Infrastructures and Imaginaries of the Communicative City: The Criticality of Communication Idioms in an Era of Mediated Urbanism

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The COVID-19 pandemic makes clear the need for science, technology, and engineering to solve urban problems and maintain quality of life. However, it is crucial to be wary of the ways in which a technocratic veneer obscures the ideological underpinnings and inherent value judgments that direct policy programs, as well as the ways in which technocratic imaginaries limit the scope of our potential urban futures. The infrastructures of urban life provide a fundamental support for daily existence and enactments of sociality, but urban imaginaries are how we envision a future for both individual and collective life beyond mere survival.

The Communicative City concept foregrounds the constitutive role of communication in urban life and emphasizes the material and social infrastructures that support open encounters and informal interactions. I am advocating for a critical component to the communicative city concept, one that goes beyond a functionalist perspective of the urban infrastructures that support sociality and considers the greater purposes that communication may serve to facilitate. The pandemic poses some clear challenges to the communicative city concept, not least of which is the impact on public interaction and encounter in a world in which isolation is celebrated as a virtue or recognized as an imperative, and indeed fulfills a social good. But the pandemic offers a lot of potential opportunities as well, as moments of crisis and dramatic change often do.

Infrastructures

The pandemic sparked two discursive shifts in urban policy conversations that I want to highlight. The first of these is the way in which popular discourse around the pervasive computing technologies associated with smart urbanism has shifted. Smart city programs typically highlight Big Data approaches to urban governance: they champion the ability of ubiquitous computing technologies and networked sensors to provide unprecedented data on urban processes. These tools have been criticized for the privacy implications they pose, as vanguards of surveillance capitalism and policing based on algorithmic prediction. In the context of the pandemic these technologies were suddenly recast as essential tools for tracking and mitigating viral transmission. Governments around the world have employed tracking of personal mobile devices to monitor potential exposure to the virus and to notify individuals of a need to quarantine. So the pandemic marks a moment where public health initiatives supersede (perhaps only temporarily) a rhetoric of surveillance and privacy in regards to locative technologies and tracking potentials.

The second shift deals with the dramatic rise of telecommuting. This year telecommuting and videoconferencing went from niche applications or seldom used technologies to a fact of everyday life for people all over the planet. In the 1990s, in the early days of the Internet when discourse surrounding the World Wide Web was characterized by techno-utopian optimism and innovation fetishism, urbanists, media scholars, and communication researchers predicted an increase in telecommuting and a corresponding decline in traditional urban centers and a loosening of ties between firms and specific geographic locations. This is not quite how things developed: rather, over the

past couple of decades since the advent of the Internet we've seen, in the U.S. certainly but also other cities around the world, a "return to the city movement," and a renewed cultural capital of urban centers, and the gentrification and hypergentrification that follows. The increasing affordability and accessibility of network communications has corresponded, somewhat paradoxically, with a resurgence of economic and industry clusters in urban centers.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been much discussion in the popular press about how there may be a shift toward preference for remote working. It remains to be seen how long-lasting these impacts will be I think it has a real potential to mark a shift in urban dynamics, particularly in relation to how companies approach the residential requirements of their employees. The late urban geographer Neil Smith highlighted the practical limits of daily commuting practices as the primary limiter to urban scale; that is, the extent that laborers are able to commute to work and back to home in the process of producing and reproducing their labor power is a central restraint to the spatial movement of capital. So it's fascinating to consider the extent to which the advent of telecommuting may further challenge traditional notions of urban scale.

Of course, it must be pointed out that the uptake of telecommuting in response to the pandemic was not experienced universally across the workforce. As the practical matters of establishing quarantine procedures to mitigate the spread of the virus was balanced against the imperative to keep the economy running and maintain supply lines, we saw the emergence of a distinction between "essential" and "non-essential" workers; and this, of course, was a way of categorizing and distinguishing between those who could stay at home or fulfill their work functions remotely, versus the laborers required to

show up in person to guarantee the continued function of essential services and provision of resources. This distinction between categories of laborers highlights the class divisions and power relations inherent to the mode of production, and also starkly illustrates the limits of virtual space. Telecommuting, virtual meeting spaces, and mediated classrooms may enable many of us to maintain employment and satisfy basic work functions, but for food and other essential forms of nourishment we remain reliant on physical spaces.

The American geographer Don Mitchell highlighted the inherent disparities between virtual and physical spaces by foregrounding an intrinsically political definition of public space, an understanding of the political and civic functions that urban public spaces provide. Mitchell advocated an understanding of public space as an intrinsically politicized terrain to be taken and remade, as well as a space that "tolerates the risks of disorder." As Mitchell adroitly argues, these differing perspectives concern not only competing ideas about what constitutes public space but also who constitutes "the public," as well as "questions about the very spaces that make political activities possible." While some scholars have optimistically cited the potential progressive political applications of communication media for facilitating exchange and interaction beyond the limitations of physical space, others have argued for the continued primacy of physical spaces for political action, as Mitchell does when stating "there has never been a revolution conducted exclusively in electronic space."

