



New Old Cities vs Old New Cities: The City of Which future? by Julien Eymeri

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Discovering a city is always a unique and intimate experience. Especially when you discover it for the first time, having been transported there in a flying or floating metal tube (or one on wheels) and dealing with a watch that resolutely displays a different time. A new time-space is upon you. You can either find your bearings as quickly as possible or give in and float dizzily along, perhaps catching a glimpse of another reality. One piece of advice: above all, do not try to understand everything immediately.

When one travels to visit the smart cities that are emerging everywhere on the planet, one is confronted with urban realities that are so novel that they seem to be perpetually underway. That is, should these cities finally fully materialize one day, and not simply remain an object of well-intentioned and more or less single-minded discourse. The consultant Julien Eymeri confronts for Stream his experience of Songdo (the Korean smart city) and Masdar (its Emirati equivalent), along with Detroit's reinvention and transformation efforts to question the characteristics of cities in the digital era and the role of business in their development.



SONGDO: THE UBIQUITOUS CITY

My experience in Songdo began like this: I arrived one night at the airport in Incheon, jumped into a “disco-taxi” that took off at high speed over a brand new bridge spanning nearly thirteen miles (twenty-one kilometers) over the Yellow Sea, to be left off at an international hotel. I went up to my room and discovered a city at night through my window. Bright lights define the skyline of buildings and public spaces; only a few cars on the road. No billboards or shop signs to distract me. My imagination did the rest. Glued to the window, I mapped out a fantasy of this city of the future that everyone is talking about.

A lot has been written about this city, rising as it did out of the ground (or rather out of the mud as its 1,500 acres [600 hectares] were reclaimed from the sea) after ten years of work and 35 billion dollars invested in this gigantic project, which in time (2025?) is supposed to accommodate 65,000 inhabitants and some 300,000 commuters. Songdo aims to be the archetype of the sustainable city at the forefront of technology. Its infrastructure covers all aspects of sustainable development: transport (connections to future rapid transit networks, an urban mix allowing travel from home to work in less than ten minutes, the infrastructure of a “walkable city”), water consumption (use of seawater and rainwater, treatment of wastewater), energy consumption (LED bulbs, solar panels, LEED-certified buildings), treatment of waste (75 percent of construction waste recycled, a pneumatic waste collection network), quality of life (40 percent of green spaces, a golf course in the city center, an international school and university campuses, convention centers, etc.). With regard to technology, everything operates via computer synapses that are buried and hidden away, offering security and services. Thousands of surveillance cameras, real-time traceability of vehicles, individual connections to the implementation of the latest automation facilities: all these make Songdo the first ubiquitous city.⁽¹⁾ It therefore becomes a single common space-time for all the inhabitants, projected forward in a virtually enhanced existence: you can be everywhere, at any time.

[1] The “U-City” or “Ubiquitous City” is the land of big brother experimentation by telecom companies. It is designed according to a logic of global integration of energy and information systems in a continuum linking the private sphere (control panels to control all functions of one’s habitat—lights, temperature, blinds, music—and remote monitoring of children) to public spaces (monitoring, control, and optimization of traffic with vehicles equipped with radio-frequency identification [RFID] chips, dynamic and intelligent management of signaling, management of the flow of people and adaptation of the level of public lighting).

The next morning, the city—or should I say the building site—appears in all its excess, its current state of development transforming it into an oversized backdrop in relation to its actual population. The accumulation of urban and cultural clichés, celebrating a very Western kind of nostalgia, is probably the most disturbing: Venetian canals, a mini Central Park, Savannah town squares, a cultural center from Sydney, and a waterfront from Manhattan. The whole represented in the shape of a plane which strangely (or not!) resembles a microprocessor, with the police station planted in the heart of the city.

You only have to leave Songdo for Seoul—a two-hour journey—to feel that you are leaving a westernized island floating off the coast of South Korea. It is resolutely turned towards the airport—just 15 minutes away, and ranked as the third largest duty-free area in the world after London and Dubai—and, thanks to the establishment of a free zone, it attracts international companies operating in the geographical area between Japan and China. Although the world's major brands have yet to establish a base here (it is true that competition from nearby Chinese cities is tough), the decision by the UN to choose Songdo over five other candidates (Germany, Mexico, Namibia, Poland, and Switzerland) for the Green Climate Fund is seen by South Korean authorities as a powerful symbol of legitimacy and credibility for the Songdo project on the international scene.²

The accumulation of clichés compromises the promise of ultra modernity. The buildings' interiors already seem very dated and poorly made: the technology in the model apartments is disappointing (especially considering South Korea's techie reputation) and shows some signs of weakness (with 10° C temperatures, heating would have been useful). Visiting the Cisco Global Center of Excellence (a showroom of urban solutions), you are surprised not by its technological prowess—some innovations are useful and relate to telemedicine, others more superfluous like transforming one's living room into a disco at the simple push of a button—but by the proposed simulations that demonstrate the power of the system (from the kidnapping of a child to a road accident or a heart attack at home), betraying a high level of generalized anxiety. The inhabitant of Songdo, a guinea pig in a Cisco "living-lab," can be put under the protection of the US company, as he or she was formerly placed under the protection of a lord, or more recently a state. We are not far from the totalitarian vision of Alphaville imagined by Jean-Luc Godard (1965).

