

## **Pokémon in the Park - Virtual Unreality**

Walking home from work recently on my usual route through Redfern Park I came across a very unusual scene. Dozens of people appeared to be aimlessly walking around the park in the twilight focused on their smartphone screens. For a second I was confused then I remembered Pokémon Go.

### ***What do we make of this activity? What does it portend for the future of our cities?***

It wasn't that long ago that computer generated imagery was a poor cousin of photography and film. Now it exceeds the capability of these media in terms of detail, action and graphic manipulation as it paints a virtual world within our computers, and by extension, our minds. Inevitably as the virtual world has gotten more real, the real world is now getting more virtual. The blurring of boundaries suggested by films such as 'Mary Poppins' and 'Total Recall' is occurring.

This can now occur because we now routinely carry devices that allow us to access the virtual world wherever we are. No longer tied to a fixed place to access virtual content, such as at work or home, we become the access point itself and our world becomes the virtual platform. The 'point and shoot' aspect of smart phones is seductive as a portal. It is only a matter of time before we can point our smartphones at anything and get an information reading. Is this a good thing?

The Pokémon Go activity suggests that a layering of the virtual onto the real can be a way of bringing people into a common place or a common activity. This can be a good thing. One can imagine that with a small tweak to the gaming program another layer of interactive capability can be built into the system that ties players not only to finding the Pokémon Go icons, but to sharing or trading them with nearby players. This could be happening simultaneously around a city, a country, or the globe with all players aware of each other. Public interaction can now take place in response to virtual activities and larger audiences can participate in events without needing to be in the event space itself.

This suggests, perhaps, that the design of public space will need respond to this expanded, yet somewhat less defined social role. As a 'form follows function' approach to defining public space becomes less relevant the timeless approach to the design of public space that preceded the modern era, where form and symbol take precedence over functional identity, may reassert itself. The narrative of place will then become the defining identity and drive the physical expression.

As a new and inevitable part of the public life of these places, virtual activity can come full circle rewarding those who reach out in real time and place to others in collaboration. As John Naisbitt noted, way back in 1982, in 'Megatrends' – high tech will lead to high touch. Julie Andrews and Arnold Schwarzenegger would probably agree.

*Dick Nugent*  
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