Transposing timelines

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Abstract

The research will speculatively project the influence of the Metaverse on our city centres and their contemporary urban challenges whilst proposing an optimistic scenario in which the digital and physical city complement one another to conserve the built environment for future generations.

We are currently living in an era where the lines between physical and digital are becoming blurred, and whilst recent research has measured the value and financial impact of the metaverse over the coming years (McKinsey & Co, 2022), it is imperative to consider the impact it will have on our environment, education, society & experiences.

We live our lives and interact within the physical built environment, however the need for a more innovative way of working, socialising and learning has only been further highlighted since the Covid19 pandemic; ultimately teaching us that these interactions will exist beyond the physical but in digital and hybrid reality. Since this, all cities now have the unique opportunity to rethink their landscape and infrastructure (Rees, 2021) addressing the needs of residents and communities, new and old. This paper suggests we must reimagine the city and utilise digital technology to our advantage when tackling contemporary urban issues.

Using Manchester in the UK as a case study, this paper will explore the narratives and perceptions surrounding the metaverse to analyse whether it can be more than just an e-commerce and marketing tool. An exploratory questionnaire of the citizens (n=50) and expert interviews (n=5) including a landscape architect, a procedural artist from a global game engine company, academics in advanced digital design, designers, and a metaverse concept architect) along with rigorous trend analysis and scenario building surrounding advanced digital technology were conducted to investigate the meaning and opportunities of metaverse for the city. It argues that whilst the metaverse is in its infancy as a digital entity, there is huge value for the city in tackling the current issues identified by the citizens.

Drawing on its findings, this paper reinforces that when designing in the virtual world, it is crucial we do not forget the physical. The metaverse provides an opportunity for local authorities, designers and urban planners to rethink cities of the future, and while for some it may be too soon to appreciate its impact, it Is not too soon to ask. Is the metaverse ready for us?