IoT enables physical devices, vehicles, buildings, bridges and roads to collect and exchange data through networks. We spoke to professor Carlo Ratti about effects of pervasive technologies like IoT on city design and urban planning. Carlo Ratti teaches at MIT, where he directs the Senseable City Lab. He is the author of the book “The City of Tomorrow” and has presented at TED.

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Carlo Ratti: Digital technologies and ubiquitous computing are transforming most aspects of our lives—the way we move, communicate, learn, work, etc. In general, we will have an increased number of options as technology opens up new possibilities. French anthropologist Leroi-Gourhan underlines how it is possible to draw a curve of human civilization by simply looking at the way tools are used across history. From the Neolithic to the twentieth century, from the first utensils made of rocks to the development of digital technologies, from stone-axes that extended the capabilities of the hand to “outsourcing” our mental processes to computers, progress has always been profoundly marked by the gradual subcontracting of our functions. The development of new technologies always had the same goal—that is, to increase our chances and opportunities.

RG: Your book mentions that it is increasingly difficult to divorce the physical space from the digital. Does this mean that all aspects of city design should factor in IoT? Or are some aspects of city design divorced from its influence?

Ratti: From an architectural point of view, I do not think that the city of tomorrow will look dramatically different from the city of today—much in the same way that the Roman ‘urbs’ is not all that different from the city as we know it today. We will always need horizontal floors for living, vertical walls in order to separate spaces and exterior enclosures to protect us from the outside. The key elements of architecture will still be there, and our models of urban planning will be quite similar to what we know today. What will change dramatically is the way we live in the city, at the convergence of the digital and physical world. IoT will have its biggest impact on the experience of the city, not necessarily its physical form.
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