

Transforming into a ‘smart city’ doesn’t make you smart

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By [Randy W. Bright](#)

Planetizen rarely publishes an article in which the author criticizes the concept of smart cities, but it did so when it published a presentation to a “High Level Group meeting on Smart Cities” in Brussels this past September 24.

The article was a transcript of the presentation by Rem Koolhaas, a Dutch architect, urbanist and architectural theorist serving as a professor in Practice of Architecture and Urban Design at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard.

Koolhaas stated in his presentation, “I had a sinking feeling as I was listening to talks by these prominent figures in the field of smart cities because the city used to be the domain of the architect, and now, frankly, they have made it their domain. The transfer of authority has been achieved in a clever way by calling their city smart – and by calling it smart, our city is condemned to being stupid.”

One might think that Koolhaas is criticizing the Smart Growth movement, but as he continues, a different picture emerges.

“Architecture used to be about the creation of community,” he said, “and making the best effort at symbolizing that community. Since the triumph of the market economy in the late 70’s, architecture no longer expenses public values but instead the values of the private sector.”

Calling the private sector a regime, he said “this regime has had a very big impact on cities and the way we understand cities. With safety and security as selling points, the city has become vastly less adventurous and more predictable. To compound the situation, when the market economy took hold at the end of the 1970s, architects stopped writing manifestos.”

Koolhaas went on to say that commercial corporations were “changing the notion of the city itself” – saying that “maybe it is no coincidence that “liveable” – flat – cities like Vancouver, Melbourne and even Perth are replacing traditional metropolises in our imagery.”

He said that the “protagonists” of the Smart City movement have created a sensor-based culture to deal with “disasters” like “the effects of climate change, an aging population and infrastructure, water and energy provisions” and that the smart city is “typically with simplistic, child-like rounded edges and bright colors” and treats its citizens like infants. He also gave examples of cars filled with “complex monitoring devices,” homes turned into “an automated, response cell” and cities that were turning into “increasingly a comprehensive surveillance system.”

And about the mayors of smart cities, they are “particularly susceptible to the rhetoric of the smart city: it is very attractive to be a smart mayor....This confluence of rhetoric – the “smart city,” the “creative class” and “innovation” – is creating a stronger and stronger argument for

consolidation. If you look in a smart city control room, like the one in Rio de Janeiro by IBM, you start to wonder about the extent of what is actually being controlled.”

He said, “a new trinity is at work: traditional European values of liberty, equality and fraternity have been replaced in the 21st century by comfort, security, and sustainability. They are now the dominant values of our culture, a revolution that has barely been registered.”

Koolhaas’s conclusion? That “smart cities and politics have been diverging, growing in separate worlds. It is absolutely critical that the two converge again.”

Koolhaas’s conclusion is flawed because he has misidentified the private sector and its provision of innovative digital technology to be the culprit that took away real thinking about how a city should look, when in reality governments have seen emerging technologies as the tools that would enable them to gain the control they so desperately want over their populations.

Even though I would agree with him that we have indeed become a “comfort, security and sustainability” society, I would argue that the “traditional European values of liberty, equality and fraternity” were ever the values we started with or the ones that we should return to. The American Constitution was a direct response to the European values we rejected. Instead, we embraced “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”, which is vastly different and infinitely better.

I would agree with Koolhaas when he said that by calling our city smart, “our city is condemned to being stupid” – just not for the same reasons. The arrogance that embodies that title should always arouse suspicion that it is anything but smart.



Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-582-3972 rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

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