be available that we could incorporate, but to date this has not happened.

Culture may be an obstacle in some countries. Not all cultures support the notion that everyone has a right to express themselves. For example, it is not uncommon in some Asian countries for students to feel that only professors have knowledge and expertise, and therefore it would be inappropriate for them to speak up and offer an opinion.

There is also the simple fact that they do not need to. There is plenty of good quality content already on the site that keeps increasing without their help. I suspect that it has never occurred to many of our members to contribute. They go

to the site to get information and see themselves as consumers, not producers of information.

It may be unrealistic to overcome barriers of language and culture, but the developers, managers, and designers of ArchNet could certainly address the issue of members feeling that they do not need to contribute. Members may not know how much their contributions are desired and appreciated because there is no reinforcement or feedback. There is no acknowledgment if they do contribute to the site, and no consequences if they do not.

Improving Motivation

The survey should help us better understand the problem, and we hope it will help suggest new ways to motivate ArchNet members to contribute more to the site. We also may have made a wrong assumption early on. We had assumed or hoped that eventually the level of contribution of to the site by the members would surpass the content provided by staff. But as both Kim (2000), Powazek (2002), and Preece (2000) emphasize, the importance of leadership and the host cannot be under estimated. ArchNet staff may have to become more involved rather than less, and take on a more pro-active and facilitating role. For example, they could organize (online and real life) events, journals, competitions, and conferences. They could designate and oversee a network of regional volunteers who would ensure that news, jobs, events, and information from their geographical areas were available on the site. Other volunteer "hosts" with special topical expertise could encourage and moderate targeted and thoughtful discussion.

A few of our members have suggested monetary rewards, but that is not an acceptable or viable option from the funders or site managers' point of view since it is contrary to the culture of generosity that it is trying to build.

One of the more effective methods may be to focus on enhancing reputation, which is especially important in a professional community. Perhaps short of developing a calculation to assess the worth and quality of a person's contribution, we could simply announce the top ten or twenty contributors every year and write up a short bio of each. Members who post interesting or useful sets of images could be announced in the News section, with links to their collection. Even an occasional simple email message from the site administrator acknowledging and thanking members for their contribution would surely encourage them to continue.

Adapting the open source method of considering new features for the program after the person has solved or helped with some of the immediate bugs is an intriguing idea. For ArchNet, perhaps the top contributors could be invited to make a wish-list of new features or new content they would like to see added to the site.

But at an even more basic level, we need to make the ArchNet community more aware of itself so that members realize there is a real audience for their contributions. Providing feedback is an obvious necessity. For example, if a member created a publicly viewable image collection, we should at least provide a counter to let them know that it was by seen by a certain number of visitors. Currently, members who do contribute must be reminded of the old riddle, "If a tree falls in a forest, and there is no one to hear it, does it make a sound?"

As managers, designers, and developers of the site, we need to ensure that everyone hears the sound of a member's contribution as we work towards creating a more supportive and generous culture within the membership and the community.

References

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Bio

Anne Beamish has been with ArchNet since 1999. She was the original Managing Director of ArchNet, and in 2002 became the Director of Research, responsible for design, development, and research on the site. She is an architect and urban planner by training, and has had a long interest in using communication technologies to support both physical and digital communities. She is curently an assitant professor in the Community and Regional Planning Program at the University of Texas at Austin.