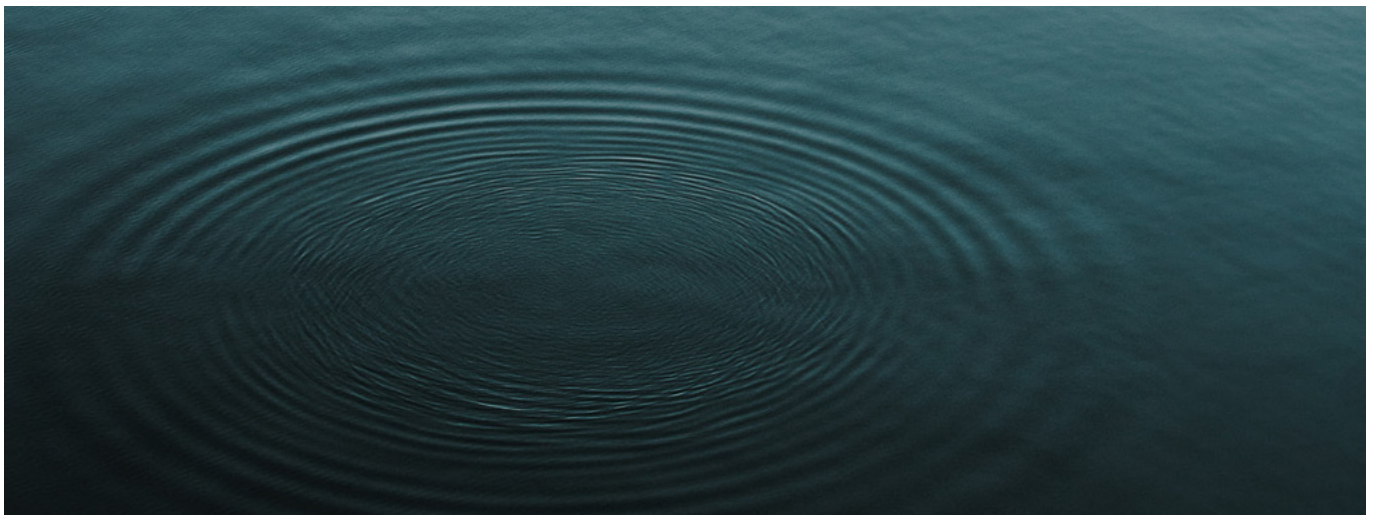**OPPORTUNITY #7**

What if technology-free zones were part of urban planning?

# TECH-FREE URBAN PLANNING

Establishing zones disconnected from devices and digital realities gives residents the freedom to unplug and recharge.



**MEGATREND**
Advanced Health and Nutrition

**TRENDS**
New Materials
Urban Design

**SECTORS AFFECTED**
Data Science, AI & Machine Learning
Immersive Technologies
Infrastructure & Construction
Media & Entertainment
Real Estate
Travel & Tourism
Government Services
Professional Services

## WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

Worldwide, the number of active devices connected to the Internet of Things (IoT) is projected to triple, from 9.8 billion in 2020 to over 29 billion in 2030.[241] These devices commonly possess 'always-on' sensors, such as accelerometers, magnetometers, gyroscopes, altimeters or barometers, global positioning systems (GPS)[242] and many more, which can reduce comfort and mental well-being.[243]

People use technology for a variety of reasons, so not all screen time should be considered the same.[244] However, in 2021 the average person had 6 hours and 58 minutes of internet-connected screen time per day, an increase from 50 minutes per day in 2013.[245]

The average American has 7 hours per day of screen time and the figure in the United Arab Emirates is around 8.5 hours, while South Africans average almost 11 hours.[246] This trend is not limited to adults and includes young children. Almost half (49%) of children up to two years old interact with smartphones.[247]

Google Trends shows that global searches for 'digital detox' have nearly doubled since 2015.[248] Searching for 'digital detox' on Google gives more than 39.2 million results, 18.7 million of which were added since the beginning of 2019.[249, 250]

Businesses are using this opportunity to help their customers stay offline. Some examples include the Hold app, which incentivises people to stay off their phone by giving them the opportunity to earn rewards, and the Digital Detox Retreats website, which lists hotels and destinations that have no Wi-Fi, phones or TVs.[251]

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## THE OPPORTUNITY

In a world where advanced connectivity is all around us, the deliberate creation of technology-free zones would be a paradigm shift for society and its citizens. Urban planners could intentionally help people who want to reduce the effects technology has on their routines, thought processes and emotions.

Designed to block communication signals and devoid of the integrated sensors and devices omnipresent in cities and homes, these spaces could be used to switch off – literally – and relax or to experiment with analogue ways of working. Pen and paper, non-AI-moderated discussion and brainstorming can exploit what research indicates about how we learn: that the brain absorbs and responds to information differently when the body is involved. For example, the act of writing something down helps us to remember it.[252]

Ubiquitous connectivity has its downsides – such as difficulty disconnecting from work completely and the inability to escape external stimuli such as screens – particularly as digital realities are expected to grow over time.[253] In addition to being a source of distraction, affecting concentration and recall, various forms of technology are actively intervening in our lives, from alarms and reminders concerning activity, sleep and calories to more intrusive examples such as remote work supervision and growing numbers of automated services and sensors.

The creation of technology-free spaces could encourage people to feel that it is acceptable to disconnect and experience the world without augmentation or prompting. These new urban zones could encourage people to interact with others without the mediating impact of a device.

## BENEFITS

Greater well-being at the individual and personal level. Potentially, an economic uplift as these zones may boost creative thinking, focus and relaxation.

## RISKS

People being unaccounted for as data from wearables become more prominent in policy-making and efforts towards safety.

Global searches for

# 'DIGITAL DETOX'

have

# DOUBLED

since 2015