Over recent years, we have witnessed the constant growth of urban density all around the world: according to the United Nations (UN), around 70% of the world’s population will live in cities by 2050. This global phenomenon is associated with numerous challenges, such as sustainable development and air quality, the transformation of transport and mobility, the preservation of public services, access to health care and the promotion of living better together.

In this publication, France urbaine, an association bringing together major cities, inter-municipalities and metropolises across France, wanted to draw up a panorama of the initiatives implemented by urban centres to make living better together of the city. In keeping with the topical issues of solidarity and access to public services, this publication examines the possible existence of a specific French model of the smart city.

THE SMART CITY: DOES A SPECIFIC FRENCH MODEL EXIST??

In view of the different contributions, rather than being a frenetic race to acquire new technologies, the use of digital technology by major French cities is the result of a global reflection process concerning its contribution to the improvement of local life: although technical in nature, digital technology should first and foremost be political and fulfil a societal function, in the general interest. The illustrations contained in the publication enable several common characteristics to be identified:

• THE QUEST FOR PERFORMANCE AND RESTRAINT
The development and exploitation of the smart city target performance, be it in terms of energy, to combat global warming, or in terms of mobility, in the face of increasing urban density. These aspects combine to make the city an attractive and desirable entity, while digital technology is positioned as being increasingly essential to maintain and develop public services.

• GOVERNANCE THAT IS HORIZONTAL AND LOCAL
The contributions described highlight a city that needs to be supported by an efficient governance structure, horizontally mobilising all local players contributing to the rapid development of usages and digital practices. Smart city projects need to be understood and embraced by citizens, by the people who interact with the city, and lend themselves to daily urban usages. The different contributions emphasise the creation of a local digital ecosystem – mobilising the local executive (elected officials and employees), businesses and start-ups, associations and citizens – to provide collective and appropriate reflection concerning digital and new technology usages for territories: a champion of the common good, the smart city should also be the champion of proximity.
• ADAPTATION OF PROJECTS TO SPECIFIC LOCAL CHARACTERISTICS
The problems and challenges facing cities are often common to all, as reflected in the determination to define a collective vision of the smart city and the way in which digital technology – new technologies, data, computerisation, artificial intelligence – should be adapted to local issues. Specific territorial aspects are thus of crucial importance: the specific feature of French smart cities is that they transcend project standardisation, implementing initiatives specific to their own territorial, social, geographic and cultural characteristics.

• A SMART CITY BASED ON AN “ALLIANCE OF TERRITORIES”
The social innovations stemming from the territories are the result of joint reflection processes, often transcending the perimeter of urban centres, since policies - living together, health, digital inclusion, etc. - are developed systemically, impacting both peri-urban and rural areas. French metropolises, made up of densely populated city centres with their high concentration of human and economic activities, also have peri-urban and rural zones within their territory, which are incorporated into reflection processes relating to the development of usages. For a city to be smart, it has to be a protection against territorial disparities and reflect in terms of reciprocity: such is the alliance of territories.

SMART CITY AND DIGITAL PUBLIC ACTION: WHAT PERSPECTIVES?
The promotion of these initiatives carries a message: give meaning to the digital era. The idea is not to make digital technology an end in itself or to convey a vision of “more digital”, but rather to address the issue of “better digital”: how can new information and communication technologies help improve public policies, maintain public services and foster more effective relations with citizens? Among the various changes and trends, major French cities and metropolises have opted to play the trust and transparency cards, well upstream of regulatory and legislative texts governing open data and data protection (French law relating to the Digital Republic of 7 October 2016, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of 25 May 2018). Local executive bodies are also contributing to the definition of “general interest data”, data that, although private in nature, may by exploited by public institutions due to their interest in terms of improving public policies.

Often poorly understood, the development of digital technology and its usages should be supported by significant political mobilisation: mayors – who are trusted by their citizens – should seize these opportunities to promote their acceptance and usage development. As such, Les Interconnectés/Réseau des territoires innovants, a national association led by France urbaine, has spent more than ten years disseminating digital usages and new technologies to local authorities across France. Its wide-ranging initiatives help raise awareness among mayors, local authority employees and all those more generally who want to act to support their region through digital technology.

A shared determination exists in French cities to develop practices relating to digital technology, consolidate incubators present in French urban centres by promoting innovation and experimentation and initiate a convergence between university research and issues associated with various digital public policies: the development of artificial intelligence (AI) from the point of view of economic development and ethics, privacy rights and data protection, cybersecurity, etc. In addition, major French cities, alongside other local institutions, the State, businesses and start-ups, are positioned to develop a French smart city model that fosters social and sustainable innovation for the benefit of all.