
Augmenting Urban Experiences : From Interface To *Interspace*

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Abstract

This article discusses the notion of augmentation from a place-making viewpoint. Through literature review and case studies, it distinguishes two opposite approaches of information in order to show that it is neither data nor storytelling, but instead the quality of the relationship between the digital object and the place that sets the stage for aesthetic experiences.

Author Keywords

Place; augmented reality; aesthetic experience; critical design; French theory.

ACM Classification Keywords

Design, Human Factors, Theory.

Introduction

The spectacular development of situated technologies raises issues of quality of presence within urban settings. Despite a terminology that emphasises the value of information *per se*, ubiquity of data can often be an obstacle to, or competes with, the feeling of “here and now” that characterises true aesthetic experiences. While it is possible and easy to associate layers of data to any and every city component – should this be a building, a street, a lamppost or a human being – one might wonder what a truly augmented experience might mean. Challenging both

technological obsession and pre-digital nostalgia, this paper will argue towards design strategies that envision augmentation of urban settings as an enhanced experience of the feeling of “being there”.

Augmenting places

Place making, that is, the art of transforming a physical location into a real place might well resume the goals of good spatial design. More difficult, however, is to define what a place is – for the aesthetic experience that holds that name, does not depend solely on material infrastructure. One of the core aspects of real places is their ability to change function and size without losing their singularity (Bloomer & Moore, 1993); which is to say that their singularity, the core quality that makes a location become a place neither lies in its physical dimension and location as such, nor on its function alone. Tim Ingold describes places as “complex knots” where multiple lines of life meet: “lines are bound together *in* the knot, but they are not bound *by* it” (Ingold, 2007, p. 100); which is to say that it is the meeting of the lines at a particular location in space that makes what we call a place.

Stated plainly: places are not ready-made experiences, located somewhere and always available, but instead *events that emerge at a particular location at a given time*; they did not exist prior to the *hic et nunc* of being there. Therefore, good spatial design can be described as the art of creating the conditions of emergence for such an event. How does that happen? According to Gilles Deleuze (1992 [1988]), an event emerges from chaos provided that some kind of sieve intervenes; which is to say that while the sieve does not constitute the place itself, it is a condition of its existence. More precisely, the sieve Deleuze refers to, can be defined as

an agent through which the site’s underlying forces are polarised and directed, allowing the emergence of the specific kind of spatial form we name “place”. Let us call that sieve, following Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 2003 [1928]), *origin*. Benjamin’s concept of origin does not relate to a chronological starting point but refers instead to a driving force, a source, a cause.

How does all of this relate to the technical possibility of linking physical locations and datasets? According to Gilbert Simondon (Simondon, 1958), the distinction between an aesthetic object and a technical one lies in the quality of the relationship between the object and its context. The latter does not need to relate to context in order to function; quite the contrary: a technical object *ought to work and function anywhere regardless of context*. Conversely, the aesthetic object brings to light and sublimates the underlying qualities of the environment: “it is not the object that is perceived, but the world, polarised in such a way that the situation makes sense” (Simondon, 1989, p. 89).

Consequently, adding data to a physical setting is not enough to augment it; instead, it is the relationship between data and *origin* that determines whether or not the experience of place is augmented. Therefore, the design task does not consist on creating an interface to make data accessible, but instead on articulating that relationship.

Let us imagine three scenarios a designer might encounter while working on an urban augmentation project:

1) the chosen location is already a place (i.e. origin is present and active). Augmenting, in this case, means

enhancing origin through amplification or, conversely, opposition to its effects;

2) the location does not have a singular, pervasive quality that makes it a place; augmenting in this case means to *produce an origin* – that is, to make use of data and digital technologies in a way that frames the urban experience in a meaningful way;

3) the location has potential (due for example to its history, or the way it is used) but is not quite a place; something is missing. Augmenting in this case means finding out what is missing and staging it. This is (arguably) the most complex, challenging and potentially rewarding of the three cases.

As we can see, whatever the starting conditions, the possibility of augmentation does not depend on data, technology, interaction, social media, information or storytelling... as such, but rather on the way we stage the relationship between data and location.

A matter of relationships

In his highly influential essay *Herzian Tales*, Anthony Dunne introduced the concept of *post-optimal object*. The thesis of the book is that the purpose of digital design should not be functional or of semiotic performance (where optimal levels have already been reached), but instead, providing “new experiences of everyday life, new poetic dimensions” (Dunne 2006 [1999]). Through the “post-optimal” concept, Dunne was actually stating that aesthetics were not just a goal for digital design but its very core.

