

New Century Cities Emerge Around The Globe

Some 150 invited participants convened on January 18 for a two-day symposium on New Century Cities. They hailed from four continents, and from disciplines ranging from “traditional” city-builders—architects, city planners, and construction firms—to the newest partners in the city development process— information technology, communications, and media firms (including Cisco, HP, and IBM), as well as historians, educators, and artists.

What brought them together was a shared belief that the cities of the next century will be radically unlike the cities of centuries past. “For example, connectivity and intelligence will be part of buildings,” said William Mitchell, head of the Media Arts and Sciences Program, “just as lighting and air-conditioning are now.” Such buildings will be “programmable devices responding actively and intelligently to changing needs and conditions,” with, say, agile interiors that can be reconfigured on demand into large or small workspaces, and light-sensing exterior “skins” that dynamically block glare.

Welcome to the new age of urban development. The symposium showcased, during a series of panel discussions, some spectacular examples of “new century cities.” These are projects that integrate the latest information, communication, and media technologies into the physical, social and commercial fabric of a community, a city, or even a region. In effect, they are living laboratories that anticipate emerging life styles at the same time that they celebrate the experience of “place.”

The projects ranged from implementing “wireless” neighborhoods (lower Manhattan) and even whole cities (Philadelphia), to developing entirely new towns, such as Seoul’s Digital Media City. In size, projects ranged from one-block, Singapore’s 450-acre district for advanced technology research, to the 24-acre Northern Ireland Science Park, a high tech incubator that will also provide “neutral ground for the formerly divided social communities in Belfast.” Some projects had academic roots, notably MIT’s initiatives on technology-supported homes, streets, and neighborhoods. Public involvement in the development process characterized two projects, Crossroads Copenhagen, an “international center of research and development in the fields of culture and media,” and Helsinki’s Arabianranta district, devoted to art and design, where collective online decision-making brought residents into the layout process.

The panels were followed by brainstorming. Attendees sought to extract common ground, not to mention common terminology, from the welter of social, intellectual, technological, and political factors that impacted their projects. In the end, they converged on the phrase “killer environment,” an analog of the software industry’s “killer app,” to encapsulate what New Century Cities will bring to the urban scene.

The symposium closed with the exhilarating sense that a new community had coalesced.

Symposium organizers Dennis Frenchman, Director, City Design and Development Group, and Michael Joroff, Senior Lecturer, both from the department of Urban Studies and Planning, said they plan to hold future meetings.

The symposium's sponsors were the Center for Real Estate, the City Design and Development Group, and the Media Lab, all in the School of Architecture and Planning. More information about the symposium, including summaries of the projects, is available at the Center for Real Estate's website <http://web.mit.edu/cre>.

CAPTIONS:

A computer-generated night view of Digital Media Street in Seoul's Digital Media City.
Source: Donyun Kim and Archiplan, Inc.

A rendering of the District Master Plan for the Ørestad Nord district of Copenhagen that houses Crossroads Copenhagen. Source: IT University Copenhagen

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