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Privately-directed participatory planning
Examining Toronto's Quayside smart city

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Résumé de l'article

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Privately-directed participatory planning: examining Toronto's Quayside smart city

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Abstract

The second wave of smart cities emerged in response to criticism of the top-down methods used to manage early smart cities, and promised a new, 'citizen-centric' approach. To understand the application of this approach in the smart city planning process there is a need for further empirical research. This paper offers a case study of the participatory planning process used in Quayside, a smart city planning effort in Toronto (Canada). Through semi-structured interviews (N=35), participant observation, and document analysis, this research finds that although Quayside included a lengthy engagement program, citizen influence was limited. This is a result of a lack of participation in initial project visioning, and the direction of the subsequent citizen engagement process by a private technology company, enabled through a public-private partnership. Based on these findings, I argue that a smart city planning process cannot be citizen-centric if citizens are unable to determine project goals. I also suggest that privately-directed engagement processes can amplify the power discrepancies that are well studied within government-directed processes and introduce new accountability challenges.

Résumé

La deuxième vague de villes intelligentes a émergé en réaction aux critiques de méthodes descendantes utilisées afin de gérer les premières villes intelligentes et a promis une nouvelle approche axée sur le citoyen. Afin de comprendre l'application de cette approche dans le processus d'aménagement de villes intelligentes, plus de recherche empirique est requise. Ce manuscrit offre une étude de cas sur le processus d'aménagement participatif utilisé à Quayside, un effort d'aménagement de ville intelligente à Toronto (Canada). Par l'entremise d'entrevues semi-structurées (N=35), d'observation de participants et d'une analyse de documents, cette recherche a révélé que bien Quayside a inclus un long programme d'engagement, l'influence des citoyens était limitée. Cela est le résultat d'un manque de participation dans la vision initiale du projet, ainsi que la réalisation du processus d'engagement citoyen subséquent par une compagnie de technologie privée, fait possible par un partenariat public-privé. Basé sur ces résultats, je soutiens qu'un processus d'aménagement d'une ville intelligente ne peut pas être axé sur le citoyen si les citoyens ne sont pas en mesure de déterminer les buts du projet. Je suggère également que les processus d'engagement dirigés à titre privé peuvent amplifier les inégalités de pouvoir qui sont bien étudiées dans les processus dirigés par le gouvernement et peuvent introduire de nouveaux défis de responsabilisation.

Keywords:

participatory planning, citizen engagement, public-private partnership, smart city

Mots-clés:

aménagement participatif, engagement citoyen, partenariat public-privé, ville intelligente

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Introduction

Smart cities are difficult to define, but are commonly understood as development projects that prioritize technologically-mediated spaces, infrastructures, and services (Angelidou, 2017). Smart city projects have been conceptualized as proceeding in two key waves (Morgan & Webb, 2020). The first projects, which were proposed and implemented by technology corporations, received significant criticism for their technocratic and top-down approaches to planning, development, and decision-making, along with the privatization of urban services, spaces, and governance (Ferreri & Sanyal, 2018; Hollands, 2008; Kitchin, 2014 & 2015; Vanolo, 2014 & 2016). In response, a second wave of smart city projects emerged that embraced language around participation and engagement, and committed to shared decision-making processes with citizens (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019; Morgan & Webb, 2020). However, many scholars have speculated that the second wave, citizen-centric smart city involves a discursive re-framing of the smart city, rather than substantive changes to the ways smart cities are planned, implemented, and managed (Joss et al., 2019; Sadowski & Pasquale, 2015; Vanolo, 2016). Early empirical research into citizen-centric smart cities demonstrates these projects are falling short of their promises to empower citizens (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019). Much of this research is focused on citizenship within already implemented smart city projects, considering the ways that privatized smart city services, technologies, and spaces regulate citizenship, and the means by which citizens contest this (see Charnock et al., 2019; Datta, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020a, 2020b; Levenda et al., 2020; Perng & Maalsen, 2020). By contrast, there is limited research on participatory processes to plan and develop new smart cities, and in particular in smart city projects promoted as citizen-centric (Clark, 2020; Ghose & Johnson, 2020; Goodman et al., 2020; Shelton & Lodato, 2019). Further, given the prominent roles of private technology companies as smart city providers, planners, and managers (Rebentisch et al., 2020; Söderström et al., 2014; Vanolo, 2016), more research is needed to understand their influence on associated participatory planning processes.

To address these gaps, I ask two key research questions: first, what are the roles and responsibilities of public and private actors in facilitating smart city participatory planning processes, and second, what approaches and methods are used to facilitate citizen participation in citizen-centric smart city planning, and what are their impacts? These questions are considered through a case study of the process to plan a smart city on a 12-acre waterfront site called Quayside in Toronto (Figure 1), which began in 2017 and was subsequently cancelled in 2020. This planning process was initiated by a public-private partnership between Waterfront Toronto, a tripartite government agency, and Sidewalk Labs, a technology company that was a subsidiary of Alphabet Inc. and a sister company to Google (prior to its subsequent absorption into Google). This is an instructive case given that extensive public engagement was advertised as a defining feature of the Quayside project and the unique public-private partnership structure allowed for the participatory planning process to be directed by the private partner (Sidewalk Labs, 2019; Nelischer, 2023).

I begin with a discussion of smart city and participatory planning literatures, and I argue that more attention should be paid to who directs participatory planning processes, given the well-studied and complicated power dynamics between citizens and facilitators. I then examine the origins, direction, and facilitation of the Quayside participatory planning process. I find that there were minimal opportunities for citizens to influence plans, which I argue resulted in part from the direction of the participatory planning process by a private technology company. As well, I find that citizens did

