

RTPI Cymru Conference 2011.

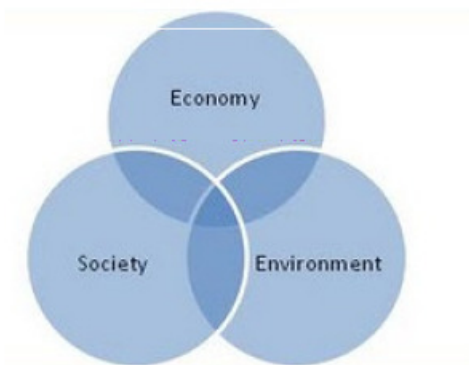
Sustainable Place Making: Examples for research and practice.

Dr. Crispin Cooper & Dr. Yi Gong - Sustainable Places Research Institute - Cardiff University.

The seminar commenced with the daunting warning that the session was a workshop, so we would be expected to provide input and do some thinking. Fore warned is fore armed, and everyone in attendance was alert and ready to lap up the initial presentation part of the workshop.

Dr Gong commenced with the definitions of sustainability, and gave us a short introduction to the theme and the debate on it's definition. Weak sustainability is about improving human life within the constraints of the ecosystem, but economic trade offs are acceptable, whereas in the stronger definitions the most important factor is the environment.

Weak model



Strong model



Bearing in mind that sustainability is difficult to define there are differing methods to measure it. Tools including Ecological footprinting, Life Cycle analysis and Carbon footprinting are employed. Dr Gong highlighted that in becoming more sustainable there are many differing solutions from all over the globe, however we must have a local focus as we all have different cultural practices, a solution which may be perfect in one community may not be best suited for another. This is where ICT and the internet can help to disseminate ideas and concepts by providing a tool to communicate variations on case studies and best practice.

The concept of Healthy Place making was introduced, as how planners and those working in the built environment can contribute to an increase in positive health outcomes. Healthy Place Making takes various forms, from increasing public participation in decisions which affect them, promoting healthy behaviours through the built environment and improving living conditions. Dr Gong then gave us a simplistic definition of a healthy place - if people walk more, the car is left in the garage, carbon footprint levels are reduced and exercise is promoted. She also presented the following graph which charts urban health problems, energy use and social policies.

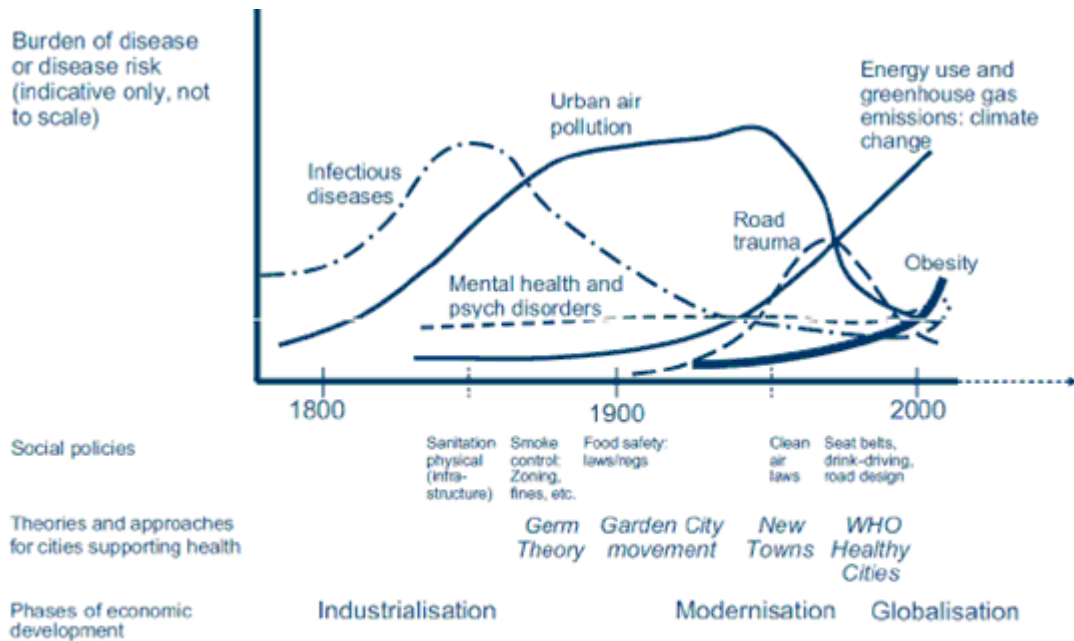
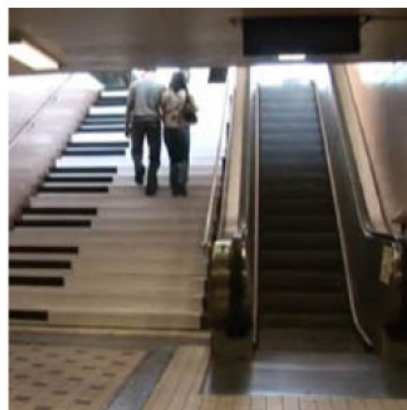
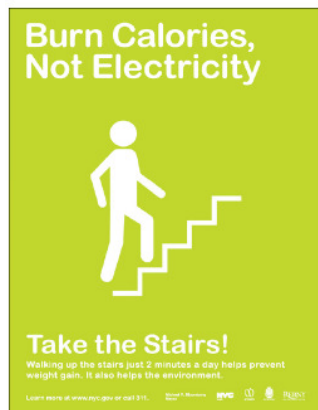


