

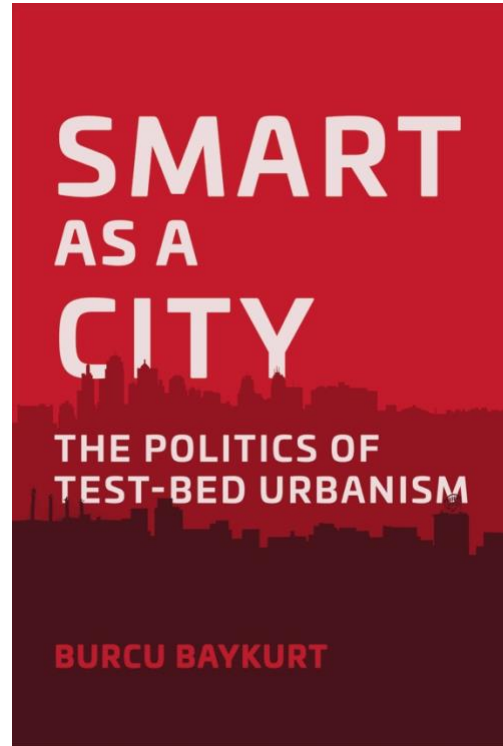
Burcu Baykurt, **Smart as a City: The Politics of Test-bed Urbanism**, California: University of California Press, 2026, 228 pp., \$95.00 (hardcover).

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Burcu Baykurt's book *Smart as a City: The Politics of Test-bed Urbanism* represents significant critical interventions in contemporary urban studies and the field of critical data studies. Through sustained ethnographic research over three years in Kansas City, Baykurt offers an intimate and uncompromising account of how data-driven governance is fundamentally reshaping urban life, civic relationships, and political practices in ways that traditional urban studies have yet to fully comprehend. Her work stands as a powerful reminder that the smart city is never merely a technological project but always a deeply political formation that produces and reproduces particular visions of urbanity, citizenship, and governance.

Baykurt situates her work within a broader critical tradition in urban studies, drawing upon the insights of scholars such as Orit Halpern, Robert Mitchell, and others who have been scrutinizing the political economy of smart city development. Rather than remaining at the level of abstract critique or distant observation, Baykurt immerses herself in the actual practices and everyday experiences of how smart city governance is implemented on the ground. This methodological commitment yields a richness of detail that would be impossible to achieve through other research methods alone. Her book investigates how smartness reshapes civic ties and transforms the ways of seeing and governing urban centers long plagued by racial and economic divides. The core research questions she addresses—how the uneven adoption of smart technologies and data-driven practices affects the relationship between citizens and local government, what mediates the understanding and experience of urban inequalities in a data-driven city, and in what ways does data-driven local governance address or exacerbate pervasive divides—provide a compelling framework for her ethnographic investigation.

The Kansas City case study is particularly compelling for several reasons that Baykurt articulates throughout her book. The city's partnerships with Google Fiber provided Baykurt with a natural laboratory for examining how these technologies are negotiated, implemented, and contested in practice. She conducted extensive interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, including residents, public officials, technology consultants, and private sector actors. This multi-sited ethnographic approach allows her to trace the connections between different sites of smart city governance and to reveal the power relations that operate across these different spheres. The Kansas City case reveals the tensions and contradictions that



arise when public infrastructure becomes entangled with proprietary private systems, and how these entanglements produce uneven patterns of benefit and harm across different urban neighborhoods.

One of Baykurt's most important theoretical contributions is her elaboration of what she terms "test-bed urbanism" as a distinct form of urban governance. Drawing on the foundational work of Halpern and Mitchell (2023), she argues that smart city projects are not merely technological interventions but are fundamentally epistemological projects that redefine how cities are known, measured, and governed. In test-bed urbanism, the city itself becomes an experiment, where policies and technologies are continuously tested, measured, and recalibrated based on data outputs. This framing has profound implications for democratic governance, since the logic of experimentation often privileges technical expertise over political deliberation and transforms citizens from political participants into data points to be optimized. The performative, inductive, and statistical nature of experiments enacted in test-bed urbanism transforms territory, population, truth, and risk with implications for representative government, subjectivity, and urban form that Baykurt traces through her ethnographic work.

