



Dystopia Or Utopia: Google's City Of The Future In Toronto

Technocrats at Google have a scientific solution for every problem, including cities. The problem is that Google or any other Big Tech company has no experience in urban planning or designing cities, so the result is nothing more than their own private vision of Utopia. □ TN Editor

Even with a chilly mid-May breeze blowing off Lake Ontario, this city's western waterfront approaches idyllic. The lake laps up against the boardwalk, people sit in colorful Adirondack chairs and footfalls of pedestrians compete with the cry of gulls. But walk east, and the scene quickly changes. Cut off from gleaming downtown Toronto by the Gardiner Expressway, the city trails off into a dusty landscape of rock-strewn parking lots and heaps of construction materials. Toronto's eastern waterfront is bleak enough that Guillermo del Toro's gothic film *The Shape of Water* used it as a plausible stand-in for Baltimore circa 1962. Says Adam Vaughan, a former journalist who represents this district in Canada's Parliament, "It's this weird industrial land that's just

been sitting there—acres and acres of it. And no one's really known what to do with it.”

That was before Google.

This past October, a coalition of the Toronto, Ontario and Canadian governments contracted with Sidewalk Labs, a sister company of Google, to come up with a \$50 million design for a dozen acres on the waterfront's far eastern end. The idea is to reimagine Toronto's derelict waterfront as “the world's first neighborhood built from the internet up,” as Sidewalk describes it. The neighborhood, called [Quayside](#), would leapfrog the usual slow walk of gentrification to build an entire zone, all at once, as a “smart city,” a sensor-enabled, highly wired metropolis that can run itself.

Toronto's choice of the Google-affiliated firm immediately captured the attention of urban planners and city officials all over the world; magazine stories trumpeted “[Google's Guinea-Pig City](#)” and “[A Smarter Smart City](#).” Still in its early days, the partnership has left people curious but wary. *Google? What does a tech company know about running a real live city?*

In one sense, what's perhaps surprising is that it has taken this long. Silicon Valley's innovators have long had side obsessions with making the world a better place, driven largely by the confidence that their own brainpower and a near-total disregard for tradition can break old logjams. PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel helped seed the “seasteading” movement to create offshore libertarian paradises; the tech incubator YCombinator is currently running a public-policy experiment in Oakland, California, giving residents a guaranteed monthly stipend to see how it might improve their quality of life.



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The notion of the feedback-rich “smart city” has circulated for years, and

in practice has mostly taken the shape of centuries-old cities like New York or Boston adopting sensor-enabled stoplights or equipping their residents with an app for spotting potholes. But the real dream, a place whose constant data flow lets it optimize services constantly, requires something different, a ground-up project not only woven through with sensors and Wi-Fi, but shaped around waves of innovation still to come, like self-driving cars. Thanks to a host of technological advances, that's practical now in a way it never has been before. Mass-produced sensors now cost less than a dollar apiece, even for hobbyists; high-speed broadband and cheap cloud computing mean that a city can collect and analyze reams of data in real time.

In Toronto, Sidewalk sketches out a picture of a neighborhood where intelligent "pay-as-you-throw" garbage chutes separate out recyclables and charge households by waste output; where hyperlocal weather sensors could detect a coming squall and heat up a snow-melting sidewalk. Apps would tell residents when the Adirondack chairs on the waterfront are open, and neighbors would crowdsource approvals for block-party permits, giving a thumbs-up or thumbs-down based on the noise the gathering was expected to produce. Traffic signals could auto-calibrate to ease pedestrian congestion during public events, or to ensure a smooth rush hour. The data from such systems would feed back into the city, which would constantly learn, optimizing its own operations from month to month, year to year. Sidewalk promises "the most measurable community in the world."

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But with it comes a host of new questions, points out Vaughan, the Toronto MP. Day to day, a truly smart city runs on data and algorithms rather than civic decisions made by humans. So, who owns all the data produced by the city of the future? Who controls it? Whose laws apply?

These have been mostly abstract questions for urban-studies seminars so far, as cities adopt relatively small-bore innovations, like a streetlight system in Chicago that self-reports malfunctions to keep the lights on in

high-crime areas. But there are already hints of darker potential. The ruler of Dubai says his plan to collect data on citizens is intended to “make Dubai the happiest city on earth,” but skeptics of the United Arab Emirates’ human rights record aren’t so sure what will happen when all its cellphone-obsessed residents are being tracked by an authoritarian state. “The reality is that conversation is coming to cities anyway,” Vaughan says. “Let’s have it now.”

Fans of what’s become known as Sidewalk Toronto say there are few better places to have this conversation than Canada, a Western democracy that takes seriously debates over informational privacy and data ownership—and is known for managing to stay polite while discussing even hot-button civic issues. Hitching up with tech companies that are flush with both cash and grand visions might be cities’ best chance to leap into the future, or at least to turbocharge their lagging districts. But some aren’t so sure cities will get the better end of the deal. Google is already buying up chunks of the Bay Area and New York; its power and public appeal could easily overwhelm cash-strapped local governments even before it becomes the repository for all that citizen data. Some urbanists and good-government advocates fret that going down the aisle with big corporations might be a short-term salvation that, generations from now, will have set cities on the wrong path.

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