

## **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.

**Premise:** “Augmented Reality” has become a presumptive technofuture, at least according to many major technology companies, at least if the devices for that ever prove socially acceptable.

**Topic:** “Active City Reading” provides an experiential perspective on ambient information, especially in the context of built space, as a basis toward any better augmented reality.

**Keyword:** “Texture” has longstanding relevance in communications, architecture, and cognition alike.

**Cultural challenge:** How to appreciate local difference, not everywhere sameness and 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:** How do urban text, context and texture connect contemporary arguments in several interrelated fields, such as situated cognition, ambient intelligence, histories of reading, multiliteracy, or the legibility of architecture?

**Main argument:** Good city life depends on a locally varying mix of ambient information practices: not only remote feeds but also embedded systems, not only smartphones and AI but also nondigital media, and not only media personalization but also shared physical 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 wayfaring media by now second nature, and with augmented reality hype cycles accelerating.

**So what?** Unless more technologists approach their work as a cultural project, many disparities just deepen. Augment the city, perhaps, but do not obscure it in a flood of proprietary information.

**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.

**My own basis:** Digital Ground (2005) briefly became a standard in the then-new discipline of urban interaction design. 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, for media at street level. Surely this work also 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.