



EDGELANDS INSTITUTE

A pop-up institute to reimagine urban social contracts for the digital age

2021 REPORT

INTRODUCTION

This document is a report and summary of the Edgelands Institute's activities and plans for the years 2021-2022. It begins with a brief introduction of the Institute, a summary of the activities so far conducted in Medellín, the first Edgelands City; a summary of the activities being conducted and planned in Geneva for 2022.

THE EDGE LANDS INSTITUTE

1. CONTEXT

We are in an era of mass disruption and rapid digital transformation. Faced with large-scale issues like pandemic and war, governments are struggling with record lows of institutional trust. In response to these challenges, they often employ digital tools, particularly for security. But these tools are remaking the borders between public and private and disrupting *social contracts*: the rules that govern how citizens and governments coexist. Lack of inclusive policy and monopolization of decision-making leads to surveillance technologies that worsen discrimination, over policing, and other social inequalities.

The Edgelands Institute studies how digitalization of security is changing urban social contracts. We focus on cities as they are at the epicenter of disruption: both the testbed for digital tools and at the forefront of progress. Cities urgently need *new* social contracts for the digital age, policies that are co-designed by all local actors. We facilitate the creation of these policies by creating pop-ups (temporary, high-energy events) for stakeholder engagement. We have chosen 7 specific cities based on their unique histories of security governance and their use of digital surveillance technology.

Our pop-up model breaks barriers of exclusivity often found in policy-making, where important decisions about security and surveillance are left to the "experts" and not open to all. We employ a variety of creative events that convene disparate groups, allow them to have honest conversations that honor their diversity of experience, and co-design solutions for security in cities.

2. THE INSTITUTE

The Edgelands Institute was incubated at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University until June 2021 when it was turned into an independent

Swiss association, based in Geneva. Edgelands is designed and organized as a multi-disciplinary pop-up organization that uses academic research, data analytics and visualization, and art to explore how the digitalization of urban security is changing the **urban social contract**—the often-unseen rules that govern our cities. Surveillance tech and other digital tools are changing urban social contracts in ways that can be difficult to see or describe. Edgelands uses art, data visualization, and conversation as a way to give visibility to this issue and engage populations that are not generally involved in such discussions.

At the Edgelands Institute, we view our role as that of a facilitator: working within spaces that just need the tools or nudges to connect and co-design. We create the connective structure for self-sustaining movements within each city that can continue long after our Institute has dissolved.

During our limited lifespan, we will **set up temporary residences** in Medellin, Cucuta, Geneva, Nairobi, Singapore, Chicago, and Beirut, seven cities with very different contexts and social realities. Edgelands structures each **city pop-up** around three steps:

1. Research: We conduct research including stakeholder interviews on each city's security landscape. We repeat and refine this process during our academic workshops, where we work with young adults on questions related to digitalization, surveillance, and governance.
2. Public Art: Interventions in physical spaces are just as important as those within the world of ideas. This is particularly true within cities, where sharing of spaces is intrinsic to the environment. We direct creative activities that help citizens re-imagine urban co-existence.
3. Participatory Workshops: The question of surveillance technology and digital governance policies requires the engagement of multiple stakeholders: the public, the government, and the private sector. We create opportunities for representatives from these groups to work together.

While events in each city are locally focused, we will facilitate strategic exchange between the networks and governments of each city we work in.

WORK IN MEDELLIN

The Edgelands Institute started its first in-city engagement in Medellin, Colombia. We began by conducting a series of over 35 semi-structured interviews on the security and technology landscape of the city with local stakeholders, the culmination of which was **the Edgelands' first report *Medellin: A diagnostic report on urban security***,

surveillance, and challenges to the urban social contract. The interview process also allowed us to build a solid and always expanding network of people and stakeholders in the city. Since its publication, this report has been quoted extensively by local and national researchers.

Based on the preliminary research we have conducted and/or are conducting five main activities in Medellin:

