

Beware of Smart People!

Redefining the
Smart City Paradigm towards
Inclusive Urbanism

*Symposium
Proceedings*

*Berlin, June 19th to
20th, 2015*

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Content

INTRODUCTION	5	PRACTICE /	
KEYNOTE	9	SPACE PRODUCTION &	
Practices of the Minimum Viable Utopia		PRACTICES OF URBAN COMMONING	87
Adam Greenfield		Introduction by Sybille Frank and Jörg Stollmann	
KEYNOTE RESPONSE	17	Towards more Inclusive Smart Cities?	
Vanessa Watson		Digital Fragments in the Slum	89
PRODUCTION / URBANIZING THE SMART CITY	23	Colin McFarlane	
Introduction by Johanna Schlaack and Andreas Brück		ScarCity	95
Is There Anybody out There? Some Hypothesis on the Role and Position of People in Smart Cities	25	Friederike Habermann	
Alberto Vanolo		Asking the Wrong Question: Smart Cities in Contemporary Urban India	103
Digitization And Work: Potentials and Challenges in Low-Wage Labor Markets		Gautam Bhan	
Saskia Sassen		REFLECTIONS ON THE “BEWARE OF SMART PEOPLE!” SYMPOSIUM	113
Smart Cities: the state-of-the-art and governance challenge	45	TU Dialogue Platform Smart People & Urban Commoning	117
Mark Deakin		The Lecturers	119
MANAGEMENT / SMART PEOPLE AND URBAN GOVERNANCE	61		
Introduction by Carolin Schröder and Philipp Misselwitz			
From a Technology Intensive to a Knowledge Intensive Smart Urbanism	63		
Ola Söderström			
Using Local Potentials by Integrating Urban Structures, Innovative Technology and Smart Behavior – the Example of PLEEC	71		
Gudrun Haindlmaier			
Smartness Inc.	79		
Ayona Datta			

Asking the Wrong Question: Smart Cities in Contemporary Urban India¹

Gautam Bhan

Indian Institute of Human Settlements,
Bangalore

1.
This Paper is an edited transcript of Gautam Bhan's symposium lecture.

The good thing about going last is that everything smart has already been said and I don't have to add to any of it. So let me take this opportunity to do something else. Since we are among a community of friends as well as scholars, let me be a little provocative and challenge some of the conversations we've been having for the last couple of days. I want to do that partly by putting myself in a particular place. I think one of the things that we said today - and it is very important not just for smart cities but for any discussion about urban theory and cities - is to refuse the ability of ideas to travel placelessly, to travel without adjectives, to travel as what Timothy Mitchell once called "principles true in every country." Because they're not. Place matters. Where you ask the question of the smart city matters. So I'm going to ask it from a particular place. I'm going to ask it from the Indian city. This is not the city yet to come that Ayona Datta talked about earlier—this is the city that's already here. From the heart of the Indian Megacity, the city of a kind that Jennifer Robinson once called "big but not powerful." So what does it mean to ask the smart city question from the Indian megacity? I have to tell you something about Indians. Indians love exams. We love them. We love taking them. We take them all our lives. We love them because exams are finite objects. You look at them and say "Here is a clear problem. I want to crack it." It is like cracking a code. We know how to crack an exam.

The Civil Service Exam, Engineering Entrance Exam, Architecture Entrance Exam, School Leaving Exam, Collage Leaving Exam, Collage Surviving Exam. What we are scared of is not an exam but an open question. An essay. It terrifies us. Give me an exam and I will crack it. Every time there is an exam in India, there is something called a "kundli". A kundli is a photocopied book that is an answer guide to an exam. It has test questions that are basically just about the cousin of the likely questions on the exam. So the minute there is a new exam we have a new kundli. It's out in five minutes. No single, recognizable person or company produces it. No one controls it. There is no technological tracking of its production, but it's on every street corner within half an hour of a new exam being announced. It's very smart. It's very efficient. It's very quick.

The thing about kundlis, the thing about this way of cracking exams, is that this is also how we have built our cities. We live in our cities and we crack them everyday. We crack broken systems, we crack fragmented governance, we find solutions very quickly that in urban theory are called informal, ephemeral, temporary. They're not. I picked this picture for a very particular reason.

