



# All knowledge is not smart: racial and environmental injustices within legacies of smart cities

Book review of: Mattern, S. (2021). *A City Is Not a Computer: Other Urban Intelligences*. Princeton University Press. ISBN 9,780,691,208,053. <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691208053/a-city-is-not-a-computer>

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In the last sentences of *A City Is Not a Computer: Other Urban Intelligences*, Shannon Mattern, a Professor of Anthropology at The New School for Social Research, elicits a sense of hope in readers for the possibility of a more inclusive future by envisioning:

Imagine if we cultivated urban rootstock that prioritises environmental, racial, and digital justice over efficiency; that draws nourishment from epistemic pluralism, blending computational logics with feral intelligence, sensory experiences, and local knowledge. A city built to recognise the wisdom ingrained in its trees and statuary, its interfaces and archives, its marginalised communities and more-than-human inhabitants is ultimately much, much smarter than any supercomputer (154).

After Mattern's critical reading of social and environmental violence embedded within smart urban infrastructures, these last words unfold a future promise. Mattern traces how smart cities exacerbate the entrenched legacies of extractivism, capitalism, colonialism, racial violence, and social and environmental inequalities. Smart cities, including their *all-seeing* and *all-knowing* dashboards, are built on exploitative heritage, further amplifying the injustice. City dashboards often claim to render the urban infrastructure visible and understandable by presenting objective data on environmental, social, and economic aspects of city life. Shannon Mattern dubs such dashboards as contemporary *talismans* simulating the past, present, and future of cities in a *big-picture*

*view* to help city governments, private corporations, and not-for-profit organisations inform policies for a better world. Despite the illusion of all-encompassing knowledge, such dashboards are laden with flaws. Dashboards glitch and freeze, much like the dystopian augmented world depicted in the short film *Hyper-Reality* by Keiichi Matsuda. Moreover, behind the façade of objectivity and techno-solutionism hides away the deep-rooted neglect towards accountability, transparency, and critical thinking, plus erasure of complexities that do not fit into neatly pigeonholed datasets. Mattern lays bare the ramifications of such issues by illustrating the impacts of data-driven COVID-19 hot-spotting and predictive crime policing in North America to demonstrate how they intensify racial, environmental, and health violence.

Looking back on the trajectory of smart cities, which have fostered many biases and inequalities, Mattern acknowledges that smart cities and their knowledge infrastructure are shaped by a small minority of humans who have actively excluded others (marginalising lesser humans and nonhumans). The questions: (a) who is considered and who is not, and; (b) who creates meaning and who does not – lie at the centre of smart city issues. With this recognition, themes of racial and environmental injustices are sketched out in Mattern's take on smart cities. A bold and inspiring thinker, Mattern is hardly reserved about being done with the orthodox concept of smartness in cities (digital technologies and resulting data) as she shifts her focus to other kinds of urban intelligence. Taking inspiration from Arturo Escobar's concept of pluriverses, Mattern shares how cities comprise different forms of local and Indigenous knowledge and their potential to heal the wounds provoked by biased algorithmic representations and bad metaphors that limit our understanding of cities.

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As reflected by the last sentences of the book, Mattern attempts to grapple with *how* to include other urban intelligence that reflect the wisdom of local human and nonhuman communities. She does not try to uncover a definitive answer to the crucial question of inclusion, which is ultimately comforting as it avoids quick-fix solutions without the consent of marginalised bodies. Instead, she holds possibilities beyond the technocratic mindset by advocating for *unsmart* knowledge, for instance, supported by libraries. While acknowledging the history of racism and ableism within libraries, Mattern maintains they can offer an alternative world to the networked city, by carrying plural epistemologies. Mattern also pays attention to the writings of Black feminists on politics of care to illustrate that we must nurture deep reciprocal care for the neglected human communities, nonhuman life-forms, and ecologies that maintain our urban infrastructures. Such care includes respecting their knowledge, giving them agency to exercise their knowledge, but also not controlling, underpaying, and burning them out.

*A City is Not a Computer!* is dense with insight on healing fractures of urban violence with plural knowledge, but Mattern's ability with words makes for an effortless read. In a book seemingly about smart cities, Mattern's allegiance is with pluriverse, inclusivity of local voices and communities, distributed power, relationship with other species, and not with smart cities. The book leaves the reader pondering: how do we live justly, oppose colonial and capitalist tendencies, and awaken others to plural knowledge that empowers thinking with marginalised human and nonhuman communities in more attuned and less calculated ways than what smart cities allow us?

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