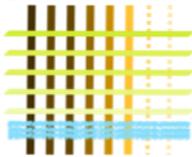


## The Fabric of our Futures



Economists and politicians like to speak of 'fabric' – the warp and weft of the threads interwoven within our society, our identity, enterprises and communities. Our '[Economic Revitalisation](#)' paper last year started with a graphic describing this complex weave – contrasting the 'silos' of governmental departments with the cross-cutting themes that hold local economies together and build prosperity on top of the underlying infrastructure.

That late-2012 view of the economic fabric was informed by the global insight of the Intelligent Community Forum based in New York. The themes were well understood by local leaders. 2013 was certainly not short of 'smart city' technology initiatives but concerns about the *quality* of digital infrastructures, the local capacity for Innovation and the availability of digital expertise became ever more apparent.

## Smart or Intelligent

The 'Economist' magazine's debate '[Are smart cities empty hype?](#)' and Prospect magazine listing '[Boom cities](#)' in their profile of '2014 big ideas' were media recognition of the inexorable growth of cities. The RSA's [City Growth Commission](#) and strategy papers from the [Department for Business Innovation & Skills](#) focused on the way cities attract innovative talent, jobs and investment (and develop overseas export potential) but they also highlighted wider issues - ever-increasing demands for urban housing, strains on public services and a realisation that calls for 'economic rebalancing' mean much more than finding a response to the economic hotspots of London and the South East.

*'While the city has been called humanity's greatest invention, rampant urbanisation has also created some of the most important challenges of our time' – Harvard Business School.*

The UK's major urban centres generate vast wealth but, in contrast to their international counterparts, our local leaders have very little control over public resources. The notions of 'localism' have still a very long way to run.

Few seem prepared to question the underlying notion of perpetual city growth and the implicit faith that technology alone will make these select places sustainable. For already unequal societies it might seem like a call for even greater extremes and the social ills that inequality fosters. Some may contend that city growth in part reflects a long-term lack of investment in their hinterlands. And, despite 'smart solutions', there's the concern that we are really talking about local communities and their cultures - including their enterprise cultures. Ultimately it is the way we learn to work and live together that is more important than the convenient economic efficiencies of squeezing more into ever-decreasing time and space.

## Cultures for Prosperity

Once again the Intelligent Community Forum is a step ahead by focusing on [community cultural](#) issues.

*'Culture gives us a sense of identity and belonging. It also creates intellectual property that can have substantial economic value.'* – ICF.

They show that investment in culture in all its forms is a major contributor to prosperity - the creation of wealth *and* its conversion into [well-being](#). This search for local economic growth is hardwired into the viewpoint of the [Federation of Small Businesses](#) – a view that challenges conventional macro-economics in the cause of taking local responsibility for local prosperity and sustainability. What is the point of national regulatory targets based on bland averages without local relevance? What price do we pay for worshipping national brands? In a world of Big Data and supposedly 'Open Government' whom can we trust with information care? Do we really desire bigger, faster, cheaper, or greater long-term utility?

## Quality and Sustainability

Nor should we be surprised if [Quality](#) concerns re-emerge in 2014. Generational shifts, increased online dependence, market education, dissatisfaction with broadband performance and new technical understandings of network flows, will drive network suppliers to abandon 'business as usual' models. 'Up To', 'Best Efforts' apologies for warranty and 'fitness for purpose', will not answer enlightened local business and community leaders' demands for 'fitness for use'. Investing in Quality (particularly *digital* infrastructure quality) will cost and the basement may not offer sustainable bargains. 'Ignorance is *not* bliss'. New performance evidence may embarrass but open recognition of great challenges often stirs [shaken communities](#) to find fresh remedies.

## The Emergent Fabric

The new economic fabric will be woven with many different threads. Creatively ambiguous, the word 'fabrication' (*'making things'* or *'making things up'*) captures the sum of all our individual threads. In 2014 a new higher-quality weave aims to be more environmentally (and economically) sustainable, culturally sensitive, less unequal yet richly diverse and fit for use.



These themes will inform the design of our Events, Study Tours and Digital Challenge awards on our journeys through the coming year. While celebrating inventive endeavour we'll aim to present balanced views, wider contexts and serious implications for the future.

Keep in touch with NG Events, the Next Generation Digital Challenge awards, Community Study Tours, Groupe Intellex blogs and all the speakers and exhibitors at our UK and overseas conferences and seminars – [www.nextgenevents.co.uk](http://www.nextgenevents.co.uk) or follow @EventsNextGen