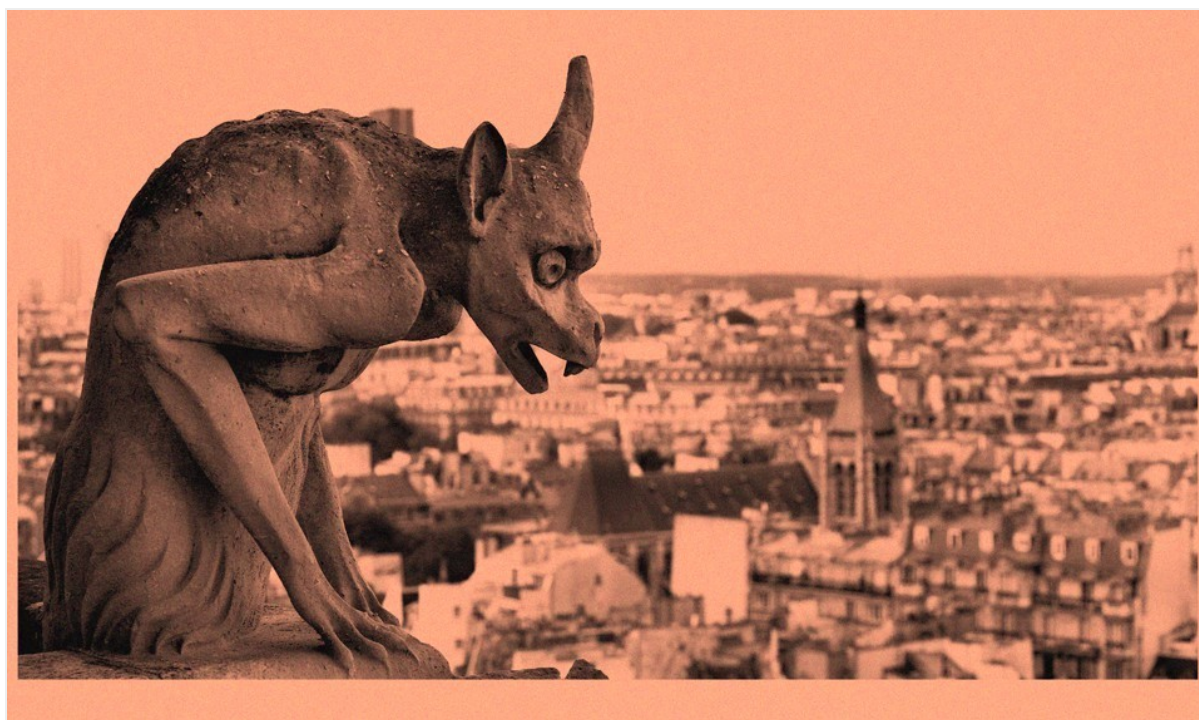


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# Stop Saying 'Smart Cities'

Digital stardust won't magically make future cities more affordable or resilient.



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The term “smart city” is interesting yet not important, because nobody defines it. “Smart” is a snazzy political label used by a modern alliance of leftist urbanites and tech industrialists. To deem yourself “smart” is to make the NIMBYites and market-force people look stupid.

Smart-city devotees all over this world will agree that London is particularly smart. Why? London is a huge, ungainly beast whose cartwheeling urban life is in cranky, irrational disarray. London is a god-awful urban mess, but London does have some of the best international smart-city conferences.

London also has a large urban-management bureaucracy who emit the proper smart-city buzzwords and have even invented some themselves. The language of Smart City is always Global Business English, no matter what town you're in.

So if grand old London is smart, with its empty skyscrapers, creepy CCTV videocams, and sewers plugged with animal fat, then we probably needn't fret about the Elon Musk sequins and stardust of digital urbanism. Better to reimagine the forthcoming urban future as a mirror of Rome, that "Eternal City," where nothing much ever gets tech-fixed, but everything changes constantly so that everything can remain the same.

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Rome and London are two huge, sluggish beasts of cities that have outlived millennia of eager reformers. They share a world where half the people already live in cities and another couple billion are on their way into town. The population is aging quickly, the current infrastructure must crumble and be replaced by its very nature, and climate disaster is taking the place of the past's great urban fires, wars, and epidemics. Those are the truly important, dull but worthy urban issues.

The digital techniques that smart-city fans adore are flimsy and flashy—and some are even actively pernicious—but they absolutely will be used in cities. They already have an urban heritage. When you bury fiber-optic under the curbs around the town, then you get internet. When you have towers and smartphones, then you get portable ubiquity. When you break up a smartphone into its separate sensors, switches, and little radios, then you get the internet of things.

