Why the future belongs to wise cities, not just smart ones

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Why the future belongs to wise cities, not just smart ones

Smart cities are powered by technology. Wise cities are grounded in human values.

Lily Kong

For more than two decades, the idea of the smart city has shaped urban policy around the world.

The promise was compelling. By harnessing data, sensors, digital platforms and advanced analytics, cities could become more efficient, sustainable and responsive. Traffic congestion could be reduced. Energy consumption could be optimised. Public services could be delivered with greater precision. Urban systems could be monitored in real time and managed with unprecedented sophistication.

In many respects, that promise is now reality in many cities.

Cities today possess capabilities that would have seemed remarkable only a generation ago. Real-time transport information guides commuters. Digital government services simplify interactions between citizens and the state. Sophisticated modelling tools help planners anticipate future needs. Increasingly, artificial intelligence is being deployed to support decision-making across domains ranging from healthcare to mobility and public safety.

Technology has become an integral part of urban life and mayors, planners, academics and other city leaders gathered in Singapore recently for the 10th World Cities Summit. Yet, an important question arises: is being smart enough?

Increasingly, the answer is no.

BEYOND OPTIMISATION

The challenges confronting cities have never been merely technical. They are also social, ethical and, increasingly, existential.

Climate change demands difficult trade-offs. Artificial intelligence raises questions about fairness and accountability. Ageing populations require new approaches to care and inclusion. Rising inequality threatens social cohesion. Geopolitical uncertainty complicates economic planning. These are not problems that can be solved through optimisation alone. They require wisdom.

The "wise city", a concept with roots in urban scholarship, shifts the focus of urban intelligence from technological optimisation towards human judgment. A wise city is one that makes good collective choices amid competing values and needs, taking into account long-term consequences.

Smartness concerns capability. Wisdom concerns judgment. As cities become increasingly data-rich, the need for judgment grows rather than diminishes.

The distinction between smartness and wisdom matters. A smart system can identify the fastest route through a city. A wise city asks whether all residents have access to mobility.

A smart algorithm can maximise efficiency in allocating resources. A wise city considers whether outcomes are equitable. A smart city gathers data. A wise city asks hard questions about what data should be collected and understands what should be done with that data. The test of a smart city is what it enables; the test of a wise city is who gets served and how, and who gets left behind and why.

There is also the fundamental question: who are cities designed and built for? If we are building a city – or a dark factory – of robots, then maximum efficiency along straight lines and shortest distances matters. But consider this: why is it that winding paths feature in all the world's best known and beloved gardens – be it in Kanazawa, Suzhou or in Singapore's own Botanic Gardens? Or that the ancient fengshui principle warns against the "killing" energy of qi moving swiftly along a straight line? Cities are for humans, not automatons. The imperative here is to slow things down – the better to pause, reflect, enjoy and consider different perspectives imposed by meandering curves and oases of calm along the way.

Yes, the efficiency that comes with speed is important in cities but it is not everything.

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The paradox of technological advancement is that while information becomes more abundant, wisdom does not automatically follow. Indeed, the modern city faces an unprecedented abundance of information as sensors monitor traffic flows, satellites track environmental conditions, and digital platforms generate vast quantities of behavioural data. Artificial intelligence serves us well in handling such volumetric data; it can identify patterns invisible to human observers.

But the challenge is not just in obtaining and analysing volumes of data from sensors and satellites. People encounter cities through memory, attachment, comfort, beauty, smell, belonging and trust. Cities are not lived cognitively only; the experience is also emotive and sensorial. Wise cities weigh up all of these, and consider what matters, when.

At a more macro level, competing objectives confront urban leaders too. Economic growth may conflict with environmental sustainability. Efficiency may conflict with inclusion. Innovation may conflict with stability. Heritage preservation may conflict with development goals. Technology can illuminate these trade-offs, but it cannot resolve them. Resolution requires values.

WHEN TECHNOLOGY MEETS HUMAN NEEDS

This is where the concept of the wise city becomes particularly relevant. A wise city recognises that urban development is ultimately about people rather than systems. Its purpose is not simply to maximise measurable outputs but also to enhance the conditions in which humans can flourish. This may sound abstract, yet it has profound implications for policy.

Consider a city with a largely youthful population designing its mass transit. A proposal is made to include lifts, ramps and other barrier-free features in addition to fast-moving escalators. This will accommodate older persons and wheelchair users. On grounds of cost and efficiency, the proposal is rejected, in favour of prioritising the movement of large numbers of commuters quickly through the system. Viewed through the lenses of optimisation, volume and speed, the decision is fully rational. Yet it reflects a particular understanding of urban success: efficiency first.

A wise city would have asked a different question. Not simply how many commuters could be moved in a day, but what kind of population the city would serve decades later. It would have recognised that ageing is not an unexpected possibility but an emerging certainty. Ultimately, stations would have to be retrofitted at considerable cost. What appeared efficient in the short term proved less so over the longer term.

Wisdom is not the opposite of efficiency. Rather, it places efficiency within a broader and longer horizon. More broadly, it asks whether decisions that optimise today's metrics will still serve tomorrow's society.

Now, consider climate resilience. Cities are investing heavily in adaptation infrastructure, predictive modelling and environmental monitoring. These efforts are essential. Yet resilience is not merely an engineering challenge. Resilience also depends on social trust, community networks and collective capacity to respond to disruption. Wisdom lies in recognising that strong communities matter as much as smart systems.

The Covid-19 pandemic illustrated this vividly. Technology played a critical role in supporting public health responses. But resilience also depended on trust, solidarity and shared purpose.

THE SINGAPORE EXPERIENCE

Singapore's experience offers useful insights. The city-state is frequently recognised for its effective use of technology in urban governance. Yet its achievements have always involved more than technical sophistication.

