

THE EDGELANDS INSTITUTE

2024 REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The Edgelands Institute has entered a new phase of the pop-up strategy: we have reached the majority of age and began planning for our next and final stage.

In 2024, we have reached a number of milestones as a well-established organization. We closed our Medellín chapter with an in-person meeting of the core team, fellows and local partners - a first of its kind for Edgelands. We launched and went full speed ahead in Houston with a complete pop-up strategy that includes research, curated conversations, movement-building and art explorations. We dug deeper in Geneva through our intercity digital pop-ups to reflect the common concerns of our citizens. We continued building on our experiences and local networks in Nairobi.

Moreover, we were able to continue our substantive research by means of a grant from the Digital Infrastructure Insights Fund (supported by the Ford and Sloan foundations). The project explored issues surrounding cybersecurity and the use of open source software in city governments.

Now as we look ahead to the closing stage of Edgelands, we reflect on all we have built and achieved.

This report summarizes the activities and milestones of the Edgelands Institute in 2024 and provides an overview of the activities planned for 2025. We will start with an introduction to our worldview, work and goals, and then present some key findings from our research and projects in each city.

Founded in 2021, The Edgelands Institute is a multi-disciplinary organization that uses academic research, data, and art to explore how the digitalization of urban security is changing the urban social contract — the often-unseen rules that govern our cities. We create pop-up spaces that bring citizens, policy makers, academics, and other stakeholders into dialogue about the way that digital tools are being used by city governments and transforming urban social fabric.

The pop-up nature of Edgelands is characterized by two key aspects. First, it reflects the institute's limited lifespan. From the very beginning, Edgelands was designed to be a temporary organization that would exist for only four to five years. This pop-up concept - and the dynamic energy it brings - is central to our work. We believe that a pop-up approach helps break down barriers to accessibility and diversify the experiences of those involved, addressing challenges often found in traditional academic and policymaking circles. The temporary nature of pop-ups generates excitement and raises awareness of the complex issues we address in a relatively short period of time, while bringing together a wide range of stakeholders through active participation. Second, it refers to the way we work on cities and engage with diverse communities and stakeholders to reflect on issues at the intersection of security, digital technologies and the urban social contract.

Our pop-up model breaks barriers of exclusivity often found in policymaking, 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 bring together different stakeholders, curating and facilitating open conversations to co-design solutions for security in their cities. Our method and activities produce a snowball effect which extends our work through our networks and partnerships, enabling local organizations ownership of the movement, making it scalable and replicable.

The Institute is also a global movement. We set up temporary residence in select cities across the globe that have made innovative strides in their use of digital technologies, particularly in application to security, and we create connections and networks to put the cities in dialogue of their stories and experiences.

The Edgelands pop-up work cycle in each city follows a basic structure:

→ **Research:** Our research process includes stakeholder interviews on each city's security landscape. We continuously repeat and refine this process during the academic workshops, where we partner with young adults on questions related to digitalization, surveillance and governance.

→ **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.

→ **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.

Our selected cities continued to be the focus of our work in 2024. Our work in Medellín came to an end with an in-person symposium which served as a closing event and space for continued reflection and connection. We launched our work in Houston, USA through the lens of surveillance and security in schools. Below is a recount of the main activities in each city and the key learnings we took from them.

GENEVA

→ ACTIVITIES

INTERCITY DIGITAL POP-UP

As part of Geneva 2.0 we brought the Edgelands network together for an intercity dialogue. This dialogue was an opportunity to exchange experiences, observations and solutions from each of the Edgelands cities, as well as from the perspectives of different stakeholders within these cities.

To guide these conversations, we took inspiration from the addition of a right to digital integrity in the Geneva constitution, voted in June 2023. This decision will govern the relationship between the Geneva government and its citizens, a good example of the renegotiation of the urban social contract in the digital age.

In the text adopted in Geneva, digital integrity includes the right to be protected from the misuse of data relating to one's digital life, the right to security in digital space, the right to an offline life, and the right to be forgotten. It also includes an active responsibility of the state to promote digital inclusion, to raise awareness of digital issues, to commit to the development of digital sovereignty in Switzerland and to cooperate in its implementation.

Building on this idea, the intercity digital pop-up provided a platform to further define some aspects of this right, explore its implications in other Edgelands cities, and, more broadly, deepen our reflections on the digitalisation of security and our collective ability to live together in cities.

This digital pop-up was a series of five curated virtual conversation spaces, bringing together stakeholders from across the Edgelands cities. Using the Edgelands pop-up methodology, each conversation served as a building block, enriching the discourse with insights from previous discussions.



