

VIRTUAL WORLDS AND COMMUNITIES:

An Examination of Living Within the Metaverse



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How are
metaverse spaces
and experiences
shaping social
interactions and
community?

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BRIDGING PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL REALMS

The metaverse is rapidly reshaping the way we engage with people and communities and intends to do it even more on the next years. In the metaverse, communities are formed based on shared interests, values, and experiences, going beyond geographical boundaries. This fosters a sense of belonging that is different from physical communities, which are often limited by proximity. However,

“when technology engineers’ intimacy, relationships can be reduced to mere connections. And then, easy connection becomes redefined as intimacy. Put otherwise, cyberintimacies slide into cybersolitudes”

(Turkle, S. 2011, p.16)

In the physical world, our body parts such as eyes, hands, and feet, are integral to our perception and interaction with the environment. Our eyes can provide us with visual information, our hands can touch and manipulate physical objects, and our feet allow us to navigate through space. In the metaverse, our eyes are redirected to digital displays, our hands interact with virtual objects through devices, and our feet provide us with stability and allow us to move. “It creates a sense whether you are online or not, if you are closer together or further apart” (Turkle, S. 2011, p.14).

Virtually, spaces are not confined by physical limitations. The spaces can be created, modified, and easily shared, allowing a large flow of versatility and creativity. This freedom can lead us to an environment that is more inclusive - most of the times - where users can express themselves without the restrictions imposed by the physical world. “There is a realistic environment that faithfully reflects realistic constraints, and an unrealistic environment that gives many degrees of freedom without realistic constraints” (Yogesh, D. et al., 2022).

The metaverse challenges our understanding of what is real, blurring the lines between the physical and the virtual, but at the same time it can be used positively to foster and enhance learning, activities, and interactions.

Metaverse is a digital realm where users interact and create virtually. This essay explores the link between tradition and modernity, and the connection of physical and of virtual spaces and how its designs influence social interactions and the formation of communities. In addition, it will also cover the philosophical concept of the relationship between our eyes, hands and feet and the consequences of not seeing the physical world while we interact within the virtual spaces.



Figure 01: Navigating Metaverse Collage (Marx, J. 2023)

In link to my design module, I will be investigating in this thesis the association of virtual and physical experiences and the users' perception of it. By doing this analysis, I will be adhering technology into a historical building and adding innovation on the program of a Leathercraft Hub focused on technology, sustainability, and education - aiming to repurpose a former tannery and creating a bridge between traditional craft and technology. The program will include a virtual reality activity in an exhibition space and virtual reality classes, to assist and enhance the leather goods making process.



Figure 02: Leathercraft Hub Collage (Fagundes, C. 2023)

“IT’S NOT A FAITH IN TECHNOLOGY. IT’S
FAITH IN PEOPLE.”

- Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple

1 REIMAGINING COMMUNITY IN A HYBRID ERA

COMMUNITY CONCEPT

Throughout history, communities have evolved and were shaped by various social, economic, and cultural factors. Their development is linked with changes in society and human interaction. Although the idea of community retains its power as a symbol and an aspiration, both in political and intellectual life, it passed out of sociological analysis. “The term suggests features of human social relationships, such as a sense of familiarity and safety, mutual concern and support, continuous loyalties, even the possibility of being appreciated for one’s full personality and contribution to group life rather than for narrower aspects of rank and achievement” (Brint, S. 2001).

HOW ARE COMMUNITIES FORMED?

The basis for the formation of a community is usually for geographic reasons or by choice, in which it branches to activity-based or belief-based groups. Communities formed by geographical reasons often emerge through a physical proximity, environmental factors, and shared resources. Those groups develop through natural interaction and historical circumstances, creating bonds by tradition, culture, and locality. Contrariwise, communities formed by choice are consciously build based on shared beliefs and interests and can go beyond the geographical boundaries and do not need face-to-face contact. Such groups can be

“virtual communities” or “imagined communities”.

By “virtual communities,” I mean communities in which members interact exclusively through the computer technology, and “imagined communities” groups with similar beliefs that are not in physical contact - this term was firstly used by Anderson Benedict in 1983, “in relation to communities of believers in the nation-state, but it is equally applicable to for example, supporters of sport teams” (Brint, S. 2001). They are focused exclusively on common identities and interests, and often do not generate strong and recognized status hierarchies.

TYPES OF COMMUNITIES

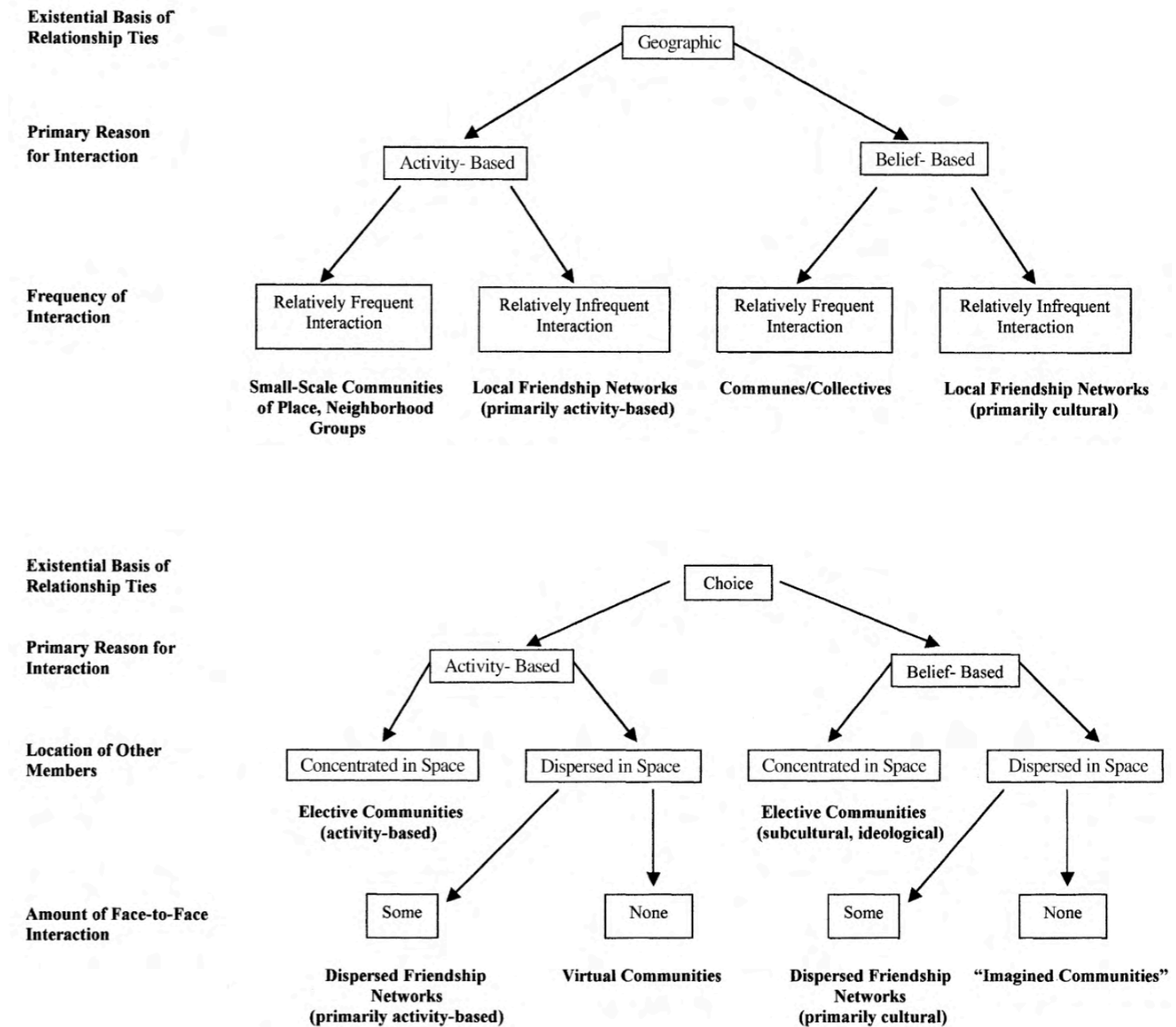


Figure 03: Community Types (Brint, S. 2001)

SHAPING GROUPS WITH SPACES

From my point of view as an interior design student, a conductor of the social interactions and community building, is spatial design. The design of a space holds a power to shape how people engage with each other, affected by components such as layout, lighting, and flow. It can foster communication and connection, encouraging organic interactions and shared experiences. People on non-physical communities such as imagined and virtual communities, nurture friendships on social-networking sites and then wonder if they are among friends.

“They are connected all day but are not sure if they have communicated. They become confused about companionship.”

(Turkle, S. 2011, p.17)

In today's digital landscape, physical social interactions can be found challenging, while irreplaceable. “Sigmund Freud considered the power of communities both to shape and to subvert us” (Turkle, S. 2011, p.14). I personally feel that physical spaces and activity are hard to be replicated digitally since it is not possible to achieve with precision the nuances of body language, gestures, energy, and atmosphere of a room. While digital spaces can offer more accessibility and be more convenient, it lacks the richness and depth of face-to-face interactions.



Figure 04: Community members working in leathercraft (Zamora, P. 2015)



Figure 05: Avatars interacting in Decentraland (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 06: Avatars interacting in Decentraland (Fagundes, C. 2023)

2 CRAFTING DIGITAL FUTURES AND COMMUNITIES

“IN THE FUTURE, INSTEAD OF JUST DOING THIS OVER A PHONE CALL, YOU’LL BE ABLE TO SIT AS A HOLOGRAM ON MY COUCH, OR I’LL BE ABLE TO SIT AS A HOLOGRAM ON YOUR COUCH, AND IT’LL ACTUALLY FEEL LIKE WE’RE IN THE SAME PLACE, EVEN IF WE’RE IN DIFFERENT STATES OR HUNDREDS MILES APART.”

- Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder and CEO of Meta



Figure 07: Quest 3 and Apple Vision Pro based on image courtesy by Meta and Apple (Lang, B. 2023)

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

As we navigate through the evolving landscape of technology throughout the years, it becomes evident the infusion of advancements in various fields, including the more traditional practices. Such as in craftsmanship, modern techniques came to revolutionize its essence, affecting both artisans and engaged communities.

Traditional craft and technology may seem opposites, however, its integration can be a bridge between the past and the present.

This fusion can be manifested as technological advancements can enhance traditional craftsmanship, rather than replace it, also placing a crucial role in fostering a sense of community and shaping individual experiences. “The possibilities are endless when it comes to using technology to enhance handmade crafts. Crafters have access to powerful tools that make creating beautiful pieces faster and easier while still maintaining the personal touch of a handmade product” (Dudu, 2023).

Nowadays, artisans have access to advanced machinery, tools and materials that complement traditional skills, enhancing efficiency and precision without compromising the authenticity of the craft. For example, a leather-worker can use computer-aided design (CAD) to plan patterns and cuts for then to use a laser cutting machine, speeding the process, and making it more accurate. The blend of modern technology and traditional craftsmanship allows new creative possibilities, however, “the understanding of traditional craft skills is essential to take advantage of these technologies” (Song, M.J. 2021).

Moreover, this fusion can also play an important role in connecting artisans and communities. Virtual spaces – such as the metaverse – become hubs for collaborations and discussions, going over geographical boundaries and creating a global network that transcend traditional limits.

THE LEATHERCRAFT HUB

A community space focused on technology, sustainability, and education

In essence, the blend of traditional craft and technology enriches both the craft itself and the communities that practice it. It creates a narrative where the past informs the present, thriving in the modern era and connecting people globally, providing individuals a platform to express their creativity while preserving the cultural heritage. Thinking of that, on my design module (IND 609), I have designed a Leathercraft Hub, a project that aims to bring the essence from a former tannery to a community space focused on technology, sustainability, and education.

At its core, the Leathercraft Hub aims to establish a dynamic and educational space that fosters a sustainable approach to leathercraft and repurpose a former tannery located in Bermondsey, in Southeast London, harmonizing the rich history of leathercraft with modern innovation.

The inclusion of crafting workshops at various skill levels and a virtual reality class, linking analogue and digital techniques, will emphasize the commitment to provide a comprehensive and accessible learning experience for the members of the community who wish to develop their craft skills. By incorporating cutting-edge technology, such as CAD and advanced machines, the space will bridge traditional craftsmanship with modern techniques, preparing individuals for the evolving landscape of the leather industry and their own professional vocation. Additionally, users of the technology class will have the chance to learn the craft through virtual reality, to enhance their experience and avoid material waste. They will also have the opportunity to navigate through leathercraft’s history and make connections with other makers around the world.



Figure 09: 1:50 physical model of Leathercraft Hub (Fagundes, C. 2023)

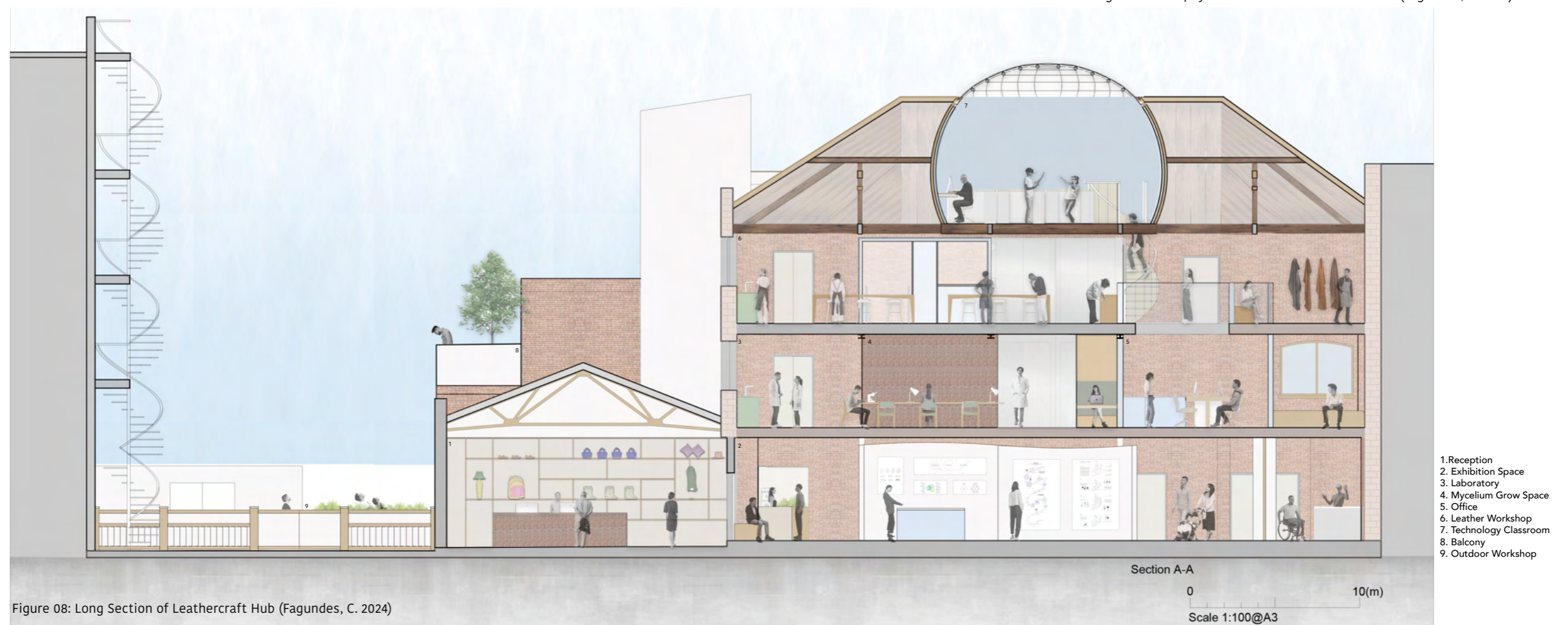


Figure 08: Long Section of Leathercraft Hub (Fagundes, C. 2024)



Figure 10: Ground Floor Plan of Leathercraft Hub (Fagundes, C. 2024)



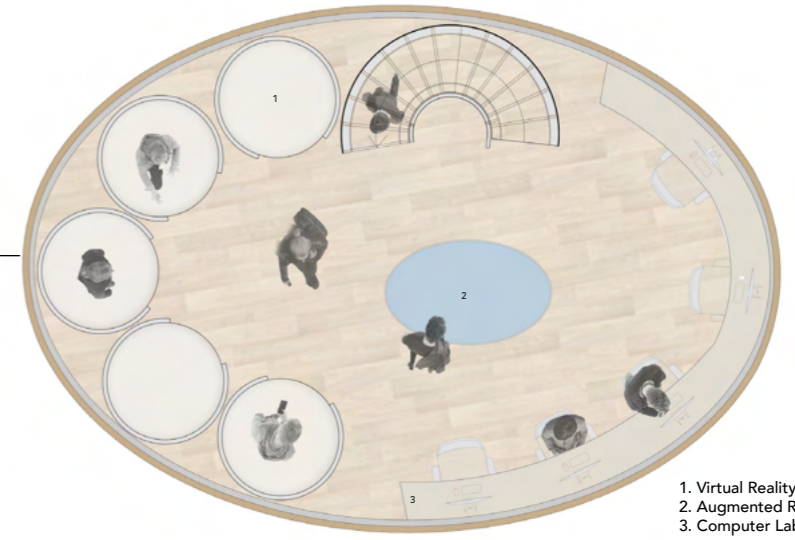
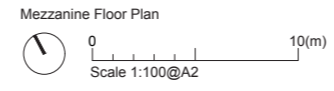
One of the project's commitments to sustainability, is the mycelium leather production lab. Mycelium, a fungus-based material, offers an eco-friendly alternative to traditional leather production. This lab not only contributes to reducing environmental impact but also serves as an educational focal point, since the material produced will be used in the workshops and it will inspire visitors to explore innovative and sustainable solutions.

Beyond education, the leathercraft hub becomes a cultural centerpiece, revitalizing the site's history with a touch of innovation. A retail store and exhibition space will showcase crafted pieces, history, and advancements, linking the hub to broader communities. The space will feature augmented reality tables and virtual reality pods, where the visitors will explore the exhibitions in more depth and detail. The café and library, will enhance the hub's appeal, creating an inviting space for collaboration and creativity.

The leathercraft hub aims to create a vibrant community space for passionate individuals to **learn, create, collaborate, and thrive** in the art of leather crafting. Through a blend of physical infrastructure, educational programs, virtual resources, and community engagement, this project seeks to elevate the craft and provide a platform for artisans to flourish.



Figure 11: Mezzanine Floor Plan of Leathercraft Hub (Fagundes, C. 2024)



1. Virtual Reality Pod
2. Augmented Reality Table
3. Computer Lab

3 THE BLENDING OF PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL

“MAGIC UNLOCKS HUMAN CAPABILITIES BEYOND WHAT WE IMAGINE IS POSSIBLE.

WELCOME TO THE METAVERSE, WHERE HUMAN IDENTITY, INTERACTIONS AND ASPIRATIONS WILL EVOLVE BEYOND THE LIMITATIONS OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD”

- Dany Farha, managing partner, BECO Capital

WHAT IS METAVERSE?

In recent years, a paradigm change has occurred in the field of social interactions and community dynamics due to the proliferation of virtual worlds. Although this is a relatively recent topic to be explored and popularized, the term ‘metaverse’ was first used in 1992 in a novel titled *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson. The novel depicts the metaverse as a persistent virtual world that is accessible to individuals via their digital avatars with special virtual reality (VR) goggles. In this world, people could meet, claim territory, build things, make money and more.

The impact of Stephenson’s idea on the real, non-fictional world, has been profound. Anyone working to create interactive 3D environments at the time, was inspired by his thoughts and the novel. Today, tech companies such as the startup Magic Leap and Jeff Bezos’s Blue Origin, have Stephenson’s as their “chief futurist” and work to develop even more on innovations on the metaverse (Jha, A. 2020).

“ The term metaverse is also described as a new version of the internet that combines blockchain technology, virtual reality headsets, and avatars to provide a new way to integrate the real and virtual worlds.”

(Joshua, J. 2017, p.17)

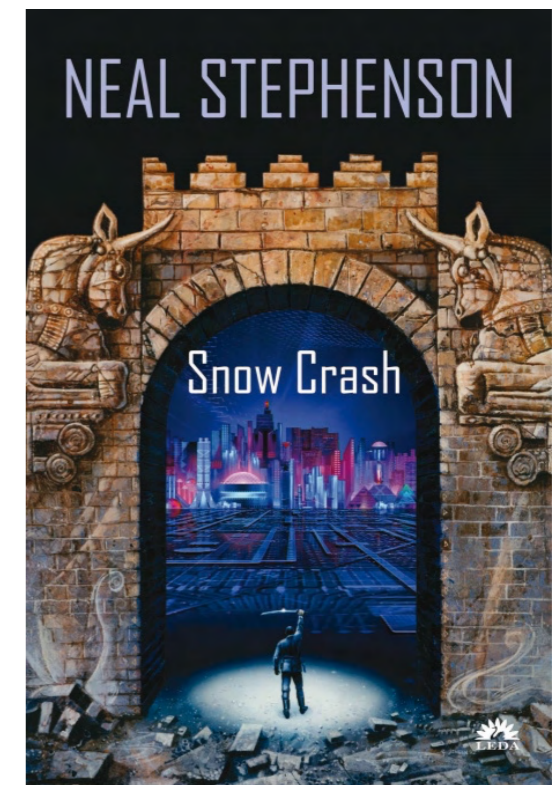


Figure 12: Snow Crash Book Cover (Wheldon, M. 2016)

In other words, the metaverse is a virtual environment in which people interact, participate in activities, and even form communities that sometimes transcend to physical reality. “These communities become a safe haven where individuals can express themselves freely and find support in a world that transcends physical boundaries” (World at Meta, 2023). Much like in the real-world, they can be formed around interests, goals, or activities. Community plays a significant role in shaping the culture and dynamics of metaverse, since it facilitates interactions, foster connections and enriches overall user experience.

Besides of human socializing purposes, the virtual reality words can also be used for entertainment, education, and commerce - as it is the case of brands in diverse fields that adhered this new platform to innovate and create different costumer experience. As an example of this, is Assouline.

ASSOULINE’S METaverse DREAM

The luxury brand focused on culture and known for the designs of coffee table books, has created in 2023 a digital store in metaverse, where its clients can access the store digitally instead of going to the physical one. As part of their Travel Collection, Assouline published a book called “Metaverse Dream” by Paul Dawalibi and Gregory Landegger. The book covers a curation of visuals of metaverse projects from fashion to architecture and conceptual design. In addition to the physical book, they have launched a pop-up boutique in Decentraland, one of metaverse’s universe. As a unique feature of the book, readers can scan a QR code located on the colorful cover and be directed to the virtual store.

“The experience will be reflective of an in-person Assouline store with key elements including the brands signature red walls, grandiose bookstands, and specialty objects. Visitors will be able to discover Assouline’s titles and will be forwarded to the Assouline website for purchase if interested.”

(Dawalibi, P. 2023)

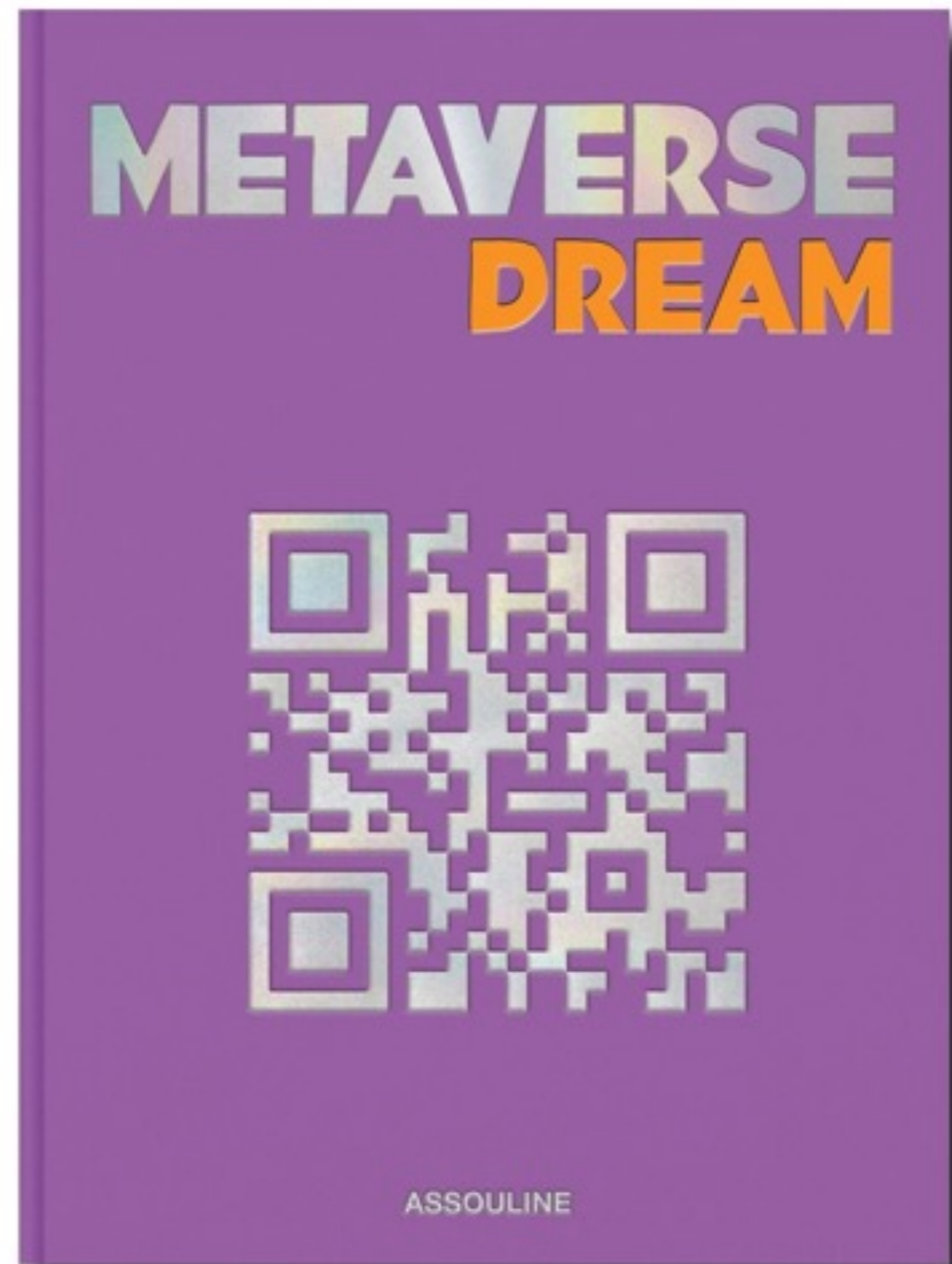


Figure 13: Metaverse Dream Book Cover (Assouline, 2023)

By way of explanation, Assouline has designed a “digital twin” for its physical store, combining literal and abstract metaverse representations to produce a distinctive visual depiction of this new space. In simple words,

“a digital twin is a virtual model of a physical object that is used in practical purposes as simulation, integration, testing, monitoring, and maintenance.”

(Borden, K. 2023)

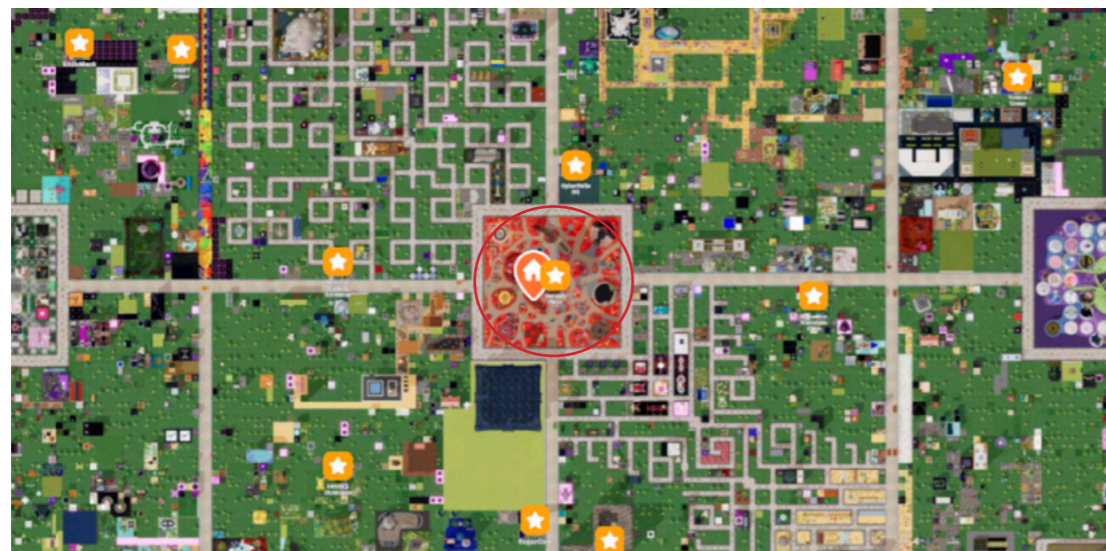


Figure 14: Location of Assouline in Decentraland (Fagundes, C. 2023)