Baykurt's analysis of the political economy underlying smart city partnerships is equally compelling. She provides a detailed account of how technology companies like Google have increasingly positioned themselves as essential infrastructure providers for 21st century cities. Her examination of Google Fiber's deployment in Kansas City demonstrates the difficulties of implementing even apparently straightforward digital infrastructure projects in complex urban environments. More importantly, she reveals how these partnerships are structured by asymmetrical power relations. While local governments seek to leverage private sector expertise and resources, they often find themselves locked into proprietary systems and business models that limit their long-term autonomy. The case of Kansas City reveals how promises of technological innovation can mask the extraction of data and the consolidation of corporate power over urban infrastructure, raising serious questions about digital sovereignty and municipal independence in the 21st century.

Another compelling contribution is Baykurt's analysis of how smart city initiatives interact with preexisting patterns of urban inequality. Rather than accepting the optimistic narratives that data-driven governance will automatically produce more equitable outcomes, Baykurt demonstrates how these technologies often reproduce and even exacerbate existing racial and economic divides. She also reveals how the uneven adoption of smart technologies affects different communities in different ways. Some neighborhoods receive investment in digital infrastructure while others are left behind, and some residents benefit from improved services while others face surveillance and data extraction. Baykurt's research shows that when tech companies enter cities, they not only change how problems are identified but also intensify divisions among residents. Young, middle-class, White residents often view smart cities as economic opportunities, while marginalized communities express concerns about being surveilled. This differential treatment is not accidental but reflects the logics of market-driven urban development that shape where and how smart city technologies are deployed, often following patterns of commercial viability rather than social need.

Baykurt's work also shows its refusal to offer easy solutions or optimistic conclusions. She is clear-eyed about the challenges that data-driven governance poses to democratic participation, civic autonomy,

and urban equity. Yet her work is not simply pessimistic or defeatist. By critically examining the assumptions and power dynamics underlying smart city initiatives, she opens up possibilities for alternative approaches to urban digitalization that prioritize the needs of all residents over the interests of tech companies. Baykurt's work has immediate practical implications for policy makers, technology companies, and civil society organizations involved in smart city initiatives. The insights gained from Kansas City can inform more equitable and democratic approaches to urban digitalization that prioritize the needs of all residents over the interests of tech companies. Her analysis also speaks to the growing literature on data governance and data justice, providing a concrete case study of how these concepts play out in actual urban contexts. For activists and community organizations seeking to challenge the unequal power relations embedded in smart city projects, Baykurt's work also offers both theoretical resources and practical guidance for advocating for more democratic and equitable approaches to urban digitalization.

Baykurt's "studying-up" methodological approach also has important implications for how scholars should study urban governance in the digital age. Her sustained ethnographic work demonstrates the value of long-term, multi-sited research for understanding the social dimensions of technological change in cities. By paying attention to the everyday practices and experiences of diverse urban stakeholders, she reveals the complex and often contradictory ways in which smart cities are actually being made and experienced. This kind of empirical richness is essential for developing nuanced and theoretically sophisticated accounts of urban governance in the digital age, moving beyond the techno-optimist rhetoric that dominates much of the contemporary literature on smart cities. Her approach shows that understanding the social dimensions of smart cities requires sustained engagement with the actual sites where urban digitalization takes place.

Smart as a City is an essential contribution to the field of critical urban studies. By combining ethnographic depth with theoretical sophistication, Baykurt offers a nuanced analysis of the promises and pitfalls of data-driven urban governance. Her central message is both sobering and empowering: while test-bed urbanism poses significant challenges to democratic governance and urban equity, these challenges are not inevitable.

Reference

Halpern, O., & Mitchell, R. (2023). *The smartness mandate*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.