

Architect + Communal Space & the Future

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“Architects are strategists, storytellers, empathizers and designers at heart” – Gunita Kuļikovska

Since the time humans have created structures, there has only been one domain of building and that is the physical space. The architects, engineers, artisans have all built magnificent structures, monuments in the physical space, but now another dimension has been created due to technology. The dimension is the ‘virtual world’, a space which exists beyond the three dimensionality of the physical space. With the spread and development of technology, the virtual world has invaded every sphere of life. Human activities which were once solely functions in the physical space now occur in the virtual world. For instance, one does not have to physically meet a person in order to communicate with him, the virtual world offers text messages, video calling, and the internet which offer the same function. The idea of recreational activities now include playing video games and reading online. The ‘shop’ is no longer the only space where one can buy and sell goods, Amazon, Ebay, Alibaba all offer the same services in a virtual setting. The extent of this overlap of virtual and physical space is such that terms once reserved for physical are used interchangeably for the virtual world. Terms such as ‘rooms’, ‘wall’, ‘stores’, ‘forum’, ‘gateway’, ‘ports’, ‘software-architecture’ among others are all terms having roots in objects in physical world. This phenomenon points to a fundamental nature of the virtual world, according to Ettliger, is that *‘the characteristics of places in virtual space are based on the characteristics of physical space, which serves as their initial point of reference.’*¹

This statement shows that the virtual world cannot be devoid of the rules that govern the physical space because any attempt to do so would ‘paint a picture too ambiguous’. Ettliger uses the example of M.C. Escher’s ‘Relativity’ to prove his point. The drawing although ‘defies’ the laws of the physical space but its elements are still recognizable as components of the physical and that is why the viewer can make

¹ Or Ettliger, Ph.D. Arch. 2008. *"In Search of Architecture: An introduction to The Virtual Space Theory."* Pg. 4

sense of it. And if anything has to have the components of the physical space, it needs a design and without any doubt the designer of such spaces is an architect.

The communal space, the physical communal space, is also rapidly changing. A traditional communal space is now not the *only* common space for people. The virtual world provides them with such an alternative, where one can be in a common space with millions if not a billion humans. According to Facebook's 3rd Quarter, 2017 report Facebook had daily active users of 1.37 billion, while monthly active users were 2.07 billion.² This meant that almost 27.6% of world population occupied one common virtual space.³ For an architect this provides an opportunity like no other.

Even a traditional communal space can be radically transformed through use of virtual technologies. An example of one such transformation was the augmented reality game 'Pokémon GO'. When the hype of Pokémon Go was at its peaks, numerous public spaces around the world were drastically morphed in to more active spaces. For instance museums registered a significant increase in footfall as points of interest from the game were created inside the museums.⁴ Because this was a new function, never designed for, functional and ethical questions were raised. The holocaust museum in D.C. requested visitors to "stop catching Pokémon here" because it was disrespectful towards the nature of the museum. This 'awkward' situation could have been avoided had an architect played a role in development of the game, because an architect understands the nature of functions and what roles they play in a physical space. Furthermore it highlights how public spaces can accommodate functions which were never anticipated for. Patrick Lynch refers to 'democratic processes' of space building when he describes why the spaces in Pokémon Go were so successful. He points that as opposed to traditional communal spaces which were 'created around points of cultural and economic interest' the space in Pokémon Go were around the places where people actually lived. Thus the ease of accessibility was a major factor in their success.⁵

² Facebook. 2017. *Facebook Reports Third Quarter 2017 Results*. November 1. Accessed February 8, 2018.

³ 2017. *World Population Clock: 7.6 Billion People (2017)*

⁴ Voon, Claire. 2016. *Pokémon Go Users Flock to Museums, Passing Picasso in Search of Pikachu*.

⁵ Lynch, Patrick. 2016. *21st Century Nollis: How Pokemon GO and Augmented Reality Could Shape Our Cities*

Lynch while describing the choice of spaces in Pokémon Go writes that the spaces had ‘a nice open environment, have comfortable places to sit, and be easily accessible – nearly all of the same qualities of what makes any public space successful.’⁶ What this point illustrates is that the design of the virtual spaces doesn’t differ much from that of the physical spaces, the general needs are the same which gives the architect familiar ground to work on. This also highlights how the architect can view the virtual world more as an ‘architectural element’, like a column or a wall, for designing the communal spaces of the present and future.

