• Paper / Proposal Title:
Entangled on the Waterfront: Smart Cities as Sites of Accumulation by Dispossession

• Author(s) Name:
William Russell

• University or Company Affiliation:
University of Southern California

• Abstract (300 words):
Recent trends in Big Data accumulation practices by social media platforms invite us to think about data not solely as information but as a form of capital that closely mirrors the process of accumulation by dispossession (Thatcher et al, 2016; Sadowski, 2019; Kitchin, 2014). Yet given the spatial and geopolitical dimensions of the process of accumulation by dispossession, it is also important to investigate the data accumulation practices of Smart City projects which seek to integrate data collection sensors, CCTV cameras, and IoT networks into large scale urban redevelopment projects. Using the framework of “entangled accumulation,” which expands upon the notion of accumulation by dispossession and other related theories (Leite Gonçalves and Costa, 2020), this paper explores Sidewalk Lab’s controversial Quayside Waterfront redevelopment project in Toronto, Canada as a case study of how platform monopolies like Google, given the market saturation of their principle ventures, seek new non-commodified spaces in which accumulate data capital. What does it mean for a platform to become a real-estate developer, which leverages affordable housing in exchange for access to unprecedented data on the residents? What are the implications of ceding the
governance of land development and urban planning to a technology service vendor? Given Sidewalk Lab’s explicit goal of replicating this project in cities worldwide, and the global municipal demand for these types of public-private partnerships as a way to offset some of the costs of integrating Smart City technology, what can we learn from this project that might inform us as to the political economy of this next era of capitalist development?

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

William Russell is a scholar, programmer, and visual artist working at the intersection of computer science, philosophy, media theory, and activism. His research interests include data surveillance in the Smart City and Smart Home, the role of technological mediation in the history of science, and the discursive effects of efficiency claims in economics and technology. He graduated with a B.A. in Film Studies from UCSB in 2004, and is a current PhD student in Cinema and Media Studies at USC’s School of Cinematic Arts. Previously, he worked for 15 years as an independent documentary filmmaker and industrial cinematographer, producer, and director, with notable clients such as the University of California Irvine, the March of Dimes, Samsung, AAMCO, ESPN, and Fox Business.