>>Figure A: Paan Vendor, Charkop, Mumbai.

This street side vending shop - the picture definitional of something informal - is literally solid enough to be built into concrete. It's not ephemeral. It's not shaky. This woman has sat at that same spot, I can tell you, every day for years. It's not just one instance or one sidewalk. This is the way in which a city is built. See Figure Two.

>>Figure B: Behrampada, Bandra East, Mumbai.

Just pay attention to that building on the right. When you teach this in Chapter One of the textbook on urban theory, you teach it as everything that is wrong. It's the unplanned, the chaotic. It's what doesn't make sense. This is the problem that smart city tries to diagnose and fix. Yet inside that building it looks like this.

>>Figure C: Section through Behrampada, Bandra East, Mumbai.

It's five floors. There's an owners house, a workers dorm, an embroidery unit, community space, a praying hall, a library, a grocery shop. Layer upon layer upon layer of use. They cracked it. When one theorizes from this, you can make it sound fancy. Teresa Caldeira and James Holston — who is in the audience — would say: "Cities of certain kinds are auto-constructed". What does that word mean? What does auto-construction mean? They define it. They tell us that many parts of the world are not built through the intentions of "us", of planners, architects or designers. They are built through what they call "transversal logics". Transversal logics with official regimes of property, of law, of planning, of land, of ownership. They're built very smartly. Now what's interesting about it is: you can talk about the idea of a smart city, a city that can be read, or prompted, or quantified, or mapped, or GPS-ed, or GIS-ed but when you put that question inside the auto-constructed city, none of it remains standing. Auto-constructed cities, like the city which I grew up in, undid modernist planning. They undid world class planning. They will undo smart cities.

This is why I don't worry about smart cities. Very few people I know in India worry about smart cities. What they say is that the new exam is the smart city. How should we crack it? How much should we play? Should we mimic? Let's be smart! Let's count! You go to

that meeting and give the data. Let's be strategic! Let's reject it! Let's break the sensor! So when we ask: what alternative imaginations of smart cities should we come up with? I don't think we should come up with anything. We're not the right people to answer this question. What we should be doing is listening to the way that people who build auto-constructed cities are cracking this code. What's the new game? What's the new play? What's the new transversal logic? What are the new vulnerabilities and possibilities that are coming up?

I've been so struck over the last two days about a sense of nervous anxiety among my European colleges when they talk about technology. Surveillance, privacy, closeness, the coming of the state. There are so many anxieties. Everyone I talk to in India is incredibly excited about technology. They want to play with it. They know it can surveil them but they also now they can crack that surveillance. We know how to hide. This state has been looking for us for ever. [As an aside, we also know that when the state wants to find you, it will pull out a paper journal from the fourth floor of the drawer of a public office and find where you are. It doesn't need any technology to exercise that kind of surveillance or that kind of violence]. What this moment needs is for us to listen to these new ways of building cities and see if one of the answers we get is technology. If so, then we have to challenge our critiques of smart cities, because perhaps technology will be the new way in which auto-constructed cities will build themselves. That was my deep discomfort with Adam's (Adam Greenfield, the editors) Keynote Talk yesterday. When he spoke about whether you should introduce 3D-printed materials in a slum in Chennai and argued that we shouldn't because a new technology will break this almost primordial psychic relationship between people and the materials they have traditionally used. Why should we fear this? Why not instead believe that people can decide whether a new technology is better than the tarp they have used so far? They will crack it. They will decide whether to use it to build houses, or to reconfigure it, sell it, transform it in ways we cannot even imagine. They will undo this new technology rather than the other way around. Your technology will not undo them, because citizens of cities of the south know how to crack codes.

