

Smart Cities

Like many people, I often wonder how I can best be useful to society. Not all the time of course (that would either make me a saint, deluded or both), but I do take the time sometimes to look at what I do and ask myself whether it's making a difference (the answer, by the way, is yes - in very small ways as befits my very small footprint on the planet, but a hopeful, little-by-little 'yes').

I think sometimes about how societies form and break, and about how we cynical noughties are ever going to repair the societal damage that occurred in Mrs Thatcher's 80s. I look around, and see communities of two or three houses, three or four flats in a block instead of the villages and areas that used to keep an eye out for each other, and I wonder where the modern equivalent is (possible answer: activity based, work, online), and what it would take for people to start connecting again.

There are schemes out there, but they too have the stamp of the authoritarian, wait-for-permission society in which we've found ourselves. One of these is [The Big Lunch](#) - a day held to meet and get to know the neighbours in your street. I blinked and [missed it](#) - and presumably there isn't another organised "meet your neighbours day" for another year now. Another, and yet again controlled from above, is the Smart Cities initiatives. Or rather, there are several Smart Cities initiatives; the [EU](#), [IBM](#), various US cities. The projections are pretty staggering: IBM [estimates](#) that, by 2050, 70% of the world's (9 billion) population will live in cities. That's a) quite a lot of people per city, and b) one heck of a chance to improve how those people live - and specifically, to improve how they use and share resources. Interestingly, from reading the reports, it appears that right now the most positive actions people can take are to insulate their lofts (if they have them, given that many cities contain apartment buildings) and to go down the pub when there's a big sporting event on (thus removing several dozen televisions from the total energy consumed). But there will be much more to do than this, and optimisation and information using technology will definitely be playing its part.

[Elsewhere](#) is a quote that cities account for 2% of the world's geography. That seems quite a lot of geography, given how much of it there is. So I had a look at said geography in the hope of getting a finger-in-the-air estimate of city population densities. So, assuming that they meant the usable geography (i.e. land), ignoring Antarctica and using [WikiAnswers](#), I make that 134987000 square km to play with, of which 2% is 2699740 square km. And 6398500000 people now - so at 70% of current population, that would be 4478950000 people to fit into the cities, 1659 people per square km, or 600 square metres each. Which, allowing for roads, offices, apartment blocks, hospitals, schools etc is still quite a decent acreage. That shrinks a bit when we use the [estimate](#) of 9.7 billion total population in 2050 (and sheesh, those Europe percentage figures are scary) - at 6.79 billion people in cities, that gives 2515 per square km, or about 400 square metres each, which all-told suddenly doesn't seem like quite as much space anymore. And equally suddenly, what looked like a cute idea to make cities a bit more energy-efficient starts to look like a climate-change-sized oncoming train. We lost the tipping-point (the time at which positive action would have made a big difference) on climate change because nobody in power was listening. Maybe, just maybe, they've learnt their lesson and are starting to prepare early this time.