Imaginaries

This notion of the political functions of public space leads me to the next point on urban imaginaries. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic initially seemed to reinforce ways of envisioning cities and urban space that characterizes "smart city" urban

imaginaries. The propagation of smart city frameworks, particularly those promoted by corporate firms and technology vendors, has been characterized as a "techno-utopian policy mobility" and expression of a "technoscientific urbanism" in which infrastructural packages are sold to beleaguered municipalities as technical "solutions" for intractable urban problems. The ambiguous nature of urban "smartness" therefore mobilizes a "test-bed urbanism," an experimental ethos in which cities function as laboratories for the development of technologies and governance models that be purchased, replicated, and deployed elsewhere.

One of the problems with these approaches, I argue, is that by foregrounding technological formulations of urban life, these programs function to depoliticize practices of city planning, obfuscate the social inequalities inherent to urban development, and foreclose opportunities to formulate an emancipatory or oppositional urban politics. The smart city imaginary of transposable technical solutions as promoted by technology vendors has emerged from the conditions of entrepreneurial urbanism and neoliberal policy approaches. The technoscientific tenor that characterizes many smart city discourses is especially amenable to neoliberal applications as it addresses urban problems through a veneer of objectivity, neutrality, and ideological agnosticism. These technocratic approaches attempt to depoliticize what are in actuality politically charged development and governance programs. Technocratic smart city frameworks thus pose the potential to present technological solutions that ignore or even compound social inequalities.

Obviously a global health crisis like this pandemic requires a technical approach, it requires science, and it requires a solutionist perspective. But my concern as a critical

scholar is that this technical approach might occlude or serve to obfuscate underlying power structures and inherent value judgments, or serve to depoliticize the urban domain. My concern in the early days of the pandemic was that the sudden and urgent emergence of a technical-managerialist approach to the public health crisis would push other concerns around social and spatial justice off of the agenda. Ultimately that concern proved unfounded. It did not take long for issues of urban life, including those pertaining to the pandemic, to become politicized. In the U.S. responses to the pandemic became polarized along ideological lines.

Contestations over competing urban imaginaries re-emerged this past summer in the various urban uprisings, protests, and riots that began as a response to not only spectacular examples of police violence and brutality against persons of color, but also continued examples of extrajudicial killings of black men in particular. So we saw stunning examples in cities across the U.S., and eventually spreading to protests in cities around the world, of mass popular demonstrations in urban space, and in some cases occupations or expropriations of urban space. In the U.S. context we saw these demonstrations draw attention to legacies of injustice, both racial and otherwise, as well as how these legacies are implicated in patterns of urban development and inscribed into the built environment through not only policing practices but also residential segregation and gentrification. So this summer featured some really extreme and somewhat contradictory examples of de-politicization as well as a corresponding hyper-politicization of space. This can be correlated with the resurgence of spatial imaginaries in U.S. political discourse during this period (i.e. the "law and order" and "suburban lifestyle dreams" evoked by President Trump).

The Communicative Idiom

So how do these trends in urban infrastructures and imaginaries relate to the Communicative City? Throughout my research on smart urbanism I've been working through the ambiguous ways that the "communicative" or "communication" idiom can be employed. The communicative city concept emerged from two interrelated questions: how does a city communicate, and how does it facilitate communication? The original "communicative city" inventory featured a range of attributes including the material elements and physical structures of the built environment, social arrangements, regulatory structures, and both fictional and non-fictional depictions of cities. The concept has also produced the Urban Communication Audit, a methodology for identifying components of the communicative city framework present in a particular municipality and gauging the extent to which residents are linked to local communication networks.

As a contrasting example of the sorts of obstacles that the use of the "communicative" idiom may represent, I'll offer the notion of "communicative capitalism" as developed by the political theorist Jodi Dean. Dean argues that discourses and practices of networked communications media fetishize speech, opinion, and participation in such a way that the exchange value of a message overtakes the use value. Messages are thus unmoored from "contexts of action and application" and become part of a circulating data stream that relieves institutional actors from the obligation to respond. Dean argues that the ostensible democratic possibilities offered by participatory media merely serve to provide a semblance of participation by substituting superficial contributions of message circulation for real political engagement. So in Dean's formulation, the integration of communication technologies and message circulation into

neoliberal governance calls the very possibility of an emancipatory communicative practice into question. This has been an influential perspective for my approach to smart cities, and a consideration of how the emphasis on implementing ICTs in urban environments and processes portends a conjunction of "communicative capitalism" and the "communicative city," urban design and governance, a sort of "communicative urbanism."