

Notes and References

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Intelligent Environments: Spatial Aspects of the Information Revolution

Peter Droege (Ed.)

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According to its title, this reader of essays is about 'intelligent environments', a rather perplexing notion that remains obscure through the book. No matter, the sub-title offers a more straightforward and accurate depiction of the volume as an examination of 'spatial aspects of the information revolution'.

This is a large volume—including some thirty-six essays—that covers a lot of empirical territory, including issues as diverse as art, architecture, transport, markets, environments, industrial change, and the media. These empirical issues are framed by two broad conceptual themes, space and information technology. The spatial scale shifts throughout the work from local, through regional and national, to global levels. (Perhaps we can be glad of the editor's assurance 'that we stay clear of molecular-scale space, and of dimensions that are larger than earth' (vi).) The information technology frame is itself a wide one, including themes such as telematics, virtual reality, telecommunications, electronic infrastructure, cyberspace and information management.

This extraordinary conceptual-empirical variety is both a weakness and a strength of the volume. The extent of coverage permits a broad, and for that very informative, view of the relationship between space and information technology. As such, the book helps resist the idea that the 'information revolution' has been a monolithic phenomenon that has simply annihilated the importance of spatial scale. However, the 'productive diversity' of the empirical content is overstressed, at the cost of conceptual clarity, by the rather unstructured organisation of the chapters. The editor does claim that 'the table of contents is structured to model a terrain of affinities'(v), but these affinities are opaque. I would have preferred a more straightforward structure with the thirty-six essays grouped under thematic themes, defined either spatially (e.g., 'local, regional, national, global'), technologically (e.g., 'telematics, virtual reality, cyberspace, electronic infrastructure, etc.'), or socially (e.g., 'economy, culture, society').

The essays also evidence a variety of analytical approaches, ranging from sober-empirical investigations (e.g. Garnsworthy and O'Connor), through unconventional (artistic) styles (e.g., King and Miranda) and droll-reportage (e.g., Sakamura; Yang), to the more critical pieces (e.g., Marcuse; Dutton; Lamberton). One pleasing aspect is the willingness of some authors (e.g., Choo; Droege; Marcuse) to make public policy prescriptions aimed

at ensuring that information technology is directed to socially useful ends, and not just to the psychic and monetary enrichment of a few.

The brief introductory chapter (2 pages) is under-equipped to provide the necessary conceptual-empirical frame for such a large and ambitious volume. This rather epigrammatic essay offers a breathless statement of theoretical-empirical themes—indeed, key conceptual issues are stated as nostrums rather than analysed as subjects of critical debates. For instance, we are told that ‘The environment—as modified and created by people—is largely about the use of information, its generation and exchange’(v). This potentially idealist reading might be countered by a more materialist approach which would give ‘information’ less theoretical significance in social explanation. Instead, the materialist view would prioritise social practices and ecological settings as the dynamic constituents of environments, and resist the idea that social life is somehow reducible to ‘information’ in any meaningful sense.

Later, the introductory essay states that the information revolution has created ‘the architecture of a postmodern paradigm ...’(v). Again, this statement is highly contestable: what precise notion of the ‘postmodern’ is invoked here? The implied answer is that the information revolution—viz., ‘swiftly mutating and proliferating technology applications ...’ (v)—has annihilated physical space as we knew it, creating a multiplicity of spatial-temporal flows that have, in various ways, reduced the significance of absolute distance. Is this enough to qualify as a ‘postmodern paradigm’? Or is it, in fact, an old refrain of modernism itself? Consider the words of the German poet Heine in 1843, describing the effects of an earlier technological revolution:

The railway kills space, so we are left with time. If we only had enough money to kill time, too! It is now possible to go to Orleans in four and a half hours ... It is as if the mountains and forests of all the countries moved towards Paris. I can smell the scent of German linden trees, and the North Sea roaring in front of my door.

(A short time later, Marx made a similar observation.) Of course, Heine was overstating it when he pronounced the ‘death of space’, when what he really meant was that space had been transformed by a combination of social and technological changes and now took new psychic, physical and cultural meanings. Technology had created a new space of anticipations for Heine: the ‘smell’ of distant places now brought to his very door. In short, a new space that was real, but only in a virtual-anticipatory sense. Sound familiar?

I think the editor might have lingered for a while longer on these complex themes in order to provide the reader with a better sense of what notions of space, technology and society are present within the volume’s diverse contributions. Moreover, we might have learned whether certain theoretical positions were used to frame selection of the various contributions to the book. For example, were all authors expected to believe in the existence of Postmodernity, or were a range of creeds encouraged?

I have few presentation-related quibbles as the volume is generally very well produced. However, the lack of an index is a real annoyance. Also, the significance of Bill Seaman’s enigmatic images at the beginning of each chapter entirely eludes me, and their inclusion seems rather gestural.

All in all this is a rich and timely volume—impressive in its sweep, if lacking somewhat in conceptual coherence. It will be an important supplement to the emerging socio-spatial literature on information technology.

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