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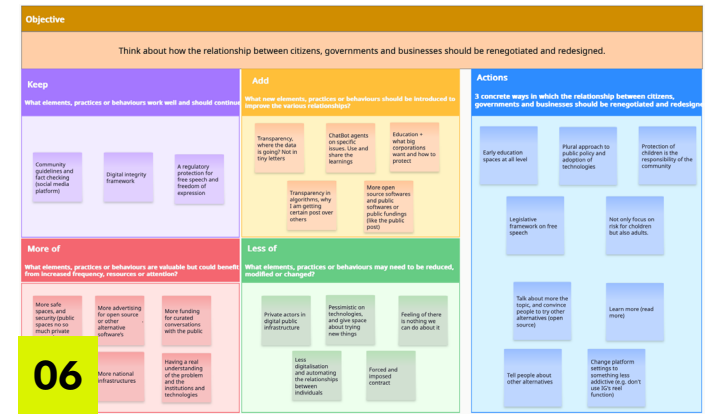
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CONVERSATIONS

1. [A Collective Reflection on Digital Integrity](#)
2. [Finding Common Ground on Key Concepts](#)
3. [Use of AI to Provide Security as a Public Service](#)
4. [People Expectations on Transparency and Security](#)
5. [Urban Social Contract and Security](#)
6. [Redefining the Urban Social Contract: Gen Z's Experiences and Expectations for Digital Integrity](#)

OPEN GENEVA HACKATHON

[READ BLOG POST →](#)

On November 1st and 2nd, Edgelands Institute participated in the Smart City Xperience hackathon organised by Open Geneva and HEG. As part of the event, Edgelands proposed the challenge: "Invisible Code, Visible Impact: The challenge of open source software for Geneva's digital future".

Over 24 hours, participants offered different perspectives on the question: "How do we get people to use OSS?" For their proposed solution, they envisioned Libre Connect, a public-private entity dedicated to promoting and facilitating the adoption of OSS in Geneva's public, private and semi-public sectors.

To communicate the importance of their solution, the participants created a video that showcased their solution and emphasised the urgent need to integrate OSS into Geneva's digital strategy. The video presents a dystopian vision of Europe's digital future, where mega-corporations use centralised algorithms and proprietary systems to undermine democracy and diminish local autonomy. In the midst of this dystopia, Geneva emerges as a stronghold of digital freedom, championing economic self-sufficiency and sustainable, community-driven growth through OSS and local infrastructure. The video positions OSS as essential for preserving local control, safeguarding democracy and fostering economic resilience.

→ KEY LEARNINGS

✓ Protecting personal data is crucial for urban safety while respecting individual rights.

✓ Urban life is deeply transformed by digital tools, requiring ethical, and social reflection.

✓ Controlled environments are essential for city governments to test AI applications safely and gain insights into their impacts.

✓ Cities should prioritize transparency in AI governance by clearly communicating policies, ethical standards, and decision-making processes to build trust and accountability.

✓ Social organizations play a vital role in fostering safety by addressing diverse community needs beyond traditional policing methods.

✓ Shifting focus from law enforcement to community-driven initiatives that prioritize inclusivity and proactive solutions for urban safety.

✓ Gen Z expects transparency, ethical practices, and accountability from institutions managing their data and digital interactions.

✓ Gen Z prioritizes inclusion, sustainability, and trust in shaping urban governance. To do so, they have called for access to information about how their data is collected and used.

