When Alphabet Inc. Plans Toronto's Waterfront: New Post-Political Modes of Urban Governance

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Article

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Abstract
'Smart cities' has become a hegemonic concept in urban discourses, despite substantial criticism presented by scholarly research and activism. The aim of this research was to understand what happens when one of the big digital corporations enters the field of real estate and land use development and urban planning, how existing institutions respond to this, and how modes of urban governance are affected. Alphabet Inc.'s plans for Toronto's waterfront provided insights into these questions. Our investigations traced a complex web of place-making practices that involved all levels of government, the general public, and networks of actors throughout the private sector. Methodologically, the discourse was reconstructed with local fieldwork, interviews with key actors, participating in tours and public meetings, and secondary sources. It was found that Alphabet Inc.'s plan to build a world-class digital city contained some lessons for urban studies and urban planning practice. First, Alphabet Inc.'s plans, which unfolded amidst initiatives to expand the knowledge economy, confirmed concerns that the trajectory of neoliberal, market-driven land use and speculation along the waterfront remains unchanged. Second, digital infrastructures are potentially a Trojan Horse. Third, it was seen that municipalities and their modes of urban planning are vulnerable to the political economic manoeuvrings of large corporate power. Fourth, Alphabet Inc. operates as a post-political package driven by a new coalition of politics, where the smart city is sold as a neutral technology. The controversies surrounding the project, however, stirred a civic discourse that might signal a return of the political.

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Urban Planning and the Smart City: Projects, Practices and Politics" edited by Andrew Karvonen (KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden), Matthew Cook (Open University, UK) and Håvard Haarstad (University of Bergen, Norway).

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to demonstrate what happens when one of the big digital corporations enters the field of land use development and urban planning. We are particularly interested in how public institutions respond to such developments and how the usual modes of urban governance and planning are impacted. The case of Alphabet Inc.'s plans for developing the Port Lands district of the City of Toronto (the City), Canada, provided excellent insight into these questions. In 2017, Sidewalk Labs (SL)—a daughter company and urban development arm of Alphabet Inc. and sister to Google LLC—won the competition to develop 4.9 hectares along Toronto's shores of Lake Ontario. The project, known as Quayside, grabbed substantial media

attention; however, observers also wondered about the implications for urban planning practices and modes of urban governance both there and everywhere, because never before had a world leader in technological innovation of such scale ever attempted to make in-roads into the field of urban planning, as urban developers.

Our background research began in 2017 and coincided—as did the announcement about Quayside—with the hype around urban digitalization that had rendered the smart city into a powerful and hegemonic concept, or imaginary, in urban planning (Sadowski & Bendor, 2019). Such hype was propagated, for example, by the Royal Town Planning Institute (2017) in the UK, which wrote about the future smart city as the answer to far-reaching challenges facing city managers, planners, and residents. Similarly, Bitkom e.V. and Fraunhofer IESE (2019) released an overview of over 50 German cities showcasing smart city agendas. Just about any city that had implemented any kind of digital device or system (such as traffic lights or driverless cars) was now classified as smart. And, there are meanwhile entire cities being built across Asia based on smart city principles (Hollands, 2015).

Along with scholars such as Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski (2016), Kitchin (2015), or Wiig (2018), we contend that there are unexpected consequences and externalities associated with the rise of smart cities and urban digitalization. These are not critical assessments of technology itself, as technological determinism and the complex relationship between urban development, urban planning, politics, and innovation are well understood. Rather, contemporary urban studies literature addresses broader debates about the modes, discourses, contradictions, and socio-political and economic processes that constitute geography's 'digital turn' (Ash et al., 2016; Graham, Kitchin, Mattern, & Shaw, 2019; Hajer, 2015; Karvonen, Cugurullo, & Caprotti, 2019; Kitchin, 2015).

Several unsolved problems with the smart city model have been documented (Cardullo, di Feliciantonio, & Kitchin, 2019; Glasmeier & Christopherson, 2015; Hollands, 2008, 2015; Kitchin, 2015; Shelton, Zook, & Wiig, 2015). These include questions about: (1) the epistemologies that inform data production; (2) ownership and regulation of data processed in remote geographic locations; (3) the problem of smart city agendas driven by companies who see cities as burgeoning markets for their digital products; and (4) the commodification of public services, lock-in effects, and consequences of standardization. With respect to Alphabet Inc., specifically, Tomlinson et al. (2010, p. 188) concluded that Google's search engines produced a hegemony of urban planning concepts that excluded "alternative perspectives and policy options." Observing Google Fiber's provision of infrastructure in Kansas City, Alizadeh, Grubesic, and Helderop (2017, p. 984) concluded that "urban governments need to develop a suite of operational checks and balances to assure the equity of access to service in their dealings with big corporations." These findings deliver

important insights into questions about how intermingled governments and large digital corporations should be, and where the lines between them ought to be drawn (Alizadeh et al., 2017, p. 974), given the costs and opportunities of enlisting the services of large digital corporations and the need for cities to keep pace with technological change despite limited resources (Alizadeh et al., 2017; Caprotti, 2018; Haarstad, 2017; Rossi, 2016; Wiig & Wyly, 2016).

Toronto's waterfront development exhibits a new incarnation of digital cities: an urban development model that is driven by a single large digital corporation, while local public policy is situated in a vacuum. Our research shows that the Quayside project was put onto Toronto's urban planning agenda by means that were neither transparent, nor driven by urban policy and planning. The mode of urban governance was thus post-political, as defined by Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014) and reflected in the works of Davidson and Iveson (2015), Deas (2014), Legacy (2018), MacLeod (2011), Mouffe (2005), and others. In our research, the post-political reading of Toronto's urban governance is exemplified by a cleft between politics and the political, and is evidenced by the strategic behaviour and the lack of communication on the part of governing authorities in charge of land use and urban planning. This article, on one hand, thus explains the case of Quayside as a cautionary tale to urban planners and development practitioners concerned with the limits of smart city models. On the other hand, this article also explains Quayside as yet another form of post-political urban development, and thus contributes to urban studies scholarship that conceptualises contemporary urbanity.

