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STRATEGIZING FOR CARING, SMART, SUSTAINABLE CITIES

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Strategizing for Caring, Smart, Sustainable Cities

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- Interweaving ‘terrains of care’ involve practices that can inform transformative smart city development.

- Planning for future smart cities can look toward the complexities inherent to how people participate through care in the urban realm.

- Understanding these caring practices in the smart city should occur by facilitating bottom-up practices that are already active.

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Sustainable, smart, and... caring city?

The city of Helsinki has set ambitious targets for achieving carbon neutrality by 2030, and carbon zero targets by 2040 (City of Helsinki, 2024). Alongside these targets, the Helsinki City Strategy 2021-2025 set priorities for the city that emphasized several key points for advancing environmental and social sustainability. The plan highlighted Helsinki as a place of growth in its many forms. Priorities included, for example, economic growth and pandemic recovery, but also emphasized the role of digitalization for attaining a functional and accessible smart city (City of Helsinki, 2020). Importantly, this included the provision of “rapid, equal, transparent and anticipatory services” for residents (ibid., p. 52). Following the recent city council elections in 2025, the new City Strategy is currently under development. In times of transition and agenda-setting, it is crucial for Helsinki and other cities to consider what the provision of smart city services means for the health and well-being of residents. These issues are fundamental for understanding the roles that smart city planning and governance can play in bringing about or limiting transformative urban futures (McPhearson et al., 2021). Research on sustainable urban change calls for urban transformations that disrupt and dismantle existing systems, while creating alternatives to take their place. The capacities for these changes center on urban “stakeholders, places, and processes” (Wolfram, Borgström and Farrelly, 2019). Therefore, transformative urban futures necessarily entail how cities are governed based on what counts as participation.

The smart city is often framed as a slick, easy-to-navigate space. One’s participation in it can be made smooth via automated internet-based technologies that level the playing field for urban decision-making processes (Vanolo, 2015). While the smart city can be imagined as a futuristic space, these urban landscapes and digital platforms also create mundane connections and frictions in everyday life (Leszczynski, 2020). This makes participation in them complex, and their governance less than intuitive.

While it is important to improve public participatory governance in smart cities, this paper discusses research conducted in Zaman et al., 2024, which was motivated by previous research indicating that emphasis on digitalized participation lends itself to a homogenized understanding of how residents participate in smart urban life (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019). I suggest that it can be helpful to contrast this with research on transformative change in cities, which has emphasized the role of care in facilitating these transformations. Zaman et al.’s research therefore centered on understanding how smart and caring cities may intersect or diverge, especially recognizing the urgent need for a shift in how cities are designed and governed.

The ways that smart cities are designed and imagined can influence the possibilities for what caring relations with one’s surroundings may include. In an important example, a study examining a smart district in Vienna found that smart city goals do not always align with the concerns and caring capacities of children and young people (Ghafoor-Zadeh, 2023). The research conducted by Zaman et al. in Helsinki in 2024 needed to take a similar approach. Although it began with the assumption that the smart city does not facilitate caring relations, it came to explore what care might look like via the diverse creative practices of its residents.

Methods

In 2022, Zaman et al. conducted interviews among three creative communities of practice in Helsinki, speaking with them about their embodied experiences of creative work in the smart city. These creative communities of practice included urban planners, artists, and community space organizers. Communities of practice became an important angle for guiding the research among these potentially disparate individuals. Communities of practice are based on diverse ways of knowing and being in the world, which can arise from work habits, formal training, and social action (Grasseni, 2007). Using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, 22 people were interviewed (one interview was conducted with two participants at once, who were colleagues in the same space).

This research began with the assumption that the smart city did not recognize creative practices as part of its agenda. However, as the study progressed, it became evident that certain practices may be hidden or invisibilized when looking for them through the lens of smart city practices. Over the course of analysis, it became evident that an approach would be necessary which recognized the embodied nature of the research question. At this stage, enactivist theory became useful for applying a hybrid deductive-inductive approach that emphasized sensemaking (Stilwell and Harman, 2021). In enactive sensemaking, meaning is generated through an organism's participation with its environment (De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007). This approach allowed the research to emphasize caring relations in Helsinki's smart city.

Enactivism: Under enactivist theory, cognition is a participatory sensemaking process between the brain, body, and environment (Di Paolo and De Jaegher, 2022). In this work, it was necessary to take an enactivist approach because this provided a relational understanding for how smart city residents may interact with urban space and other beings within it.

Discussion

Through the findings emerging from the interviews, Zaman et al. (2024) elaborate on caring participation in the smart city that can be ambivalent. This means that participation in the smart city may sometimes pose uncertainties, and positive and/or negative challenges. Additionally, caring participation may not always be intuitive or beneficial for the carer or the cared-for. The findings in Zaman et al. refer to three interlinked care practices: 1) affective engagement; 2) navigating rules and institutions; 3) cultivating joy and inspiration. These are referred to as terrains of care.

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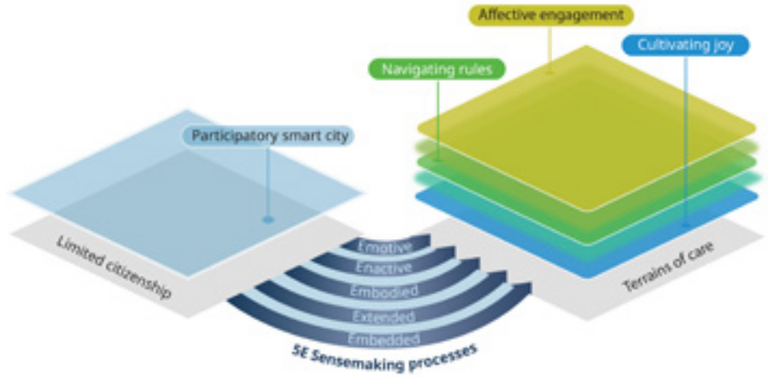

To begin, affective engagement was seen in the professional intimacies of the interviewees, where the personal and the professional would intertwine to inform their practice. Secondly, navigating rules and institutions meant that interviewees would find themselves navigating both real and perceived barriers to their practice. Finally, cultivating joyful experiences and inspiration meant that interviewees were often drawn to creating meaningful experiences in their work for themselves and others. These experiences would force them to slow down, to be "unfunctional", or even to be bored. In terrains of care, participation in the smart city is relational, non-neutral, and affective. For example, urban planning cannot be reduced to a dispassionate practice, and sensemaking in all creative communities of practice can underscore individuals' vulnerabilities at personal and professional levels.

Conclusions

Terrains of care are not a tool that one can leverage to achieve sustainability goals directly. The transformative capacity of care is much more complex, which likely makes it undesirable as a starting point for developing a city strategy. However, care can be an important place to begin conversations on visions about what could be different in the city. Care as a value can help facilitate discussions which acknowledge that there are tensions in the city, our practices, and our relations that do not make it an easy place to live. However, this research shows how ease in a smart city does not always produce meaningful experiences. Overall, shifting attention to care practices is not sufficient on its own as a solution to the limitations of participatory smart cities. This research has depicted already-existing terrains of care in a smart city in progress, and this cannot be artificially created and superimposed in a city for the purposes of achieving sustainability targets.

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