

Understanding Place as Experience: Augmenting Human Activities in Context

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we will outline our approach to studying and understanding place as a notion to guide the design of novel interactive installations in public spaces, in order to augment and enhance, as well as support, peoples' experience. Our current research project "Shared Worlds" is focusing on two case studies within two different public spaces, a city centre open-air market and an international airport. In the paper we will outline our overall vision of place, as well as detailing the project's concerns and the specific work being conducted on-site according to particular conceptual approaches.

Keywords: experiential place, townscape, humanistic geography, design implications

INTRODUCTION

Authors such as Erickson (1993) and Harrison and Dourish (1996) have argued for the appropriateness of place, rather than space, as a notion for understanding people's activities within physical environments. More recently, several papers in the areas of Human-Computer Interaction, Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Interaction Design (see for example, Fitzpatrick, 2003; Brown and Perry, 2001; Turner and Turner, 2003) have developed the understanding of notions of space and place and their applicability to the design of interactive technologies. These authors have highlighted the importance of clearly defining the theoretical rooting that such notions imply, and of considering their methodological implications.

In the last few years, work at the Interaction Design Centre has focused specifically on issues related to how to conceptualise, understand and design for space and place (for an extensive review of possible approaches, see Casey, 1997). Our particular scope for applying notions of space and place during past project such as "SHAPE" (Ferris et al., 2004) was aiding the design of technologically-enhanced physical environments where people could access digital information and trigger certain behaviours by interacting with fixtures and fittings of a physical locale.

Building on the lessons learned through this case study, we have developed a shared conceptualisation of place grounded on phenomenologically-influenced literature (see, for example, Tuan, 1977; Malpas, 1999), and seeing place not just as a location, but as an experiential notion incorporating human activities and experiences in the physical world.

Therefore, our vision of place is centred around the notion of human activity and experience, place is a *lived space* which is irreducible to physicality alone, and transcends its structural dimensions to encompass human activity as constituent of the identity of the space itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

This vision of place has led us to reflecting on the importance of theoretical and methodological implications regarding how to study and to understand human experience of place. In the following sections we will describe two examples of possible approaches, one developed within architecture and urban planning, the other within humanistic geography, and both sharing a vision of place as experiential notion, which we are currently exploring as

part of our work on the “Shared Worlds” project.

THE “SHARED WORLDS” PROJECT

“Shared Worlds” is funded by Science Foundation Ireland and will be concluded in 2007. The project is investigating the development and use of novel interactive technologies within public spaces - such as museum galleries, shopping malls, airport passenger areas, and libraries.

We are exploring how people can not only use technologies, but how people might begin to live with them in their everyday lives. While we are working with the latest ideas in information and communications technology, such as ubiquitous computing (Weiser, 1991), we take our starting point in an understanding of how people live, work and play in the everyday world.

This research is based on what is known as a human-centred computing perspective, where technological developments are based on both a theoretical and practical understanding of human activities in the world (Bannon, 2005). The project includes the deployment of these new interactive technologies in two installations in the field that will be open to the public for use.

Our work is currently focused on two sites: the Milk Market in Limerick City, and Shannon International Airport.

In the following sections we will describe our approaches to study these two places in more detail.

The Milk Market

The Milk Market in Limerick is a traditional farmers’ market which has continued to function for over 150 years. Despite its name, it sells a variety of foods, bric-a-brac, crafts and plants. It takes place every Saturday and it is located at the junction of several city streets not far from Limerick’s main thoroughfare.

Traditional urban markets, such as the Milk Market in Limerick are places for urban and social activity. They are vibrant places, they set a stage for social interaction, they enhance communications amongst humans and are important instruments of sociality. Such places support self-organising behaviour and self-emerging activities of various users and enhance sense of belonging of citizens. The Venice Charter for

Urban Conservation (1964) highlights importance of such historic centres, as such places have *memory values* assumed in a spontaneous and non-intentional way. The Charter recommends the development of approaches to support sustainable development in such places and to ensure their conservation.

