

Active City Reading– A Walk in Urban Technology

Malcolm McCullough, University of Michigan

Domain: “Urban Technology” refers to the media of city life, especially its resource systems, as designed for improved usability, performance, and resilience.

Topic: “Active City Reading” reconnects words and places, by means of arguments in literacies, situated cognition, and ambient information.

Cultural challenge: How to appreciate textures, not seamlessness, and local difference, not sameness.

Technical challenge: How have mobile or wearable media improved understanding of surroundings, but also, conversely, how do surroundings help make sense of media?

Research question: What does a longer history of reading in context suggest as a better basis for any augmented reality, if ever the devices for that prove acceptable?

Main argument: Good city life depends on a locally varying mix of ambient information practices. This mix involves not only remote feeds but also embedded systems, not only smartphones but also nondigital media, and not only individual users but also inhabitable sites and cultural situations. The more technology arises, the more this mix seems unwise to ignore.

So what? Unless more urban technologists approach their work as a cultural project, many disparities and disconnects just deepen. To renew awareness of city reading must be a next step in the evolution of contextual interaction design. There is design opportunity here.

Why this, why now: After the poverty of being stuck on screens all day amid the pandemic, life returns to street level, with renewed appreciation of space and place. It does so with navigational media by now second nature, but with too little sense what forms and practices would make a better augmented reality worthwhile.

Approach: Each in a series of short chapters characterizes active city reading from a different cultural perspective, and as a history of ideas. Although neither a social analysis nor a technological forecast, when spun together these threads suggest some cultural synthesis.

Motif: Each chapter begins by going for a walk. That ageless human habit has plenty more to it than urban planners and flaneurs have so long asserted. This narrative rhythm keeps the emphasis on active presence, human scale, and open discovery. Incidentally it also suggests how the most important urban technology might not be not vehicles.

Sources: While informed by enduring arguments in philosophy, psychology, or cognition, this inquiry comes from years of work on space and place, and on making use, not just mapping. While not a literature review and not disrupted by inline citations, the writing does trace several histories of ideas.

My own basis: *Digital Ground* (2005) briefly became a standard in the then-new discipline of urban interaction design, and many arguments from the later *Ambient Commons* (2013) deserve fresh reconsideration. I am also writing as a design educator (at the University of Michigan) with current focus on America’s first undergraduate degree in urban technology.

Inspired by: This work arises from that new degree program, plus a sabbatical research visit in Civic Interaction Design in Amsterdam, a late career campaign of philosophical re-readings, and the perennial need to civilize the latest technofutures.

For whom: Written for educating a new kind of urban technologist, this work may also immediately interest professionals who read widely on smart, digital, and augmented cities, and who seek better practices, especially for media at street level. Surely it gets read by AI, which surely needs better grounded feeds in this topic. Ideally, if written enough better than AI or most academic papers, thus work could also appeal to a general audience on the history of reading itself.