# China leads global smart city surge as Sidewalk Toronto’s legacy fades



Nearly five years after the cancellation of the highly publicised and contentious Sidewalk Toronto project, the global landscape of smart cities has notably evolved. The Sidewalk Toronto initiative, launched in 2017 by Sidewalk Labs—a subsidiary of Google under Alphabet—was an ambitious attempt to develop a technology-enhanced urban neighbourhood along Toronto’s waterfront. The project aimed to enhance residents’ quality of life and serve as a proving ground for innovative urban design and technologies. However, persistent concerns over data privacy and the complexities exacerbated by COVID-19’s economic uncertainty led Alphabet to withdraw in May 2020.

Since the end of Sidewalk Toronto, smart city developments have expanded and deepened across various continents. In the early phase, European cities such as London, Paris, Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Amsterdam were prominent leaders in smart urban initiatives. These cities were later joined by major urban centres in the United States, including Boston, New York, and San Francisco, alongside key Asian cities such as Seoul and Shanghai, as well as Wellington in the Asia-Pacific region.

A particularly significant surge in smart city growth has been observed in China, where the government has institutionalised smart city development as a key national strategy over the past decade. By 2022, China had integrated smart city plans into nearly every level of its administrative structure, with all four sub-provincial cities, nearly 90% of prefecture-level cities, and more than 60% of county-level cities having formulated relevant strategies. These efforts position China as home to roughly half of all smart city projects worldwide. Major Chinese cities such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Chengdu, Chongqing, Guiyang, Shanghai, Beijing, Wuhan, and Nanjing have been at the forefront. Shenzhen, for instance, won the Smart City of 2024 award for its “Smarter City, Better Life” initiative, which focuses on digitisation, advanced urban management, and sustainable development to address urban challenges.

Chinese technology companies have played a pivotal role in promoting artificial intelligence applications in urban management, ranging from traffic flow monitoring to accident detection. However, the deployment of AI in Chinese cities has also been associated with widespread surveillance practices. Among the technological innovations gaining traction globally is the use of digital twins—real-time digital replicas of urban environments created using data from sensors, drones, and mobile devices to support operational decision-making.

The Middle East has recently emerged as another arena for ambitious smart city projects. Abudhabi’s Masdar City exemplifies efforts to integrate cutting-edge technologies with traditional planning principles, aiming to create a carbon-neutral and zero-waste urban community. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia’s NEOM project and its iconic linear city, The Line, represent one of the world’s most high-profile attempts to reimagine urbanism on a grand scale. The Line is designed to span 170 kilometres, extending from the Red Sea into the desert, though recent reports suggest that its completion may face significant delays, with only a small portion expected by 2030. Despite potential setbacks, NEOM is seen as a visionary, long-term project extending over decades.

In comparison to these large and novel projects, research by Barcelona's IESE Business School highlights that traditional powerhouses in Europe and the US remain leaders in smart city development. The IESE Cities in Motion Index, which ranks cities based on human capital, economy, governance, environment, mobility, and technology, continues to place London, New York, and Paris at the top globally. The top ten also includes Tokyo, Berlin, Washington D.C., Copenhagen, Oslo, Singapore, and San Francisco. Notably, Asian cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong have been rapidly narrowing the competitive gap with these leaders.

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced additional uncertainties into urban development, but the continuing investment and technological advancements underscore the enduring significance and evolution of smart cities worldwide. The verdict.co.uk is reporting on this ongoing global trend and the diversified trajectories of smart city projects across continents.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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