Through the Looking Glass to a Post-pandemic World, With New Media Artists as Our Guide

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This paper addresses the question: In a post-pandemic world, what happens to culture: will our cultural institutions seize new opportunities for advancement or suffer decline? New forms of digital aesthetics, which simulate works of art and cultural artefacts in their original settings, can now provide an immersive, interactive, computer-generated, experience of reality – an experience that not only matches people’s growing expectations but, also, keeps abreast of the way proactive art galleries and museums are seeking to engage with the public. Art and technology offer a way forward as long as both elements are woven seamlessly together. In tackling this task, we can anticipate that new media artists will act as our guide in leading the way through the Looking Glass from reality to virtuality – a feat of artistic creativity that will enable our cultural institutions to emerge from near catastrophe to face the rigours of a new age. The City of London provides a test case of post-pandemic planning with culture joining commerce in a spirit of partnership and sociability.

New media art. Museums. Art galleries. Digital aesthetics, Extended reality. City of London.

1. INTRODUCTION

At a recent EVA (Electronic Visualisation and the Arts) International Session, held virtually in São Paulo (EVA-MINERVA 2021), participants expressed diverse views on the question: In a post-pandemic world, what happens to Culture; will our Cultural Institutions seize new opportunities for advancement or suffer decline? EVA, as a worldwide community embracing artists, curators, art historians, archivists, technologists, computer scientists et al, is remarkably well qualified to take an informed view on a subject which has leapt into the consciousness of our exhausted Covid-ridden minds. We have all felt the emptiness of an existence where, instead of visiting museums and art galleries, we see art ‘on-screen’ rather than in reality and experience the cultural artefacts of history as pale imitations in books rather than in actuality. Always, it is past experiences of the real that hold firm in our long-term memories – memories that fleetingly can be brought back to life by mind-jogging images on screen or the printed page.

What of a future where we might be denied any access to original, great works of past civilisations or, for that matter, contemporary creations when they are located in far-away continents? I don’t think any of us can imagine a future where travelling a few thousand miles might present an insurmountable barrier in fulfilling our need to feed our memories with life-enhancing experiences. But, for our grandchildren, that is the bleak, dystopian world that now beckons; for them, the question of whether or not it is possible to produce an acceptable digital immersive experience of reality becomes a subject of pressing concern. For those of us, too, who already possess a memory bank of experiences, the idea of being able to recapture them conveniently in close-by locations is tantalising.

Taking Culture as my starting point, I’m aiming to show how new and developing Immersive Technologies can contribute to the creation of a post-pandemic world that will enable us to see, hear and learn about works of art and cultural artefacts in virtual and augmented environments. As a process that represents a move from physicality towards digitality, it will not only enable museums and art galleries to survive and prosper but, also, impact on the way our cities adopt strategies for recovery by attracting people back for work and leisure. The City of London is one such case where culture is set to join commerce as a way of fuelling renewal.
In facilitating these instruments of change as we move towards a post-pandemic future, it can be anticipated that new media artists, working with technologists and architects, will play a crucial role.

2. THE SEARCH FOR NEW FORMS OF DIGITAL AESTHETICS

There was general agreement, at EVA São Paulo, that audiences for either screen-based or 3D and 4D simulations of works of art and artefacts, in their original settings, will always demand an enhanced digital version of what is real rather than a mere replica of what might be experienced during a gallery or museum visit. The search is on, therefore, to find new forms of digital aesthetics that will match people’s expectations and, at the same time, keep abreast of the sweeping changes that are impacting on the way galleries and museums engage with the public. In his recent book, ‘The Art Museum in Modern Times’, Charles Saumarez Smith opines:

In the aftermath of an international pandemic, people will value the experience of art, in whatever form it takes, more than before and will not take international travel and cultural tourism so much for granted. Galleries will reduce the number of exhibitions dependent on international travel not just for works of art but for curators as well; many have discovered new online ways of communication with their audiences during periods of closure (Saumarez Smith 2021).

