



Refusal and the Computational City - From (de)coding the machine to (en)coding care

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[Reading time: 8:56 minutes]

Big tech companies are more than just vague corporate ideas drifting in a cloud. They have gradually become our neighbors, shaping spaces and futures (Berlin VS Amazon 2023; Solnit/Schwartzberg 2018). Promising the most convenient ‘solutions’ to transform increasingly tech-driven cities, corporations influence what is on the map; how place-based politics are designed; and, ultimately, who gets to participate in decision-making-processes about our living-together of tomorrow (Mattern 2021; Shaw/Graham 2017).

In these often tech-euphoric times, bottom-up reclamations and cyberfeminist approaches to ‘hack’ the urban have become important and critical voices (Maalsen 2022; Sollfrank 2018): their organizing based on the principles of commoning, sovereignty, and feminist positionality refuse the looming tech-solutions to multiple crises (Vadiati 2022; Voigt 2023). Sovereignty, especially, has been contested among major and resistant forces. Sadowski (2021: 1732) foresees the fundamental shift of technology companies in moving beyond treating “the city merely as a place to extract value from and start thinking of it as also a space to exercise dominion over”. The bottom-up urban sovereignty discourse challenges that and aims to reclaim control over technology, space, and the politics between them (Lynch 2020; Pierri/Lüning 2023). It meets the growing privatization of public goods in the interest of capitalist goals with drafts of alternative resources and worlds.

Be it as activists, educators, hackers, tinkerers, artists, practitioners, and/ or academics: (digital) grassroots collectives have long been pioneers of opening the black box, building informational infrastructures, and creatively thinking through the entanglement of the interspace between the analog and the digital. In the urban context, however, this is often a balancing act. Grassroots movements stand between fighting for a right to the (digitally accessible) city and initiating or fueling gentrification processes with their creative capital (Tonkiss 2013). Although they mostly resist the dominant techno-political settings of a

platformization of cities, they similarly feed into its entrepreneurial, solutionist, and techno-deterministic “fix-thinking” (Carraro 2023: 2). Often enough, grassroots collectives fill gaps of the neoliberal city with unpaid care-work and infrastructure. Therewith, they repair and reproduce what might need revolutionary change instead.

At the same time, techno-urban practices from the bottom up also remind us to tend to a world “in which carelessness reigns” (The Care Collective 2020: 1; Mattern 2018; Kouki/Makrygianni 2022). Leaning on the works of Sollfrank (2018), Russell (2020), Steele (2021), and D’Ignazio/Klein (2020) (among others) occurring digital, cyber-, and glitch feminisms represent diverse techno-affine and interdisciplinary practices, counter-strategies to oppressions as well as political standpoints which celebrate creative ways to “live, here and now” (Carraro 2023: 6). Centering digital joy, community-building, and survival strategies, these approaches of refusing the computational city constitute a new relational geography of transformation and prefiguration among urban denizens. Here, refusal has shown to be a crucial practice that does not simply reject technology. Instead, “it asks for multiplicity, difference, and co-existence, rather than fixed systems of logic that organise and tie socio-political lives to undeclared algorithmic biases and colonial histories” (transmediale 2021). Refusing, therefore, embodies a critical engagement with how we know (about technology) (Tuck/Wayne 2014; Simpson 2007). It demands collective responsibility and negotiations of otherwise politics in an increasingly unequal smart society.

This special issue seeks to draw together a diverse range of essays that addresses prefigurative grassroots urbanism in the context of post-digital cities. In it, we would like to amplify voices which usually do not get much visibility in the (academic) discourses around technocapitalist urbanism and strategies against it. Whether you are a practitioner, activist, self-declared cyberfeminist, part of a collective, digital advocate, academic or urbanist_a, we gently invite you to think with us about the following questions:

- What kinds of actions, activists, and alliances embody the right to digital urbanism and practices of care in cities? With what kinds of caveats and complexities?
- What are the geographies of bottom-up, cyber-, techno, hackfeminist practices today and how are they inscribed into urban spaces and materialities – from streets to screens and in between?
- What are places and arenas of negotiations about the future (smart) city? Who is involved? Who is not?
- What methods and care-ful-ness should we apply for a more entangled practice of city-building in the future? How to acknowledge the various spatial settings from virtual and analogue worlds? How to sensitively embed anxieties, trauma, and uncertainties of everyday urban life today?
- And: What do counter-tech-urbanisms (from the bottom up) look like?

We believe we are in desperate need of collective and hopeful imaginaries that resist the corporate-dominated and colonialist narratives of (digitized) worlds to come. With this special issue, we would like to start a conversation that goes beyond the gates of the

academy, recognizing that we cannot understand the city from analyses alone. Thus, we are looking forward to articles jointly building a new vocabulary around movements of refusal in cities, from (de)coding the machine to (en)coding care.

Formalities:

Our goal is to accept a portfolio of articles that provide theoretical as well as empirical contributions. If you are basing your paper on fieldwork and/ or with the help and support of others (which all of us do), please consider making visible your process of knowledge production and add your (non-academic) collaborators as co-authors. For inspiration on how to consciously think about an author's order, see [this](#) resource by CLEAR (Drmaxlib 2021). Authors are defined as those who have made a significant contribution to the conception, design, execution, or interpretation of the reported study. Transparency about the contributions of authors is encouraged, for example in the form of a [CRediT author statement](#). We warmly welcome the work of collectives!

Should you wish to submit your contribution, please send a **350-words-abstract** to **Niloufar Vadiati (niloufar.vadiati@hcu-hamburg.de)** and **Maja-Lee Voigt (maja-lee.voigt@leuphana.de)** by **October 30, 2023**. Notification of acceptance: November 20, 2023. Please specify your methods, theoretical framing and central argument. In order to curate the submission and publication process as caring, mindful, and inclusive as possible, we invite you to fill out [this form](#) as well.

Disclaimer: We very much encourage the collaboration between all kinds of job practices (academic, practitioner), disciplines, backgrounds, institutional hierarchies, and levels of experiences. We will prioritize the perspectives we feel do not get represented enough and/or are often affected by any kind(s) of discrimination(s).

If you are invited to submit an article:

- the word limit is 9,000 words, including notes and references
- all articles will be subject to peer review and editorial decisions as usual
- we expect submissions of accepted papers by April 30, 2024. Please select the article type "VSI: Refusal and the Computational City" [when submitting your manuscript](#).

We thank you for your time and interest, and are very much looking forward to learning from your work.

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