These tedious yet important digital transformations have been creeping into town for a couple of generations. At this point, they're pretty much all that urban populations can remember how to do. Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent—these are the true industrial titans of our era. That's how people make money, that's how they make war, so of course, it will be how they make cities.

However, the cities of the future won't be "smart," or well-engineered, cleverly designed, just, clean, fair, green, sustainable, safe, healthy, affordable, or resilient. They won't have any particularly higher ethical values of liberty, equality, or fraternity, either. The future smart city will be the internet, the mobile cloud, and a lot of weird paste-on gadgetry, deployed by City Hall, mostly for the sake of making towns more attractive to capital.

Whenever that's done right, it will increase the soft power of the more alert and ambitious towns and make the mayors look more electable. When it's done wrong, it'll much resemble the ragged downsides of the previous waves of urban innovation, such as railways, electrification, freeways, and oil pipelines. There will also be a host of boozy side effects and toxic blowback that even the wisest urban planner could never possibly expect.

These smart cities won't be a solutionist paradise that's as neatly groomed as [the new Apple Headquarters](#). The cities that promulgate, and also suffer, this new dynamic action will look more or less like Amsterdam, Singapore, Tallinn, Dubai, Barcelona, Los Angeles, Toronto, Shanghai, Sydney—and yes, London—for the simple reasons that those are the people who are already doing it. That's where it's at.

I used to imagine that time was on the side of the internet's infrastructure providers—that we were in for a flat world of torrenting, friction-free data. That could well have happened, but it didn't pay off fast enough; instead, today's surveillance-marketing business model set in, and with it the realization that "information about you wants to be free to us."

This silo-izing and digital balkanizing is sinister and unfair in many ways, but it also tends to add regional character. It's about as flat and fair as a billionaire's penthouse.

This year, a host of American cities vilely prostrated themselves to Amazon in the hopes of winning its promised, new second headquarters. They'd do anything for the scraps of Amazon's shipping business (although, nobody knows what kind of jobs Amazon is really promising). This also made it clear, though, that the flat-world internet game was up, and it's still about location,

location, and location.

That's why the previously little-known German town of Duisburg is [carving out](#) a brand-new reason for existence as the first Chinese tech smart city that's located in Europe. It's also why Tallinn, Estonia, [offers](#) "e-residencies" to South Koreans who want to pretend to be European Union businesspeople, without having to actually place their shoes in the marshy ground of the Baltics.

Smart cities will use the techniques of "smartness" to leverage their regional competitive advantages. Instead of being speed-of-light flat-world platforms, all global and multicultural, they'll be digitally gated communities, with "[code as law](#)" that is as crooked, complex, and deceitful as a Facebook privacy chart.

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I didn't expect to see this, but neither did city planners. Back in the internet days, the fact that everybody had broadband and cellphones made it look like city government would become flat, participatory, and inclusive. You still see this upbeat notion remaining in the current smart-city rhetoric, mostly because it suits the institutional interests of the left. Community leaders, grassroots activism, the people who want to "participate"—to point, click, and fix the potholes—there are plenty of such people around. However, they're always the people who think a city-council meeting or a labor-union rally are interesting. They're not interesting. They're important, but they're dull.

That's why smart cities, in this new digital era of Big Five and [China-BAT industry consolidation](#), drift away from open public websites and popular comments. Instead, they're adopting that new surveillance-marketing paradigm of "data extractivity." Why trouble to ask the "citizens" what they want from urban life, when you can accurately surveil the real actions of city's "users" and decode what they're actually doing, as opposed to what they vaguely claim they might want to do?

Historically, this is a rather typical drift for a left-wing mass-democratic

ideology—from the unwieldy awkwardness of rallying the entire people, and toward the semi-covert vanguard of the revolution. Throw in some engineering degrees and a whole lot of police software, and this is the basic model for modern Chinese cyberspace sovereignty. The new Chinese smart-city model isn't London at all, but rather “Baidu-Macau,” where the state-approved social-media giant shows up in the sleepy ex-Portuguese gambling town, and offers to ramp up the local action. For instance, embedding Chinese AI facial recognition into all the town's police security cameras.

Brand-new Brazilian AI security cams are [arriving](#) in Mumbai, Delhi, and Agra, too. That's pretty interesting, in its dramatic Orwellian fashion, but I'm not sure it's as important to city life as it may sound. Gang kids in Chicago like to voluntarily wave automatic weapons on YouTube while chanting death threats; they're auto-surveilling themselves.

