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THE ROLE OF AI IN GENERATING ENGAGEMENT IN INCLUSIVE SMART CITIES PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the role of artificial intelligence in the creative and narrative processes of university projects. Based on a survey conducted among teams participating in a Hackathon on Smart Cities and social inclusion, it examines the use of AI tools in the ideation, production, and presentation of audiovisual narratives, as well as their perceived impact on attention and engagement. The quantitative analysis is complemented by a qualitative focus group with team leaders. The results show that AI acts as a strategic facilitator of communicative impact, while also posing challenges related to creativity, narrative diversity, and social responsibility.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, and particularly rapidly since 2023, artificial intelligence (AI) has ceased to be an experimental resource and has become a structural component of digital content creation processes, directly impacting the production, distribution and reception of audiovisual narratives in interactive media and digital platforms (Haque, E. et al., 2025). This transformation is part of what some authors call the attention economy, a highly competitive environment in which the ability to capture, maintain and stimulate user interest is a central objective for communication, education and digital engagement strategies. Such competition for visibility forces us to rethink not only formats and channels, but also the very dynamics of narrative production mediated by intelligent algorithms.

The incorporation of AI into content creation has been analysed in various practical and theoretical fields. For example, in education, generative AI has been valued for its contribution to the personalisation of materials, adaptability of content and multimodal production, which promotes both attention and pedagogical inclusion (Macias, J., 2025; Esquinas, M. et al., 2025; Martínez, C. & Ferrández, P., 2024). Likewise, recent research confirms that AI not only automates low-level tasks, but also has the potential to enrich the structure and coherence of complex narratives, providing meaningful insights for different user profiles (Palmeiro, L. L., et al., 2025). These capabilities position AI as a mediating actor in a communicative ecosystem where audiovisual narratives become instruments for capturing and sustaining attention in information-saturated environments, influencing the way diverse audiences consume content.

At the same time, the concept of Smart Cities has shifted, in literature and urban practice, from a technocentric logic towards models that place people, social inclusion and accessibility at the centre of urban and communicative design (Calzada, I. & Eizaguirre, I., 2025). This emphasis on equity implies that smart cities are not only defined by sensors, networks or operational efficiency, but also by how social issues are communicated, how citizen participation is promoted and how public understanding of complex processes is facilitated (Ntanda, A., & Carolissen, R., 2025). In this sense, AI and narratives generated from smart tools appear as strategic resources for highlighting inequalities, building inclusive discourses, and mobilising urban actors towards socially relevant changes.

This communicative dimension is particularly crucial in educational contexts where hackathons and challenges constitute spaces for experiential learning and technological co-creation where students can think about and propose projects based on the idea of the inclusive Smart City, among other possible topics (Ruiz-Viñals, C. & Sancho-Ruiz, D., 2025). These events bring together students and professionals to tackle real challenges through collaborative innovation, producing prototypes, narratives and solutions that articulate technology and critical vision in concrete projects (Maillart et al., 2024; Ruiz-Viñals, C., 2024). Hackathons focused on inclusive Smart Cities not only promote the practical application of interdisciplinary knowledge, but also generate a high level of emotional and cognitive engagement among participants.

In addition, they integrate communication elements across the board, from the initial stages of project conception to the final presentation of solutions, the results of which can be directly applied in the cities where the participants live. This allows them to address urban issues they know first-hand and explore how technology can offer concrete answers to practical everyday needs and challenges. The introduction of AI tools in these educational environments, which constitute a powerful teaching innovation, opens up unprecedented possibilities for enhancing creativity, streamlining production processes and generating visual narratives that capture the attention of diverse audiences. At the same time, however, it also raises questions about originality, ethics and social responsibility, especially if automation ends up replacing necessary reflective practices with generative shortcuts (Nodarse, M.H., et al., 2025; Ruiz, C., 2013). This tension requires a deeper understanding of how students perceive and use AI as a mediator between technical automation and the coherent and meaningful narrative construction necessary in any project.

This article proposes to analyse the role of AI in generating engagement in projects by university students who have participated in an academic challenge focused on inclusive Smart Cities organised by the Entrepreneurs Club of Abat Oliba CEU University, with the support of the Chair in Business Creation and Family Business at the same university (CEYEF).

