

MODERN, BEAUTIFUL, SMART CHANDIGARH CONTESTATIONS FROM THE MARGINS

Michelle Ruiz

During my MA studies of Modern South and Southeast Asian Studies at IAAW and a student exchange in Delhi, plenty of bridges to Latin America and Europe became evident. Especially since policy-makers and corporates have determined the whole globe's future as 'urban' and 'digital', I was motivated to engage in explorative empirical research on urban and digital development, particularly in the context of 'smart city' planning.

Yet 'smart cities' are not restricted to urban infrastructure, but also focus on the human side of 'smart'. What constitutes a 'smart' citizen? Which rights are gained and which ones are lost, and who is (dis)entitled to or from the realm of 'smartness'? I decided to explore these questions following the launch of India's *100 Smart Cities Mission* - one of the world's most ambitious smart city projects - which is being extended, in spite of its questionable impact.

As I was looking for critical responses to this enterprise, I came across an interesting intervention by an organisation in Chandigarh called *Ghar Adhikar Sangharsh Morcha* (GASM, united front for housing rights). Chandigarh is a highly segregated, yet celebrated, icon of modernist master-planning. In one of his statements, GASM activist Sachinderpal ('Pali') criticized the World Bank's interlinked promotion of slum-free and smart cities campaigns. Accordingly, GASM's protest is primarily directed against the demolition of twelve working-class bastis (urban settlements) in Chandigarh. Most importantly such resistance is sustained by acknowledging the struggles of generations of forcibly displaced, yet insufficiently compensated daily laborers.

Starting with the Smart City Mission Statement and Guidelines, followed by interviews with activists, bureaucrats, artists and citizens in bastis, at Punjab University and in the shopping mall, my research highlights how the smart cities program threatens citizens' rights to the city in epistemic, civic and material ways. At a time of alarming housing, climate, and food crises, CEOs, instead of elected representati-

ves, are entrusted to implement 'smart' interventions, without any sustainability indicators.

In my Master's Thesis, I argue that 'smartness' reproduces a class divide, separating those who would be in a position to manage their transactions on their smartphones from those who are surveilled as 'encroachers' in their former living (now 'slum-free') or working (now 'hawker-free') places. Therefore, in the case study of Chandigarh, I propose taking a distance from 'control-room utopias' (top-down city planning without regard for social, environmental and cultural contexts), in order to concentrate on the long-term development and pro-active reproduction of socio-spatial injustices.

In Chandigarh, only a few areas were selected to be redeveloped as 'smart hubs' and receive by far the largest part of the city's budget. As a consequence, policy-makers neglect basic services such as electricity, water and schooling for the poor who work for, but cannot afford to live in 'smart' Chandigarh.

Thus, technological promises on urban infrastructure reinforce existing inequalities. Importantly, this has not stopped, but encouraged activists and artists to develop counter-strategies to the logics of 'smart' participation, which reduces the space for discussion and bottom-up solutions.



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About the Author:

Michelle Ruiz earned her MA in Modern South and Southeast Asian Studies at IAAW in 2018. She is currently based in Quito, Ecuador. Her interests include south-south dialogues on education, cinema, agroecology, and knowledge politics.



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