Building from this starting point, the first question that comes to a designer’s mind is, of course: how? Before

suggesting a possible answer, we should take a few steps back and ask a second question: does information invariably lead to “new poetic dimensions”? If we focus on information as content, as knowledge to be acquired, the answer is clearly not. Aesthetic experiences require openness, a state of active reception, of intense presence that is incompatible with the cognitive effort of processing information “about” something (Maldiney, 1986).

An alternative might be to consider strategies of gamification or storytelling. In this case, the urban setting becomes a stage for a narrative or a ludic experience. Sometimes narratives and gameplays are good, sometimes not; however, the quality of the story or the game as such is not the determinant factor. We ought to go back to our starting point and ask ourselves *whether or not the story or the game enhances our feeling of “being there”*.

To answer this last question, we need to make a very careful distinction between the *topic* of the device and the actual *relationship* that links the device to the location’s *origin*. My contention is that in order to truly augment a place, the digital device has to offer the *experience* of its origin, not just its narrative. The distinction lies upon the role we give to information. In the case of narrative, information is an end, a goal, while, in experience, it is a vehicle, a catalyser.

To make this particular point clearer, let us compare the following examples: *Totem urbain* by JC Decaux and *iGirouette*, a prototype designed by Vincent Autin from Lyon-based design firm *biin*. Both objects fulfill the same function, namely, displaying *tweets* in urban space. But while the shape of *Totem urbain* can be

accurately described as a rectangular screen on top of a high pole, *iGirouette* has a more unusual form which consists on a set of turning arrows that point to the direction of the *tweet*'s source as they display it.



Figure 1. *iGirouette*, by Vincent Autin/biin. Photos ©biin.

The implications behind this formal difference are not just a question of prettiness; *iGirouette*'s design not only conveys the object's function, it actually defines it, or even invents it. Indeed: the utility of displaying *tweets* in urban space is questionable. After all, *tweets* are a highly subjective and personal type of information. Moreover, many *tweets* include urls, a kind of data completely useless in this context. Thus, it is neither the function nor the content that makes the difference. What is it, then? The key to this question lies, once again, on the way data is used to create a relationship between the object and its environment. Through spinning and pointing in the direction of the *tweets*, *iGirouette* makes visible a neighborhood's life, the forces that lie beneath its surface. The simple fact of turning conveys an ambiance, something about the place that is not measurable in quantitative terms: dynamism, degree of activity, rhythms, polarities... One could sense the pulse of a place just by looking at

iGirouette, without even reading the *tweets*, and it's in this sense that the object is *post-optimal*: beyond function and semiotics (which are performed at optimal levels), it adds new poetic dimensions to the urban landscape and contributes to place making.

From interface to interspace

The previous developments have led us to a clear distinction between two kinds of digital augmentation devices: one that aims at making information accessible within urban space, and another that uses information as a trigger for urban experiences. The first one can be accurately described through the term *interface* – a word that names the possibility of navigating between multiple and heterogeneous layers of information. As for the second, I will call it *Interspace* and define it as the *experience of multiple dimensions co-existing within a unified perception of reality*. The difference between the two lies on the fragmentary nature of the first as opposed to the unified nature of the second. Getting back to *Totem Urbain* and *iGirouette*: while the former is composed of three detached elements–the city, the screen, the *tweets*–, the latter instead embodies and stages the relationship between them. The object is not just a generic device meant to display any and every type of content: not only the screen's shape is suited to the specific content it serves–i.e. short textual messages–, but it also delivers information in a form, that, both triggers engagement with the urban setting, and reveals something about it. The distinction is important in order to make clear that it is unity, not information, which makes it an experience. In the words of John Dewey: "an experience has a unity that gives it its name, *that* meal, *that* storm, *that* rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single

quality that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts” (Dewey, 2005 [1934], p. 38). And, this is where design’s role is determinant for the quality of the outcome. It is design that ensures, through the careful craftsmanship of relationships, the transformation of what would otherwise be just a technical object into an aesthetic one. “Design is [...] the integration of technological, social and economic requirements, biological necessities, and the psychophysical effects of materials, shape, color, volume and space: thinking in relationships” (Moholy-Nagy, 1947, p. 42).