[2] Beyond its symbolic nature, its realism still is in question: conceived in 2010 to provide financial assistance to the most vulnerable countries to reduce their environmental impact and to protect themselves against the effects of climate change, this "Green Climate Fund" must now, in the context of a lasting economic crisis, bring together 100 billion dollars annually as planned up to 2020.

Songdo has the atmosphere of an ideal world that eventually, it seems to me, has no future. A world without surprises, bland (the comfortable, but so boring “international style,” removed from its territory, its history, its local culture) where (almost) everything is well designed and controlled. I also question the relevance of founding such a city by the sea without regard to the rising sea levels (the property promoters admit to this omission). Similarly, the reliance of the model on airplane transport neglects to take into account a low-carbon future that will certainly be necessary.

Of course, this is the experience of the discovery of a seemingly intelligent city by a European who is (supposedly) not familiar with the cultural, social, political, and economic territory on which Songdo stands. One should probably understand the project on different terms and trust residents—current and future—to beat the system, allowing two desires and temporalities to face off: that of the planner (a kind of corporate creator³ with clear economic interests) who thinks and builds a city in less than twenty years, and that of the generations that will be born, live, work, and die there.

[3] Gale International is the New York designer and developer of the site which involves several major international operators such as Cisco, GE, KPF, and Jack Nicklaus for the professional-level golf course.



MASDAR: THE OPENING-SOON CITY

Another innovative city is being built five thousand miles (eight thousand kilometers) from Songdo. It is the embodiment of an economic dream. Located in the heart of the United Arab Emirates, about six miles (ten kilometers) from the historic district of Abu Dhabi and close to the international airport, Masdar City shares with its South Korean sister a lofty ambition (a planned investment of close to eighteen billion dollars): a zero-carbon city (a challenge for a country with the third largest ecological footprint per capita in the world) attracting more than 50,000 people and almost as many commuters, employees of large international companies and high-tech start-ups.

Before arriving in Masdar, I read many articles relating to the city and was struck with an indescribable feeling, a sort of *déjà vu*: the same characteristics, the same figures, the same intentions from its eponymous designer. Once on site, the area of the future city is large (2.3 sq. mi. [6 sq. km], like Songdo). Circumnavigating the city involves following an interminable white building fence, punctuated every kilometer by a sign saying “Masdar City, the City of Possibilities.” But, once I arrived, I discovered that what constitutes the city in May of 2014 is almost exactly what was being said about it two years earlier: Masdar City is the “Opening-Soon City” par excellence. Walking around, there are some seemingly deserted buildings (it is a disturbing experience to enter an empty hall, take an elevator to discover that each floor is also abandoned), alleyways used by security guards (to protect the abandoned buildings?) or cleaning sites (it is true that the dust from the desert gets everywhere and got the better of the solar panels placed on the roofs of the buildings). The loud drone of natural air conditioning (a huge wind tower) is omnipresent, even oppressive.

Some students (there are barely a hundred and they are the only inhabitants in the city) seem lost even though the surface area is small. Ironically, a travel agency (one of the few shops open near the international supermarket selling organic—albeit overpriced—products, which certainly has a very high carbon footprint) seems to be inviting them to buy a one-way ticket to escape their isolation. Unlike Songdo whose developers bid on public facilities at the beginning of the project (schools, cultural centers, sports fields etc.), Masdar City has bet exclusively on business. A hundred start-ups (of the 1,500 announced over time) are still in the development stage while Siemens has offices there and General Electric has a showroom. The result is that life is simply impossible: you have to drive several miles to do basic shopping.