The argument is organized as follows. First, we introduce the conceptual lens of post-political governance, which magnifies the changes in urban policy-making and politics, when big corporations like Alphabet Inc. enter the field of urban planning and development. Second, we explain the methodology, comprising of mainly of non-standardized methods of inquiry such as document analyses, in-depth expert interviews and participant observation at community meetings. Third, the case of Quayside is presented, situated in the context of a new phase in Toronto's waterfront development. Here, SL's alignment with Canadian politics is seen, as are the possibilities and limitations of a political civic response. Fourth, conclusions are made concerning the key lessons for urban planning and urban studies scholarship.

2. Urban Governance and Post-Political Developments

One of the big debates in urban studies scholarship concerns the changes in governance configurations and related practices that have taken shape in urban regions across Europe and North America in recent decades (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Throughout the years, cities—or better, city-regions—have become more and more integrated into global production networks as

hot spots in the emerging services industries, and re-configured as strategic, competitive locales for cognitive-cultural capitalism (Krueger, Gibbs, & Carr, 2018; Scott, 2001). In terms of urban governance, most notable changes include the rise of corporate power within a neoliberal framework, a related shift from managerial to entrepreneurial urbanism, and an increasingly competitive positioning of urban politics (McCann, 2017, pp. 313–314). Broadly speaking, these changes triggered the current configuration of many cities as "crucial sites in the circulation of capital, culture and mobile policy" (MacLeod, 2011, p. 2632). MacLeod claims that cities have become:

> Glittering commercial citadels…of iconic development…[with] globally mediated bidding process[es] to host prestige exhibitions and magnetic arts, cultural and sporting venues and events…[often transforming] former industrial inner-city zones into mixed-use creative cultural quarters, buzzing economic districts, heritage and tourism villages and gentrified apartments…orchestrated by state-led coalitions and special-purpose agencies whose aim is to boost urban economies amid a quicksilver globalising capitalism. (MacLeod, 2011, p. 2630)

Indeed, previous studies of Toronto's urban development informed MacLeod's (2011) observations above. And, as confirmed elsewhere, Toronto's condominium boom (Rosen & Walks, 2014), transit developments (Keil & Addie, 2016), and mega event plans (Bellas & Oliver, 2016) have all been described as post-political processes. Certainly, this article adds to this area-based inventory of post-political processes in Toronto, and furthers other debates that examine the (im)possibility of the political in cities (Beveridge & Koch, 2017; Davidson & Iveson, 2015; Deas, 2014; Gray, 2018; Kenis & Lievens, 2017; Legacy, 2018; Mössner, 2016; Paddison, 2009; Richter & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Swyngedouw, 2011).

Informed by critical analyses of cities and urban spaces from around the globe, scholarly debates shed light on post-political developments, as a means of understanding the fuzzy practices situated between the power of big politics and the characteristically messy political processes. Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014) provide a useful starting point for understanding both the origins of the concept as well as one pole of the heated scholarly discussion. They conceived the post-political in terms of a Lacanian Borromean Knot, i.e., intertwined registers of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary, whereby one cannot be separated out without unravelling the others, and together the registers constitute dimensions of the post-political. In short, the Imaginary can be understood as the production of overarching narratives that function to supplant all dissent with a higher priority (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014, p. 7) used the example of the "end of history" narrative as one that sanctified the new global capitalist

order. The Symbolic is when politics is reduced to consensual management, and the idea, memory, or notion of deliberation is merely invoked but not practiced. The Real refers to the ontological elimination of difference across political spheres (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014).

There are careful, if not contested, definitions to recall here (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014): The political is "the space of contestation and agonistic engagement" while politics refers to the "technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism" (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 6). In post-politics:

> Political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance. 'The people'—as a potentially disruptive political collective—is replaced by the population—the aggregated object of opinion polls, surveillance, and bio-political optimisation. Citizens become consumers, and elections are framed as just another 'choice.' (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 6)

For Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014), Chantal Mouffe is one of the key thinkers of post-politics. According to Mouffe (2005), political adversity—antagonism—is a necessary component of functioning democracies; however, this is repressed in post-democratic regimes as politics strives for hegemony, while the political strives to subvert it. Some have observed this, for example, in urban regeneration initiatives that claim to be progressive, calling for local participation and collaboration, but are void of debate and contestation (see Gray, 2018). We argue that Quayside represents a classic case of Mouffe's (2005) condition of the post-political where deliberation is void of oppositional debate (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014), and politics is severed from the political (Mouffe, 2005). This split between politics and the political was a key feature of Toronto's and Canada's dealings with Alphabet Inc. This invokes the first lesson for urban planning practice—that processes are opaque—and a second lesson about the character of (post-)politics when powerful corporations want to do urban development.

There is a second current in the post-political literature that is also instructive. Authors, here, are concerned with "the post-political trap" (Beveridge & Koch, 2017). These authors argue that the prevailing binary of politics and political potentially occludes both the plurality of "actually existing multiplicity of voices and forms of contestation" (Kenis, 2019, p. 833), and by extension, the urban as a setting for resistance (Kenis, 2019). Richter and Fitzpatrick (2018) challenge the concept that post-politics is a condition that merely unfolds unimpeded: If politics has merely sanitized the political, then it is difficult to account for actual movements of resistance, community actions, or positions.

