

Debunking the smart-city myth



THE GRUDGING URBANIST
ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

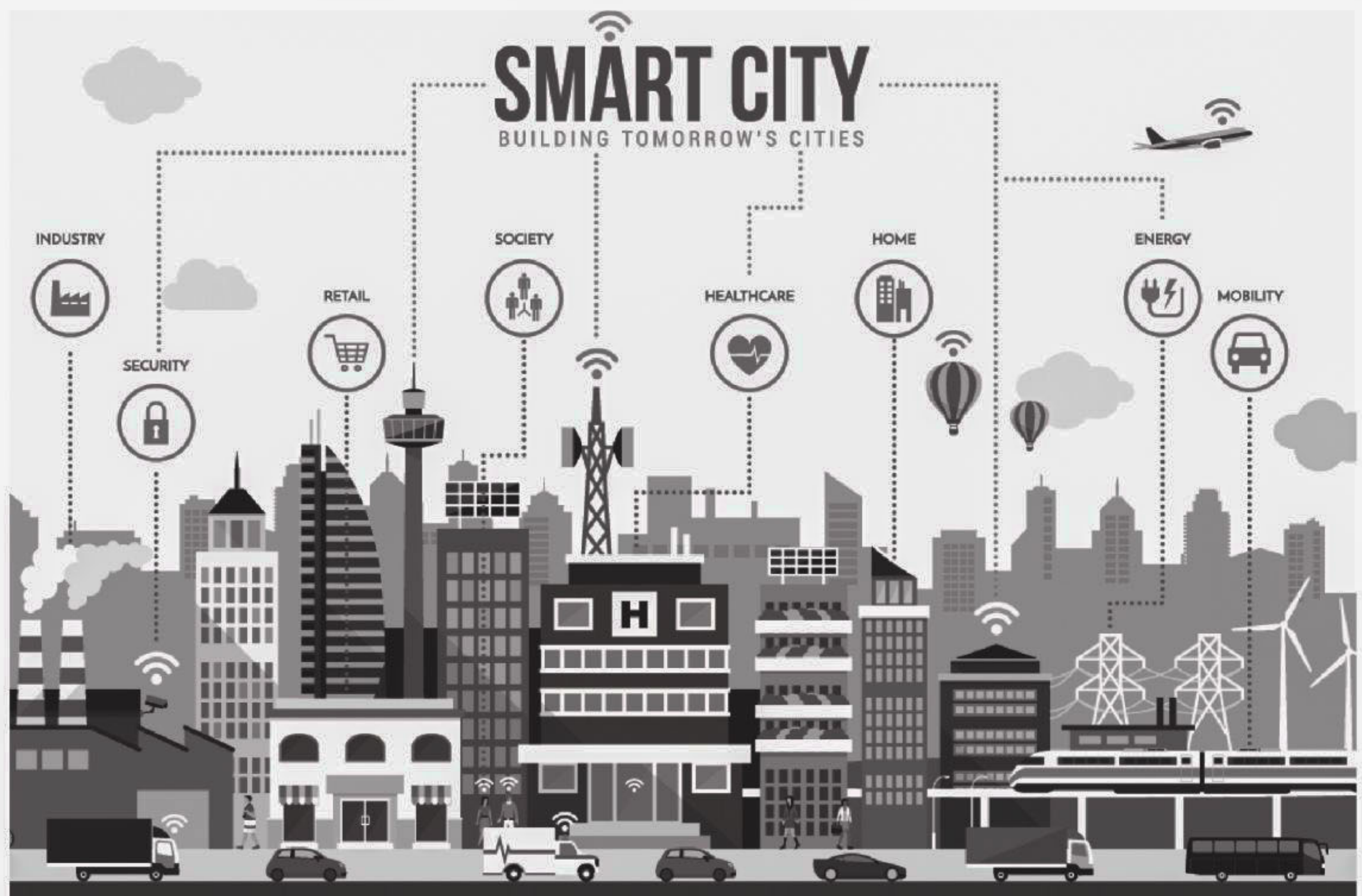
I have been following the “smart city” conversation in Bangladesh for quite some time now. Last year I sat on a panel to discuss the topic during what was called the “smart-city week” in Dhaka. As Bangladesh urbanises rapidly, as mid-sized cities increasingly become its new urban frontier, the mayors of small towns across the country seem drawn to the idea of smart city. They frequently talk about how they are eager to transform their towns into smart cities. I myself spoke with a few mayors who sounded anxious to bring “smartness” to their towns.

I wondered what they actually meant. I puzzled over how they defined “smart city,” what kind of urban imageries they construed in their minds for their smart cities, what kind of life they thought people would live in their smart cities. I couldn’t help but think of the American short-story writer Raymond Carver’s anthology “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” What do the mayors talk about when they talk about smart cities?

I suspect that they talk about something that is not their idea, something that is not organic to their economic and cultural experiences, something that is one of the biggest hypes of our times. Do they feel pressured to jump on the smart-city bandwagon? Do they think that they would be considered backward if they didn’t talk about smart cities? I wonder whether their dream of smart city is planted in their heads by international lending agencies, multinational corporations, and real-estate organisations for marketing purposes.