The Inclusive Smart Cities Challenge has had teams from different Spanish universitiea and 4 international teams belonging to the EUonAir consortium. Each team consisted of a number between three and six students from different disciplines, combining profiles from both technical fields (e.g. engineering, computer science, architecture and technological design) and social fields (business, communication, law and political science), and was led by one of its members in order to promote coordination and decision-making within the group. Eight teams participated in the challenge, with a total of 34 students involved. The cultural and academic diversity of the teams allows them to address the challenges of Smart Cities from multiple perspectives, integrating technical, creative and social skills that can contribute positively to the complexity of contemporary urban challenges, with real and applicable proposals.

This work analyses perceptions of the use of AI as a mediating tool in creative automation processes, narrative construction and attention capture within digital communication environments characterised by high content saturation. The analysis is based on a focus group study conducted with the leaders of the participating teams and a survey of all participants in the inclusive Smart Cities challenge at the Barcelona Digital Challenge hackathon, held in Barcelona. Other challenges related to social inclusion were also incorporated into the event. The Inclusive Smart Cities challenge was selected for its cross-cutting approach to the application of technological solutions aimed at social inclusion, accessibility and equity in the urban environment. The research examines the educational and social implications of integrating AI into collaborative projects.

Likewise, the challenge of inclusive Smart Cities provides a particularly fertile framework for developing projects from complementary technical and social perspectives, promoting interdisciplinarity and collaborative experimentation. The participation of teams from different European countries, with diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, broadens the perspectives from which urban challenges are addressed, enriching the proposals developed. This cultural and methodological diversity enhances the value of the challenge as a space for narrative and technological innovation in the field of Smart Cities, allowing for the exploration of multiple approaches to inclusion, accessibility and urban sustainability.

2. Objectives

The overall objective of this research is to systematically analyse the influence of the use of AI tools on the creative and narrative processes of student projects developed within the framework of an academic hackathon focused on inclusive Smart Cities, as well as to examine their perceived impact on generating attention and student engagement in contemporary digital environments.

This general objective is formulated from a communicative and educational perspective that conceives AI not only as a technical or instrumental resource, but also as a mediating agent in the construction of audiovisual discourses in the presentation of projects. From this approach, AI intervenes in the configuration of narratives with social, participatory and inclusive potential, influencing both production dynamics and narrative strategies aimed at capturing the attention and stimulating the engagement of audiences (Attaluri, V., & Mudunuri, L., 2025). In this case, the objective of the different participating teams is to make a good audiovisual presentation, with which to convince the hackathon jury and the audience attending the finalists' project presentation gala that their project is worthy of the first prize.

In line with this approach, the study seeks to analyse the potential of hackathon teaching innovation in relation to the processes generated by the challenge and to contribute to understanding the role played by AI in training contexts based on experiential learning, where students take on an active role as content producers and agents of social innovation. Thus, the objectives are aimed not only at describing technological uses, but also at interpreting the symbolic, creative and ethical implications associated with the incorporation of intelligent systems into collective narrative processes.

Based on this general framework, the following specific objectives have been formulated:

- Identify the degree, frequency and type of use of AI tools by students during the different phases of project development, from initial ideation to final dissemination of content.
- Analyse students' perceptions of the influence of AI on the construction of audiovisual narratives, taking into account aspects such as the clarity of the message, the coherence of the story and the communicative appeal of the content produced.

- Examine the relationship between the use of AI tools and the perceived ability of projects to capture attention, generate engagement and have an impact on different audiences.
- Explore the role attributed to AI in the integration of social inclusion and accessibility criteria within audiovisual narratives about Smart Cities, considering the representation of diversity and the adaptation of content to heterogeneous audiences.
- Identify tensions, limitations and critical assessments associated with the use of AI in collective creative processes, especially with regard to originality, autonomy in narrative decision-making and the social responsibility of projects.

2.1. Study variables

In line with the objectives set out, the study is structured around a set of variables that enable the empirical analysis of the use of AI in student projects arising from the entrepreneurship hackathon on the Smart Cities challenge, facilitating a systematic and structured approach to the phenomenon analysed.