In this article, we contend that big tech corporations in general and smart city discourses in particular are prone to pushing a neutral, expertise-led, technological agenda that is post-political. However, we also see the possible emergence of a *realpolitik*. When SL entered the field of urban planning, it also sparked a resistance that cannot be "written off as post-political" (Kern & McLean, 2017, p. 410). Legacy, Cook, Rogers, and Ruming (2018, p. 2) are helpful here: "Post-political theorists claim that formal, state-created processes and spaces for participation increasingly offer no grounds for actual public debate, nor legitimate spaces for contestation." While SL became a central actor in Toronto urban planning alongside Canadian politics, urban residents established new spaces to engage in the political (see Legacy, 2018, p. 77).

3. The Research Approach

The research began in 2017 (Carr & Hesse, 2019), when Waterfront Toronto (WT)—the agency in charge of property development along the lakeside and in the Port Lands—announced that SL won its competition to develop Quayside (Figure 1). At this point in time, big tech corporations had already gained some attention concerning their possible stakes in urban development, particularly after Amazon.com instigated a competition for the location of its second headquarters (HQ2; Nager, Lowe Reed, & Langford, 2019). The announcement that Alphabet Inc. was interested in developing Toronto's waterfront signalled another opportunity to examine what happens to urban governance processes when large corporations from the digital economy get involved.

To comprehend the complexities of urban politics in Toronto—Canada's most populous city—and around a project such as Quayside, the research focused on both the contextuality of SL's arrival on Toronto's urban planning and development scene, and the processuality of Toronto's urbanization. The latter has roots in urban political ecology as developed by scholars such as Keil (2003), Bunce and Desfor (2007), and Angelo and Wachsmuth (2014), who draw on Lefebvre (2003) and focus on the processes of production as constitutive of urban change, because, as Keil (2003, p. 725) articulates it, "'the urban' is a complex, multiscale and multidimensional process where the general and specific aspects of the human condition meet." We thus applied a qualitative research approach common in both human geography and urban studies as a means of understanding and analyzing urban politics and political processes (see Kenis, 2019; Mössner, 2016). The research design "aimed to arrive at a thick and rich description of the discourses developed by…participants" active in the field (Kenis, 2019, p. 836). While Kenis (2019) sought to tease out the various discourses of two different activist movements, our work aimed at identifying and reconstructing the different discourses produced by both politics and the political.

Secondary sources were central in understanding the situation in broad strokes and for identifying key actors and institutions. A wide variety of media outlets and documents were available for assessment. There was also a wealth of videos available on the internet, such as recordings of public events organized by SL or WT, interviews with politicians, or public announcements. SL also has a significant number of relevant videos on its dedicated website, Sidewalktoronto.ca.

The next step entailed exploring the site, meeting key actors in the field, and triangulating their narratives against the written discourse. Working in collaboration with local institutions, Carr spent a total of three months in downtown Toronto: four weeks in the spring of 2019, and eight weeks in early autumn, 2019. During this time, Carr, who had also lived in the waterfront district (the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood) for 20 years, was able to update prior knowledge of socio-political and institutional structures in the area, and build that into the study.

On-site research included meetings with scholarly experts knowledgeable of Torontonian social movements, urban planning and development practices, legalities of land use, local political processes and institutions of politics, and urban transformation along the waterfront and in the Port Lands. A total of ten voluntary, circa hour-long conversations were held. While it was always clear that this was a research trip, Carr was on friendly terms with most of the participants and the conversations were informal in character (recall Mössner, 2016). The goal of these conversations was to not only learn about the contemporary Toronto context and receive direction or hints towards further readings or key players, but also to assist in orienting in the written discourse and act as sounding boards for ideas and interpretations.

During the first trip, on-site visits included a banquet at the Four Seasons Hotel featuring a venture capitalist speaker, one press conference at the Ontario Legislative Building and one at Toronto City Hall, one community meeting, and exhibitions held at SL's office and exhibition space, The 307. Quayside was a subject at all of these venues. Like Kenis (2019, p. 836), Carr "was an active participant amongst the other participants, taking part in meetings…while at the same time maintaining a position as a researcher." Also, tours of the Port Lands were taken with local residents. Methodologically, these tours served as a kind of "walking interview [that] have been demonstrated as a highly productive way of accessing a local community's connections to their surrounding environment. This is critical because [they reveal] people's relationships with place keys into contemporary policy issues" (Evans & Jones, 2011, p. 856).

During the second trip, two further informal conversations were held with scholarly experts, and two additional professional tours were taken, one with an urban planner and one formal tour with on-site industry. Around 20 invitations to participate in a research interview were sent to real estate developers, City officials, WT representatives, SL, journalists, activists, real estate developers and business owners in the Port Lands. Four

recorded conversations were held: one with a journalist following the story, one with a representative of SL, one with a Canadian business executive and one with a community facilitation agency. These served to drill down even further into the various discursive spheres. The low response rate, i.e., from local officials (the City, WT) was possibly reflective of the case: While Quayside was receiving widespread international attention, it was highly sensitive locally and some were hesitant to speak on record. Indeed, not a single person from Toronto City Hall or WT responded to requests for an interview. Real estate developers were equally unresponsive. Two activists also declined an interview citing their precarious labour situation and perceiving research processes as extractive.

4. A New Phase in Waterfront Development

4.1. A Short History

Toronto urban planning and waterfront development has been the subject of international scholarly debates in urban studies for decades and there is a rich literature to draw upon (see Desfor & Laidley, 2011). Indeed, the waterfront has been settled, stolen, bought, sold, drained, dredged, filled, polluted, cleaned-up, channelled, industrialized, abandoned, re-naturalized, festivalized, and reshaped continuously since its first surveying and use as a military fort by the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, in 1793, and has always been an important cornerstone of Toronto's urban development. Throughout the late 19th and 20th century, the waterfront was characterized by technological innovations brought on by industrialization. In the early 1900s, with profits to be earned by turning Toronto into a booming port city along the St. Lawrence Seaway (Desfor & Laidley, 2011), the federal government took control of the lakeside lands and formed the Toronto Harbour Commission (THC) that encouraged shipping and railway development in order to transform the harbour into a bustling port moving people and goods, and enable economic growth (Desfor & Laidley, 2011).

