The BIM Balancing Act: Tilt the Scales in Your Favor

Synergy in the Sandbox

By Adam Lega, BIM Coordinator, KAI Design & BUILD

AN ARCHITECT, AN ENGINEER, a contractor and an owner walk into a bar… sounds like the beginning of a joke, right? Nope. This has become reality in the world of local user groups!

A local user group (LUG) is "a group of individuals, usually in a specific city or other geographical area, who are interested in common topics, and who meet regularly to discuss them." The term apparently got a start from the Linux Users Group but has since broadened to encompass the term "Local." Typical LUG activities include: encouraging and assisting new users, listening to presentations on specific topics, exchanging job information, developing projects, socializing and discussing means and methodologies about the topic around which the user group has formed. So basically, a LUG is like a neighborhood sandbox—it brings people together from all different walks of life to play and learn.

As BIM has become the new buzzword in the industry (and yes, it is official that BIM is unofficially a word), LUGs have begun to pop up everywhere to promote the concept of BIM and the supporting software products that make BIM possible. Some of the user groups are grass-roots efforts, some are corporate-sponsored. Our purpose is to explore several LUGs in particular and find out how they get the community more involved.

LUGs in four different markets (St. Louis, Kansas City, Denver and New York) were explored and—like neighborhood sandboxes—while their sponsorships are different, it was refreshing to discover that there are a number of similarities.

Each group handles meetings and topics in a similar fashion.

Typically, the LUG gets together informally, usually for dinner and drinks while they listen to a presenter for anywhere between thirty minutes to one hour. Dinner is generally provided free of charge for the attendees, either paid for by the group sponsor, donated or by minimal membership fees. The topics presented are relevant to the group meeting. After the presentation, there is a discussion that carries on until the last person decides to leave.

How often each group meets is a different story, however. According to Patrick Davis of the Kansas City Revit Users Group (K.C.R.U.G.), "We try to do something quarterly. Everyone is extremely busy and if we do a meeting or session, we want to make sure that it is meaningful." The Revit Roundtable (R.R.U.G.) and Ground Breakers [i.e. Civil] (G.B.U.G.) Users Groups in St. Louis meet six times a year—once every quarter and then twice for special sessions. "This allows people flexibility and keeps the group focused on the issues of BIM…" says Tracy Fisher of Hagerman and Company, Inc. On the other hand, the NYC Metro BIM Users Group was founded in April 2008 and to date they have had four meetings. That is at least once a month. The Denver Revit Users Group (D.R.U.G.—anyone noticing a theme here with these "UG" names?) also meets once a month, for twelve meetings per year. "We strive to keep the topics of our presentations varied in both discipline and skill level…from beginning a new project to advanced techniques…" according to Christopher Lynch, Vice President of D.R.U.G. This brings us to the next set of similarities:

Each group has a variety of members—from different market segments to varying skill levels—people are always willing to attend.

According to Davis, "We have people, from those that have not even purchased the tools, to experts." In St. Louis, the R.R.U.G. "gets attendance from everyone—architects, engineers, owners, professors, some students—the exception being contractors, though that is also changing as BIM becomes more prevalent," says Fisher. Lynch supports this assessment as well saying that the members come from "all areas—we have college students, architects, structural and MEP engineers and General Contractors." Another interesting bit of information—each group has managed to grow their user base despite their different means of supporting themselves. The common consensus: word of mouth is the most effective means of expanding each group. For example, in Denver the group has grown to 196 members. They have a minimal membership fee to support the cost of meetings and enjoy the support of some of the local resellers to provide resources. In Kansas City, they "no longer track membership…but at last count had 250 plus members." There are no membership fees in KC and the group itself has no sponsors. It is just an informal get-together with people who want to share information about BIM. R.R.U.G.

in St. Louis is sponsored by Hagerman and Company, Inc. They have about 70 members to date and are continuing to grow. Because R.R.U.G. has a corporate sponsor, there is no membership fee associated with being part of their group. The newest member of the LUGs studied, NYC Metro BIM has 168 BIMologists at the time this article was written—and that is four months into their groups founding. Even more interesting is that anyone can join their group. Despite catering to their strong local presence, NYC Metro also has a growing national membership, due to their use of technology. New members just sign up on their website. This leads to another observation:

Each of the groups has a web presence of some kind.

