



Smart Cities Flashback: ‘In The End, They will Destroy Democracy’

Smart Cities are the crown jewels of Technocracy, and they will, by their very nature, destroy democracy and all other forms of government. Technocrats know this and thus are putting all their effort into building Smart Cities around the globe. The United Nations, of course, is the primary driver and catalyst for Smart Cities, thanks to its recent Habitat III conference and the New Urban Agenda. □ TN Editor

A woman drives to the outskirts of the city and steps directly on to a train; her electric car then drives itself off to park and recharge. A man has a heart attack in the street; the emergency services send a drone equipped with a defibrillator to arrive crucial minutes before an ambulance can. A family of flying maintenance robots lives atop an apartment block - able to autonomously repair cracks or leaks and clear leaves from the gutters.

Such utopian, urban visions help drive the “smart city” rhetoric that has,

for the past decade or so, been promulgated most energetically by big technology, engineering and consulting companies. The movement is predicated on ubiquitous wireless broadband and the embedding of computerised sensors into the urban fabric, so that bike racks and lamp posts, CCTV and traffic lights, as well as geeky home appliances such as internet fridges and remote-controlled heating systems, become part of the so-called “internet of things” (the global market for which is now estimated at \$1.7tn). Better living through biochemistry gives way to a dream of better living through data. You can even take an [MSc in Smart Cities](#) at University College, London.

Yet there are dystopian critiques, too, of what this smart city vision might mean for the ordinary citizen. The phrase itself has sparked a rhetorical battle between techno-utopianists and postmodern flâneurs: should the city be an optimised panopticon, or a melting pot of cultures and ideas?

And what role will the citizen play? That of unpaid data-clerk, voluntarily contributing information to an urban database that is monetised by private companies? Is the city-dweller best visualised as a smoothly moving pixel, travelling to work, shops and home again, on a colourful 3D graphic display? Or is the citizen rightfully an unpredictable source of obstreperous demands and assertions of rights? “Why do smart cities offer only improvement?” [asks the architect Rem Koolhaas](#). “Where is the possibility of transgression?”

The smart city concept arguably dates back at least as far as the invention of automated traffic lights, which were first deployed in 1922 in Houston, Texas. Leo Hollis, author of [Cities Are Good For You](#), says the one unarguably positive achievement of smart city-style thinking in modern times is the train indicator boards on the London Underground. But in the last decade, thanks to the rise of ubiquitous internet connectivity and the miniaturisation of electronics in such now-common devices as RFID tags, the concept seems to have crystallised into an image of the city as a vast, efficient robot – a vision that originated, according to [Adam Greenfield](#) at [LSE Cities](#), with giant technology companies such as IBM, Cisco and Software AG, all of whom hoped to profit from big municipal contracts.

“The notion of the smart city in its full contemporary form appears to have originated within these businesses,” Greenfield notes in his 2013 book *Against the Smart City*, “rather than with any party, group or individual recognised for their contributions to the theory or practice of urban planning.”

Whole new cities, such as [Songdo](#) in South Korea, have already been constructed according to this template. Its buildings have automatic climate control and computerised access; its roads and water, waste and electricity systems are dense with electronic sensors to enable the city’s brain to track and respond to the movement of residents. But such places retain an eerie and half-finished feel to visitors - which perhaps shouldn’t be surprising. According to Antony M Townsend, in his 2013 book [Smart Cities](#), Songdo was originally conceived as “a weapon for fighting trade wars”; the idea was “to entice multinationals to set up Asian operations at Songdo ... with lower taxes and less regulation”.

[Read full story here...](#)