When industry declined in the latter decades of the 20th century, politicians from all levels of government sought to transform the waterfront for new residential, entertainment, and tourism activities (Lehrer & Laidley, 2008; Sanderson & Filion, 2011). Industries had closed in response to the economic transformation, railways were dismantled, the St Lawrence Neighbourhood was built, and most recently, condominium towers were constructed that brought hundreds of thousands of new residents to the area. This post-industrial phase can hardly be captured in a single article. It has, however, been the subject of many scholarly investigations such as those from Bunce (2009, 2019), Desfor and Keil (2004), Keil and Desfor (2010), Kipfer and Keil (2002), Laidley (2007), and Lehrer, Keil, and Kipfer (2010), who recognized these revitalization plans as modes of ecological modernization,

state-led green gentrification, globalization, and associated effects of urban inequality and exclusion.

This late 20th century transition was also marked by new struggles between the federal, provincial, and municipal governments, each of which wanted their stake in the waterfront. Desfor and Laidley's (2011) volume is a rich resource of details on these institutional changes. The point here is that the waterfront can be understood as a struggle of multi-level governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). Key institutional changes include the federal government's creation of the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront (RCFTW) in 1998 to address municipal-federal tensions. Learning from the RCFTW that the THC was engaging less in port functions and more in post-industrial land use activities, the federal government decided to replace the THC by the Toronto Port Authority (TPA; Sanderson & Filion, 2011) increasing its influence. This was significant because although the THC was a federally run organization, most of its board members were appointed by the City (Sanderson & Filion, 2011); the new TPA, in contrast, consisted mainly of federal appointees (Sanderson & Filion, 2011). Also in 1998, the three levels of government established the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation (TWRC)—a body that would represent all governing interests and simultaneously "spark a 'virtuous cycle,' attracting billions in private investment from the companies and people fuelling key sectors of the global economy…creating jobs and…tax revenues" (Laidley, 2007, p. 260). The TWRC later became WT which is now in charge of property development along the waterfront (Figure 1). And, it would soon be recognized for its "almost complete lack of disclosure of the ways in which it spends public funds" (Lehrer & Laidley, 2008, p. 792).

4.2. A New Phase? The Waterfront as a Tech Hub

The development of the waterfront as the City's hub of technological development is rather recent (professional tour of the Port Lands, August 2019; professional tour of the waterfront, August 2019; tour with residents, April 2019, August, 2019). The Waterfront Innovation Centre (WIC) is already under construction. With possible synergies with George Brown College Waterfront Campus that specializes in health sciences—and is expanding its premises with a timber-frame building by Moriyama & Teshima Architects—the WIC will house more offices of MaRS (a company providing meeting, office, and lab spaces to start-ups) and the University of Toronto (U of T). MaRS and the U of T already work together supporting R&D and start-ups in fin-tech, clean tech, and health science (U of T, 2018). MaRS (2019) already boasts revenue in the billions, while the U of T boasts the forthcoming Vector Institute for Artificial Intelligence that was funded by a 100 million $Can donation by philanthropists Schwartz and Reisman (Fong, 2019). These plans to develop Toronto as a hub of state-of-the-art technological
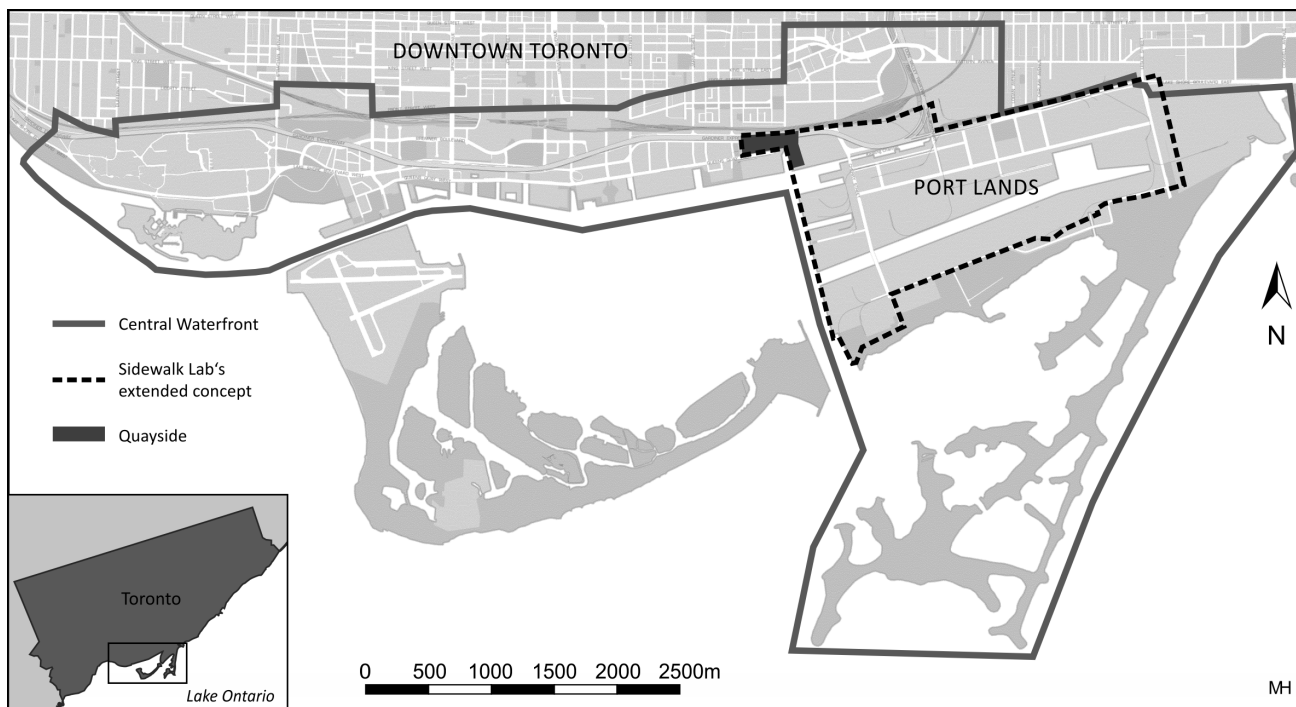
Figure 1. Downtown Toronto waterfront (map by Malte Helfer, 2019).