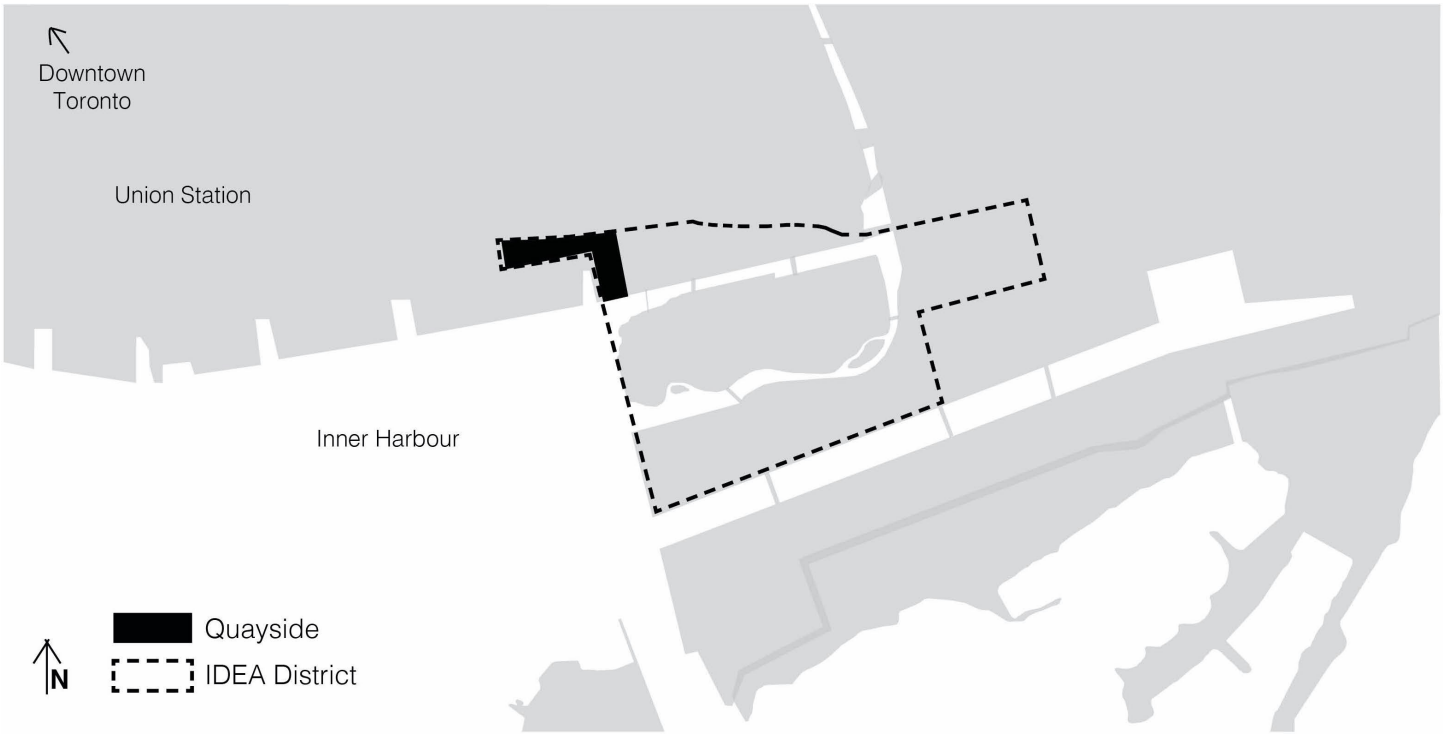

Figure 1. Map showing the 12-acre Quayside site within the context of the larger IDEA District proposed for redevelopment by Sidewalk Labs along Toronto's waterfront. Redrawn based on map published by Waterfront Toronto, 2019b.

not have an opportunity to participate in determining project objectives prior to the procurement of the private partner. My findings identify barriers to achieving citizen-centric ideals in smart city planning processes and illuminate complications that private direction can introduce to participatory planning processes.

Understanding participatory planning and power dynamics in the smart city

Citizen participation in the smart city

The smart cities discourse has long positioned the urban citizen as the primary benefactor, arguing that further integrating technology into infrastructure, applying technology to services, and deploying technology as an intermediary between municipal governments and residents will drastically improve quality of life (Kitchin, 2014; Vanolo, 2016). Goodman et al. (2020) argue that if citizens are the primary benefactors, then it would seem logical for citizens to also serve as primary contributors and decision-makers in smart cities. However, this is rarely the case (Morgan & Webb, 2020; Willems et al., 2017). Kitchin (2014) suggests that even in the new, citizen-centric smart city, "citizen engaged" language is used to better conceal the profit-seeking pursuits of the smart city, rather than to actually engage citizens.

One way that citizen-centric smart cities are differentiated is by their deployment of apps and web-based tools, sometimes called "digital civics," with the stated intent to improve communication and engagement. However, critics argue that these tools are often ineffective in facilitating meaningful engagement because they are not designed to disrupt power dynamics between technology corporations, governments, and citizens (Clark, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Levenda et al., 2020; Robinson & Johnson,

2023). Instead, these tools can provide opportunities for smart city providers to collect data from users (citizens) and can facilitate more transactional relationships between citizens and government (Clark, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020). Robinson and Johnson (2023) group these tools into what they call the "platformization" of public participation, coinciding with the phenomenon of platform urbanism, which seeks to streamline and economize citizen-government interactions.

Most of the scholarship that is critical of the citizen-centric wave of smart cities is concerned with citizen participation in the management of existing smart cities, such as the use of digital civics, rather than in planning new smart cities. There is however a burgeoning area of smart city planning scholarship focused on processes rather than outcomes (see Ghose & Johnson, 2020; Johnson et al. 2020; Flynn & Valverde, 2019 & 2020; Sadowski & Maalsen, 2020; Rebentisch et al., 2020). Much of this scholarship acknowledges the continued proliferation of smart cities now that they have gained such popularity and focuses on identifying practices for achieving more equitable and inclusive smart cities (see Morozov and Bria, 2018; Shelton et al., 2015; Townsend, 2013). Within the literature on smart city planning processes, further empirical research is needed to understand citizen participation and how it can be improved, especially given the rise of citizen-centric narratives in smart city discourses (Kitchin, 2014; Sadowski & Maalsen, 2020). A focus on participation allows for consideration of who participates (and who is excluded), who governs, who holds power, and who is accountable, applying to smart cities what Friedmann (1987) calls the central question of planning: "Planning for whom, with whom, and against whom?" (p. 129).

Though limited, the literature on smart city participatory planning suggests that the planning process may present opportunities to actually shift power dynamics. In particular, it argues that if citizens have meaningful opportunities to self-determine needs and create context-specific solutions during the planning phase, smart cities can become more citizen-centric (Odendaal, 2021). Existing empirical work has shown that without this groundwork laid, smart city projects risk providing solutions to problems that do not exist, creating path dependencies that are challenging to reverse (Levenda et al., 2020; Morgan & Webb, 2020; Robinson & Biggar, 2023; Sadowski & Maalsen, 2020).

Additional case studies are needed to better understand participatory planning in the citizen-centric smart city era, and to expand smart city scholarship by further integrating participatory planning literature (Clark, 2020). In particular, evaluations of failed attempts to create citizen-centric smart city plans (such as Quayside) are needed to identify best practices and potential risks. Other researchers have also recognized this need, and this article exists within a small body of scholarship that analyzes the Quayside case from various perspectives and disciplines. For example, Artyushina (2023) uses Quayside to explore the conceptualization of smart infrastructure as a common pool resource, and cites the project's failure to meaningfully engage citizens as a hindrance to achieving this. Spicer and Zwick (2021) argue that the failures of the Quayside case point to a need for federal governments to develop robust data governance policies and to play a more active role in overseeing smart city development initiatives.[1] Flynn and Valverde (2019) use Quayside to analyze Waterfront Toronto's governance structure and speculate on the agency's responsibility to consult with citizens, while McCord and Becker

[1] For those interested in learning more about the Quayside / Sidewalk Toronto story, two recent popular press books provide valuable detail: Sideways by Josh O'Kane (2022) and Dream States by John Lorinc (2022).