Fig. 2. The rise and fall of major urban health penalties in developed countries over the past two centuries. (The main remedial responses and influential emergent theories of cities, wellbeing and health are shown at the bottom.) (McMichael 2007)

A very inspirational video was shown about a project on Stockholm’s underground system which led to a staggering 66% of people taking the stairs over the escalator. The interesting project turned a set of stairs adjacent to escalators into a giant piano. Each step played a note when stepped on, and this encouraged experimentation and fun in the urban environment. Another problem was presented, that of an ageing population and how we will have to adapt to this significant demographic change. Countering issues such as social exclusion and a lack of exercise opportunities directed at the elderly are increasingly important. There have been numerous examples of playgrounds for elderly people springing up across the world. These sites facilitate elderly people getting out, meeting other elderly people and engaging in gentle exercise on outdoor gym machines specifically designed with the elderly in mind. Another example shown included Guerrilla Gardening. This movement, which is gathering pace in the UK and abroad, involves gardeners who plant flowers or vegetables in unused, often unsightly spaces - such as unmaintained council planters, scraps of unkempt land, etc. Dr. Gong challenged the room by asking if we, as built environment professionals, could incorporate local movements, such as the ones she mentioned, in to our work. This challenge expands on the increasingly important practice of public consultation on elements of our work, and pushes us to actively engage those who live and use the spaces we as planners shape.

