



THE NEXT STEP: VIRTUAL REALITY

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With the need to produce more refined and creative store experiences, virtual reality is a powerful aid in the design process, finds Retail Focus.

Unless you've been living on Venus the last few weeks, Pokémon Go has become a global phenomenon. The game sees people walking around searching for virtual monsters which they can then train to fight other monsters. Moving aside from gaming, in the retail design hemisphere it seems virtual reality can be a very intelligent and useful tool in the store design process.

'VR offers designers a completely new tool, allowing them to design whilst immersed in the environment they are designing. By not taking designers out of the space to design, as is the case with 2D design, it allows them to immediately see the impact of decisions regarding materials, form, colour etc,' says Sol Rogers, CEO/founder of virtual reality and creative production agency, REWIND:VR. 'This makes the design planning process more flexible and it allows designers to be more experiential, which may lead to concepts that just wouldn't be conceived in more traditional processes. Furthermore,

the whole body can be used so that both the dimensional and the ergonomic relationships of spaces and elements can be explored and developed.'

Rogers notes there has been a lot of media coverage about VR and empathy, as it allows you to experience life as someone else, but it also allows you to design in someone else's shoes too. For example, you could explore and design from a child's point of view, literally, if your retail environment was aimed at that audience.

'Architects are using VR to check their designs and walk clients through their projects before even a brick is laid; engineers are viewing their projects in VR to gain a greater understanding of how it works and using it to spot flaws and potential risks before implementation. VR is already being adopted within the design process within many different industries and it will just continue to gather more acceptance and momentum because of it's many benefits,' says Rogers.

'To "experience" means to be able to walk (or even fly!) around this new store or concept model and experience it at a 1:1 scale; every key space, every detail from every angle and any journey in or around

that space. This high fidelity experience is consumable by all stakeholders at any stage, be that the designer, a consumer focus group, the CFO, key suppliers or perhaps the local community,' says Dan Harper, managing director of Cityscape Digital, a 3D creative studio specialising in virtual reality and visualisation.

Cityscape Digital recently unveiled a virtual reality installation at the RIBA Constructing Communities launch to demonstrate how the technology can revolutionise the way in which people view and interact with design proposals. 'The installation was an interesting showcase of new innovation in architecture and design. The work Cityscape Digital has done to translate the Constructing Communities entry is very inspiring and highlights the exciting developments virtual reality technology can offer to the architecture profession,' says Marcelo Ventura, development manager at RIBA.

'If you really want to break the mould, realise disruptive and yet successful concepts, get creating in a VR environment from a blank canvas; as you start creating, unexpected and coincidental variants will emerge, fuelling an instinctive, experimental and unconstrained search to generate new design patterns. Once the concept is known, then it's using the power of VR to look at all the key spaces - does the point

Above: Sol Rogers, CEO/founder of REWIND:CO, says it's only a matter of time before VR is a standard tool within the design process.



of sale feel comfortable for the customer, does the entrance feel inviting, what is the visibility of key retailing zones?' explains Harper. 'In terms of getting detailing right, you can add all of the detailed fittings and finishes, to understand exactly what the store/retail premises will look like and how it will feel to shop, eat or stay in.'

Live modelling is possible so everything from redesigning whole concepts to tweaking can be done live in a facilitated session with internal stakeholders or say a focus group with customers. Harper suggests getting customers to create their store of the future (facilitated by them giving instructions to a trained VR specialist who builds it in real-time).

From September, the software company that retail consultancy Shopworks currently uses will be launching a new VR compatibility feature. 'This will allow us to see the design from a real life perspective and to pick up on any aspects which we might have missed,' says Ross Wakefield, head of design at Shopworks. 'More interesting, however, is how virtual reality is now designed into schemes that we are producing. Virtual reality is becoming more than just a design tool as its applications for the retail sector are more far reaching.'

Moving forward, Shopworks is developing virtual reality and augmented reality retail solutions that directly connect with the customer journey and consumer shopping missions. 'We have also been developing 360 degree virtual store tours to use as research tools. These allow us to obtain valuable qualitative customer feedback on a store concept design without the retailer needing to undertake the expensive process of building a prototype store or mockshop,' explains Wakefield. 'Engaging with consumers on an

Above main: Cityscape Digital recently unveiled a virtual reality installation at the RIBA Constructing Communities launch to demonstrate how the technology can revolutionise the way in which people can view and interact with design proposals.

Above inset: Green Room is embracing the use of virtual reality within the design process.

omnichannel level is becoming increasingly important for the retailer and we expect to see the line between online and offline becoming increasingly blurred in the next five years. You only have to look at the unprecedented uptake of Pokémon Go to see how if retailers can capture consumers' imagination then the commercial benefits are exponential.'

Design consultancy Green Room has been creating 360 degree video of its projects for use in case studies for some time, and has started to look at how VR can make the design process more efficient and how it can support the collaborative client relationship. 'At Green Room we're particularly interested in two questions. [The first question is] can VR help our clients to understand the spaces we design better?

We've seen that VR can be an excellent way to put someone into the heart of design and help them to appreciate the physicality of the space. We're not yet in the position where we're modifying designs in VR (which sounds fun), but if it can help a client to actually "see" a line of sight, then we're winning,' says Andrew Bowyer, digital director at Green Room.

'[The second question is] can VR help us to plan retail campaigns and content more effectively? VR seems very promising as a tool to help us design the right density or intensity of video content in a three-dimensional space where, for example, the customer may be able to see four screens at any one time and could easily be distracted or overwhelmed,' continues Bowyer.

'VR has the ability to depict fine grain details due to high end graphics, a fast refresh rate and realistic sound and movement creating realistic prototypes and environments. It allows design teams to observe their project within safe environments and make changes as and where necessary. This saves time and money; you can't really argue with that can you? It's only a matter of time before VR is a standard tool within the design process,' concludes Rogers. **RF**



Left: Shopworks used virtual reality to design an exhibition stand for Azerbaijan mobile telecom provider Nar, built around its new brand concept of creating comfortable, interactive spaces inspired by nature.