FROM THE SUSTAINABLE CITY TO THE SMART CITY. DON'T LOSE PERSPECTIVE

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Smart cities everywhere. Now it's time to talk about this. Clean slate, that new airs and new generators of discourse around the city arrive. Imaginary dreams of perfect cities in a sea of digital ubiquity where information flows perfectly, citizens connect to urban information flows to operate in real time and the web gives us yet another paradise. I have the impression that we have to run a little less. That technology is fine, but to its extent and, totally, it always depends on the use we make of it. And, depending on who it comes from and the control we have over it, things look one way or another.

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If we use the **presence of the subject in non-specialized publications** as a barometer, by putting all the references together we understand that we are facing a new wave. From an unordered selection we can highlight cases such as [TIME](#), which dedicates a special to the subject, Guardian publishes a section (again with IBM involved) titled [Smater Cities](#), [The Times](#) also dedicated a supplement to the subject a few months ago, the Financial Times has a very complete special dedicated to [The future of cities](#) which, although it is the most comprehensive of all the examples, pays special attention to the role of technology in the transformation of cities, [National Building Museum](#) (in collaboration with IBM) opens a think tank ([Intelligent Cities Initiative](#)), [Institute for the Future](#) publishes comprehensive map of technologies that will affect cities in the future, GOOD stands out among digital publications with [Cities rethought](#), and even [El País](#) published a report on the subject. Not to mention more specialized media, both from areas of urban analysis and from environments more linked to digital in a broad sense.

My impression for some time now is that all of this is too **confusing**, the result of the various approaches and **disciplines** that are approaching the subject (which is good) and also the result of of **more interested views** for linking the term to some issues more than others (which is a bit more worrying). So these are rather fragmentary notes but with which I try to at least organize the pieces of the debate and clear up the most critical aspects a bit. And, as it has been a bit long, **I will publish it little by little**. This first post is an introduction to the terminological confusion, and later others will come on the relationship of this topic with energy and the digital world, on its link to certain industrial sectors and the opportunity for technological transformation that it can represent and, also, a review of the projects that today are being defined as "*smart cities*". I will end with a review of the social and political consequences of these approaches.

From the sustainable city to the smart city

I start, first of all, from a statement that pointed out [Nate Berg](#) a few weeks ago (['Smart Growth' Replaced by 'Intelligent Cities'](#)) from an article in USA Today ([Will 'intelligent cities' put an end to suburban sprawl?](#)): smart cities like[new lexical link](#) in urban discourse that replaces others that we have used in recent times such as [sustainable cities](#) or [smart growth](#), two terms that are not exactly synonymous but share -versus < em>smart cities- the exclusion of technology as a central element of proposals for urban improvement. Is the dream of local sustainability over and the utopia of the techno-smart city begins? Pig in a poke?

I have many doubts that the solution to sustainability problems at all levels -also at [local scale](#)- come hand in hand with miraculous technological solutions. It is a question of principle that, later, admits that, obviously, eco-innovation applied to urban functioning has a lot to offer in the form of improving efficiency in passive urban metabolism, that is, everything where the human use of technology and behavior and consumption patterns do not have much to say. To give an example: the [smart grids](#) they sound good, and will generate management by the owners of the network and the most efficient distribution companies, but stop there. The weak link in the chain is the final consumer where, it occurs to me, an intelligent pricing system is much more environmentally efficient than a smart meter.

In addition, like almost everything in this era, the *smart city* wave has no memory and risks forgetting previous theoretical developments and proposals. Hadn't we agreed that sustainable

strategies were, above all, an intelligent way of living? What is the *smart city* going to teach us now? Maybe a little cynical but, beware, let us not forget. I read these [eleven ideas](#) and they seem to me a much smarter approach to the smart and sustainable city. They are not necessarily incompatible, but sometimes they seem so and, above all, the new -*smart city*- does not really build on what until now seemed something that was beginning to take hold. This explains it very well [Brent Toderian](#) at ["Intelligent City Model" Complements Smart Growth - Doesn't Replace It!](#), with an anecdote in Spain precisely and that I fully agree:

At a conference late last year in Spain, I found myself on panels discussing new technologies that will improve cities, surrounded by tech-companies reps hard-pitching to a global audience. I likely disappointed them, by stating that in my opinion the "technologies" that will do the most good, are not new - compact, mixed-use, walkable communities; bikes, separated bike lanes and bike sharing; transit; small scale innovation like wheeled-luggage; simple techniques that we've forgotten like passive building design; or globally-understood tech like district/neighbourhood energy based on renewable resources. But those big companies weren't selling those products. They were selling smart city solutions.

Smart city vs. Intelligent city

From the foregoing we can verify, secondly, put to think only in terminology, that we have two terms that allude to different concepts or that, I understand, we have to avoid being synonymous. *Intelligent cities* and *smart cities*. The second of them is much more widespread and is the one that represents the conceptual novelty, because it is the one that evokes the technological load linked to *smart grids*, information technologies or intelligent infrastructures.

The terminological dispute does not reach more, it is the least of it. More important is that intelligence is present, with or without technology. Is it [Masdar](#) a smart city? Well, I think not, no matter how intelligent all the technique put at the service of the most complete model of ex-novo construction of a city is. No, it's not smart to build in the desert like that. Is a city smarter because it has, say, a hyper-technological metro system, but does it not sufficiently balance the different modes of urban mobility? Is it a smarter city to develop [a new neighborhood](#) with all the benefits of a *smart city* while having lots, buildings and [unused premises](#) ?

Possibly cynical. Or not. Simply, that we run the risk of having our gaze too focused, of losing the horizon and the objective. They could say that it has nothing to do with the development line of the [sensors](#) applied, let's say, to traffic management with the regeneration and recovery of the already built city. And this is where we find another risk of missing something: **a city thought intelligently, not a city with intelligent devices**.

To be continue....

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