

From Disruption to Dystopia: Silicon Valley Envisions the City of the Future

by Joel Kotkin

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The tech oligarchs who already dominate our culture and commerce, manipulate our moods, and shape the behaviors of our children while accumulating capital at a rate unprecedented in at least a century want to fashion our urban future in a way that dramatically extends the reach of the surveillance state already evident in airports and on our phones.

Redesigning cities has become all the rage in the tech world, with Google parent company Alphabet leading the race to build a new city of its own and companies like Y Combinator, Lyft, Cisco, and Panasonic all vying to design the so-called smart city.

It goes without saying, this is not a matter of merely wanting to do good. These companies are promoting these new cities as fitter, happier,

more productive, and convenient places, even as they are envisioning cities with expanded means to monitor our lives, and better market our previously private information to advertisers.

This drive is the latest expansion of the Valley's narcissistic notion of "changing the world" through disruption of its existing structures and governments and the limits those still place on the tech giants' grandest ambitions. This new urban vision negates the notion of organic city-building and replaces it with an algorithmic regime that seeks to rationalize, and control, our way of life.

In reality, Google is entering the "smart city" business in no small part to develop high-tech dormitories for youthful tech workers and the cheaper foreign noncitizen workers in the U.S., including H1B indentured servants; overall non-

citizens make up the vast majority of the Valley's tech workforce. Even as the tech fortunes have grown ever larger, the companies own workers have been left behind, with the average programmer earning about as much today as she did in 1998 even as housing costs in tech hubs have exploded.

The drive to redesign our cities, however, is not really the end of the agenda of those who Aldous Huxley described as the top of the "scientific caste system." The oligarchy has also worked to make our homes, our personal space, "connected" to their monitoring and money machines. This may be a multibillion-dollar market soon, but many who have employed such devices at home—appliances that track our activities and speak to us like loyal servants—find them "creepy," as they should, given that their daily activities are fed back to enrich the high-tech hive mind. Both the city and house the future may owe more to *Brave New World* than *Better Homes and Gardens*.

This is a vision of the urban future in which the tech companies' own workers and whatever other people with skills the machines haven't yet replaced are a new class of urban serfs living in small apartments, along with a much larger class of dependent persons living on "income maintenance" and housing or housing subsidies provided by the state. "Bees exist on Earth to pollinate flowers, and maybe humans are here to build the machines," observes professor Andrew Hudson-Smith, from University College London's *Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis*. "The city will be one big joined-up urban machine, and humans' role on Earth will be done."

This new urban form is an extension of the notion—shared by most top internet founders—that their industry will exacerbate inequality between the rich and the middle class, while eradicating abject poverty by making cheap essential goods. Companies prosper in this model by avoiding the messy reality of paying higher wages through automating ever higher-end functions.

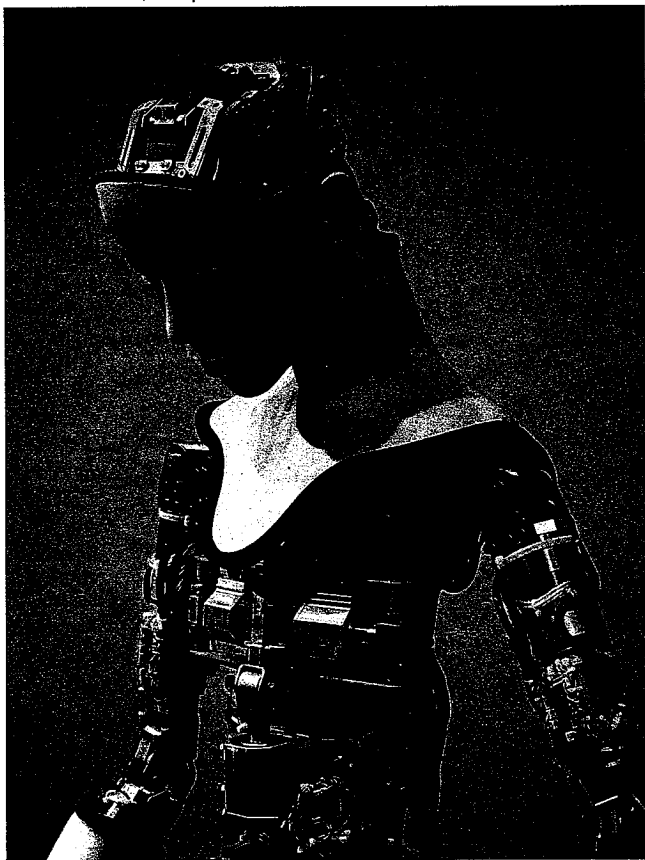
As the hoi polloi cluster in small apartments, the choice spots will be left for the extremely wealthy workaholics who create technologies. Everyone else will enjoy leisurely prosperity—playing with their phones, video games, and virtual reality in what Google calls "immersive computing."