It appears that the traditional perception of the gallery, as a ‘cathedral of art’, is under attack; it should no longer be focused entirely on the values of the past and history but, also, become a place of 21st century experiment:

somewhere to think about the nature of art rather than to be told about it; somewhere for people to experience art, to look, to interpret and explore in accord with their own independent appetites.

2.1 Experiments at National Gallery X

Proactive galleries, even before the pandemic struck, were beginning to explore new ways of holding conversations with the public, telling stories, creating experiences and collaborating with other institutions. At National Gallery X (NGX), a joint project between the National Gallery, London, and King’s College, London, the Almena Group of new media artists was invited to develop ‘KIMA: Colour’ – a project that started life as an in-gallery immersive light installation and then, after interruption by Covid-19, became a multi-sensory artwork that could be experienced by audiences at home. This transition was achieved by harnessing digital technologies currently used in the entertainment sector, and other experimental systems being developed by King’s College, to simulate the presentation of art and artefacts in illusional settings (National Gallery X 2021).

At EVA São Paulo, Oliver Gingrich and Aphra Shemza presented a follow-up NGX experiment in transformative art, ‘Art in Flux: Reclaimed’ - a celebration of work by twelve innovative new media artists. Here, visitors to a virtual gallery located, notionally, in Trafalgar Square gain glimpses of the National Gallery, itself, through a virtual transparent roof which is eerily reminiscent of the British Museum’s glazed courtyard (Figure 1). In this immersive setting, as a test of visitors’ credulity and dexterity, they are required to engage with online works of new media art; each artwork requires visitors to navigate their own route through and round it. In other words, Art in Flux: Reclaimed provides an illusionary setting where dexterous fingers on a keyboard replace the physical steps of wandering feet on a hard gallery floor. (Art in Flux: Reclaimed 2021).

2.2 New media art as a platform for communication

All the separate exhibits in ‘Art in Flux: Reclaimed’ demand close investigation but, here, I’m choosing just one as an example. INTER/her is an intimate
immersive journey through the female body presented by new media artist Camille Baker. Working with a gynaecologist, Camille gives focus to female reproductive diseases, explored through a feminine lens, to raise greater public awareness of the inner world of women’s bodies and the diseases they suffer. I’ve been taken on the INTER/her journey myself, in reality, with Camille as my guide. First, I was dressed with a haptic corset and then fitted with a VR headset before crawling through the vaginal style opening of an igloo shaped tent to enter a Sitting Womb. What then happens for participants, just three at any one time, is a free visual exploration of the female inner world with haptic sensations felt on the lower abdomen, all triggered by stories, events and objects heard and seen within the realm of VR (Figure 2) (INTER/her 2021).

My own full-on experience of INTER/her, when trapped within the confined physical reality of an igloo/womb, raises the question: Can any similarly palpable experience be gained by visitors coming across Camille’s work in a virtual reality? The answer has to be ‘no’, of course, but, through the operation of keyboard controls, a screen-bound visitor can gain a semblance of the journey in his or her mind’s eye. In my opinion, this limitation does not negate the value of ‘Art in Flux: Reclaimed’ as a 21st century experiment in exploring new approaches to public engagement. As the National Gallery has recognised, it’s through new forms of digital aesthetics that it can reach new audiences in remote locations, worldwide. The process becomes a two-way exchange of mutual benefit: new media artists gain new platforms of communication; museums of art find new ways of holding conversations with the public, which enable them to spread their sphere of cultural influence in local communities far and wide.

2.3 Boundless Worlds

Figure 3: ‘Odyssey: Ride’ is Fion Gunn’s own part in the worlds of Boundless. It’s a roller coaster of images and sounds which enables visitors to change pathways, to hear a story or read a poem, all embedded in a virtual world. Image courtesy of Fion Gunn.

