

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW

Smart cities are great. Human-centric cities are (again) the future

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REUTERS/BOBBY YIP

Future city?

You'd be hard-pressed to find someone who doesn't believe cities are one of our economy's major arteries—maybe even its heart. To be specific, cities generate **more than 80%** of the world's gross domestic products.

And though urbanization can certainly spur sustainable growth by upping productivity (allowing innovation to flourish), the scale and speed that requires present challenges: meeting higher demands for affordable housing; establishing efficient, well-connected transportation systems; and creating other infrastructure, services, and jobs, especially so the 1 billion impoverished city dwellers who live in settlements can be closer to opportunities for work, leisure, and education.



Thus, building safe and sustainable cities requires serious policy coordination and investment decisions. And today, it seems, it also requires an edge—one that human-centered urban digitization can catalyze. And it only makes sense when we examine how much American cities spent on technology in 2016: roughly [\\$52.4 billion](#). Globally, cities could spend upward of [\\$41 trillion](#) on smart tech within the next two decades.

With all of this in mind, we'd do well to examine how a future saturated in automation and digitization will continue benefiting US cities. Further, which cities are already embracing this digital urban mindset, and what can we learn from what they've done?

How do you design a city as an [extension of its residents](#)? This is the question leaders must answer when fleshing out their human-centered smart cities. No, it's not an easy task to pull off, but you know what is? Gaining traction.

These days, huge capital investments are no longer required to put cities on the map. Case in point: I've seen booths set up at South by Southwest that are promoting cities—not companies: *cities*. (Richmond, Virginia, and San Marcos, Texas, are just two on [this year's roster](#), with Atlanta [leading the show with its ChooseATL](#) campaign.)

Besides, the need for automated, human-centric cities is all too evident. Not only does [two-thirds of the country's population](#) live in cities, but these urban areas also continue to struggle as they grow. As they are, they're not sustainable. The challenges they face—expensive housing, [aging infrastructure](#), worsening traffic, and increasing pollution, to name a few—cannot be ignored. To solve these issues, cities must secure the power of automation, big data, and machine learning.

While all of this sounds like something out of an episode of “The Jetsons”—which is admittedly striking—there are two serious points to consider: You don't want your smart city's proverbial slip to show, and you don't want to overwhelm your citizens with too much tech. So what's the plan?

1. Start making technology invisible

Being able to “see” technology creates interaction, and interaction creates distraction.



To illustrate: Assuming your car and smartphone are connected, your phone should be able to notify someone—someone texting you, for example—that you’re driving and can’t respond. You don’t want to take your hands off the wheel, so your phone should instead be able to send an automatic response to the text sender: “I’m driving right now, but I’ll get back to you later.” It keeps you and others safe on the road, and it doesn’t force you to respond.

So combine autonomy and data with artificial intelligence. Think about ways you can design products to encompass both AI and self-driving or operating components: The less a user has to interact, the less distracted he’ll be. As the nonprofit TM Forum’s Carl Piva told [Computerworld](#), the “technology of the future will become more and more invisible to individuals, and the best success criteria will be people not really even noticing the technology.”

Detroit, for instance, is already investigating the idea of “invisible” technology, particularly when it comes to residents’ safety. Last fall, Detroit’s city officials partnered with Comcast to expand the area’s [Project Green Light](#) program, which allows businesses to install cameras police can use to monitor crimes (and solve them) in real time.

The program’s expansion led to a 50% drop in violent crime at convenience stores and gas stations. Thanks to the technology—which was by no means a distraction to Detroit’s residents—the city is safer, and business is better.

While Detroit excels at making tech inconspicuous, most of the country is doing what it can to be more on-the-grid than ever before, completely ignoring (or altogether missing) the subtleties “invisible” tech offers. Last fall, New York City officials introduced [LinkNYC](#), a free Wi-Fi service throughout Manhattan in the form of 500 touch-screen kiosks available for public use.

As the adage suggests, sometimes there can be [too much of a good thing](#). With the kiosks being essentially *too* visible in Manhattan’s streets, problems arose: The city’s homeless population began misusing them, and certain groups started insisting the kiosks help officials “spy” on its residents.

The solution is simple: Keep your city's technology autonomous and discrete, and take advantage of the Internet of Things and AI to help you do it.

Finally, once the idea of “invisible” tech is embraced, leaders must communicate it back to appropriate government and civic bodies; then, collaboration among the parties can begin, and a smart city can be born.

2. Your city must be conscious of digital overload

In a world where technology rules, it's imperative we find time to think, breathe, and unplug, so city leaders must carefully marry tech and mindfulness. Otherwise, they face the consequences of [information overload](#): weakened decision-making and the feeling of being overwhelmed, among others. A city's occasional digital detox is crucial.

Why? Studies have shown that smartphones could be causing [insomnia](#), social media may be spawning [narcissism](#), and computer screens might be making our kids [less empathetic](#). At some point, a line must be drawn.

Luckily, certain cities are starting to draw it. Late last year, Miami's development authority department [proposed](#) turning lanes clogged with traffic on Biscayne Boulevard into a spacious greenway that welcomed both pedestrians and bicyclists. Beyond that, walking trails are growing along the river and bay, and another trail is in the works. [City developers have also approved](#) smaller residential projects in areas that public transit serves.

Though Miami is quelling the digital overload, most of America is still bombarding its citizens with tech, putting a strain on their psyches. Consider the example of Raleigh, North Carolina, which once took home the No. 1 spot on Forbes' “America's Most Wired Cities.” The city has even built [a ring of fiber](#) around itself, linking all public facilities to one another. Undeniably, that's quite a bit of connection.

“The problem is humans can't keep up with all the technology they have created,” said [Avivah Litan, an analyst at Gartner](#). “It's becoming unmanageable by the human brain. Our best hope may be that computers eventually will become smart enough to maintain themselves.”

Even a simple art exhibit can be [marred by too much tech](#). In California cities, the pressure is ever-mounting to uphold the tech reputation Silicon Valley has created. This was the case for a 2016 exhibit in San Francisco that boasted the works of Andy Warhol and other greats. “Silicon Valley, San Francisco, is a place of innovation, and so we feel quite a strong pressure to play a role in that in the museum space,” said Keir Winesmith, head of web and digital platforms at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

And so, the entire experience became digital, equipped with a downloadable app for viewers’ smartphones that guided them through the exhibit via GPS and featured interactive touch screens throughout.

Other gallery curators aren’t loving the marriage of art and tech. Connie Wolf, Stanford University’s director of the Cantor Arts Center, is particularly cautious. “In our busy lives, in our crazy lives, we’re always connected to technology,” she said. “People want to come into museums and put that technology aside for a moment.”

Bottom line: Being connected is great, but being conscious is better. City leaders would do well to remember this.

So while our generation is starry-eyed and eager for the future of smart cities that cater to our every need, future generations will look back at our innovation in awe—assuming our construction of human-focused, digitized, and intelligent cities actually leaves the cutting room floor. Practice the above, and be sure it does.

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