

PLAY #3

INVITE PUBLIC INFLUENCE

The opportunistic economic and technological climate fueling today's smart city investments creates a parallel ethical urgency to effectively consult publics in the design and adoption of these investments. With new participatory frameworks and technologies, cities have the chance to move beyond tired and non-representative town hall models of engagement, and to entirely reimagine their processes for inviting publics to influence decision-making. For participants, these processes are built on an understanding of smart that appreciates their local expertise and involves publics from start to finish. Processes that request deep engagement should convey deep respect for elicited opinions and labor as well, committing to transparency and providing evidence of impacts on decision-making to build trust. Lastly, input into civic processes can be augmented with technologies as means of active and passive participation.

DISCUSSION



As technologies become more complex, smart city conversations are increasingly relegated to the realm of technology experts, who may be fluent in community inclusion rhetoric, yet struggle to actually include publics in smart processes. For civic smart city design, it is imperative that cities acknowledge and leverage existing local expertise, giving a diverse group a seat at the decision-making table. Cecily Garrett points out that in addition to inviting a diversity of stakeholders to the table, "It matters just as much to ask, whose table is it?" Or as Kathy Nyland suggests, sometimes it is the city's responsibility to let local communities make their own table: "We are trying to provide a platform in the City [of Seattle] that empowers a lot of community-led initiatives that, otherwise, would be seen as peripheral or small or fragmented." Additionally, these partnerships cannot be temporary; it is important that cities support persistent input. "Always involve community from beginning to end," says Layman Lee, "even if they don't know anything about technology."

Cities need to design for trust, not only function. Kade Crockford argues that we need "systemic reforms for engagement. Cities won't be able to get people engaged with city projects unless they know their voice is being heard."

In practice, this means creating feedback loops between government and publics to demonstrate that the city is listening.⁸ Cities must prove their trustworthiness over time, to varying publics, with particular focus on communities with historical and persisting reasons to distrust government. Understanding priorities across the range of publics and making evident how resources are allocated should be a primary goal of smart city planning.

This play calls for a shift from “smart technologies in search of problems” to “defining problems with publics, then working to solve them with technologies.” The goal is not to talk about smart cities, but to get smarter in the way we talk about cities. In designing toward greater civic participation, we must also recognize that people can only attend to so many things at once before attention deficit or sheer exhaustion erodes their ability to engage. With the labor of civic participation in mind, cities should anticipate the complexity of participation when either the same people are asked to come to the table over and over again, or certain communities are in the constant churn of being surveyed. This is especially true for lower-income communities. Beth Coleman says, “We have a two-tiered system where people who are ‘at-risk’ (more likely to be surveilled) are asked to do the double task of having a job and also sustaining a community activist position.” This isn’t unique to smart cities—most planning processes place more demands on the people who are most vulnerable—but if we want our cities to be smart, we can start by designing more equitable engagement processes.

Civic technologies can be designed to “gently nudge engagement in public discourse,” Catherine Geanuracos suggests. Technologies that invite conversation, from online discussions to public art, can effectively “bring the city to the people,” Sun-ha Hong says. But we cannot continue with the pattern of cities building platforms for communities. Ceasar McDowell argues that “[cities] should build a process that community members can initiate themselves.”

ACTION IDEAS



- Reframe “smart” to include local expertise
- Support communities defining their own engagement processes
- Be aware of demands placed on at-risk communities — assure expectations are equitable

⁸ For a rich description of effective public engagement processes, see: “Accelerating Public Engagement: A Roadmap for Local Government.” Eric Gordon (2017). <https://engage.livingcities.org/guide>