Mobiles show a city in motion

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Residents of Rome have entered a new era with the help of their mobile phones.

A futuristic urban map, featuring the dynamics of the Italian capital in real time, made its debut at the weekend.

The map project, known as Wiki City Rome, is continuously fed data through wireless technology such as mobile phones and global positioning systems on city buses and taxis.

Developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the project was launched during Rome's Notte Bianca (White Night), an all-night festival of 400 events, which drew about 2.5 million people onto Rome's streets.

Mobile phones will help visitors avoid the crowds at tourist hot spots such as Rome's Colosseum *(Image: iStockphoto)*

Matching the pulsing flow of activities, a big screen display in one of Rome's main squares showed a continuously changing picture of the city.

Red, yellow and green lights overlaid on a map of the city reflected the movements of hundreds of thousands of people, the real-time position of city buses and taxis, and crowds at the most popular events.

Anyone with an internet connection was able to follow the unique map of the city and experience "a new awareness of how Romans move within their city in response to exceptional pulses of activities", says Kristian Kloeckl, a researcher at MIT's SENSEable City Laboratory.

Congestion

The system, says the lab's director Dr Carlo Ratti, can help people make more informed decisions about their surroundings, such as "avoiding traffic congestions, or knowing where people are congregating on a Saturday afternoon".

In worst-case scenarios, this real-time urban mapping can also make it

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easier to evacuate cities, assuming mobile phones are working.

Using algorithms developed by Telecom Italia, the main sponsor of the project, the technology can distinguish whether a mobile phone signal comes from a user who is stuck in traffic or perhaps taking a slow walk in a park.

International phone numbers can also reveal the movements of tourists who are carrying their phones.

The concept may remind some of Big Brother, but the researchers say data is kept anonymous to preserve individual privacy.

The information is aggregated from communications and GPS networks and stripped of any personal identifiers.

During the Rome experiment, the ever-changing map ran smoothly, even as 2.5 million people roamed across the city,

"I was really impressed when I realised that there were hundreds of thousand of people in line to visit the city's museums," Rome's mayor Walter Veltroni says.

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