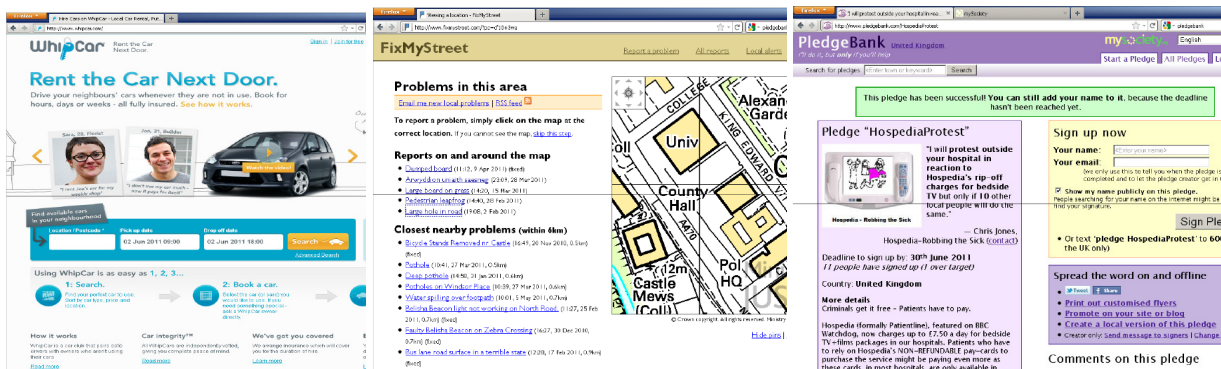


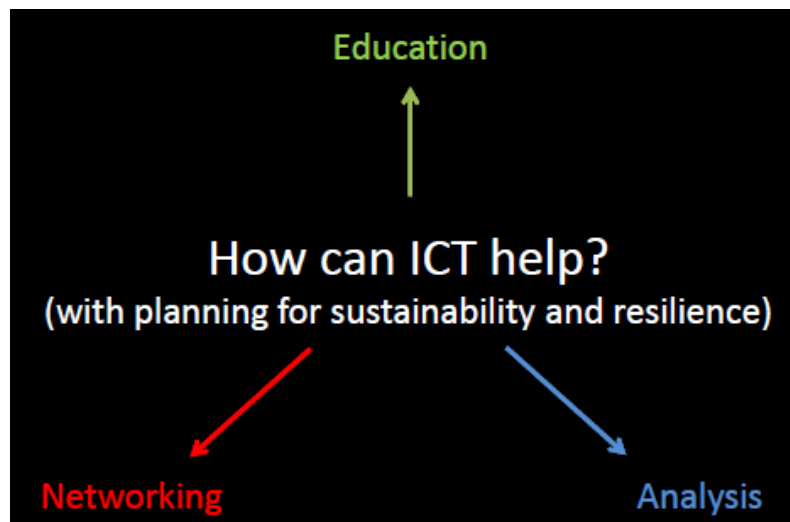
Piano stairs, Stockholm

Dr Crispin Cooper then spoke about his research field; how can ICT help with planning for sustainability and resilience. There is more to the power of ICT than just running highly sophisticated technical statistical calculations, ICT is increasingly becoming an important community tool and a way which many people interact socially. Dr Cooper then ran through some diverse examples of how the internet was spreading the sustainable message. First up was the impressive “my 2050” webpage produced by the Department of Energy and Climate Change. This website is a game which challenges you to reduce the emissions of a community by 20%. This highly interactive site gives the user a feel for the possibilities and incorporates the figures that are banded around by the media and in government documentation. The site is more than a mere game, the models used and data employed are those agreed by various experts. There is also a full scientific and statistics filled version for those who want to understand more. Plus the site interacts with various social networking tools (Facebook, etc) to post your results to all your digital friends, thus spreading the message and potentially getting more people interested in sustainability.



Dr Cooper’s next example was the WhipCar website which allows users to rent the car next door. The scheme takes care of insurance and other administrative issues allowing users to rent local people’s cars. It isn’t just the exhaust fumes that contributes to CO2 emissions, manufacture of cars also contributes, therefore maximising use from existing cars is greener than everyone owning their own car. A series of other examples including Pledge Bank - where users group together to pledge tasks together, Fix my Street and the Coalition’s Red Tape Challenge site were also mentioned.





The discussions then began, and the workshop was split into two groups who were asked to brain storm how the internet could be used to strengthen communities and build sustainable networks. The groups drew inspiration from problems faced in their own communities - such as those in the neighbourhood who could use some assistance plus topical issues such as reducing food waste, how to connect communities, and how to increase usage of public transport. Dr Cooper and Dr Gong wanted to demonstrate that we can make a difference in our community, that ideas can be exchanged and built on by others, and left us with the message that their seminar was merely a starting point, and that we should continue thinking and talking about how to improve our environment. They also stressed that their research is looking to create a better interface between planning and academic research, and that they are keen to help planners to use their research.

Dr Crispin Cooper is also a researcher at the Sustainable Places Institute. He is currently developing computer systems for supporting sustainable decision making, networking and education.

Dr Yi Gong researches healthy place making at the Sustainable Places Research Institute, Cardiff University. Her current research looks at healthy ageing, e.g. exploring which environmental characteristics facilitate improvements in physical and mental health in elderly people, and which characteristics create barriers to this. More details can be found at <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/research/sustainableplaces/>.



Images provided by Dr Yi Gong and Dr Crispin Cooper. Cardiff University.