

Europe needs 'smart urbanism' not 'smart cities'

EU municipalities are 'well positioned' to become 'livable, pleasant cities that last', argues **Maarten Hajer**

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Everywhere we hear the discourse of 'smart cities'. It promises an era of innovative urban planning, driven by smart urban technologies that will make cities safer, cleaner and, above all, more efficient. Efficiency seems uncontroversial, but does it make for great cities? I would argue for a 'smart urbanism' instead of uncritically adopting 'smart cities'.

This smart urbanism needs, first and foremost, to find solutions for what modern 20th century urbanism forgot to take into account: the 'metabolism' of cities – the variety of flows that connect city life to nature; from water to waste, from energy to food and from people to materials. What are we taking in? What are we putting out? And how efficient are we in doing it?

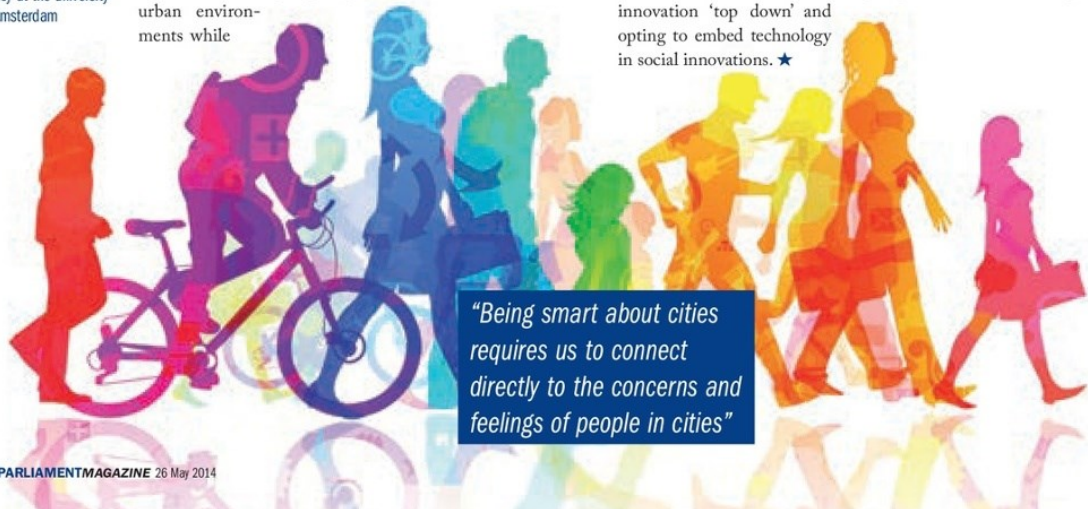
But cities and urbanism are always, crucially, about citizens. Being smart about cities requires us to connect directly to the concerns and feelings of people in cities. Historically, people have always moved to cities to improve their lives. Currently, we see yet another wave of urbanisation. Smart urbanism is a strategic orientation to work on the creation of livable, pleasant cities that last.

In a global perspective European cities are very well positioned. We have a culture of building relatively dense, well connected cities. Partly due to our common history as medieval walled cities, our cities have a scale and degree of density that allows us to achieve high quality urban environments while

using far fewer resources. High quality public domains, with lush parks and lively squares, friendly river banks, active pavements and well protected bicycle lanes and pedestrian crossings are assets which make European cities stand out globally.

The challenge for strategic planning is to build on this heritage, while at the same time enhancing the resilience of our cities. This requires, first of all, that jobs are and remain literally within reach. This requires planning: the economic success of metropolitan cities like London or Paris comes with a reordering of the housing market, driving out low and middle income households. This can be seen in the extent of increasing commute lengths for nurses, policemen and teachers already. A housing and transport strategy is required to keep our cities together in this respect. Second, if we want to reach a clean economy by 2050 we need to produce our welfare with approximately a tenth of the fossil fuels we use now. We can certainly do this, but it calls for a big effort to insulate our homes and reduce the inputs and emissions from vehicles. Third, in the 21st century, cities are not going to be planned from above. The future is for networked governance, involving stakeholders of various sorts.

Cities have to learn faster and jointly identify strategies that work. New urban data are going to be of tremendous importance to help understand how to best develop our living cities. That is what smart urbanism is going to be about: avoiding innovation 'top down' and opting to embed technology in social innovations. ★



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