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The importance of digital continuity
Eric Davy

All players in the real estate industry should speak the same language in the age of big data

Data has become such a key element of business management that the volume of produced data will reach a record 47 zettabytes this year. The International Data Corporation, a specialist in international business intelligence, predicts that spending on data and analysis will reach €245bn by 2022.

We tend to be insensitive and gullible to the numerical data that appears on our screens after having been manipulated by unknown algorithms. We never wonder how the apparent result is calculated, nor whether the (massive) underlying data that generated it is relevant.

Technology has a form of (mechanical) authority that imposes its calculations on we homo sapiens with limited brains. Yet it is a fact that we no longer understand the decisions of our computers.

In the 21st century, with big data being 'cooked' by algorithms, we are exposed to too much information. To work efficiently, we need to use the most relevant parts of the data that is available.

Our strategic decision-making is fed by indicators that model the data manipulated by the algorithms of our real estate information systems[1]. Since we will not go back in time, we should realise that the most important thing is first to ensure the quality of primary data, which also implies transparently assessing its specific level of reliability in order to make its economic valuation easier [2].

Otherwise, between information of dubious quality that induces false results, ignored variables that are not included in algorithmic processing that has become ipso facto incomplete, and arbitrary parameters of selected data that do not represent reality, it is easy to be deluded, to make incongruous decisions – devoid of common sense – that nevertheless feel justified. Welcome then to Absurdistan, the land of powerlessness and numerical bias, the ABC of inconsequence, which is always, in the end, a mistake.

The raw material that enables the construction of reliable digital flows must be accessible to be collected, understandable to be analysed, and authentic to validate the relevance of our strategic decisions.

The lifecycle of a building is commonly assessed as a five-year design-and-build period followed by a 30-50-year operational period. Then, the 50-year-old building will benefit from heavy refurbishment involving exposure and restoration of its load-bearing structure, before the integration of new internal layers of technical components, up to the double external skin.

This lifecycle must be documented in full accordance with regulations – financial, energy, safety, and so on. However, it is clear that our industry is experiencing an incredible digital poverty, fragmented, conflicting, littered with extremely dissonant relationships between trades, which leaves it far behind other major industries.

Adopting a common language that secures the meaning (and thus the understanding), the structure, the format and the transport of data is a first step that greatly facilitates reliable and sustainable interoperability.

Following the signing of the partnership between the French Federation of Real Estate Developers and the FIDJI professional association at Building Information Modelling World 2019, we have created a working group whose mission is to promote a true digital continuity in the real estate industry.

"Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication," said Leonardo da Vinci. In our work, what we are enthusiastically discovering is that our industry possesses a kind of surprising fractal property of self-similarity at different scales.

Each company, when it comes to communicating with its stakeholders, whether internally or externally, must make use of a common language to ensure digital continuity in our industry.

Each company implements a single multi-directional import-export interface at the location it considers most relevant to its information system, which avoids the costly maintenance of multiple unstable interfaces with external software applications.

Playing the same game – one interface, one location for each information system – results in a great saving of time and money for everyone.

Thanks to a small corpus of data, invariant in nature regardless of the profession using it, useful information can be transported in a limited volume. This saves time, energy, money and resources. Here we have a simple, constant and multidirectional tool that is flexible in its active functional scope.

Eventually, it will prove the maturity of our industry in facing emerging global constraints and will mean that we the real estate professionals have mastered our digital tools – not the other way around.

FIDJI is a common language that formalises the exchange of quantitative and qualitative information between the various players in the French real estate market, without the need to reprocess them. A new version of the FIDJI format is being finalised and is designed to provide genuine digital continuity within our field.

Digital continuity within our industry, which has become an emerging condition at the service of the common good, is changing the behaviour of the players in the sector and their representations.

By giving ourselves the capacity to exchange, through a neutral and open format, we secure data in our industry between stakeholders without depending on a particular actor or tool. Thus, each of the professions in the real estate sector can develop its individual information system based on the same basic architecture and enrich it as it sees fit.

1 We have dashboards and metrics calculated for this purpose. But the algorithms are not free of bias either. They can become "Weapons of mathematical destruction" (Cathy O'Neil, Weapons of Math Destruction, Penguin Books, June 2017): tools that, under the guise of objective mathematical formulas, lead to blindness and bad decisions, which common sense would deny.

2 The idea here is to systematically measure the uncertainty correlated to a data item. As Edgar Morin said: "Knowledge progresses by integrating uncertainty into it, not exorcising it."

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