Date des images satellite : 26/12/2013 24°25'23.61"N 54°37'27.80"E elev. 0 m altitude 8.13 km



An advertising fence surrounds the city, promising a bright future. On the other side, the dizzying empty spaces are surprising: no cranes on the horizon, in striking contrast with the rest of the region. Is Masdar City a broken down city? When asked about the future of the project, a representative remains cautious, asking for patience (a surprising statement in a state which claims to ebb the fastest and the first on every street corner), finally admitting that it is—politically—unthinkable to abandon such a project: a kind of urban abortion that is prohibited under penalty of the equivalent of stoning of its international reputation. While Stan Gale is traveling all over the world to sell the Songdo concept, the Masdar City model seems difficult to reproduce: too isolated, too expensive, too empty. The embryo town appears rather as a symptom of the obsession of a state with regard to its future. What will become of this territory, once its hydrocarbon reserves are depleted? In response, the frenzied builders attempt to inject some form of permanent life into a land that seems hostile to human existence; facing the fear of death by building quickly (an “instant city”), the transition to an Emirates that is a techno-ecological leader. Masdar City is meant to be the laboratory. Opening-soon, one day.

SMART CITY: THE PROCESSED CITY

Songdo and Masdar City are often presented as examples of smart cities. This paradigm is based on an urban hyper-connectivity of objects (housing, transport, energy, and communication tools) intended to facilitate people’s lives while greatly reducing the energy required to operate the system as a whole. The value and power of “old cities” is visible (their story written in their architectural heritage); that of smart cities is invisible. The smart city sees itself as a giant smartphone with urban developers as vendors of useful applications for the survival of city life.

The city itself becomes “sensitive.” Overloaded with sensors, it records its people’s every move and its powerful algorithms optimize the activity of the urban infrastructure (and indirectly that of its inhabitants) in a commitment to absolute efficiency. The intelligence of the city then translates the human-machine coupling to create what Antoine Picon calls the cyber-city.⁴ It also becomes predictable and, like the Pre-Cogs in the film *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), thwarts crime and reveals latent criminals. This temptation is omniscient and sees the possible shift from a “sensored city” to a “censored city,” to use the aphorism coined by Saskia Sassen.⁵

[4] Antoine Picon, *Smart Cities, théorie et critique d'un idéal auto-réalisateur* (Paris: Éditions B2, 2013).

[5] Saskia Sassen, “Does a sensed city mean a censored city?” (BBC, August 18, 2013).

What, then, is the idea of a smart city? Is it a city full of inherently safe technologies, a city designed by a kind of creator where everything seems functional and processed, an “aerotropolis”⁶ for “smart people” involved in the “globalization of talent” who board airplanes the way others take the subway? If one should not give in to the easy criticism of these projects that seek to combine efficiency and sustainability, smart cities appear clearly to be great business models for many global organizations⁷ that share a lucrative market (to the tune of tens of billions of dollars according to some studies, most of them sponsored by the same companies). Urban competition is intense so as to attract investors (as demonstrated by the large displays of seemingly misleading mock-ups exhibited at international fairs) and city-marketing⁸ is exploding, imposing on everyone (and therefore for no one) the winning triptych: the city of the future will be global, green, and connected. The urban revolution is happening.

[6] On the phenomenon of cities linked to airports, see the work of John Kasarda and Greg Lindsay, *Aerotropolis: The Way We'll Live Next* (London: Penguin, 2012).

[7] Examples in France include Schneider Electric, IBM, Siemens, Cisco, Veolia, GDF-Suez, and Orange.

[8] Ruedi Baur, *Face au Brand Territorial* (Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2013).



Masdar City, Siemens Building



DETROIT: THE CENTURY-OLD SMART CITY

Detroit, as many are aware, is the fallen icon of a city dedicated to the power of the North American model set up by Ford. Does Detroit have, paradoxically, more of a future than Songdo or Masdar City? At first glance, Detroit is the epitome of urban design, outdated, dedicated to motor power (the Motor City). Its political, social, and economic geography reflects a divided and hierarchical linear vision. And yet, somehow, Detroit is a smart city of its time, albeit a low-tech version. The urban organism of Detroit consists of a hub (the Renaissance Center, General Motors' headquarters, in the downtown area that the main avenues of the city converge on in the form of a star) and now oversized highway arteries whose lines cut across the city center blocking access to certain neighborhoods (mostly black and rundown) while simultaneously ferrying out rich families (mostly white) to comfortable residential suburbs.

Abandoned by its leaders (corrupt politicians and industrialists, victims of a deep and irremediable crisis), the city has gradually been taken over by its inhabitants, moving from an industrial era to one of citizen cooperation. Detroiters are laying down new rules to the game (communities organize themselves in a network through, for example, the Detroit Future City initiative),⁹ invent new models of development (Detroit is the DIY city), put forward an attractive image capitalizing on the heritage of the city (Made in Detroit), its history (its international exposure), and even its fall (Ruin Porn or the aesthetics of the fall becoming a trend). And they are betting on the long term, with the support of university students in Michigan who now decide to remain in Detroit rather than starting their careers in New York, Chicago, or on the West Coast. As for the city center, it is gradually being transformed into a "pop-up smart city" spurred on by investor Dan Gilbert. The city was rebuilt from the will of its people and a little pride. This example illustrates that the urban question is one of democracy par excellence.

