

Surveillance capitalism: critics urges Toronto to abandon sinister Google smart spy city project

Project with Google's Sidewalk Labs comes under increasing scrutiny amid concerns over privacy and data harvesting

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▲ A rendering of the proposed Quayside neighbourhood in Toronto by Google sister company Sidewalk Labs. Photograph: Heatherwick Studio

A “smart city” project in [Canada](#) has hit yet another snag, as mounting delays and privacy concerns threaten the controversial development along the Toronto’s eastern waterfront.

The 12-acre Quayside project, a partnership between Google’s Sidewalk Labs and the city of Toronto, has come under increasing scrutiny amid concerns over privacy and data harvesting.

This week, the US venture capitalist Roger McNamee warned that technology companies such as [Google](#) cannot be trusted to safely manage the data they collect on residents.

“The smart city project on the Toronto waterfront is the most highly evolved version to date of ... surveillance capitalism”, he wrote to the city council, suggesting Google will use “algorithms to nudge human behavior” in ways to “favor its business”.

McNamee, an early investor in Facebook and Google, is co-founder of Silver Lake Partners, one of the world’s largest technology investors.

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But in recent years, he has soured on many of the technology giants and their handling of data and privacy concerns.

“No matter what Google is offering, the value to Toronto cannot possibly approach the value your city is giving up,” he wrote, pleading with officials to abandon the project. “It is a dystopian vision that has no place in a democratic society.”

The letter follows news that the project’s advisory panel, Waterfront Toronto, plans to delay a planned vote on the Quayside development to ensure it can undertake an “accountable, transparent, and extensive” evaluation of Sidewalk Labs’ plans, which are expected to be submitted in the coming weeks.

“We have adjusted our expected timelines accordingly to ensure that the evaluation process has the time required to meet the expectations of Waterfront Toronto, and the public as a whole,” spokesman Andrew Tumilty said in a statement.

McNamee’s criticisms are the latest in a growing chorus of opposition to the project by high-profile technology investors and executives.



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▲ 'No matter what Google is offering, the value to Toronto cannot possible approach the value your city is giving up.' Photograph: Image Courtesy of Heatherwick Studio

Late last year, Jim Balsille, the co-founder of BlackBerry maker Research in

Motion, called the project “a colonizing experiment in surveillance capitalism attempting to bulldoze important urban, civic and political issues”.

In 2017, Sidewalk Labs won a proposal to develop a 12-acre section of Toronto’s eastern waterfront. The proposal also left the possibility of developing as many as 800 acres of the city’s Port Lands area in the coming years.

Originally seen as a tool for addressing affordability and transportation issues in the city, Quayside was meant to be one of the world’s first “smart cities”, drawing on environmentally conscious design and emerging technologies to “accelerate urban innovation and serve as a beacon for cities around the world”. Sidewalk Labs intends to build 2,500 housing units, nearly half of them under market value.

Despite initial public support for the project, Quayside has been dogged by fears of data harvesting, privacy concerns and an overall lack of transparency.

In early October, entrepreneur Saadia Muzaffar resigned from the project’s advisory panel, citing a lack of transparency by Waterfront Toronto and saying the organization showed “apathy and a lack of leadership regarding shaky public trust”.



'City of surveillance': privacy expert quits Toronto's smart-city project



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Later that month, [Ann Cavoukian, the former privacy commissioner of Ontario, also resigned](#). “I imagined us creating a Smart City of Privacy, as opposed to a Smart City of Surveillance,” she wrote in her resignation letter.

In statement to Guardian Cities, Sidewalk Labs rejected McNamee’s allegations, adding that while they welcomed public debate, “[he] does not seem very familiar with what Sidewalk Labs is actually proposing”.

The company disputed McNamee’s suggestion that they would use facial recognition technologies in the project.

“As we have made clear, we believe that data collected in public space must be overseen and closely controlled by an independent and publicly accountable Data Trust, not Sidewalk Labs, Google, or any private company,” said spokesperson Keerthana Rang.

Toronto city council is set to discuss McNamee’s letter - and Sidewalk Labs - at Thursday’s meeting.

Deputy mayor Ana Bailão told Guardian Cities via email that privacy and data are some “of the most significant challenges facing our society today” and that councillors would review any concerns raised over the project.