



BOOK REVIEW

Germaine R. Halegoua (2019). *The Digital City: Media and the Social Production of Place*. New York: New York University Press.

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Techno-capitalist urban redevelopment is marked by an increased popularity of digital urban governance and various intersections between platforms and urbanity. These exacerbate the existing socio-spatial inequalities while depoliticizing dataisation and digitalization, which now are widely considered the popular ways of general advancement of city life, particularly by authorities of all levels and corporations. While research into so-called “smart” or “digital” cities has mushroomed over the two last decades there remain some considerable gaps in our understanding of the links among the tangible, physical urban spaces, and the changes that the digital age brings, namely and most elementary, that participating in city life is impossible without being plugged.

Two of the most pressing gaps form the focus of this book that seeks to elucidate: first, how citizens daily engage in the digital placemaking practices; second, diversity of ways in which various populations employ navigation technologies and media platforms. While the attempts to make sense of the growing digitization and datafication of cities are timely and much-needed, a key limitation is that these often tend to locate governance strategies and processes of data circulation almost wholly in the digital realm. Digitization, further, is often described as the top-down strategy increasingly used by the governments, municipalities and corporate players. This fails to make sense of numerous and intricate intersections of digital and physical spaces. It underestimates the material transmission of digital content in offline surroundings, as well as the digital remediation of urban places. However, since the uses of information and communication technology in the city are promoted by firms and governments, it is important to consider the tensions among citizen-oriented digital tools and “steering” of digitization by powerful urban and national players. In this vein, Halegoua critically juxtaposes the visions and practices of digital urban professionals, the authorities, and the urban residents in five chapters.

Chapter 1 “Smart City: Strategic Placemaking and the Internet of Things” looks at the image-making processes as envisioned by the corporations and authorities in “smart-from-the-start” showcase projects in three countries, namely, Songdo International Business District in South Korea, Masdar City in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates and PlanIT Valley near Porto in Portugal. United by their artificiality, these cities, the author shows, have difficulties attracting residents because they lack vibe, vibrancy, and history – traits that cities build for centuries. Strategic placemaking and imagination are reductive in a sense that citizens are understood here as “points of data collection” and community as “quantified” (p. 53).

In the next chapter, the one on digital infrastructure and urban transformation, Haleboua focuses on the controversies stemming from the ambitious project undertaken by Google corporation – Google Fiber in Kansas City. Google chose Kansas City and surroundings in 2011 as the first city to launch a citywide network of fiber cables: a cheap super-fast Internet and TV was made available. There, the corporate ideas about efficient services clashed with the values of citizens and their ways of understanding community and home. The author reflects on the contrasts between the rhetoric of “broadband optimism” and “ameliorating the digital divide” and things on the ground and claims that many efforts, which were progressively framed to be “sold” to municipal authorities did not materialize (p. 75). Joining the growing group of scholars investigating the tactics of non-use, media refusal, and opting out and drawing on an extensive fieldwork, Haleboua shows that the Kansas City residents quickly realized that it is not their sense of place and identities that Google had in mind. In other words, “Google Fiber was perceived as service that didn’t imagine them as potential users in realistic and meaningful ways” (pp. 87–88).

Reaching beyond the substantial social, technical, psychological and practical issues raised by the implementation of the top-down digital projects, the book also examines anthropological and other theoretical underpinnings of the digitalized everyday practices of navigating cities in chapters 3 (on navigating space as place) and 4 (on the spatial self). Drawing on the mix of questionnaire use and interviews conducted in Madison and Lawrence, as well as the studies of spatial cognition, the author shows the changes in mental mapping of a city caused by the use of GPS and other navigation devices. If in classic Lynch’s study, it is the city’s legibility, that is its capacity to generate its image as a whole that is continuously emphasized, today the citizens not only are not concerned with “wholeness” but they delegated wayfinding tasks to their devices and are quite comfortable about it (p. 123). Visualizing of routes and paths affords citizens’ “agency in placemaking” (p. 144).