[9] For more information, see <http://detroitfuturecity.com>. Last accessed 5 October 2014.

[10] It is striking to go, over three blocks, from a tidy residential street (Grixdale Avenue) to the hell of Robinwood Street, only fifteen minutes from the Renaissance Center, the heart of downtown. Detroit, moreover, is consistently ranked among the most dangerous cities in the world.

Detroit is also an inspiring city, drawing its energy from its history and its legendary industrial know-how, its violent cultural and social struggles, and its artistic dynamics (including music). Jim Jarmusch set the scene for his latest film, *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014), in Detroit and the tribute is troubling: lying somewhere between a fascination for an aesthetic of decadence and a reminder of the importance of this area for creation. Vampires roam the bloodless arteries of the city and, once the day breaks, flee the "zombies" (the incarnation of American consumerism?). The experience of the border between life and death is also omnipresent¹⁰ in this gigantic city (Manhattan, Boston, and San Francisco would all fit in



without difficulty). Paradoxically, the tension in the streets of Detroit creates a form of excitement in the face of latent danger, an urgency about life that reminds us of our human condition (mortality), and the opposite of an overprotective model of a processed, controlled, and predictable city that tries to make us believe in immortality, in endless sustainability.

A BREACH OF URBAN THOUGHT

The city is not a process, it is an organization. Urban infrastructure decides the flow of information, goods, and people. Each era has developed its urban model from political, economic, and social considerations. The Fordist model flowed out of the factory and was the design for many cities in the United States, creating a separation of the functions of the city, a zoning of activities, and a rather diffuse nature of its framework. It is the city made for cars, which allows for longer distances and reduced travel times. Economist Jeremy Rifkin¹¹ has shown that this model—which has shaped the industrial world of the twentieth century—will quickly be replaced by another model, one that is more distributional and more organic. On the one hand, the Internet exaggerates what the car had once allowed (the geographic reach is now global and the relationship to time has become immediate), while the relational principle that it promotes (exchange and sharing) means that use (where time is the unit of measurement) becomes more important than the object itself, the service rendered more valuable than the ownership of a good.

Urban translation embodies a comprehensive and immediate space-time, whose value depends on its intensity of usage.¹² Finally, the connection to flow is more important than the place itself.¹³ This intensive urban model pushes these cities together to form a large, uniform network driven by market interests. The programmatic, planned, and creative desire seen in a city like Sondgo—the ultimate culmination of a Western model four decades old—could bring about a nightmare¹⁴ instead of the dream that was announced. The city—is it necessary to remind ourselves of this?—is first and foremost a political project

[11] Jeremy Rifkin, *The Third Industrial Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[12] This was well understood by the authorities in Dubai (United Arab Emirates) for example, who played the tourist attraction card (beating records for the uses of concrete—as stupid as they are vulgar—and positioning its airport as an international transit mega-hub for the A380s of the Emirates airline) and intend to build their city / country as a company of usage and of passage, where the vast majority of the population only has a temporary residence visa.

[13] Olivier Mongin, *La Ville des flux, l'envers et l'endroit de la mondialisation urbaine* (Paris: Fayard, 2013).

[14] It is useful to recall the aphorism of René Char, “That which removes distance kills, the gods die to be with us,” in *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

(housing projects) before it is the result of an economic ideal. Detroit has shown us this painful experience and the flow it now seeks to capture is the essence of citizenship, constituting the internal energy necessary for the survival of a city that was the model of intelligence a century ago.

So, before the city becomes a museum (or a zoo) for humans, the emergence of these protopoles¹⁵ makes us question the responsibility of private actors in the construction of urban futures. A city is not an extended business and the deep crisis that we face (which is political and social as well as economic and cultural) requires companies to take care of people (they must adapt and not the reverse) and, finally, to combine innovation and differentiation, because the replication of yesterday's solutions no longer provides value. It is essential to make room for aesthetic emotion and for a chance to disrupt any overly well-oiled machine and any conformity that is necessarily deadly. We must accept the transgression and pleasure that attract youth and encourage the development and the emergence of new ideas. This long-term thinking requires a real openness to the inhabitants and simple passengers of each city to encourage their (re)appropriation of this unique space-time. The city at night offers a great field of public-private-citizen space to imagine the city of the future: a space-time of respiration, creation, and innovation, a space-time of repair and preparation, the city at night is both a territory and a temporality, both essential to urban life.

[15]

City-laboratories, in the words of Terence Mathieu in his account Masdar, *La mue du monde* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014).

