Portals
Space Popular
Episode 14

A door to an alternate reality.
INTRODUCTION

For many of us, the concept of ‘Entering the Metaverse’ has this classic Alice in Wonderland-type feeling of falling down the rabbit hole. It’s a digital gateway into an alternate reality, detached from many of the physical laws and structures that our world is subject to. Anything is possible once you step through the gateway into this alternate realm. Architecture studio Space Popular, our guests for this episode, have spent a lot of time thinking about this idea of gateways or as they describe it, portals. In this episode, we dig deeper into this idea and ask how this research can help us create better infrastructures in these future virtual spaces.

GUESTS

Space Popular is a research-driven architecture, design, and media studio that explores the future spirit of spatial experience through virtual reality, film, exhibitions, speculative writing, as well as buildings and objects. Space Popular is directed by Lara Lesmes & Fredrik Hellberg.

HOST

Severin Matusek is a strategist and founder of co—matter, a creative studio exploring the cultural and societal impact of new technologies.

IDEAS AND PEOPLE IN CONTEXT

- The Portal Galleries is a research project creating an archive of portals in fiction and popular culture. [https://www.soane.org/exhibitions/space-popular-portal-galleries](https://www.soane.org/exhibitions/space-popular-portal-galleries)

CREDITS

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Theme Music by Zanshin.
Lara Lesmes
There should be more of an awareness of where that term comes from but also I think what's maybe more problematic is that, the way that is used now, termed as the Metaverse, very much makes it seem as a product that is there to be built, when we believe that it’s very much actually just an evolution of what we already have that is the internet. Just, we are adding a third dimension, and we are also adding methods of exchange and methods of carrying information and contracts, and so on, that will enable new forms of authentication and new forms of carrying through an identity but is no more than an evolution of what we already have. It is just not great to see it as a product that some whatever, massive company is going to build for everybody to use, but actually, hopefully, we will carry through the diversity of the internet as it is.

Severin Matusek
Which is becoming harder and harder, I guess, because I think now that the metaverse becomes so popular and now that we have seen over the last two years how much commercial potential there is. Now we're all going back to like physical gatherings again and we don't have to be on Zoom calls again but yeah, probably in the next few years it's only going to show, really how in the long term, it's going to evolve. So when you talk about in your eighth thesis as part of the manifesto, I think a very important word there is civic infrastructure, which is not commercial infrastructure, not branded infrastructure. So can you explain a little bit more about what you mean by civic infrastructure for the immersive internet?

Fredrik Hellberg
Yeah, this, we think, really is something that will be absolutely key, if it's going to become anything else than just a commercial nightmare. It's getting built now, obviously, and it's we our belief from our research is really inevitable that we will be spending an increasing amount of time in these virtual environments and if they are driven by revenue-driven companies only, then that will be the core purpose, and the quality of the interaction of humans will be secondary. Jaron Lanier, who is the person who coined the term virtual reality, whose later turned completely against many of these technologies, described it quite well. If you have an interaction between two people, and you have a third party, who runs the platform where the interaction happens, and that platform's only interest is to manipulate this conversation, then the interaction can never really be truly meaningful. So we think and we are not policymakers, we're not politicians, but we try throughout our work slightly, just kind of make as many people aware as possible to try and influence sort of on a policy level, that it's really time for cities, governments potentially or other organizations to make a big effort to try and make these virtual platforms that are public or civic. We do not see much great hope for this yet. There’s a lot of groups that are trying to influence tech companies, but they will require a tremendous effort or a disaster for this to really happen.