I suspect most mayors see smart city as a futuristic domain of glass towers, shopping malls, apartment blocks, ICT parks, theme parks, artificial lakes, bullet trains, sleek roads, signature flyovers, a lot of neon signs, and corporate executives. Smart cities all over the world look the same, the identical technocratic glitz, the identical corporate aesthetics, the identical financial mobility. One thing is absent: the everyday life of the people.

We really can’t blame our mayors for imagining this rather faultless future of abundance and unimpeded capital flow. A swanky smart-city perception has been crystallising over the past decade or so in Bangladesh and other developing countries. The notion of smart city is often packaged with a visual language of spectacular futurism



and precision. We have been told over and over again how smart city is the surefire answer to urban chaos, inefficiency, and wastefulness. And, there was a breathless impatience to accept the grand smart-city solution.

So, what is a smart city actually? How do the pundits define it? There is no universal definition, yet its portrayal is alarmingly consistent across geographic regions. The concept of smart city is a cybernetic idea—that is, information or data can enable urban governments to establish total control over all aspects of life in the city, ranging from public transportation to electricity usage, from waste management to water supply.

This technocratic idea implies that a comprehensive system of digital infrastructures, including sensors and devices placed throughout the city, would amass a vast body of data on, among other things, people’s movement and their spatial behaviour, traffic mobility, public transportation, energy usage, utility grid,

water supply, and garbage collection. The digital infrastructure would then auto-create an efficient system of energy optimisation and frictionless management. In short, smart city proposes a system of data-driven urbanisation, ensuring energy efficiency, optimal mobilisation of resources, coordinated public service delivery, and intelligent management.

IBM has been creating digital urban infrastructures that would enable city governments to consolidate all urban-service providers under a central command-and-control mechanism, eliminating all system loss. Smart-city advocates, on the other hand, hope to attract foreign investment and capital mobilisation, with a view to developing their cities as hubs of economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

These are both very inspiring and dangerous ideas. Inspiring, because everybody wants efficiency. Who wouldn’t want perfectly functioning streets with vehicles following traffic regulations and taking passengers to

their destinations on time? Who wouldn’t appreciate smart street signals that auto-adjust with fluctuating traffic volume in real time? Who wouldn’t love a clean-energy utility system that lowers people’s monthly energy bill? The core idea of smart city makes sense. We should, of course, take advantage of digital infrastructures to manage urban systems and operations.

But the smart-city idea, as it is often proposed, is also dangerous. The belief that we can mitigate a city’s complex sociocultural issues with data-driven technical solutions tranquilises the very concept of the city, a place where people don’t just become a system. People also want to be free in the city. They do random things. Factory-like efficiency and big-brother digital devices in the city may stifle life and defeat the purpose of a city as a community place with its unique social characteristics and quirks. I would rather be in Kolkata than Dubai. I would rather walk on the winding medieval streets of Prague than the hyper-efficient streets of Singapore.

If the intelligence of smart city is orchestrated by software programmers, technology giants, corporate CEOs, and high priests of neoliberal capital flow, then we, the people, need to be cautious because every aspect of our lives will be programmed and monitored by these invisible power-wielders. We don’t need smart cities that only serve as neocolonial outposts, ensuring smooth capital transfer to the Wall Streets of the world, while the local glass boxes would get peanuts and false pride.

Most worryingly, the identical architecture of smart cities across the world would only ensure a new generation of corporate global domination. We must be wary of top-down mantras that reframe the city’s complex social, cultural, political, and economic issues as technical puzzles. Cities must be grounded in their unique local customs and indigenous spatial sensibilities, while also competing in the global marketplace with the strength of their future-ready aspirations and public resilience.

This, of course, doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t use data to ensure road safety in the city; or contain dengue by pinpointing its source; or divert vehicular traffic when there is a road congestion; or create intelligent footpaths that accommodate both pedestrians and vendors. We should use digital technologies to facilitate intelligent functioning of the city.

The biggest problem with the prevailing idea of smart city is that it is woefully generic, benefiting predatory capitalism that relies on the uniformity and homogenisation of people’s lives across the world. At the heart of the smart-city hype is the misguided ideology that there is a universal technical solution to messy urban problems and unique environmental challenges. Can we get rid of urban poverty even if we have data about all aspects of the poor? It never works that way because a subject as complex as poverty can’t be quantified into a mathematical question to be answered. Instead of prematurely believing in the instant transformation of city life promised by smart cities, we should focus on an ethos of step-by-step change in the city. By centring on the public good and resilience in both urban governance and digital infrastructure discourses we can create a smart community.