I found that setting up the EVA São Paulo International Session, far from being an extended organisational process, was relatively easy. A number of invitees responded quickly and with enthusiasm to a suggestion that they should contribute to a debate of immediate interest to the worldwide EVA community. I’ve referred, so far, to Art in Flux, an artists’ collective whose recent work at NGX and elsewhere has caused them to gaze long and hard through a Looking Glass into a foreseeable post-pandemic world. A-Maze artists, too, a group formed as a direct consequence of the pandemic, has taken a similar leap into the unknown (A-Maze Artists 2021). It seems that, far from keeping artists apart, the present crisis has shown how interconnected we all are in striving towards the realisation of virtual worlds through emerging digital tools and reaching out for audience participation. Fion Gunn, who initiated A-Maze artists in March 2020 presented, at EVA São Paulo, an ambitious digital project, ‘Boundless: Worlds in Flux’, where visitors experience the interconnected worlds of artists in an ‘interactive prototype for our online multiverse’ (Boundless 2021). She says it’s like dropping into a museum or public gallery.

For her own part in the virtual assembly of Boundless, Fion created ‘Odyssey: Ride’, supported by Tate Exchange Liverpool, to celebrate the exciting and positive aspects of change and flux (Figure 3). It’s a complex and cyclical roller coaster of images and sounds which allows visitors to change pathways and make stops to hear a story, read a poem or watch a short film, all embedded in a virtual world (Odyssey: Ride 2021).

3. MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES AT THE CROSSROADS

In its aim to connect the virtual world with the real world, the work of A-Maze artists reflects a process of digital development that has gained momentum due to the pandemic; the rising digitality of our lockdown lives push us evermore towards virtual life. Tula Giannini, describes this transition as follows (Giannini & Bowen 2018):

As the tension between physicality and digitality grows, the longer Covid-19 continues, the more human behaviour adapts to altered states of being digital while the public square, the place where people gather and socialise shrinks, we find ourselves in retreat from the life we knew as big tech and big government occupy the void.

Tula then poses the question:

What will happen to the public places we abandoned during Covid-19, and what will motivate people to come back, and will museums be able to attract new audiences?

In her answer, she endorses the skills and motivation of new media artists, such as those who presented at EVA São Paulo:
Enter digital artists, designers and museum curators – those who know how to use digital to make art and engage audiences, to tell stories and be contemporary and relevant. Digital artists, whose presence in museums seems sorely lacking must assume a more central role in digital integration and visualisation of human dignity and identity. Curators …… recognise the need to collaborate with artists as new narratives, which in turn open up museums to reimagine collections in ways that encourage them to engage with more diverse communities, artists and audiences.

The above quote is taken from ‘Museums at the crossroads: between digitality, reality and Covid-19’, a paper by Tula Giannini and Jonathan Bowen delivered at EVA London, July 2021. The authors extol artists’ use of advanced technologies, including 360, VR, AR, and MR simulations, in anticipation of a post-pandemic world where all forms of new media art (including digital) are moving centre stage. Presenters at EVA São Paulo concurred in the view that, in the future that now beckons, we must be ready to tackle and control the unstoppable forces of digital revolution - a jump through the Looking Glass that will enable our Cultural Institutions to emerge from near catastrophe to face, with some confidence, the rigours of a new age. This was the optimistic message conveyed by Ernest Edmonds in bringing the EVA São Paulo International Session to a close. He predicted a wonderful future for new media artists becoming an essential element of change – change that will involve galleries and museums providing an enhanced view of the old (i.e. original works of art and artefacts) which can dramatically change our ways of appreciating them.

All this can happen through participation by the public, participatory art, collaboration, being together, making things together (EVA-MINERVA 2021).

From the many telling points made by Ernest, I’m referencing below his comments on how museums, intent on forging a path towards a digital future, still have a duty ‘to hold, present and make available the old’:

So, how do they do that? How can that duty be enhanced by the new technology? ….. Instead of the model of the museum curator holding an object, presenting it to us and telling us what we should think about it, a new model is possible where the curator presents that object and seeks our opinion, our knowledge, our anecdotes (my grandmother had one of those and she used to do so and so). Instead of the museum providing information to the public, in a one way street of activity, the museum can collaborate with the public, gaining as much as it gives, and making that available for the future………The museum becomes a collaborator with the public, not merely a provider of information.

