

The Pothole Facts – Potholes!

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As a kind of echo of my days as a city planner for the United Nations, I occasionally receive invitations to events like those that, as part of my work, I often organized and attended. Asked to write about smart cities for *Out of Place*, I went back and opened some of these emails, followed the links, and once again saw the issues and strategies I left behind two years ago. But for me more so than their actual meanings, these words evoked physical memories – of conference halls, seating arrangements, PowerPoint or now iPad presentations, notepads, flipcharts, coffee breaks, bistro tables and the various forms (some playful, some more formal) of presenting expertise and its intersections with politics. A part of these settings involved writing keywords on a whiteboard as an aesthetic representation of the knowledge that problems are interconnected, a phenomenon referenced, for example, by promotional materials for the 9th Berlin Biennale in a kind of anthropological mimicry (*Les maîtres fous* as just another day at a start-up: What are they up to anyway? Maybe we can make sense of it by tracing markings on a board in red pen? – understanding by going through the motions). In the 1990s, the members of the artist group Minimal Club discussed the way familiar office settings began to appear on our virtual interfaces (the trash can), whereas today, the average city planning department works with a visualization of the logic of the internet – in which the edges of graphs point to solutions based on workarounds via variously defined nodes to arrive at the desired result if no direct route is available.¹ And that's how the internet was originally conceived – the grand idea of being able to reroute should a crisis arise.

So instead of writing this article, I could have attended an event organized by Vienna's Smart City Agency, a bureau I helped launch years ago; the title: *Smart, Digital, Tinderland, Urban*.² Tinderland is the odd one out in this agglomeration of words, and not just because it's the only noun. Astonishingly, the sole application-oriented term in this discussion of a city's smartness is a dating platform, of all things. Meaning the municipality is building the debate regarding smart cities around the sexual needs of its citizens. But the discourse on smart cities also includes other such pet fields of speculation for contemporary essayists as the internet of things, social media and big data. And with them, planning discourse has also found many new experts. I don't count myself among them. My perspective is rooted in a practice that I developed in a kind of double life parallel to the field of art. As a political person, I was often disconcerted by people's reluctance to acknowledge certain realities and perceive looming problems (income inequality, housing shortages, substandard housing for the poor, emissions levels, particulate matter in the air, the privatization of water, this is a wretched list). As an artist, I never took the money-minded buzzwords seriously, although I spoke this jargon every day. So, smart cities.

As a concise concept for a planning objective, 'smart cities' was the successor to 'sustainable cities'. It is a step further toward a planning practice not understood as regulatory, one justified by dwindling municipal budgets and based on the capitalist logic of product cycles. The sustainable city was founded above all on changing patterns of behaviour and the possibility of understanding the material world in different ways (thus favouring longer product cycles) as well as including a global aspect in terms of redistribution. In contrast, the concept of the smart city defines the future as methodical product innovation, leading not only to furniture functioning as agents, but also to a kind of networked globalization in which the roundabout reroute could just as well go via Africa. Unlike the unidirectional concept of redistribution, this notion of a networked simultaneity can be

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□ See graph theory.

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□ See Smart City Agentur Wien (Partner in the event *Smart, Digital, Tinderland, Urban*, 5.12.2016, TU Wien). www.tinavienna.at/de/smartcitywienagentur.

interpreted as altogether less paternalistic. In reality, however, it depends first and foremost on the cables installed by international corporations.

Early implementations of what would later become the smart city and its products consisted primarily of model projects like Masdar, a new town in the desert emirate of Abu Dhabi. It features pod-like public transportation systems, fresh-air corridors reaching across entire neighbourhoods and greywater cycles, thus highlighting the wealth of technical possibilities as well as the glaring lack of such an infrastructure almost everywhere else. This also made it even clearer that the failure to realize sustainable cities was the result not of technical impossibilities but of a reluctance to make them a reality. In current discourse, at least in Europe and the United States, these model city approaches to the smart city (some of which are still being implemented) are now being criticized and in some cases rejected by planners as overly technocratic, architectural and bureaucratic. They are seen as undemocratic fantasies, with the poor working conditions during construction frequently cited as proof of the wrongheadedness of the approach as a whole. Given that the working conditions of one's own neoliberal construction projects is given little attention in the discussion, the emphasis on the democratic element comes across as rather spurious. It sketches the outlines of the main sectors of modern industry (oil, automotive, chemicals), their local demise and the global appetites of their protagonists. This failure to realize simple planning solutions, like rerouting public spending from private to public transportation, revealed the lack of real commitment underlying the gestures towards ecological sustainability made by many cities. But Masdar showed them to be feasible – so Masdar had to be wrong.

Other issues, such as the distribution of land and real estate ownership – a resource that has undergone a huge investment boom in the last decade, coupled with historically low numbers of people taking part in it – were discussed in early smart cities programmes at best on a project level (i.e. on the level of extras) and never as a standard.

