

Technocentric neoliberalism and okness: the shaping of the city

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Fig. 1 A \$250 device from *august* you attach to your existing deadbolts that allows you to control your door lock through your smartphone via Bluetooth.

Cities are not stable entities. The physical component, represented by buildings and infrastructure, may appear solid, but urban flows and networks that take place within are in a constant movement driven by the social and economical contexts surrounding them. They are the concrete embodiment of a population's economical and political policies.

A neoliberalist-oriented market adapted to specific contexts has been a key feature of the western world ideal economic policies, with a pervasive effect on all dimensions of society including (for good and for bad) the reconfiguration of urban areas. A mix between the will of economical interests and the implied correctness of democratic politicians and city officials has clearly ruled the development of the cities in the last 40 years¹. It is no novelty that space by itself is a market commodity which has been poorly regulated by most state institutions² and that the city itself has a great profitability. Money, power and economical interests have set the rules of how we build the city almost since its existence and have greatly defined the physiognomy of contemporary urban zones.

However it is interesting to note that in the last 20 years the economic speculation of the city's space has been in juxtaposition with the discourse of sustainability, efficiency and competitiveness that culminates in the emerging vision of the smart city. We cannot neglect in the discourse the advantages of the smart cities

and architecture if they're sustainable, competitive and efficient, nevertheless the contradictions within this juxtaposition of values are worth to reflect on.

Recently Koolhaas stated that: "As a substitute for the French Revolution's *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, a new universal trinity has been adopted: comfort, security, sustainability"³; we could hardly argue against the authoritarianism of correctness, the lactose and gluten free city shouldn't disturb us because it is being shaped for our own good, for us to have better quality of life and more opportunities.

On the other hand as much as state institutions have been drawn into ever more explicit forms of the creative destruction of urban built environments in order to promote even more intensively marketized land-use regimes⁴, speculation is not only about space anymore, is about automated life and about smart cities shaping smart citizens who are digitally savvy, efficient and entrepreneurial.

Last June Google's sidewalk labs was announced, "An urban innovation company that will develop technology at the intersection of the physical and digital worlds, with a focus on improving city life for residents, businesses and governments"⁵. The head of the project Dan Doctoroff, mentioned in the official announce of the company that: "We are at the beginning of a historic transformation in cities. At a time when the concerns about urban equity, costs, health and the environment

1,2,4 Peck J., Theodore N. & Brenner N. (2009), *Neoliberal Urbanism Models, Moments, Mutations SAIS Review*.

3 Koolhaas R., April 2015 *Artforum International Magazine*.

5,6 sidewalkinc.com

5,6 sidewalkinc.com

7 Mumford, L. (1971). *Technics and Human Development: The Myth of the Machine*, Vol. I. Harvest Books.



Fig. 2 Songdo City, South Korea. One of the world's first specially designed "smart cities."

8 In the frame of the 56th Venice art Biennale, Shawn Maximo for DIS magazine on *Styles and Customs in the 2020s*.

are intensifying, unprecedented technological change is going to enable cities to be more efficient, responsive, flexible and resilient. We hope that Sidewalk will play a major role in developing technology products, platforms and advanced infrastructure that can be implemented at scale in cities around the world.⁶

Technocentric neoliberal utopianism in which it is unquestioningly assumed that technology development and business growth will automatically improve quality of life within the city and its space, its not only a google's feature, an immense number of entities are hands-on on the smart city and its market based on promises of a better life. By doing so they are completely changing the way we move, inhabit and read the city, creating an incredibly vast and unprecedented infrastructure of services directly related to it, not only redefining existing cities, but already defining the ones to come.

Ironically, what may have been Le Corbusier's idea that a house is a machine for living has been extended to the whole city, empowered through Lewis Mumford's⁷ conception of large hierarchical organizations as mega machines – machines using humans as its components, the city becomes a machine for living, a digital one, and in consequence life itself becomes subject to technological automatization with digital placemaking substituting actual sense of place, and digital capital replacing social capital. The digital and physical space merge in the contemporary city completely changing the creation of a place and therefore the people defining it.

The smart city's digital place is almost as present in our consciousness as the physical one, our relation towards the city depends everytime more of the screen as an interface to inhabit it, perceive it and share it. The architect has never been alone in the shaping of the city, but never before has been more accompanied in defining the relationships towards the city space. An army of software engineers, entrepreneurs and investors are slowly kicking the architect out of imagining the future city or using him as a necessary marketing accessory. The discipline may not disappear or be substituted by graphic designers⁸ in the near future, but the role of the architect as the catalyzer of the space available to citizens in their pursuit of a meaningful relationship with

the city is on stake. For how long the discipline will remain relevant under such scenario?

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Rubén Valdez (Zacatecas, Mexico, 1986) studied architecture at the Accademia di architettura di Mendrisio and contemporary art at ECAL (école cantonal d'art de Lausanne). After doing an internship at Miller & Maranta Architekten in Basel and Estudio Toga in Mexico, he worked independently in Guadalajara, México, on several single housing projects. He has been participant of different architecture and art exhibitions such as „Monumental Masonry“ at the Sir John Soane's museum (London), „Vertige des correspondances“ curated by Julien Fronsacq at ELAC (Lausanne) „Life is a Bed of Roses“ curated by Stephanie Moisdon at Fondation Ricard (Paris).

Images:

Fig. 1 taken from august.com

Fig. 2 taken from songdo.com