What we see is a great opportunity for all of us in the new media art world because, all of a sudden, we’re being taken notice of by the museums. But just think about the past. We owe it to our history not just to make new work that is inspired by a Van Gogh but, also, to enable people to see and appreciate Van Gogh. You can only do that by actually physically looking at the painting: a Van Gogh in a book or on a screen is not the same thing. However, new media can enable museums to help us prepare for seeing the original physical objects (EVA-MINERVA 2021 & Edmonds 2020).

To prove Ernest’s point, we need look no further than ‘Van Gogh: Starry Night’, a digital experience at Atelier des Lumières, Paris, in 2019, which took visitors on an immersive visual and musical journey of discovery through Van Gogh’s famous painting. (Figure 4). Fondation Culturespaces’ initial idea, in producing this experience and many others, was to facilitate the access of sick, handicapped and otherwise deprived children to the arts and cultural heritage. However, the appeal of this type of experimental art entertainment proved to be much wider; sell-out shows, lasting a year, engaged the attention of tech-savvy younger audiences with the result that Fondation Culturespaces has now opened centres throughout France (e.g. Baux-de-Provene and Bordeaux) and further afield in Korea and Dubai. In all these locations, the exhibits complement rather than compete with galleries showing original works of art. The success of ‘Van Gogh: Starry Night’, for instance, in introducing young visitors to a work of art through the use of new media technology, confirms that a virtual interpretation ‘can help us prepare for seeing the original physical object’ elsewhere’. Sometimes, this might be too far away to afford easy access (e.g. the original of Starry Night is in New York) but for Parisian visitors, at least, many other Van Gogh paintings lie close at-hand, in galleries ready to welcome a newly enthused audience.

3.1. Tackling the seemingly impossible

Current controversy concerning the return of art and artefacts to their original sources comes to
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mind. Can a new relationship between the real and the virtual come to the rescue in situations where treasures have been obtained, either legally or otherwise, from countries that now want them back? In Athens, a new Acropolis Museum has been built with the specific aim that, one day, the Parthenon’s relief carvings and sculptures, on display in the British Museum since 1817, will be returned. The doubts and arguments surrounding this issue are the cause of considerable acrimony. In anticipation that Greece will eventually win the day, the Acropolis Museum contains spaces for all the missing relief carvings of the Parthenon’s frieze and the sculptures of its pediments to be displayed (Figure 5). Currently, these spaces are filled with ‘temporary’ plaster replicas.

Figure 5: Parthenon Frieze, c. 438-32 B.C.E., (420 linear feet of the 525 that complete the frieze are in the British Museum) photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA

The opportunities that Bernard Tschumi’s architecture offers for accommodating a virtual version of the Parthenon’s complete frieze and pediments causes me to put forward the contentious suggestion that the creation of an enhanced digital interpretation of the temple’s magical carvings may be able to equal, and even exceed, the overall impact of the originals. Further, it would become possible, although not necessarily advisable, to digitally meld together, and even colour, images of the separated, and sometimes broken, marbles, as they currently exist in the British Museum. In saying this, I fully realise that I’m treading on many curatorial toes. The outcome I’m describing could well cause a political storm, but there’s no denying the fact that the technology now exists to tackle the seemingly impossible. With further research and the wielding of considerable skill by new media artists, a world beating immersive experience of Ancient Greek life in the 5th century BC can be achieved. All concerned may then accept that the Elgin Marbles can remain in the UK, where they have been well looked after for over two centuries.

