

# Introduction: The Digital Polis and Its Practices—Beyond Gated Communities



Heewon Chung and Kon Kim

**Abstract** This chapter introduces the concept of the ‘digital polis’ as the focus of this edited collection, which investigates the idea along the dimensions of subjectivity and reality as well as in terms of exclusion and cooperation in communities across physical and virtual urban spaces. Tracing back to Mumford’s description of the city as media and its development by Kittler, the chapter launches the ‘digital polis’ as a key concept underpinning a new theoretical framework that brings to the fore the (re)production of power, knowledge, and space by physically and virtually networked communities, thereby expanding the scope of research for Urban Humanities in contemporary urban environments. The questions we explore in the book revolve around how people, urban spaces, and technologies relate to and affect each other in an urban future. With the advent of a digital divide that produces cyberspace as a kind of gated community, what will our urban future be like? What is the ‘digital polis’ and what kinds of new subjectivity does it produce? How do digital technology and its virtuality reshape the city and our spatial awareness of it? What kinds of exclusion and cooperation are at work in communities and spaces in the digital age? This introduction helps readers navigate the following chapters to open avenues for research and to build new discourses on the ‘digital polis’ as the grounds for a genuinely humanizing urbanism in latent futures, or in other words, futures in the making that are ‘on the way’.

**Keywords** Digital polis · Gated community · Urban humanities · Alternative urbanism

In her witty and satirical video *How Not to Be Seen* (2013), German artist and critic, Hito Steyerl demonstrates five lessons in being invisible in the digital age. The fourth lesson, entitled ‘How to Be Invisible by Disappearing’, presents ‘thirteen ways of becoming invisible by disappearing’, perhaps parodying the title of American

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**Fig. 1** Still from *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File* (2015). Image courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin/Paris/Seoul

modernist poet Wallace Stevens’s ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’. If Stevens’s poem ponders on how to observe an object, Steyerl’s essayistic video asks: ‘how do people disappear in an age of total over-visibility?’ (Steyerl 2013). Interestingly enough, the first answer that the video offers is ‘Living in a Gated Community’. With this voiceover, an image of a luxurious residence is given, with the subtitle of ‘Safe and Secure: Gated Community with Multiple Tier Security’ (Fig. 1). Utilizing clichés of promotion video images provided by real estate developers, this section intends to make a twisted comment on the possibility of the separation and ‘filtering’ of certain groups of people and/or their images from a territory of (in)visibility in the era of digital technology.

When Jeremy Rifkin in his seminal work *The Age of Access* (2000) opens the chapter ‘Access as a Way of Life’ with the subject of gated communities, he rightly recognizes that the problem of accessibility speaks to the double dimensions of community: that is, both communities based on physical space and cyberspace as a virtual community.

Part of the appeal of gated communities is the belief that by living with others who share common values and enjoy comparable incomes, and by being able to shut out others who might threaten real estate values, one’s investment in home and property can be secured.

The gap between the possessed and the dispossessed is wide, but the gap between the connected and the disconnected is even wider. The world is fast developing into two distinct civilizations—those living inside the electronic gates of cyberspace and those on the outside. ... The separation of humanity into two different spheres of existence—the so-called digital divide—represents a defining moment in history. (123, 13–14)

As Steyerl's *How Not to Be Seen* aptly puts it, residents of gated communities pursue security and invisibility from others by denying public access to their common space. Likewise, as the word 'digital divide' indicates, cyberspace has arguably evolved into a kind of gated community despite its potential as a virtual commons. As is widely known, the Internet and the World Wide Web was once hailed as the advent of a global commons where users can both produce and receive information by using new technology. What shifted over recent decades, then, and what will our urban future be like? What is the 'digital polis' and what kinds of new subjectivity does it produce? How do digital technology and its virtuality reshape the city and our spatial awareness of it? What kinds of exclusion and cooperation are at work in communities and spaces in the digital age? The title of the book invites us to explore these questions.

