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Digitised cities a once in a lifetime opportunity to rebuild in a different way



YOUR self-driving car glides slowly into docklands and your smartphone guides the vehicle to an empty parking space on the quay. As you step out, you skip around a robot which is keeping the path clean.

At a table outside your hotel, you scan your credit card on a clock, buy two hours of table time and are served free coffee. The hotel is powered and heated by the salt water in the dock. Using fast, free, street broadband, you do some work, before eating a salad that was grown on the hotel rooftop.

All of this technology is already in use in cities around the world and according to Charles Landry, an international authority on urban change, the implications of the digital age for cities will be as dramatic as the shifts brought about by the industrial revolution.

Landry is set to be a keynote speaker at a conference entitled 'Urban Futures — cities and towns in transition', which is being organised by the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland and the Academy of Urbanism, and takes place next Thursday and Friday in

Dublin Castle.

Landry will speak on 'Digitised Cities' and I had a fascinating chat with him about urban evolution. He told me that cities, citizens and urban leaders have a once in a lifetime opportunity to rebuild our cities in a different way.

Originally our urban centres evolved around the hard infrastructure of streets and buildings, before entering into what Landry terms a more "consultative era" of "starchitects" and "glamorisation". He said the challenge now is to create environments where people can think and act with imagination.

Landry said that cities must become more adaptable, convenient, seamlessly connected and use less energy and that "digitisation" is at the heart of that.

"The digitised city is already with us, but we need a common vision of where next" he told me.

"This requires local authorities to become more of a facilitator of opportunities, rather than just an arbitrator on planning, and a new level of open co-operation with citizens, business and, particularly, the

technology sector," Landry said.

"When the world's biggest hotel chain, Airbnb, has no hotels, and the world's biggest media provider, Facebook, has no content, we have to accept that business has changed."

With people now spending much longer working in clusters from locations such as coffee shops, and from home, the demand for office space will reduce. This is where Landry cited the examples of coffee shops in Moscow and London where you buy time at the table.

Digitisation includes the seamless connection of devices, where everything from transport systems, to signage to lighting, are interconnected, self-regulating and communicating with citizens, leading to greater convenience, efficiency and energy savings. Landry cited Helsinki, Barcelona and Antwerp as being advanced in this regard.

Amsterdam has an app enabling citizens to report problems to officials, from a broken light to a pothole. Antwerp's 'City of Things' project is seeing all its street furniture "sensorised", right

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down to its traffic cones. Antwerp's parking app will guide you to available spaces on the streets and Barcelona's bins tell the truck when they are full. In Eindhoven, street lights turn on as a car approaches.

Landry emphasised the key to progress is "sharing" and referred to Helsinki, where the city provides over 700 streams of data, free, to tech companies, who then create apps that solve problems.

One example is the BlindSquare app, where your phone will guide you around a city via an earpiece. This warns visually impaired people of possible dangers and is in use in over 50 cities.

Generally, procurement policy needs to change to invite solutions, as opposed to specifying equipment, he said.

For developers, Landry said sustainability is the priority and that digitisation supports that.

"A building must be made intelligent, communicating with itself, via self-regulating devices. Buildings can become energy providers instead of energy users. Developers can incorporate more intelligent devices into the mechanics of a building and avoid a lot of retrofitting later," he said.

Dublin has done considerable work in this sphere and the Digital Dublin project has established a base for future progress in this rapidly changing area.