development are also part of wider plans to expand the knowledge economy (see Moos, Revington, Wilkin, & Andrey, 2019). SL foresees its role at Quayside as an incubator for further innovation and technological development on the waterfront (interview with business executive, September 2019; interview with community facilitator, August 2019; interview with journalist, April 2019; interview with representative from SL, August 2019).

5. Quayside Exposing Fractures across Politics and the Political

While the production of the waterfront knowledge economy—with SL at the helm—signals a new generation of waterfront development, it unfolds in the context of Toronto's pre-existing modes of urban planning (interview with community facilitator, August 2019; interview with journalist, April 2019; professional tour of the Port Lands, August 2019). This article demonstrates the post-political character of this process, discussing it in regards to: (1) SL and its alignment with Canadian politics; and (2) the possibilities and limitations of a political civic response.

5.1. SL and the Alignment of Canadian Politics

Figure 2 illustrates the key dates and publications surrounding the procurement of SL. In the spring of 2017, WT issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) and held an international competition for an "innovation and funding partner" (WT, 2017a, p. 6) at Quayside. In September 2017, the City of Toronto and WT (2017) published the Port Lands Planning Framework (PLPF). This document

makes no reference to SL, but does mention (City of Toronto & WT, 2017, p. ii) that the planning concepts contained within it were the result of a collaborative process between the City, WT, and a number of consulting firms including Archaeological Services Inc., CH2MHill, Cicada Design Inc., Dillon Consulting Ltd., Golder Associates, Hemson Consulting, LURA, Performance Publications Media Group, R.E Millward & Associates Ltd., and Urban Strategies Inc. Closer inspection of these companies reveals that some of their employees now work at SL. The same month, WT notified SL that they were "the preferred proponent" (WT, 2019a). WT approved the Framework Agreement (FA; WT, 2017b) on October 17, 2017 (WT, 2019a), and on October 18, 2017, a joint public announcement was made by the Prime Minister, the Premier of Ontario, the Mayor of Toronto, and the CEOs of WT, SL, and Alphabet Inc. (Valverde, 2018; WT, 2019a). It was also noted that such an event would take careful coordination:

> I just know, as a journalist, that to get someone like Eric Schmidt and Justin Trudeau on the same stage at the same time is a difficult thing to do. So, you need to have people who can really stage manage and have close connections. (interview with journalist, April 2019)

This was followed by SL's (2017) widely marketed claims that it would develop Quayside into the best digital city ever: It would be "the first neighbourhood from the internet up" (SL, 2017, p. 20). SL claimed that Quayside would be fashioned with environmentally friendly, climate positive buildings, which would be flexible and multi-
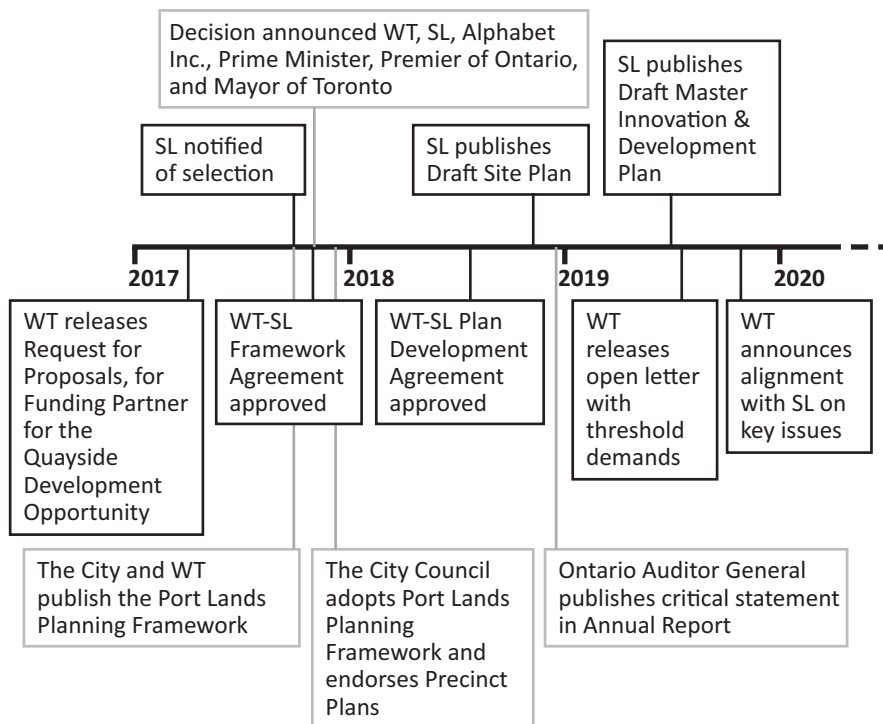
Figure 2. Timeline of key dates and publications concerning the procurement of SL.

purpose. Garbage would be automatically removed, autonomous vehicles would move people around, and sensors would monitor air pollution. Quayside would aid in economic development, by reducing the costs of government administration, and it would be equitable, ensuring that housing is affordable. The proposal was presented as historic.