## 1 From Global City to Global Polis

Before giving a detailed overview of this edited collection and the concept of the 'digital polis' that it explores, we will briefly introduce the history of research carried out by the Institute for Urban Humanities (IUH) over the past decade. In 2007, IUH opened up the interdisciplinary field of 'Urban Humanities' with the support of the National Research Foundation of Korea, launching a major project entitled 'Humanistic Vision of Global Polis'.<sup>1</sup> IUH coined the term 'global polis' in order to rediscover the potentiality of the city as a community in which political agency is not entirely dominated by capitalistic networks in the age of capitalist geopolitics and globalization (Kwack 2009). In this view, the 'global polis' was proposed as a term that would rewrite the definition of the 'global city' as proposed by Saskia Sassen (2001), thereby suggesting post-colonial implications for a counter-discourse while both endorsing and criticizing Sassen's analysis of metropolises mainly focused on the Global North. The project searched for diverse possibilities toward a global polis through multidisciplinary work by philosophers, literary researchers, historians, sociologists, geographers, and urbanists at IUH. Themes covered during the project include the cosmopolis and global city, gender justice, critiques of the capitalist production of space and gentrification, commons and communality, the production of urban subjectivity and literary community, and more. In addition, IUH issued twenty-five edited collections and monographs during the project, including *The Ambivalence of Global Polis and the Perspectives of Urban Humanities* (2010), which is the fruit of the first three-year phase of the project and comprises interdisciplinary research articles on

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ihuos.uos.ac.kr/eng/eng2\\_2.php](https://ihuos.uos.ac.kr/eng/eng2_2.php).

the global polis, the political economy of difference, and other relevant subjects. Later during the project, IUH also published an anthology, *The Humanities of Seoul* (2016), a result of the 2015 Seoul Humanities Project—a team effort by IUH and the Seoul Institute, a think tank in the megacity of Seoul. This edited collection ‘sought to record the present of the city of Seoul’ and the interiority of Seoulites ‘from the perspective of humanistic reflection’.<sup>2</sup> With these varied academic research projects and ensuing publications for a broader reading public, IUH has endeavored to enrich the idea of the global polis simultaneously through its scholarly conceptualization and through the dissemination of the outcomes of our academic efforts.

## 2 From Digital City to Digital Polis

Building upon a refined idea of the global polis, IUH embarked on a novel research project, ‘Humanistic Vision of Digital Polis: Digital Urbanism and Post-urban Communities’, with the support of the National Research Foundation of Korea in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Central to the research project is the work of decoding and critically revisiting the multifaceted aspects of digital urbanity, and thereby paving paths toward open urban communities and communality in the digital age beyond policing and against gatekeeping as exclusion. To this end, IUH coined the term ‘digital polis’ to contemplate a digital city discourse based on interdisciplinary scholarship, such as that of Manuel Castells, Lewis Mumford, Henri Lefebvre, Friedrich Kittler, David Harvey, Shoshana Zuboff, and Edward Soja. Since Castells’s groundbreaking work *The Informational City* in 1989, much discourse on the structure of contemporary cities has taken into consideration information and communication technology (ICT) as a crucial element and mediator. Unsurprisingly, the digital city has become one of the key issues of urban studies. A considerable number of researchers have used the term ‘digital city’ interchangeably with ‘smart city’ (Ishida and Isbister 2000); however, more recent works on the digital and smart city have made attempts to define the boundaries of this terminology (Dameri and Cocchia 2013; Cocchia 2014). According to Annalisa Cocchia, the most cited definitions of ‘smart city’ include ICT as its essential aspect, while those of ‘digital city’ tend to accentuate its virtuality (‘a virtual digital space for a city’) and consider digital technology as its communicative devices and infrastructure (32). The aforementioned discourse on the digital city commonly recognizes its potential as communication media, and media studies also question the relationship between digital technology, digital media, and the production of urban places. For instance, developing Yi-Fu Tuan’s (1979) renowned distinctions of space and place, Germaine R. Halegoua in her book *The Digital City* (2019) defines place as performative, and makes the diagnosis that people are ‘replacing the city’ in contemporary urban places; that is, they perform ‘the subjective,

<sup>2</sup> [http://49.247.26.159/books/3080/?book\\_category=humanities](http://49.247.26.159/books/3080/?book_category=humanities).