Severin Matusek
If we use a metaphor, the metaverse or the immersive internet basically becomes like a huge shopping mall, where the shopping mall is owned by someone, and the shops are owned by someone and all the owners of these shops have an interest of us spending more money, spending more time etc. and
there's nothing such as a publicly funded museum or a public park, no things that are actually funded by society or by taxpayers. Is that a correct metaphor for the upcoming Metaverse

**Lara Lesmes**
You can also look back at cities and maybe realize that it's not so new, I mean, or that the city square or the walled city, being the city square not being originally a space that represented democracy, right, but actually being more of a space of surveillance? You had a walled city, and then you have this opening in the middle of the walled city where any stranger or any people could gather, but also where you could literally be seen. So in a way, you could see that maybe a similar trajectory. I mean, you choose a kind of safety, or you choose a sort of predictability in the way we are also using the internet. That's where we go to our centralized platforms because that is where you actually can find your way in the mess, and I think that's very similar to the way in which we choose to gather in cities. The thing is that, well, seems we have done all of the work over the centuries to build certain civic infrastructures that have been, some of them more successful than others, then maybe some of that could be applied proactively as opposed to retroactively, which is what now is trying to be done to social media platforms to retroactively regulate them. So maybe in this case, it could be done proactively, but very likely, it won't, because it's very hard to see the relevance and the importance and the impact of often new technological infrastructure before it's actually there and before you're actually using it.

**Severin Matusek**
So a possible solution would be that actually, city governments or national governments get involved now to build their own virtual, immersive spaces, but they apparently don't.

**Lara Lesmes**
Could be, probably won't happen. That is also really odd, because we're talking about an infrastructure that is so global, and then it's just so odd, how the internet is trying to be regulated according to physical borders. So that is also really strange. However, it's like, well, if you don't have any other means of organizing yourself that are not geographically located, and according to political borders, then maybe that is how it needs to begin until we start figuring out. Another option is what we're trying to do a lot, is that like, people create their own platforms, and they host them in servers, where you agree with how that server is run, what energy is using, and so on. You have the management of that space, or a particular group has the management, there is an agreement and an understanding of what you are agreeing to, when you come into that space, as opposed to only only only using maybe, like very large centralized platforms.

**Severin Matusek**
That's where basically your concept of portals comes in, right as kind of the interweaving fabric that connects different spaces that can be hyper commercial or hyper individual or hyper artistic or countercultural but the fabric of portals is kind of like the navigating structure that people find, right?

**Fredrik Hellberg**
Yeah, it's the equivalent of the street network, essentially. It works on a design level completely differently than a street network but it's a good metaphor, where like, unless there is somebody, some organization somehow, that makes the effort to connect things, even if that is not really of your personal
gain or interest. Like you connect a person's house with a street, even if that person is not going to come and buy your products or whatever and like it's happened similarly, I guess, with other kinds of, now public utilities, like electricity. So when you had like several companies competing, and you either bought electricity from one company or another, then that meant that you either had access or not to certain other things, etc. It's inevitably going to be, and ideally, extremely different in all of these different virtual environments. It can't all be the same. That's also not really the point, right, which means that the transition is going to be complex on a design level, but also on a political level. Because you would want to bring your, whatever it might be, the way you look or the other things that you associate with yourself, with you into another place that is very complex on a coding level, etc. So it will, it will require a tremendous human collaborative effort that really could become something really to be proud of. There is efforts that goes in this direction, but again, we will probably have to prepare ourselves for a period that will be extremely weird with these kind of enclaves really, the metaphor of the walled city, where sort of all of these things happen in individual silos, where to bring all of your goods, your connections, your friends, from one to another will be difficult, which means that it will be really a separation between different cultures, until hopefully, very soon, this kind of portal network really gets built out on a sort of big scale.

Severin Matusek
Can you talk a little bit more about your research process into portals. I loved the slides that you showed at the end, where you both had a huge spreadsheet with lots of information, but then as well, you had these pop cultural references from youth literature and cartoons, and then videogame stuff even. So how do you approach a project like that? Where do you start? Where do you find your resources? And do you feel like we can learn something from these references of the present or as well as the past like the portals from centuries ago that were represented different things than today?

Fredrik Hellberg
Yeah, in this case, it's quite straightforward. It's really consuming the actual media where these portals takes place

Severin Matusek
So, watching a lot of cartoons.