In December 2017, the Toronto City Council adopted the PLPF (City of Toronto, 2019a) and endorsed the precinct plans for Polson Quay, McCleary District, South River, and Villier's Island (sub-districts of the Port Lands). These were consistent with the Official City Plan (OCP) that viewed the Port Lands as "ripe for major growth" (City of Toronto, 2019b, p. 4). Flynn and Valverde (2019) note that this is the binding precinct city plan for the Port Lands district. Generally, in Ontario, land use follows a multi-level governance set of land use planning procedures. The City sets its vision of development, assigns land uses, sets the infrastructural framework (e.g., roads, waste management), and outlines these in its OCP "the most important document for planning practice in contemporary Toronto" (Lehrer & Wieditz, 2009, p. 92). The Ontario Planning Act (Government of Ontario, 2019), however, guarantees that the Province can intervene in affairs that constitute one of their 19 domains of "provincial interest" that are expressed in very broad terms, such as the protection of natural resources, supply of infrastructure, sustainability, or climate change. The Ontario government thus has a strong authority over the municipalities. This can be traced back to the British North America Act of 1867 (that established the Dominion of Canada) and the Canadian Constitution of

1982, which gave jurisdiction to the provinces to create new municipal institutions or redraw municipal boundaries without the consent of the municipalities themselves (Frisken, 2003).

The province has intervened numerous times to change Toronto's governing structure, such as the amalgamation of the City in 1998 (Frisken, 2003) and the reduction of the City Council in 2019 (Rider & Kopun, 2019). This right to intervene remains a significant authority in the story of Quayside. While the City has planning authority and the federal government defends its national interest, the Premier of Ontario reserves a critical stance concerning Quayside (Gray & Moore, 2019; interview with journalist, April 2019).

While WT and the City were generating land use plans, SL moved forward with town hall meetings and public round tables. On July 31st, SL and WT (2018) replaced the FA with the Plan Development Agreement (PDA), which Flynn and Valverde (2019, p. 773) described as "a 'plan to plan' with no binding authority over what happens in the 12-acre Quayside area." The PDA did, however, bind the SL to a 50 million US$ investment into public outreach programs towards the development of its Master Innovation and Development Plan (MIDP) (SL & WT, 2018, p. 9). As stated in the PDA (SL & WT, 2018, p. 53), these were design jams, civic labs, neighbourhood meetings, use of social media, and public roundtables. SL also offered space for weekend Open Houses in its offices at The 307. There, visitors could observe models, engage with interactive programs explaining urban design, learn about the housing objectives and the benefits of digital electricity or timber-

frame architecture. Outside The 307, visitors could learn about weather-mitigating building raincoats and hexagonal cobblestones with traffic controlling sensors (tour of The 307, April 2019, August 2019).

While SL's efforts in public outreach seemed impressive compared with business-as-usual developer-led urban planning (interview with community facilitator, August 2019), it all had the veneer of a sales pitch. Most messages praised how fabulous Toronto was, and how SL's products would only improve it. As Coletta (2019) later quoted Michael Bryant from the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA), people were "seduced by the honey pot of Google's sparkling brand and promises of political and economic glory."

Finally, in June 2019, SL released the 1,500-page, 4-volume, MIDP. It could be read on-site at The 307 or downloaded from SL's website, but hard copies were not available for order (tour of The 307, August 2019). It received considerable critique for being impossible to digest by the public (Valverde & Flynn, 2019): "The MIDP is not for reading," Haggart (2019) commented. The MIDP also indicated that SL wanted to develop much more than the originally announced Quayside. Effectively, SL wanted to build not a 4.9-hectare but a 77-hectare Innovative Development and Economic Acceleration District (SL, 2019a, 2019b) on municipal precincts south and southeast of the Quayside property, including Google's Canadian headquarters on Villier's Island (SL, 2019a, p. 20).

By mid-2018, however, the Quayside project was rather contested locally, and the MIDP, its bulk, and the variety of surprises and unanswered questions, did not quell the critical reaction. WT (2019a) produced a "Note to the Reader" in what seemed like a feeble attempt to assist the interested public in making sense of the MIDP. Later, the new WT Board Chair, surprised observers with an open letter to the public, acknowledging that the MIDP included "a number of exciting ideas that respond to challenges," but distancing itself from SL because there would be "very different perspectives" such as the massive expansion beyond the Quayside area (Diamond, 2019). The Chair also concluded that the project had "stirred vigorous debate and, regardless of the outcome, raises issues to consider." It was a profound distancing of a public agency from a planning proposal of which itself was, in fact, in charge. WT then set an October 31, 2019 deadline for SL to respond to unanswered questions. By early November 2019, WT (2019b, p. 1) declared that it had found "alignment with SL on the threshold issues [and that] WT's Board of Directors unanimously decided to move forward with the formal evaluation of the MIDP" in consultation with their experts, who include ARUP, Moriyama & Teshima Architects, Perkins & Will Architects, Steer Davies & Gleave Ltd., N. Barry Lyon Consultants Limited, and McCarthy Tétrault (WT, 2019c). Several of these agencies are already active in other projects on the waterfront.

5.2. The Political Civic Response

Various authors have described the controversies around Quayside (Flynn & Valverde, 2019; Haggart, 2019; Tusikov, 2019a, 2019b; Valverde, 2018; Wylie, 2018). The current civic reaction spans two polar opposites, from fully against to fully in favour (interview with community facilitator, August 2019). The latter are consistently members or associates of SL such as Urban Strategies Inc. or the Wellesley Institute (Berridge, 2019; Doctoroff, 2019; McKenzie, 2019). These argued that people should not fear private companies, and that Torontonians ought to seize the opportunity to improve the labour market and foster economic growth. The Port Lands, according to these authors, would be a hub of innovation and economic activity that would place Toronto at the forefront of technological innovation (Florida, 2019). Voices in the middle ground are in favour as long as questions are answered and SL is accountable to the public (interview with community facilitator, August 2019).

