

Digital Zoning - In the age of surveillance capitalism - can urban planning help regulate technology?

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ABSTRACT

Elaborating on the term “Digital Zoning” – this paper discusses the use of urban planning procedures as a form of technology regulation. Recent debate on risks to user privacy and surveillance in urban environments suggest a close link between spatial politics and totalitarianism (Zuboff, 2018). An interesting development in this matter has been the call for regulation from several high-level tech executives - portraying the rare case of a business sector requesting its own regulation. Additionally, various cities and public venues around the world, such as the city of Hobart, Tasmania, discussing the implementation of “tech-free zones,” the city of San Francisco banning facial recognition, and a café in London experimenting with “tech-free spaces,” signal as a whole a growing interest in developing theories and techniques for technology regulation in physical space.

As future 5G networks and smartphones will allow for highly precise environments for positioning, we will likely witness not only an enabling of a large amount of location-based services and applications but also the capacity to regulate such services based on their position in space. This functions in parallel with a technique called “geofencing”, in which virtual perimeters are created for real-world geographic areas. This technique as a form of zoning may specify ways in which a physical space could have a digital policy. The paper demonstrates how this form of regulation may safeguard user privacy while allowing for a level playing field in which all digital services proposals are applied through the same set of regulations. This allows for a condition in which zoning provides a tool for authorities, public services, or planning councils to enforce an intended digital policy upon a specific district based on local needs or practices. Finally, the paper demonstrates various self-conducted experiments in Oslo, Norway with installations in public space as part of a larger body of research on the “Nordic Digital City.”