The City of Toronto’s recent award to Alphabet’s Sidewalk Lab for design services has sparked a heated controversy among urban planners and citizens alike. By engaging a private technology company, one that passively captures data on its customers and then re-sales that data to third parties, Toronto’s Eastern Waterfront points to a significant change in the understanding and practice of contemporary urban planning and design. The city’s decision not only signals a different model of practice, but it also represents a conceptual shift from citizen to urban consumer.

Acknowledging the city as a site of disciplinary disruption, the paper begins with a discussion of Henri Lefebvre’s notion that the modern market economy is characterized by contradictory tendencies that [1] increase standardization in everyday life (a regularity in work and objects through a general commodification) at the same time as [2] social inequalities are increased (the intensification of class, race, gender, or age hierarchies). We build on Lefebvre’s position by examining twenty-first century theories related to the internet, privacy, and the dominance of big data. This theoretical lens supports our argument that Toronto’s Eastern Waterfront project has internalized...
relations of colonization whereby the economic objectives of a multinational technology company take on new configurations at a local level of human (and non-human) information extraction – thereby transforming not only public land, but also everyday life into a zone of unmitigated consumption.

Google LLC is a technology company that specializes in internet-related services and products. These include online advertising technologies, search engines, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, software, and hardware. In August 2015, Google reorganized its various interests as a conglomerate called Alphabet Inc., one of which includes Sidewalk Labs. Sidewalk Lab’s goal is to improve cities vis-à-vis their suite of urban products, which include Google’s Pixel 2 phone, search tools, mobile mapping, the autonomous car, and all of the data captured therewith.

1 Ben Highmore, Everyday Life and Cultural Theory, (NY Routledge 2002), 119

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Born in Palo Alto, California, Tierney is the founding director of URL: Urban Research Lab at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. URL Lab focuses on the design implications of network technologies on cities, people, and infrastructure. Recent URL research includes smart cities and the Internet of Things, transit oriented development, and big data analysis for urban resilience. In 2013, Tierney was a US Delegate to Smart & Digital Cities in France; she was selected for the quality of her research in the application of new technologies to build the next generation of cities.

Tierney is the author of several books including The Public Space of Social Media: Connected Cultures of the Networked Society (Routledge 2013), which was a finalist for the Jane Jacobs Urban Communication Award; Abstract Space: Beneath the Media Surface (Routledge 2007); and editor of Intelligent Infrastructure: Zip Cars, Invisible Networks and Urban Transformation (University of Virginia Press 2017). Tierney holds a PhD in Architecture with a Designated Emphasis in New Media from the University of California Berkeley, a BArch from California College of the Arts. During 2006, she was a predoctoral researcher at the MIT media lab.