(2019) untangle the relations of people and institutions through the project, Morgan and Webb (2020) highlight a lack of public interest protection, and Carr and Hesse (2020) profile community resistance. Additional Quayside-related publications are referenced throughout this article. This research makes a novel contribution by considering how the direction of citizen engagement by the private smart city provider (Sidewalk Labs) instead of the public agency (Waterfront Toronto) impacted the participatory planning process.

The role of direction in participatory planning

The many conflicts, contradictions, and power imbalances of participatory planning processes have long been observed in practice and analyzed in scholarship (see Albrechts, 2002; Bohman, 2000; Doak & Parker, 2005; Few et al., 2007; Lane, 2005). Scholarship that interrogates clandestine uses of power in planning is particularly relevant to a discussion of the citizen-centric smart city and the potential disconnect between its discursive framing and on-the-ground practices (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019). This includes critiques of governmental use of engagement practices that placate instead of empower citizens (Brown & Chin, 2013; Brownill & Parker, 2010; Phillips et al., 2010). As well, others have criticized communicative and collaborative planning scholars and practitioners for setting unrealistic expectations for participatory planning practices to overcome entrenched and unequal power relations between citizens, planners, bureaucrats, and political actors (Huxley, 2000). However, one of the most persistent debates within participatory planning literature remains normative, focused on how to evaluate participation approaches, methods, and tools, and subsequently how to identify ideal forms (Silver et al., 2010). To this end, many scholars reinterpret and expand Arnstein's (1969) "Ladder of Citizen Participation" to propose new frameworks for evaluation.[2] A sole focus on participation tools and methods risks avoiding contemplation of the more instrumental forces determining the effectiveness of participatory planning processes, including who has access to decision-making power and who does not, and the ever-changing relationships between state and non-state actors (Blue et al., 2019; Rosol, 2010). As well, within much of this literature governments and government agencies (or their consultants) are often assumed to be directing citizen engagement.[3] Thus, questions concerning who directs engagement processes (and the resulting impacts) are not analyzed further.

Engagement processes directed and facilitated by private sector actors carry unique implications and there is a need to better understand them as they become more common within the context of expanded roles for private actors in public-private partnerships (PPP) (Ahmed & Ali, 2006; Boyer, 2019; de Paula et al., 2023; Kuronen et al., 2010; Siemiatycki, 2007). This includes within smart city projects, given the high level of involvement of private technology companies in smart city PPPs (Liu et al., 2021; Quan & Solheim, 2023). However, there

[2] Some recent examples include Blue et al.'s (2019) model, which seeks to evaluate how just or unjust an engagement process is. van Empel's (2008) evaluation matrix focuses on the process, not the outcomes, of participatory planning; Al-Kodmany's (2001) framework examines the usefulness of various visualization tools (such as GIS); Srivastava and Mostafavi (2018) evaluate crowdsourcing platforms as participatory tools; Hassenforder et al. (2016) propose a framework specifically for practitioners designing new participatory processes; and, Geekiyanage et al. (2021) synthesize four commonly used frameworks into one extremely detailed matrix.

[3] An exception is the more recent focus within planning literature on the emergence of "co-production" between governments and citizens (Watson, 2014). Watson (2014) highlights that a key difference between co-production and well-established participatory planning approaches, such as communicative planning, is that co-production processes are typically bottom-up in that they are often initiated and led by grassroots efforts and are sometimes in conflict with governance processes or governments. Furthermore, in co-production processes citizens are involved and influential in every planning stage, whereas government is involved in a limited capacity—shifting the balance of power to citizens (Albrects, 2013; Watson, 2014).

is insufficient consideration for direction in smart city participation literature, which focuses primarily on evaluating engagement methods.[4] An exception is Goodman et al. (2020), who present a study of public engagement within various communities competing in Canada's Smart City Challenge. The authors cite Cleaver's (1999) examination of the meaningfulness of participatory planning approaches to argue that undue attention to participation methods and techniques can obfuscate larger questions of power dynamics in smart city planning (Goodman et al., 2020). Another notable contribution is Capra's (2019) application of network governance theory to an analysis of citizen engagement in the existing smart city. Capra (2019) finds that projects with a commitment to partnering with not only smart city providers, but also citizens and non-profit organizations, can lead to more meaningful engagement processes. As well, Gohari et. al. (2020) propose considering who facilitates the process as a metric for evaluating smart city participation. There is a need to consider who convenes, directs, facilitates, and governs smart city participatory planning and what impacts this has.

The question of "who directs?" also raises questions of who has the right and power to plan and develop land in question. Settler cities like Toronto have, for centuries, displaced Indigenous communities through the development of urban space. But as Tomiak (2017) argues, too often this process is considered historical, when in reality processes of displacement and dispossession are ongoing and often perpetuated through planning practices. One method by which this takes place is the ignoring of unceded or contested territories (Pasternak, 2015; Tomiak, 2017). Another way is by planners inviting Indigenous peoples to attend public consultation meetings on par with local residents, which undermines Indigenous sovereignty, rather than positioning them as decision makers (Walker, 2017). Walker (2017) argues that planners in Canada often describe Indigenous peoples as "stakeholders" and "important voices" in an effort to signal inclusivity in the planning process, but with the opposite effect. There is a growing body of literature that analyzes the effectiveness of participatory planning processes in engaging Indigenous communities and supporting Indigenous sovereignty (see for example Umemoto, 2004) and there has been some recent research on the impacts of smart city technologies on Indigenous communities (see O'Malley and Smith, 2020). However, there is very little consideration for Indigenous involvement in (or exclusion from) smart city planning processes.

