



FEATURE ARTICLE

Smart Cities, dodgeball, being uncomfortable and talking to strangers

Chris Isles MPlA, Executive Director Planning, Place Design Group

So late last year, Barcelona hosted another edition of the World Smart City Expo. It is the global gathering place of all smart city aficionados (read 'nerds' like me). If this was the opening night of the latest Star Wars movie, we would have all been there at midnight in our Sith and Jedi costumes running around with our light sabres.

It was put to me that Barcelona really is a fantasy place for any planner and a city that each of us really need to both have on our bucket list, but then also cross off that list too. So, I was a tad excited to finally get there to see it for myself. I could write for hours and well over my word limit here on everything that goes to make Barcelona one of the true great cities in the world and why it is that way. But I won't give it away, I'll leave that for you all to discover yourselves. But make the effort, you won't be disappointed!

So, a 50 words or less description of the Smart City Congress to set the scene. Firstly, it has a trade hall about 3ha in area with 700+ exhibitors showing everything from parking sensors, to Apps, to hardware and software, and electric anything and everything. It is a proverbial candy store for a smart city kid. Beyond the candy store that

is the trade show, it has typical conference sessions that fill 7 rooms/venues all day every day for 3 days straight, with speakers from all corners of the world sharing the learnings, ideas, and thoughts on the various parts of the smart city spectrum.

There genuinely was so much going that, one of the Aussie's on the trip with me said "it is like drinking from a firehose. You can only absorb and take in so much of the content, before you are full." You needed to be a master of time management to skilfully take on the challenging daily balancing act of plotting out your day down to the nano-second, so to ensure you could see and absorb all that there is or at least as much as your brain and eyes can take it. This is no small feat, but worth the challenge.

For me what was interesting was to see where Australia was at on the Smart City Spectrum. We have started talking about

it, we have some pilot projects and I think we are at the 'dawn of awakening' when it comes to the Smart City space, whilst much of Europe and America seems to have been doing it for years and they have mass smart city initiative rollouts and many success stories and learnings to share with the world. And that is why a little planner from Australia treks all the way over to Barcelona for a conference talking about Smart Cities—to learn from those that have done it and are doing it. We have much to learn before we potentially head off in the wrong direction or the same dead ends that those before us have done.

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But all of that aside, why go to Barcelona and the Congress? Simple. Because it is a melting pot of people, inspiration



Figure 1: World Smart City Expo 2017, Barcelona (Source: Place Design Group)

and innovation and you really need to be here, in and amongst it to get it and hear and see it first hand, because so much of the nuances and subtleties are lost in translation if you are just reading about it second-hand, via articles like this or by following Twitter.

I read an article recently in the Wall Street Journal by Andy Kessler, who captured very eloquently why I love participating in so many similar discussions on the Smart City and Smart City + Planning space and why I would encourage all of those reading to do the same. Anyway, it was kind of a long piece, so I paraphrase and summarise what Andy wrote below:

'The Future is dodgeball, and to understand what is coming, you need to let some of those balls whizzing by start to hit you... Nobody knows anything. Everyone is an outsider, and it's all up for grabs. Someone might have an opinion, but there are few facts. What you need are your own opinions about where the world is headed in any given industry... You need to go to places where the future is discussed. Every industry has these events. Make the time to go. And not only to hear keynoters billow hot air, but for the panel discussions where people disagree... Walk up and talk to people. Ask what they do. They're there because they want to learn something too. They will all ask you what you think. Come up with something fast, but don't

be too stubborn to change what you think as you learn more... The goal is finding a new way to think, to filter news over time as the future takes shape in fits and starts. It never happens in a straight line... The future doesn't happen overnight. You just need to get inside it and let some of those balls whizzing by start to hit you. And you've got to do this in person. Most issues don't show up online, let alone on Facebook or Twitter.'

So, what does this have to do with planning and planners?

To me, Andy Kessler has eloquently captured what our profession needs to do, but also perhaps one of our greatest weaknesses as a profession as well. That being we tend to hang out with planners, and only go to planning type events and conferences. Sure we might dip our toe into a town centre conference, economic development or placemaking events, but we are still pretty much playing with the same people in the same sandpit.

My view is that the whole Smart City thing has and is moving from a bit of a profile gimmick to now an essential part of our city and government strategy and an essential piece of understanding for all planners. I don't think we will need to speak 'fluent' smart city, but planners will need to develop or have enough understanding of the smart city space

that you can translate and work with data, technology and tech people to both get the data from the smart city stuff to help you be a better planner, but also know what is happening to be the defenders of our cities too and ensure that the technology aspects of the Smart City ecosystem don't dominate and to the dis-benefit of making our cities better places to live thanks to the technology.

The future of our cities really hinges on how 'city types' (however you personally identify, be you a planner, architect, engineer or designer) learn to adopt and use data and smart city technology, principles and opportunities as a core part of these future cities. I would encourage you to get out and attend some events and lectures on topics out of your comfort zone in different spheres. Be it, big data, IOT, blockchain, spatial industries and obviously Smart Cities.

To then finish again with Andy Kessler, 'The Future Is Dodgeball. To understand what's coming, let some of those balls whizzing by start to hit you ■

Chris Isles, is the Executive Director for Planning at Place Design Group and works at the intersection of planning, smart cities and data science. Awarded Australian Planner of the Year 2015 his driving energy is the recognition of the critical role that planners have in the cities of the future.



ESSENTIAL ECONOMICS
26/44 MARKET ST SYDNEY NSW 2000 AUSTRALIA
96 PELHAM ST CARLTON VICTORIA 3053 AUSTRALIA
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