

Chapter 17

Smart Urbanism and Digital Activism in Southern Italy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter debates the competing approaches of the smart city model. It starts by critically discussing top-down approaches, focusing on influence of neoliberal urban experimentation, the role of dominant social interests, the reduction of the city and of urban citizenship, and the risks linked with its uncritical assumption. Then, attention shifts on counter-geographies of digital urbanism drawn from below by citizens, communities, and social movements, as part of a fragmented landscape of activism engaged in building alternative and bottom-up approaches of the smart city. Making use of the case study of a city in southern Italy, Catania, the aim of the chapter is threefold since it discusses the critical aspects linked with dissemination of smart city model as a means for investigating the evolutionary neoliberalization developed in southern Italy during last decades, the influence of neoliberal scripts of urban planning on policy practices, and then the potential alternative activities of digital urbanism hold for a more human-centered and socially embedded smart city.

INTRODUCTION

The buzzword smart indicates a new visionary city which is directed at the planning of hi-tech-oriented urban efficiency and sustainability. The smart city is being promoted and advertised enthusiastically by governments, corporations, and even academies as part of national responses to austerity, while cities are increasingly competing with each other to become the context for the pilot testing of a wide range of neoliberal urban experimentation focused on technological solutions. Although this process may be globalizing, its operationalization and outcomes remain stubbornly local and context specific. This opens up new spaces for the promotion of local alternatives to dominant neoliberal political economic practices and to the technocratic determinism of the smart city model.

This chapter is structured in five sections. The first critically analysis top-down approaches of the smart city planning model, focusing on relations with neoliberal urban experimentation, the role of

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dominant social interests, the reconfiguration of the city and of urban citizenship, and the risks linked with its uncritical assumption. The second section debates the potential grassroots practices of digital urbanism hold for an alternative and a more human-centred smart city of the future. The third section scrutinises the implementation of top-down approaches of the smart city in southern Italian cities during neoliberal transition. The fourth section pays attention to the already existing practices of digital urbanism promoted by active citizens and social movements in a city of southern Italy, Catania. The chapter concludes by calling for a combination between top-down and bottom-up approaches of smart city, in order to build urban technological design on a perception of smartness that includes the conflicts inherent to the different collective urban cultures and experiences.

The aim of the chapter is threefold since it discusses the critical aspects linked with dissemination of smart city mobile model as a means for investigating the evolutionary neoliberalization developed in southern Italy during last decades, the influence of neoliberal scripts of urban regeneration on governance arrangements, territorial imaginaries, and policy practices, and then the potential alternative practices of digital urbanism hold for a more progressive and socially embedded smart urbanism.

The theoretical framework through which this topic is examined includes critical studies on urban neoliberalism, smart urbanism and digital activism. Methodologically, the analysis is developed by reviewing the ever more abundant social science literature on smart urbanism, in particular ‘grey’ literature (conference presentations, institutional and research reports, on-line papers), and previous analysis conducted during last years on digital activism in the city of Catania.

URBAN NEOLIBERISM AND THE TRIUMPH OF SMART CITY

In the context of what has been termed cultural-cognitive capitalism (Scott, 2011), together with a technological and informational vertigo that gives fresh impulse to capital accumulation, there has been an on-going internationalization of policy regimes, which involves the communication of neoliberal and market-oriented policies as best practices orthodoxy and the mobilization of certain neoliberal policy models through the mediation of fast policy circuits (Healey, 2013; Prince, 2012). A growing number of policy makers and urban leaders, persuaded by specialist intermediaries, *gurus*, centres (think-tanks, cultural, university-based) and corporations, as well as by international agencies, such as UE and World Bank, in the form of public policy programmes and investment incentives, increasingly tend to invoke stories, ideal types, visions and models of urban planning, often as the panacea for the many pressing problems of contemporary cities.

In the post-recession context, the buzzword “smart” indicates a new visionary city, based on the integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) applications in certain key dimensions, such as energy, mobility, buildings and governance, which through the negotiation between, and the incorporation of, economic imperatives, ecological integrity and social equity goals is directed at the planning of hi-tech-oriented urban efficiency and sustainability.

In smart city visionary framework, a multi-objective approach of integrated urban, ICTs and digital data development is presented in order to challenge problems of economic growth and competitiveness (smart economy), accessibility (smart mobility), quality of life (smart living), social capital (smart people), political efficiency (smart governance) and environmental performances (smart environment) (Giffinger et al., 2007).

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