Learning from the future visions developed in the past

As a freshman at Purdue University in 1995, I was exposed to the most futuristic piece of technology I had ever seen, the DOV (Data Over Voice) Modem. This beige box was high-speed internet, no dialing up, no AOL discs required. This was the future! I thought that this was the best the internet could ever possibly get. We all know how that turned out. We all have a much faster connection on our wireless phones than the DOV, and our relatively cheap internet connections at home and work absolutely smoke the capabilities of any 1995-era technology. I fell into a common trap. I saw an amazing advancement in the present, but failed to see the obvious evolution that was certainly coming in the future. That year, when I returned home over the holiday break, I had a conversation with my mother about how futuristic the SUN computer labs and wired-for-internet dorm rooms were at Purdue. My mom, a project manager in technology and a former COBAL programmer, told me a story to serve as a warning about getting too caught up in current technology. In her first professional job, the computer (yes, the one the entire group shared) was upgraded to a full 1KB of memory. Every engineer in the building thought it was a silly investment, as they could never use all of that memory. At the time I had 128MB of RAM in my school computer and it routinely crashed when I pushed it too far. The message was simple. Technology will always evolve. If you are going to work in a high-tech field, one of your concerns should be keeping a perspective
on trends and never assume that the status quo now will ever be acceptable or commonplace in the future. Since then I have had a personal interest in following tech trends and keeping an eye out for unanticipated shifts in the tech world.

The ‘Past Vision of the Future’ section of the ‘Future Vision’ lecture resonated with me (Richert). I was probably the only student in the room that was around for reruns of ‘The Jetsons;’ though I probably bridged the generational gap as a huge ‘Futurama’ fan. These silly visions of future, along with classic Sci-Fi television shows, influenced my thinking about what the future will look like. The Jetson’s clip, from the 1960s depicted a future of incredibly lazy people, surrounded by technology that did everything for them, including grooming and exercising. I can’t say they were too far off. We do have electronic toothbrushes and belts that shock our abdominal muscles into contracting without sit-ups. However, they also showed a future with automated vehicles, large flat panel video calling, miniaturization, and robotic servants with personalities. Since none of that technology was even close to being developed, credit is due to the creative minds that worked on that show. As with any prognostications, some predictions can be very accurate and some can be horribly wrong. The problem with many 1960s versions of the future is they assumed, having survived World War II and scary nuclear threats such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, that all man-made problems would eventually have man-made solutions, and a Utopia would result. The best way to prevent these types of mistakes is to study the past visions of the future, and adjust our thinking.

An article by Nate Berg for The Guardian details the work of Professors Nick Dunn and Serena Pollastri of Lancaster University and Dr. Paul Cureton of University of Hertfordshire. This group reviewed nearly a thousand examples of proposed designs of
future urban environments from over a hundred years, to analyze trends and see what a “futuristic” city would look like 50 years from now (Berg). The article looks at the romantic views from the past, and how they have let us down in the present. The author muses about these designs saying “such visions have infiltrated the general consciousness, setting grand expectations and perhaps causing some disappointment at the substandard world we’re stuck with. Where are our flying cars? Our hoverboards?” Of course the author also references a “conflict-free utopian society based on the principle of love” (Berg) as something disappointingly missing from the present. The researchers broke down all of the visions from the past and organized them into 100 basic projects with categories of design, such as the “Garden” city, first appearing in 1898. In analyzing of these projections, trends have emerged. As environmental concerns, such as global warming, has become part of the public consciousness, “street-based urbanism—human-centred cities; cities that are based on people walking, bikes, neighbourhoods” has become a primary focus of design. The 2010 ‘Saturation City’ project is given as an example of a futuristic Melbourne, Australia, in which sea levels have risen to the point that homes have turned into “Super Blocks” rising high above the water (Berg).

The article speculates that better understanding of the past, and modern visualization tools, might be the key to improved cities in the future. Key technological innovations mentioned were video games such as SimCity and Minecraft. These games are basically computerized environments in which a player builds their own city. It could be possible, that just as US Air Force pilots have improved because of Xbox gaming as children, future urban engineers will be better at solving complex development problems because they have had practice solving them in video games. As this technology gets
closer and closer to simulating reality, these young gamers will develop into city planners, architects, and engineers with an understanding of the past, and an impressive skill-set of (somewhat) future-proof problem solving solutions.
Works Cited
