Interview with Rob Kitchin

Interview by Joan Fitzgerald, Editor-in-Chief, Regions and Cities Book Series Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

I am delighted to interview Rob Kitchin again. Recall that he edited *Data and the City* in 2018, and *Code and the City* in 2016—both very successful books in the Routledge Regions & Cities series. He is Professor and European Research Council Advanced Investigator for Programmable City Project at Maynooth University, Ireland. In addition, he is co-principal investigator of the Building City Dashboards project.

This time we talk about *Creating Smart Cities,* he co-edited together with Claudio Coletta, Leighton Evans and Liam Heaphy.

Joan Fitzgerald (JF): : How did this project come about?

Rob Kitchin (RK): It came out of a workshop hosted by the Programmable City Project. I had been noticing that we have two groups that don't speak to each

other. The first are academics who have been critiquing various aspects of "smart cities" for years. And there's a lot to critique— equity concerns, production of technocratic governance, corporatization of urban services, technological lock-ins, privacy violations, and vulnerability to cyberattack. The second group is the technicians and staffers designing and implementing smart cities technology and trying to get it in place quickly so cities can function better. They weren't paying attention to the critics, mainly because the critics weren't offering any policy or practical suggestions. So, my challenge to my colleagues was to go out and do the field work—talk to people in cities and figure out how write about how we can develop an agenda for reimagining smart cities.

JF: And did they?

RK: They did. The chapters are case studies based on grounded field work. The cases represent cities all over the world—Amsterdam, Atlanta, Barcelona, Camden, Dublin, Medellín, and cities participating in a national smart cities project in India. And they offer social, political and practical interventions for creating more equitable and just smart cities. The chapters offer practical advice on how to reap the benefits of smart city initiatives while minimizing some of the problems that have been identified.

JF: What are some examples of equitable and just smart cities initiatives?

RK: *Félix Talvard*'s chapter on Medellín discusses how its Inclusive Smart City approach could be a model for the Global South. Medellín has its own energy company that produces power for itself and other cities as well. The profits are reinvested back into the city in ways that use technology to serve poorer residents—that's how the how the Metrocable gondola system was created—and its first line served poor neighbourhoods. The chapter also discusses Medellín's world-known Innovation District, which is a sustainable area defined by technology companies who use technology to create an exciting work-live environment. The notion with Medellín's smart cities approach is that strategies can't create gentrification—they have to serve people living there. Duncan McLaren and Julian Agyeman's chapter discusses in part Barcelona's formulation of technological sovereignty, transitioning to a model that emphasizes citizen participation and openness. Barcelona used to be the poster child for corporate neoliberal smart city approach, but when a left-wing government was elected in 2015, the city made a commitment to rethink the strategy. They started with

citizen needs and shifted municipal and state agencies to open source software. They don't roll out schemes until they have vetted them with residents.

JF: Is this bottom-up, engaged model the norm now?

RK: There's some movement, as in the cases I just mentioned. But no, it isn't the norm. Smart Cities is usually a top-down process tied in with neoliberal processes of marketization and privatization. Most cities seek advice from global players such as Deloitte, IBM, and KPMG.

We see in Ayona Datta's chapter on smart cities in India that it is part of a national program to modernize cities. The approach is aimed at emerging middle class, not on sorting out slums and providing social infrastructure.

JF: What are the key takeaways of the book?

RK: My concluding chapter lays out an agenda for re-imagining and remaking the smart city based on the case studies. It argues that there is little point being against the smart city – it is here to stay. Networked computation is thoroughly woven into how cities are managed and governed along with the provision of services. What we can do though is change the normative ideas underpinning the smart city, as well as the practical and political praxes with regards to its operation. In so doing we can try to create a smart city that maximizes the benefits to all citizens, and not a select group, companies or states, while minimizing its pernicious effects. To create a more ethical and citizen-centric smart city. To treat the city not as a system of systems, but rather as a bricolage of places.