The main variables considered in the research are as follows:

- Use of artificial intelligence: this variable considers the frequency of use of AI tools by the teams, the phases of the creative process in which they are applied (ideation, scripting, content production, post-production and dissemination) and the type of tools used, such as text, image and video generation systems, automated editing or other AI-based solutions.
- Narrative influence of AI: refers to the perception of the impact of AI on the construction of the audiovisual narrative, including dimensions such as clarity of discourse, narrative coherence, content structuring, and the aesthetic and communicative appeal of the project.
- Engagement and attention: this includes an assessment of the effect of AI use on the project's ability to capture the interest of the audience and the hackathon jury.
- Inclusion and accessibility: this refers to the perception of AI support in incorporating inclusive approaches within narratives, representing social and cultural diversity, and adapting content to different audiences and reception contexts.

2.2. Analytical dimension and interpretative approach

The defined variables are approached from a dual analytical perspective: descriptive and interpretative. From a descriptive perspective, patterns of use, frequency and assessment of AI tools are analysed using quantitative indicators that enable general trends among the group of participants to be identified.

Complementarily, an interpretative perspective is adopted that incorporates the analysis of open-ended responses from the questionnaire, in order to understand the meanings, perceptions and assessments that students attribute to the use of AI in relation to creativity, narrative innovation and the social commitment of the projects developed. This approach is complemented by a focus group study with the leaders of the participating teams, which allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of use, decision-making and critical reflections on the integration of AI into creative and collaborative processes.

This combined approach allows the study's objectives to be set not only in terms of measuring results, but also in understanding the symbolic, pedagogical and strategic role that artificial intelligence acquires in educational contexts geared towards social innovation and the development of audiovisual narratives with communicative impact.

3. Methodology

This research adopts an exploratory and descriptive quantitative methodological approach, suitable for analysing emerging phenomena such as the incorporation of AI tools in educational and creative contexts. A cross-sectional quantitative methodology is used, complemented by open-ended questions for qualitative support and a focus group analysis involving the leaders of the participating teams, which allows for the systematic measurement of perceptions to be combined with the collection of discursive nuances provided by the participants.

The focus group methodology promotes the co-construction of meaning among participants (Geampana, A., & Perrotta, M., 2025) and is particularly suitable for exploring shared perceptions,

experiences and dynamics. Furthermore, the use of focus groups has been widely validated in marketing and communication research, where it is used to analyse decision-making processes, discourse and collective assessments (Chand, S.P., 2025).

The study is being conducted in the context of a university challenge, the 14th Barcelona Digital Challenge, held in Barcelona between January and March 2026, which is focused on the development of projects on inclusive Smart Cities, in which students, organised into multidisciplinary teams, must design and present proposals that integrate technology, communication and a social approach. This environment is an ideal space for observing the applied use of AI in collaborative creative processes, as well as its influence on the construction of audiovisual narratives with social impact.

The population studied consists of the 34 students from the 8 teams participating in the challenge, in one of its three challenges, specifically the challenge of proposing projects for inclusive Smart Cities. The students who make up these teams come from different degree programmes and academic years, and from different universities and countries in the EU, which allows the phenomenon to be analysed from an interdisciplinary and intercultural perspective. The population was defined based on effective participation in the training experience and the potential use of AI tools during the development of the projects carried out collectively by the students.

The main data collection technique is an online survey, distributed after the completion of the projects to the 34 participants in the challenge studied, with the aim of gathering their reflective assessments once the creative process has been completed. The questionnaire is structured in several sections that address the participant's profile, the degree and type of use of AI tools, the perceived influence of these technologies on narrative construction, and their impact on the project's ability to capture attention and generate active participation.

The closed-ended responses in the questionnaire are analysed using descriptive quantitative analysis, which allows us to identify patterns of use, general trends and shared assessments among participants. Complementarily, the qualitative analysis is based both on the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and on a focus group with the leaders of the participating teams, which makes it possible to delve deeper into issues related to creativity, inclusion, narrative decision-making and critical perceptions of the use of AI, thus enriching the interpretation and contextualisation of the quantitative results.