Long-term planning, institutional coordination and social investment have been equally important. The success of public housing, for example, reflects not merely engineering expertise but also a broader vision of nation-building and community formation.

Similarly, water security is not only a technical achievement, but it also reflects decades of strategic thinking, public communication and societal commitment.

These examples point to the enduring value placed on the trust, reciprocity and mutual care embedded in community life to weather times of disruption. Wise cities are deliberate about preserving what cannot be engineered top-down. Wisdom, in this sense, manifests through the ability to integrate multiple perspectives across long time horizons, and the recognition that urban experience is not only a cognitive experience, but also an aesthetic, sensory, emotional, social and psychological one.

Wise cities think beyond election cycles. They invest in future generations. They recognise that some outcomes cannot be measured immediately, and not everything can be measured.

But wise cities also sometimes trip up. The mass transit example cited above is reportedly about Singapore four decades ago.

GOVERNING IN THE AGE OF AI

Back to artificial intelligence, the words on everyone's lips. It cannot be disputed that AI offers extraordinary possibilities. It can improve forecasting, support decision-making and enhance service delivery. Yet its growing influence also raises difficult questions.

How can AI handle the less tangible qualities that matter: social trust, community resilience, cultural identity, intergenerational solidarity and a sense of belonging? How can we avoid overly enthusiastic focus on what algorithms can measure rather than what truly matters? Further, how should accountability be maintained when algorithms inform decisions? How can bias be identified and mitigated? What balance should be struck between efficiency and human discretion? These are not technical questions alone. They are questions of governance.

Wise cities approach such issues with humility. They recognise that technological capability does not eliminate uncertainty. Indeed, greater capability often increases responsibility.

FROM SUSTAINABILITY TO STEWARDSHIP

The challenge of building greener cities offers another illustration. Urban leaders increasingly seek to weave nature into the fabric of the city through parks, green corridors and biodiversity initiatives. The benefits are substantial: cooler temperatures, cleaner air, improved mental well-being and stronger ecological resilience.

Yet success creates new dilemmas. Residents may complain about noisy birds. Wildlife (think otters, junglefowl and macaques!) may stray into urban spaces. Conservation goals may conflict with convenience or perceived safety. Even well-intentioned architecture can have unintended consequences, as reflective glass buildings contribute to bird deaths.

A smart city might seek to eliminate these frictions through technical fixes. It might deploy sensors and cameras to track populations, use AI to identify hot spots of human-wildlife conflict, install automated deterrent systems, adjust traffic signals in areas with frequent road crossings, or use predictive analytics to determine where intervention is needed. Success would be measured through metrics such as reductions in complaints, traffic disruptions, or property damage. These "management problems" can certainly be optimised.

But a wise city recognises that coexistence inevitably involves trade-offs. The question is not how to remove every inconvenience, but how to balance competing goods: biodiversity and liveability, conservation and safety, human comfort and ecological flourishing.

A wise city does not refuse technical tools; it refuses to treat them as sufficient. It uses technology to inform judgment, not to replace it.

In the example above, a wise city may undertake some of the technical fixes, but, simultaneously, seek to cultivate public understanding (of why some species are present, what ecological roles they play, and how human behaviour shapes encounters) rather than simply suppress complaints. It would accept a degree of inconvenience as the price of a richer urban environment. It would deliberate openly about trade-offs, and it would seek to design for co-existence rather than control.

If urban sustainability is to shift from control – reducing carbon footprints, minimising waste and mitigating environmental harm – to the more ambitious objective of regeneration, optimisation alone will not suffice.

For regenerative cities to go further than minimise damage to restore ecosystems, strengthen communities and create positive environmental outcomes, a broader movement is needed, from optimisation towards stewardship.

And stewardship is fundamentally a concept of wisdom. It asks leaders to go beyond thinking of the city as a closed technological system to be optimised, and, instead, manage it as a living, breathing ecosystem.

Perhaps this is the defining challenge of contemporary urban leadership. Cities must act with urgency while maintaining perspective. They must innovate rapidly while preserving social cohesion and human-nature harmony. They must embrace transformation while safeguarding what matters most. These tensions cannot be resolved through technology alone. They require judgment. And good judgment emerges from wisdom.

THE NEXT URBAN FRONTIER

As the World Cities Summit celebrates its 10th edition, it is worth reflecting on how urban aspirations have evolved. The early smart city movement focused primarily on what technology could do. The next phase of urban development must focus more deeply on why technology is being deployed and for whom. This does not diminish the importance of innovation. On the contrary, innovation remains essential.

But innovation should be guided by purpose. The ultimate measure of a city is not how much data it collects, how many sensors it deploys or how efficiently it manages infrastructure. The ultimate measure is whether people can lead meaningful, healthy and fulfilling lives.

Can children thrive? Can older adults age with dignity? Can communities remain resilient amid disruption? Can economic opportunity be broadly shared? Can future generations inherit a liveable planet? These are the questions that define urban success. Answering them requires more than cognitive understanding. It requires wisdom to know what kind of city we wish to become, and how to get there.

The future, therefore, may belong not to the smartest cities, but to the wisest ones. Cities that understand technology as a tool rather than an end. Cities that balance innovation with inclusion. Cities that combine analytical capability with moral purpose. Cities that remember that behind every metric lies a human experience, behind every dataset, a human story.

If the 20th century was about building modern cities, and the early 21st century was about building smart cities, perhaps the next chapter is about building wise cities.

That would be a worthy ambition for the years ahead.

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Singapore is frequently recognised for its effective use of technology in urban governance. Yet its achievements have always involved more than technical sophistication. Long-term planning, institutional coordination and social investment have been equally important, says the writer. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG