Some notes on smart cities and the corporatization of urban governance

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We want to address a discrepancy; that is, the discrepancy between processes and practices of technological development on one hand and/or production processes of urban change and urban problems on the other. There's a gap here, that we can illustrate with the case of the so called "Google City"(1).

The scholarly literature on digital cities is quite clear that there are externalities, uncertainties and risks associated with the hype around, and the rash introduction of, 'smartness'. To us, an old saying comes to mind: Don't put the wagon before the horse.

Obviously, digitization and technology have revolutionized geography in many ways. And, this is nothing new. Roughly twenty years ago, with the rise of the Internet, some, such as MIT's Bill Mitchell (1995), speculated that it and other ITs would eradicate space into the 'City of Bits'. However, even back then statements like these didn't go uncriticised by those who pointed at the inherent technological determinism and exposed that there is a complex relationship between urban development, urban planning, and technological innovation; that the relationship was neither new, nor trivial such that tech, itself, would automatically and necessarily be productive, beneficial, and central to cities.

What has changed is the proliferation of digital technologies and their applications. We agree with Ash et al. (2016) that geography has experienced a 'digital turn' where urban geography now produced by, through and of digitization. And, while digitalization of urbanity has provided benefits, it has also come sidelong a number of unsolved problems.

First, behind the production of big data, algorithms, and digital design, there are certain epistemologies – ways of knowing. Data is not value-free. Rather, data is an end product of political and associated methods of framing that structure the production of data. So, now that we "live in a present characterized by a […] diverse array of spatially-enabled digital devices, platforms, applications and services," (Ash et al. 2016: 28), we can interrogate how these processes and algorithms are informed by socio-economic inequalities, because the risk is that new technologies will simply reproduce them.

Second, the circulation of data around the globe invokes questions about who owns and regulates them when stored and processed in remote geographic locations. This uncertainty, is also not new. But scholars are more and more concerned about the implications of data-driven markets, algorithmic capitalism, and algorithmic governance (Bilić 2018; Fuchs 2017; Larsson 2018; Zuboff 2019). There is the risk that end-users, citizens, or residents, will lose ownership, sovereignty and democratic control of data that is produced. Or worse, that they will form an

underclass, whose behavioural data is simply a low-priced resource to be extracted in the interests of '#SurveillanceCapitalism' – referring here to the revolution in capital accumulation that Google, itself, invented (Zuboff, 2019).

Third, the smart-city agenda is heavily pushed by tech companies who see digitizing urban environments as a burgeoning market for their products. Kitchin (2015) sees a number of undesirable externalities on this point alone: a) the commodification of public services, as they are administered by and for private profit; b) technological lock-in effects that can render the city less resilient against bugs, viruses, crashes, and hacks, which can also be difficult to reverse; and (c) digitalization endorses certain processes of standardization that overlook the specificities of places, fixing municipal administrations to narrowly defined technocratic modes of digital governance. Question: Are tech companies are aware of these downsides, because they are certainly never featured in marketing campaigns. We also wonder if this is something society, in fact, needs or even wants. How will the outcomes be managed, and by who?

Fourth urban policies and practices are not one-size-fits-all, ready-for-wear, templates that can simply be transferred from one place to another. It is not reasonable to expect that a practice developed in one context will be successful in another. This is the message from the urban policy mobilities literature (Baker and Temenos 2015; Carr 2014): Local context does matter.

One smart city that is receiving widespread attention at the moment is Alphabet Inc.'s (formerly known as Google) project in Toronto. In 2017, Sidewalk Labs – a subsidiary of Alphabet Inc. – won the international competition to develop Quayside, a derelict piece of land on Lake Ontario. This grabbed media attention far and wide. The tech community drooled (see Marshall, 2017): "Alphabet joins the grand tradition of master-planned cities, places built from near-nothing with big social goals in mind," WIRED magazine announced. But others wondered why an advertising company running annual revenues of 110 billion USD (Alphabet, 2017: 5) was getting into urban development. In fact, our research has found that there is a clear discrepancy between the optimism delivered by Sidewalk and the uncertainties raised by a rather diverse set of actors from the general public.

While the exact plan is yet to be revealed; Sidewalk maintains that jointly with the government owned, Waterfront Toronto, it will develop Quayside into the best smart city ever (see Sidewalk Toronto, 2019). Through its widely advertised but hardly explained "single digital platform" (SDP), Sidewalk will deliver on the three 'E's of sustainability. Quayside will be environmental with climate positive passive buildings, which will be flexible and multi-purpose. Garbage will be automatically removed, smart cars will ferry people about, and sensors will monitor air pollution. Quayside will be social as development will be participatory, harnessing diverse inputs. To this end, Sidewalk Labs invested 50 million USD (think about that) in public outreach, orchestrating Public Roundtables, Public Talks, Neighbourhood Meetings, Workshops, Design Jams, Civic Labs, Kids Camps: This is termed interacting with the neighbourhood. Quayside will aid in urban economic development, by reducing the costs of government and ensuring that housing is affordable, reversing the trend of gentrification that is otherwise sweeping the city.

