Like many books addressing global trends, e-topia doesn’t directly discuss Egypt. But the author, on a recent visit to Cairo did discuss its specific relevance to the situation here. “There are good reasons why digital technology makes sense here. It is already cheaper to get a mobile line than a regular line for local calls,” says William Mitchell, Dean of the School of Architecture MIT. “You don’t need to dig ditches and run lines, you just have to find locations on tall buildings to put transmitters.”

Mitchell’s argument, as outlined in e-topia, is that digital technology, if applied with the interests of society at large in mind, is significant to planners and architects throughout the world. “This technology could elevate the standard of living in the developing world, in effect helping developing societies leapfrog developed societies,” he elaborates.

Digital technology in the developed world was introduced years ago, and because the infrastructure is in place integrating updated versions of the same technology is expensive and less appealing than in countries where landlines are inadequate or expensive, as in Egypt.

In e-topia Mitchell discusses the impact of industrialization on architecture and urban planning, and from there encourages the reader to question what aspects of infrastructure societies should and shouldn’t centralize. “I’ve only been in Cairo for a few days, and can’t assume to know the situation,” he explains. “But I’m confident that it is important for Cairo to reduce the amount of traffic. And this is being addressed. People at the AUC were telling me that they have created a set of satellite centres scattered around Cairo hooked together by high-speed networking. Students don’t have to come into the campus necessarily, they can go to one of these centres and work online.”

The potential of digital technology is noteworthy in a city with significant monuments that will only survive if suitable plans for adaptive reuse are concocted. Mitchell outlines case studies that show the potential of this technology; for example South of Market Street in San Francisco. This old industrial area full of warehouses was inhabited by homeless people up until five years ago. But with electronic connections the area has become a lively urban neighborhood. People who work from home - artists, writers, software programmers, those in the entertainment business - have moved into the area. Loft space is ideal because it can be easily restructured into functioning living and work spaces. South of Market Street now has 24-hour street life. “Cairo is the perfect place for such a transformation,” reflects Mitchell. “You could take any of the medieval monuments or Ottoman houses, give them internet connections, and make them work and or living spaces.”

“I saw an example of an internet connection being used to expand a business in Beirut the other day,” tells Mitchell. “I went to a sweet shop with a friend, and saw some women in the back of the store packing up candy. The proprietor of the store said he had an Internet connection, so he’s started taking orders worldwide.” Business possibilities like this are what Mitchell argues should be considered when designing commercial spaces. This small family-run sweet shop is reaching all ends of the globe because it offers a special commodity.

This type of development requires a supportive infrastructure. Cairo would need an overhaul of the postal system, or the expansion and improvement of competitive private courier services.

At the same time, the potential for technology to widen the gap between the haves and have nots is addressed. There is no quick solution to the problem, but Mitchell clearly articulates the critical role of people and their governments to ensure that the emergence of global e-commerce does not further widen the already too wide gap. “It is of course very easy to create walled enclaves with high level services, but that’s socially really bad,” he says. “What architects have to think about is how you make wired neighborhoods permeable with diverse public spaces.” He points out the worst case scenario; “Jakarta is a really terrible city. There are two Jakarta’s coexisting, the Jakarta of air-conditioned high-rise buildings that have guards on the door and electronic access to the world. And there is another Jakarta that is overlaid and is village-like.”

Random wiring up of flats and shops is clearly not the scenario Mitchell is putting forward. The idea that comes across strongest is that planners need to start to develop communities that incorporate places to live, work, and socialize. “The corniche in Beirut is a genuinely effective public space intensely used by a real cross section of society,” comments Mitchell. “Diversity is a sensitive issue in Lebanon, and that this city uses the corniche so effectively is impressive.” Architects now have to consider the realities of digital technology. As Mitchell reflects: “If you have to live all your life in public space you’re a homeless person - and if you live all your life in private space you’re a hermit,” reflects Mitchell.