"Virtuality" - The business of reducing buildings

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We all know about, and have used various hardware, software and applications that make communication and networking easier. Loosely defined, it is commonly called "virtuality." Consider the obvious uses:

The Virtual Mall - The percentage of internet retail shoppers increases every year. It is appropriate in this holiday season that a new shopper's holiday, "Internet Monday" has just been created to follow the highest store sales volume day (Black Friday). Pre-holiday specials are being held in the stores, but most importantly specials will continue on-line throughout the weekend for the first time. It is a great example of how retail shopping will continue to grow in the future, but the question looms as to how many and how big our physical building shopping areas need to be.

The Virtual Office - This concept is well underway. The notion of road warriors, young people working around the country armed with blackberrys and I-pads, sitting in airports using Wi-fi is reality. People are plugging in everywhere, except for the office. The idea that everyone needs their own office is long gone. Road warriors drop into headquarters using flex space while they nest for a little while. This concept is not going away, and the need for ever increasing office space looms also as a large question.

Virtual Manufacturing - While spaces for building large physical objects are necessary, they are not necessary in U.S metropolitan areas or U.S. buildings. As the U.S. knows all too well, manufacturing continues to leave its shores to settle in emerging countries where labor is less expensive, and manufacturing plants are located any where. Inventories and orders are managed electronically, with less need for advance production and storage, and products can be produced 24/7 over different time zones. Enter robotics, and the flexibility of production and decreasing needs for a specific labor force or location will continue. While not yet virtual, manufacturing production is facilitated by the communication and networking that virtual networks have to offer.

These changes towards "virtual," already well underway, have brought me to a newer area of dramatic change: health care. Health care is a hugely growing issue obviously, with escalating costs and growing demand from the demographic bubble of the baby boomers. A friend and former professor and I have been investigating the concept of virtual long-term care for some time.

One nearby Boston model already exists, called Beacon Hill Village, which is essentially a group of people, living in their own homes, but using the technology of communication to network together various services. Remaining in one's own home can be facilitated through networked health care, general care and services, entertainment, education and what ever else one might typically find in the physical plant called "retirement home." The concept clearly fits a need that people have unequivocally expressed, that is to remain in one's own environment, not restrained in an isolated building somewhere, but to be able to be cared for.

While a neophyte in the health area, but increasingly involved with health care institutions, I find the

health business and space need relationship fascinating. I can see a time and place where the virtual village combines with hospitals, colleges, recreational facilities, and various other health organizations to provide a package of services devoted to a high quality of life. In my view, there will be an increase in a network of buildings to service these needs, rather than a brand new facility. It seems inevitable that health care will benefit from the same virtual networking that other real estate/business relationships already have.

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