

/imagine: A Journey into The New Virtual

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MAK – Press and PR

Press Release

Vienna, 9.5.2023

presse@MAK.at

Press Conference

Tuesday, 9.5.2023, 10 am

In virtual space visionary designs and fictional scenarios for architecture can be imagined without the limitations of the real world. Hyperrealistic renderings and AI algorithms are becoming ever more popular and have revolutionized approaches to concept development in architecture and design. These technologies are now available to practitioners from a range of cultures and backgrounds, who are using them to imagine new worlds and utopias that exist between speculation and reality.

/imagine: A Journey into The New Virtual is the first MAK exhibition to showcase a wide array of interior design, architecture, and urban planning in Virtual Space looking in particular at the last decade (2013–2023). The exhibition gives an overview of the many design strategies of “The New Virtual” and brings together recent and exciting projects by international architects, designers, and artists.

The exhibition’s title */imagine*: is the command that users input into the AI software Midjourney to create their own architectural utopias. The platform uses a short text description to generate images with limitless variations and modifications.

In four chapters—“Speculative Narratives and Worldbuilding,” “Research Investigations,” “Dreamscapes,” and “AI and Algorithmic Variation”—the exhibition features a diverse range of works in various media. Renderings, CGI visualizations, 3D animations and prints, digital films, and virtual reality, as well as blockchain projects and video games, provide research and crucial insights along pressing social, environmental, political, and aesthetic questions.

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Some Place Studio, an architecture office based in Vienna and Berlin, has created a custom exhibition display inspired by visual tropes taken from 3D digital worlds and rendering processes. Each work in the show is housed in a custom display to allow for the variety of media. The design also includes a lounge with infinity mirrors, inviting visitors for a moment of rest, relaxation, and reflection.

The first section, “Speculative Narratives and Worldbuilding,” looks at projects in film and virtual reality that offer critical, optimistic as well as provocative visions of the future. It features the Austrian museum premiere of *Planet City* (2020) by architect and director Liam Young. The film is set in a futuristic megacity in the year 2050, which is home to the planet’s entire population of 10 billion people. Described by the BBC as “the man designing our futures,” Young uses the medium of film to combine visionary images with pressing environmental challenges.

Architect and filmmaker Kordae Jatafa Henry is showcasing a utopian short film titled *Earth Mother, Sky Father* (2019), which takes a poetic look at the extraction of raw materials in the Congo. Other works with an environmental focus include the urban design video games *Block'hood* and *Common'hood* created by Jose Sanchez, an architect, game designer, and the director of research studio Plethora Project. iheartblob (Aleksandra Belitskaja, Ben James, and Shaun McCallum) are presenting the decentralized city *_Spaces* (2020), which is based on blockchain technology.

Space Popular (Lara Lesmes and Fredrik Hellberg) is expanding its *The Portal Galleries* research project on the magic and mechanics of portals into a VR installation, a piece designed specifically for this exhibition. The archive comprises over 1,000 portals and 23 archetypes taken from fantasy and (science-)fiction books, films, graphic novels, and games from the past 250 years and reflects Space Popular’s manifesto for the future of travel across virtual environments and for a fair, civic infrastructure in the metaverse.

The works exhibited in “Research Investigations” provide counternarratives to western colonialism’s ongoing influence on technology and raise our awareness of the need to decolonize digital data. One pioneer in this field is Iranian-Kurdish artist Morehshin Allahyari whose project *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015/16) reproduces 3D-printed replicas of a set of twelve artifacts destroyed by ISIS, each with a flash drive inside containing digital data and research on the context of the original piece. In her VR multiplayer game *Abyssinian Cyber Vernaculus* (2019), designer Miriam Hillawi Abraham enables players to navigate the “digital twin” of Ethiopia’s historic site of Lalibela and adopt new perspectives on African cultural heritage.

New York based artist Genevieve Goffman, whose work focuses on the history of architecture, internet aesthetics, and “lore” (video game backstories), has developed a commissioned piece comprising 3D-printed miniatures inspired



by Viennese Modernism and Adolf Loos' concept of interior and exterior space.

The piece marks the transition to the chapter “Dreamscapes,” which examines visualizations that exist at the intersection between illustration, surrealism, and architectural visualization. During the Covid-19 pandemic, journeys to hyperrealistic destinations became more popular than ever. Social media enabled designers to reach a global audience, and they continue to publish new utopian scenarios that offer tranquility and escapism in an age of crisis and uncertainty.