In a second attempt designed to distract from this crisis of implementation (to use the most euphemistic term), and again while invoking our oh-so-democratic mode of coexistence, the cloud became the new guiding model for smart cities. Put another way, municipal politicians chose the internet as a means of diverting attention away from decisions that needed to be taken. The new net-based model emerged from discussions concerning potential financiers for the smart city's technical infrastructure. It adapted the popular (though seldom realized) model of public-private partnerships (PPP) so that citizens (the public in PPP) were now expected to pay for the construction of this infrastructure not only via taxes, but also as individuals. Another aspect of this, beyond the financial incentive, was that **they made themselves** available to the companies (the private in PPP) as a mass of data and as customers. In discussions concerning the relationship between an impoverished public sector (a municipality), this [the] business model (an online app in the form of a start-up) and the potentiality of individuals on the internet (as a cloud), one example from planning discourse is always cited: the *potholepalooza* programme originally developed for the city of Oakland and considered a “gateway drug”³ for the traffic software *Waze* (developed in Israel, then acquired by Google in 2013). Lured by the promise that reported potholes would be fixed by the city within 48 hours, users became **mapping sensors** for a real-time traffic monitoring system. In this model, the city receives reports of potholes, while the people get these potholes repaired and are given a new toy – reporting traffic data – that is equipped with the kind of instant reward module (like!) for which the internet has been known since its earliest days. *Waze* then sells the data collected by the traffic reporters to radio stations, governments and planning offices, but primarily to companies that broadcast tailored advertising to traffic reporters sitting in the traffic jams they have reported. In this way, *Waze* became the world's biggest **mapping data provider** and the favourite game [like in model?] of the political advisers who sell smart city concepts to impoverished municipalities as

money-saving projects. According to *Waze's* spokespeople, Kenya and Brazil are their biggest markets moving forward.⁴

If you watch the video on YouTube of the launch of *potholepalooza* in Washington, D.C., in 2015 up until the part where the reporters ask questions, they reveal an astonishing non-simultaneity within the concept described as a planning utopia. Asked why newly filled holes were opening up again after just one week, the man in charge responds that they've been using the same material for decades; there haven't been any technical developments. "We're still using the same asphalt."⁵

This is actually a good thing (!), at least as it concerns smartness. Because if the search for technical solutions had been concentrated on finding lasting repairs for potholes (or, more sustainable still, on changing traffic behaviour), then there would be no need for software that helps drivers, by way of an app and radio broadcasts, avoid damaged streets. Nor would it be possible to suggest places to stop and eat or shop in nearby streets to people stuck in traffic. The result would be not a smart city but something perhaps modern in the way described by Viennese cultural pessimist Karl Kraus around 1900: "I demand from a city where I should live: asphalt, street cleaning, a front door key, heat, and piped hot water."⁶ A smart city, on the other hand, depends on a *broken* modernity complete with potholes – after all, there has to be something for the app to route you around. That is why future markets for smartness are located in places where modernity left behind particularly numerous ruins in the form of non-simultaneities and thus potholes (see the high hopes placed on Kenya and Brazil).

Another often publicized smart city project is city dustbins that alert waste disposal employees when they are full (part of the internet of things: objects with an IP address). Readers can pick apart the dustbin example in the same way – either in terms of smartness or in terms of its capacity to solve problems. What stands in for the pothole in this example? What, then, is the aspect of modernity that has been awaiting reform for decades?

At any rate, according to the global engineering company Black & Veatch, it is now possible, thanks to *Waze* and the cloud, to give the dustbin lorries controlled by the communicative dustbins a wide berth: "This is a unique opportunity to see where these thought leaders believe the Smart City industry is headed."⁷

To come back to the event in Vienna: What role does *Tinderland* play here? Is the inclusion of a dating app within the scope of a smart city not an anomaly after all, but another parallel to *potholepalooza*? – one based on a societal logic in which a modernity in ruins, thus a huge pothole (in this case consisting of alienation and sexism), must be maintained so that retailers can suggest alternate routes via some kind of eternal shopping mall where people can somehow hook up?

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See PJA, *The Unconventionals, From Faster Commutes To Better Communities, We're All Working For Waze*, Season 4, Episode 4. www.agencypja.com/the-unconventionals/from-faster-commutes-to-better-communities-were-all-working-for-waze/.

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Mayor Muriel Bowser on *War on Potholes* at the launch of *potholepalooza* 2015. www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbQH536kDxQ.

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□ Karl Kraus, *Pro domo et mundo*, 1919.

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□ Dave Hahn, *Meeting of the Minds*, Director of Communication, five-part blog series on Smart Cities. <http://cityminded.org/>.