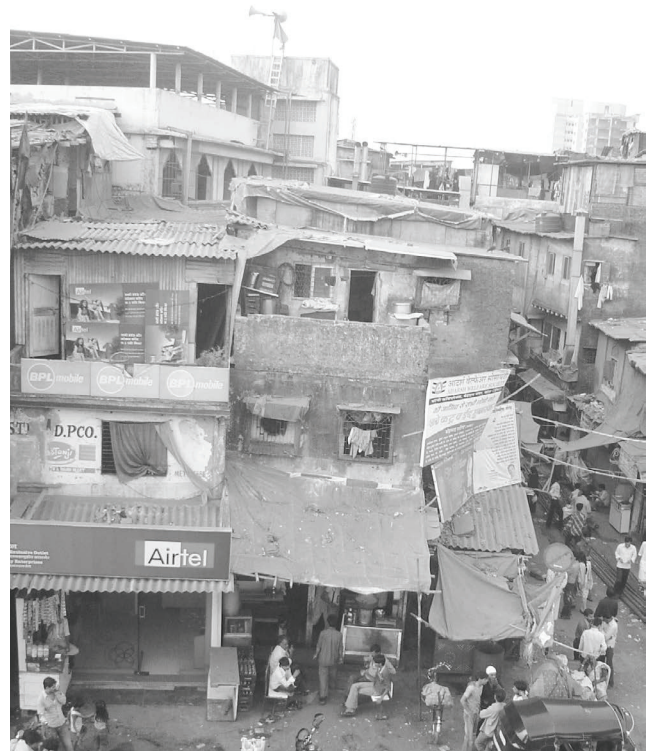
A.
Paan Vendor, Charkop, Mumbai
Source: Prasad Shetty

B.
Behrampada, Bandra East, Mumbai
Source: Prasad Shetty

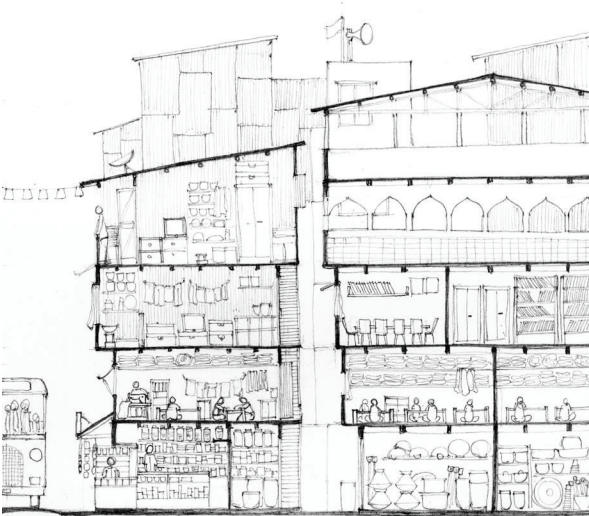
C.
Section through Behrampada, Bandra East, Mumbai
Source: Prasad Shetty



A.



B.



C.

They are not hackers of algorithms— they are hackers of urban cities. When we fear change, we must think of our own uncertainties as planners, architects, designers and policy makers and check our own arrogance about our impact.

But now I want to disagree with myself because this story is too easy. It's too quick. It's too nice to say here is *jugaad*, the Hindi word that denotes making something out of nothing. We will cope. Informality is not marginality, it is entrepreneurial heroism. The thing is: while it is wrong to dismiss informality as a site only of squalor in a "planet of slums," it is equally insulting and patronizing to mis-recognize the vulnerability of the slum. It is not fair to expect a community that is resilient to keep self-providing trunk infrastructure just because it can cope. It is not fair to expect infrastructure to be provided precisely by those who are most vulnerable and most excluded from it. So while we celebrate the agency of the slum, we can not absolve ourselves of the responsibility of its missing infrastructure. Which is why in this panel I want to challenge the idea of the commons against an older idea of the public. A public that - following scholars like Edgar Pieterse who is in the African Centre for Cities in Cape Town - can not be so easily pulled apart from the state. That same developmental state that was meant to provide what the self-provisioned commoning and community practices seek to now make up for.

I am a big fan of commoning and community practices. But I live in a city where 17% of the city is covered by drainage pipes. To speak of commoning where collective infrastructures exist is very different to speak of commoning in cities where collective infrastructure does not. Because to communally build a sewer pipe is possible but the cost of building that is a cost that falls upon precisely the most vulnerable of urban residents. In some way then, the discussion of the smart city — as well as its critique — has to go back to a paradigm that we also critiqued as academics: modernist planning. We know how to kill this idea. Yet David Harvey warned us - since we're doing Harvey quotes in this session - to "constantly resist the endless pleasure of the damming critique". He is right. Because in some sense the challenge to us is to say like Anant Maringanti said from the Hyderabad Urban Lab: "How do you plan in places where planning is both broken and essential?

