

Smart City Songdo? A Digital Turn on Urban Fabric*

Suzanne Peyrard and Valérie Gelézeau

Using the perspective of cultural and critical geography, this paper discusses the fabric of Songdo, South Korea, a mega-urban project declared the paragon of a “smart city” and intended to house about 250,000 inhabitants by 2020.¹ After demonstrating how Songdo fits David Harvey’s (1975, 2001b) concept of a “mega-project,” we deconstruct the development of Songdo to show how the city is a “spatial fix” (Harvey 1981, 2001a). Then, according to Henri Lefebvre’s (1974) theory of space (conceived, perceived, and experienced), we analyze Songdo’s smart city marketing. This method allows us to interrogate the logics of actors in the fabric of Songdo and the articulation between the fabric, the meaning, and the living, focusing on residential scale. What does it mean to live in such a “smart city” in the making? Are the housing, planning, and public facilities appropriate for the pioneering residents’ actual practices in the new city? Has digital intelligence had any effects on building and managing a city? If so, what are they? By analyzing data collected through ethnographic methods, we present a better vision of the complex temporalities of such a mega-project under construction. A city in the making leads to functional and morphological discrepancies: from the presence of idle lands nearby brand new towers to vegetable gardens in front of glamorous urban facilities. Our approach to Songdo is remote from the usual boasting discourse on the “smart city.” Songdo is hardly smarter than any contemporary city; rather, it is a smart city only because digital life enhanced by the use of smartphones has become a “total social fact” (Mauss 1973) in South Korea and in urbanism.

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1. Incheon Free Economic Zone official website: <https://www.ifez.go.kr/ivt075>, Accessed September 10, 2019.

Suzanne Peyrard (suzanne.peyrard@ehess.fr) is a PhD candidate at the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), The Centre for Studies on China, Korea, and Japan (CNRS-EHESS-Université de Paris). Valérie Gelézeau (gelezeau@ehess.fr) is a Professor (Directrice d'études), Centre for Korean Studies, and Director of The Centre for Studies on China, Korea, and Japan (CNRS-EHESS-Université de Paris)

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