

Mattern, Shannon. *A City Is Not a Computer: Other Urban Intelligences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. xxi + 187 pages. Paperback, \$14.99.

Built on her previous research and publications in the past two decades, in this book, Shannon Mattern tries to challenge the city-as-computer metaphor that has emerged in recent years in urban planning and urban governance. She not only traces the roots of the concept but also explores the limitations as well as the potential negative consequences of the metaphor.

The book is divided into five chapters. In Chapter 1, Mattern first points out that dashboard governance has become very popular locally and globally. Then she provides a brief review of the dashboard approach historically, showing that this mechanistic approach is nothing new. Although she acknowledges that dashboard approach is useful for data representation, contextualization and decision-making for particular targeted audiences, she argues that it “does little to educate those users about where the data come from and about whose interests they serve” (p. 48). In addition, she reminds us that too many dashboards may confuse users and make them skeptical of their value. Finally, she warns us that creating and using dashboards may reflect/reinforce existing prejudice, discrimination and inequalities embedded in the current system.

In Chapter 2, Mattern addresses the fundamental question of what makes a city a city. As a historian, again, she traces the historical roots of the city-as-computer metaphor. She argues that it is very important to debunk this false metaphor because it provides the epistemological foundation for recent urban planning and governance. She explains the city-as-computer model is appealing because “it frames the messiness of urban life as programmable and subject to rational order,” thus, it is easier for bureaucrats

to accept and to use (p. 65). She cautions that we should not “let the totalizing idea of city-as-computer blind you to the countless of other forms of data and sites of intelligence-generation in the city such as municipal archive, library, museum and environment” (p. 67). She concludes that city-as-computer metaphor is the product of an oversimplification which will hinder the development of healthy, just and resilient cities, and calls for new models for thinking about cities that do not compute.

Mattern believes that city-making is based on city-knowing, thus she discusses the public knowledge in Chapter 3. First, she introduces the new metaphor of seeing and using library as platform. Citing many studies, she points out that nowadays libraries play more and more functions than in times past. In some countries, under this new platform paradigm, libraries have been “conscripted into smart city narratives” (p.75). However, Mattern also points out there are limitations of the platform metaphor. It tends to be “market-oriented and infuses with prejudice and lacks of depth with a flat two-dimensional stage” (p. 76). She proposes that we need to treat library as infrastructure not only providing knowledge but also social connections. More importantly, she believes that library can serve as ontological infrastructure to encompass more and more social services. She concludes that the library should be used as “infrastructures to care for, maintain, and build the rich diversity of public knowledges that already define our cities” (104).

In Chapter 4, Mattern points out that infrastructures fail everywhere, all the time, thus maintenance is very important. She also points out that study of maintenance has become a collective endeavor in recent years. She provides detailed analysis of maintenance in four areas including repair of large urban infrastructure, architectural

maintenance, electronic devices, and data clean and maintenance. She further calls for using maintenance approach to replace the innovation and newness approach as the dominant paradigm, though she also warns that we “have to avoid romanticizing maintenance and repair” (108).

Unlike other books, Mattern’s does not follow the conventional way of summarizing what has been discussed in the book in the concluding chapter. Instead, she discusses two interesting cases, one in New York city and the other in Los Angeles. She argues that under the current smart city model, that there is “the array of possibilities that arise when civic infrastructural is built and managed by private corporations with minimal public accountability and overseen by government clients enamored of technocratic solutions” (p.139). In addition, she argues that not only private corporation project often reinforces the logics of racial profiling and but also tend to overlook the “feral nexus of forces that shape inequalities” (p. 144). Again, she argues that a well-supported public library and a robust municipal archive that recognize the myriad forms of intelligence may be the best solution for solving those problems aforementioned.

This is a very timely work given the prevalence of the smart city approach in urban planning and governance in recent years. It certainly provides a different angle to look at smart city development. She reminds us that the issue is not building smart cities, but how to build smart cities and how to use modern technology to do so.

Mattern is very knowledgeable and cited many other researchers from multiple disciplines such as communication, media studies, geography, literary scholars, environmental studies in this book. In addition, she provides a global view of the issue by including many cases studies from different countries around the world.

Mattern made several very good arguments in the book. For instance, she cautions that we should not “let the totalizing idea of city-as-computer blind you to the countless of other forms of data and sites of intelligence -generation in the city such as municipal archive, library, museum and environment” (p. 67). She proposes that we need to treat library as infrastructure not only providing knowledge but also social connections. More importantly, she argues that library can serve as ontological infrastructure to encompass more and more social services.

I have a few concerns about this book. First, what puzzles me is about the relevance of the Chapter 4 with the central theme of the book that a city is not a computer. I wish the author could make it clearer how this chapter is related to the main theme of the book. Second, Mattern uses the word “image” repeatedly in the book. Of course, imaginations are important. However, what should be followed based on the imaginations are also, if not more, important. Imaginations are only imaginations without solutions.

Third, I fully agree with the notion that a city is not a computer. However, I would like to point out that a city is not a city without computers nowadays. I also would like to add that a city is not a utopia. A city is a social entity with many issues and problems, historically, currently and in the future. We need to work together to solve those issues and problems when they emerge and recognized with the help of modern technology especially with the computer technology.

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