

THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE CITY IS IN THE STREET

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I recommend listening carefully to this [intervention](#) by [Adam Greenfield](#), founder of [Urbanscale](#) and one of the people with the clearest ideas about the role that **technology can play in urban life**. As a pioneer of [urban computing](#), his book [Everyware: The dawning age of ubiquitous computing](#) is a reference on ubiquitous computing and its presence in the built environment. A shorter work in the form of an interview, [Urban Computing and its Discontents](#), is also required reading for anyone who approaches these topics to understand the dilemmas of the interaction of the digital and the physical

space of the city. They are works that have enough time to understand that, first of all, that nothing that falls under the **smart city** label is new (here is a good one [selection of books](#) on the subject in the last ten years which give some perspective) and, secondly, they allow us to take a little distance to see how many of the promises have been fulfilled and how much there has been and is optimistic exaggeration about the value of digital technologies in cities .

Smart City is an expression that I try to avoid, precisely because its relevance has only confused things. I prefer to talk about **technologies for urban functioning** when I think about improving public services, and **civic empowerment technologies** when it comes to new forms of digital intervention in collective creation from the city or simply from the experience of life in the city. It is also an absolutely misleading expression, and those who use it most often admit that they do not know what it means. You have to **go down the scale, to street level**, for example, to understand the value of technology in everyday life. Looking at the city from above, as the generic idea of smart city does, allows us to see certain needs (energy distribution networks, traffic flows, etc.) but does not give us **sufficient clarity to look at real life of the city and its citizens**. And that life occurs on a smaller scale and that is where we can discover the small daily interactions between people and between people and urban services and find new innovations that are really necessary and have **better prospects for success. It is the scale that allows us to understand what real needs we have to use public transport more, what real obstacles exist to create viable business models for real-time parking information automation systems. The street is the dynamic space where we can find more everyday applications that allow us to use all the potential of the city in its interaction between the physical and the digital. The street as a platform** Dan Hill called him a long time ago.

[Adam Greenfield on Another City is Possible / PICNIC Festival 2011](#) from [PICNIC](#) on Vimeo.

We've got new agents raving about the city and promising it's going to be smart. They are newcomers to the discussion of the city and are acting with exaggerated optimism and an almost complete lack of perspective on the city they claim to serve. An avant-garde rhetoric to which they add sustainability objectives to legitimize their commercial strategies, but without knowing hardly anything about urban ecology, urban sociology or simply about the social life of public spaces. Not even the different industries seem to be [agree](#). About this, [Anthony Townsend](#) raises an idea that I think is fundamental when it comes to focusing the technological developments that companies want to make in smart cities:

But have only the foggiest notions about what people might do with it. It's a vision of the city driven by a product. We've made that mistake before. In the 20th century, when we let General Motors convince us to design our cities around cars. We can't make that mistake again.

It is clear that companies that have technological products to offer have to focus on their products to sell them. But it is not enough to add certain added technologies or to cover the products of a lifetime with a more sophisticated layer. If we really want to contribute to a better urban development, it will be necessary to design these products from the beginning thinking about the

urban services to which they contribute. There we will find **non-technological variables for its design** that will be decisive for the products to be useful. Yes, [Masdar](#), [Incheon](#) or [Songdoson](#) [large projects that give us an idea of the nature and scale with which we are capable of intervening in the territory. But they are nothing more than ideas contrary to the very concept of the city as a place with memory, with history, with conflict. They are just examples of exorbitant technological optimism and unfair pessimism about the cities we have, and they mislead us from the main objective, which is none other than having better conditions for satisfying the opportunities and capabilities of people where they live. Lavasa \(India\) is the perfect example to explain the **disconnection between smart and urban**, as it is being sold.](#)

Throughout 2011 I have come to count no less than ten events of a certain level in Spain where the main motto was smart cities. And all of them always lacked an integral perspective of the city, a broad vision of the city as a place and not as a mere space on which to implement sophisticated networks or develop mobile applications. Events where slogans, examples and promises are repeated, in which contributions on the umpteenth reinvention of social networks, smart grids or the latest sensor applications are mixed equally, in a totum revolutum difficult to understand and in which everything, anything, can have the hashtag #smartcity. But there is barely a trace of how to socially face the generalization of video surveillance and facial control technologies, of how to address the sustainability of the energy model beyond technologies, of how to understand an intelligent model of urban mobility, for example.

Yes, we have the data. Yes, we have important technological developments. We have, even with [trademark](#), a [urban operating system](#). But none of that is going to work, I can bet anything, without understanding the city in context. Just as the futuristic visions of years ago did not work. Let's talk about cities, perfect, because that's where the future of this urban world lies. But let's put things in perspective before we are wrong as dreams about the [future of the city](#). Start with [Jane Jacobs](#). Any paragraph from [Life and death of big cities](#) can be read today and find implications about the real value of technology in the city. Because the fascination produced by [renders](#) [wonderful new cities in remote corners of the world, the interest aroused by any new iPhone app, the potential of releasing public data or the innovative nature of smart grids are nothing without context. And the context is urban and conspicuous by its absence in a large part of the claims around the smart city.](#)

The greatest exponent of the latter is that news that, like many others, circulated uncritically a few weeks ago. Nothing less than [a city without people in the New Mexico desert](#), built as a laboratory for smart technologies for cities. To accept these kinds of ideas is to move away from an open research model in which technologies are tested with [users](#). Go outside, which is the main laboratory, and you will find more answers on how to guide the development that you are doing.

The true intelligence of the city lies in the almost miraculous unstable spontaneous order in which life occurs in the city. They are social relationships, the [people](#), those that generate the intelligence of the functioning of the cities. Imperfect, conflictive, sometimes disastrous, always improvable. Technology will only facilitate certain processes, and the logic of collective life will defeat any attempt to implement systems that exceed the necessary level of sophistication. The technology that gives intelligence to the city and that makes things work is invisible and has to do with diversity, mutual trust, meeting others or the ability to appropriate and build the city together. **Technological determinism** will inevitably collide with the unpredictability and complexity of urban life if **top-down strategies** of technological sophistication are imposed at a time, in addition, of budgetary difficulties for local entities.

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