Devices are also of great importance for broadcasting visited places that the users knowingly perform. In the strongest, in my view, chapter 4, the author traces the genealogy of the ways of registering and demonstrating one’s presence in place and their importance for constructing identities and building a sense of belonging. “Geocoded self-presentation”, as well as selfie-making become parts of the spatial self which is interestingly discussed in this chapter. Haleboua embeds her analysis of the connections between who urban dwellers are and places they want to be and seen in the account of the changed sense of the world, and asks a highly relevant

question: “When the world is presented as an expansively locatable series of places where a person can perpetually belong, does this alter individual or collective agency to intervene in the social production of place?” (p. 149). Lefebvre’s perspective on the production of space in the current digital context is used by the author to problematize a number of skeptical and critical assessments of the impact that the digitalization has on a sense of place.

Rather than mourning the alleged fragmentation of places caused by digital navigation, etc., she powerfully shows how the very practices of constructing the cities are changing and how productive tensions between people, technologies, subjective connective and place-related agency, and embodied practices emerge. One of the subchapters of the book, I believe, will particularly resonate with readers: there, the author talks about self-quantification as the popular strategy of place-making. The datafication of people’s bodies and practices is implemented through monitoring apps and wearable devices. The amount of attention directed at variously measuring a number of one’s steps, heartrate, distances covered, minutes spent without web surfing, etc. is indeed remarkable. Equally remarkable is enthusiasm with which people entrust their privacy and autonomy in hands of global platforms, producers of smartphones and applications like Fitbit, Samsung Health, Getup and many, many others. Intense global tracking, processing and selling of personal data would be impossible without voluntary self-tracking and it is exactly its voluntariness that interests the author. Haleboua charts ambivalences characteristic for those “new algorithmic identities”, for instance, the reduction of a sense of surprise and strangeness, which are historically important for exploring a city (p. 176). Ambivalent is also the process of making sense of data since it is, as a rule, easier to gather data than to interpret it and, as a result, location itself becomes context: “In the datafication of location, paradoxically, a sense of place is often the context that is both lost and sought through data collection and analysis” (p. 177).

The final chapter of the book is devoted to the uses of digital media in creative place and the author completes a sort of the circle: having started from rendering the top down approaches to placemaking facilitated by professionals, the book in the end again returns to the practices of those who professionally implement placemaking activities (p. 183). Continuing with capturing ambivalences of the urban digital era, the author admits to the vagueness of the very goals of creative placemaking (p. 185). Indeed, for starters, what exactly differentiate creative placemaking from “simple” placemaking, particularly given that in the preceding chapters of the book Haleboua impressively demonstrated richness and diversity of the everyday spatial-digital practices of lay citizens. It is natural then that creative placemaking is met with a great deal of skepticism, and the images of Trojan horse covered with the blanket saying “Art place grant” are used in the posters depicting what seem to be self-serving agendas of the boosters, which promise to bring vibrancy back to cities.

Summarizing the activities of three American funds for creative placemaking, Haleboua posits a few contradictions marking the use of digital media to promote and indeed make spaces. Deemed drivers of economic development, creative industries contribute to decrease of local business and physical sense of place. One

of the conclusions she comes to in this chapter is that “a shift in perspective and the incorporation of digital media as creative rather than commercial could help recognize experiences of place attachment and place identity that are emerging alongside digital media use in everyday life” (p. 213). This strikes me as not particularly realistic hope: first, the very juxtaposition of “commercial” and “creative” seems at odds with the predominant understanding of everything creative these days, namely, the commodification, mediatisation, and instrumentalization of creativity; second, however different the practices of users are, they obviously lack cultural or aesthetic novelty, which is commonly associated with creativity. Similarly, I failed to fully grasp the force of the author’s juxtaposition of “the space of humanistic use and the space of top-down exchange process” (p. 222).

The possibility of gaining “right to the city” through digital media and related placemaking – which is one of the main arguments of the book – seems to me very modest. I think that the book insufficiently takes into account an extent to which datafication is linked to dataveillance and more generally, the immense internalization by citizens of strategies of digital capitalism. Whether their digital practices present the case of everyday creativity, as the author claims, or the case of puzzling compliance with the norms of big data epoch, is an open question. The book ends with generous suggestions for future research, and I am confident that it will act as a stimulus to further research into digital cities. While you may not agree with all Haleboua’s arguments, this is a useful book, which should be read widely by all those interested in the connections between digitality, cultural politics, and everyday life.