

An expedition into the programmable city

May 9 2013



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Software, in its various manifestations, is now essential to the functioning of cities. A new EU-funded project is preparing to undertake a sustained programme of research on how software makes a difference in the urban world.

Today, computer software is deeply and pervasively embedded into the systems and infrastructure of the built environment, and in the

management and governance of urban societies.

The SOFTCITY project ('The Programmable City'), led by Professor Robert Michael Kitchin of the National University of Ireland, will look at the nature and diverse forms of software, as well as its impact on daily life.

Scientists now know that software-enabled technologies and services augment and facilitate how we understand and plan cities. As well as how we manage urban services and utilities, and how we live urban lives. Across a diverse set of everyday tasks - domestic chores, work, shopping, travelling, communicating, governing and policing - software now plays a central role.

Indeed, some analysts predict that we are entering a new phase of 'everyware', where [computational power](#) will be distributed and available at any point on the planet for people to use in negotiating everyday life.

The SOFTCITY project, launched in June 2013 with EUR 2.3 million in EU funding, will examine how software underpins 'smart' technologies and infrastructures. This includes smart buildings, intelligent transport utility systems, dense [telematics](#) and informatics infrastructures. All of which can increase productivity, competitiveness and sustainability.

Researchers will also study the generation and analysis of so-called 'big data', i.e. enormous, dynamic and interconnected datasets relating to people, objects, interactions, transactions and territories.

Analysis will also focus on four key urban activities - understanding, managing, working, and living in the city.

Just some of the specific questions to be asked include: How is software used to regulate and govern city life? How is the geography and political

economy of software production organised? And how does software transform the spatial behaviour of individuals?

Fieldwork will be carried out principally in Dublin, with a secondary site in Boston, USA. Both cities are key sites of agglomeration for software production and both are experiencing forms of programmable urbanism. In addition, having two case study sites will enable the comparing and contrasting of how software is produced and employed in two locales.

A range of methodologies will be employed, including interviews, ethnographies, audits, surveys, discourse analysis, and the development of a new method - the algorithm archaeology.

SOFTCITY partners believe their work will address a serious gap in social science research, answering key questions about the nature of [software](#) in cities. As well as providing new theoretical tools and empirical evidence for thinking through the new era of programmable urbanism.

More information: National University of Ireland, Maynooth
www.nuim.ie/

Provided by CORDIS

Citation: An expedition into the programmable city (2013, May 9) retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-05-programmable-city.html>

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