- **A research sprint with circa 50 young people** from the city, in partnership with the Center for Political Analysis of Universidad EAFIT. The sprint allowed students to be in conversation with local and international experts on issues related to security and surveillance. The Sprint resulted in a **second report *Another Urban Social Contract is Possible: Lessons from Te Estamos Grabando***, and the drafting of a “**Youth Manifesto**,” by the participants, on their hopes and expectations for the future of the city.
- **A three-week Arts residency, MATZA-EDGE LANDS**, brought to Medellin a group of 11 national and international artists to Medellin. The residence was fed by the Institute’s previous research and also the inputs of local and international experts of the Edgelands Network. The Residency’s result was a contemporary arts exhibition open to the public in Bodega Comfama in Medellin until the end of March 2022.
- **A data analytics and visualization with circa 40 young people** from the city in partnership with the Center for Political Analysis of Universidad EAFIT. The sprint is ongoing and it allows data-analytics savvy students to engage with local stakeholders—from the city government to civil society organizations—to use their analytic skills to answer policy problems related to surveillance and security in the city and add to the narrative of security of the city. The sprint will result in a report with the research findings as well as a presentation for local stakeholders.
- **A Civic Lab with Fundación Mi Sangre with circa 35 mid-career leaders** of the city from different backgrounds to be in conversation with each other and local and international experts on issues related to security and surveillance. March/April 2022.
- **Engagement with high officials of the Medellin municipality.** We have engaged with various high-level officials of the city government of Medellin, most notably with the secretary of security. In February 2022, we closed a research partnership with them and the city government has been regularly attending and collaborating in several of our ongoing engagements.

Forthcoming in Medellin in 2022 are:

- An art residency and a two-day workshop with Magnum Photographer Peter van Agtmael. March/April 2022.
- **A series of workshops with high-school students with Editores de Ciudad**, one of the city's most important after-school programs of civic education in Comuna 13. March/April 2022.

Key learnings from our work in Medellin thus far:

- **The advantages of being a pop-up:** Our time-bound pop-up nature allows us to show up in cities with both humility and high energy. We are perceived as actors who do rigorous research and are respectful of local expertise—instead of bringing some ideas from abroad—while presenting a conversation that is interesting and novel. The speed and energy of our interventions are attractive while at the same time making us non-threatening; we are not planning to stay and challenge local actors' places. At the same time, they invite local actors to own that conversation—they have been inviting us to more and new spaces or to explore with them how we can continue supporting them, as they take on the work of the conversation.
- **Edgelands is a facilitator:** We are mostly facilitators for conversations between different actors—and our impartiality and foreignness allow us to bring together stakeholders that would otherwise not meet in non-threatening or confrontational spaces.
- **The snowball effect/spiral nature of Edgelands:** We often say Edgelands works like a spiral: trying to bring new people in while always working with old friends. Thus, during the interview process, we always asked interviewees who else we should talk to, we have then invited these people to our different events, always adding new layers of experts, students, and regular people. This has allowed us to build a solid base of allies in the city that know us and know our work and can vouch for us when we explore new partners/projects.
- **The importance of "coexistence":** In Medellin and Colombia in general, policy-makers don't speak about urban security but urban security and **coexistence** (in Spanish, *convivencia*, which means living together). This organizational and policy emphasis has its roots in the mid-90s and the toughest day of the war against drugs. We find this emphasis, and broader understanding of what security actually entails—the ability to live together—fascinating as it expands the type of measures that can be taken to address insecurity that goes well beyond traditional "law and order" or blunt surveillance—from strengthening urban infrastructure to hosting soccer games—, and it is one of the key learnings we want to take from Medellin to the other cities in which we work.

- **The importance of youth but also including mid-career professionals:** We are convinced of the importance, power, and energy of working with youth as they bring energy and thoughtfulness into our spaces. At the same time, we have identified that it is participants in their late 20s and early 30s who can carry the work and intention of Edgelands to their own organizations and spaces with greater ease, achieving lasting change. Thus, we will open up more spaces for people within this age and career range.

WORK/PREPARATION IN GENEVA

The preparation for **Edgelands Geneva** began in the summer of 2021, with a comprehensive review of policies and reports related to security practices in the city, and the study of literature that examined social issues, challenges, and opportunities in Geneva related to security and digitization.

During the fall of 2021, we established key partnerships with collaborators such as Département de la Culture et de la Transition Numérique of the City of Geneva, The Graduate Institute, Stiftung Mercator Schweiz, Dezentrum, and Maison Rousseau de Littérature. In conversation with the City of Geneva, we have decided that one of the main focuses of our work in the city will be the nature and impact of **digital inequality**.

The active work of Edgelands in Geneva started in **February 2022** and in its first pop-up iteration will go until **February 2023**. The Institute will then come back to the city in 2024. As in Medellín, the Institute will host and co-host different interventions and activities that will bring citizens, policy-makers, academics, and other stakeholders into the dialogue about the way that digital tools are transforming the urban social fabric.

