

Abstract

Thanks to the digital revolution, smart cities have been brought as solutions to urbanization and sustainability challenges. As one of the large-scale corporate and government-led smart city projects, New Songdo City is one of the most expensive development projects ever undertaken. Developing Songdo, building a city from the ground-up is like drawing a picture on an empty canvas. Developers, while defining the problems, risks and solutions in connection with their future visions, also implicitly develop assumptions about the prospective inhabitants of the city. Then, promotion of the city comes to the foreground in advertising the city, its advanced technology and new lifestyles to attract people to the city.

I argue that the intention to produce the promotional videos of Songdo must be understood as a highly political act of framing cities with specific imaginations of prospective inhabitants of the city. Developers of Songdo not only construct the “city of the future”, but also conceptualize people who will live in the city. My aim in this study is to investigate how prospective inhabitants of Songdo are imagined by the developers in the promotional videos of the city. I focus on five promotional videos of CISCO, the technology partner of the main developer company, to understand the imaginations about the prospective inhabitants of Songdo.

Remarkably, the assumptions of the developers about the prospective inhabitants of the city are in contrast with the capability of communities to (re)make their cities and themselves based on their local knowledge as emphasized inherently in STS literature on cities and in the Deweyan Public. I suggest that the prospective inhabitants of Songdo are conceptualized more like *users*: active only in the use of advanced technology within the city but without any contribution in the decision-making about this technology or the city. Their local knowledge and capabilities are ignored and avoided to prevent possible deviations from the standardization of the city, since the success of Songdo is strongly linked with its capacity to be a neutral city that could be replicated. Regarding previous similar planning attempts (for example Brasilia), this kind of an approach proposes the major risk to the ‘high-tech utopia’, since a plan could only be a city in the hands of its communities. Then, there is more need to identify the differences among communities and their local capacities to (re)make their cities and themselves in multiple ways to have livable smart cities. Consequently, in an era of global homogenization, Songdo raises serious concerns, which also makes it an interesting case to study.