Smart security services may see, on smart video, that their populations get restive—but that doesn't mean the wretches actually stop. You could say much the same for [smart air-pollution sensors](#), which are deployed all over the toxic winds of China, yet are ceremoniously ignored because the truth's so inconvenient.

So what future cities have in store, I surmise, is not a comprehensive, sleek, point-and-click new digital urban order, but many localized, haphazard mash-ups of digital tips, tricks, and hacks. These half-baked smart-aleck cities will require the arcane knowledge that any local townie knows—that he or she considers habit, a second nature. But the tourist and the émigré will be automatically skinned.

The “bad part of town” will be full of algorithms that shuffle you straight from high-school detention into the prison system. The rich part of town will get mirror-glassed limos that breeze through the smart red lights to seamlessly deliver the aristocracy from curb into penthouse.

These aren't the “best practices” beloved by software engineers; they're just the standard urban practices, with software layered over. It's urban design as the barbarian's varnish on urbanism. People could have it otherwise,



technically, if they really wanted it and had the political will, but they don't. So they won't get it.

This may sound cynical from the point of view of my American hometown of Austin, Texas. Austin is a high-quality-of-life, high-tech, overeducated city that consistently preens itself about its "smartness." However, Austin has a remarkably odd and quirky set of regional technical allies. These typical "Golden Rut" Austin techies are remarkably advanced, only nobody who matters has ever heard of 'em.

I appreciate that prototypical Austin situation, but I also spend much time in Belgrade, Serbia, a city that locals say was burned to the ground 19 times (at the very least, it's been sieged, assaulted, and conquered [that many](#)). From the urban point of view of Belgrade, a smart-city "advancement" deeper into crabbiness and quiriness actually sounds pretty good. Because it's an urban situation that has Belgrade's own fully flavored, small-language, weird ethnic, formerly Ottoman atmosphere. It means a Byzantine, kinky town that doesn't have to fret too much about being outworked by Shenzhen or outschemeed by Silicon Valley.

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If you look at where the money goes (always a good idea), it's not clear that the "smart city" is really about digitizing cities. Smart cities are a generational civil war within an urban world that's already digitized. It's the process of the new big-money, post-internet crowd, Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft et al., disrupting your uncle's industrial computer companies, the old-school machinery guys who ran the city infrastructures, Honeywell, IBM, General Electric. It's a land grab for the command and control systems that were mostly already there.

The GAFAM crowd isn't all that well suited to the urban task at hand, either. Running cities is not a good business fit for them because they always give up too easily. America's already littered with the remnants of abandoned Google Moonshots. Amazon kills towns by crushing retail streets and moving all the clerks backstage into blind big-box shipping centers. The idea of these post-

internet majors muscling up for some 30-year urban megaproject—a subway system, aqueducts, the sewers—seems goofy.

These Big Tech players have certainly got enough cash to build a new, utopian town from scratch, entirely on their own software principles—a one-company Detroit for the Digital Initiative. But they won't do that because they're American. The United States hasn't incorporated a major new city in [almost 70 years](#).

There are some brand-new cities in the rapidly urbanizing world: Oyala, Equatorial Guinea; Saihoon, Tajikistan; Rawabi, Palestine; Astana, Kazakhstan—but you never hear about them in the context of “smart cities.” Even though they're new, and they have shiny modern infrastructure, they're not “smart.” Even though Astana is a genuine political capital, and also a very interesting place, it doesn't have enough “political capital” to become a player in the smart-city sweepstakes.

“Smart cities” merely want to be perceived as smart, when what they actually need is quite different. Cities need to be rich, powerful, and culturally persuasive, with the means, motive, and opportunity to manage their own affairs. That's not at all a novel situation for a city. “Smartness” is just today's means to this well-established end.

The future prospects of city life may seem strange or dreadful, but they're surely not so dreadful as traditional rural life. All over the planet, villagers and farmers are rushing headlong into cities. Even nations so placid, calm, and prosperous as the old Axis allies of Germany, Japan, and Italy have strange, depopulated rural landscapes now. People outside the cities vote with their feet; they check in, and they don't leave. The lure of cities is that powerful. They may be dumb, blind, thorny, crooked, congested, filthy, and seething with social injustice, but boy are they strong.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BRUCE STERLING** is an American science fiction author and one of the founders of the genre's cyberpunk movement. A professor at the European Graduate School, Sterling blogs at [Wired's Beyond the Beyond](#).

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