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LOOSE WIRE
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Finding a Place to Live Is More Low-Tech Than You Think

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The past few days, I've been engaged in that most stressful of pursuits: looking for a place to live, when my wife and I move to Singapore from Jakarta. It's been a while since I've done this, but since I'm doing it in Singapore, supposedly the most wired city on earth, I thought that technology might help. And it did -- sort of.


This is what I thought would happen: My wife and I would do extensive research using online property sites and Google Earth (earth.google.com¹) to narrow down which area and properties we were interested in. (This bit worked well: Google Earth is fabulous for getting a fix on a place you're interested in, although some of the images are a little out of date.)

Then I would be deployed, controlled like a guided missile by my wife, who remained behind in Jakarta, via SMS and 3G. Before my trip to Singapore she used Skype, the free or inexpensive Internet phone service, to arrange for four real estate agents to show me around a selection of residences. I would then stand outside my hotel each morning to be picked up by the first of the agents.

All this went very well -- right up until the Agent Turning Up In A Car bit. The first turned up 45 minutes late and drove so erratically I thought the only accommodation in Singapore I was going to need would be a drawer in the morgue. Of the six properties she had promised, we saw one, and drove around so long looking for another that it had been rented out by the time we arrived. The one we did see didn't meet our stated criteria. "When I said 'three bedrooms,' I didn't mean 'one bedroom,'" I complained. She looked at me as if I was being persnickety. I couldn't tell if the other agents were any better because I never met them. One told me the night before I was due to meet him that he was getting married and needed the week to get ready. Another developed food poisoning.

So we had to refine our system. As we suspected, the only property listings worth taking note of are still those found in the local newspaper, which doesn't put them online. Poring over the paper's

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listings reminded me of days gone by -- sifting through tiny script, highlighting the possibles and ignoring the many entries that are either out of my league or don't mention a price (the same thing, I quickly learned). So far, so old wave. Clearly, technology was only going to get us so far. None of the agents I contacted seemed to like SMS, so I went back to arranging viewings by phone call.

My wife and I set up a new schedule using Google Calendar. This meant we could both add stuff and I could access it via my Nokia N95 cellphone's calendar, using my cellphone connection and a Google Calendar synchronizing service called GooSync (www.goosync.com²). A map of the area from a Web site called Street Directory (www.streetdirectory.com³) could then be sent to my Singapore cellphone. Agents' contacts could be zapped as business cards to my phone (most agents, it turns out, are called Wendy or Ray, so it's good to add a few details to tell them apart).

Out in the field I took plenty of snaps and uploaded them to photo-sharing Web site Flickr direct from my cellphone so my wife could see what I saw. With the N95, which has a Global Positioning System chip inside, I could also mark the exact location of the residence -- useful, say, if it's one of those apartment complexes with a gazillion towers. This saved us a bit of time.

I did, however, come away with some thoughts. One is that technologically advanced countries aren't always technologically advanced in the areas you'd expect them to be -- especially in something that lends itself to technology so readily as real estate. Europe and North America, by contrast, are finally applying the lessons of Web 2.0 (the current era of the Internet, where users have a range of tools to create and share their thoughts, images and videos) to real estate. Realtors are setting up blogs -- either to talk about the industry or, more usefully, to start a conversation with potential buyers. Real estate being about location, a lot of these blogs are "hyperlocal," meaning that both writer and reader are interested in a very specific area, according to Joel Burslem, a blogger and social media/interactive marketing manager at real estate Web site Inman News in Oregon (www.inman.com⁴). Other Web 2.0 features that have crept into real estate: search engines that, in theory, make it easier for house hunters to find what they're looking for, using online maps (Washington state real estate site Estate.ly.com⁵, for example, lets users search not just by city or postal code but also by neighborhood, and see the results on Google Maps); and uploaded videos (www.wellcomemat.com⁶, for example). Other Web sites, like Trulia Voices (www.trulia.com/voices⁷), allow users to swap real estate information.

My concerns, however, are smaller-scale. As is often the case with technology, we seem to love to tweak the big stuff, but not improve on the small. Most of these new technologies help speed up the process of selecting a place to look at, but they don't necessarily help us out in the field. For example, the N95, like a lot of cellphones, lets you down when it comes to snippets of data. Text from an incoming SMS, for example, could not easily be copied and pasted into the device's calendar (or, indeed, anywhere else, unless it's a contact).

More seriously, however good the photos or videos you take of a place, they still don't really capture it for someone who hasn't seen it. For that, you'd probably have to turn to something like Microsoft's Photosynth (labs.live.com/photosynth/default.html⁸), which will take a large batch of photos of one place and turn them into a three dimensional space you can wander around. (A

somewhat simpler version of this idea can be found at fotowoosh.com⁹, which will convert one photo of something into a 3D scene.) On the other hand, no technology I know of exists to answer the kind of questions my wife was asking, which went along the lines of: "What are the neighbors like? What does it smell like? Does it feel homey?" That, I suspect, is some way off.

Perhaps because of this, I didn't find what we are looking for. So, if your name is Wendy or Ray, I'm still in the market.

--Email me at jeremy@loose-wire.com¹⁰

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