## Planning (in) the digitised future
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If you've been excited by the digital world created in Alfonso Cuaron's Gravity, then looking up a planning application on a local authority website is likely to bring you back down to earth with even more of a bump than Sandra Bullock's landing. What are the prospects for better and more sophisticated digitisation of the planning system?

It's not hard to imagine amazing possibilities for spatial planning in a digitised world, given the continuing exponential growth of computing power and capacity that we can expect (even if Moore's Law now turns out to have been more of a guideline – a bit like planning policies). The kind of digital imagery we are used to seeing on Time Team, with successive phases of building on an archaeological site reconstructed in 'fast forward' fly-throughs, could be used for future project proposals and made available for consultees to review on a local authority website. Or a dynamic imaging app could allow you to hold up your iPad in front of you on site and view a new scheme overlaid on reality, as it would appear from that viewpoint. Increasingly detailed digital city models already exist, and with more detailed data, greater computing power and better applications, the possibilities for inserting schemes in a digital world are exciting.

But today, it feels as if we are still in the digital Stone Age when it comes to the planning process. The applications suggested above wouldn't need any technology that isn't already in use in other more technically advanced fields - but they are not likely to become standard practice soon. The reality is that digitisation of the planning system is in its infancy – and for the most part it is in the hands of local authorities, who are generally not at the bleeding edge of technology. The presentation of planning applications on a local authority website is typically poor: dumb search functions with no fuzzy logic, so you can't find a site in the first place; bad indexing of documents if you do find them; and documents scanned at poor resolution, or in such large files that they are broken into dozens of parts for downloading.

In the spirit of learning to walk before you can run, I suggest we need to think about the digital near future a bit harder, and worry about the more distant future when the present system is working properly. What would be nice this year would be:

•	National standards for presenting data, so that a search on any local authority website looks the same (or better, is a national resource)
•	Standards of search functions that match those of say Google – not much to ask, but the present reality is a long way from that; and all data geo-located on maps.
•	Clear, user friendly presentation of planning documents, in digital originals rather than scans, viewable online without needing to download, and all suitable for a lay person with a home PC.

All that would be a good start, but would appear to be some way off.

What about further ahead? Even as the physical reality of building proposals can be presented in more and more sophisticated ways through computer modelling, will this bring about better planning? It's hard to see why one should expect that. The many problems of the UK planning system are not mainly to do with lack of access to data.

Digital exclusion, too, should be a major concern in a system that is supposed to be democratically accountable. Your 80 year old mother might want to say something about the Wetherspoon planned to open on her doorstep (mine did), but the average council website will not make it easy for her, even if she did use the internet.

In an optimistic version of the digital future, planning authorities will be much more readily able to receive data as well as to disseminate it. In that case, will voters still want their councillors deciding what will happen – why not decision-making by popular vote? Compared with a digital city model, the system that would allow citizens to vote online on planning applications and strategies would be pretty straightforward. But there is little appetite anywhere - least of all with the politicians who would have to give up the power

they enjoy - for rule by plebiscite rather than by representative government.

That might lead you to wonder what the point would be in providing citizens with increasingly sophisticated data concerning things they are not being asked to decide on in any case.

By the time we are ready to move to a more sophisticated level of digital planning, there will be hardware and software as yet undreamt of, so let's worry about that when the time comes. A system that allows you access to the data you seek without a significant rise in blood pressure would be good for now.