4. ART & TECHNOLOGY ACTING TOGETHER TO CREATE VIRTUAL WORLDS

In new media art, there can be no division between art and technology; as in architecture, both elements have to be melded seamlessly together to achieve success. The use of advanced technology, in itself, can never be enough. I remember a recent visit to ‘Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser’ at the V&A, London, where audiences were invited to tumble down the rabbit hole and embark on a mind-bending trip into Wonderland through the ‘playful dimension of VR’. The reality of the experience was anti-climactic; only four headsets were available at the exhibition, with at least one always out of service. Technicians took many minutes to fit headsets on individual visitors and explain the control mechanism. The result, for me, was a long wait in a short queue that moved at a snail’s pace. I lost patience and gave up after 30 minutes of waiting.

VR requiring the use of headsets can never work in a public exhibition with a large footfall. It’s a problem that can be remedied, to an extent, in a Fulldome VR environment equipped with an immersive 360° projection system (i.e. ‘sphere technology). In a recent example built within the Market Hall, Devonport, Plymouth, UK, the dome extends beyond the equator line to create a down-to-floor experience with many rings of speakers providing surround sound (Figure 6). Fulldomes of this type provide an environment where up to 50 people, standing or sitting at any one time on the dome’s 15m diameter floor, can enjoy an immersive audio-visual experience. I see them as being suitable for performances of Visual Music – my own medium of expression (Clark, Trickett & Weinel 2021). Fulldomes, although they are available for installation in all parts of the world, have to be regarded as a specialist rather than a universal solution. At the V&A, for instance, the lack of space of sufficient height, might well have ruled them out for consideration.

Figure 6: Diagram of a Fulldome recently opened at the Market Hall, Devonport, Plymouth, UK. It offers a VR environment where audiences, standing or sitting on a 15m diameter floor, can experience immersive audio-visual performances.

The full spectrum of Immersive Technologies can be described as Extended Reality (XR). All are
concerned with computer technologies that allow humans to see, hear, talk, think, learn and solve problems in virtual and augmented environments. Research in AI addresses technologies that allow computing machines to mimic these same human abilities. It’s these two fields, evolved separately but now unleashed together, that will impact significantly on human senses, skills and knowledge; they will enable new media artists to create evermore natural and realistic virtual worlds.

As long ago as 2006, in a Time Magazine interview, Stephen Spielberg predicted:

Someday, in the not-too-distant future, you'll be able to go to a movie and the movie will be all around you. It'll be over your head – it'll be 360 degrees around you – even a little bit under you.

We can now achieve all of this.

4.1 The realisation of a dream

I, too, have a dream; I want to be able to experience Fion’s ‘Odyssey: Ride’ with no boundaries or borders; to feel it and hear it all around me. If I lived in Japan, I could do just that. teamLabBorderless is a group of artworks that form one continuous, borderless world. Artworks move out of spaces freely, form connections and relationships with people, communicate with other works, influence and sometimes intermingle with each other and, according to the artist collective that creates Borderless: “the work has the same concept as the human body”. In the exhibition space of teamLab’s Borderless Museum in Tokyo, boulder-sized flower petals twirl and flit in infinite space, encapsulating visitors as they lie on a mirrored floor (Figure 7). Animated cherry blossoms sprout as visitors press their palms on gallery walls, creating an entire self-contained ecosystem of change and action. Floors and walls become shrouded in light projections and mirrors, space becomes boundless, and time feels limitless (teamLabBorderless 2021).

5. THE CITY OF LONDON: A TEST CASE OF POST-PANDEMIC PLANNING

Returning to home, I find that the City of London is about to enter new and relatively unexplored territory with its intention to generate international creative cooperation by joining commerce with culture and the arts in a spirit of partnership and sociability. It’s a program of work which, if implemented, will take the use of Immersive Technologies to a new level and test, to the limit, the skills of new media artists using those technologies.

Last year, the City of London’s Culture & Commerce Taskforce declared its intention to:

...reanimate the City of London’s spaces in unique ways that attract people back......and build the connections required internationally for the City to remain a global hub of commerce and become a centre for culture.