Direction, authority, and control in participatory planning are also relevant to public-private partnership scholarship, due to the complications introduced by private developers. However, there is only a nascent literature on citizen participation in PPPs (Boyer et al., 2015; Siemiatycki, 2007). Most existing research focuses on how the public sector directs citizen engagement in PPPs (see Ahmed & Ali, 2006; Siemiatycki, 2007). Some more recent public-private partnership scholarship, for example Boyer (2019), posits that enhanced interaction between private partners and citizens can be beneficial—including through participatory planning processes directed by private actors. Like Boyer's (2019) study, this paper also responds "to calls for examining the democratic legitimacy of public

[4] For example, Cardullo and Kitchin (2019) reinterpret Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of participation" for the smart city by proposing a new "scaffold" to analyze citizen participation, while Willems et al. (2017) directly apply Arnstein's ladder to study the Smart London projects. Clement (2020) offers a particularly relevant analysis of smart city participatory planning to this research by focusing on the Quayside engagement process. Clement (2020) proposes a framework to assess the efficacy of smart city public participation processes based on participatory design (PD) principles. However, this framework focuses mostly on the approaches, tools, and communications strategies used to engage citizens and stakeholders, instead of the impact of direction on the process. This is apparent in Clement's (2020) application of the evaluation framework to the Quayside engagement process, where he groups the Sidewalk Labs-led process and the subsequent Waterfront Toronto-led process together.

programmes developed with private partners" (p. 1469). However, Boyer's (2019) central argument is grounded in the belief that "community support is a fundamental objective of public participation" (p. 1467). There is a need for additional research that is instead guided by the participatory planning literature that seeks to identify approaches for achieving more equitable shared decision-making. This scholarship builds on earlier concepts of communicative and collaborative planning to offer more detailed consideration of power dynamics between citizens and facilitators within formal participatory processes, along with grassroots responses (see Aylett, 2010; Legacy, 2017; Refstie & Brun, 2016, Silver et al., 2010).

Analyzing smart city participatory planning

In March 2017, Waterfront Toronto (a tripartite government agency responsible for waterfront revitalization) released a Request for Proposals (RFP) to find a private partner with which to plan a new smart city development on an unused, publicly-owned, 12-acre waterfront site in Toronto called Quayside (Waterfront Toronto, 2017a).[5] Sidewalk Labs (a New York City-based technology company and subsidiary of Alphabet Inc.) was selected, and in fall of that year the two partners announced the launch of a participatory planning process to inform the Master Innovation and Development Plan (MIDP), which would become the key master planning document for the site.[6] However, in Spring 2020, after over two years of citizen engagement activities and a year after the MIDP was completed (and while the document was still under review by the Waterfront Toronto Board of Directors), the Quayside project was cancelled when Sidewalk Labs abruptly exited the partnership (Doctoroff, 2020).

The Quayside smart city project is a useful case for several reasons. First, the Quayside planning process began after the rise of the citizen-centric wave of smart cities (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019; Vanolo, 2016). Extensive public engagement was advertised as a defining feature of Quayside from the outset of the project. For example, the CEOs of Sidewalk Labs and Waterfront Toronto co-wrote an opinion editorial to promote the first public meeting, titled: "The neighbourhood of the future starts with your ideas" (Doctoroff & Fleissig, 2017). Between the project's launch in 2017 and the publication of the MIDP in 2019, approximately 21,000 people participated in the Quayside participatory planning process (Sidewalk Labs, 2019), which far exceeded the number of participants for any of Waterfront Toronto's previous projects (Interviews). Second, Quayside is an interesting case because of the private partner's (Sidewalk Labs) high level of involvement and power in the initial planning process for these public lands, which resulted from the unique structure of its "co-creation" public-private partnership with Waterfront Toronto (Nelischer, 2023). As this paper will show, Sidewalk Labs' power in the partnership translated to the citizen engagement process, which was initially intended to be co-led by the partners but was ultimately directed by the private technology company. Sidewalk Labs' direction role and its specific approach to the citizen engagement process, which prioritized marketing its proposals and wooing key stakeholders to build buy-in, became the source of significant public controversy and internal strife[7] over the project—so

[5] Quayside is both the name of the 12-acre site, and the name of the smart city planning initiative for this site. Early on in planning efforts Sidewalk Labs and Waterfront Toronto also called this initiative "Sidewalk Toronto" (Doctoroff, 2018, para. 2). For clarity, the project is referred to as "Quayside" throughout this paper.

[6] The MIDP can be accessed via Sidewalk Labs' website: https://www.sidewalklabs.com/toronto.

[7] Artyushina (2023) provides a helpful overview of how the relationship between Sidewalk Labs and Waterfront Toronto shifted throughout the project.

Table 1. Table of participating interviewees and their affiliations.

Number of Interview Participants	Organization / Constituency
7	Waterfront Toronto staff, board members, committee members, and consultants
6	Sidewalk Labs staff and consultants
2	Government staff
4	Politicians
4	Stakeholder group members
5	Activists
2	Writers and journalists
3	Researchers and academics
2	Local business representatives

much so that Waterfront Toronto later initiated a second engagement process separate from Sidewalk Labs.[8] Third, Quayside is a useful case because of, not despite, its cancellation. This project branded itself as citizen-centric and included a lengthy citizen engagement process, yet it faced some of its most impassioned criticisms for failing to adequately empower citizens. Understanding the barriers to Quayside's achievement of a citizen-centric smart city planning process is useful in identifying potential risks and informing best practices for future large-scale urban development projects carried out via public-private partnerships that seek to facilitate meaningful citizen participation.

The primary methodological approach of this research was semi-structured interviews. Between 2019 and 2020, I conducted 43 semi-structured interviews with 35 participants who played active roles in the Quayside planning process (Table 1). Interviews focused on the following: the public engagement process; project branding, marketing, and communications strategies; the procurement process; Waterfront Toronto's mandate and authorities; and Sidewalk Labs' expertise and authorities. Participant observation was also employed to better understand the methods used to engage citizens. From 2018 to 2020 I observed 13 public meetings and events hosted by Sidewalk Labs and Waterfront Toronto, and eight other meetings or events related to the project and hosted by external organizations, such as local advocacy groups. Interview transcripts, participant observation notes, and secondary sources (such as policy and planning documents, requests for proposals, partnership agreements, and meeting minutes) were analyzed discursively which allowed for consideration of context and non-explicit meaning to reveal participant and author interpretations of Quayside

[8]Quayside is a large and complicated project that offers many opportunities for scholarly attention, and it is not the intention of this paper to provide a fully encompassing view of the participatory planning process. Notably, this paper does not analyze the Waterfront Toronto-led engagement process that followed Sidewalk Labs' publication of the MIDP, nor does it detail the Waterfront Toronto-led engagement process to develop a new RFP for Quayside following Sidewalk Labs' departure in 2020. Both are interesting areas for future research.

and to illuminate prominent themes (Schreier, 2012). Coding was completed using an inductive approach to build codes and categories iteratively in order to support the emergence of coherent findings (Mayring, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2016). Coding was completed using the qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) ATLAS.ti.

