



Photo: Rohit Madan (CC BY-NC-SA)

(Re)Thinking Smart, (Re)Building Scale in a Digital Urban Age

12th - 13th November 2021

Building Centre, 26 Store St, London WC1E 7BT

Recent scholarship on smart cities and digital urbanism suggests a shift from a focus on grand visions of Internet of Things, Big Data and widespread 'technological solutionism' (Kitchin 2015) to more prosaic and everyday uses of technology. From detailed examinations of digital surveillance and privacy breaches, more recent examinations of smart cities have expanded the meanings and significance of technology in reinforcing multiple marginalisations (Datta 2018) as well as providing opportunities for empowerment (Datta and Thomas 2021). This shift signals a rethinking of 'smart' urbanism as a collective of multiple, fragmented and dispersed initiatives of making do by assisting, challenging or disrupting smart urban futures. This also implies a rethinking of smart through a scalar shift – from large city-based infrastructure projects to smaller individual community level endeavours, from Big Data initiatives to deep and open data practices, from an Internet of Things (IoT) to a 'politics of things' (Willems 2019). These shifts, we suggest can potentially equalise power through parsimonious digital devices and infrastructures.

This conference thus seeks to explore how we may rethink 'smart' by rebuilding its scalar logics from the global to the local, from the regional to the relational, from the urban to the domestic. For human geographers, debates on scale have largely been framed to challenge its construction as an ontological and epistemological given. In rethinking smart through scalar shifts we take seriously Smith's (1984) claim that different levels of scale (e.g. urban, global, national) were characterised and described by different types of relationships to capital. So that, for instance, the urban scale was determined by relations between labour and commuting, spaces of production and reproduction. Building on this work, human geographers conceptualised scale as a kind of spatial imaginary in which certain geographic relationships could be observed and delineated (Marston 2000).

The Conference will explore this relationship between scale and smart futures. For instance, how do we rebuild our conception of scale for the smart city? We argue that this

means a focus on the smart city from everyday prosaic relations of power from below, which has the potential to disrupt utopian imaginaries of technological driven urban life from above. We ask how we might go about rethinking smart through smaller spaces and scales, from the small and medium sized cities to rebuilding data democracy and internet freedom from within communities and homes. For instance, how does 'smartness' as we understand it at the urban scale, translate to the domestic in the Smart Home? How has the global, urban, and workplace been folded into the domestic scale (Lindner 2021)? Given the tendency of new surveillant, efficiency saving technologies to disproportionately make the already marginalised vulnerable, what does this mean in terms of renegotiating power at the most intimate, domestic and bodily scales? How could this scalar shift enable us to capture the embodiment of data injustices and take into account urban relations of labour, capital, assets, markets, and the prosaic conditions of everyday life? How will rethinking smart through frugal technologies rupture and recalibrate the wider urban and regional inequalities? How will rethinking smart rebuild new and novel assemblages of 'small data' that can be both empowering and emancipatory?

Learning from Small Cities team:

- Prof. Ayona Datta (UCL)
- Prof. Melissa Butcher (Birkbeck)
- Dr. Sophie Hadfield-Hill (University of Birmingham)
- Prof. Sanjay Srivastava (UCL)
- Dr. Philip J Nicholson (UCL)

Keynotes:

- Prof. Sarah Elwood (University of Washington)
- Prof. Susan Parnell (University of Bristol)
- Prof. René Veron (University of Lausanne)
- Prof. Ursula Rao (Max Planck Institute)
- Prof. Rohit Negi (Ambedkar University)
- Dr. Rob Cowley (KCL)
- Dr. Ipshita Basu (University of Westminster)
- Dr. Jaideep Gupte (Institute of Development Studies)
- Ana Brandusescu (McGill)