

An Exploration of Augmented Reality and Place

As you live, you are the subjective creator of your reality through perception... But does a shared physical space act as a limiting factor in this? Augmented reality brings this into question as it makes an infinite potential of space into something that is visual and tangible. The expansion of perception with augmented reality becomes a stepping stone that dissolves this barrier between the infinite imagination and a limited world.

However, within this, there is a great splice in this perception, and as a result, also a great splice in place as a concept. The first splice is augmented reality that is rooted in the individual; the second splice is augmented reality that is rooted in the physical environment; the third splice is the reality of those who do not perceive augmentation at all. Each one of the three relates to a different aspect of our current digital system, but within a new medium entirely as the digital aspects start to blur with the physical world. To explore this splicing, it is necessary to look at each reality in turn, starting with the one rooted in the individual.

Reality 1: “Decentralized Meaning” – Augmented Reality, A separate reality.

One side of the coin with augmented reality is the way that it can amplify individual perception. This is similar to how current technological systems tailor themselves to us with personalized wallpapers, curated feeds, or endlessly customizable themes for the device. In this case, augmented reality has the ability to extend this personalization into the outside world and outside of a device. Scholars like Lev Manovich describe this aspect as the “softwarization” of culture in how the digital becomes the main driver of media, making it increasingly more hybrid in its ability to be customized. Augmented reality takes this “softwarization” and brings it to the physical plane, dissolving the boundary of the device between the interface and the environment.

Through the tailoring of everyone's environment in this way, the digital individuality that used to live only within a singular screen within reality now can spill into streets, parks, and hallways – places that we once thought were stable. Every moment in reality can become an individual's reflection of utility, desire, and mood.

This is how placelessness may emerge: not through sameness but rather through over-individualization. Through augmented reality, each person can carry their own customized world with them, a world that can be placed on any physical site. Thus, reality becomes a decentralized system where there is a layer of perception unrooted in the environment itself but rather in the overlays that the user can apply. Just as a McDonald's can be placed anywhere in the world and can feel essentially the same, this digital place made by the user can also be summoned anywhere identically.

Question: If anyone can summon a portable world at any moment, what happens to how we perceive the place underneath it?

Reality 2: “Centralized Meaning” – Augmented Reality, a deepened layer.

The other side of the equation with augmented reality emerges in the possibility of a centralized meaning system. While each person drifts into their own individualized realities, augmented reality also can produce a digital reality that is rooted in the shared physical world. This layer exists parallel to all of the individual overlays, a communal digital atmosphere that is suspended over reality. These would be equivalent to the internet, but instead of information coming out of a search, this information populates in relation to the environment.

This aligns with the ideas within José Sanchez's *Architecture for the Commons*, which argues for communal modes of interaction that arise when people collectively build systems.

Rather than emphasizing augmented reality as a personal bubble creator, the author's viewpoint reimagines it as a participatory structure where the value comes from co-creation instead of isolation. Digital layers become shared authorship. In this framing, it becomes a platform where meaning is negotiated and added onto through the collaboration with others.

This is where AR may become a tool for place rather than placelessness. Imagine being at a landmark and you are able to have the collective histories, stories, and memories unfold around you – not as distractions but rather as extensions. It functions almost like a living archive stitched into the architecture and landscape. Instead of a subtraction of the physical world, it can give people a new way to interact with places they inhabit.

Question: When layers of shared meaning become instantly visible, does it enrich the site or flatten its meaning by anchoring its interpretation?

Reality 3: “Unmediated Reality” – A reality without augmentation.

However, the third reality is the one that many will confront: a world where augmented reality is prevalent but not everyone is inside of it. Whether this is through choice or through inaccessibility, many become spectators to a world that is not fully mutual. There may be a kind of perceptual divide that happens to the outsider, with many occupying a reality that is parallel yet inaccessible without the technology. These outsiders don't just lack augmentation, but rather they experience a different reality entirely.

Two people in this system can stand in front of a singular tree and inhabit two alternate versions of it in a singular moment. One person only perceives the physical reality of the tree – the bark, the leaves, the color – nothing more than what the senses already offer. The other can potentially see what type of tree it is, the history of the tree, or even community-placed memories

related to it. For one, the tree remains a material presence; for the other, it becomes a digitally mediated object with layers that inherently reshape that specific tree's meaning on an individual level.

Question: Can a place truly be “shared” if there is an unequal access to all its elements?

Conclusion

In the end, augmented reality does not give us one future place but many – whether individualized, collective, or unaugmented. Being at the cusp of this technology, there is an inherent level of ambiguity associated with how people will interact with it and how it can manifest into the environments around us. What lies ahead with this technology is not a singular trajectory but a field of possibilities, where place is something that is no longer a given but rather something that is constantly negotiated. Thus, within this unknown field, it is through questioning that we may have a clearer path forward in its constant development and in its application to humanity.