Voices against Quayside began surfacing in early 2018. There were resignations and dismissals at WT, and the CCLA filed a legal suit against WT and all three levels of government arguing that the contractual agreements with Alphabet Inc. on data governance were neither in the public interest nor constitutional (interview with business executive, September 2019; press conference at the Ontario Legislative Building, April 2019). Later, former Toronto Chief Urban Planner came out with the criticism that the plans offer no real solution to the housing crisis (Keesmaat, 2019). Similarly, another City Councillor spoke out against it, arguing that privately developed cities cannot substitute democracy (Perks, 2019).

#Blocksidewalk was also launched as an informal group of concerned residents, City Councillors, local urban scholars, tech entrepreneurs, and city planners (press conference at Toronto City Hall, April 2019). It became one of the more vocal opponents of SL, with the public interest as a key concern: "Development should prioritize city needs first, not the needs and interests of a private corporation" (Blocksidewalk, 2019). The key points of dispute are summarized in Table 1. The recurring themes are data governance, the problems of "rogue capitalism" as inspired by Zuboff (2019), lack of transparency, trust, scale, political economic disparity, tax avoidance, housing affordability, spatial planning, labour market, public services, and economic nationalism.

While wide in their scope, the source of the critiques focussed mainly on SL's digital city concept and associated array of digital services, which would require developed surveillance infrastructure throughout the development—including inside private quarters—to observe, and capitalize on, human behaviour (banquet at the Four Seasons Hotel, April 2019; interview with business executive, September 2019). SL attempted to quell these concerns, and proposed a set of icons that would indicate to users what kind of information they were col-

Table 1. Key points of criticism concerning the Quayside project. Source: Blocksidewalk (2019).

Codes	Quotes from #Blocksidewalk (2019)
data governance, rogue capitalism, public interest	"Toronto [needs] digital governance practices that will serve the public interest. [These] should [be] in place before committing to a partnership whose consequences we can't control."
data governance, public interest	"There is no option for residents, workers or visitors to opt out of 'urban data' collection, and no safeguards for children….All Torontonians deserve the right to say no to ubiquitous surveillance."
lack of transparency, trust, public interest	"The project was [first] limited to a 12-acre area….Then, a leaked document revealed that they planned…450 acres….Now…they want 190 acres. SL isn't…clear about their intentions. Can they be trusted with our waterfront?"
scale, political economic disparity, public interest	"As residents, we can't compete with SL's enormous lobbying budget."
tax avoidance, public interest	"Google's affiliates demand tax breaks for private real estate developments on top of avoiding corporate taxes…global tech companies should pay their taxes, not profit from ours."
housing affordability, spatial planning, public interest	"Large tech developments drive up rents….Let's learn from the mistakes of San Francisco, Seattle and New York City, where the cost of renting a home has outpaced even tech workers' salaries. Toronto needs a real affordable housing strategy. This isn't it."
labour market, public interest	"More than half of Google's global workforce is temporary or contract-based, which means they earn less money and have no job security. [Furthermore], automation [may] threaten good public sector jobs."
data governance, public services, public interest, economic nationalism	"SL wants to use surveillance technologies to change how Torontonians receive health care….There are billions of dollars in profits to be made in health data and AI. We support universal health care and think that American tech companies have no business running our public health system."
data governance	"Surveillance practices actually harm low-income…and disabled people…vulnerable to algorithmic bias."

lecting. They also argued that on-site cameras would de-identify data, decoupling collected data from personally identifying data; however, not everyone was convinced (Haggart, 2019; Tusikov, 2019a, 2019b; Wylie, 2018).

#Blocksidewalk's concerns also targeted Alphabet's known business model, and lack of clarity on issues of data storage and ownership. Venture capitalist Roger McNamee condemned Google's behavioural prediction algorithms designed to steer behaviour to benefit their business (banquet at the Four Seasons Hotel, April 2019). Harvard Professor Shoshanna Zuboff along with Roger McNamee and Jim Balsillie, Director of the Balsillie Institute of International Affairs at CIGI Campus, Waterloo, testified as witnesses before the Canadian Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics, as well as the International Grand Committee on Big Data Privacy and Democracy, with critical comments on Alphabet Inc.'s business model. Echoing these:

> The fact that you would let a company such as Google control your city data, data driven economy….You know, all the alarms went off in my head. And, I thought it was incredibly irresponsible on the part of the political leaders…to dive into something so

naively with a powerful company, whose objective is to undermine personal autonomy and sell that to the highest bidder….It was an incredibly naive….When it comes to data, the consumer of your data is another corporation who is trading personal autonomy at the corporate level. So, there is no consumer in this anymore; it's just business to another business. And, once we lose personal autonomy, that's it for democracy, and that's it for markets. So it's a much more….It's a higher stakes game right now, because its irreversible. (interview with business executive, September 2019)

These critical voices are either direct supporters of, or inspirations to, the #Blocksidewalk campaign. To date, #Blocksidewalk has over 1,000 members (Blocksidewalk, 2019), amassing a formidable force against the project, and mobilizing the public to address the deeper implications (interview with community facilitator, 2019). They have regular public meetings and are active in social media. #Blocksidewalk, the CCLA lawsuit, and a few prominent experts appear to be the main oppositional forces. "I think they are going to be shown the door," said one interviewee (interview with business executive, September 2019).

