

Technology is no substitute for the messiness of humanity.

Brigid Delaney
August 19, 2009

Despite our ability to live remotely, we still crave the buzz of cities.

THE world is flat, US journalist Thomas Friedman told us in his 2005 book of the same name. Globalisation and technology meant work could now occur any time, anywhere, if you had the right software.

The implication was that geography was dead. We could begin the process of seriously experimenting with new ways of living. Trends emerged such as telecommuting - where you would work from home, communicating via the internet with your colleagues wherever they were, and the sea change and the tree change trends. More recently the San Francisco Chronicle coined a new term for the tech-enabled mobile worker. "New nomads" were being seen around the coffee houses of the city, moving around according to the strength of Wi-Fi signals, "paying their rent in lattes".

The implication for cities had the potential to be profound. In the flat Earth world, where you lived didn't matter. It's weird then that towards the end of this turbulent decade of technology, where we were promised freedom from place, that we are still living in cities. In fact our cities are in ruder health than ever. As the population heads towards 4 million, Melbourne's biggest issue is growth. So many people want to live here, that we have to think creatively about where to put everyone.

After spending more than a decade away from my home town, what has amazed me on return is the buzz in the city. When I last lived here in the '90s, bars started to appear in the laneways at the top of the city, and a few brave souls were moving into new CBD apartments, or else Melrose Place-style compounds on the city fringe in Southbank, East Melbourne and North Melbourne.

Docklands didn't exist, Federation Square was a wasteland, and edginess was a defining characteristic of the inner city. The heroin problem created a continual thrum of tension.

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Now the city has other problems, including a rise in drunken violence, but there is a different sort of energy from the '90s - the energy of a place that is being boisterously, enthusiastically, lovingly inhabited. Some nights, pushing against the tide of people moving up Little Bourke Street, the energy of Melbourne at night exceeds that of serious nightlife capitals such as Barcelona or London.

Academic Richard Florida tackles the enduring appeal of the city in his book *Who's Your City*. He writes: "Globalisation is not flattening the world; on the contrary, the world is spiky. Place is becoming more relevant to the global economy and our individual lives. The choice of where to live, therefore, is not an arbitrary one. It is arguably the most important decision we make, as important as choosing a spouse or a career. In fact, place exerts powerful influence over the jobs and careers we have access to, the people we meet and our 'mating markets' and our ability to lead happy and fulfilled lives." Florida's point is: where you live matters.

Cities are still the best place for serendipity - accidental meetings, the spontaneous catch-up for drinks, chance meetings with people who inspire, help, or challenge you. There is none of this real-life messiness - or magic - for those living "remotely".

Writes Florida: "When large numbers of entrepreneurs, financiers, engineers, designers, and other smart creative people are constantly bumping into one another inside and outside work, business ideas are formed, sharpened, executed and, if successful, expanded. As the number of smart people increase and the connections among them grow more dense, the faster it all goes. It's the multiplying effect of the clustering force at work." The more Melbourne grows and attracts a creative class, the more of that type of class it will attract. This poses a challenge for governments and planners. How to harness the energy and the social and creative capital of the bright young things that flock here? Yet how to stop the city becoming what Florida calls topsy-turvy - that is a city where the "winner takes all".

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The tipping point for these cities is when other residents (those with less dynamic jobs and less dynamic salaries) get pushed out to the fringes. House prices rise, and essential service workers cannot afford to live near their workplaces.

The city becomes too hip for its own good and loses the beckoning spark that made it so attractive in the first place.

Brigid Delaney is the author of *This Restless Life*, available now.

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