



5.6 Human distances. Distance is not abstract, since it quite strongly relates to the way we are aware of our fellow human beings. Under normal circumstances, the senses work in a series of nested spatial bubbles rather like ‘Russian dolls’. We can see, hear, smell and touch people in that order

This absurd scenario is obviously entirely theoretical and is very unlikely to be reflected in any real experience. The point, however, is that we detect each other in a wide variety of ways. Each of these sensations has a range that is fairly rigidly fixed unless obscured by barriers of sight or sound or masked by other events, or alternatively is amplified by technology. Distance then is not a simple continuum, but has a series of perceptual thresholds. In that most important of all things in our lives, our relationships with others, distance is critical and crucial, for it determines how we will interact.

Let us persevere with some slightly more realistic scenarios to tease out the critical points in distance that cause relationships to change. Imagine now that you are waiting in a public place to meet somebody – perhaps you are at a railway station to collect a visitor (Fig. 5.7). This person knows you will be there, but you have never actually met previously so you do not know how to recognize your visitor. Naturally you will choose to make yourself very obvious so that it is clear you might be the host. You will stand out in the open and well away from other waiting people – literally, you will stand out from the crowd. Imagine now that another stranger also obviously waiting for someone to arrive comes onto the station. You will have expectations about where this person will stand. You would not normally be conscious of these expectations and therefore be highly unlikely to analyse them, but should the stranger fail to respect the language of space that you are