<sup>3</sup> [https://ihuos.uos.ac.kr:57009/eng/eng2\\_1.php](https://ihuos.uos.ac.kr:57009/eng/eng2_1.php).

habitual practice of assessing and combining physical, social, and digital contexts in order to more fully understand one's embeddedness within urban places' (8).

In retrospect, it was Mumford who had already described the city as media as early as the 1960s:

Through its concentration of physical and cultural power, the city heightened the tempo of human intercourse and translated its products into forms that could be stored and reproduced. ... By means of its storage facilities (buildings, vaults, archives, monuments, tablets, books), the city became capable of transmitting a complex culture from generation to generation. ... As compared with the complex human order of the city, our present ingenious electronic mechanisms for storing and transmitting information are crude and limited. (569)

Citing this paragraph in his essay 'The City Is a Medium' (1996), Kittler assesses that Mumford obviously comprehends cities to be comparable and compatible with computers—'and therefore media' (721). If media can 'record, transmit and process information' (722), Kittler insightfully indicates that the city is a medium with its own inscription and storage systems, such as buildings, archives, monuments, and books, that enable the recording and transgenerational transmission of information. In her talk at IUH's 2021 international conference, 'Mapping Digital Cityscapes', Tiziana Terranova (2021) updates Kittler's argument and writes that 'the city is a technosocial medium'. By deploying the term 'technosocial' to describe 'the process by which the social has become directly coded and recursively reconfigured by digital communication technologies as a space of security, that is a [Foucauldian] milieu or [Kittlerian] medium of circulation', Terranova offers the analysis that technosocial mediation now pervades all spaces: '[t]here is no social relation (between buyers and sellers, teachers and students, between friends and between lovers, between hosts, between politicians and electors) that has not become somehow technically encoded as a relation' (42).

With these scholarly perspectives on the digital city from various fields in mind, this edited collection launches the 'digital polis' as our key concept and offers a new theoretical framework for thinking through the (re)production of power, knowledge, and space by both physically and virtually networked communities in contemporary urban environments. Instead of the digital 'city', we use the terminology of the digital 'polis' for a more nuanced articulation of the project's participatory and alternative orientation toward a counter-mapping of the digital cityscape. Considering the potential of the digital polis in the active support of socially just and politically inclusive urban circumstances that mirror the Greek *polis*, our attention is drawn toward the interweaving of the development of digital technology, urban space, and social dynamics. As cities and urbanity incorporate multifarious levels of actors such as people, their cultures, mediated communication among them, social/physical space, the architectural built environment, and networked or virtual communities, research on the digital polis requires an inherently interdisciplinary approach.

The understanding of the digital polis put forth in these chapters, as an emergent definition encompassing research and practice, may not converge at a single vanishing point; however, each chapter deliberates on the term in its own way, and readers will be able to navigate their routes in the following pages. Definitions of the digital polis may include:

- a de-territorial network and hybridity, an urban network where the flows of technology, people, goods, money, and images are intricately interconnected (chapter “[Digital Polis and the ‘Safe’ Feminism: Focusing on the Strategies of Direct Punishment and Gated Community](#)”)
- a digital version of the ‘space of appearance’ that Hannah Arendt (1958) depicts; that is, a space in which the vulnerable subject struggles to overcome one’s vulnerability and to appear as an equal within the unequal techno-urban cultural structure (chapter “[Toward Digital Polis: Gendered Data \(In\)justice and Data Activism in South Korea](#)”)
- a network that produces the subjection and de-subjectification of networked individuals (chapter “[Subjection or Subjectification: Representation of ‘Networked Individuals’ in Korean Web Novels](#)”)
- an urban space that operates simultaneously as a digital medium and through digital media (chapter “[Digital Polis and Urban Commons: Justice Beyond the Gated Community](#)”)
- a structure of combined operation of three forms: imaginary-virtual, intermediary-virtual, and real-virtual gated communities (chapter “[Production and Reproduction of Space and Culture in the Virtual Realm: Gated Communities as the Imaginary, Intermediary and Real Spaces](#)”)
- a post-family imagination as a building block to bridge the expanded communities between the pre-digital and digital generations (chapter “[The Uniformity of Living Space and the Anxiety of the Middle Class](#)”)
- a fragmented production of urban space through multi-layered physical and digital fortification (chapter “[Spatial and Digital Fortressing of Apartment Complexes in Seoul: Two Case Studies](#)”)
- a radical transition toward a digital version of a ‘genuinely humanizing urbanism’ in David Harvey’s terms (chapter “[Inclusion, Exclusion, and Participation in Digital Polis: Double-Edged Development of Poor Urban Communities in Alternative Smart City-Making](#)”)
- a more inclusive and collective foodscape emerging through the creation and appropriation of social networks by online-based food hubs (chapter “[Online-Based Food Hubs for Community Health and Well-being: Performance in Practice and Its Implications for Urban Design](#)”)
- smart cities as a new paradigm of urban transformation with digital third places grounded on ‘open source urbanism’ as defined by Saskia Sassen (chapter “[Third Places: The Social Infrastructure of the Smart City](#)”).

These definitions focus on diverse facets of the digital polis that embrace both analyses of, and alternatives to, the contemporary networked city and society. Some chapters emphasize the closed tendency of the digital polis in view of gated communities that operate under the (capitalistic) techniques of governmentality, and others pay more attention to the possibility of the redistribution of power and knowledge within the cityscape of the digital polis in an urban future. With this in mind, the next section outlines what each chapter presents and how they are laid out throughout this edited collection.

### 3 Overview of Chapters

This book comprises eleven chapters, including this chapter, which introduces background information and the general structure of the book. The following chapters present varied topics regarding digital feminism, data activism, networked individualism, digital commons, real-virtual communalism, post-family imagination, digital fortress cities, rights to the smart city, online foodscapes, and open source urbanism across the globe. This publication is a result of the open dialogue we had during the IUH 2022 international conference, ‘Rethinking gated communities in the digital polis: digital pathology, imagination, exclusion, and cooperation’, as well as a subsequent selective peer review process. Researchers from numerous fields including philosophy, literature, media and communication studies, geography, architecture, and urban studies have contributed to this book, and their essays are organized across four sections.

### 4 Part 1: The Digital Polis and the Formation of Technosocial Subjectivity

Part 1 opens with timely diagnoses of the ebullient activism and production of networked individuality in the contemporary South Korean virtual realm, as it witnesses the formation of technosocial subjectivity. Hyun-jae Lee (chapter “[Digital Polis and the ‘Safe’ Feminism: Focusing on the Strategies of Direct Punishment and Gated Community](#)”) traces the recent trajectory of digital feminism under the time-space conditions of the digital polis which, in her view, is characterized by ‘a de-territorial network and hybridity, unlike traditional cities as territorial places of homogenization’. Developing Soja’s discourse on the postmetropolis (2000) into that of the digital polis, Lee explains why some Korean digital feminists test out strategies of forming virtual gated communities that strengthen sexual boundaries and use gatekeeping as a method of digital feminist activism.

In chapter “[Toward Digital Polis: Gendered Data \(In\)justice and Data Activism in South Korea](#)”, Namhee Hong analyzes datafication and data activism from a gendered perspective. Datafication is regarded as a new scientific paradigm for quantifying all kinds of sociality and social actions, including personal information (van Dijck 2014), which leads to ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff 2019). The data produced and collected across online and urban spaces cause problems of injustice toward marginalized or vulnerable groups such as women. Hong focuses on young women in South Korea as both digital natives and vulnerable subjects, and examines how they make various attempts to improve their techno-cultural conditions through data activism. Data activism is a kind of critical attitude and practice toward big data that uses the given digital affordances in reverse form to produce counter-discourses. If the digital polis is a networked space where diverse people explore their own identities and participate in digital place-making, Korean young women’s data activism forges



their own empowerment in it, at the same time as it reveals the unequal techno-urban cultural structure. In this respect, the digital polis questions the promise of technology and datafication. Also, it makes us consider what and how we must develop if we want to move toward a digital polis.