The virtual world can act as a point of interest, an activity, like Pokémon Go or it can serve more specific purposes such as demonstrated by BC “Heavy” Bierrman, a computer programmer and trans-media scholar, who created virtual artworks in physical public spaces around Los Angeles, viewable only through a tablet or a smartphone. His works were aimed revitalizing public spaces and showcasing how the overlap between the virtual and physical world can have a positive effect on the physical communal space.

Another aspect of the design in virtual world is designing solely in virtual space. Virtual-Reality (V.R.) is one such example where the experience exists solely in virtual realm. In V.R. literally infinite amount of worlds can be created, one such example is that of ‘Second Life’ which is a virtual 3D world. In Second life players can create ‘avatars’ which then interact with other ‘avatars’, inhabit virtual spaces, go to work and function as one would function in the real world. The ‘virtual’ world in this platform is created in likeness of the real world with residences, high rises, parks, streets and all the other architectural elements from the physical world. When designing such virtual spaces, although the laws of physics, materials, economy and structure might not be the same but they nonetheless possess the same spatial qualities and experiences that one regards with physical spaces. Sociologists and psychologists have researched how spatial perception and experiences behave in virtual world. According to Animesh et. al. design in virtual

⁶Ibid.

space should ‘implement the "sociability by design"’ which means that maximum opportunity to be given for social interaction. ⁷ Ettlenger considers that all virtual space is public⁸, with this in mind one needs to look at the virtual space similar to physical space. Levine et. al. says that “Designing virtual architecture requires a fresh look at architecture itself and all our understanding of it reevaluated.”⁹

Considering all of the factors provided above it is not unrealistic to believe that the communal spaces of tomorrow will have a serious overlap with the virtual world. Our functions, actions and needs would all drastically alter to accommodate this change. William Mitchel, the dean of School of Architecture and Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, predicts a ‘City of Bits’ to succeed the ‘industrial and agricultural’ landscapes of the human civilization. He believes that the networks need to be designed as environment instead of just being put in place. His city of bits is a ‘collection of aliases and agent’s’ controlled by ‘bandwidth and connectivity’ constraints instead of accessibility and land.¹⁰ Because the inherent nature of virtual space is such that it always belongs to everyone, there can be no doubt of its potential as a designed communal space. A space which offers us human sensory experiences and doesn’t dehumanizes our experiences while we interact with it. This designed communal space needs a designer and there is no other person than the architect better suited for this job. The architect brings with him the understanding of functions, spatial perception, human interaction, experiences and meaning. With the skillset of an architect, the virtual space will no longer just merely exists but it’ll come to life and the marriage between physical and virtual might even deepen.

Considering the rate at which technology is occupying our daily lives, it is inevitable that the physical communal spaces around the globe will need to be rethought. A communal space of the future might not

⁷ Animesh, Animesh, Alain Pinsonneault, Sung-Byung Yang, and Wonseok Oh. 2011. "An Odyssey into Virtual Worlds: Exploring the Impacts of Technological and Spatial." *MIS Quarterly* (Management Information Systems Research Center, University of Minnesota) 35 (3). Pg. 805

⁸ Ettlenger, Op.Cit.

⁹ Wake, Warren K., and Sally L. Levine. "Complementary Virtual Architecture and the Design Studio." *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 56, no. 2 (2002): 18-22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1425705>.

¹⁰ Adams, Paul C. 1997. "Cyberspace and Virtual Places." *Geographical Review* (American Geographical Society) 87 (2): Pg. 159

be successful until it exists in the virtual world as well. This offers the architect a unique opportunity, to build a new dimension and for millions of people. It should serve as an opportunity for architects, old and new, to view the virtual world as a building block, a tool, through which they can create truly communal space which survive in the future. This might even force our understanding of communal spaces to be reevaluated. Regardless, one thing is certain, that the future of a *successful* communal space doesn't lie only in the physical space. For any architect wanting to design a communal space which will stay relevant in the coming decades, the virtual world will be as important as brick and mortar itself.

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