4. Results

The analysis of the results reveals widespread and strategic use of artificial intelligence tools throughout project development, as well as a significant influence of these technologies on the creative, narrative and communication processes of the participating teams. Quantitative and qualitative data show that AI has been used primarily as a support resource in the initial stages of ideation, structuring and content production, helping to improve narrative clarity, visual appeal, the synthesis of complex ideas and the accessibility of stories, especially in technologically complex contexts such as those linked to Smart Cities. However, the results also reveal a shared critical awareness of the limits, risks, and tensions associated with the use of AI.

4.1. Use of artificial intelligence tools

100% of participants say they used AI tools during project development. In terms of the stages of the creative process, the use of AI is mainly concentrated in the initial ideation (90%), structuring of the discourse and scripting (80%) and production of audiovisual content (70%). To a lesser extent, AI is used in the dissemination and final presentation stages (50%).

With regard to the type of tools used, the most common are text generation tools (90%), followed by image generation or editing tools (70%) and AI-assisted video editing tools (30%). From the qualitative analysis, it can be said that participants describe AI as a resource primarily aimed at optimising working times and supporting the conceptual organisation of the project, rather than as an autonomous creation system.

From the perspective of team leaders, the use of AI tools was strategically and deliberately integrated into the workflow, especially in the early stages of the project. The focus group revealed that AI was conceived as a ‘creative support’ that helped to organise scattered ideas, generate initial narrative approaches and unblock creative processes, but always required subsequent review, selection and

reformulation by the team. The leaders emphasised that the final decisions, both conceptual and narrative, remained under the control of the team members, reinforcing the perception of AI as a support tool and not as an autonomous creative agent.

Likewise, qualitative analysis reveals a shared critical awareness of the limits and risks of using AI. The focus group raised concerns about the possible loss of originality and the need to maintain an ethical and contextualised perspective, especially in relation to inclusion and Smart Cities. Several leaders pointed out that the differential value of the projects did not lie in the technological sophistication of the tools used, but in the team's ability to reinterpret and adapt AI suggestions to specific social realities. This reflective attitude reinforces the idea of an instrumental and critical use of AI, aligned with the creative and social objectives of the project.

4.2. Influence of AI on narrative construction

In terms of narrative influence, 80% of team members believe that the use of AI significantly improved the clarity of the message, while 70% point to an improvement in the coherence and structure of the narrative in the project presented. Likewise, 60% of participants stated that AI helped make the content more understandable for non-expert audiences, especially in projects with a strong technological basis.

However, 40% of participants noted that some AI-generated proposals tended to be overly generic, requiring critical review and active human intervention to make the narrative more original and appropriate to the specific urban context in which the project was taking place. Qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions in the questionnaire provides additional nuances to these findings. The students involved describe how AI facilitated the rapid generation of ideas and visual resources, but they emphasise that human intervention was key to contextualising the content, integrating social inclusion criteria and maintaining narrative coherence. Some participants pointed out that AI, although useful for inspiring initial concepts, did not always capture specific nuances of the local urban reality, which required a reflective process of adaptation and personalisation of the narratives. This critical approach allowed for a balance between technical efficiency and the creativity and relevance of the project, demonstrating that AI functions as a flexible mediator that enhances, but does not replace, the teams' strategic and narrative decision-making.

The discourse of the team leaders gathered in the discussion group reinforces the idea that AI acted primarily as a facilitator of narrative structuring, especially in projects with a high degree of technical complexity. The leaders emphasised that AI tools made it possible to translate abstract or highly specialised concepts into more accessible narratives, promoting a clearer and more understandable narrative for them and for different audiences. However, they stressed that this process was not automatic, but required constant mediation by team members to adjust the tone, focus and narrative sequence to the communication objectives and specific urban context of each project.

On the other hand, the focus group revealed a recurring tension between narrative efficiency and differentiation of the project presented. Several leaders pointed out that AI-generated narrative proposals tended to reproduce standardised structures or recognisable discursive formulas, which led to internal debates about the need to differentiate the narratives and give them their own voice. This concern led the teams to develop conscious strategies for rewriting, adapting and reinterpreting the generated content, incorporating local perspectives, social inclusion criteria and real experiences. This has been particularly important given the wide variety of projects from countries as diverse as Poland, Spain, Lithuania, France, Germany, Croatia, Luxembourg and Greece, some with more technical profiles and others with a more social profile. In this sense, AI was perceived by leaders as a useful starting point, but insufficient to showcase the originality of the projects.