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One of the most sought-after digital artists of the 21st century, Andrés Reisinger, posted a 3D digital rendering of his fictitious *Hortensia Chair* on Instagram in July 2018 that soon went viral. Together with Júlia Esqué and Moooi, he turned the virtual design into a real-life chair covered in 20,000 pink fabric petals. Designer Alexis Christodoulou presents the beguiling train journey *Quantum Express* (2022), which has also been produced as an NFT.

In *Neo-Chemosphere* (2021), Charlotte Taylor and Anthony Authié (Zyva Studio) take us on an odyssey into a post-anthropocentric world with a fictitious design set against the backdrop of pink rocks in the Calanques near Marseille that pays homage to John Lautner's *Chemosphere House* (Los Angeles, 1960). Collaboration between artists creating dreamscapes is common, leading to a cross pollination of ideas and skills. Studio Mary Lennox is showcasing *Smokebush Court* (2020), CGI visualizations of tennis courts taken over by flowers and plants in full bloom. The project was realized in collaboration with Charlotte Taylor and Berlin-based design studio Formundrausch.

Studio Precht, a Salzburg based architecture studio led by Chris and Fei Tang Precht, became famous on Instagram for their dreamy visualizations of architectural designs using sustainable building methods such as timber construction. Some of these designs are now actually being realized and built. One of the projects on display in this exhibition is *Bert* (2018), a modular treehouse developed in cooperation with tiny-homes startup Baumbau that can grow by adding new modules.

The section “AI and Algorithmic Variation” looks at AI-based architecture projects. Algorithms are not just procedures for step-by-step problem solving or mechanistic language—they also raise profound philosophical and design questions.

SPAN architects (Matias del Campo and Sandra Manninger) have been working with AI and state-of-the-art technologies since the 1990s. For the MAK, the team has created an installation featuring every image that SPAN has generated using AI. A larger-than-life physical model titled *Doghouse* (2023), which was designed using Midjourney's AI bot, is inhabited by AIBO robot dogs. A livestream offers viewers a dog's-eye view of life inside.



Domestic robots, such as AI powered vacuum cleaners are trained on datasets from model homes in order to understand their environment.

In her short film *HOMESCHOOL* (2019), designer Simone C. Niquille critically and humorously examines one of the largest training datasets: SceneNet RGB-D. Machine learning and generative processes are also the focus of designer Alisa Andrasek, whose project *Ecocity* (2023) aims to merge speculative research and real-world application.

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The exhibition will also premiere a project by architect and game designer Leah Wulfman titled *My Mid Journey Trash Pile* (2022), in which AI images of Midjourney-generated buildings from disposed building materials are realized as oil paintings. In *Symbiotic House* (since 2022), Lee Pivnik, founder of The Institute of Queer Ecology, demonstrates how AI-supported architectural visions can be used to imagine a “multi-species habitat” together with the local community of South Florida.

Featuring work by:

Morehshin Allahyari, Alisa Andrasek, Matias del Campo & Sandra Manninger (SPAN), Alexis Christodoulou, Formundrausch, Genevieve Goffman, Kordae Jatafa Henry, Miriam Hillawi Abraham, iheartblob, Simone C. Niquille (/technoflesh Studio), Lee Pivnik (The Institute of Queer Ecology), Andrés Reisinger (Reisinger Studio), Jose Sanchez (Plethora Project), Space Popular, Studio Mary Lennox, Studio Precht, Charlotte Taylor, Leah Wulfman, Liam Young, Zyva Studio, 2MVD (Damjan Minovski, Valerie Messini).

thenewvirtual.org

All texts and information on the exhibited works will be available on the project website from 9 May.

Press photos are available for download at [MAK.at/en/press](https://mak.at/en/press).



Press Conference

Tuesday, 9.5.2023, 10 am

Opening

Tuesday, 9.5.2023, 7 pm

Free admission

Exhibition Venue

MAK Exhibition Hall, ground floor

MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna

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Exhibition Dates

10.5.–10.9.2023

Opening Hours

Tue 10 am–9 pm, Wed to Sun 10 am–6 pm

Curators

Bika Rebek, Architect and Founder, Some Place Studio

Marlies Wirth, Curator, Digital Culture and MAK Design Collection

Exhibition Design

Some Place Studio

Program

You can find out more about events related to the exhibition as well as guided tours at [MAK.at/en/thenewvirtual](https://www.mak.at/en/thenewvirtual)

MAK Admission

€ 15, reduced € 12, every Tuesday 6–9 pm: admission € 7

Free admission for children and teens under 19

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