Access
to the Internet

Dr Rob Kitchin of the Department of Geography, School of Geosciences, Queen's University, Belfast, explains how to access the Internet and explore sites of interest to architects, planners, designers and disability groups.

The Internet

The Internet is a vast computer network of connected smaller networks that spans the globe to form a 'virtual' cooperative community who share ideas and information. It is increasingly of interest to planners, architects, designers, and disabled groups because of the enormous amount of information and resources that can be easily accessed, all from the comfort of your home, office or school. As with anything relating to computers there are a number of jargon terms and abbreviations which conspire to make the Internet seem confusing. However, the Internet is easy to learn and use, with most grasping the basics within a few minutes. In this short article I will try to explain the basic concepts that will allow you to join the 30 million or so other users in the parallel universe that is cyberspace.

The Internet started its life in around 1969 as a simple USA defence network called ARPANET. In 1983, the military component was moved and in 1984 the National Science Foundation, a US government agency, in an effort to improve efficiency connected their supercomputers for educational use. The high-speed networks that connect the NSF supercomputer sites formed the backbone of the early Internet, although now there are global connections, linking every continent. This means that wherever you are in the world, so long as you have a phone line, modem, a computer, the right software and access rights you can connect to the Internet, to send electronic mail (e-mail) and to find useful information. If you have access to a computer through a university site the Internet is free to use, otherwise you have to subscribe to a computer server who will allow access for a small fee. A number of companies such as Pipex and Compuserve serve the UK market and adverts can be found in any computing magazine.

Range of interactions

At present, the Internet offers users a range of interactions allowing them the opportunity to exchange electronic mail, transfer files, search databases and retrieve information from remote libraries, take part in real-time conferences, run software on distant computers, and participate in discussion groups on a range of topics. The four methods discussed here are World Wide Web software (eg Netscape), Telnet, File Transfer protocols (FTP) or electronic mail (e-mail). The World Wide Web was developed by CERN (European Particle Physics Laboratory). Each document provides links to other documents allowing you to move between sources of information without typing in addresses. Typically, a hyper-media package such as Netscape is used to access and view documents. This software is available free on the Internet, although many companies now supply Netscape with new computers. Alternatively, you can buy an Internet start-up kit from most computer software shops. Starting Netscape takes you to a 'home page' from where you can explore information across the globe. Documents can be accessed and viewed, either by typing in a URL (Uniform Resource Locator) address (a computer's home address also prefixed by http://), or by clicking on 'hot - spots' within the current document. These 'hot-spots' typically take the form of highlighted blue text or small graphical icons. Once the information is displayed, it can be saved for later use or sent to your printer.

Starting to explore

A good starting point to explore the internet from is the Virtual Tourist home page, which is located on a computer in Buffalo, New York. Type in the URL address: http://wings.buffalo.edu:80/world/

In a couple of minutes a map of the world will appear on the screen divided into coloured sections. To explore the part of a part of the world, say Europe, just click on the relevant section. In a few moments a map of Europe will appear. Click on the country that interests you, say the United Kingdom, and a map of the UK will appear covered with different symbols. Each symbol represents a local network, and by clicking on an individual symbol, you are connected to that site and gain access to the information stored there.

Search engines

Another way to find information is to use a search engine, equivalent to the Yellow Pages. There are many available, and a Buffalo site gives access to over 20 different ones (http://www.geog.buffalo.edu/geog/searchers.html).

Each engine uses a different strategy to search for relevant information and then allows you to connect to the sites of interest. All the information about sites in this article were gained through search engines. The searches I used contained key words such as access, disability, planning, urban design, built environment, and architecture. The box below details some of the more useful sites found.

Using Netscape

There are literally hundreds of sources of information and resources, relevant to accessing the environment, that can be found on the Internet using Netscape. There are, however, a number of addresses that will speed up your search for relevant information and data.

These include:

Design, architecture and planning

Architecture
http://nimrod.mit.edu/depts/rotch/subjects/architecture/page one.html
http://www.unlv.edu/library/arch/index.html

City planning
http://lycos.cs.cmu.edu/

Urban planning
http://www.arch.buffalo.edu/pairc/index.html

Disability Access
http://www.healthworks.co.uk/daccess/DA.html

http://www.globalnet.co.uk/~pmatthews/disabilitynet/

http://www.cityspace.co.uk/cgi_bin/dat2html?file=467

All three sites give a range of information concerning disability, access, publications, jobs, shopping, products and organisations.

