



Ambient Commons

**Attention in the Age of
Embodied Information**

Malcolm McCullough

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Ambient Commons is about attention in architecture. It is about information media becoming contextual, tangible, and persistent. It begins an environmental history of information. Attention matters more than ever, attention to surroundings matters more than people once thought it did, and tuning out surroundings may only worsen other more disembodied forms of overload. The process of engaging the world has become much more mediated, however, not only with smartphones but by situated technologies too. Although people in any era have lamented overload, never did the sources reach into so many facets of life. The mind has always wandered, but never did it have such abundant means for doing so. This book takes two phenomena in the rise of the “augmented city,” and explores whether it makes sense to combine them. “Ambient” is that which surrounds but does not distract. Information is becoming ambient, even inhabitable as a part of architecture. “Commons” is self-governing restraint in resource sharing, a process which political economists increasingly see complementing markets. “Information commons” has been topical since the mid 90s, but only now begins to merge with physical space. “Ambient Commons” does not exist except in a few niches of music: not in media studies, nor pervasive computing, nor urbanism. But should it?

CONTENTS

Prologue: Street Level

Part I: IDEAS OF THE AMBIENT

1. Ambient
2. Information
3. Attention
4. Embodiment
5. Fixity

Part II: TOWARD AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF INFORMATION

6. Tagging the Commons
7. Frames and Facades
8. Architectural Atmospheres
9. Megacity Resources
10. Environmental History
11. Governing the Ambient
12. Peak Distraction

Epilogue: Silent Commons

Preface

Gentle reader, this is for your reflections. To sit down with a book seems less and less what life is like. To be alone with one's thoughts was perhaps never the usual human condition. As evident in today's tastes for perpetual messaging, many people do not just share so much as generate their thoughts, even their deepest feelings, through constant social connectivity. Solitary reflection may have always been the exception, a chosen path for a few, or more like a few chosen hours in a busy life. Introspection remains a difficult art. Fortunately, to sit with a book is more of a dialogue in any case. Unlike feeding among so many short, separate, messages at once, to sit down with a book is to take up a longer transaction between reader and writer. This format exists not only to allow more depth or nuance to the issues, but also for the sake of language itself.

Here the transaction is this: like a highway resurfacing project, this book asks your patience with a temporary inconvenience for the sake of permanent improvement. The project seems justifiable enough: call it overload or call it superabundance, but the volume of mediated information defines this era for all involved. This book just adds a tiny (if dense) drop to that flood. It is nevertheless potential demand on your attention, and hence an inconvenience. For as the philosophers explain, often the solution to too much information consists of still more information: not only tags and filters, but also the perspectives of context. Not all messages inform. Not all information is something sent.

So with potential improvements as a prospect, but you are hereby invited to rethink attention itself, especially with respect to surroundings. For instance you are invited to look past obsessions with smartphones, and to notice more situated, often inescapable forms of information. At the very least, this book may help you justify more attention to surroundings as something better than nostalgia. There is a new sensibility here. It belongs to a cognitive revolution. So the next time you mumble "be here now!" at someone texting-while-walking in your way, this book could help you mean more by that.

One first disclaimer must be this. People have always felt overload. That seems safe to assume. The world has always been overwhelming, presumably only more so whenever such basic needs as for food or safety have not been met. If you believe the old truism that a person can keep only seven things in mind at once, then perhaps people began sensing overload as soon as there were eight.

Yet today surely something has changed. Much more of any given sensory field comes from and refers to someplace else. Much more of it has been engineered deliberately for the workings of attention. The seductions of personalized media seem quite the opposite of numbing, monotonous din. They don't lead to overload so much as overconsumption. They are not confined to specific sites like the workplace or literary salon (where ladies and gentlemen of centuries past

complained of overload--from the pressure to memorize too much poetry.) Maybe the biggest change is ubiquity. For as you may have noticed, the world is filling with ever more kinds of media, in ever more contexts and formats. Screens large and small appear just about anywhere; physical locations are increasingly tagged and digitally augmented; sensors, processors, and memory are not just carried about in your pocket but also built into everyday objects. All these increasingly connect. This isn't the clanking industrial city that led sociologists to emphasize distraction, nor the media monoculture that led to situationist critiques of spectacle, nor the all-seeing Orwellian state that people assume must be the outcome of unchecked mediation. Today's embodiments of information have become something far, far more chaotic, often quite culturally fertile, with ever more subtle cognitive appeal. The twenty first century arts are the arts of interface. Interface is no longer just about sitting at a machine. For a single word to describe this new outlook, as a catalyst for this inquiry into attention, this book adopts the Ambient.

For asking what just happened, a book still works best, at least across any scope longer a moment ago. (There's Twitter for that.) Although print is slow to produce, a book may still be the best way to trace an enduring path through the ideas of a recent decade, even a century. Here in the twilight of print, it helps to remember that. Although a book cannot interconnect ideas so well as the web, it may sometimes penetrate some of them better. A longer form in a consistent voice may improve access to a field of ideas from others. This need read not as journalism, nor as curation, nor for authority on any given topic. Don't read this to learn something new about your own field, except perhaps to gain perspective on it. Do take this simply as one writer's inquiry. That word should keep coming up. To write is to learn. To write well is to bring others along, even through superabundance. For in the quickly rising flood of data something just happened for attention to surroundings.

*On the value of the built environment to attention practices,
amid a new stage in the history of information.*

The world is filling with ever more kinds of media, in ever more contexts and formats. Glowing rectangles have become part of the scene; screens, large and small, appear everywhere. Physical locations are increasingly tagged and digitally augmented. Sensors, processors, and memory are not found only in chic smart phones but also built into everyday objects. Amid this flood, your attention practices matter more than ever. You might not be able to tune this world out; to do so might just leave media as your only world anyway. So it is worth remembering that underneath all these augmentations and data flows, fixed forms persist, and that to notice them can improve other sensibilities too. In *Ambient Commons*, Malcolm McCullough explores the workings of attention through a rediscovery of surroundings. Not all that informs has been written and sent; not all attention involves deliberate thought. The intrinsic structure of space--the layout of a studio, for example, or a plaza--becomes part of any mental engagement with it. Without claiming how neuroscience proves "we" think this way or that, this book may help you understand embodied cognition. McCullough describes what he calls the Ambient: an increasing tendency to perceive information superabundance whole, where individual signals matter less, and at least some mediation assumes inhabitable form. He explores how the fixed forms of architecture and the city play a cognitive role in the the flow of ambient information. As a persistently inhabited world, can the Ambient be understood as a shared cultural resource, to be socially curated, voluntarily limited, and self-governed as if a commons? *Ambient Commons* invites you to look past current obsessions with smart phones to rethink attention itself, to care for more situated, often inescapable forms of information.

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