My interviewing experience was similar to what Weber (2015) describes in her ethnography of real estate developers in Chicago, in that my own professional planning history in the private and public sectors in Toronto afforded me a high level of access and ease with my interviewees. This was not the experience of other researchers examining the Quayside project, who were often met with refusals or silence (see Carr & Hesse, 2020). Given this context, my interviews offer a unique interpretation of the project. However, I also encountered challenges. I researched the Quayside planning process as it unfolded and as project leadership, timelines, and objectives changed multiple times. This volatility, coupled with the political and high-profile nature of the project, meant that some interviewees were at times reticent to discuss certain subjects, and a select few key decisionmakers declined to participate. However, I largely found participants were willing to engage openly with this research.

Limited engagement in the Quayside procurement process

Through the Quayside project, Waterfront Toronto sought to test a new "competitive dialogue" procurement process and design a new "co-creation" partnership model with the goals to both facilitate greater collaboration between partners and to establish Waterfront Toronto as an expert in innovative partnerships (Nelischer, 2023). Key to the vision for the "co-creation" partnership was that the private partner would participate at the earliest planning stages (Nelischer, 2023). I suggest here that by engaging the private partner so early in the process—before citizens or other key stakeholders—Waterfront Toronto foreclosed opportunities for Quayside to become a citizen-centric smart city.

In the Quayside Request for Proposals (RFP), Waterfront Toronto identified an overarching vision for the proposed smart city, project objectives, and expectations for the selected proponent and the partnership structure (Waterfront Toronto, 2017a). Although the RFP was a critical document in determining the future of the Quayside project, interviews reveal that Waterfront Toronto created this RFP without citizen input.[9] Prior to Quayside, Waterfront Toronto's planners and communications staff had frequently invited local residents' associations to participate in creating visions and goals for upcoming development projects prior to the release of RFPs (Interviews). Additionally, following Sidewalk Labs' departure from the project in 2020, Waterfront Toronto led a public consultation process to draft a new RFP for the site (Waterfront Toronto, 2020). The intervening Quayside RFP was a rare departure from this convention that surprised representatives from local residents' associations and stakeholder groups (Interviews). Waterfront Toronto had engaged residents' associations in earlier visioning discussions for the Quayside site to inform a previous iteration of the RFP. However, interviews reveal that Waterfront Toronto abandoned that earlier version of the RFP before its release, and then replaced it with a new RFP that introduced a focus on technology, which had not been reviewed by citizens or other key stakeholders. A particular point of concern is that the Quayside land lies within the territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN), and a study participant representing the MCFN noted they too were left out of the RFP

[9] This is consistent with Clement's (2020) findings.

development process—an exclusion that perpetuates longstanding colonial traditions in planning. Additionally, the resulting RFP does not mention a need to engage Indigenous communities (Waterfront Toronto, 2017b).

Study participants lament that the absence of citizen participation in the RFP fractured the high level of public trust that Waterfront Toronto had spent years building through extensive engagement programs for its other development projects, collaborations with stakeholders, and a longstanding commitment to fostering and maintaining strong relationships with local residents. The following comment from a frequent participant in Waterfront Toronto's planning and development projects is indicative of this observed sentiment:

> "Before we might have had the momentum, the input, and if nothing else the public pressure that actually had something to press on. You knew the people at Waterfront Toronto, we'd run into them on the street. Whereas now Waterfront Toronto has become this kind of cloud. You push at it and nothing happens. Your hand just disappears." (Interview, May 2019)

The lack of citizen participation in the development of the RFP, and therefore in determining both the guiding vision for Quayside and the type of private partner needed to achieve this vision, became one of the central criticisms of the project from residents and community organizations (Filion et al., 2023). Block Sidewalk, a grassroots organization formed in 2019 to contest Quayside, argued that citizen engagement came too late in the project for it to be meaningful. Comments from a Block Sidewalk member illustrate this point:

> "When the issue of consultations comes up, the pro-Sidewalk people will say, 'Well, they've had a year and a half of consultations.' But my point is that the consultations should have happened before the RFP was ever issued. That's what's been missing" (Interview, July 2019).

Central to more just and equitable smart city planning is the ability of citizens to self-determine their needs and contribute to the "making of the city" from the start, rather than merely providing feedback on pre-established proposals and plans (Foth, 2018, p. 10). Given the importance of the RFP in determining the vision, partnership, and planning process for Quayside, the lack of citizen participation in preparing this document eliminated opportunities for Quayside to become a truly citizen-centric smart city. This is consistent with what other researchers have identified as an inauthenticity across smart city planning projects framed as citizen-centric but that in reality do not offer opportunities for citizen empowerment (Alizedeh, 2017; Cruz & Sarmento, 2017; Morgan & Webb, 2020; Joss et al., 2017; Shelton & Lodato, 2019).

The power to frame an engagement process

Gohari et. al. (2020) propose that one of the key questions smart city actors must consider when first developing a project is, "how and to what extent citizen engagement should be facilitated, and by whom?" (p. 21). A review of Quayside contracts shows that Waterfront Toronto and Sidewalk Labs envisioned that their partnership would allow them to co-lead the planning process (Waterfront Toronto, 2017a, 2017b; Sidewalk Labs, 2018a). However, resource asymmetries and conflicting working styles quickly led to power struggles between the partners.[10] As well, there was a lack of clarity

[10]See Nelischer (2023) for a detailed analysis of the "co-creation" public-private partnership and the privatization of the Quayside planning process.

around individual partner roles and responsibilities within the RFP and partnership agreements—a strategic choice by Waterfront Toronto in an effort to facilitate collaboration. Together, unclear roles and resource asymmetries opened the door for Sidewalk Labs to take primary control of the planning process leading to the MIDP (Nelischer, 2023).[11]

This control extended to the citizen engagement process. Waterfront Toronto initially envisioned (and publicized) the engagement process as being jointly led by the two entities. In doing so, Waterfront Toronto empowered the private partner as a joint director and delegated to it partial responsibility for the citizen engagement process. However, Sidewalk Labs' role quickly expanded when the resource asymmetries and conflicts became more apparent. Although branded as co-directed, in reality the public meetings, events, workshops, and communications materials leading to the MIDP were primarily directed and produced by Sidewalk Labs staff and consultants, including planners, facilitators, and communications experts. As well, citizen comments were provided directly to Sidewalk Labs, then interpreted and summarized by Sidewalk Labs staff and consultants and reported in Sidewalk Labs-produced reports. Thus, without previous opportunities provided by Waterfront Toronto to influence the RFP, citizens found themselves participating in a privately-directed engagement process to plan an already-envisioned smart city neighbourhood on publicly-owned land. Many study participants expressed concern over a lack of accountability in the engagement process as a result of Sidewalk Labs' direction role, as exemplified by the following comment from a member of a local residents' association:

> "I feel that the consultants at Waterfront Toronto are accountable to us. They have to explain to us why they're not doing things that we want, or how they're addressing the issues that we raised. I thought that the Sidewalk Toronto process provided lots of opportunity for people to maybe come and learn about the project and get excited about it, but it wasn't clear to me how that was going to create any of this, you know, feedback, iterative feedback, in which they would be accountable to anybody at all" (Interview, May 2019).