6. Conclusion

Quayside represents the unprecedented case of a large-scale digital corporation entering the field of urban planning, and aiming to control development over a piece of urban space for its own business purposes. Amazon.com has gained a reputation for its urban–regional imprint that results from their parallel worlds of digital, logistical, and locational operations (Hesse, 2018). Also, in his striking account of San Francisco and Bay Area, Walker (2019) sketched, in broad terms, the long-term impacts that big tech firms can have on urban–regional lifeworlds. The case of Quayside, however, delivers important insights about how public institutions respond to new large corporate players in the field, and how modes of urban governance and planning are affected. Quayside illuminates challenges in urban planning and the kinds of relationships that unfold. We argue that these relationships are largely post-political, but that there is also the glimmer of a possible return of the political.

6.1. Lessons for Urban Planning

There are three issues to which urban planning will need to respond to if—or when—big tech corporations enter the field of urban development. The first is an area-based concern: Quayside is unfolding amidst a new phase in Toronto's waterfront development, namely as a location for an expanded knowledge economy. These are processes, too, that are closely connected to post-industrial modes of development that prioritized globalization, privatized condominiums, state-led green gentrification, and mega-event planning (Bellas & Oliver, 2016; Bunce, 2019; Desfor & Keil, 2004; Desfor & Laidley, 2011; Keil & Addie, 2016; Kipfer & Keil, 2002; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008; Moos et al., 2019; Rosen & Walks, 2014). Alphabet Inc., as another developer on the field, demonstrated that the trajectory of a neoliberal, market-driven land use, speculation, and investment remains unchanged.

The second concerns the business model that more and more big tech firms operate with. Much of the critique against SL—whether in the form of #Blocksidewalk, the CCLA lawsuit, outspoken venture capitalists, or observant scholars such as Haggart (2019), Tusikov (2019a, 2019b), or Wylie (2018)—concerned data collection, surveillance, the relationship between it and marketable predictive algorithms, and the inability of legislation to protect citizen rights. There were also concerns about SL's willingness to respond to public problems in housing, transportation, labour market, and delivery of public services and prioritize them over their profit-making strategies. SL's Quayside demonstrated that its business model and vision of urban development does not prioritize the public interest.

Third, Quayside exposed how municipalities and their residents are vulnerable to the manoeuvrings of large corporations. SL, the daughter firm of one of the largest tech companies in the world, aimed at taking over planning functions normally left to municipal institutions, such as staging town hall meetings, or the MIDP that was disguised as, but not a replacement for—as it took Flynn and Valverde (2019) to point out—a planning document. As Flynn and Valverde (2019, p. 774) further argue:

> This case…calls into question the degree to which smart city pioneers like SL, who have a tremendous amount of lobbying power and funding, make a play not only for more data or more money, but for the power to plan public space.

Alphabet Inc. exercised considerable pressure on local governing institutions. Municipalities elsewhere thus need to ask themselves if they have the sufficient resources to adequately respond to large tech firms in ways that will protect their citizens' rights and the integrity of their institutions.

6.2. Lessons for Scholarly Debate

Several scholars have already come to the conclusion that Toronto's waterfront development is post-political (Bellas & Oliver, 2016; Keil & Addie, 2016; MacLeod, 2011; Rosen & Walks, 2014). So far, Alphabet Inc. has demonstrated that it operates within this governance mode, and that the gap between politics and the political is unlikely to be narrowed by their activity in the urban planning scene.

First, post-politics is characterised by the reduction of political contradictions to policy problems and managerial processes (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). This was the case at Quayside as SL and the Canadian government (politics), together, aimed at neutralising urban planning practices. The procurement and endorsement of SL at Quayside was the outcome of networks of private firms, WT, and the federal government. WT orchestrated the RFP process in coordination with all three levels of government and a network of planning consulting firms. The timeline of events and publications shows, too, how SL and Canadian politics were in co-operation with one another. That is, the urban planning agenda was set by politics through means that were neither transparent nor steered by urban policy, planning, or public need.

Second, post-political managerial processes are legitimated through a mirage of participatory processes where the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). After SL was chosen, it held information sessions in the form of town hall meetings and civic jams, etc. These were glossy events with high profile names/speakers where SL set the agenda, choose speakers, and curated its audience. On one hand, these events served as a means of delivering information to residents—but not to seek out what was necessary or in demand. On the other hand, they also served to groom SL's image as a competent, expert player in the field of urban development. Also characteristic of the process was how information was communi-

cated at a volume that was crippling for the public to digest. Despite public messages articulated by prominent voices, or the activity of groups like #Blocksidewalk, SL's only response to criticism was either silence or the production of inaccessible planning documents. In sum, the memory of deliberation was repeatedly invoked—this is post-political in the Symbolic (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014)—yet SL's efforts consistently offered neither space for public debate or contestation, nor a guarantee for the inclusion of a diversity of voices.

Alphabet Inc. continually strived for a hegemony in Toronto's urban planning discourse, which endorsed the split between politics and the political that others have already identified as characteristic of Toronto's urban development (Keil & Addie, 2016; MacLeod, 2011; Rosen & Walks, 2014). However, a chorus of independent political civic action groups did arise, raising awareness about the potential negative impacts of SL and Quayside. As Legacy et al. (2018) also observed in their work, this action took place in spaces outside formal planning. It was #Blocksidewalk, prominent venture capitalists, and the CCLA that raised "fundamental questions about the future of cities,…the allocation of resources, or the distribution of goods and services" (Legacy et al., 2018). So, while Toronto's waterfront development as a hub in technological innovation is unfolding as an exercise of politics, perhaps there is a glimmer of *realpolitik*, as these groups filled the discursive void by raising pointed concerns that were left unaddressed. Perhaps they marked a return to the political that cannot be "written off" (Kern & McLean, 2017, p. 410).

When one of the big tech corporations enters the field of real estate and land use development, it may mark a new generation of post-political cities. If Quayside is any indication, such cities will be run as a coalition of big politics that do not respond to the public interest or need, but to the business and profit-making interests of politics. A civic political response is, however, still possible. Will the post-political gap close? Look further to Quayside to find out.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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