Disability general

Disability line
http://disability.com/cool.html

Healthworks
http://www.healthworks.co.uk/

Centre for Independent Living
http://www.cil.berkeley.ca.us/agc-cil.html

Family Village
http://www.family village.wisc.edu/

Americans with disabilities Act
Accessibility Information
http://www.public.iastate.edu:80/~sbilling/ada.html

Government

UK government
http://www.open.gov.uk/

European Union
http://www.echo.lu/

Commonwealth
http://.col.org/0/html/comover.html

Links to 18 different countries government servers
http://www.echo.lu/other/otherhome.html

Netscape will also allow you to use Telnet and FTP software, although these can be used separately. Telnet allows you to login (attach) to a remote host computer. In effect, your computer becomes a terminal of the remote host allowing you to explore the files stored there. In general, you will need a login name and a password to gain entry, but there are some open access sites. FTP allows you to 'download' or copy files from a remote computer to your own. Unlike Telnet, which makes you a terminal of the host, when using FTP you can only look at files and download them. Again, you need to have a username and a password. For open access sites the username is generally, Anonymous. Sometimes no password is required, but if there is, it is usual to enter your e-mail address.

Using Telnet or FTP

To use Telnet or FTP you need to know the address to log in to. Software such as ARCHIE or GOPHER search the net for you to find the addresses of relevant Telnet and FTP sites. ARCHIE'S UK address can be assessed from Telnet by typing:
telnet> open archie.doc.ic.ac.uk
login: archie
    archie.doc.ic.ac.uk> set pager (lets you look at one page at a time - use space bar)
    archie.doc.ic.ac.uk> prog access (search for files relating to access -q quits back to the prompt)

E-mail

Electronic mail (e-mail) allows people to send messages to each other via the computer. Such has been the success of e-mail that amongst professionals an e-mail address is increasingly expected as part of a person's contact address. Mailing lists are centralised, and in some cases monitored, forums for allowing a number of individuals to converse or swap information via e-mail on specific topics. Mailing lists have been particularly successful with millions of subscribers worldwide, and foster the interchange of ideas between personal level discusions on anything from soap operas to building regulations.

There are well over 13,000 mailing lists on the Internet. The following inventory of mailing lists is available at:
http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/
    Lists of potential interest
BEPAC (Building Environmental Performance Analysis Club).

Blind-mobility-research
Design-research
Disability-research
EAD (European Academy of Design)
IBSPA (International Building Performance Simulation Association)
Urban-regional-planning
To subscribe to a list send the following e-mail message to: listname@mailbase.ac.uk
JOIN listname firstname(s) last name
e.g. JOIN disability-research Rob Kitchin sending the message to disability-research@mailbase.ac.uk
USA based lists
There are thousands of USA based mailing lists. Unlike the UK version they are not centralised. The inventory can be searched at http://www.nova.edu/inter-links/listserv.html
lists of potential interest
AXSLIB-L (Disability access to libraries) @bitnic.educom.edu
Design-L (Design and architecture) @psuvm.psu.edu
DS-H-MO (Mobility issues) @list.nih.gov
FACXGH-L (architecture) @psuvm.psu.edu
Mobility (Disabled access and mobility issues) @sjuvm.stjohns.edu
O and M (Orientation and mobility) @msu.edu.bitnet
To subscribe to a list send the following e-mail message to listserv@sitename
SUB listname firstname(s) lastname
e.g. SUB OandM Rob Kitchin sending the message to listserv@msu.edu.bitnet

Words of caution

The Internet can provide a vast array of information of interest. However, a couple of words of caution. First, it can take a long time for the information to work its way back to you, especially if it contains images (remember some sites you are connecting to are on the other side of the world). A good time to access the Internet is in the morning, before America 'wakes up', as the number of users is lower. Secondly, mailing lists will provide more 'junk mail' than useful mail, and because of the sheer volume of messages you will need to clear out your e-mail directory on a daily basis. Given these cautions, the Internet is well worth exploring, saving you hours of searching through a library, and providing access to novel sources normally unavailable.