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Smart Cities and Slowness

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SMART CITIES AND SLOWNESS

It is difficult not to be in favour of smart cities when contemplating our global urban future. After all, who wants to live in the rhetorical alternative of a ‘dumb city?’ And if we consider the extent to which smart city discourse is already entangled with two other dominant discourses within urban studies, policy, and planning—those of the sustainable city and the creative city—the centrality of smart cities to future urban living can seem like a *fait accompli*.

Yet, in the race to bring technological and engineering innovations into the heart of urban planning, architecture, and design, we too often skip over more fundamental discussions about what values should underpin and steer the development of smart (and smarter) cities. In other words, which kind of smartness do we want in tomorrow’s ‘intelligent’ urban environments? And what social, political, and economic needs should that smartness serve? I want to respond to these questions by making two suggestions. One is direct and practical, while the other is more abstract and philosophical.

First, we need to engage in much more extensive discussion, exploration, experimentation, and debate about what should (and could) constitute smart cities of the future. Second, now is the right time to step back from the growing hype surrounding smart cities and ask whether smarter is indeed better. Perhaps, as I want to argue here, we should also be talking about slowness alongside smartness.



Slowness, informality, and community. Urban farmpods, Bellamyuin, Amsterdam, 2012. Courtesy Stadsboeren.org.

Smart and slow do not necessarily preclude one another, and indeed there are many ways in which the two can not only co-exist but also create the material and cultural conditions for supporting each other in urban contexts. After all, just as smart technologies and engineering have helped to make cities move and function faster and faster, they can also be used strategically and selectively to decelerate cities.

Even so, smart and slow do not often sit comfortably together in current urban living and critical thinking. One reason is that, in recent years, smart city initiatives have been closely linked to the forms of accelerated living that increasingly dominate everyday life in the global metropolitan era. Smart cities are fast cities, efficient cities, controlled cities, or so we have been conditioned to think. But this is now changing.

In an era increasingly dominated by speed and movement, acceleration and flow, the need to think through the relationship between technology and velocity in globalizing urban environments has become urgent. Given the environmental excesses and precarious human and economic conditions



now facing cities worldwide, sustainability is rightly a core concern within smart city design. Yet, smart cities of the future will struggle to achieve

The possibilities, and sometimes the necessities, for slowing down—for deceleration, detour, delay, interruption, inertia, stoppage, immobility, and more—still need to be explored and understood more fully. Far from being antithetical or marginal to such a project, ICT and engineering are crucial to any such effort.

their goals of sustainability if they do not also address the ever-increasing acceleration of urban life, systems, networks, and flows through which conditions of precarity, inequality, excess, and waste have been exacerbated.

In short, my point is that slowness—as concept, value, practice, and experience—needs to be incorporated more explicitly into future thinking about cities, including smart cities and their technologically-driven efforts to promote sustainability. The possibilities, and sometimes the necessities, for slowing down—for deceleration, detour, delay, interruption, inertia, stoppage, immobility, and more—still need to be explored and understood more fully. Far from being antithetical or marginal to such a project, ICT and engineering are crucial to any such effort.

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such effort.

The urban-social thinker Richard Sennett¹ recently spoke out against what he calls the ‘stupefying smart city’ in which the overabundance of new techno-informational tools of surveillance, connection, mobility, and exchange have a deadening rather than liberating effect on everyday urban life. He cites the examples of Masdar City in the United Arab Emirates and Songdo in South Korea, both of which are elaborate, purpose-built extravaganzas overrun by futuristic technologies. For Sennett, the closed-system hyper-smart-

ness of these cities leads to a new kind of informational and spatial inscrutability.

While many factors contribute to creating the stupefying smart city—which some commentators other than Sennett have celebrated as triumphs of imaginative, eco-friendly, globalized living—the embrace and internalization of a culture of speed and hypermobility (of people, data, goods, capital, etc) is a significant factor. Slowness is not an answer to this situation, but counterbalancing smart urbanism’s tendency towards accelerated living with more strategic investment in decelerated living as a social-cultural value would help.

Sennett ultimately advocates the ‘smart-smart city,’ a future-tech metropolis where plenty of room is made for the informal and the unplanned and where systems and networks are built around openness and access. Such a vision is compelling, and I agree that openness, access, and informality should all have a central place in smart urbanism, but I would add that slowness,

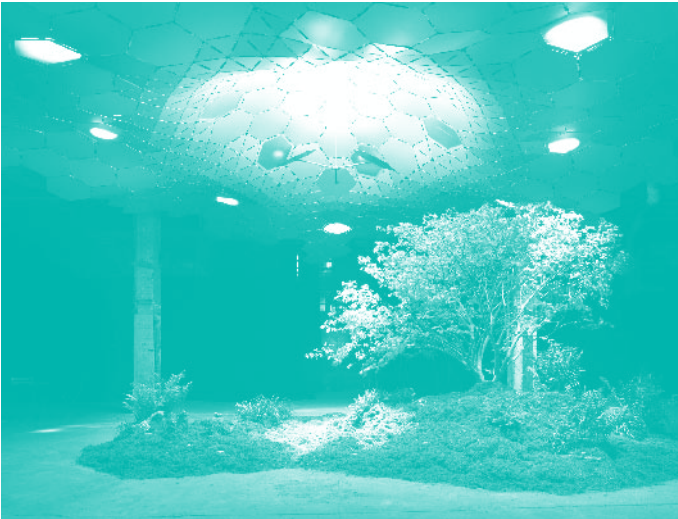


Waiting and enforced slowness.
Beijing hotel, 2008.
Photo by Jeroen de Kloet.





Asynchronous slowness. Valérie Jouve, *Untitled (Les Figures avec Rachid Ouramdane)*, 2007–2009. Courtesy Galerie Xippas.



Subterranean slowness: biotechnological urbanism and the Lowline (*Delancey Underground*), New York City, 2012. Photo by Robyn Shapiro.

in some measure, needs to be there too. The smart-smart city of the future is also a slow-smart city.

What a slow-smart city might look like, just how slow we want it to be, and when and where we want that slowness to occur (in the workplace, at home, in the streets, online, etc), all remain open for discussion. A starting point would be to experiment with designing smart ‘slow-spots’ in our cities: creative sites of decelerated practice and experience—whether virtual, material, spatial, or aesthetic—where ICT and engineering are used to explore and develop sustainable alternatives to the city of speed and flash.

¹ Richard Sennett, ‘The Stupefying Smart City,’ in *The Electric City* (London: LSE Cities, 2012), 16.

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