

Bika Rebek & Agustin Schang

episode 6

The Culture & Technology Podcast

<https://culture-technology.podigee.io>

Episode 6: The Architecture of Culture
Bika Rebek x Agustin Schang

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, spatial experiences have been resolutely material, taking place within cities, buildings, and rooms. Over the past year, however, the pandemic has moved museums, performances, and gatherings online, into virtual environments from games and video calls to VR hubs.

To get the lowdown on how technology is rebuilding our notions of space, Episode 6 invites two architects and curators, Bika Rebek and Agustin Schang to share their take on the shifting form of architecture within our emerging hybrid reality.

GUESTS

Bika Rebek is an architect, curator and educator. As co-founder and partner of Some Place Studio, she has created physical and virtual spaces with institutions such as MoMA in New York and the MAK in Vienna. someplace.studio

Agustin Schang is an architect, curator and cultural producer. His work focuses on the intersection of architecture, culture, and the city which he most recently brought to life as the associate producer of The Mile-Long Opera, a public engagement project at the Highline in Manhattan. agustinschang.com

HOST

Severin Matusek is a writer, producer and editor who has spent the last decade researching how technology transforms culture, communities and society.

IDEAS AND PEOPLE IN CONTEXT

- **Some Place Studio** is an architectural practice bringing to life physical and virtual spaces. Founded by Bika Rebek and Daniel Prost, the practice approaches contemporary issues through the lens of architectural discourse and photography. someplace.studio
- ***Uncanny Values: Artificial Intelligence & You*** was an exhibition held at the MAK in Vienna as part of the Vienna Biennale for Change 2019. 100 years after Freud wrote “The Uncanny”, the exhibition delved into the impacts of artificial intelligence on every aspect of contemporary life. uncannyvalues.org
- **Susan Sellers** is Senior Design Critic at the Yale School of Art, and founding partner and creative director of New York-based global design consultancy 2x4, where she leads a range of strategy and design projects across culture, commerce and urban life. 2x4.org
- ***The Mile-Long Opera: A Biography of 7 O’Clock*** is a theatrical performing arts opera that was held at New York’s High Line in October 2018 co-created by architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro and composer David Lang, with words and lyrics by Anne Carson and Claudia Rankin. High Line milelongopera.com
- Greg Lynn is an American architect, founder of Greg Lynn FORM office, professor at the UCLA School of Arts and Architecture, and co-founder of robotics company Piaggio Fast Forward. glform.com
- **Hubs by Mozilla** are open-source virtual reality (VR) chat rooms allowing people to come together to watch videos, chat, enjoy 3D objects, or simply spend time together. hubs.mozilla.com

- **Future Architecture Rooms** is an experimental digital environment comprising online architecture museums, galleries, publishing houses, and labs, curated by designer and researcher Anastassia Smirnova, who also co-founded SVESMI, a Dutch-Russian office for architecture and urbanism. futurearchitectureplatform.org

CREDITS

The Vienna Business Agency supports businesses, the economy and the city in developing the Austrian capital's creative industries and shaping its future trajectory. viennabusinessagency.at

Editorial Team: Paul Feigelfeld, Anna Dorothea Ker, Severin Matusek, Elisabeth Noever-Ginthör, Elisa Stockinger, Heinz Wolf.

Theme Music by Zanshin.

The topics of the Culture & Technology Podcast will be further discussed at the Creative Days Vienna 2021 - part of Vienna UP'21. <https://viennaup.com>

TRANSCRIPT

"The future is going to be mixed. Our physical spaces are going to be kind of contingent, or really intermixed with our virtual spaces. But I think museums and cultural institutions haven't been taking full advantage of that."

Hello and welcome to the Culture and Technology Podcast. I'm your host, Severin Matusek. The Culture and Technology Podcast is a virtual salon initiated by the Vienna Business Agency in which experts from Vienna and around the globe explore how technology is reshaping the future of culture.

In today's episode we're going to talk about the architecture of physical and virtual spaces. Architecture is a huge part of how we experience culture. Take the Museum of Fine Arts in Vienna, for example: when you enter it, you're welcomed by incredibly high ceilings, marble floors and gold leaves, ready to take in some of history's most incredible fine art. It's clear that when the museum was built in the 19th century, it incorporated the values of its time in how art should be presented and worshipped.