HOUSTON

→ ACTIVITIES

- **Report Launch:** Edgelands hosted a virtual launch of the [Houston Youth Surveillance Report](#), where we discussed how Houston's public school system, known for its diversity and rapid growth, has turned into testing grounds for digital surveillance technologies. From AI-powered cameras to vape detectors and "aggression" analyzers, these tools are marketed as solutions to safety and efficiency. Yet, their adoption raises pressing questions about equity, privacy, and the very purpose of education.
- **Ending Youth Surveillance Series:** Edgelands Institute has co-hosted the "Ending Youth Surveillance Virtual Series" in partnership with the NOTICE Coalition. The speaker series focuses on the intersection of technology and youth justice, with past speakers including Dr. Rua Williams and Cameron Samuels, exploring topics like disability justice, censorship, and anti-LGBTQ+ policies. Watch the full recordings on [Youtube](#).
- Edgelands Fellow [Tammie Campbell Lang](#) hosted a A.I. Community Awareness event in partnership with Houston Community College. Over 100 young people and school officials were in the audience.
- Edgelands went to the capitol with [SEAT - Students Engaged in Advancing Texas](#) for an Advocacy day, where SEAT youth delegates proposed a new bill on Web Filters, HB. 2469: <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/89R/billtext/pdf/HB02469I.pdf#navpanes=0>
- The Houston team partnered with the Edgelands communication team to create a series of social media content focused on engaging youth and high-schoolers to talk about the use of web filters in Houston public schools. Catch up with our content on [Instagram](#), [Linkedin](#) or [Tiktok](#).
- Houston visit: Over an entire week, members of the Edgelands core team visited the Houston local team and followed up a series of activities, encounters and artistic practices with the Houston fellows. We had the pleasure of having important conversations with Christianna Thomas, Chinelo Dike, Jeremy Eugene, Jonathan Rodriguez, Ms. Tammie Campbell and Joy, each one of them engaging with the ed-tech issue from a different perspective and bringing to the table their personal experiences.

→ KEY LEARNINGS



While officials often acquire these technologies with the intention of improving how public schools function and operate, our research has shown that most of these corporate technologies are inadequate for addressing the durable problems within Texas public schools and often exacerbate underlying structural and systemic problems.



VAPE DETECTION: In recent years, Houston-area districts have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on vape detection sensors. We explore the ways such devices fuel punitive policies that push kids out of the classroom and into the criminal legal system, especially when implemented alongside a recent Texas law which mandates automatic placement in a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) for any student who is found with a vaping device near campus.



SHOTSPOTTER: In 2022, the Houston City Council signed a five year, multi-million dollar contract for ShotSpotter, a technology that uses audio sensors to detect gunshots. Earlier this year, it was revealed that the Houston Police Department installed ShotSpotter microphones on or near 65 schools in Spring Branch ISD, Aldine ISD, and Houston ISD.¹⁰ We look at the ways the placement of ShotSpotter in or around schools creates a web of police surveillance that is used to justify ongoing police presence in hyper-policed locales.



WEB FILTERS: Web filters are used in most US public schools as a means of complying with federal regulation regarding the protection of children from harmful content and predatory behavior online. However, research has shown that web filters are both technically flawed and prone to manipulation by school officials and policymakers.



VIRTUAL TEACHING PLATFORMS: As school districts contend with widespread teacher shortages, virtual teaching services have become a rapidly growing industry. Rather than alleviate the structural problems causing teacher shortages, virtual teaching services make it hard to foster a strong sense of community within schools and chip away at the value of public education as a public good.

NAIROBI

→ ACTIVITIES

PRE-UNCSC 2024: AI, SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGIES, AND DIGITAL SECURITY GOVERNANCE

The AI and Cyber-Tech Governance ImPACT Coalition, led by the Lawyers Hub and Stimson Center, conducted an in-depth analysis in the governance of surveillance technologies, cybersecurity, and AI. The Lawyers Hub, a Pan-African digital, law, data governance, and policy think tank was the host and partner for the Research Sprint 2023 facilitated by Edgeland's Nairobi. The coalition addressed key challenges, threats, and opportunities within regulatory, security, and digital equity frameworks. Guided by principles of safety, sustainability, and inclusion, discussions aligned with the Pact for the Future—particularly Chapter Three on science, technology, innovation, and digital cooperation—as well as the Global Digital Compact's Objective 5, which emphasizes responsible governance of emerging technologies.

The UNCSC session in Nairobi explored strategies for enhancing the global governance of AI and cyber technologies, aiming to balance security imperatives with human rights and equitable access. The coalition's findings contributed to intergovernmental negotiations leading up to the Summit of the Future in September 2024. Coalition members also remained engaged with the United Nations, international organizations, and national governments to support implementation efforts for the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact.

AT THE UNITED NATIONS CIVIL SOCIETY CONFERENCE - NAIROBI, MAY 2024

OBJECTIVES AND KEY LEARNINGS

- **Global AI Risk Governance** Strengthening international mechanisms for monitoring and responding to security risks posed by AI, including potential misuse in surveillance technologies and autonomous systems. The coalition emphasized the need for transparent, accountable AI risk assessment methodologies that prioritize human rights, rule of law and digital security.
- **Regulatory Interoperability** Developing international frameworks to ensure harmonization and interoperability of national AI and cybersecurity regulations. This includes standardizing oversight mechanisms for surveillance technologies to prevent regulatory gaps that could compromise global security and digital sovereignty.
- **Inclusion and Accessibility** Expanding global access to AI-related infrastructure, digital security training, and capacity-building programs. Ensuring equitable representation in AI research and policy discussions, particularly for marginalized groups, remains a priority.
- **Institutional Strengthening and Partnerships** Leveraging existing and emerging UN mechanisms to enhance AI and cyber governance. Strengthening government capacities through readiness assessments, ethical AI impact methodologies, and multi-stakeholder dialogues, such as the UNESCO Global Forum on the Ethics of AI and the ITU AI for Good Summit.