R.R.U.G. uses email and the web to register people for meetings. Additionally, a PDF newsletter, The Revit Review, is sent out to all registered members in order to communicate what happens in each of the meetings that take place. For D.R.U.G., the internet, "…has been very key to our organization. Almost the entire organization is run through the website… providing one central location for members to access…past presentation downloads, allowing people to join or just being able to contact someone to get more information." Lynch also says that their blog "provides volunteers a quick and easy method of updating the website and keeping members informed." K.C.R.U.G. has a website and blog that is not much used at all. Davis links to other sites that have the resources already available, rather than repeating what has been done well elsewhere. NYC Metro has one of the most interesting web uses. As stated previously, they draw members from a national audience. This happens through their use of the web to broadcast their local meetings via webinar technology. It enables people nationally to participate locally, to view the presentation being given. For NYC Metro, the internet is instrumental in organizing the meetings and registering the members who attend.

So what does each group gain from forming? With some differences, the motivation is the same: Hagerman and Company, Inc. has invested their own resources—marketing, profit, time and effort—into sponsoring a synergistic

atmosphere at R.R.U.G. and G.B.U.G., where locals from different companies can get together and share knowledge. What motivates Hagerman to do this is not profit but instead "to be perceived as the industry experts and service leaders," according to Fisher. Though profit is not motivation, it makes sense that Hagerman will have a better reputation across the AEC industry as a direct result of fostering a collaborative environment. Contrast that to K.C.R.U.G. who "has attended some of the AUGI meetings at AU about growing your User Group, creating an organization structure and that is not what this group is about. We are just trying to share information, if that means 100 people attend a meeting or 10, that's ok," says Davis. For D.R.U.G., "the members show up because of the content that is provided." Lynch goes on to say that, "… I also receive the benefit of networking with a wide variety of professionals in the design/construction field, and they recognize me as one of the area's most advanced users." NYC Metro is "dedicated to supporting the networking for all organizations involved in BIM, gaining the support and involvement of owners, architects, engineers, construction firms and practitioners, educational institutions, property and facility managers and other professionals."

Each group was formed as an outlet to share information and network with like-minded individuals.

Each of the Local User Groups covers BIM in one way or another.

Take a look at the names of each User Group studied. G.B.U.G., R.R.U.G., D.R.U.G., K.C.R.U.G., NYC Metro BIM—it is evident that their focus is to understand the tools used in the BIM process. They each go about it differently, however. BIM encompasses much more than just a single piece of software. BIM is a process, a methodology—a noun, a verb and a gerund all rolled into one acronym if you want to get technical (in fact, the only gerund not ending in "-ing"). This is where each groups stands alone. G.B.U.G. studies civil aspects of BIM, R.R.U.G. studies architectural, structural and MEP. D.R.U.G. and K.C.R.U.G. have discussions that focus on process and tools that will work with Revit exclusively. And NYC Metro approaches BIM as a whole, studying what it does to benefit business and society alike—how it is used currently, how it will be used and how we can achieve true collaboration in an interoperable environment.

How do we get into the sandbox?

This question has a simple answer—go to a meeting of your local user group. An intriguing

phenomena evolving with BIM has been the buildingSMART Alliance Interest Groups or "BIM Breakfast" groups as they have been called. Like the LUGs, they meet once a month in a local venue for breakfast and BIM, in a session that lasts about ninety minutes. It is very informal and has drawn users from all over. In fact, the NYC Metro BIM users group is an Alliance affiliate. Unlike the LUGs, they have no specific software focus. These groups are local grass roots organizations that have been established to get AEC practitioners and stakeholders alike to interact with each other in an effort to understand BIM and help make it better.

Or better yet, start a user group—build your own local BIM sandbox! The buildingSMART Alliance website has a list of currently active interest groups and who to contact to get involved. There is also an excellent PDF guide outlining how to start a BIM interest group in your neck of the woods. The challenge is getting that local sandbox synergy to coalesce.

Whether at a home or in a park, a sandbox is a place where neighborhood kids get together to create and play. And if someone does not play nicely, they are evicted. So the synergy remains undisturbed and is left to foster a culture of sharing and collaboration. These local

user groups are akin to that sandbox—locals gathering to learn, share and grow in their chosen topic. What ultimately creates this synergy in the sandbox? Remarkably, across all these groups it is the members who are the most important factor in their success. Different people from different market segments are all coming together to network, to chat, to share knowledge and to help each other understand BIM. Some meetings are formal, while some are informal; but they all promise an environment where people can collaborate and disseminate information about a topic that everyone desires to understand—it is all about BIM.

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Adam Lega is the Building Information Modeling Coordinator for KAI Design & BUILD.