Digital spaces, too, are built on certain values. Games, video calls or even websites are designed according to certain principles that define how we interact there.

So, as the spaces in which we experience culture continually evolve and become more virtual, I wanted to invite two architects to our virtual salon to help us understand how space shapes culture.

Bika Rebek is a partner at architecture design firm Some Place Studio and has created physical and virtual spaces with institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna.

Agustin Schang is an architect, curator and cultural producer. His work focuses on the intersection of architecture, culture, and the city which he most recently brought to life as the associate producer of The Mile-Long Opera, a public engagement project at the Highline in Manhattan.

Together with Bika and Agustin I sat down to explore the question: How are architecture and new technologies shaping the future of cultural experiences?

Welcome to our virtual salon, Agustin and Bika.

—

BR

During this year, and the pandemic, really, it became very clear what the role is. And I think the role is actually to create, you know that that's a very personal definition. But I think it's to create social contact, and to allow for a level of propinquity, or people kind of accidentally encountering each other or running into each other, having somewhat unexpected, unplanned experiences.

Because I think what we're really good at right now is doing things like this podcast, we're meeting and for a specific time, and having a specific conversation with a specific intent. But I think what spaces can do is sort of allow for people, you know, to have this unexpected experience. And I think that's really missing right now. And I think that's something that I think we'll maybe be more aware of in the kind of years to come after that experience.

SM

I'm curious, Agus, you, don't work as an architect, per se, I think you come from a school of architecture, but you work as a cultural producer and curator, but I think you will really apply a lot of principles of architecture to producing cultural experiences. Is that correct? So how would you describe it?

AS

We met actually doing a specific program here in New York. And we started to understand that the architecture is definitely beyond the built environment. I mean, it's beyond the built form, and Bika being like someone more like an educator, and maybe me, I'm, like, more of a cultural provocateur, an 'infiltrator', as I try to call myself...

I think we have also responsibility to do, too, for the general public public tissue architecture, as I was saying before, is something that is beyond the bare like aesthetic, like build forum, and also show them how any little architectural, you know, definition or even, how any kind of architectural situation that has been done by architects or urban planners can affect our lives. What both of us are trying to do is to make sure that the architectural method could be more expanded and more democratic and reach more new audiences.

SM

Can you give an example of that – so how in your projects, have you applied his principles of using architecture to reach more audiences, make more democratic access for many people?

BR

For me, the turning point really came when I started working at the Met, the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. And I was there as an exhibition designer. And before that I had worked in different firms and had worked mostly on, you know, what you can call 'high end', either residential things, or wealthy investors, things like that, that often were in locations far away that I would never even be able to visit. And so there was a certain dissociation from the work that I had done. I loved the design part, but it didn't feel like I could actually connect to the people that were going to use that architecture.

And so when I started to do exhibition design at the Met, it's the most public thing, right, like 1000s, millions of people go sometimes to see this shows, and I could, on one hand, sort of be on site, experience, these, you know, not just the people visiting, but also the people making and building and setting up the exhibitions, all the different parts that came together, because exhibitions are done relatively fast.

And, you know, that, while they're not necessarily cheaper, but they, they're always designed also, with the premise of being accessible to everybody, we had to think about wheelchair access, we had to think about visually impaired people, we had to, you know, really think about the audience, the large range of population that will come in. And then we also started to think about anything that influenced my work later is also about digital access, and read the whole user journey from how somebody finds out about this, to, you know, how they get there. What do they do there, how they take a break, all these things. And I think that really became defining for Some Place Studio and the office that we started later.

SM

I'm so interested about your experience at the Met, because I mean, anyone who has been there in New York City knows it's this amazing place. It's so big, it has so many things to see, you feel like you've never reached an end with all the stuff that's there. So how would you say has this amazing public space influenced other projects

that came after it? Like, can you give an example of maybe a recent exhibition or a recent architectural project that you worked on where you feel like, that's where some of the experience that I had at the Met really influenced my work? And my thinking behind that?

BR

Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think it reverberates in all the work we do in a way because, you know, it was such an important experience, I always like to say it's my favorite job, except for having my own office. But they're specifically *Uncanny Values* at the MAK in Vienna. And yet, I think it was sort of, you know, informed by that experience, because it was also a public institution.

