Active City Reading–
A Walk in Urban Technology

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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, in an experiential perspective, toward any better future augmentation.

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

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 do contemporary arguments in literacies, situated cognition, ambient intelligence, or the history of reading 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 and AI 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.

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, and with augmented reality hype cycles accelerating, but with too little sense of what forms and practices would make that worthwhile.

So what? Unless more technologists approach their work as a cultural project, many disparities 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.

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 invite a new 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 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 of technology in context. While not a literature review 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. This work also arises from a sabbatical research visit in civic interaction design.

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.