

Smart cities: The standardization of cities?

Gernot Grabher | Joachim Thiel | Filipe Mello Rose

HafenCity University of Hamburg | Urban and Regional Economics

Research project funded by the German Research Association

DFG – GR 1913/14-1 | Project period: 3-2018 to 2-2021

Project abstract

The research project seeks to disentangle the complex and contradictory forces that drive the global spread of Smart-City-projects. On the one hand, the research addresses the standardization dynamics that affect both urban development and the production of urban space. The key argument here is that leading global players from the IT industry, by entering the growth market of urban infrastructures, are the main driving forces behind this standardization. On the other hand, we place a particular emphasis on those aspects that, in a sense, 'refract' standardization. The project holds that this refraction occurs particularly along three key tensions: (a) public vs. private interests; (b) global circulation vs. adaptation to local requirements; (c) technology development in industrial economies vs. main implementation in emerging economies. The project particularly tries to find out both how and with what result concrete strategies and projects conceived to implement Smart Cities deal with the conflicts that underlie these tensions.

Empirically the project addresses the complexity of how Smart-City-strategies circulate globally through an explicitly multi-scalar research approach, also aligned with the three key areas of tension. We carry out local case studies about (a) processes of interaction and negotiation between the public administration and private technology firms within the organizational ecologies of implementation projects in two cities. We (b) systematically extend the analysis beyond the borders of the case study cities in order to grasp how standardized solutions are translated into specific local contexts. Finally, we (c) select Amsterdam and Singapore as case cities, thereby paradigmatically taking the difference between industrialized countries and emerging economies into account.