The question of "who directs?" is particularly consequential to participatory planning because directors hold the power to frame the process (Blue et al., 2019; Friedmann, 1987; Innes, 1996). The power to frame participation has significant impacts on what issues are on the table for discussion (and what are not), who participates to what extent (and who does not), and, subsequently, the outcomes of the planning process. Critics of publicly-led participatory planning processes argue that governments often frame such processes to meet regulatory requirements and quell community concerns, rather than to meaningfully engage in collaborative decision-making or knowledge sharing (Albrechts, 2002; Arnstein, 1969; Huxley, 2000). However, the likelihood of this narrow framing is amplified when the director role is taken on by a private actor with a vested interest in ensuring the project moves forward in specific ways, from which it stands to benefit financially.

[11] Waterfront Toronto did make several subsequent attempts to regain power prior to the publication of the MIDP, including by creating a separate project website and facilitating separate citizen engagement events (Waterfront Toronto, 2018a; Sidewalk Labs, 2019). However, these were discrete pieces and auxiliary to the primary engagement process that was directed by Sidewalk Labs (Waterfront Toronto, 2018c).

Outcomes of privately-directed participatory planning

Sidewalk Labs directed an 18-month, US$11 million engagement process that included large-format roundtable meetings, topic-specific working groups, presentations, workshops, programming for children and students, a residents' reference panel, and neighbourhood association meetings, among other activities (Sidewalk Labs, 2018a; Sidewalk Labs, 2019). Sidewalk Labs often referenced the many meetings and activities, and the associated high number of participants, as evidence that the process was successful (Sidewalk Labs, 2019).[12] However, evaluating a participatory process based solely on the number of events and attendees paints an incomplete picture (Gohari et al., 2020; Rosol, 2010; Silver et al., 2010). As summarized in the following pages, analysis of Sidewalk Labs' framing of the engagement process, including how it distributed company resources, which stakeholders it prioritized, the information it provided publicly, the questions it asked of participants, its reports summarizing participant feedback, and the final MIDP, reveals that the company was focused on publicizing and generating buy-in for its proposals, rather than on facilitating discussion or shared decision-making.

The flagship citizen engagement events for Quayside were the four "roundtables" held by Sidewalk Labs from 2017-2018 (Figures 2-4). As a former practitioner who has attended and organized many public meetings in Toronto for large planning, transportation, and design initiatives over the last decade, a number of key distinctions between the roundtables and typical local public meetings became clear during participant observation. The scale of these events was significantly larger, attendance was broadened beyond local residents in proximity to the development site (who typically attend public meetings), and the production quality was much higher and included professional sound systems, colour displays and printed materials, and refreshments for attendees. Participants in this study often describe the roundtables as grand but empty gestures that prioritized form over substance by spending more time highlighting technology and building proposals than facilitating conversations and listening to citizen questions and concerns. For example, one interviewee laments that "the razzle dazzle of the technology is getting in the way of the basic - how do you build the city?" (Interview, May 2019). This echoes what Sadowski and Maalsen (2020) call "digital bling" – sales pitches made by private technology companies to implement expansive technology in smart cities (p. 7). The following comment from a member of a local residents' association reflects participant concerns over the lack of focused conversations during the roundtables:

> "It was overwhelming. I know that hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people are going to want to participate because it's very high profile. So, then, what do you do with that? How do you turn that into meaningful discussion?" (Interview, May 2019)

Roundtable presentations and associated written materials produced by Sidewalk Labs offered minimal details about proposals, options, and opportunities for the Quayside site, and what was provided was often framed in positive tones.[13] This

[12] Sidewalk Labs' summary of participation in the planning process is still available on the company's website: https://www.sidewalklabs.com/toronto

[13] Some of the engagement materials can still be found through Waterfront Toronto's document library (https://www.waterfrontoronto.ca/document-library), though most Sidewalk Labs-produced materials are no longer publicly available. Video recordings of Public Rountable presentations and other public meetings are still available on Youtube (https://www.youtube.com/@sidewalktoronto3924). See Haggart (2020) for a review of the language used in the resulting MIDP, which the author finds perpetuates this marketing speak.

Figure 2. Roundtable #2 held on May 3, 2018 (photo by author).

approach was consistent throughout materials produced to facilitate (and subsequently summarize) attendee participation, revealed through a review of all roundtable discussion guides and summary reports. The following examples, selected from documents published for multiple roundtable events to demonstrate the consistency of this approach, are indicative of this positive framing. At the first roundtable, participants were asked, "What is the most exciting and valuable thing that the design of Quayside could help prove is possible?" (Sidewalk Labs, 2018b, p. 2). By the third roundtable, in the midst of significant public controversy over the project, the discussion guide asked, "What did you like or not like?" about proposals presented for the design of the public realm, streets, and buildings (Sidewalk Labs, 2018c, p. 12). At the fourth and final roundtable, participants were asked what they were "most excited about" (Sidewalk Labs, 2018d, p. 2). By structuring discussions around these and similar questions, Sidewalk Labs limited the topics of conversation and the insights gathered. Concurrently, this framing avoided concerns that were repeatedly raised by participants, such as project scale, the potential privatization of public land, the governance of the proposed neighbourhood, or accountability in the planning process. For example, the first roundtable summary report confusingly grouped all criticisms of the planning process and governance under the "Digital Platform" heading, including the following comment: "residents were concerned that the consultation process feels top-down and that it could be more democratic" (Sidewalk Labs, 2018b, p. 30).

Frustration with the company's focus on trivial questions and avoidance of participant concerns was expressed by Waterfront Toronto advisors[14] and Sidewalk Labs' own team members. Upon reflection, one participant notes,

[14] The Digital Strategy Advisory Panel frequently raised concerns to Sidewalk Labs about the lack of digital literacy education in the engagement process (Waterfront Toronto, 2018c-e; Waterfront Toronto, 2019a).

Figure 3. Roundtable #3 held on August 14, 2018 (photo by author).

Figure 4. Roundtable #4 held on December 8, 2018 (photo by author).

> "What's been very frustrating for me is that has felt as though we've been regurgitating a kind of liturgy from the beginning. People wanted multi-use spaces that were all season appropriate, that welcomed a diverse range. So, what didn't we know?" (Interview, July 2019).

This participant explains that because the engagement process did not include a public education component that would have prepared citizens to participate in generative conversations about smart city technologies, processes, and policies, and did not ask more fundamental questions about community needs and desires for the future of Quayside, it lacked impact on plans.