This is markedly different from the capitalist system that emerged after the Second World War, when large employers like General Motors or Lockheed did not so consciously monitor their employees' lives once they left work. The growth of these companies also allowed many working and middle class people to buy homes, primarily in suburbia, where they could separate corporate life from family life.

Silicon Valley remains stubbornly suburban in form, but the oligarchs now believe that "urbanization is a moral imperative," notes author Greg Ferenstein, who has interviewed them extensively. Conveniently for the new rulers sopping up a share of the capital unmatched since the gilded age, cramming people into tighter and heavily monitored spaces also discourages them from having large families, or any children at all, and thus fewer "excess" people without coding skills to be housed and fed.

Even as the suburban garage remains the Valley's preferred symbol, suggesting that anyone with a vision can build the next Facebook, in fact today's giants prefer to buy up emerging innovators and to build dense urban complexes inhabited by workers who will become ever more corporate, consolidated, and controlled.

Even as the oligarchs' apologists insist dense cities are "home to more innovation and income equality," research shows quite the opposite, with San Francisco, for example, recently ranked by the Brookings Institution as America's second most unequal city. Perhaps Facebook should look at what happens to its contract workers sleeping in their cars and working numerous jobs to afford to stay near the mother ship.



Unlike urban centers of the past, the new oligarchic city is not a mechanism that spurs individuals toward adulthood, family, or independence. Instead, the idea is to create a kind of extended adolescence or quasi-college experience, in which the tech giants or the government acting as their proxy gets to play dorm mother, encouraging people to behave and think in ways the oligarchs deem useful.

In this world, there is little room for home ownership. The oligarchs have endorsed Bay Area regulations that limit single family-home development and have helped created some of the world's highest housing prices and rents. According to Zillow, rent costs now claim upward of 45 percent of income for young workers in San Francisco, compared to closer to 30 percent of income in metropolitan areas like Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston. The average new mortgage for a home in San Francisco takes, on average, close to 40 percent of income, compared to 15 percent nationally.

Under this regime, the new generation of Bay Area residents seems destined to live as renters, without enjoying equity in property. The 2040 regional plan for the Bay Area calls for 75 percent of new housing development to take place on

barely 5 percent of the land mass, all but guaranteeing high prices for those who can (barely) afford to live crammed into small apartments.

One well-used rationale for densification lies with the assumption that building more units on these pricey pieces of land will help solve California's severe housing affordability crisis. Yet in reality, construction costs for higher density housing are much higher—up to 7.5 times the cost per square foot of building detached housing. Nor will densification do much to address climate issues: Savings cited in a recent Berkeley study suggest that enforced densification would contribute less than 1 percent of the new emissions reductions the state has mandated by 2030.

Yet the CEOs of Lyft, Salesforce.com, Square, Twitter, and Yelp, as well senior executives at Google, all support densification, and have rallied behind a new bill by California state Sen. Scott Wiener to strip local communities of most of their zoning powers to allow significant densification virtually everywhere there is basic transit or rail bus service.

This shift in power from localities to the state follows the oligarch's preference for centralized power that avoids the messiness of dealing with the local peasantry.

Like your bucolic suburb or human scale neighborhood? Too bad. The oligarchs have spoken.

Instead of the lower density and relatively affordable post-war suburbs that "smart" planners and progressives have long mocked as cultural wastelands, the tech giants are pushing a 21st century high-tech update of the grim worker housing that dotted the Lancastrian and New England landscapes of the early industrial revolution.

In developing dense housing estates around their headquarters, the new "company town" for the 21st century will erase both privacy and financial independence. Firms like Google, Apple, and Facebook seek employees who embrace, as the New Yorker recently observed, "not only a life style but a fully realized life" based on a modernist version of "monasticism."

