The Tuning of Place

Sociable Spaces and Pervasive Digital Media

Richard Coyne

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Preface

How do pervasive digital devices influence the way people use spaces? This book examines the concept of tuning as a way of understanding how people adjust their interactions with one other and with the places they occupy. I propose that mobile phones, smartphones, personal stereos, handhelds, wearables, other pervasive digital devices, and the networks that support them become the means of making incremental adjustments within spaces—of tuning place.

The book develops an understanding of how pervasive media help to formulate a sense of place through their capacity to introduce small changes, in the same way that tuning a musical instrument invokes the subtle process of recalibration. Murray Schafer coined the term *the tuning of the world*. I adopt his emphasis on the importance of sound in the creation of environments, the implied contrast between sound and vision, and the small-scale, incremental change. There is a strong social aspect to place making. Ubiquitous devices are obviously tools for social interaction. The tuning of place is also the tuning of social relations.

Pervasive digital media integrate information processing and computation into the world of everyday objects and environments, as computer components become smaller, more powerful, better connected, and less costly. Cell phones, smartphones, portable audiovisual devices, and the convergences among them herald the development of new and inventive ways of secreting computational capability into household goods, equipment, clothing, vehicles, and new kinds of commodities barely conceived. Such devices depend on omnipresent networks, infrastructures, and methods of content distribution. There is also a pervasive aspect to the development of these systems, the democratization of innovation whereby it is claimed that any small developer, producer, publisher, artist, or user

can establish a niche in content provision, programming, and customization, abetted in no small part by interfacing with and reporting via the participative media of the World Wide Web and its progeny.

Rather than catalog achievements and predictions this book presents a framework for discussing how pervasive digital media can inform developers, designers, and users as they contemplate interventions into the environment. Processes of tuning can be expanded to a consideration of intervention, calibration, wedges, habits, rhythm, tags, taps, tactics, thresholds, aggregation, noise, and interference—themes highly relevant to pervasive computing and that structure the content of this book. I expect this orientation toward the art, design, and culture of digital media to be instructive to anyone interested in understanding the world of technology and how the smartphone generation tunes its relationships with place.

This book builds on my critique of the digital economy and its narratives about the gift society, *Cornucopia Limited*,[1] in which I examined Marxist, neo-Marxist and other critical positions in relation to global markets, capital, and cultures of digital consumption. A previous work, *Technoromanticism*,[2] examined the romantic legacy in information technology design and proposed alternatives to celebratory cyberspace narratives. An even earlier book, *Designing Information Technology in the Postmodern Age*,[3] critiqued the technorationalist imperative and promoted the theme of metaphor in place of a belief in blind, impersonal calculation and the imminence of artificial intelligence. This fourth book in the series emerged from my long-standing commitment not only to architecture, cultural theory, and computers, but also to issues of sound, behind which lurks the master metaphor of architecture as "frozen music."[4] I am fortunate to have been able to work closely with several experts in music and sound, from whom I have learned a great deal about priorities outside of the visual confines of architecture. In particular I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Pedro Rebelo, Peter Nelson, and Martin Parker.

This book is also the culmination of work carried out with the generous support of the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The first of three funded projects was supported by the AHRC's Designing for the 21st Century initiative and was titled Orienting the Future: Design Strategies for Non-place (EP/C513878/1), with a follow-on project, Branded Meeting Places: Ubiquitous Technologies and the Design of Places for

Meaningful Human Encounter (AH/E507654/1). Along the way I was supported by the AHRC on a speculative study, Inflecting Space: Correlating the Attributes of Voice with the Character of Urban Spaces (AHRC 112333). Collaborators in these projects included Peter Nelson, Martin Parker, Stephen Cairns, Robin Williams, Jane Jacobs, Ewan Klein, Elizabeth Davenport, Susan Turner, Jennifer Willies, and Ray Lucas. Alan Dix, Peter Excell, Ann Light, William Mackaness, Vlad Tanasescu, and Chris Speed provided further insights. Mobile Acuity Ltd, directed by Anthony Ashbrook, stimulated several of the practical insights explored in this book. It is also the product of extended discussions with the project research team of Henrik Ekeus, Mark Wright, James Stewart, Penny Travlou, and John Lee. In particular I would like to acknowledge the enormously imaginative experimentation and development of Henrik Ekeus and Mark Wright. The book is also the fruit of much experimental design work by students too numerous to mention in our Master of Science in Design and Digital Media and Master of Science in Sound Design programs at the University of Edinburgh, and key PhD projects by Aghlab Al-Attili, David Fortin, Anastasia Karandinou, Leonidas Koutsoumpos, and Dermott McMeel.