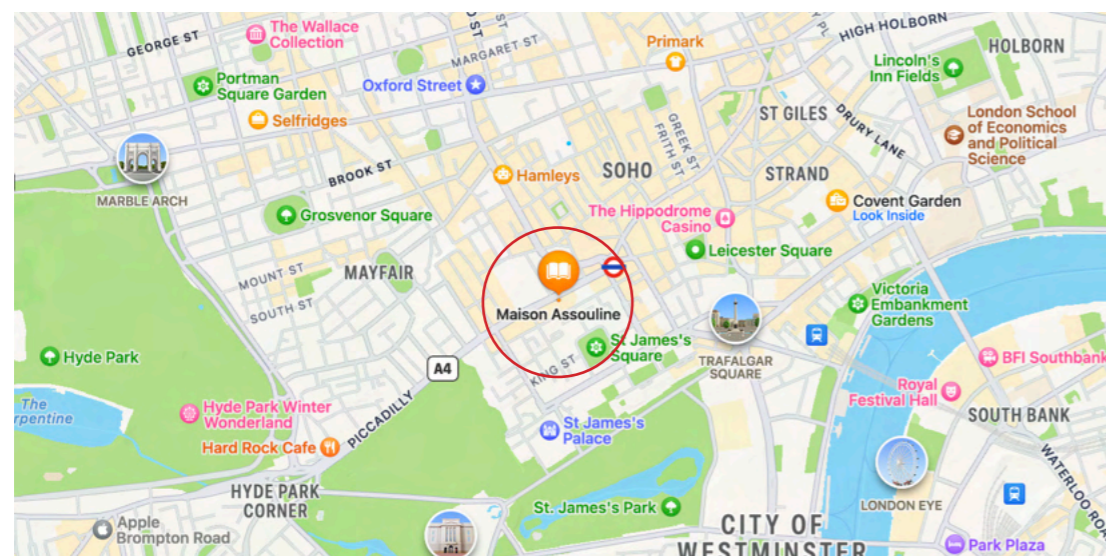


Figure 15: Location of Assouline in London (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 16: Maison Assouline in Decentraland (Assouline, 2023)

PHYSICAL VS. DIGITAL SPACES

When accessing Assouline’s virtual store, you are required to use a screen and create a personalized avatar. With this avatar you are able to navigate through the space and even communicate with other people live in the virtual world – in this case, Decentraland. With this type of communication in simulated reality, user avatars can collaborate and share experiences, creating new value through it.

“Unlike in the real world, this collaboration makes it possible to transcend time and space. It also gives users a common purpose and allows the metaverse to continue as a society.”

(Zachery, A. et al. 2016)

In terms of interactivity, if physical public spaces allow unstructured social interaction, virtual public spaces are the opposite. In some digital platforms, social interactions can be more structured because of restrictions such as text, images, and videos. In addition, social networks formed in physical and virtual public spaces also have the possibility of huge-scale differences. “When physical public spaces can only reach the surrounding communities, virtual public spaces know no territorial boundaries in the affairs of their users” (Anabata, 2022).

Having had the chance to visit the Assouline store both in person and virtually, I have contrasted and evaluated the two experiences. Entering the London store physically was an immersive experience for the senses, in a way where I could touch and hold the books, sit and read, smelling the scented candles from the brand and interacting with other people who were doing the same. In the virtual space, I fairly felt freer to explore the space, but did miss the tactility given by the physical limitations. The interactions were lively and varied, but there was a lack of closeness to the actual world. However, by keeping the social aspects in mind, the environment created in the metaverse can also imitate the real world. Therefore,

“even though it remains virtual, public spaces in the Metaverse are seen as an option equivalent to physical public spaces in the real world.”

(Anabata, 2022)



Figure 17: Avatar in Decentraland (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 19: Maison Assouline in London (Fagundes, C. 2023)

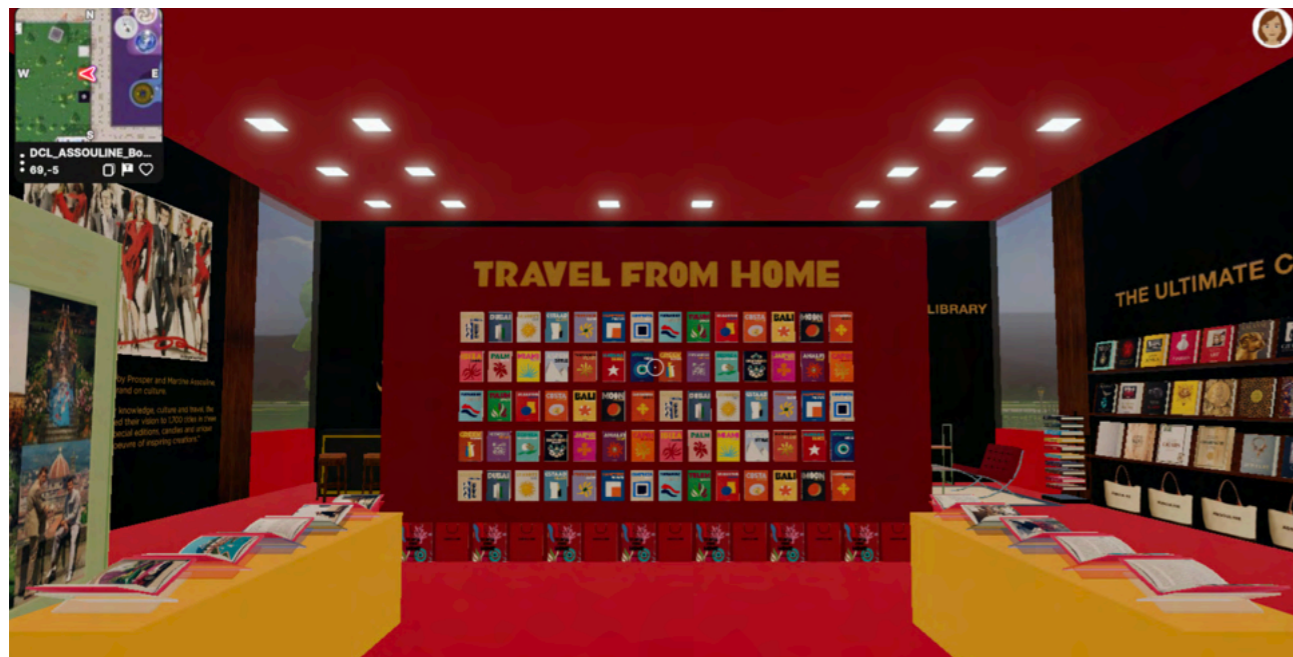


Figure 18: Assouline store in Decentraland (Fagundes, C. 2023)

ASSOULINE'S NO-COMPUTER POLICY

No digital in physical

When visiting Assouline's physical store, I was surprised by a no-computer policy in the space. There were no signs indicating this policy, but as soon as I put my laptop out, a member of the staff came to politely ask me to put it away. This made me feel a bit uncomfortable and conflicted about the brand's philosophy. However, it inspired me to take a more in-depth consideration of how human interaction with technology is changing. While in the store, I reflected about the company's contradiction of not allowing computers in the physical space and at the same time encouraging people to access the metaverse.

Assouline's no-computer policy in their physical store mirrors their ethos on valuing their physical printed products. By discouraging screens on the space, they motivate guests to immerse themselves with the sensory tactile experiences of the books, fostering an environment where one engages with the literature and promotes a thoughtful exploration. Although there was a clear demand for advancement, the tradition and past were not forgotten, rather it was integrated in the process of evolution. In a way, innovation was welcomed, yet the heritage was preserved.

4 BEYOND LIMITS: IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES AND ACCESSIBILITY

“SIMPLY PUT, WE BELIEVE AUGMENTED REALITY IS GOING TO CHANGE THE WAY WE USE TECHNOLOGY FOREVER. WE’RE ALREADY SEEING THINGS THAT WILL TRANSFORM THE WAY YOU WORK, PLAY, CONNECT AND LEARN”

- Tim Cook, CEO, Apple

AUGMENTED REALITY EXPERIENCES

Differently from metaverse spaces, are metaverse experiences. Experiences usually happen within the space, however, the experiences denote the activities and engagements the users take. The relationship between both is similar to the relationship between physical words and the activities we engage within that world. When using such tools as virtual reality (VR) headsets to enter a metaverse world, you usually have the feeling of being totally immersed in that certain place.

“Those new devices provide space for the emergence of a new state of the self, itself, split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology.”

(Turkle, S. 2011, p.16)

Although your body is in a physical space, your eyes are redirected to a totally different one that makes you feel part of it, even though you can't physically feel it. When integrating eyes, hands and feet, a seamless connection is created between your perception, interaction, and movement within the metaverse. When those body parts are working harmoniously, a deeper immersion is created as if they are truly present in the digital environment. For instance, you might look at an object with your eyes, reach out to grab it with your hands and then step closer or move around with your feet, creating a cohesive and immersive experience mirroring real-life interactions.



Figure 21: Monet Immersive Experience Chicago (MonetExpo, 2022)

IMMERSIVENESS

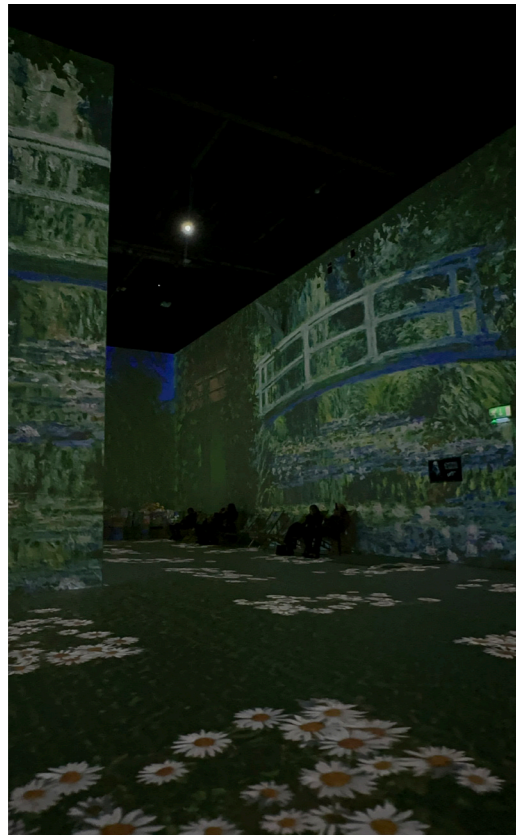


Figure 22: Monet Immersive Experience London (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 23: Monet Immersive Experience London (Fagundes, C. 2023)

Lately, it was possible to notice that immersive experiences have been expanding in different fields, but particularly in the art world. As an example of it, are the popular projected art exhibitions that showcase digital artwork in larger scale so visitors can have the feeling of being inside it, even though you can't touch or feel anything physically. "Those are artistic wonderland of projected images and soundscapes spread throughout event spaces, that are usually pricey and designed for social media sharing" (Mondloch, K. 2022).

Beyond the projections, some of those exhibitions offer VR experiences where you navigate 360-degree within a painting, in a journey throughout the landscapes, with the goal to make the visitors feel immersed to it based on what we see and hear. Experiences like that attract a large number of people every month due to its excessive promotion to view what can be called an artistic encounter that is supposedly categorically distinct from "traditional" art viewing. However, none of these multimedia art experiences display original works. Rather, "the event sponsors promise intense art-inspired multimedia episodes brimming with emotional resonance and sensory reverberation" (Mondloch, K. 2022).

MONET IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

I have attended the Monet Immersive Experience in London, where I could explore some of the most compelling paintings by Claude Monet in a large space featuring light and sound to the projections. Digital images inspired by the artist's life and works were projected onto the exhibition spaces' walls, ceilings, and floors, in a large warehouse-like space. In addition to the projection space, VR headsets were also available for visitors to experience the art in another level of immersiveness.



Figure 24: VR Meta Quest 2 (CNN, 2024)



Figure 25: Monet VR Experience (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 26: Monet VR Experience (Fagundes, C. 2023)

Personally, the virtual explorations of the artwork enhanced my perception of it as I could navigate through the paintings, differently from the projections where I did not feel fully immersed. While the exhibition was visually captivating, there was a sense of artificiality and lack of authenticity. I observed that most of the visitors were using their phones to capture the moment, as well as another way to become part of the exhibition through this documentation but diverting their attention from the intended experience. But on the other hand, the VR headsets provided an interesting way to explore Monet's masterpieces in greater detail.

There was a feeling of intimate exploration, allowing the visitors to immerse in a journey through the renowned brushstrokes and nuances, otherwise unnoticeable in conventional settings. The technology enhanced the link between visitor and exhibition, intensifying emotional connection and understanding of the artistry. In a way,

“there is a desire to engage in an immersive, embodied artistic encounter - a desire to be physically “in” the work, creating one’s customized experience, as opposed to merely observing from afar.”

(Mondloch, K. 2022)

Comparatively, people are choosing to pay much more money to attend artist inspired multimedia spectacle, than to visit museums or galleries with a number of original and more valued paintings, for much less - especially in the major cities where those events usually take place. The authenticity is being left aside to the new and most enthusiastic way of exhibiting. The exhibition producers, for their part, see it differently. “While they don’t go so far as to refute the fundamental commercial nature of their enterprises, they do contend that their experiences offer educational and even social value” (Mondloch, K. 2022). “The digitalization of our attention of course opens unprecedented perspectives—for the of modes of interaction that have already been experimented with in earlier contexts” (Citton, Y. 2014).

Traditional museums provide a genuine experience with art, creating a reflective and enriching environment that is useful for understanding the artist’s purpose, providing a platform that goes beyond observation and connecting artistic expression across time and cultures. In spite of that, “the interesting thing about the immersive world in general is that we are able to play with smell, taste, sight and all these other things that are sort of built in natural emotional triggers” (Baltin, S. 2021). Those emotional triggers are what motivate most of the visitors to attend the exhibitions, since the more prominent the emotions, the higher the engagement; the higher the engagement, the higher the interaction on social media; the higher the interaction on social media; the higher the marketing value.

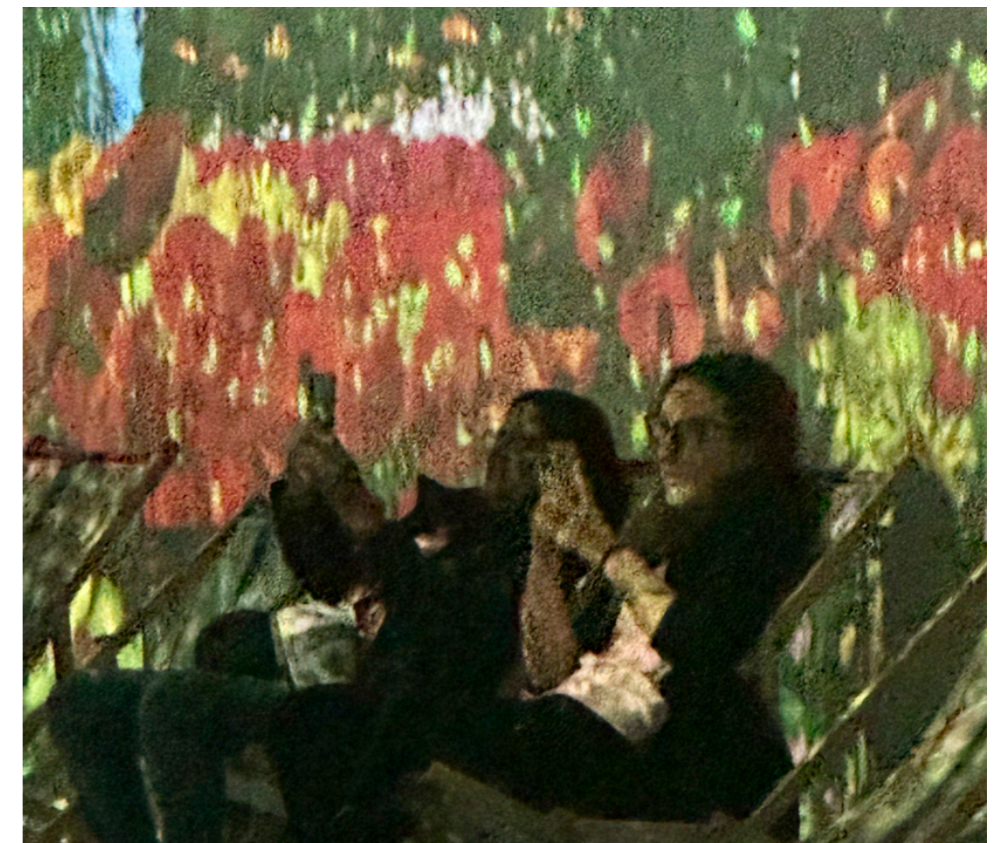


Figure 27: Public at Monet Immersive Experience London (Fagundes, C. 2023)

Nowadays, there are numerous companies investing on immersive experiences. The producers bypass the issue of authenticity, trumpeting instead their efforts to promote accessibility and anti-elitism, to preserve the aging and “over-visited” original artworks, to offer a more comprehensive representation of the artists vast output than any single museum could accomplish, and to provide “socially transformational educational experiences” (Mondloch, K. 2022).

ACCESSIBILITY

When it comes to accessibility, immersive art experiences have a dual nature. While it offers an inclusive and captivating environment, engaging the senses, and breaking traditional barriers between visitors and art, it can also be limited by various factors. One of the main factors is definitely the cost, both for creating and for experiencing. According to Bloomberg CityLab, it is estimated that one pop-up venue for art exhibitions - such as Monet’s - costs around 1 million dollars (Capps, K. 2021). The investors represent a minor class of the society and target the same class to attend the events, since individual tickets are sold at high price as well.



Figure 28: Autistic Children in Immersive Exhibition (Immersive Reality, 2023)



Figure 29: Ray-Ban Stories Advertisement (Cohen, D. 2021)



Figure 30: Ray-Ban Stories Advertisement (Cohen, D. 2021)

Physical constraints are also an issue and it may impede individuals from fully participating in the exhibitions. However, the experiences often transcend from language, making it universally accessible. It also stimulates interactions and emotions to serve to diverse audiences, fostering a deeper connection to art beyond only observation. Nevertheless, even more changes and innovations are being made to enhance the accessibility in immersive art. Such as virtual reality (VR), opportunities for remote participation are being implemented, making art reachable to a wider audience. Additionally, the companies responsible for the experiences are promoting inclusive design principles to the space, striving to create installations that accommodate various needs, in a way where more people can attend and engage with the experience. Issues with physical constraints and economic barriers may

make immersive art challenge to achieve full accessibility,

yet continued innovation to inclusive design are essential to increase the access to the experiences for all - as for instance devices that translate visuals for those who have difficulty in seeing or understanding, such as the Ray-Ban Stories.

“I DON’T SEE SOMEONE STRAPPING A SCREEN TO THEIR FACE ALL DAY AND NOT WANTING TO EVER LEAVE”

- Elon Musk, funder of Tesla and Space X

5 EVERYDAY NORMAL - HOW ARE DIGITAL PRODUCTS AFFECTING OUR SPACES AND COMMUNITIES

AUGMENTED REALITY SMART GLASSES

Immersiveness can go beyond retail or art explorations, it can be part of our everyday life, assisting and enhancing daily activities. Given that, the use of augmented reality smart glasses (ARSGs) has increased dramatically in recent years as they are utilized in many fields. “These glasses appeared on the market in 2013 with the release of Google Glass” (Klein, D. et al., 2020), hence early definitions are associated with this device. “Google glasses were defined as a wearable device that is worn like eyeglasses, with the difference that its technical interface turns it into a computer interface” (Aungst, T. and Lewis, T. 2015). More recently, the definition of smart glasses have evolved since different companies have released their smart glass product, each with its particularities and advancements. These glasses are revolutionizing the way we perceive space and interact with the digital world, giving a stylish look, and integrating information to real-world environments.

“ARSGs focus on the fact that they offer the ability to interact with the device, a range of applications, and the virtual or augmented reality experience.”

(Romare, C. and Skar, L. 2020)



Figure 31: Google Glasses (BBC, 2017)

RAY-BAN STORIES

As part of Meta's (formerly Facebook) efforts to develop new technologies with augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), in late September 2023, they unveiled smart glasses in collaboration with eye-wear brand Ray-Ban. "These smart glasses come with enhanced audio and cameras, and a light design. The glasses are equipped with an ultra-wide 12 megapixel camera and immersive audio recording capabilities, allowing users to capture moments with a high level of detail and depth" (Waisberg, E. et al. 2023). Differently from VR glasses, Ray-Ban Stories – as they call it – is discreet and comes in three classic models of the brand, even including prescribed lens in various degrees. Additionally, it does not have an actual display, allowing users to see and interact normally with the real world. The glasses combines cutting-edge technology with a comfortable design.

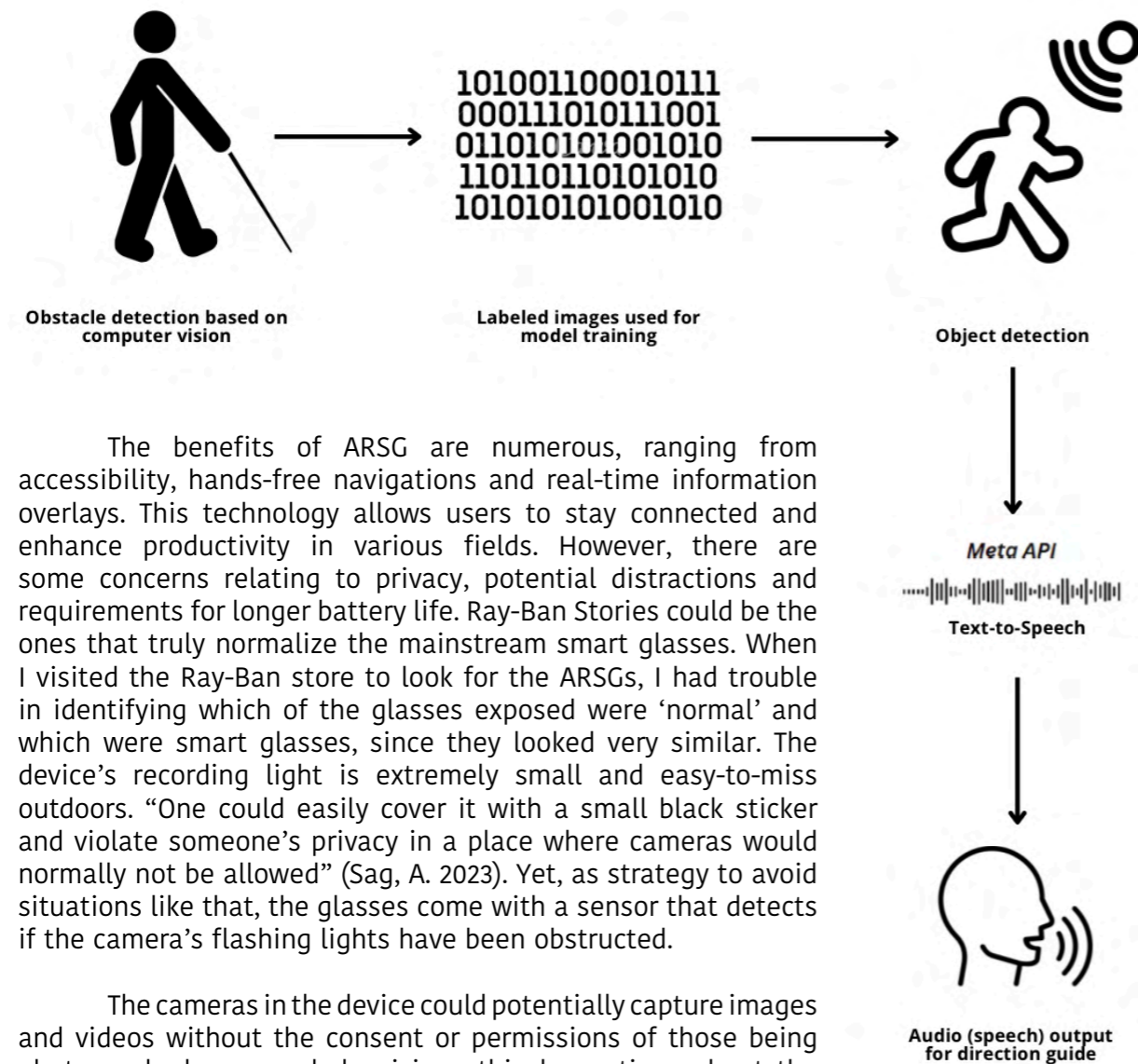
It is not only a fashionable accessory, but a device that integrates artificial intelligence and allow users to interact with digital content while elevating everyday experiences.



Figure 32: Ray-Ban Stories (Mcdowell, M. 2021)

Besides the look and its main functions, "the Ray-Ban Meta smart glasses also represent a promising development in assistive technology for individuals with visual impairments and have the potential to significantly enhance their quality of life with potential features like magnification, contrast enhancement, and color correction, enhancing their ability to see and navigate their surroundings more effectively" (Waisberg, E. et al. 2023). In that manner, technology can allow visual informations to be transformed into speech for those with visual impairments, providing a real-time image processing, while built in AI can recognize objects and convert it. Perhaps, future incorporation of GPS navigations with audio can also facilitate self-navigating and alert possible danger. "Previous research in the United Kingdom showed that nearly 40% of blind and partially sighted individuals are not currently able to complete all of the journey that they need or wish to make" (Slade, J. and Edwards, R. 2015).

SAFETY AND PRIVACY



The benefits of ARSG are numerous, ranging from accessibility, hands-free navigations and real-time information overlays. This technology allows users to stay connected and enhance productivity in various fields. However, there are some concerns relating to privacy, potential distractions and requirements for longer battery life. Ray-Ban Stories could be the ones that truly normalize the mainstream smart glasses. When I visited the Ray-Ban store to look for the ARSGs, I had trouble in identifying which of the glasses exposed were ‘normal’ and which were smart glasses, since they looked very similar. The device’s recording light is extremely small and easy-to-miss outdoors. “One could easily cover it with a small black sticker and violate someone’s privacy in a place where cameras would normally not be allowed” (Sag, A. 2023). Yet, as strategy to avoid situations like that, the glasses come with a sensor that detects if the camera’s flashing lights have been obstructed.

The cameras in the device could potentially capture images and videos without the consent or permissions of those being photographed or recorded, raising ethical questions about the responsible use of this new technology and individual’s privacy rights. On the other hand, it could capture moments regarding safety, such as in women abuses or harassments cases, assisting investigations.

Figure 33: Diagram of how ARSG can provide direction guidance (Fagundes, C. 2021)

CONNECTION TO DISCONNECTION

Beyond ethical implications related to privacy and safety, the concerns extend to potential disruption of social interactions. Even though Meta’s smart glasses allow the users view of the surroundings, the continuous connectivity may lead to a disconnection to the present moment and people physically around. Face-to-face interactions can be impacted and users could prioritize virtual communication, over real-world engagement.

“The fact that smart glasses are a new technology, creates a lot of uncertainty about whether they will be adopted by users.”

(Rejali, S. et al. 2023)

Personally, I feel that the smart glasses are a great device for everyday use, as long as it does not infringe personal rights and doesn’t affect human physical interaction. As for interior design, it could be a potential tool for exploring the creative process, save references and visualize design concepts. However, as the ethical considerations arise, I believe that could be a kind of policy regarding the professional use of ARSG. Smart glasses have the capacity to change the way I view and document a space, offering new dimensions to the design journey while posing moral and social challenges in a profession based on individual and communal aesthetics.



Figure 34: Ray-Ban Stories Advertisement (Cohen, D. 2021)



Figure 35: Ray-Ban London Flagship Store (Fagundes, C. 2024)

In physical spaces that follow a no-technology policy, introducing devices like Ray-Ban Stories can raise questions about the harmony between innovation and the intention of disconnection. As previously mentioned, Assouline does not permit the use of computers in its store in London, reflecting their commitment to foster their shopping experience and encouraging customers to engage with the physical books collection. The brand is dedicated to preserve tradition and tactile sense, even though they offer an online store through the metaverse.

The juxtaposition of virtual and physical with Ray-Ban Stories inside Assouline, prompts examination regarding whether smart glasses enhance or disrupt the atmosphere of the bookshop. ARSGs can offer technological features blurring the lines between the physical and digital realms, yet pose a challenge to the no-computer policy, diverting the attention of the customers. In a situation like that, it becomes important for Assouline to enhance the balance of their technological aspect on the metaverse and their in-store rules. As smart glasses become more common, physical spaces have the need to adapt to evolve the consumer expectations, while also preserving their ethos and ambiance that defines their brand.

“THE METAVERSE IS NOT JUST A DIGITAL SPACE. IT’S WHERE OUR DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL REALITIES CONVERGE, TRANSFORMING HOW WE CONNECT, CREATE AND COMMUNITY”

- Matthew Ball, *writer*

6 CLOSING THE GAP - COMMUNITIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

NAVIGATING HYBRID REALITIES

As communities evolve, physical spaces continue to hold an advantage in fostering deeper interpersonal connections, yet the metaverse presents an evolving landscape with potential for enhanced relationships through hybrid experiences and spaces.

Where the synthesis of physical and digital elements come together, people's interaction and establishment of communities might be reshaped in the digital era. As we navigate this advanced landscape, it is evident that the metaverse is not just a technological tool, but also a cultural and social aspect that can redefine the way we connect and engage with one another.

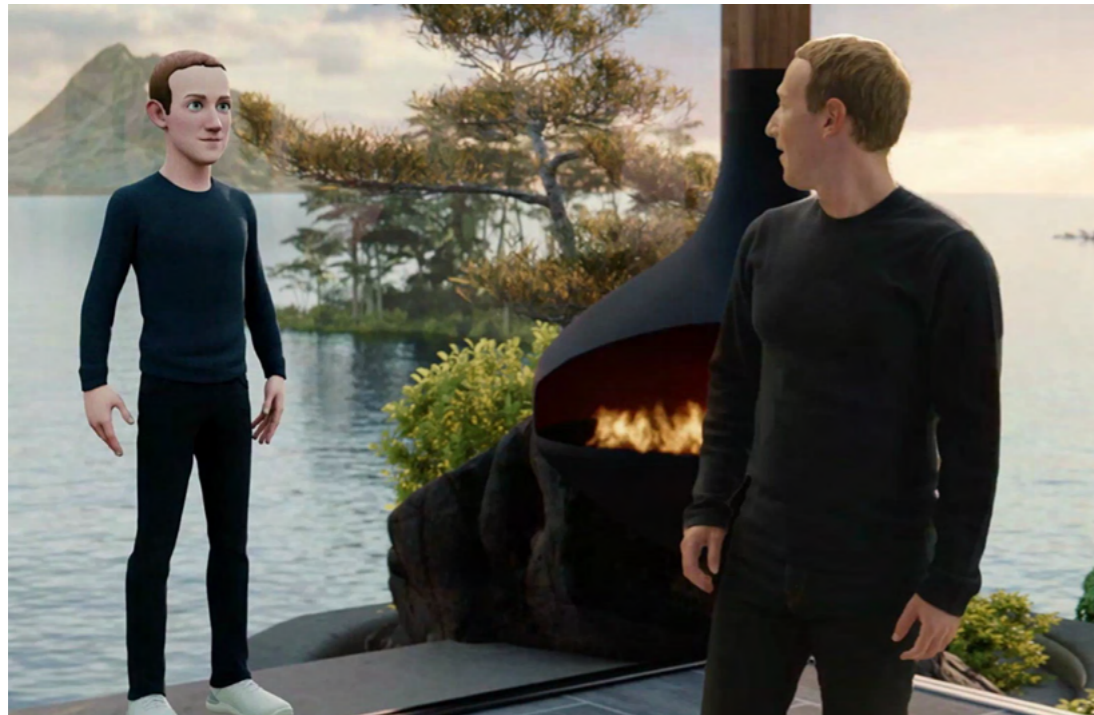


Figure 36: Meta's Metaverse Advertisement (The Hard Copy, 2022)

WEAVING HERITAGE AND INNOVATION

Traditionally, craft and technology were distinct realms, but the evolving scenario has seamlessly integrated these elements. Techniques used in the past have evolved but its essence was kept, creating a harmonious convergence of heritage and innovation. As we look ahead on the proposed design project, the Leathercraft Hub not only portrays the landscape of the craft but contributes to shaping its future by weaving together past, present and future.

Contrasting the physical spaces of Assouline store with its boundless digital space in Decentraland, lights the divergence and convergence of physical and digital realms. It underscores a division in design philosophies, in which each offers unique strengths and weakness, characterized by limitations. The integration of the digital and physical fosters a new form of community engagement where users can navigate through spaces virtually, interact with people and products and connect with like-minded individuals transcending geographical constraints.



Figure 37: Meta's Advertisement (THC, 2022)

The metaverse has significantly influenced social interactions and community dynamics, which is evident in the juxtaposition of virtual and physical spaces, where a bridge is created between the tangible and the digital.

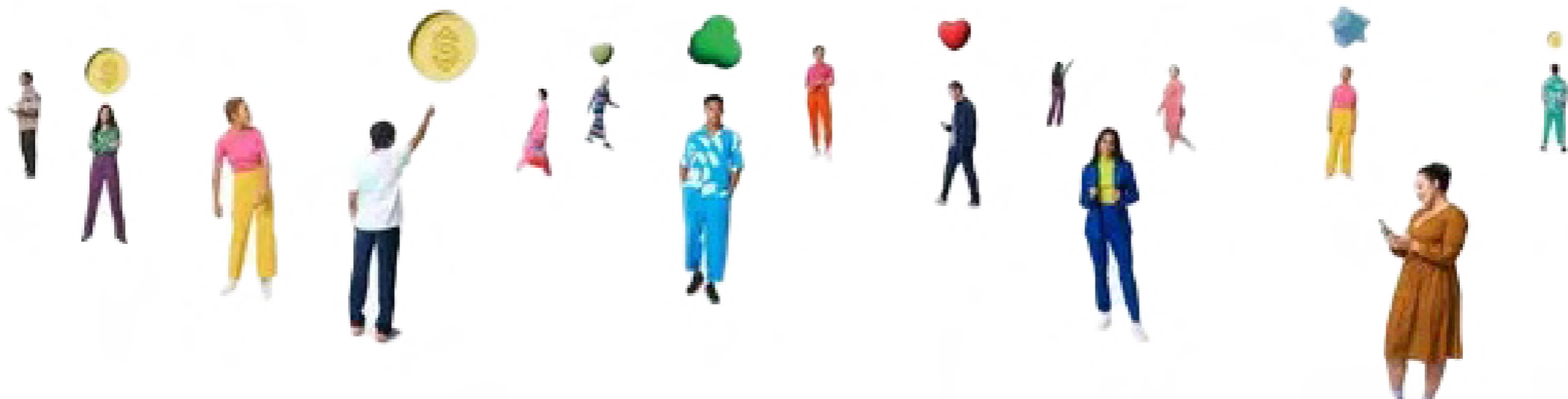


Figure 38: Community in Metaverse (Fernandez, A. 2022)

FROM PIXELS TO PERCEPTION

Moreover, virtual reality art exhibitions exemplified by the Monet Immersive Experience, represent the extension of technological advancements into the realm of art. The augmented reality exhibitions are a gateway to artistic richness, even though it lacks authenticity. It sometimes raises concerns regarding accessibility due to associated costs and constraints, prompting a critical dialogue on affordability and inclusivity. However, the technology present in the exhibitions, like virtual reality, enables users to step into the artist's world by **transcending physical limitations** this transforms the way individuals interact and appreciate art, fostering a sense of community among art admirers worldwide.

Augmented reality smart glasses came to revolutionize everyday life and activities. They represent a new dimension to technology's impact on social interaction. Such devices like Ray-Ban Stories, also blend the physical and digital worlds, offering a greater perspective of their surroundings and assisting its users in need. Besides the positive use of the device, it also generates concerns regarding the policy of privacy and safety, since it is an accessory that can be used without other's perception or awareness. The ARSG may have the **potential to create a new layer of connection between individuals and reshape how communities communicate and share experiences.**

While physical spaces usually foster deeper connections, the metaverse, still on its early stages, offer possibilities for virtual relationships. The project of the Leathercraft Hub is an example of the harmonious convergence of innovation and heritage, weaving past, present and future. This convergence is also highlighted in Assouline's physical store with its digital twin in Decentraland, each with its unique strengths and weakness in influencing community engagements. The metaverse's impact in social integrations molds a bridge between tangible and digital realms as seen in the juxtaposition of virtual and physical spaces. Virtual reality art exhibitions and augmented reality smart glasses add up to technology's influence on art appreciation and social interaction, although they bring concerns about accessibility, privacy and safety. As we navigate in this advanced landscape, the metaverse plays a role not only as a technological tool, but as a social and cultural force in deeper reshaping our connections and interactions.

The evolving landscape of the design in the metaverse explores the synthesis of digital and physical elements that reshape community dynamics.



Figure 39: Community (Wolfenstein, K. 2023)

A photograph of three children, two boys and one girl, focused on a Raspberry Pi project. They are gathered around a table, looking at a small robot-like device constructed from a Raspberry Pi board, a motor, and various sensors. The boy on the right is wearing a blue cap and a blue shirt, and is pointing at the device. The boy in the middle is wearing a white shirt and is also looking intently at the device. The girl on the left is wearing a yellow shirt and is looking towards the device. The background is slightly blurred, showing an outdoor setting with greenery. The entire image has a light blue overlay.

“IN THE DIGITAL AGE, ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY
DETERMINES NOT JUST OPPORTUNITIES, BUT DESTINIES”

- Sheryl Sandberg, former COO of Meta

SOCIAL EQUALITY IN DIGITAL LIFE

HOW DO WE CREATE INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE METAVERSE?

Technology has become essential to the daily life of the majority of the population, however, a great number of people do not have access to internet or to required devices. After the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020/2021, the use of digital tools became even more indispensable, with that, inequality is deepening as digital inclusion increases in importance.

Digital inclusion refers to the guarantee that all individuals and communities, regardless of socio-economic status, have access and can use digital technologies. According to a UK Government Report with UNICEF, digital inclusion requires five key components to be in place: a device, a connection, skills, a safe online environment, and sustainability of access (United Kingdom. UNICEF, Closing the Digital Divide for Good, 2021). The challenge to achieving full digital inclusivity is in how to ensure that all people have these five components.



Figure 42: Closing the Digital Divide for Good (UNICEF, 2021)

Until all people are able to access digital life from a minimum level of participation, the gap between those who have access and those who don't will not be closed and some will continue to be excluded from the digital world.

Digital learning is now essential to social equality. By breaking socio-geographical barriers and ensuring digital access for all, learners would have access to educational resources from anywhere in the world, enhanced educational experiences and engaging interactive materials.

The metaverse has a promising future regarding education and accessibility. It has the potential to transform the way we learn by creating immersive and interactive environments. As technologies evolve the metaverse has the potential to become a mainstream platform for delivering inclusive and innovative educational experiences and building stronger more equal societies.

“A large proportion of children and young people can access digital devices – in fact 92% of children aged 5 – 15 have access to a desktop computer, laptop or netbook which is connected to the internet at home. However, the remaining 8% represent children who already experience compounding disadvantage due to their socioeconomic status, and are at greater risk of falling behind their peers.”

(UNICEF, 2021)



Figure 41: Digital Inclusion Components (UNICEF, 2021)

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APPENDIX

Site Visit 01: Assouline Store London
05 October 2023

On a surprisingly sunny day in London, I went to visit the Assouline Store in London, located on Piccadilly Street - one of the most renowned streets in the city. The façade is not very eye-catching and can sometimes go unnoticed, but as a fan and customer of the brand, I had no problem finding it since I have been there a few times before.

Upon entering the store, the ambience conveyed a sense of luxury and sophistication. Visitors are confronted with large bookshelves exposing the brand's Travel Collection books. The interiors feature a blend of modern and classic elements that is visible from the entrance, with displays cases juxtaposed against ornate bookcases and architectural details. The building where the store is located was formerly an old bank from the 1920s and I could see that some original characteristics were maintained, such as the ceiling and details. Combined with the heritage of the building preserved, there were also colored LED lights on the walls that brought a sense of modernity.

Moving to the center of the space, I faced a large table with about 20 coffee table books and some scented candles, all carefully curated. The books there were also part of their Travel Collection, where I was able to find the Metaverse Dream book that I was looking for.

I spent a few minutes leafing through the pages standing, while other visitors were doing the same. As this was relevant book to my research, I went to the seating area, where 4 Barcelona chairs created an intimate and sophisticated space.

On the cover of the Metaverse Dream book, there is a QR code that leads you to the Assouline Store in the Metaverse. This Metaverse store was also part of my research, therefore, I put my laptop out to enter the virtual world to compare both spaces while being there. As soon as I entered the Metaverse world on my laptop, a member of the staff came to politely ask me to put it away, since they have no-computer policy in the store. There were no signs or indications of this policy in the space. This was very controversial for me, since they encouraged visitors

to explore the digital store with the QR code on the bright cover of the book. I believe this is part of the brand's philosophy to keep the tradition of physical books.

Finishing my visit there, I sat at the bar that is integrated in the store and enjoyed a freshly squeezed orange juice while taking some annotations and observing the space and people around.

Overall, this was a very interesting and successful site visit and I was able to experience being in the store both physically and digitally, which helped me with my research and to support my arguments. Furthermore, I was able to observe not only the space, but the interaction of visitors and community.



Figure 01: Entrance of Assouline Store London (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 02: Assouline Store London (Fagundes, C. 2023)

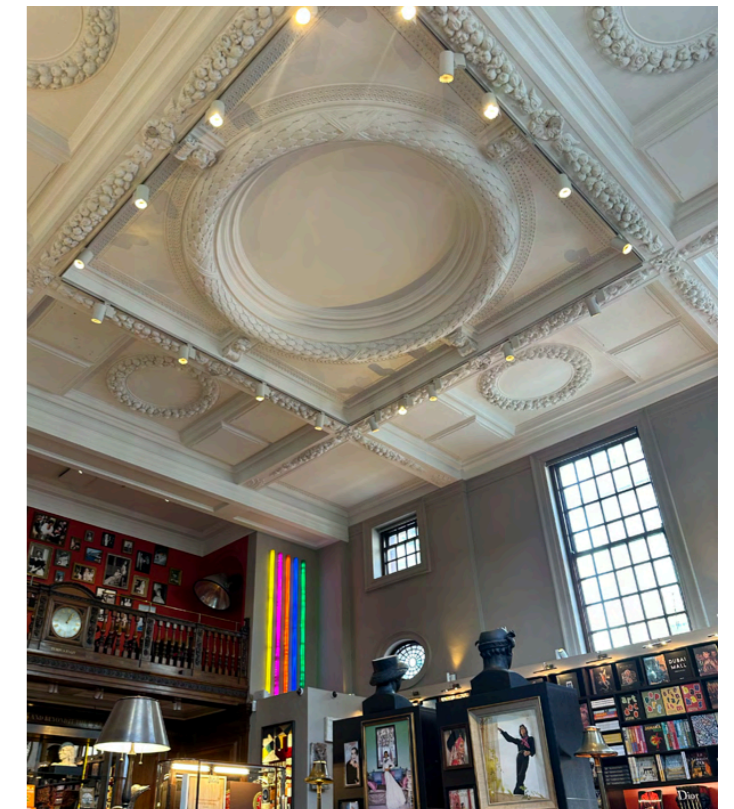


Figure 03: Assouline Store London (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 04: Assouline Store London (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 05: Assouline Metaverse Dream Book (Fagundes, C.2023)

Site Visit 02: Monet Immersive Experience London
08 November 2023

Visiting the Monet Immersive Experience in London was an enlightening experience. On a cold and rainy usual day in London, I invited my friends to come to this immersive experience that was happening in a large warehouse-like space in Shoreditch. We booked tickets 2 days in advance, and it costed 20 pounds for the adult regular ticket. There were only a few spots available for the 4pm entrance.

We took the underground and arrived there on time for the experience's entrance. Upon arrival at the space, we were greeted by a member of the staff who was beeping our tickets. The experience started with some panels with background information about the artist – Claude Monet – followed by a 1:1 scale replica of his house. This is where the immersiveness started as we could feel a little of how the place was. After that, we were guided to the main exhibition space, where there were very high and large walls with projections going on. Each artwork was projected for around 3 minutes and covered all the space.

This was one of the most beautiful exhibitions I have ever experienced. All the colors and movements of the artwork projections created an intimate atmosphere. I could stay for hours seated on the comfortable chairs provided, just looking around to the amazing presentation of images on the walls. All my friends that went with me really enjoyed being there.

Following the projection part of the exhibition, we moved on to the Virtual Reality experience. The VR had an extra cost of 10 pounds per person, which we thought it was overpriced since we had already paid for the entrance tickets. Members of the staff helped us to set up the headsets and seat in allocated chairs. The chairs were swivel but we could not stand up while the experience was going on. It lasted about 20 minutes and on the goggles we could see in 360 degrees a journey through all the most renowned paintings from Claude Monet. Differently from the projections, we had a better feeling of immersiveness.

The whole exhibition was very engaging with the public, even though I felt a lack of authenticity on the artwork, and it was overpriced. Overall, it was a very positive site visit since I was able to feel immersed and engage with what was exhibited, had an experience with virtual reality, and enjoyed all the involvement with the projections.



Figure 06: Entrance of Monet Immersive Experience (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 07: Information Panel of Monet Immersive Experience (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 08: Replica of Claude Monet's House (Fagundes, C. 2023)

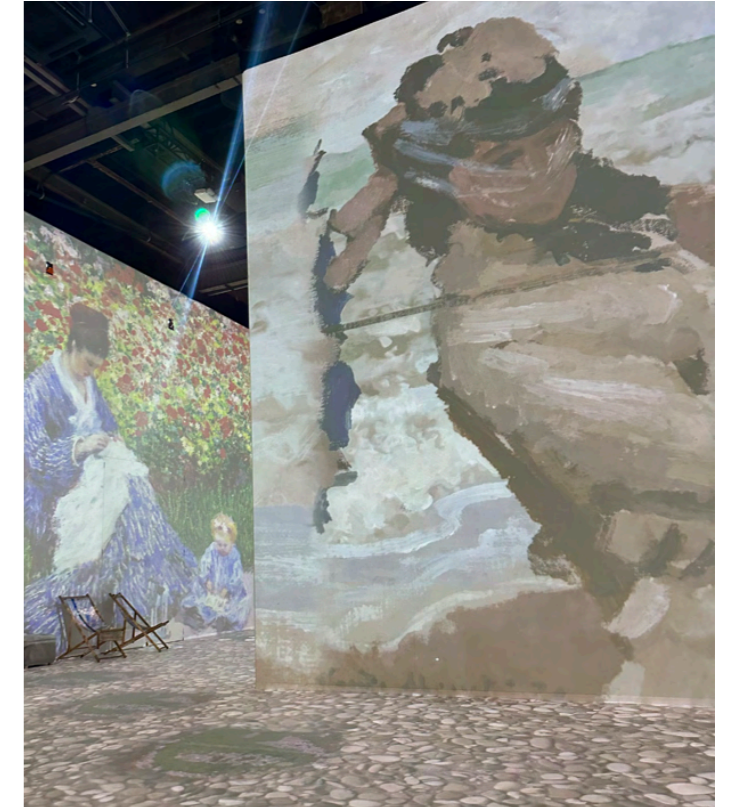


Figure 09: Projections at Monet Immersive Experience (Fagundes, C. 2023)



Figure 10: VR at Monet Immersive Experience (Fagundes, C. 2023)

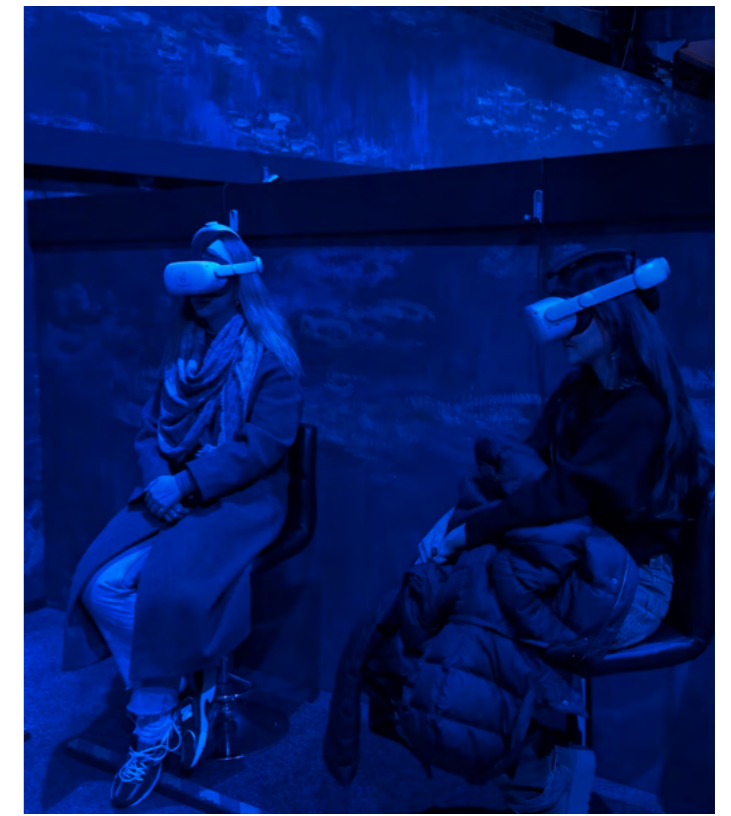


Figure 11: VR at Monet Immersive Experience (Fagundes, C. 2023)