The Taskforce has recognised that the Cultural Sector has the potential to play a crucial role in the City’s recovery – a city, where, like many other metropolises round the world, it can be anticipated that in a post-pandemic world up to two fifths of current office space will become surplus to requirements and, thus, become available for repurposing. It’s the gradual release of this surplus space onto the market, over a period of 5 – 10 years, that will enable creative industries and cultural institutions to gain a foothold.

No doubt, the mediaeval street pattern of the City, preserved through millennia, will remain; cobbled passages, known to only a few, will continue to present a sense of history confirmed by evocative place names derived from ancient trades and sources of wealth. Charles Landry’s ‘think of the city as if it were a living breathing work of art’ is apt, not only for the City as it is today but, also, as a prescription for what the City can become in its new found form embracing culture as well as commerce (Landry & Bianchini 1995). For the future, closed doors forbidding entry to the City’s secrets will be replaced by a new transparency where ground floor ‘shop windows’ will provide indications of what lies behind in reception areas made accessible as public galleries. Signs of the City’s embrace of art and culture will be everywhere, not least in spaces where potential architects of the City’s new found form will seek to meet a challenge of unbounded ambition (Figure 8).
they designed, may indicate how, in the future, City interiors can be expected to provide the conditions for collaboration between culture and commerce. (Photo by Paul Raftery)

5.1 Culture and commerce stronger together

Of course, change to physical space, as now demanded by a depleted city, cannot in itself generate a different type of collaboration built on the respective strengths and needs of culture and commerce. It will take the ‘software’ of digital transformation working in close harmony with the ‘hardware’ of re-purposed physical space to ensure the success of the City’s renewal. As an architect, I’m the first to recognise that the creation of appropriate multi-purpose spaces will place a huge demand on the City’s infrastructure and necessitate the re-purposing of many of its buildings. No doubt, the performance of this immense task will stretch available professional skills to the limit, but these are tried and tested skills unlike those concerned in transforming the City’s ‘software’.

The software of digital transformation requires blending human potential with technology to enable creativity. Machines are not taking over the world; they rely on a process of machine learning whereby they must first be trained by humans. This idea of technology and people working symbiotically together, rather than competitively, is at the very heart of digital transformation – a fact that is firmly established in the cultural sector. For this reason, the Taskforce’s plans for attracting creative cultural industries to the City, far from being blue sky, are set to move ahead at a time when the cultural sector can act as ‘carriers’ helping to push the commercial sector towards necessary digital transformation.

As mentioned at the outset of this paper (Section 2), proactive art galleries and museums now feel an urgent imperative to expand beyond their traditional boundaries and connect with the public through digital media displays that merge with the digital life of city streets. The way is open, therefore, for museums to transform themselves from quiet, highly organised and predictable institutions to become cultural organisations entrenched in the life of diverse communities and connected to global audiences. It’s by tapping into this urge that the City can make ‘Commerce and Culture stronger together’. What is now on offer is a match made in heaven where the City’s commercial streets will become bathed in a new glow of cultural gold – a virtual dream, maybe, but it can be made real with guidance from our new media artists. The task ahead is both immensely complex and hugely ambitious but the City has done it before, rebuilding after the Great Fire and again after the Second World War and, more recently, in adapting to Big Bang. The City can do it again.

In facing up to this challenge, the City has yet another string to its cultural bow.

5.2 London Wall West

Once the Museum of London moves to West Smithfield, a key site located in the Northwest corner of the Square Mile will be released for development. So far, initial ideas put forward by the City’s Property Investment Board have served only to highlight the extent of the problem in defining an appropriate brief, which will not only fuel the City’s ambition to ‘build the connections required internationally’ but, also, celebrate creativity in the widest sense of the word. Opportunities to create flexible public spaces designed to host culture working alongside commerce don’t occur very often which explains why I regard London Wall West as a significant test case on how cities plan for a post-pandemic future. The eyes of the world will be watching! Will London Wall West succeed in acting as a cultural beacon in bringing people back to the City? Can it effectively demonstrate the City’s new found destiny as a global centre of culture?

