Stop labelling cities! A plea for people-centred planning

Labels can be a distraction from what should be the focus of urban planning: people.

By Catherine Jimenea, June 2021

Cities have a labelling boom. It is no longer sufficient to identify cities by their names (such as Toronto, Ottawa, or Vancouver); it seems they now need to be labelled as well. Creative, eco, green, resilient, smart, and sustainable are just a few of the trending adjectives used to label cities.

Perhaps the trendiest label of all is “smart city.” Apparently undeterred by the difficulties faced by ‘smart city’ prototypes like Songdo, Korea, many smart city proponents—from governments to industry—are riding the smart city bandwagon. The technology giant IBM led a seven-year Smarter Cities Challenge, Infrastructure Canada hosted the pan-Canadian Smart Cities Challenge, and the Institute for Management Development has a global smart city index that ranks 109 cities.

Academia is not immune either. A search of the term “smart city” in the Web of Science website (an online repository of multiple academic databases) as of June 16, 2021, produced 9,755 results between 1991 and 2021. In a span of 30 years, the number of articles jumped from one in 1991 to 1,699 in 2020, with 9,074, or 93%, between 2013 and 2020.

Sometimes, the label, “smart city,” may simply be a marketing tool. An academic article, for example, may include “smart city” in its title even though the article’s contents do not relate to smart cities or even include the term. Cities may call themselves ‘smart’ just for switching to LED lightbulbs, installing green roofs and walls, or having free public access to broadband. This “smartwashing” is akin to “greenwashing”: making a city or product seem ‘green’ for incorporating minor adjustments in the production process.

Part of the problem stems from a lack of clarity on what we mean by ‘smart.’ Many definitions have been established by individuals, organizations, governments, and international standards, and some of them are vaguely worded or imply that a city is “smart” just for having standard technologies or best practices.

But I want to point to a deeper problem in this race to live up to empty labels. Cities seem to have forgotten the reasons they exist: to bring people together, improve the ways we live, work, and socialize, and protect our ecologies – continuously and in perpetuity.
Now, don’t get me wrong. Cities are welcome to be smart, sustainable, resilient, or however else they wish to be described. However, it is a problem when a city claims or tries to be these things just because those labels are trending.

Take the case of smart cities. In focusing on being ‘smart,’ cities may incorporate technology for technology’s sake, rather than putting it at the service of people. Such was the concern around Quayside in Toronto, the much-hyped Google city that never came to fruition. While sustainable features were incorporated in the smart city’s design, plans to collect data through Big Brother-style sensors raised questions about data ownership and use, data type (public or personal), and the invasion of privacy. For most, the costs outweighed the benefits. The failure of Quayside justified the criticism of corporate interest behind vague smart city agendas.

I suggest that it’s time to move from a label-centric planning approach to a people-centred one. This starts with involving all residents in planning for and finding urban participative solutions. And it must begin with the most pressing urban problems. Cities have finally awakened to the reality that they have to mitigate and adapt to climatic change. And the COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the urgent need to close the widening equality gap, end discrimination and poverty, and improve access to basic services for vulnerable groups.

Of course, it will not be easy. People and cities are complex. A solution to one problem may have a negative impact on another problem. And a solution for one city may not apply to another. So, instead of siloed approaches, we will need synergistic and holistic solutions tailored and responsive to a city.

Similar to how a writer would first write a piece and then set on a title, planners, policymakers and residents should first focus on their goals, strategies, and actions for improving the quality of life of their people and then describe their city. In the face of climatic change and growing inequality, I absolutely want to describe my home city of Toronto as “inclusive, livable, car-free, and fossil fuel-free.”

But let’s get there first.

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