MAKE A CALL, PLAN A DEVELOPING CITY

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because in emerging markets, people can help make cities better places to live just by gabbing on their cell phones.

OZY and Predix (http://bs.serving-sys.com/BurstingPipe/adServer.bs?cn=tf&c=20&mc=click&pli=18560095&PluID=0&ord=[timestamp]) from GE — the cloud-based development platform built for industry — have partnered to bring you an inside look at the future of digital industries, where people, data and productivity meet.

The buses might as well be parked along the highway, since they sure aren't going anywhere. The trains? Even worse — the cars are so crowded that people are spilling out, clinging to each other so they won't fall. This isn't a trailer for the latest flee-the-coming-apocalypse thriller, although maybe it should be. For now, this is a typical morning commute in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. Most mornings it takes 60 to 90 minutes to go seven miles. *Highway of Hell*, indeed.

Urban planners in struggling cities get a bad rap, if they get any rap at all. But they may have a clever ace up their sleeve. And that ace is composed of conversation, or, more specifically, all the phone calls that all those people sitting in hell are making. Armed with new corporate partners who themselves are probably tired of their employees showing up late because of nightmare commutes, they're figuring out ways to turn pissed-off SOS calls into a fast lane to smoother commutes. One

example: in Sri Lanka, the think tank LIRNEasia has created a plan for fixing traffic jams and even identifying the best locations for public facilities in Colombo. The organization is now looking at Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Treat the citizen as the sensor.

Rohan Samarajiva, CEO of LIRNEasia

While data has been relatively easier to access for urban planners in developed countries (thanks, in part, to services like Google Maps), emerging markets have long been stuck with more expensive sensors or less accurate survey-based methods to gather this kind of intel. Now, they're collecting data at a "much more rapid rate" than in developed countries, says Brooks Rainwater, a director at the National League of Cities who specializes in urban sustainability. To help them on this quest: more than 80 percent of the world's 5 billion or so mobile phones currently in use, where almost anyone carrying a basic GPS-equipped model may be contributing (usually anonymous) location and movement data to the cause. In Sri Lanka, where plain old dumbphones are the norm — comprising nearly 80 percent of all 1 million cell phones — LIRNEasia's CEO, Rohan Samarajiva, says the goal is to "treat the citizen as the sensor."

Of course, we all know that cities can get congested and, in some cases, unlivable, particularly with more than half of the world's population now calling urban settings home. But that's sparked a new surge of interest in high-tech urban maps. Sales of planning software have grown by more than 12 percent over the past five years, according to an IBISWorld report. In 2014, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi called for 100 smart cities — urban areas that use communication technologies to cut down on inefficiency. A 2013 IDC report predicts that by 2017, there will be 3.5 billion people connected to the Internet, close to two-thirds of whom will use mobile devices. And those gadgets will produce around 40 trillion gigabytes of data, providing a huge opportunity to ask and answer a lot of pressing questions about how people live.

FEATURED STORY

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Still, planning hopefuls face an uphill battle. After all, understanding human flows in urban areas is "an old dream," says Carlo Ratti, director at MIT's Senseable City Lab. It's difficult to forge partnerships with telephone companies for data, stripping data of sensitive information is time-consuming and analysis takes an expert team. (Samarajiva says it was two years before he had preliminary results to send to government officials, in 2014.) New pitfalls could also undoubtedly lead data-enabled urban planners astray the same way a lack of foresight plagued some of their predecessors. And anonymizing data isn't perfect — researchers have already shown that it's possible in many cases to identify people based on their movements. "You can make inferences about groups of people, or people within a certain area," says Joanne Furtsch, director of product policy at TRUSTe, which specializes in privacy management services.

But the use of this sort of data hasn't created much of a backlash (yet), and the smart-planning movement continues to grow, with new sources of data also on the rise. If you're wearing a Fitbit or an Apple Watch, for instance, that could give researchers even better data to know not just where you're coming from, but also how you're getting from point A to point B. From Samarajiva's perspective, though, harnessing mobile data is enough for now, as he tries to force metro bureaucrats to account for poorer city dwellers long overlooked by traditional planning.