Fredrik Hellberg
Yeah exactly. It's goes different in other projects, like freestyle, where we were looking at the relationship between evolution media, and style and architecture, because then really we have a lot of different cross referencing data. But it's extremely interesting when we start to build up some of this data and we start to see trends, because we were always under the assumption that portals had existed for a very long time in fiction, but it actually hasn't. And you look at folklore, to some degree, mythology, and then more organised religion, in this part of the world, and it's very rarely mentioning any of these sorts of magical devices. For instance, in the Bible, the word portal doesn't exist in the English translation, but the word gate is mentioned 338 times. Only one of those is mentioning a kind of metaphysical gate, a gate to heaven, only one time in the entire Bible. All of the other mentions are physical gates into cities that were, of course, then extremely important. It's really after the Second World War, where they start to become very, very common in fiction and before then they're not so common, and they change with
the sort of evolution of what's happening in society. So in the 50s, and 60s, most of them are about big, collaborative technological innovations in the sort of nuclear age, and then, in the 80s, 90s, that kind of more postmodern era where they become sort of devices to connect contradictions in culture. And then, towards the end of the 20th century, and the beginning of the 21st century, almost all of them are about class and class wars, and about belonging or not belonging. In the exhibition, we will unveil some of this, but it's really much more complex than we could have, kind of, anticipated. So this project will continue, and hopefully, it will eventually result in an archive that will be available where you can really search for which portals require training or which portals look like this or their liminal depth, like how long time it takes to pass through them, or, yeah.

Severin Matusek
Is there a certain goal that you pursue in doing your research, in publishing manifestos, in doing public exhibitions, you know, some sort of influencing the trajectory or educating the general public about what this future might look like, and how they can engage, and possibly positively shape it?

Lara Lesmes
I mean, there is that goal of sharing that information and creating an awareness of posts like, what feelings might these devices instigate, or where are we headed and so on. I also like to say also, that somehow, you kind of do this work because you need to, like, it's almost like you don't have an option to not do it, because suddenly you have that curiosity, and then you start, and there is not an option to not do it. You can not avoid just like, throwing yourself into it at a personal level as well. So I think that it is quite a lot of that as well feeling a sense of fulfillment through just like trying to figure these things out for yourself, and then if you can share them with others, and they can be useful for them, that's also wonderful.

Severin Matusek
My final question is, what do these virtual environments that we just discussed mean to our sense of identity? You also discussed avatars, and how we probably choose different avatars in different virtual environments, what does this do to our understanding of who we are, both in the virtual worlds, but also in the physical worlds? Do you see any future where it will change?

Lara Lesmes
It's not going to be pretty, the next few years. It's probably going to be hyper commercial, hyper centralized, and yet, we're all probably gonna go there, because it will allow a possibility of exchange, or possibility for togetherness, that I think most humans will find hard to resist. Human connection, being with others, and whatever means we have to do that, it seems to be in our nature to seek that, to seek those forms of exchange. So it's not going to look good, and then we're here trying to see what are the ways in which maybe we can be more informed about it, doing this sort of research of like, okay, what are the things that we are going to be looking at? What is the meaning of that? In which ways we can make that better? What could be the better infrastructures that we could follow? I don't know, no, we should perhaps make a decision. Like, should we go deep into politics to really try to make some of these things happening? It's like, what, no, it doesn't even make any sense but it's just not gonna be good. We might look optimistic. We might sound optimistic, but it is going to be rough. It is not gonna be a smooth ride.
Fredrik Hellberg
One thing that will very likely happen, probably within our lifetime when smartphones get replaced with devices that will look like this, which means that all media that we perceive will be spatial, there will be a possibility to not have any artificial lighting anymore. No more billboards, no more spotlights, because all of the lighting that we navigate in our environment, both informational and navigational lighting, can be personal. It's a possibility that every city in the world will go completely dark, no more artificial lighting anywhere. That poses many questions for like, how much energy would this save? What kind of life would this create? It's at the level that even us spending a lot of time thinking about this, we can't quite comprehend the insane social and political, cultural problems that we will have to face. Many people also speak of a sort of VR winter, where like, it will be behaviorally and socially so insanely complex, similar to what happened with psychedelic drugs in the 60s, that it's just too complex for society to handle that it just became illegal. So we're also very, very prepared that this technology might be extremely heavily restricted, and that might literally be the best way to go. And maybe, ideally, before something disastrous happens.