4.3. Generating attention and active participation

In terms of the ability of projects to capture attention and generate engagement, 80% of respondents felt that the use of AI tools had a positive impact on the visual and narrative appeal of the final presentation. 70% felt that AI helped differentiate their project from others, particularly through the use of more dynamic and visually coherent audiovisual resources.

Likewise, 60% of participants indicated that AI facilitated the synthesis of complex ideas into brief and effective formats, an aspect considered key in a competitive context saturated with digital communication such as a hackathon, which is ultimately a competitive contest of ideas and projects.

Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses complements these findings by revealing how participating students perceived the role of AI in generating attention and engagement. Participants highlighted that AI allowed them to experiment with different visual and narrative formats quickly, facilitating the exploration of creative alternatives that would have been slower to implement manually throughout all phases of the project. However, two participants stressed that the effectiveness of these tools depended on the critical intervention of the team: it was necessary to select, adjust, and contextualise the generated content so that it was consistent with the project's message and relevant to the jury. In addition, several students pointed out that AI helped to structure the information in a clear and attractive way, helping to synthesise complex concepts, but always as a support that enhanced human creativity and not as a substitute for strategic decision-making in the project or critical judgement in the final presentation.

In the focus group, team leaders agreed that AI acted as a catalyst for participation and attention, but insisted that its impact depended on strategic use by the teams. They pointed out that AI tools facilitated rapid experimentation with different visual resources and narrative formats, allowing presentations to be repeated and adjusted efficiently. However, they stressed that the differential value of the projects lay in the team's ability to select and rework the proposals generated by AI, ensuring that each visual and narrative element responded both to the project's objectives and to the perception of the audience and the jury. This reflection from the focus group confirms that AI enhanced creativity and engagement, but always within a framework of mediation.

4.4. Inclusion and accessibility in narratives about Smart Cities

In terms of inclusion and accessibility, 70% of participating students believe that AI helped to integrate more inclusive approaches into narratives about Smart Cities, particularly by simplifying language and adapting discourse to diverse audiences. 60% highlight that AI tools facilitated the visual representation of complex social issues, helping to make them more visible and understandable.

However, 30% of participants expressed reservations about the risk of oversimplification or stereotypical representation of certain groups, emphasising the need for ethical and contextual oversight in the use of these technologies.

Qualitative analysis is key here to capture the nuances behind these percentages. Students highlight that AI facilitated the adaptation of language and visual representation of complex social issues, while a deep understanding of urban contexts and sensitivity to diversity depended on human intervention. Several responses emphasise that it was necessary to review and adjust AI-generated content to avoid stereotypes or oversimplification, ensuring that narratives were inclusive and respectful of different groups. Likewise, participants appreciate that AI allowed them to quickly explore different communication approaches, enhancing creativity and the ability to synthesise, but they emphasise that real effectiveness in terms of inclusion and accessibility was only achieved through a reflective and collaborative process that integrated social knowledge and cultural sensitivity.

In the focus group, team leaders agreed that AI was a useful resource for highlighting social issues and adapting narratives to different audiences, but emphasised that inclusion and accessibility always required critical and contextualised work on the part of team members. Participants in the discussion group highlighted that AI tools have facilitated experimentation with different formats and languages, allowing for the rapid identification of possible biases or simplifications. However, they stressed that sensitivity to diversity and social awareness depended on the collective reflection of the team members and their prior knowledge of the urban and social environment in which each project was developed. This dialogue shows that AI has functioned as an enabling tool, but that ultimate responsibility and the correct adaptation of projects to specific urban frameworks has depended on the knowledge of the people in the teams.

4.5. Critical assessments and perceived tensions

Finally, 50% of respondents identify tensions related to content originality and dependence on automated tools. Despite this, 90% agree that when AI is used critically and thoughtfully, it is a valuable resource for experiential learning, collective creativity, and building projects with social impact.