Instead of educating participants or facilitating meaningful conversations, Sidewalk Labs focused its energy and resources on generating buy-in from influential stakeholders. This is evident in the line item in Sidewalk Labs' budget for communications and engagement, which includes "stakeholder engagement" and "private sector engagement" "to ensure support for MIDP among key constituents in Toronto" (Waterfront Toronto, 2018b: p. 34). Sidewalk Labs dedicated significant resources to assembling a team that would help ensure this support. While the company hired a Toronto-based consulting firm that specializes in facilitation to design the citizen engagement process, it invested more heavily in public relations, communications, graphic design, and management consultants.[15] This team helped Sidewalk Labs convene "key constituents" (private sector stakeholders, representatives of local institutions, etc.) through exclusive, invitation-only meetings and the formation of the Sidewalk Labs Advisory Council (which did not involve Waterfront Toronto) where the company had the opportunity to develop relationships with interested attendees. This proved effective as many of these "key constituents" became vocal in their support of the project and wrote op-eds, spoke on panels, and signed an open letter endorsing the MIDP (O'Kane, 2022; Toronto Region Board of Trade, 2019). The prioritization of elite stakeholders in participatory planning processes is not new (see Silver et al., 2010). However, Sidewalk Labs employed this approach to a much greater extent than typically seen from government institutions directly accountable to the public, marking another particularity of privately-directed public engagement processes.

Levenda et al. (2020) argue that studies of smart city participation must "consider which broad and diverse publics actually engage in these programs" (p. 346). The power that Sidewalk Labs' held to frame the participatory planning process allowed it to not only determine who would be engaged and to what extent, but also who would be excluded. A particularly glaring absence from Sidewalk Labs' "key constituents" were Indigenous communities and leaders. A study participant representing the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN) laments that Sidewalk Labs treated them as participants throughout the engagement process instead of key stakeholders or decisionmakers. The participant notes,

> "You know, they make us feel welcome. They make us feel that our input is valuable. But again, we're not part of the development process. Everything is, okay, 'here's what we've developed, how do you like it?'" (Interview, August 2019).

[15] This team included; New York-based PR consultants, BerlinRosen; Toronto-based crisis communications firm, Navigator; Montreal-based visual communications firm, Daily Tous les Jours; New York-based graphic design firm, Pentagram (to design the MIDP document); Doblin, Deloitte's innovation consultancy; and Idea Couture, a global strategic innovation firm.

Inviting the MCFN to join the engagement process after the project was underway required that participation in planning its traditional land and unceded waterways be facilitated only under terms set by Waterfront Toronto and Sidewalk Labs.

Sidewalk Labs' final Master Innovation and Development Plan (MIDP) is consistent with the observed penchant of company to prioritize quantity over quality. The MIDP is a 1,500-page tome laden with aspirational marketing language to describe 144 "innovations," published without an executive summary (or an accessible version of the document). A participant at Waterfront Toronto's first public meeting to review the MIDP commented to me that it took her an entire summer to read the five books in George R.R. Martin's Game of Thrones series, which together are not much longer than the MIDP. At Waterfront Toronto's second MIDP review meeting, a participant at my table noted that the MIDP contained both far too much information to review and yet not enough detail to understand the vision for Quayside. The MIDP format is so difficult to navigate that shortly after its release Waterfront Toronto produced a corresponding guide document to assist participants in their assessments.

The MIDP also clarifies the lack of citizen influence on Sidewalk Labs' planning decision. As one former Sidewalk Labs consultant notes, "The real theatrics has been exaggerating the importance of public consultation. How much of the Master of Innovation and Development Plan could have been written without consultation?" (Interview, July 2019). The MIDP limits its summary of citizen feedback to the following categories: Mobility, Public Realm, Buildings and Housing, Sustainability, and Digital Innovation. This avoids the more consequential topics (highlighted above) raised by participants, and reflection on the planning process itself.

Discussion

Smart city planning scholarship has shown that the unique conditions of smart cities require new approaches to city-building. This includes policies (data privacy, land use, housing, sustainability, procurement, and service provision), structures (governance and administrative, including democratic oversight), partnerships (land ownership and management), and revenue streams (for governments and private vendors) (Cruz & Sarmento, 2017; Ojo et al., 2015; Vanolo, 2014). However, the unique qualities of smart city providers also demand consideration.

Because smart cities require specialized technical expertise that governments do not typically have in-house, smart city projects on public lands are often pursued through partnerships between governments and smart city providers (Rebentisch et al., 2020; Söderström et al., 2014; Vanolo, 2016). Smart city providers are typically large technology corporations, which are distinctive in a number of ways from traditional real estate developers (who usually partner with public entities in urban development projects). They have significant financial resources and substantial political influence at national and international scales (Ferreri & Sanyal, 2018; Goodman & Powles, 2019; Zukin, 2020). As well, smart city providers often have ambitions that expand beyond real estate development to also include proprietary technological development, data gathering and sales, and service delivery (Zuboff, 2019). Lastly, scholars have identified the inexperience of private smart city providers in working with governments, their unfamiliarity with city-building processes, and their tendency to disregard planning regulations (Ferreri & Sanyal, 2018; Sadowski & Maalsen, 2020). Given the distinctive qualities of smart city providers and their growing influence in determining the future physical, economic, and administrative shape of cities (Zukin,

2021), it is important to better understand their roles, motivations, methods, and impacts in the planning process. Of particular interest to this research is the position of the smart city provider within the citizen-centric smart city era, and the ways that these private technology companies may contribute to or challenge the achievement of truly citizen-centric planning processes.

A clear accountability structure is an important component in building trust in a participatory planning process between directors and citizens. This is perhaps of even greater importance in a smart city context where citizens may be unfamiliar with technology-focused proposals and where there is unlikely to be an established relationship between citizens and smart city providers. When the director of a participatory process is a government or government agency, the accountability structure is established via legislation. However, when the director is a private company, this structure is rather unclear. Private companies are not legislated to act in the public interest nor are they subject to freedom of information regulations; they have no mandate to report information to the public, respond to questions or concerns, or provide documents in response to requests from the public or media. All of this limits transparency and accountability. Employees of the private company may have professional ethical obligations to protect the public interest, such is the case for professional planners, but this does not guide company-wide decisions or practices. Participants in this study often raised concerns about the lack of accountability in a participatory planning process directed by Sidewalk Labs, which ultimately precipitated the many challenges in the process outlined in these research findings. As a private company, Sidewalk Labs was not accountable to the public through any legislation, nor was it responsible for upholding the public interest (Flynn & Valverde, 2019; Morgan & Webb, 2020).