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On fasting away from home



SARAH ANJUM BARI

“NO, not even water,” I explain to my friend, whose eyes grow wide at my description of fasting during Ramadan. We’re walking down Boulevard Raspail on the sixth arrondissement of Paris, past rows of people sitting out on café tables, past a noodle shop, a Pizzeria, a *sandwicherie*, and a Lebanese restaurant. It’s a hot summer afternoon. The air smells of cheese and caffeine, and I still have eight hours to go before I can eat or drink anything.

My friend, who has been brought up in the States, asks me what Ramadan is all about. I talk her through the basic rules and then launch into a description of what the month entails in Dhaka. I tell her about waking up in the middle of the night, dizzy with sleep and nauseated at the idea of eating a full meal in semi-consciousness. I tell her about the scent of butter and spices in the air. The flood of discounts, Iftar deals, fashion collections. The unanimous rush to get home at the same time, resulting in traffic that snarls and bites. I describe the excitement of deciding what to eat each day, and the way busy friends and families unite for at least an hour every sunset; the way our bodies deflate with exhaustion after Iftar, and how the city reawakens for 3am restaurant meals. My friend is awestruck. “It sounds like

a month-long festival,” she tells me, and I feel like I’ve somehow failed to answer her question.

About 8,000 miles away from home, Ramadan feels drastically different to me this year. The sun sets after 9pm in my corner of Europe. The 17 hours during which I’m trying to be fasting are unmarked by the ringing of prayer calls, by any early end to classes and work. Unlike the communities that I’ve described to my friend, this city is in celebration for a different kind of festival—the arrival of summer and the promise of food and drinks in the sun. When I wake up to eat late at night, however, it is deep in sleep, with the stoves and microwaves in my dorm barred away behind padlocked kitchens.

It is the sense of community that you miss most under such circumstances. In the absence of an entire country following suit, you realise how much the decision to practice your religion and culture is entirely your own. You’re forced to find out if that practice is belief or mere habit. For every time you have to explain why you’re not eating or drinking, you’re reminded of how you’re different from those around you. For every time your non-Muslim friends wait for dinner until you can eat, you’re reminded of how much you belong.

I think, for a while, that these reflections should form my response to my friend. But my homesickness feels too simplistic, too self-centred an explanation for a practise so much bigger than the sum of my experiences. Still an unsatisfactory answer, I realise.



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A key part of living in France is climbing steps. While some newer buildings and shopping malls might have elevators, most houses, libraries, and university campuses that have survived decades expect you to manoeuvre narrow, twisting flights of wooden stairs. If you can make the journey while balancing books, groceries, and cups of coffee in both hands without fearing for your life, know that you’ve truly assimilated. And

if you’re fasting, the trip leaves you almost crying for a sip of water.

They say it gets easier after the first few days once your body gets used to the new dietary schedule. While that felt true in all my years in Bangladesh, climbing the harrowing stairs with a parched throat in France and trying to work on an empty stomach makes me feel more and more exhausted each day. By the time it’s 4 or 5pm, my brain has stopped working altogether, my stomach feels like a gaping hole, and I can see a good five more hours of the day wasting away in unproductive exhaustion. It’s the worst kind of dilemma for a grad student preparing for a thesis presentation approaching in two short weeks.

It is in these hours of starvation, though, that I notice more than my beautiful walk through Boulevard Raspail. Just a few paces away from the line of cafés and restaurants, a refugee family sits on the ground whose hopeful *Bonjour!*’s I’ve run past many a time in my rush to get to class every day. But as I pant after reaching the campus staircase landing, or hear my stomach grumbling as I try to concentrate on the page, I realise that I’m going through this experience out of choice. That food—good food—and drinks are a mere exchange of coins away, unlike for that family sitting out in the heat. I think back to my friend’s question about what Ramadan is all about. As clichéd as it sounds, I think I finally start to get it.

Sarah Anjum Bari is a member of the Star Weekend magazine team, *The Daily Star*. She was living and studying in Paris at the time of writing this article last year.

QUOTE

Quote

KOFI ANNAN
(1938–2018)
Ghanaian diplomat and seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Bit of gossip
6 Microwave sounds
11 Like tumblers
12 Cry of surrender
13 Piquant
14 Scuffle
15 Consumption
17 One or more
18 Pindar poem
19 Spanish girl of old song
22 Down
23 Weapons store
24 Sailor’s cry
25 Help out
27 Acquire
30 Sci-fi convention-

eer, perhaps
31 Lode material
32 One of the Ger-shwins
33 Mysterious stuff
35 Spock player
38 Parcels out
39 Dodge
40 Come up
41 Transmits
42 Track contests

DOWN

1 Math comparisons
2 Kenya neighbor
3 Made money
4 Gymnast Korbut
5 Iceland capital
6 Vagabond
7 Compass dir.
8 Bakery treat
9 More than enough
10 “Bye!”
16 Turkey setting
20 Netherlands capital
21 Negating word
24 Invite
25 Show up
26 Mariner
27 Player in a mask
28 Composer Bloch
29 Taunts
30 Fork features
34 Heart
36 Unmatched
37 “For sure!”

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

A	S	S	E	T		Z	A	P	P	A
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott