

How Good Is Virtual?



There are now virtual reality movie theaters – this [photo](#) shows a pioneering one (VR Cinema) in Amsterdam. We can now have virtual friends, join virtual communities, visit virtual places, play virtual sports, even have virtual sex. And all of this can happen whenever and wherever we want. Old fashioned human contact is optional.

There are some clear benefits from all of these virtual connections. Grandparents can stay close to their grandchildren. Those with physical handicaps can compensate with such things as virtual voices and virtual limbs. And those restricted in their mobility can still reach out to others, with high bandwidth shared video and sound.

Notwithstanding the increasingly rich virtual connections, we are significantly rooted in actual human communities and actual physical places. We develop our basic sense of self from how others react to us. Communities have been strongly linked to their important places. These physical connections both sustain and constrain us. That's the world in which our species developed. Dense, modern cities and especially dense tall condos have become placeless. Communities have become increasingly abstract.

Actual, physical connections have almost become optional. That may free us from the constraints of actual communities, ... and actual people. It's true that the anonymity of big cities can be appealing. Urban anonymity and virtual realities may also give rise to a desire for a new foundation. One fear is that growing numbers of people will turn to the certainty found in extreme political, cultural or religious positions.

How should we properly balance our human need for roots, for contact, for community, against the benefits and the allure of the urban and virtual world?