Another comparison might help us better grasp the issues at stake. Consider popular orientation systems such as GoogleMaps® or Apple’s Plans®. Much has been said about how, despite their usefulness and practical advantages, such devices impoverish the urban experience, as the user tends to get visually trapped within the smartphone’s screen and read the city through the map instead of directly experiencing it. As I discuss this topic with colleagues and friends, the answer I often get is “you can always shut the smartphone down if you don’t like it!”. This issue, however, is more complex than a simple matter of individual taste; it is ultimately about ways of framing existence. But without going in depth to this discussion, let us just challenge the assumptions implied in that simple, straightforward answer. Is there, really, no other option than choosing between “being guided” and “being there”? Or can design provide alternatives to this dichotomy? *No Place Like Home GPS shoes*, a remarkable 2012 project by Dominic Wilcox might help us get a grasp on the issues at stake. These shoes can guide wearers anywhere they want. After uploading the required destination, the embedded GPS module (which

is located in the shoe’s heel) will guide the user through a combination of visual cues emitted by mini LEDs placed on the traditional brogue shoe hole perforations. No need to concentrate on a screen and go through a conscious map reading process; you’re free to wander around and get lost, while still being assured of finding your way in the end.

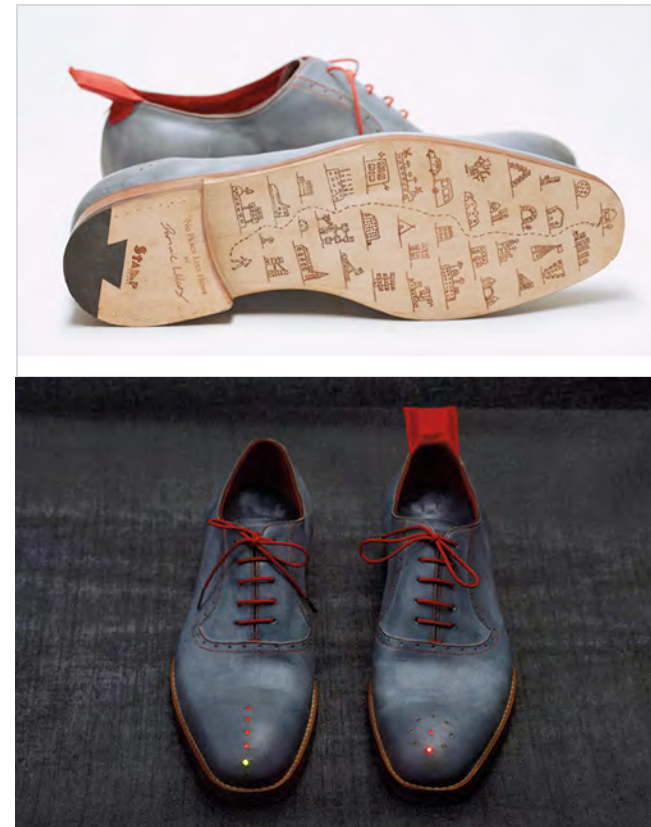


Fig. 2 & 3. *No Place Like Home GPS Shoes* (2012), by Dominic Wilcox. Photos ©Dominic Wilcox.

Wilcox's GPS shoes were produced in the context of a commission by the Global Footprint project in Northamptonshire, a place reputed for quality shoemaking. The designer relied on, and built upon, that fine craftsmanship tradition of the place. The result is an object that is at once a beautiful pair of shoes and a fully-functional, albeit unobtrusive, orientation device. Beyond material and function, the object speaks of and embeds the rich tradition and history of the place where it was made.

But there is more: the interaction principle has not been chosen arbitrarily. It draws on the resources of the shared imaginary world of popular culture. Wilcox's inspiration for this project came from Victor Fleming's 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy, the main character, clicks her shoes together when she wants to go back home. In an analogous manner, *No Place Like Home's* wearers click their heels together to activate the system. The object's design articulates multiple, heterogeneous dimensions: matter and bits, craftsmanship and technology, local tradition and global culture, imaginary worlds and down-to-earth functions. Its interactive principle relies on intuitive, simple, widely spread knowledge. It tells stories and it is playful in a different and more authentic manner than "storytelling" or "gamification". Beyond narrative, it sets up the conditions for an *experience* of origin.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have gestured towards a vision of the augmented city that, departing from information, storytelling and gamification, focuses primarily on place making. Through careful definition of the notions of experience and origin, I have shown that the aesthetic dimension lies on the quality of the

relationships the digital device establishes, with the urban setting, in order to suggest a shift in focus, from the technologically inspired notion of interface to the singular aesthetic experience I have called *Interspace*.

Within *interspaces*, unity is achieved through connection with *origin*; which is to say, that it is authenticity that provides the living force that ties the parts together.

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