To answer these questions, I’m turning to an initial scheme for London Wall West prepared by the City’s appointed architects, Diller Scofidio + Renfro (DS+R), which seeks to ‘amplify the creativity embedded within the area and use it to create lasting change into the future’. This is a vision that we would all like to see made real but, unfortunately, the scheme’s first presentation revealed an interpretation which placed an emphasis on commercial office space to the detriment of culture activities. Given every opportunity to respond, I’ve put forward my own suggestion for reversing the scheme’s priorities with culture taking centre stage.

A laudable aim to ‘develop increased green space and pockets of nature and tranquillity’ underlay DS+R’s first proposals (City of London 2021). This is a skill that the architects have demonstrated par excellence in their work on the High Line, New York, and now, somewhat unexpectedly, a similar opportunity presents itself in London. I’m aiming to show, in my suggestion, how DS+R’s idea for a high-level green space or ‘Meadow’ can be extended to embrace the cultural components of a revised scheme. But, first, I should explain that this is no ordinary meadow; it has been described by the City’s Property Investment Board as ‘a distinctive figural bowl that creates a moment of surreal respite from the City around it with a meadow-like character’. My transformations of this feature are indicated in plan sketches for both the Higher and Lower levels of the Meadow (Figures 9 & 11) A ‘gallery’ encapsulated within the undulating
structure of the Meadow provides a space for 21st century creative experimentation (Figures 10 & 11).

**Figure 9:** Sketch plan showing extended Meadow (Higher Level) Terry Trickett with acknowledgment to the architects for London Wall West, Diller Scofidio + Renfro.

**Figure 10:** Section / Elevation AA showing the supporting structure for the Meadow and adjacent Allosphere.

**Figure 11:** Sketch plan showing extended Meadow (Lower Level)

Further suggestions include a Performance and Display Space located under an elliptical Public Platform (Figure 12). Here, the aim is that galleries and museums from around the world will mount a series of illusionary/immersive displays which engage the public in state-of-the-art virtual reality experiences. This, too, is the prime purpose of the Allosphere, a large scale, immersive, surround-view instrument for both scientific and artistic experimentation positioned at the key access point to the London Wall West site (Kuchera – Morin 2021).

All the cultural elements described above are interlinked by the huge supporting structure of the Meadow (Figure 10). The overall assembly is cathedral-like in scale with a length not far off that of nearby St Pauls. It promises to offer, at both the Lower and Higher Meadow levels, opportunities for continuously changing panoramic sky-walks giving glimpses of London’s remarkable two thousand year history from Roman times to its post-pandemic revival.

Inherent in the City’s plans for renewal is a recognition that the more human behaviour adapts to an altered state of being digital, the less City life will depend on the places where people work and
socialise. It’s a pattern of change that will be permanent which gives the City a once-in-a-lifetime chance to rebalance priorities between physicality and digitality. Building use will change dramatically but not disastrously; the need to repurpose existing structures combined with the opportunities on offer at London Wall West will enable the City to not only adapt but, also, effectively fuel and announce its creative renewal. This is a hugely ambitious task but, once achieved, the connections required internationally will be increased by the City’s newfound reputation as a centre of culture with its status as a global hub for commerce retained—in all, a radical and successful transition to a post-pandemic world.

6. ENDNOTE

The picture I’ve painted of a post-pandemic world might surprise some readers; it doesn’t echo the gloomy thoughts of a dystopian future—rather the opposite, in fact. I see the cultural aspects of life assuming a new importance in our cities, where architects, engineers, artists and technologists can play their full part in creating a physical and digital road to recovery. The priorities that we have known in the past, where a work/life balance has always been difficult to achieve, will be discarded in favour of placing a new-found emphasis on culture and leisure. I realise that it will be all too easy to lose sight of the opportunities that a post-pandemic life offers, which is why I have placed stress, in this paper, on the need to experiment with new forms of technology to enable a virtual interpretation of the past to inform the reality of our vision of the future.

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