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Connecting the Dots

The Future of Urban Development

> About the authors

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> Introduction

We make connections. We connect with one another in a specific city or anywhere in the world often by chance, sometimes by choice. Some of those connections become deep and ongoing, as we connect in all and every aspect.

For some, discovering a city is life-changing. They are seduced by its atmosphere, its people, its architecture and bond through its all-encompassing story. A story that is often a thrilling combination of particular protagonists and certain historic events that portray the city's character and that of its citizens. That story functions as an invitation, describing what future may await if you connect with that specific city DNA.

As such, we stay in that city. We sometimes leave, but we always come back. At that moment that city becomes part of our identity.

Cities have been providing opportunities for centuries, an alluring prospect that has drawn citizens away from rural areas in order to find a job, adequate housing, convenient transport, education and much more.

In the 1960s people started leaving the city again. Changing labour opportunities and 'one family, one home' policies, accompanied by easy credit access for housing and personal transport, fuelled a suburbanisation movement. We changed our landscapes and scaled architecture towards family homes and cars instead of shared apartment blocks and public transport.

However, the attractiveness of the aforementioned opportunities has kept cities at the heart of change and in the hearts of people.

Today, the city is drawing us back in with its siren song. It seems we were not looking for a dream house, but for a dream neighbourhood. We got trapped behind our closed front doors and privacy-secured window panes, in between garden fences where we could only smell what our neighbours were cooking instead of tasting it.

Generation Y and millennials are therefore moving back to the city. However, that very same city has to change as well. In its current

shadow looms alienation, distress or anxiety as a result of a more competitive outlook and a certain lack of accountability. We therefore need to rethink our cities, starting from a human-centred perspective. We don't just need public spaces with architectural delight. We need public spaces that enable human connection, where citizens can experience nature, sit near the water, find their own spot and find other people.

The prospect of growing cities can therefore fuel us with optimism or cynicism, with love or animosity. It should stimulate our beliefs, in one way or another. Its uncertainty however cannot stop us, or leave us frozen like a deer in the headlights.

There are too many opportunities ahead, as a result of technology, new ways of cooperation, etc. We should re-apply the lessons from the old Greek art of stoicism: stare those difficulties in the face and ensure an impact is made.

Therefore, our love for the city can be reaffirmed:

- If we do not lose sight of human-centred design, while we're all heading towards a more and more technology-driven society in that city.
- If we are able to connect old and new dots despite uncertainties, even the ones that we do not know today, which will both be complicated and exciting at the same time.
- By upholding a set of values that is able to withstand the force of such disruption. These essential values are empathy, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity, flexibility to change, coping with uncertainty and societal participation.

> 1. A technology-driven, yet human-centred society

Constant disruption of the status-quo will be at the centre of the models we know. How we deal with mobility, consumer behaviour, privacy, health, climate, energy and education will change fundamentally, driven by technology.

In this fast-changing setting, cities can play a leading role, steering all the excitement in a specific direction. A direction that takes into account individual, small-scale and large-scale benefits. As such, that city should be equipped with a responsive set of policy tools, able to retain its agility where fast policy adjustments are required. As the next big thing will often be a combination of small things, cities have the benefit of being a sizeable network able to recalibrate quickly. The need for policy to follow the pace, or better even beat it, of technological developments, will be immense. But our cities intrinsically have the upper hand in comparison with other more large-scale institutional players such as regions or countries.

In mobility for example, we can see how the pace of technology is picking up and driving us in a certain direction. These cars are already being marketed today, indicating that the transition to a complete new city mobility will happen faster than we can even imagine.

Self-driving electric vehicles are able to diminish the need for car ownership, reduce the number of parking spaces needed, lower the number of accidents due to human failure, and decrease the pollution that is causing more and more harm to us.

Due to the scalability of new business concepts in various environments, whether they are developed in a European, American, African, Asian or any other city, such evolution seems inevitable. Instead of sitting back and waiting quietly until the storm hits, cities should prepare and look now at how they can steer these changes in a direction which can be a win-win for both the city and its citizens.

These city challenges are all linked to one another. Therefore cities should keep their eyes open for possible links in other domains.

In recent decades, we have missed the opportunity to make the city so attractive that people don't need to a car anymore (whether it be electric or self-driving). As we are coping with this changing mobility issue we should take the opportunity to make our cities more walkable

and bike-friendly, so that we, at the same time, are promoting healthy living standards, battling obesity and encouraging fitter citizens. We can shift away from ownership towards the possibility of accessing several means of transport. A more walkable city with lots of public spaces and nature that enables human connection can even improve mental health, build relationships and create happier citizens.

Those citizens can even personally help to inform their city of what needs to be done to create more contented citizens. Through the use of Internet of Things technologies we can turn people into smart citizens, creating a smart city environment. The data that they generate by walking through a city can be used to target more specific investments towards improving the urban environment. Such citizen-generated data can be provided by the city as open data in order to kick start research into resolving urban issues, by companies or pro bono organisations capable of creating added value.

However, these entities will have the daunting task of reassuring citizens that in return for their data they shall receive an equally valuable product or service. It is up to the city to create a well-functioning policy that takes into account that fragile relationship, thus ensuring the unconditional support of those smart citizens in improving for instance transport and mobility in the city environment.

To easily incorporate these changes there will be a need for an all-encompassing mobility plan in cities, connecting all of these known and unknown dots.

Those mobility plans will need to be visionary, daring and as lean as possible. Such planning will need to take into account a very complicated period of transition during which our old forms of transport in the city will overlap with this completely new mobility scheme as a result of different implementation speeds.