Mark Zuckerberg, even as he fought to expand his own sprawling suburban homestead, envisions

his employees living in crowded dormitories close to work, including a planned 1,500-unit apartment development near Facebook's Menlo Park campus. Zuckerberg, like most oligarchs, prefers workers unengaged with the mundanities of family life.

"Young people just have simpler lives," he explained to the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "We may not own a car. We may not have a family. Simplicity in life is what allows you to focus on what's important."

The man preaching this diminished view of urban life, of course, has a car, a family and all the benefits that come with a vast fortune. He is not part of the "we" he's purporting to speak for.

The city that he is envisioning, that "we" are supposed to enjoy, will be organized not by civic loyalty but pools of constantly tracked personal information collected and sold by his company.

One early indicator: Google is working to create a new, "smart" neighborhood in an undeveloped 12-acre portion of Toronto called Quayside. Sidewalk, the Alphabet unit run by former New York Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff, describes its vision for Quayside as the prototype for a city "built from the internet up... merging the physical and digital realms," with its residents acting in effect as the company's beta-testers.

This "smart" urbanity revolves around surveillance and relentless data-gathering. Swarms of monitoring sensors inside and outside buildings and on streets will be constantly on duty. Google would collect data about everything from water use to air quality to the movements of Quayside's residents, using that data to run energy, transport, and all other systems. In this controlled environment, consent over pillaging personal data "goes out the window straight away" says David Murakami Wood, an associate professor at Queens University who studies surveillance in cities.

"The whole point of a smart city is that everything that can be collected will be collected," Al

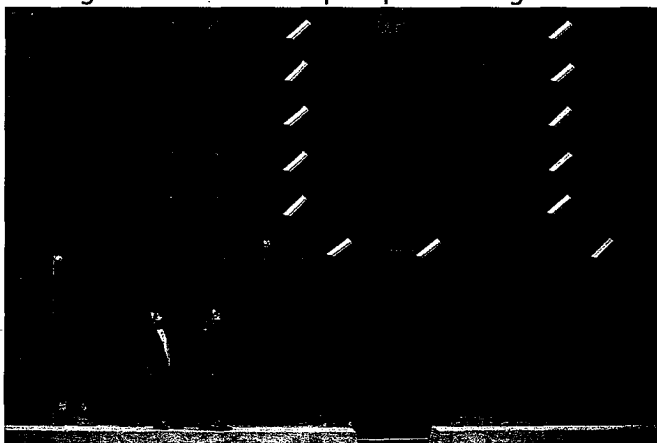
Gidari, the director of privacy at Stanford University's Center for Internet and Society in California, told the CBC. If smart cities really wanted to give people more control over their privacy, they wouldn't collect any of it unless people opted in.

Relentless monitoring, no doubt, will create some efficiencies for things such as trash collection, but at an enormous cost to privacy. Where people walk, what they do will all be fed into Google's advertising and marketing machine. Meanwhile, Google, Wired notes, will be gaining insights about urban life—including energy use, transit effectiveness, climate mitigation strategies, and social service delivery patterns—that it will then be able to sell to cities around the world.