Our research in the city so far reveals four main important trends: First, there is a divide between “regular” Geneva, and “international” Geneva, there is far less information about how surveillance and security are perceived in regular Geneva and, particularly amongst vulnerable populations like migrants. Second, the providers of security and surveillance service in Geneva are varied. Not only does the city have its own security and surveillance infrastructure, as all cities do, but different embassies, international organizations, and, particularly, financial institutions do too. How these different providers interact or not is of great interest to us. Third, there are growing concerns about digital inequality and the people that are being left behind as many local services are digitized. Though people in Geneva have relatively good access to electronic devices and the Internet, it is still difficult for a surprisingly high number of people to interact with local services through digital interfaces. Finally, increased digitization raises

important cyber-security risks, which have become very evident with recent incidents such as the attacks on the ICRC, the data leak of Credit Suisse, and this security weak spot found in the Swiss railway system.

Main activities in Geneva during 2022 exploring these issues will be:

- **Diagnostic report** on urban security, surveillance, privacy, and challenges to the urban social contract in Geneva based on a series of over - 40 interviews with local experts on urban security and digitization. [Ongoing—will be done by the end of April 2022].

Based on our positive experience working with youth in Medellin we are not only focusing the research on the differentiated impact that the securities challenges in the city have on the youth, but we are also including young people from the research stage. For this we hired four students from the Graduate Institute who are participating in the process of deciding and contacting the relevant stakeholders for the interviews, they are performing most of the interviews, and will also participate in the writing of the diagnostic report.

- **Research sprint with young people** from the city, in partnership with a local university and local youth. We will integrate into this sprint youth from different universities and “rivers” of the city, such as the Graduate Institute and the Open University. The objective of the sprint will be to bring students in conversation with each other and local and international experts. The key output of this activity will be a **second report** that will further challenges and opportunities that exist at the intersection of security and digital technologies. [Summer 2022].
- **Data results** from the digital conversation we will launch with OPPI platform. This data will allow us to better understand the perceptions of people living in Geneva about certain elements of the social contract related to the digitalization of security and privacy. [July to October 2022].
- **Data Visualization and Analytics Research Sprint** with a Swiss university and local youth. The key output will be data visualizations developed by the workshop’s participants aimed to contribute to the city’s security narrative and the public policy that seeks to address it. [Fall 2022]
- **Art Residencies and exhibitions** exploring the relation between security, digitalization, and the social contract in Geneva with key partners such as [Magnum photos](#), [Matza](#), [International Museum of the Red Cross](#) local network of artists). [December 2022/January 2023]

- **Research partnerships and projects with local NGOs and think tanks** such as Dezentrum (focused on digitization and society), the Transdisciplinary Research Network of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, and the [Maison Rousseau and Literature](#). All of these engagements will seek to bring citizens, policy-makers, academics, and other stakeholders into the dialogue about the way that digital tools are transforming the urban social fabric and imagine the Geneva of the Future.
- **Co-host events** to create spaces for exchanges/collaborations between Geneva and other Edgelands cities (i.e., Medellín, Nairobi, Cúcuta). [Mid summer 2022]
- **Research sprint for policy-makers:** We will co-host a research sprint for early-career policy-makers and researchers from Geneva and the different Edgelands Cities in partnership with the Digital Asia Hub, based in Singapore and Hong Kong.

Outcomes

In the short-term, the Edgelands Institute will:

- **Promote findings** of the Edgelands diagnostic report, research sprint, and data workshops to inform shared vision and the city strategy in an attractive, interactive way.
- **Accelerate synergies and collaborations** between local partners and stakeholders to deliver results of the demonstration projects for digital literacy, security, and youth.
- **Raise public awareness** and **engage youth** in active discourse and participation.
- **Build collaborations with emerging media** and develop, in co-creation with the digital generation, awareness of the problems posed by the surveillance society.
- **Co-host spaces** for discussion and learning to empower and engage young people.
- **Accelerate synergies and collaborations** between the Geneva government and the local governments of other Edgelands cities.

In the long-term, the Edgelands Institute's and its partners' work will:

- **Start a meaningful and strong conversation** in Geneva to transform it into a city where youth's needs are a priority, especially in regards to their inclusion in the digital transformation, security-related challenges, and surveillance-related policies.

- **Empower a new generation of leaders** in Geneva when it comes to discussing questions relating to digitization and its impact on the social contract in the urban area of Geneva.
- **Accelerate best practices are scaled upbringing** learnings from Geneva and other cities to the international arena and scene of the city, contributing to the city's strategic place globally.

OTHER PLANS FOR 2022–2023

In 2022 the Institute will start exploring connections and doing research in Nairobi, Kenya in the spring of 2022. As of March 2022, the Institute is also conducting research in Cúcuta, Colombia, and will launch a smaller version of its pop-up there in the summer of 2022.

All the reports and resources cited on this document can be found on our website <https://edgelands.institute/>.

