

Design for the 21st Century

Industry and Design Focus October 2019



PJA hosted the first of a planned series of roundtable discussions, bringing together experts from across the property industry. The discussion focussed on the role technology and Artificial Intelligence was having on the development industry and how we should be designing for the future.

Hope vs Reality

Immediate access to information and enhanced communication have become essential to everyday life. Consensus of those present was that ‘smart’ technology acts as an “enabler”. However, questions remain about how to standardise the collection and sharing of information so that it can become useful for everyone.

Even more uncertain is the role of information and its value in the design process. Nigel Lea discussed the role of CGIs and said the use of technology had proven not to be as popular with some clients as the current hype would suggest. Whilst technology makes collaboration and sharing of ideas much easier, hand drawn sketches, modular designs and real-life experience offer more of a “feel” for a place. The Public therefore still seemed to trust hand drawn images over those that are digitally produced.

There was agreement that the technological debate today is also a London-centric one, as there appears to be a huge disparity between the availability and use of most recent technology in different parts of the country. Interestingly, it also seems the UK is lagging behind other parts of the globe.

The Next Generation

Technological knowledge among younger professionals across the industry is promising. It has already become apparent at workplaces of those attending that the next generation will re-define the working environment through different skill sets and approaches. However, this should not be seen as a replacement for experience, Alastair Roberts, noted: *"You should always be 10%-15% uncomfortable in your job."*

Concerns were raised, based on personal experiences, that technology might take away forms of social interaction that develop important personal and professional skills; Jerry noted that body language is important in how we communicate ideas and responses and this will be missed through use of virtual meeting conferences. How will people meet, learn about social values, or become confident public speakers? Meeting places and tools of communication will change and potentially open up new entry points for personal and professional ambitions. Should there maybe be a balance? We can't dictate what people do in their own time, but what about our workplaces? Why is social interaction so important?

The importance of social interaction began when workplaces became communities and public open space was incorporated into the development design to create islands for people to see each other and to be seen. The intrinsic value of social interaction is informing people about their active role in the making of places.

Collaboration across industries offers such an opportunity. Rather than a threat to liability or personal data, collaboration can save time, break down barriers, and result in better decision-making. Collaboration is also about sharing risks to claim mutual benefits. Nathan Koren used Project 13 as an example, which is a business model for infrastructure delivery that replaces transactional arrangements with a collaborative enterprise model to enhance certainty about productivity and delivery of outcomes.

The benefits of successful collaboration appear to be manifold. Why are larger firms not too open to the idea of collaboration at workplaces, whereas smaller firms are? In summary, sufficient financial resources will fill the voids created by inefficient processes, whereas SMEs cannot afford to get it wrong too many times. It was agreed by all that 5G and AI will help enhance how we interact and improve our potential to collaborate with each other.

The Death of Location? Virtual and Physical Space

Technology allows us to work from almost anywhere these days. Do you actually need physical space and infrastructure to go along your business? Are we experiencing the death of location?

Not really, says Nathan Koren; who believes there is a danger of things that have become universal to be devalued. Thus, he has strong belief in the survival of professions that are based on or are inherently offering social interaction within confined physical spaces as they will become a scarce good that people seek out (like a gym at your workplace, for example).

There is, of course, the possibility that these interactions can result in conflict. Physical space offers confined boundaries within which to operate until conflict becomes unavoidable. Virtual spaces are limitless, offering conflicts to be avoided. Consensus is not always desired, as cities as well as project teams live off the bouncing off each other. Knowing how break down the border between virtual space and physical space in order to harvest the potential of both will become key at modern workplaces.

Decision Making

The above points show that despite of technological advances, there is still the human element that carries the debate. Indeed, Nick Gregory, believes that the technology is only as good as the person using it. This becomes particularly relevant during decision-making processes.

Everybody in the room agreed that technology is not going to solve all problems. However, within the industry, property developers are aware of everybody's expectations to be connected at all times; architects appreciate that technology makes design simpler, and plan around these expectations; and transport consultants investigate the impact of more autonomous environments on the planning of future infrastructure. However, at local authority level where many of the decisions about development for the future are made, limited resources and rigid planning guidance act as a blocker.

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