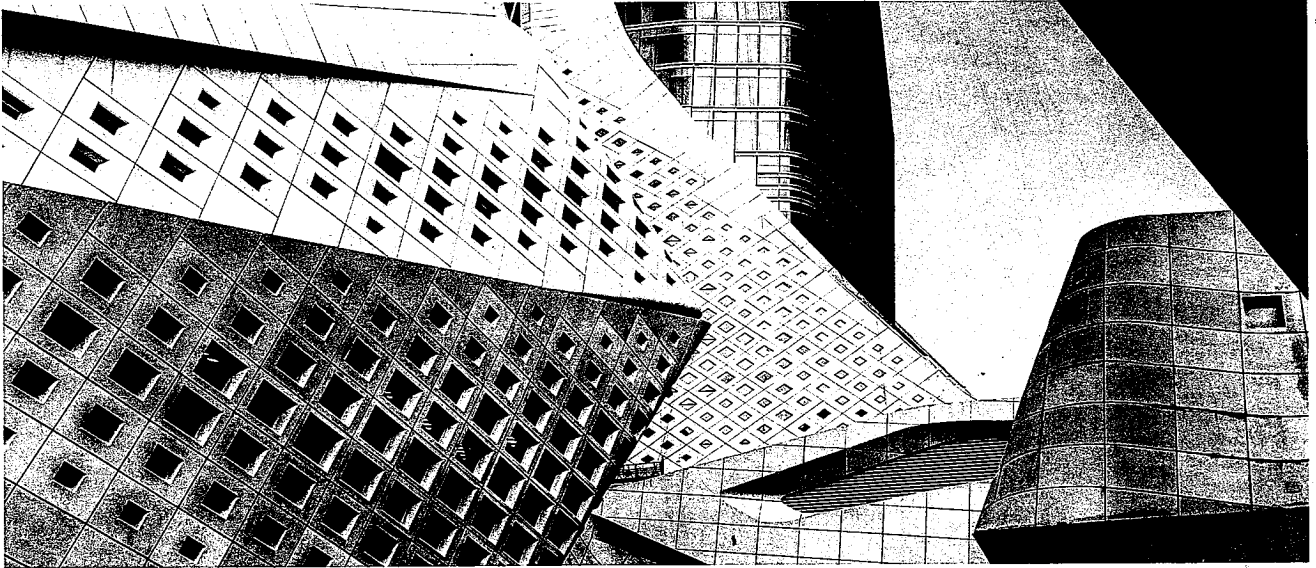
While Canadians may still be able to object to attempts at this kind of control, citizens in Russia, India, and China are less likely to do so. In China, tech firms are desperate enough for future profits to cooperate openly with the state's surveillance and censorship regime in exchange for market access.

China presents the oligarchic city builders with a real-life laboratory for surveillance. In western China, where Muslim dissidents are a problem, Chinese authorities are testing a facial-recognition system that alerts authorities when targets stray more than 300 meters from their home or workplace. The state is also working on the harvesting of biometric data, smartphone scanners, voice analysis, and compulsory satellite-tracking systems for vehicles.

The tech giants, who know a market opportunity when they see one, are already selling gear and software to expand China's surveillance state while the venture community in Silicon Valley is raising funds for startups specializing in these



Matthew Henry, Unsplash



intrusive technologies.

What is occurring in Silicon Valley, being proposed in Toronto, and now implemented in China all points toward efforts by tech companies and governments to create new dense and data-driven cities that shape what the British academic David Lyon calls a “surveillance society,” where all of our data is shared with the governments and companies that use it to control us. In many ways these “cities” will be the opposite of the real thing, driven by a technological culture that, as David Byrne has suggested, substitutes spontaneous human interaction—the glory of the traditional city—with machine-driven interfaces.

The idea is not, to paraphrase the late William F. Buckley, to stand athwart the internet, yelling stop. But instead this is a call for urbanites and all citizens to rise up against the transformation of our cities into tech satrapies. One obvious step is enhanced anti-trust enforcement, something increasingly attractive on both left and right. Unlike in the internet boom of the 1990s, the current one has seen a dearth of new listings and a general decline in business startups, including in tech.

Another step would be to look toward Europe, which has taken an increasingly hardline stance against social media intrusion into personal lives, for ways to curb the tech oligarchs’ ability to control content on the internet and the profits that flow through it.

This is not about rejecting technology, but regaining control of it and being sure that its advances, and the information culled from our

individual and collective lives, is used for our benefit, not only the private profits of a handful of monopolists.

If giants aren't allowed to hoard our information that is the source of their great power and profit, the incredible technologies at our disposal now should allow all of us access to ever more sophisticated information that provides the basis for decentralized self-government.

The more cities genuflect to firms like Amazon, Facebook, and Google, the more our communities will be shaped not by our own preferences but by the controlling vision of oligarchs who know more than it’s pleasant to imagine about each of our habits, inclinations, and desires.

To maintain the freedom of the city requires that citizens, not the oligarchy, drive its development. Anything else undermines the very idea of democracy. When a city manager suggests that changes are dictated by data collected by the smart city operators, rather than popular sentiment, democracy itself has been unplugged.

This is the time to reclaim cities suited to human aspiration. We need to do this before control is ceded to a small tech elite that profits by shaping our future, stealing our privacy and nudging us toward a new era of mass serfdom.

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