BRINGING THE PACT HOME – CIVIL SOCIETY CONSULTATION ON THE SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE

Edgeland's Nairobi led an interactive World Café session at the United Nations Office in Nairobi on the Global Digital Compact following the adoption of the Pact for the Future by global member states at the UNGA 2024. We explored actionable strategies to expand technology access and strengthen digital safety and security within the diverse communities in Kenya.

This initiative convened by the United Nations Information Service in Nairobi (UNON) had a key focus on promoting robust digital and technological governance through policies that advance digital cooperation, cybersecurity, and equitable access to technology. Additionally, it prioritized safeguarding human rights, fostering gender equality, and empowering youth while ensuring long-term protections for future generations. To achieve these objectives, this session advocated for a transformative approach to global governance by engaging a diverse range of stakeholders—including governments, civil society, academia, and the private sector—to enhance decision-making effectiveness.

KEY INITIATIVES:

- Advocating for comprehensive cyber harassment legislation to protect vulnerable populations from digital abuse.
- Promoting digital literacy initiatives to strengthen public awareness of online security and data protection.
- Collaborating with technology firms to mitigate the risks associated with online surveillance and unauthorized data collection.
- Supporting the development and enforcement of data protection and privacy regulatory frameworks.
- Engaging youth and underrepresented communities in digital governance initiatives to ensure diverse perspectives in policy development.

→ KEY LEARNINGS



The need to restructure international cooperation frameworks to better address emerging global challenges and enhance their effectiveness.



Evolving digital governance is essential to promote equitable access, robust data protection, and cybersecurity at a global scale.



Strengthening multilateralism requires mechanisms that ensure inclusivity and accountability in global decision-making.



Policies and frameworks must be developed to uphold human rights, gender equality, and intergenerational justice in the digital era.



Fostering collaboration among diverse global stakeholders is crucial for improving the implementation and impact of the Pact for the Future.

EDGELANDS SYMPOSIUM: BRIDGING BOUNDARIES IN TECH, SECURITY, SOCIAL CONTRACT, AND DIGITAL INTEGRITY

On 22-23 February, the Edgelands Institute hosted its first pop-up symposium in Medellín, bringing together international Edgelands, fellows and key stakeholders from Medellín. This event served both as a platform for collective reflection on urban security, digital technologies and governance, and as an opportunity to officially conclude the Edgelands Medellín Pop-Up. Discussions focused on critical issues related to security policies, surveillance and the evolving urban social contract in a rapidly digitising world.

Key findings from the symposium, which have continued to inform the work of Edgelands, highlighted the complex relationship between security, politics, and technology. Participants explored the role of surveillance cameras, city governments, and media discourse in shaping urban security narratives. They emphasised the importance of inclusive policy innovation, transparency, and distinguishing between the technology itself and its human impact. Discussions also highlighted the need to critically examine who benefits from security technologies and who may be excluded or overlooked in their implementation.

A dedicated workshop on digital integrity and security explored four key themes: the use of AI for public safety, transparency, the social contract and digital sovereignty. Participants raised pressing questions about AI regulation, power dynamics in security governance, and the intersection of urban and national digital sovereignty.

The symposium also explored the role of art as a tool for critical engagement, with artists offering unique perspectives on security and digital landscapes. The tangible format of the Edgelands ArtBook was particularly noted for its ability to bridge connections between cities, issues and lived experiences.

RESEARCH GRANT: DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE INSIGHTS FUND

With a grant from the Digital Infrastructure Insights Fund (supported by the Ford and Sloan foundations) we completed a research project focused on cybersecurity and maintenance vulnerabilities faced by cities and municipal governments. The goal of the project is to highlight the role of cities and municipal governments in maintaining and supporting Open Source Software (OSS) in this country. It does so from the perspective of the incentives and barriers to adopt and maintain OSS, and the related challenges to cybersecurity. A final report is expected to be published in 2025.

