Urban Matters

Editorial: Imagining/doing smart cities

January 21, 2022

Issue: Imagining / Doing Smart Cities.

Chiara Valli , Guy Baeten

The smart city is, first and foremost, an intention. From the early computing models to regulate transportation flows in the 1950s, up to today's urban Living Labs, what has underscored smart city projects has been a choice to invest in technological infrastructures with the aim to bring the existing city into a state of *smartness*. The very act of *imagining* what is 'smart' and the pursuit of this ideal, we suggest, is the essence of smart cities. While the individual technological solutions clearly differ in time and space, what remains is essentially the intention of planning a better future via more efficient and responsive socio-technological systems. This issue of *Urban Matters* focuses on the act of *imagining smartness*, and the tensions between *imagining and doing* 'smart' cities. The articles in this issue explore the imagination(s) that push cities to detach from their existing conditions and then project the urban into a future smartness. But the deviance between the existing and the imagined is not only a precondition for smart city projects. It is also a consequence of smart city efforts, in the difference between what was imagined and the resultant reality.

In a thought-provoking photo essay, **Fredrik Torisson** retraces the history of smart city imagination in its visual representations. By demonstrating how iconic images of the smart city present recurrent similarities, he proposes that smart city imagineering is not futurism proper, but a "representation of futurism". Rather than creating new versions of the imagined future through a linear progression in time, the same ideas of the future come back in a loop, reproducing "past futures". In his words: "beyond the metanarrative of progress, we make images of previous expressions of progress".

Adriana de la Peña takes us to Guadalajara, Mexico, where the smart city imagination met with the creative city discourse, in what was supposed to become the first Mexican Digital Creative City. She guides us through the parabolical journey from the dream to become a global creative industries hub, to a messy reality of lost investments and broken promises.

Syeda Jenifa Zahan explores the marginalising power of smart city visions in India, where smart cities are consistently treated as the "ideal city of the future". The area-based development of the Guwahati Smart City is a telling example of how "peripheralised spaces and communities remain largely invisible in smart city plans, discourses and imaginaries".

In turn, **Lorena Melgaço** and **Camila Freitas de Souza** give us a glimpse of a growing niche of smart city developments where the urban poor are instead the focal target group. They present findings from their research on the Brazilian "*social* smart city", where private developers are building entire neighbourhoods with the argument of providing social and technological inclusion for low-income Brazilians. They compare the visions and discourse of big corporations with the realities of the everyday lives of inhabitants.

Chiara Valli, relying on conversations with **Gillian Rose, Germaine Halegoua**, and **Linda Gustafsson** for the Smart Cities for City Officials project, reflects on alternative ways of knowing, imagining, and co-creating smart cities through a feminist epistemology. The imagination driving smart city intentions should be more rich, nuanced, difference-sensitive and multiple, as "striving for a feminist smart city would be (…) striving for

nothing less than a smart feminist city".

Finally, **Guy Baeten** in an interview with **Rob Kitchin** discusses smart cities in relation to the notion of the right to the city. For many governments and private corporations alike, smart city imaginings and actually existing projects are mostly about profits and surveillance. Notions of justice, democracy, and citizen well-being are often pushed to the background, if they are present at all. New surveillance technologies to control movement during the Coronavirus crisis have only reinforced this tendency. Rob Kitchin calls for a tighter cooperation between critical scholars, cities, and citizens to imagine and implement fairer smart cities.

We hope you will enjoy this issue of Urban Matters and we warmly welcome you to have a look at the *Beyond Smart Cities Today* conference program, organised by IUR. This two-day conference, taking place in Malmö on 16-17 June 2022, aims to provide time and space to question the differences within smart cities, reflect on issues of justice and injustice, analyse social and spatial inequalities through feminist and postcolonial lenses, and underline historical perspectives to situate the smart city in time and place.

Authors

Chiara Valli

Associate Senior Lecturer » Malmö University

Chiara Valli is Associate Senior Lecturer at the Department of Urban Studies. She is an urban geographer interested in housing and planning and their relations to social justice. After her PhD degree in Social and Economic Geography at Uppsala University, Chiara has conducted a postdoc project at the University of Gothenburg, a postdoc at IUR within the CRUSH project, and finally a postdoc in the projectSmart cities for city officials. Chiara's research interests include: housing, housing financialisation, gentrification, segregation, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), smart cities, labour precarity, urban activism, participatory and visual research methodologies. Since December 2021, Chiara has been leading the project Financialization of everyday life in Sweden. Intersectional perspectives on housing and labor precarity.

Guy Baeten

Professor » Malmö University

Guy Baeten is Professor of Urban Studies at Malmö University and has previously worked at the universities of Lund, Oxford, Leuven and Strathclyde. He is the PI of the VR Research Environment 'Housing as a digitalised service' together with the universities of Lund, Roskilde, Amsterdam and Hong Kong. He is the founder and current vice-Director of the Institute for Urban Research. Guy Baeten is interested in urban development projects, the housing question, and has a long-standing interest in critical approaches to urban sustainability. Guy Baeten is part of the Horizon project 'PREFIGURE – Prototypes for Addressing the Housing-Energy Nexus' that researches how citizens and neighbourhoods provide alternative housing and energy renovations in Europe. He is part of a Nordic research project (together with the Arctic University of Norway and Roskilde University) that investigates the notion of 'livability' in a Nordic urban context, and recently he finished a project on the histories of the sustainability concept in Malmö's ('Norra Sorgenfri planned, populated and problematised: the role of social sustainability in urban renewal urban planning' 2018-2021). In the recent past, he was PI of the Formas Strong Research Environment 'CRUSH – Critical Urban Sustainability Hub' that ran between 2014 and 2019 together with the universities of Lund, Uppsala and Göteborg.