The influence of interactive technology to be placed in such historic urban places has the potential to introduce new forms of activities within the environment. As such places play a central role in strengthening relationships between an ever evolving urban space and social activities, a careful approach is required for introduction of computational technology in such places in order to conserve and enhance them.

In order to design a technological installation in the Milk market, we decided to use the ‘*Townscape Approach*’ (Cullen, 1959), developed within the field of urban design, in order to understand how the place is perceived by people - i.e. how various components of the place are contributing together to provide it a unique character.

Gordon Cullen suggests three ways/dimensions for understanding a place:

1. *Serial Vision* – Sequential vision concerning exiting and emerging view within an urban place
2. *Place* – Concerning position, an experience stemming from exposure and enclosure
3. *Content* – This and that, concerning the variety and richness of the activities

Using this framework, we are identifying townscape elements providing a strong townscape character to the place, owing to its spatial configuration and –most of all– uniqueness of activities. A series of design sensitivities for the development of an intervention will be drawn on the basis on the townscape elements identified during this study.

Such a framework will allow us to develop a design brief for introducing computational technologies within this place, while sustaining the activities happening within the place.

Shannon Airport

Shannon Airport is located in County Clare, on West coast of Ireland and overlooking the estuary of the river Shannon. Since the 1950s it has been a hub for international air traffic, particularly due to the so-called "Shannon stop-over": all planes leaving Europe towards the United States and all Europe-bound US flights had to stop at Shannon to refuel. Shannon Airport hosts the world's first ever "duty free" shop, and the only branch of US customs existing outside of US territory.

Our work at Shannon Airport within the Shared Worlds project is aimed at developing an interactive installation to engage and entertain passengers, staff, meters and greeters who find themselves waiting or – more generally- spending time at the airport.

Our approach to studying and understanding Shannon Airport as a place is based on the conceptualisation of place we have developed in the past few years, through an articulation of notions developed within Humanistic Geography. As Peet notes: "Humanistic Geography looks at environment and sees place - that is, a series of locales in which people find themselves, live, have experiences, interpret, understand, and find meaning" (Peet, 1998, p. 48)

Based on the work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1971; 1977; 1979) we have articulated a notion of place as physical space which is experienced by people along different dimensions:

- Personal: memories, associations, values which individuals associate to a place;
- Social: episodes of social interaction, the presence of others within the place;
- Cultural: codes of behaviour, national/language differences, etc.;
- Physical/Structural: the perceptible physical qualities of the places such as the materials, colours, disposition of artefacts, etc.

In the activities people perform through time, spaces are experienced and lived through these dimensions, and are made into places (Ciolfi, 2004; Ciolfi and Bannon, 2005).

Through this approach we are currently studying people's activities, perceptions and

experiences of Shannon, and reflecting on how people make a place out of Shannon through the articulation of the four dimensions. Participant observations, informal interviews and cultural probes are some of the methodologies we are currently making use of.

Discussion and conclusions

The two spaces we are investigating in the Shared Worlds project present very different features, favour diverse activities and are populated by many kinds of inhabitants. Sharing a common vision of place as experienced space - a locus for human activities - we are currently exploring the Milk Market in Limerick and Shannon Airport adopting two specific approaches.

Cullen's "Townscape" approach is being applied to studying and understanding the Market as an urban place and how the relationship between spatial structures and social activities is established there.

On the other hand, an articulation of Yi-Fu Tuan's geographical notion of place (developed by Ciolfi and Bannon) is guiding the exploration of Shannon Airport, an environment that is not related to an urban centre, and that functions as an independent "ecology". Our analysis aims at understanding how people make such a space into a place through four experiential dimensions.

At the workshop in September we would describe in more detail the two approaches, and present examples of data collected on-site both at Shannon and at the Milk Market for analysis and discussion.

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