New wave of smart cities has arrived – and they're nothing like science fiction

Today's smart cities look nothing like science fiction. In fact, the sleek, futuristic visions often used to promote smart cities tend to alienate[1] residents. Isolated high-tech buildings, streets or cities can foster social inequality, and even free WiFi and bike-sharing schemes mainly benefit the affluent[2].

These new smart cities are getting communities and universities involved, alongside big companies and city authorities. This has helped shift the focus of smart city projects onto the needs of residents. During my interviews in cities across Europe – from Bucharest, Romania to Warsaw, Poland and Zaragoza, Spain – I found that university students and researchers have played an active role in this, consulting with residents and working with city hall to promote cooperation between citizens and local institutions.

Universities produce a wealth of knowledge about the kinds of problems facing cities, and there is often a need to make more people aware of new research, so they can shape it, use it and build on it.

But above all, communities are now part of the conversation. The EU-funded Sharing Cities programme, led by city halls and universities in London, Lisbon and Milan, has the audacious goal of proving that at least half of the 15,000 locals affected by improvements have actively participated in the process. As such, city authorities have worked with residents to design and implement smart city technologies including smart lampposts, energy management and e-mobility (smart parking, car sharing, electric charging points and so on) – but also to ensure these changes actually improve their lives.

Successful smart city projects blend disciplines, bringing together experts in behavioural change alongside specialists in artificial intelligence and information technologies. Interdisciplinary work can be messy and difficult, it can take longer and may not always work – but when it does, it can bring real benefits to cities.

For instance, when Technological University Dublin and Dublin City Council came together to develop a new campus in the deprived district of Grangegorman, they opened it up to the rest of the city. The community eat with the students in the canteen, new buildings reuse material from the old site, renewable energy is stored locally, with excess power released onto the grid, and signage throughout the campus is the same as the rest of the city, blurring the edges between the university and the city.

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[1] To aleniate : repousser
[2] The affluent : les personnes fortunées