

## The Future Of Shopping Is . . . Second Life On Acid?

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### BRITISH DESIGNER ALLISON CRANK IMAGINES A VIRTUAL-REALITY MEGA MALL TO REPLACE THE SOCIAL ELEMENT SHOPPING HAS LOST TO E-COMMERCE.

When [Victor Gruen invented the shopping mall](#) in 1956, he wanted to give suburban citizens a sorely needed [third place](#) to **socialize** and shop. Today, malls have been usurped by e-commerce. And while the ease of one-click shopping fulfills the consumerist part of **Gruen's** equation, it ignores the equally therapeutic leisure element.

[Allison Crank](#), a **designer** and filmmaker based in Eindhoven, thinks that virtual reality is one way to restore the **social** side of things.

"[The Reality Theater: Shopping In the Ludic Century](#)," **Crank's** master's thesis, proposes a virtual mall in which players meander through a psychedelic landscape of neon signs, labyrinthine escalators, bubbles (!), and animals.

**Crank** calls it "a new third place for the public to meet, perform, indulge, and play in immersive environments." I call it Second Life on acid. The **designer** envisions her concept working with augmented reality devices like **Microsoft's Hololens** or **Magic Leap** to superimpose this virtual world over our own. For example, if someone were commuting, he or she could strap on an augmented reality headset and participate in the Reality Theater.

"If I were finishing my day at work and heading home on the train, the waiting platform to inside the train could become the mall or store," **Crank** says. "And if during my train ride, I decided to shop for a bespoke item at one of the stores, my view from inside the train would transfer from the 'mall' stage into the store, where I could interact with the **designer** and together create a bespoke item that I would then go on to purchase. While I'm in the 'store,' I can invite my friends to virtually shop with me, help me with my decision, or explore the store's virtual stage."

**Crank** acknowledges that it would take quite a few technological advancements to achieve this outcome. "What's most important is that the experience is led and directed around the wants and needs of each consumer, who in the end is a co-**designer** in the creation of their item," she

says.

While this Day-Glo spectacle of a mall looks downright terrifying, the root concept—a virtual shop—doesn't seem *that* far off. Fashion **brands** are already experimenting with [VR experiences](#) and [interactive boutiques](#). Oculus Rift with your khakis, anyone?

[All Images: via [Allison Crank](#)]

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