# How are apps shaping the way we explore?

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Where do we get our information?

When it comes to travel and exploration, we have more resources now than ever before in terms of finding information quickly about our new destinations. Whereas travelers of past generations had to rely on word of mouth or the services of travel agents, we now have a seemingly endless supply of digital applications at our disposal, giving us real time insight from our peers on where to go and where to avoid. But as we allow ourselves to become increasingly reliant on digital crowdsourcing to generate our own travel itineraries, the question becomes: What role do apps play in shaping the way that we explore?
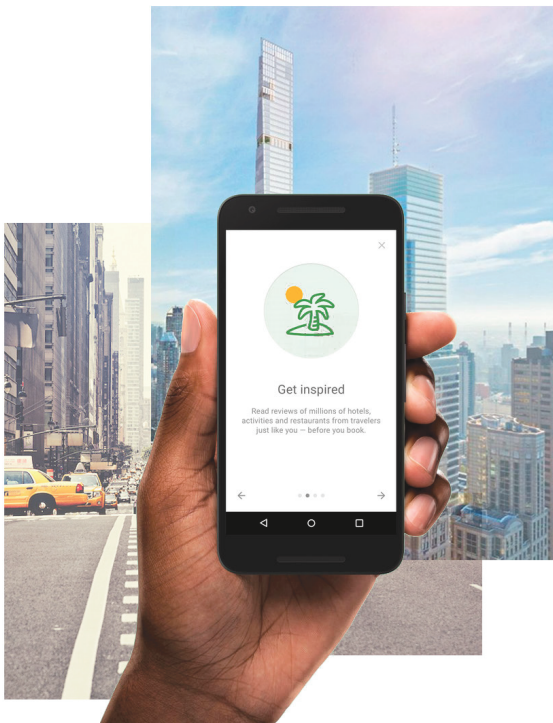
When it comes to discovering must-see locations within a city or simply finding a place to stay for the night, the rise to prominence of digital applications within the hospitality and tourism industry has seemingly accounted for everything. Dedicated travel apps such as TripAdvisor provide everything from restaurant reviews to airline bookings, while a secondary, more specific subcategory of applications offers advice for things like outdoor activities and nightlife. The common feature among these applications is a reliance on user reviews to generate content, something that has sparked an unexpected trend within the industry.

With the abundance of user feedback that has become available via digital applications, travel companies once predicated upon the notion of providing information to those who ask have been forced to be more aggressive.[1] As a result, we find ourselves inundated with not only information from fellow travelers, but also from companies looking to advertise once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Our willingness to plan trips around information gathered solely from travel applications has made us more susceptible to marketing, as an estimated 85% of travelers wait until arriving at their destination to plan activities.[2] According to industry experts, it is these "can't-wait-to-explore" moments in which we are most influenced by suggestions on our mobile devices, and our certainty that suggestions will appear on command has made us even more likely to place ourselves at the hands of travel advisors.[3]

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[1] Isabella Leland, "The Rise of Tourism Apps," Good Barber, 19 Jan. 2017.
[2] "How Mobile Influences Travel Decision Making in Can't-Wait-to-Explore Moments," Think with Google, July 2016.
[3] Ibid.

How do we meet people?

While the market for travel applications is a highly commercialized space that oftentimes provides a mixture of content from both peers and marketers, communities have begun to recognize similar, albeit more localized, applications as a valuable tool for fostering connectivity and camaraderie among residents. The Nextdoor app, which originated in San Francisco, offers a way to connect with fellow permanent residents in your immediate area, sharing information about upcoming events or even asking for help finding a lost dog.[4] Much of what we consume in terms of digital content deals with macrocommunities, providing us with information that loosely pertains to our everyday lives. The Nextdoor app, however, is quietly building a network of microcommunities across the country, giving people the chance to connect with those in their community while simultaneously bridging the social gap forged by our attachment to other applications.

Nextdoor has further secured its role as a community building service by aligning itself with local agencies such as police and fire departments, providing a useful outlet to quickly spread information to residents.[5] Aside from its success in facilitating communication among community members, Nextdoor has also taken a genuine approach to providing reviews for local businesses and destinations. The company's stance that a review from your neighbor carries more significance than that of a stranger via Yelp or TripAdvisor that forms the premise of Nextdoor's business model,[6] gradually building a base of users to provide authentic information as opposed to playing the short game and relying on what may be more superficial content.

[4] "About Nextdoor," Nextdoor.
[5] Mike Isaac, "Nextdoor Social Network Digs Deep Into Neighborhoods,"
  New York Times, 3 Mar. 2015.
[6] Ibid.

What does this mean for architects?

While Nextdoor's approach offers hope that social media can transcend its superficial reputation to foster meaningful connections within a community, the fact remains that user reviews and real-time feedback are a major driver in people's decision making processes today. Thus, the question of how architects can harness this abundance of thoughts and opinions that permeate the digital landscape to bolster the success of designed spaces becomes ever important. In what ways can architects leverage this information to enhance the quality of their designs?

Given the commercialized nature of the content generated by high-power travel apps such as TripAdvisor and Yelp, the answer most likely does not lie in the further examination of user content interspersed with marketing media. Instead, the goals and objectives of architects and designers are much more closely aligned with those of community building applications such as Nextdoor, seeking not to promote sponsored content but to foster real connections between people and the built environment in which they live. While Nextdoor functions primarily to facilitate conversations between neighbors about the ongoings in their immediate surroundings, a form expanded functionality to include real-time reviews of built spaces from the people who use them the most could be of serious benefit to architects seeking feedback on their work. As with most social media applications, the challenge lies in curating responses that carry actual weight within a community as opposed to the filler content found across the web, but the potential to solicit user feedback from those who interact with spaces the most is without doubt a valuable avenue to be explored.