I do not suggest that, because of their lack of public accountability, private smart city providers such as Sidewalk Labs should not be involved in participatory planning. However, as evidenced in Quayside, when directed by a private partner, participatory planning processes afford considerably more power to that private partner. This dynamic threatens the meaningfulness of these processes, and I found in Quayside that citizen influence was restricted by private direction. Therefore, I suggest that the responsibility to direct should reside with publicly-accountable governing bodies or institutions. There are, of course, many failures, challenges, and power inequities in publicly-directed participatory planning processes, and these processes cannot uncritically be idealized as best practices. However, allowing private entities to direct participatory planning processes is likely to amplify these issues and also introduce new, profit-driven motivations to decision making processes while also eroding accountability.

Given these impacts, I also argue that scholars evaluating participatory planning processes and planners designing them ought to devote more attention to who directs these processes. This question of "who directs?" is especially relevant in the context of public-private partnerships, which can provide private sector partners with expanded roles in planning processes (de Paula et al., 2023).

Barriers to achieving meaningful citizen engagement were created by the lack of accountability in the Quayside participatory planning process, but were further amplified by Sidewalk Labs' specific approaches to engagement. Sidewalk Labs' practices limited information sharing, minimized citizen influence, and prioritized a

marketing strategy to generate buy-in from influential stakeholders. Sidewalk Labs' engagement process was too focused on format over substance, avoiding the most pressing topics related to a smart city development and failing to lead a public education component that would have allowed for deeper, interest-based conversations. Sidewalk Labs' avoidance of more consequential topics is consistent with strategies observed in other smart city case studies, where innovation-focused rhetoric is deployed to dominate public discourse and obfuscate critical discussions of power, thereby limiting the potential for citizen impact on the planning process (Gohari et al., 2020; Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019). In this way, Quayside serves as an example of particularly extreme consequences of private direction in a participatory planning process.

Recent public-private partnership scholarship has highlighted the increasing involvement of private actors in participatory planning processes and has argued that enhanced direct connections between private partners and citizens can be beneficial to knowledge sharing (Boyer et al., 2015; Boyer, 2019; Kuronen et al., 2010). In contrast, my research finds that the highest level of private sector involvement in participatory planning processes—direction of those processes—can disempower citizens. This finding is specific to the smart city context, which has many unique characteristics (as summarized above). Therefore, additional research is needed to determine if these outcomes are consistent outside of the smart city.

Recognizing that much of the existing smart city literature is speculative, a number of scholars argue that additional case studies are needed to inform academic debates around smart city planning processes (Alizadeh & Sadowski, 2020; Ojo et al., 2015; Ghose & Johnson, 2020). Each smart city unfolds in context-specific ways that reflect the political, geographic, economic, and social conditions within which it is planned and implemented (Dowling et al., 2018; Sadowski & Maalsen, 2020). Therefore, additional research is needed to determine if findings in Quayside are consistent across other privately-directed smart city participatory planning processes.

With an eye to practice, Cruz and Sarmento (2017) note that it is difficult for planners to improve smart city public-private partnership models without sufficient case studies to understand what has worked (and what has not) in particular places. Quayside provides examples of what has not worked, and therefore a promising next step in this research agenda would be to compare Quayside to engagement processes in government-directed smart city initiatives, such as in Barcelona, where scholars have identified potential best practices (see Charnock et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The second wave, citizen-centric smart city has received criticism from scholars who speculate that the shift from the first wave, technology-focused smart city merely represents a discursive re-framing rather than any real changes to the ways that smart cities engage and empower citizens (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019; Joss et al., 2019; Sadowski & Pasquale, 2015; Vanolo, 2016). Much of the existing empirical research supporting this argument focuses on implemented smart city technologies, services, and apps, and the ways that they further limit citizen power and access to institutions and decision-making processes (Clark, 2020; Levenda et al., 2020; Robinson & Johnson, 2023). By contrast, this article is situated within a small but growing contingent of research that is interested in processes to plan new smart cities (see Ghose & Johnson, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Flynn & Valverde, 2019 & 2020; Sadowski & Maalsen, 2020; Rebentisch et al., 2020). In particular, the focus of this article on the

participatory planning process within a citizen-centric era smart city, and the application of participatory planning literature to the smart city context, allows it to make meaningful contributions to the body of literature that is critical of the citizen-centric smart city. This article presents empirical findings that are consistent with earlier theoretical scholarship claiming that the new citizen-centric smart city planning process is not meaningfully different in practice from the earlier technology-focused smart city. My findings identify barriers to achieving citizen-centric ideals in smart city planning processes and illuminate the complications that private direction introduces to participatory planning processes.

Analysis of Quayside reveals a planning process that was promoted as citizen-centric but did not provide opportunities for citizens to identify problems or establish priorities and objectives to guide the project from its outset. The absence of citizen participation or involvement of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation in the preparation of the RFP, and therefore in determining the overall vision for Quayside, foreclosed opportunities for a citizen-centric smart city planning process. Once the participatory planning process began, many of the most significant decisions had already been made—including who would direct citizen participation.

I also find that despite Sidewalk Labs' provision of many public meetings and other engagement opportunities, and the participation of over 21,000 citizens in this process, citizen impact over the planning process and influence in the development of the Master Innovation and Development Plan (MIDP) was minimal. As a private technology company, Sidewalk Labs was not publicly accountable, which sowed distrust. As well, I find that Sidewalk Labs narrowly framed discussions and prioritized marketing efforts to generate buy-in. The Quayside case demonstrates that who directs participatory planning processes - and their motivations, responsibilities, and accountabilities - significantly impacts the framing and outcomes of these processes.

The smart city development agenda continues to expand, so it is important to learn from previous failures and identify potential strategies for facilitating more equitable and inclusive planning processes (Morozov and Bria, 2018; Shelton et al., 2015; Townsend, 2013). The Quayside case offers valuable insights for planners working on future smart city projects. I suggest that truly citizen-centric smart city planning processes must begin with citizen participation in creating project visions, goals, and objectives. This is applicable to a variety of scales, whether the project at hand is a large urban redevelopment plan like Quayside, or a smaller scale proposal to integrate smart city technologies into the existing urban realm or civic services. This citizen-led visioning is necessary prior to the participation of private partners, as without a pre-established vision in place the substantial resources and ambitions of smart city technology companies can influence and overshadow community needs and desires. Planners should also consider the power that directors of participatory planning processes hold to frame these processes by determining what topics to discuss, which participants to prioritize, and what information to share or withhold. As well, planners working within both the public and private sectors should be aware of the possible loss of trust with communities that private direction can create, which can be detrimental to the success of a project, as evidenced in Quayside.

Notes on Contributor

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