As the speed of change will pick up over the coming years, we should start planning for this rapid shift right now. This is the only way we're ever going to be able to adapt swiftly, while keeping our solutions as human-centred as

possible. Changes on this scale will even create the need for a new vocabulary to shape our thought processes so we can better understand and grasp them.

As such, we need to make sure that current and future citizens understand the challenges that lie ahead as soon as possible, in order to prepare them for such challenging times. In a time where the best part of their thoughts will be taken up with other questions concerning the future of work, of leisure or even romance, they may lack the ability to look at the challenges in city planning from an open-minded perspective. That will allow us to reduce the risk of a democratic deficit.

> 2. Connecting old and new dots

As the main entities driving economic and democratic change are no longer countries, but rather cities, we shall see a shift in methods of cooperation. In a world where networks of smaller players are taking advantage of their combination of unique selling points, old-school figures will be easily outmanoeuvred. Cities will challenge the nation state, but will also be challenged themselves by smaller actors within a city. Actors that may be doing a better job than the city itself.

Therefore cities should put into place very flexible mechanisms to accommodate such smaller entities, and look at where both can benefit. We envisage more and more initiatives in which a variety of different types of organisations start working together in all different forms of partnerships.

Connections are made between governments, profit, non-profit and academic organisations. In some cases, these are formalised agreements, while in others they are very informal. Accommodating these initiatives will furthermore require finding the right setting and method of interaction for the following three-phase process:

> First phase: explore

Cities need to create settings where those aforementioned players can meet informally, learn why they are allocating time and resources to achieving a specific goal, and get to know one another. These settings should be informal, yet enriched with inspiring ideas. All the different entities - be they corporate, commercial or pro bono - should be able to share a visionary moment during which they consider the possibilities that can arise when working together to achieve that shared future.

> Second phase: create

Beautiful examples of co-creation are popping up all over Europe. We see local pro bono initiatives working with large corporate organisations in order to accommodate certain challenges. However, most of the initiatives seem to be steered by the large corporate players, often for branding purposes or within their specific and more narrow corporate social responsibility focus.

We need to find a way to shift that focus towards the actual issues at hand. It seems clear that this is the only way to unleash the real power of these co-creation initiatives. It would make co-creation more relevant and help corporates to experience the real strength of co-creation.

That same idea of shifting towards issue-oriented co-creation is in their own interest, as they have to shift their economic approach towards finding new and relevant innovative products and services to keep their businesses afloat. In an economy where the power of the network will be most important, teaming up in co-creation partnerships will be inevitable.

> Third phase: resolve

As more and more stories of co-creation are shared, some shall lead by example. The shared goal of improving quality of life within the city shall become the driving force of more and

more co-creation activities. The very structures that allowed such cooperation are then able to become secondary to achieving their specific goals.

Right now, some of these collaborative ventures have already immersed themselves in this pool of possibilities and have reached the aforementioned second phase. Others are still working cautiously in the first phase.

Between the second and third phases there is a big leap to be made. The group of the willing will need to find partners in a city environment who are able to support their efforts. An environment where coaching, innovation guidance and a platform to share their stories are present.

In the city of Ghent we bring such a coalition of the willing together within 'De Community Gent' framework. It is a setting where the city governing bodies, public entities, non-profit initiatives and private companies meet and are able to grow along this path of three phases.

As the combination of future challenges - such as changing mobility - gradually start to kick in, local government will be in a difficult position to handle each and every issue by itself. Having created this 'De Community Gent' setting, the different members can group together behind specific societal objectives and work to overcome any formal restraints.

> Conclusion

Some talent is born into a specific city, others are attracted to its core values. Critical thinking and tolerance have been part of the city of Ghent's DNA from time immemorial. Some have been dipped into this bath of values as soon as they were born; others have picked them up as students, homeowners or employees in the city.

If cities are willing to create a certain setting that is able to withstand the force of disruption, they shall be required to uphold a set of values that serves as the glue holding that very setting together. These essential values are empathy, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity,

flexibility to change, coping with uncertainty and societal participation. Everyone will need to be able to think into the future. To start creating policy with a forward-thinking future approach, that will have to be adjusted everyday. We need people in policy or in these new growing cooperative structures to think in new ways and to ask themselves critical questions all the time.

A number of evolutions seem inevitable. The law of Moore is driving new technologies forward, lowering cost and doubling speed. We have come to a point where all large corporate players are aware of these disruptive forces, and able to take their businesses forward. Even when they realise that such an opponent is less experienced and of a smaller scale, corporates start to get the point where they have to redirect their vessel in order to survive.

Societal changes have always been led by economic changes. Technology will drive that change at an ever faster pace. Cities can no longer continue business as usual. They have to redirect their vessels as well. They will need to develop policies that are lean and able to pivot according to certain changes. City councils will need to dare to take more long-term decisions that are able to attract the talents that will shape their future economies, with enough leverage for short-term adaptations.

But before they overhaul current policies, these city councils will need to try to paint a broader picture. If we change our current mobility setup, why not also make a choice that does more than just enable more fluid transport with electric self-driving cars? Why not also take into account the promotion of healthy lifestyle choices or enabling human interaction, by creating a human-centred walkable city with green open spaces?

We will all need to become small entrepreneurs ourselves, able to co-create. We shall need to ensure that the aforementioned list of values are echoed and become part of us. The one thing we cannot do is to be overwhelmed and freeze.

Because one cannot forget that “the task is,

not so much to see what no one yet has seen; but to think what nobody yet has thought, about that which everybody sees...” (Arthur Schopenhauer)