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It's 2015. Where's My Hoverboard?

The “Back to the Future” franchise offers prophetic insights about the real estate industry, predicting the scope of change over three decades.

A time span of 30 years—more substantial than mere decades, but more manageable than a century—provides useful perspective on technological innovation. Now that three decades have passed since time travelers Marty McFly and Dr. Emmett Brown traveled to 2015 in “Back to the Future Part II,” let’s look back at the future they saw and examine how their predictions have played out in real life, particularly at the notable implications for the real estate industry.

Set in fictional Hill Valley, Calif., in 1985, both the first and second “Back to the Future” films use the 30-year conceit to explore how life has changed since 1955 and how it might transform by 2015. The first movie was a smoother, more critically acclaimed film, perhaps because 1955 was relatively easy to recreate. In “Back to the Future Part II,” director Robert Zemeckis had to dream up what life would be like in 2015. Back

when the sequel was released in 1989, the late film critic Gene Siskel called it “very gadget-filled and really noisy.” Sound familiar?

Indeed, real life in 2015 shares many similarities to the future envisioned by Zemeckis and cowriter Bob Gale. Hill Valley’s retro “Cafe 80’s” diner offers a colorful background, but it’s doubtful the set builders knew the real 2015 would see leg warmers back on store shelves or record companies releasing new albums on cassette tapes. When the film poked fun at executive producer Steven Spielberg with a “holoplex” movie theater ad for “Jaws 19,” was it simply looking for an easy cultural reference or did it somehow predict the 3-D sequel-mania that would grip Hollywood in the first decades of the 21st century?

Setting aside the prognostication prowess of the filmmakers, let’s put on a real estate lens to see the marketing mar-

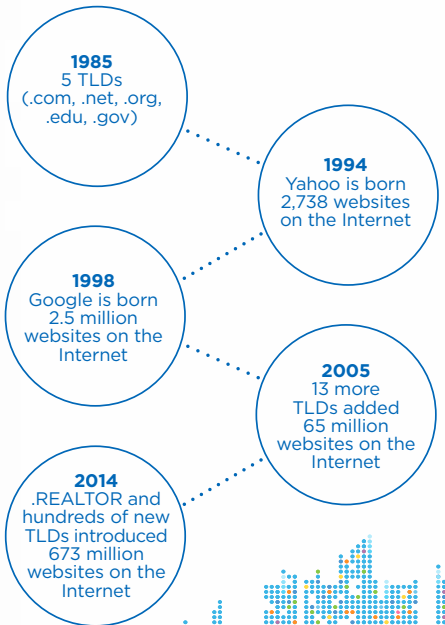
vels and property-related technologies that jumped from Hill Valley to real life.

That tongue-in-cheek ad for “Jaws 19” contains clues about the future of advertising. In the movie, McFly fears he’ll be swallowed up by a holographic shark that dives down from a billboard above him. After setting aside the creature’s eerie resemblance to Katy Perry’s “left shark” (the costumed character who grabbed the nation’s attention during the 2015 Super Bowl halftime show), we know that individually targeting one customer in the crowd is already possible in the real 2015. Real estate pros are learning how beacon technology can help them zero in on potential clients passing by For Sale signs (see “*Real Estate and the Internet of Things*,” *March/April 2015*, page 26). So the idea that McFly could be targeted by the makers of “Jaws 19” isn’t too far off from today’s hyperfocused marketing approaches.

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Using technology less menacing than a giant shark leaping from a sign, real estate pros may soon be able to develop marketing that features 3-D moving images—perhaps two satisfied clients shaking hands, a new development coming to life, or a key turning in a front-door lock—on a billboard-sized scale. Austrian startup TriLite Technologies recently partnered with the Vienna University of Technology to demonstrate how the human brain can be convinced it's seeing mobile 3-D vignettes without the use of special eyewear. Instead of flat pixels, they've developed the "trixel" with lasers and a movable mirror that deflects light to both the left and right eyes, which results in an image that appears to move in three dimensions. The researchers' published paper noted that such a device far outshines current glasses-free 3-D technology in terms of both image quality and visibility in sunlit conditions. They say the trixels could deliver to a large crowd with "theoretically up to several thousand 3-D viewing zones, and maximum 3-D viewing distances of up to 70 meters." Such technology could offer forward-thinking agents and brokerages the opportunity to stand out from competitors who simply paste their head shots on a billboard.

The house of the future also makes a debut in the movie, as the McFlys' fictional domicile features many smart-home gadgets with counterparts in the real 2015. For example, the house's security system uses fingerprint technology to open doors. While many real estate pros have yet to see biometric locks on their own listings, this form of keyless home entry is offered by a number of companies (though the real 2015 hasn't gotten rid of doorknobs as they have in Hill Valley).

The home also has programmable

lights that respond to each resident's presence, an increasingly common offering in today's smart-home packages. We may laugh when Grandma McFly pops a tiny pizza in the "rehydrator" and removes a bubbling, full-sized dinner a few seconds later. But the real kitchens of 2015 are seeing water emerge as the star of a new, faster cooking appliance known as the combi-steam oven.

The McFlys' televisions are the flat-screened version we're used to, and they easily accommodate videoconferencing and multiple programs on one display. Even some of the content is similar; after the termination of a videoconferencing call, one television reverts to an image of a famous Van Gogh self-portrait as a kind of high-tech screen saver. Real estate pros can use the ArtKick app to class up open houses with similar technology that displays fine art on their listings' TVs.

While many other inventions we commonly see today are featured in "Back to the Future Part II"—Marty's kids take phone calls and watch videos on goggles that could be mistaken for a 1980s version of Google Glass—there are implausible moments. The McFly house laughably has fax machines in every room that spew dot-matrix-style documents. As the chattering classes have noted, we never got the hoverboards we were promised (when released last year, the Hendo hoverboard—which works only on copper-plated surfaces—was panned as a poor substitute for the movie gadget that allowed Marty McFly to skateboard on air), to say nothing of flying cars. Perhaps the most far-fetched claim of all: the Chicago Cubs heading to the 2015 World Series. But no one ever claimed baseball fans of the future would be immune from that especially cruel joke.

By Meg White