Inhyeok Yu (chapter “[Subjection or Subjectification: Representation of ‘Networked Individuals’ in Korean Web Novels](#)”) argues that in the genre of the Korean web novel, the network functions as a device that subordinates the human subject to the huge machine of capitalism, and asserts that these web novels properly grasp the contradictory conditions of capitalism under which subjectification takes the form of subjection. Taking insights from Terranova’s famous discussion of ‘netslaves’ who voluntarily indulge in free labor (2004) and Maurizio Lazzarato’s theoretical notion of ‘social subjection’ and de-subjectification (2014), Yu maintains that the networked individuality represented by contemporary Korean web novels arises from the indivisible two sides of subjection to the network on the one hand and subjectification through the network on the other. Overall, Part 1 contains a critical contribution to the understanding of the digital polis, and its three chapters observe and analyze the formation of technosocial subjectivity within it.

## 5 Part 2: Real-and-Virtual Combined Urbanity in Seoul and Istanbul

The second part forms a stimulating comparison of Seoul and Istanbul in terms of reality and virtuality. Defining the digital polis as an urban space operating as a digital medium, Eun-joo Kim (chapter “[Digital Polis and Urban Commons: Justice Beyond the Gated Community](#)”) critically introduces S-Map, or ‘Virtual Seoul’ (<https://smap.seoul.go.kr>), unveiled in April 2021 as ‘the nation’s first urban problem-solving simulation’ (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport, 2001). After delineating a brief outline of S-Map, Kim raises a question concerning the logic or philosophy of demarcation innate in its design: if S-Map is built by funding from Seoul and taxes from Seoulites, does it exclusively belong to the city and the citizens of Seoul? The author follows by suggesting a reconsideration of the philosophy of urban commons as a principle of the digital polis.

Basak Tanulku (chapter “[Production and Reproduction of Space and Culture in the Virtual Realm: Gated Communities as the Imaginary, Intermediary and Real Spaces](#)”) argues that there are three categories of virtual gated communities in Istanbul: ‘imaginary-virtual gated communities’, reproduced in formal websites provided by supply-side actors (developers) to promote themselves; ‘intermediary-virtual gated communities’ acting between imaginary and real-virtual gated communities, produced through social media open to anyone such as Instagram and Facebook;



and finally, ‘real-virtual gated communities’ reproduced on various platforms exclusively reserved for their residents/members. Read side by side with chapter “[Digital Polis and Urban Commons: Justice Beyond the Gated Community](#)”, Tanulku’s paper inquires into ‘what or who is included and excluded’ in the virtual city.

## 6 Part 3: The Spatial Dimensions of Exclusion in the Digital Polis

The third and fourth parts shift the analytical focus from the conceptual realm of the digital polis to a more concrete and empirical realm. In chapter “[The Uniformity of Living Space and the Anxiety of the Middle Class](#)”, Yangsook Lee draws attention to the flatness and uniformity of space created by apartments against the backdrop of the anxiety and pain of the Korean middle class, through a contextual analysis of the ‘apartment novels’ of Park Wan-seo in the 1970s. By highlighting the women’s dreams of defamilizing, she raises questions simultaneously about how to break out of a flat and uniform space, and about imagining the transition from an isolated family to a more extended community. Her post-family imagination gives a clue to understanding the transformation of gated urban communities from early modern times to the contemporary digital era in South Korea.