However, a number of critical voices have surfaced particularly in regards to that mysterious SDP. And some are hard to ignore because they reveal that this smart city is really problematic. To name a few who might be most important in this respect:

1) Jim Balsillie, founder of Blackberry, and Balsillie School of International Affairs at U Waterloo & Laurier U. He published a scathing piece in a Canadian national daily, where the title said it all, "Sidewalk Toronto has only one beneficiary, and it is not Toronto;"

2) Prof. Ann Cavoukian, Privacy by Design Centre of Excellence at Ryerson U and Former Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario. She was long touted as Sidewalks on-board, Canadian-bred, privacy specialist – resigned after she discovered that privacy would not, could not, be guaranteed.

3) Prof. Mariana Valverde, and Prof. Alexdra Flynn, Sociolegal Studies at University of Toronto. Her team unpacked the exact legal, institutional and geo-spatial arrangement of Alphabet Inc., Google LLC, Sidewalk Labs and Sidewalk Toronto, revealing suspicious international financial circuits.

4) Saadia Muzaffar, Her resignation letter to the Digital Strategy Advisory Panel of Waterfront Toronto is a must read, but here is a quote: "There is nothing innovative about city-building that disenfranchises its residents … and robs valuable earnings out of public budgets, or commits scarce public funds to ... technology that city leadership has not even declared a need for."

5) Bonnie Lysyk, Ontario Auditor General. She has already fired a number of officials at Waterfront Toronto for apparent mismanagement.

These are some, but not all, of the region's most talented experts in the field, who have raised serious reservations, about which Sidewalk remainssilent. So, it's political now. Further, it reveals the central risk: that no one has a clue on how to regulate or manage this development. Rest assured, too, the story is not over. The Auditor General's 'blow' might simply be indicative of partisan politics – between the Trudeau government that is said to have had a direct hand in the development and the Conservatives who control the provincial and city governments.

So, Quayside is being sold to the world as the next generation digital city. But what can it offer to scholarly debates and to local Luxembourgish policy?

First, Quayside brings into focus that Alphabet Inc. is entering urban policy as another developer on the field: Alphabet Inc. is getting into territory, and that so far the neoliberal logics of market-driven land use, speculation and investment are unchanged. However, gaps in the discourse – the silence – related to urban and data governance suggest that there are some hidden dimensions, underlying logics, 'immense asymmetries of knowledge' (Zuboff on Talking Politics 2019) and quite likely even new dimensions of geography produced for the digital, and not the other way around.

Second, as Kitchin (2015) argued, smart city agendas entail a certain international circulation of knowledge followed by the application of standardized instruments that don't match the specificity of place. Sidewalk, with its palate or ready-made solutions to problems that haven't been identified yet, is an example of this. This lesson of policy mobility is particularly relevant for Luxembourg, which is demonstrably a rather specific context.

So, in order to avoid a discussion of products before clarifying what the actual demand or need or problem is, one must ask the following question: What are, in fact, the real urban problems

here, in Luxembourg? In a nutshell, the most pressing issues are (Carr 2011, 2014, 2018; Hesse 2015; Krueger et al. 2018)

- extreme pressure of economic and population growth, a related imbalance between jobs and housing and a lack of affordable housing;
- increasing dysfunctional mobility infrastructure;
- underdeveloped governance competencies to steer these phenomena; and
- the vast political majority in this country believes that things should continue to grow … The ramifications of this pathway are viewed second order problems, simply in need of a technical fix.

The question is: How the smart city be beneficial in this situation, with this set of problems. What will smart city development add, beyond simply opening up a new field of business?

Thus, we argue: Let's be careful not to put the cart in front of the horse and start with an open discussion about cities first, and smartness second. After an awareness of the critical elements of Luxembourg local development is developed, one could then explore the nexus of cities and smartness, how they could be brought into productive conversation, what the cost and benefits would be, and so forth. …because smartness isn't a free lunch (!); It would automatically be good, and won't automatically improve cities and urban life.

Note
(1) Zuboff on *Talking Politics* (2019) makes the point that this is not "Google's City, it is Toronto's City": "'The Google City.' So now what we see is: Google replaces government; computation replaces politics; no one is asking the citizens what they want. This is the citizen's city. This is the people of Toronto's city. This is not the Google City." And she went on to say that "there are people in Toronto right now fighting this fight, saying these things, and their public officials are not listening to them, because somehow they are living in a fantasy world where they equate Google with progress."

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