POWER TO THE CITIZEN
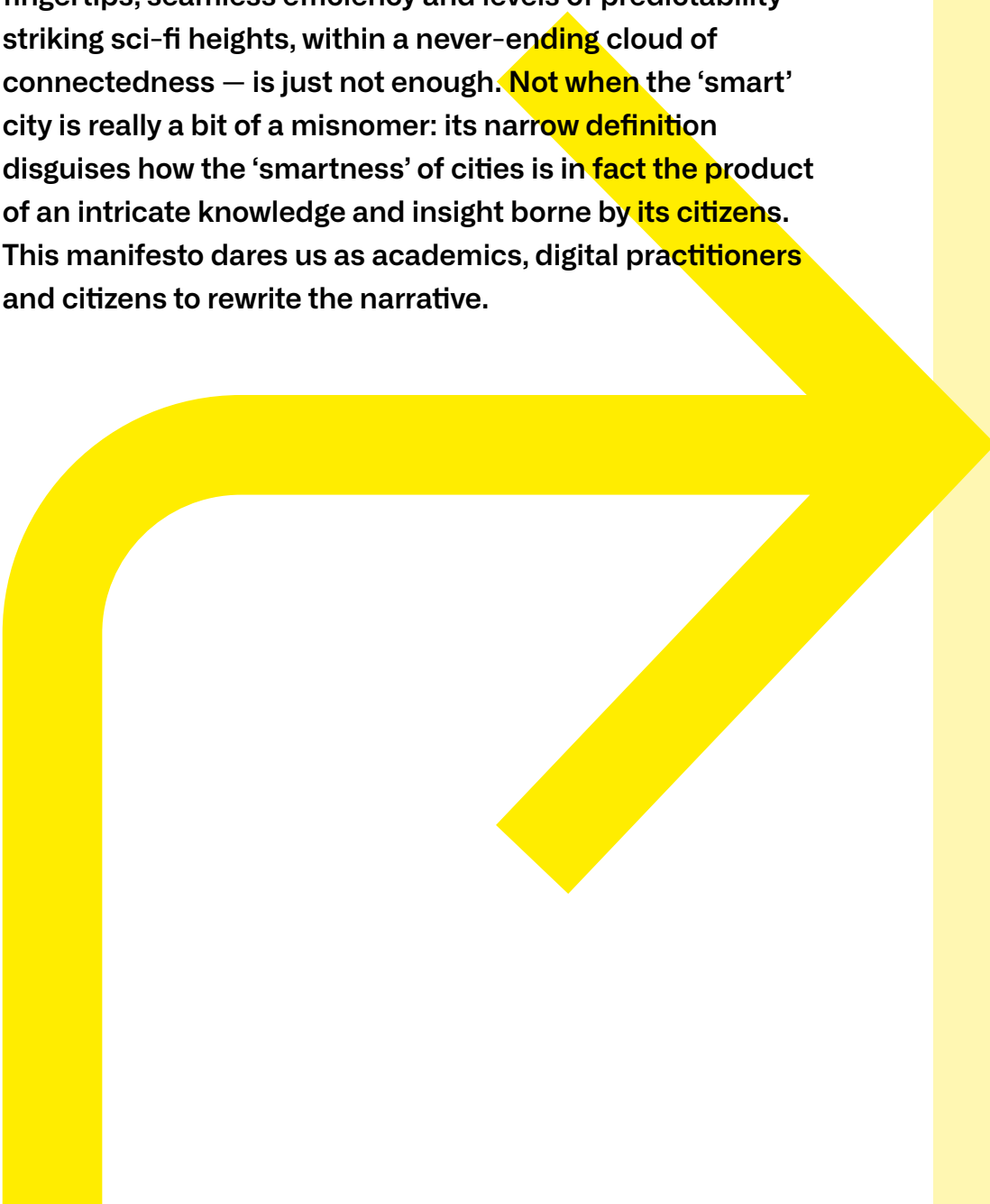
POWER TO THE CITIZEN! is a manifesto for the public authoring of our cities. The rhetoric we see pushed and increasingly peddled — of unimaginable convenience at our fingertips, seamless efficiency and levels of predictability striking sci-fi heights, within a never-ending cloud of connectedness — is just not enough. Not when the 'smart' city is really a bit of a misnomer: its narrow definition disguises how the 'smartness' of cities is in fact the product of an intricate knowledge and insight borne by its citizens. This manifesto dares us as academics, digital practitioners and citizens to rewrite the narrative.

Open-access datasets and open-source code are some of the tools we now find at our disposal, but of course, these are not without limitation. There are biases hidden deep within the algorithms we design and data is not always neutral. As we take hold of the code, we'll need to design new tools, combining digital and physical processes to ensure that we don't propagate further inequality. Conversing with a wide and diverse audience in a language that is not always 'digital' will have to become the new norm as we act collectively, connecting and building alliances amongst community groups, universities, local practitioners and governments. Evolving the technology used by communities, will be critical in opening-up the capacity for citizen self-determination. A shift that is essential in empowering communities to be collaborators rather than passive spectators from the sidelines.

As we disrupt together, we will need to recognise the unique history and character of every city and borough — at the same time ensuring our efforts are complementary and we do not waste time reinventing the wheel. The reality is, each neighbourhood might not need a bespoke solution. We should be focused on how to build adaptable platforms with open-endedness in mind, sharing this knowledge often. The real challenge will lie in connecting local need to metropolitan support whilst scaling-up individual experimentation to deliver for different groups of citizens, without becoming generic and losing value.

Appropriation of technology needs to form the backbone of this collaborative endeavour. We will undoubtedly find value in platforms that are at once open-ended, but framed. In platforms that are sustainable, engaging with a wide community of users, coders and mappers not only to maintain and update data, but to take charge of inventing and reinventing over time. Such ownership might just start to melt away some of the tension between top-down and bottom-up approaches to city-making.

Technology doesn't stand alone. There is a complex spatial social condition that surrounds and influences place-making and how we think about it. But the digital can unlock new capacities for street-level facilitation. We should unearth new ways that enable people to author, shape, write or make narratives about the environment around them. This will likely be a blend of citizen insight and education, along with digital tools co-produced and applied in creative, intelligent ways. Our task will be to find innovative mediating mechanisms that work to inform, educate and connect.

Harnessing this type of thinking will enable analyses of other datasets (not just those which have been made publicly available) to widen and diversify the data discussion. We should use this to our best advantage: to enable a more proactive position at the early stages of consultation, rather than a reactive stance. The challenge of getting heard and the friction between consulting with an individual versus communities has always been problematic. By seeing city-making (which includes processes of consultation) as a continued dialectic, we might even find value in more ad-hoc, asynchronous modes of engagement, with people simply interacting and exchanging content on an as-and-when basis.

The 'smart city' hype will be resistant — it won't be easily erased. But with this call to action, the manifesto dares us to lessen its technocratic tone and flesh out new forms of digital democracy within the city. It asks that we turn our gaze from market-led to community-led models that communicate, connect, investigate and mobilise in open source ways. Without a conversation between cities and its citizens, we're simply building 'smart' castles in the sky.

This manifesto is based on a public panel session held on 25 July 2017 at Base KX in London.

Speakers included Lucy Bullivant (curator, author and founder/editor in chief of urbanista.org), Nicolas Fonty (JustMap), Stephen Lorimer (Greater London Authority), Adam Dennett (The Bartlett Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, UCL), and Ava Fatah gen. Schieck (The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL).

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