Ji-in Chang and Soe-won Hwang (chapter “[Spatial and Digital Fortressing of Apartment Complexes in Seoul: Two Case Studies](#)”) investigate the progressive strengthening of spatial and technological means of control in apartment complexes in Seoul. Tracing the evolution of spatial control from the 1970s to the 2020s, the authors argue that the control of access through physical and digital measures is an expression of power derived from surveillance and exclusion. Reinforced by technology, the power that the authors indicate can be turned both outwards and inwards to determine insiders and outsiders. By highlighting the ongoing phenomena of spatial and digital fortressing, this chapter calls for discussion on how urban design and technology can contribute to mitigating social and urban fragmentation against the relentless privatization of space and security.

In chapter “[Inclusion, Exclusion, and Participation in Digital Polis: Double-Edged Development of Poor Urban Communities in Alternative Smart City-Making](#)”, Kon Kim shifts the focus from upscale apartment complexes to shanty ‘jjokbang villages’ where the urban poor can afford to live in Seoul. The author explores how the urban poor creates an alternative ‘smart city’-making pathway in cooperation with radical social groups outside the institution. His qualitative exploration concludes that radical intermediary intervention deprives the urban poor of opportunities to join official partnerships for government-driven smart city projects, even as such interventions serve, within certain limits, to improve their communal autonomy and build their self-governing system. Arguing that radical intermediary intervention is still seen as unauthorized, unofficial, or unlicensed, the author highlights the double-edged nature of alternative ‘smart city’-making for the urban poor, where

their substantive rights to the smart city remain unachieved despite the fact that their radical approach contributes a step toward a genuinely humanizing smart urbanism. Overall, by presenting contrastive case studies from Seoul, Part 3 forms the basis for a more nuanced understanding of socio-spatial exclusion and inclusion in the gated communities that emerge and evolve in the digital polis.

## **7 Part 4: Toward a More Emancipatory and Empowering Digital Polis**

Part 4 introduces more optimistic and hopeful scenarios with a focus on prospective collaboration and cooperation among communities in the digital polis. Sang-hee Kim (chapter “[Online-Based Food Hubs for Community Health and Well-being: Performance in Practice and Its Implications for Urban Design](#)”) explores online-based food hubs in London, which facilitate the direct connection of producers and customers by promoting community-based box schemes virtually as well as producing and delivering them physically. In an empirical analysis of these case studies based on practice theory (Warde 2005), Kim argues that online-based food hubs serve as a platform that can engage a diverse population of local communities, and thereby promote a more holistic approach to urban design and management for inclusive growth. Her argument helps us imagine ways in which the recent pandemic may reconfigure local foodscapes, the spatialization of foodways, and the interconnections between people, food, and places in the digital polis.

In the final chapter, Katharine Willis proposes a smart city as a new model of integrated urban design bringing people, urban spaces, and technologies together. Building on Ray Oldenberg’s idea of ‘third place’ (1999) and Sassen’s concept of ‘open sourced urbanism’ (2011), Willis introduces different models of place-making and ways of interacting with and shaping the city that can start with the local neighborhood, rather than with technology. Her novel approach to the smart city requires thinking about not only the digital but also the social infrastructure of cities, including living labs, car-sharing, community currencies, hackerspaces, time-banks, and tool libraries. Such a novel way of envisioning the future city helps lay the foundations for creating emancipatory and empowering place-making pathways in the digital polis.

Collectively, the papers in this collection serve to generate an alternative discourse the digital polis, our term for cities that are evolving with physically and virtually networked communities. The questions guiding the research revolve around how people, urban spaces, and technologies relate to and affect each other in contemporary neighborhood transformations. The aim of this book is not to present idealistic concepts of an urban future ungrounded in contemporary reality, nor is it to enumerate a variety of present cases as success stories or failures. The intention is to open avenues for research and new discourses on the ‘digital polis’ as the grounds for a genuinely humanizing urbanism (Harvey 1973) in latent futures, or futures in the making that are ‘on the way’ (Adam and Groves 2007). In this sense, this

collection provides valuable insights into fundamental considerations on relationships between people, place, and society—relationships that are physically, but also virtually, constructed across the globe.

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