How do you deal with urbanism in places where the state is both inadequate and indispensable?" So the challenge that smart city provokes for me is not a challenge of our technology or data. It is a challenge to say: What role can this technology or data play in going back to the original questions of providing a set of core public goods and infrastructures? What I want to do is to challenge our idea of planning itself. To say: the death of modernist planning can not be replaced by paradigms that do not know how to build the sewage pipes under the city's floor. In closing, let me suggest three different kinds of re-imagination of planners who practice what Solomon Benjamin once described as "occupancy urbanism"— the building of the city not through the logics of intention but through micro-practices of everyday incremental occupation. For Benjamin, occupancy urbanism is done by people who build slums as the auto-constructed the city. The question I am asking is different: Why can't planners be occupancy urbanists? Why can't planning be a site of critical, radical, incremental politics? Why can't we imagine planning losing the shadow of modernist planning but not going all the way to the imagination of the smart city? We can then think of planning in new ways: of a boundary condition, of a mechanism to protect the public, to block concentrations of value and resources.

Can we imagine smart planning as a radical, political exercise that protects the public? I pick up the example of planning particularly to suggest that it is too easy for us to concede the duty and obligation of resistance only to subvert urban residents. It is too easy for us to set aside top-down practices —including master planning — as necessarily oppressive and tools of state violence. Planning is all of these things but it can also be a whole set of other things. To me a way to re-imagine what planning is will be an imagination of smart planning. Not because it's clear or efficient, or that it realizes itself on the ground, but precisely because it recognizes itself as only one actor in a game where multiple people are building cities of multiple logics. It seeks to enter into this game, to play its part, to push it in one direction or the other. This is a re-imagination that the notion of smartness pushes in me, and it is a provocation that I would like to leave you with.

Thank you!

A.
**Day 2 - Discussion Panel 3,
at TU Berlin**

B.
**Ola Söderström in the
discussion of Panel 3**

C.
**Ayona Datta in the
discussion of Panel 3**



A.

(...) Listening to you, Gautam, I was thinking about Singapore because I just spent time there a few years ago. And about this extraordinary story of how a city was disciplined through this extremely hard hand of the state (...). You were kind of switching between this Indian capacity to crack cities (...), to say what is the capacity of all the cities in the global south. I was wondering how far this is true, having Singapore in mind, and how this city is extremely disciplined and even though you framed it as „Indian,, it is an european critique towards the Smart City. How far does that reach? What is the geography of your argument?

B.

(...) I am just thinking about the planning issue as a very important issue. Listening to your talk I agreed with most of it. I was just wondering is it the death of modernist planning, or do we actually seeing a resurgence of modernist planning in the Smart City? A Much more potent and avaricious kind of form of modernist planning armed with technology. Because some of the planners I have been talking to who are designing these cities - and again I am speaking from that perspective of the new cities - are really thinking about planning in a very modernist way. The planning in which slums have no roles, the kinds of digital assemblages which Colin is talking about will really have no role in that. And they see that modernist planning equipped with technology of GIS and survey technologies, mapping everything onto that and so actually the technology ist giving them more power of autocratic planning. So where can that code get cracked? In part you tried giving some examples of where is that code being cracked in these actual practices of Smart City making? In slums and all of that of course they are doing it in a very informal way but not necessarily linking that to actually cracking a Smart City proposal or redevelopment. Perhaps you can give some examples.

C.

A.
Voice from the audience

B.
Day2 - Discussion final
round, at TU Berlin

„I was thinking that there was a slippage during the two days between smart city and smart metering. But I think there is quite an important difference in that the smart city - besides from its corporate logo, which I think is the least interesting - as it gets developed in engineering schools has within it at its core a sense of totality. It is a totalizing project. It is smart city, and it is an integrative, totalizing project. Whereas a smart meter isn't necessarily. It could be just a single meter, or metering project. And I think we need to think more about the question of totalization, totality and of course modernism, of which we spoke towards the end of today. One aspect of course about modernism is its totalization. The question is not that plans and master plans are not necessary, planning is necessary. One question is how to subvert their totalization. And to develop master plans that carry within them a subversion. And that would be a plan that questions itself as a plan or presents itself as a different kind of plan.“

A.



B.

