

Preface

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In recent decades, we have witnessed an unprecedented transformation in the urbanisation of our planet. The rise of cities has reached extraordinary proportions, with predictions that by 2050, more than 85 per cent of the world's population will live in cities. This transition brings significant challenges, but also extraordinary opportunities to redefine the way we live, work and interact with our environment.

In this context, the concept of the European Smart City emerges as the key to meeting the needs and challenges of the future cities and to overcoming the polarization towards large urban centers, that risks depopulating smaller cities.

It is therefore necessary to guide the intelligent transformation of our territories, in an open innovation perspective that makes the so-called rising cities attractive. On the one hand, attractive for talent, because the challenges of innovation and the ecological and digital transition require specialized skills and knowledge. On the other hand, attractive for investment, which enables territories to grow.

The European identity of the rising cities must be cultivated strengthened by a constant presence in the networks and funding and acceleration programs offered by the European Union. The Smart City, in fact, is first and foremost a city in contact with other cities in Europe to exchange experiences, best practices, governance models and solutions to be replicated; a city that by contamination could continuously question itself, without concern of abandoning the past patterns.

Precisely in the European Union's definition, the Smart City is a city where emerging and enabling technologies play a crucial role: Internet of Things (IoT), platforms for data collection and management, artificial intelligence and mapping technologies for the creation of digital twins are the engine that fuels the transformation.

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The data collected by all the city's stakeholders must be used by administrators to make the best decisions for designing the city's future, with an overall vision, based on long-term planning, to be implemented step by step, without falling into the temptation of doing something just to do it.

The city must become a flexible platform where experimental projects and innovative solutions can be quickly implemented, but just as quickly abandoned if they prove ineffective. This agility is essential to deal with the rapid changes characterizing contemporary society.

With a view to the platform city, it is important, therefore, to feed the innovation ecosystem, involving public and private stakeholders in building the city's future and planning integrated projects being truly everyone's projects. Putting into practice policies that can attract the establishment of start-ups and innovative companies, that incentivize the protection and exploitation of the results of research and development processes, encouraging technology transfer between universities and the business world.

In this perspective, the smart city can also be an enabling city for other territories.

However, the smart city is not only a question of technology, but above all of sustainability: social, economic, environmental. All citizens shall have access to services and opportunities, in a fair and inclusive manner, and contribute to the pursuit of the climate neutrality goals imposed by the European agenda. In this sense, innovation shall serve sustainability.

Innovation, transformation, and change, finally, must be rooted in the cultural traditions that identify the *genius loci*, which must be preserved and taken into account in the decision-making policies. The Smart City of the future is a place where innovation and tradition coexist, where every corner of the city is ready to offer opportunities and well-being.

In summary, this Special Issue of Regional Studies and Local Development, dedicated to Sustainable Smart Cities, offers a range of good examples from the city of Padua and around the world. The conversation between the municipality, firms, University, and civil society is paramount to developing cities that aggregate technology and well-being in diverse contexts. This Special Issue may inspire other decision-makers to explore and implement some of the solutions presented.