Qualitative analysis has been key to deepening this critical assessment of the use of AI. Participants expressed that, although automation can generate content quickly, the originality and differential value of projects depend on the supervision and critical judgement of the team. Several responses highlighted that AI functioned as a support that enhanced creativity and facilitated experimentation, but that it cannot replace strategic reflection, narrative decision-making, or the ability to contextualise content within real urban problems. This critical approach allowed participants to balance technological efficiency and conceptual quality, reinforcing the idea that AI is most effective when used consciously and responsibly, enhancing experiential learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the construction of projects with tangible social impact.

In the focus group, team leaders agreed that AI has created natural tensions between efficiency and originality, especially in the ideation and content generation phases. They pointed out that, while automation allowed them to move forward quickly and explore multiple alternatives, the distinctive creativity of each project ultimately depended on the team's ability to select, reinterpret and contextualise the proposals generated. The leaders emphasised that these tensions were not necessarily negative, but rather stimulated critical reflection and negotiation within the team, strengthening collaboration and the ability to make informed strategic decisions.

Furthermore, the focus group analysis revealed that the perceived value of AI has been closely linked to its conscious and ethical use. Leaders emphasised the importance of maintaining human control over content, especially with regard to social relevance, inclusion, and narrative originality. They highlighted that, although AI has facilitated experimentation and the agile generation of resources, teams have had to integrate contextual sensitivity to ensure that projects were not only technically sound, but also creative, relevant and socially responsible. This collective reflection shows that AI acts as a capacity enabler, but that experiential learning and the construction of social impact depend fundamentally on human intervention.

5. Conclusions

The results obtained confirm the emerging role of AI as a mediating tool in the construction of audiovisual narratives aimed at communicating projects to juries and audiences in the context of a hackathon, in line with what has been pointed out in the literature on attention economics and digital communication in saturated environments (Calzada & Eizaguirre, 2025; Palmeiro et al., 2025). The widespread use of AI by students reinforces the idea that these technologies are no longer experimental resources but have become structural elements of contemporary creative processes, facilitating the clear, attractive and persuasive presentation of complex proposals.

In line with previous studies in the field of education (Macias, J., 2025; Esquinas, M. et al., 2025), participants perceive AI as a significant support for organising discourse, improving narrative clarity and producing multimodal content. This mediating function is particularly relevant in experiential learning contexts such as hackathons, where limited time and competitive pressure intensify the need for effective communication solutions.

From a perspective focused on visual culture and audiovisual narratives, the results show that AI reinforces the visual impact and narrative rhythm of project presentations, key elements for capturing the jury's attention and generating engagement in highly competitive digital contexts. Its ability to facilitate visual and discursive synthesis is aligned with current audiovisual consumption dynamics, characterised by fragmentation and overexposure to stimuli, and is evident in a consolidated teaching innovation framework such as the BCN Digital Challenge, which celebrates its 14th edition in 2026. This work highlights teaching innovation initiatives promoted by the CEYEF Chair, which, thanks to the experiential impact they have on students, enable them to achieve greater success and development than is possible in traditional teaching environments of a purely expository nature.

In relation to inclusive Smart Cities, the findings support the theoretical shift from technocentric approaches to models focused on people and accessibility (Ntanda & Carolissen, 2025). The perception

of AI as a facilitator of more understandable and inclusive narratives suggests its potential as a strategic tool for communicating complex urban issues to diverse audiences. However, the reservations expressed by participants highlight the need to maintain a critical perspective that avoids oversimplification or the reproduction of stereotypes, as warned by Nodarse et al. (2025).

Finally, the tensions identified around originality and automation highlight that integrating AI into collective creative processes is not without challenges, both ethical and pedagogical. These challenges are evident, for example, in the need to ensure that the use of AI does not displace students' creativity and critical judgement, as well as in the responsibility to guide its application in a way that respects principles of transparency and intellectual authorship. In this sense, the results obtained reinforce the idea that the true educational value of AI does not lie in merely replacing human creativity, but in its thoughtful use as a mediation tool which, when properly managed, can significantly enhance learning processes, innovation and students' ability to construct audiovisual narratives and present them with real communicative and social impact. Furthermore, this mediating approach allows for the exploration of new forms of collaboration and can stimulate experimentation and the promotion of critical use of technology. This can contribute to promoting an environment in which AI becomes an ally for the generation of original ideas, which, in the case of its application in the ideation of projects for inclusive Smart Cities, has the potential to generate inclusive and sustainable urban projects.

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