→ KEY LEARNINGS

- ✓ **OSS Adoption is Growing:** Municipalities in Colombia, especially larger cities like Bogotá and Medellín, are increasingly using open-source software to improve governance and public services.
- ✓ **Smaller municipalities face barriers:** Limited financial and technical resources hinder OSS adoption and cybersecurity preparedness in smaller local governments.
- ✓ **Cybersecurity challenges persist:** Key obstacles include a lack of skilled personnel, outdated procurement regulations, insufficient cybersecurity resources, and cultural resistance to OSS.
- ✓ **Strategic changes are needed:** A unified national cybersecurity strategy, IT workforce investment, modernized procurement policies, and a cultural shift toward OSS are crucial for success.
- ✓ **Urgent cybersecurity action required:** Deploying tools like the OSV scanner can help municipalities detect and respond to security threats in real-time, strengthening their cybersecurity posture.

LOOKING AHEAD: POP DOWN AND POP BEYOND

As a pop-up institute, it was always our plan to be temporary. Our philosophy of temporary existence has allowed us to scale and replicate our methodology and projects in each city, making connections, curating dialogues, and producing key learnings and calls to action.

For this reason, Edgelands will explore a new frontier in 2025, which will be both a '**popping down**' and a '**popping beyond**' process. This approach will ensure that the Institute concludes as intended, following the proposed methodology, while creating opportunities to enable initiatives to continue beyond the Institute's closure.

The Pop Down and Beyond process will bring together partners, fellows, and the Edgelands team to reflect on the work of Edgelands over the past four years and explore ways forward. The process will be guided by the following six New Territories that have been collectively defined through a series of conversations involving the global Edgelands team, local partners, fellows, and board members.

THE BEACH:

The Beach team will explore the curation and organisation of a space to celebrate Edgelands' work and network as the Institute pops down. This space will embody the same spirit as previous Edgelands events: fun, celebratory

and engaging, and will be a space to share and reflect on Edgelands' achievements over the past 5 years and possible Pop Beyond initiatives.

THE POP UP METHODOLOGY:

The Pop-Up Methodology team will explore how Edgeland's methodology and the reflections gathered over these four years can live on beyond the Institute's pop-down. This exploration is divided into two paths:

- **Path 1. Sharing the Methodology:** Bringing the pop-up methodology into different formats, accessible to anyone who wants to use it for different topics and contexts.
- **Path 2. Sharing Concepts and Reflections:** Transforming the concepts and reflections gathered over the past years into formats that are accessible to everyone.

THE ARTS:

Art has been a central pillar of Edgelands, bridging creative expression with research and dialogue. To make sure that this continues to be the case during this new frontier of the Institute, this new territory will have a distinct Pop Down and Pop Beyond elements:

- As part of the **Pop Down element**, The Arts team will explore how artistic elements can continue to shape the other New Territories, and will reflect on how to analyse, store, and narrate all the art that has been produced through Edgelands in the last four years.
- As part of the **Pop Beyond element**, The Arts team will reflect on the possibility of an initiative that uses art as the research process, to bring communities together and discuss the social contract through other forms of language and communication.

THE THEME:

The Theme team will explore the intersection between the urban social contract and digitalisation of security with a community centre approach that takes this into account:

- The focus will be on both the community and the individual, as they are the ones who use the different digital technologies as tools in their daily lives and are directly affected by the technologies.
- The conversation will be framed by understanding digital technologies not as abstract tools, but as tools used by individuals to communicate and create communities.

THE NETWORK:

The Network team will reflect and curate on how to keep the network connected and engaged after the institute pops downs, by creating a space for people to exchange information/knowledge/ideas and curating a (bi)annual ritual that takes into account that:

- **Space for exchange:** A key element of this space is people's willingness to share knowledge or ideas with others
- **(bi)Annual Ritual:** This should be a ritual that is exciting for people, that is spontaneous and at the same time has some of the key characteristics of previous Edgelands events - safe space, art, reflection and awareness raising.

THE ASIAN PERSPECTIVES:

In exploring the intersection of security digitisation and the urban social contract, Edgelands has always prioritised bringing diverse voices into the conversation—encompassing a range of perspectives, experiences, and expertise. After all, Edgelands' strength lies in its people and the collective intelligence they bring to research sprints, fellowships, and artistic interventions. This commitment has led the Institute to pop-up in cities across several continents.

Taking this into consideration, this New Territory team will reflect on how to integrate Asian perspectives into our broader thinking in order to deepen our reflection and reimagining of the urban social contract.

EDGE LANDS

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