You know, a kind of big exhibition with Marlies Wirth who was, I think, also on this podcast. So it had kind of similar parameters, but sort of applied to a more local context. But I think what I learned at the Met in terms of design also – and that was due to some of the people that I worked with – people like Susan Sellers, who's the head of 2x4 is to, to push institutions a little bit.

So you know, big institutions like the Met, and actually the MAK in Vienna as well, the Museum of Applied Arts, they have a long history, but they also sometimes can be a little slow, or, you know, they're maybe not the most adventurous on their own. And so you have kind of learned a little bit about the tactic, but just you know, that it's that it's actually possible to push them and then that they're really satisfied with that in the end. And I think that, that has been kind of a direct effect, a learning experience that I could apply later.

SM

Maybe that's a good transition to Agus because I'm also interested in your experience with the cultural productions. Have you applied that in your work as well?

AS

I think that's the main architectural characteristic first, trying to plan to organize things with what we have coming from the Global South, from South America. The conditions are never there. So when you're at school and you've been trained as an architect, apparently there is this idea that all the conditions on the thing that you need to fulfill, but in real life, nothing of that applies. And I think that requires some kind of architectural way of thinking to work with what you have in sample like, from basically from budget to materials to site and also to people you're working with.

All the ideas or all build it, or you can say all the theories, and this actually ended up coming from production, you know, ending coming from those kinds of, like, forced unexpected encounters with things, people in places that, you know, push us to come with some kind of result. You know, I think that the interest of architects is also thinking about, there has to be some kind of outcome. Again, going back to the same

before, it doesn't have to be extremely like a built outcome, but at least have some kind of impact, or effective.

SM

I'm actually interested in one particular example of your work that I researched, which is this project called the Mile-Long Opera, which I think you were a big part of at the High Line. Can you talk a little bit about that?

AS

Definitely. First. I want to give credit to Diller Scofidio. She's not only been the designer of the High Line, but also been working on this project for more than six years, trying to reconnect the park with the community.

SM

So I just want to clarify to the audience what the High Line is because maybe not everyone knows it, right. The Highline is this amazing Park, in the Chelsea district of Manhattan.

AS

It is the elevator park for – that goes for like a month and a half. And they used to be a next piece of train infrastructure that was going to be demolished and then a group of neighbors – I think 10, more than 10, 15 years ago, got it together and start putting, you know, petitions to the City Hall not to demolish and also to somehow acknowledge the natural, kind of like, fauna and flora that appears there. And somehow keep that and then through a competition thing, Diller Scofidio won that commission and they created this incredible park.

The park is a great, great thing for the area, you know, it revitalized, kind of like a lost part of Manhattan. So this project was an interesting cultural experience design, but Liz Diller in connection with their performance background in the early late 80s, and 90s. to reconnect the part with the community again.

I was the producer of the project, with a mandate beginning with three people working and imagining them trying to gather 1000 singers – it was more like trying to build the Olympics. So my role there for me was finding those participants, those singers who are going to be part of the project. And from the very beginning, for me, knowing the city and understanding how this process operates, with gentrification and everything, making sure that we bring the most diverse group of singers to the park.

SM

I want to ask both of you as an open ended question now. When we talk about technology, and when we talk about virtualization, you know, the fact that we are here in a virtual podcast room talking to each other, how do you think about virtual

spaces? In regarding the future of cultural experiences, but also the future of architecture? How do you use these virtual spaces and possibilities that we nowadays have to bring people together through architecture essentially?

BR

In my case, I think, not the obsession, but I said interest in technology, actually, origin, the origin is at Die Angewandte in Vienna. Because of my university setting with Greg Lynn and with the people around there, there was an incredible openness within the architecture curriculum towards trying new technologies. When you're in an academic school, you don't quite realize how you get pushed into certain directions. And I just thought, as a default, I thought, everybody learns all these new technologies and knows how to use them. And it's kind of open to learning more of them. And then I went into other contexts and realized that that's not necessarily the case.

I think one thing I became particularly interested in is that same idea of how do we actually bring people together in virtual space, the way that you know that that is really missing. And I think that, especially in this pandemic, we're noticing that is really missing.

And this year, in particular, I've gotten very much into VR, out of out of the circumstances, and in particular, start to work with Mozilla Hubs, which is an open source platform developed by by Mozilla, and they essentially enable social VR rooms. So you can go in and you know, hang out in a virtual space.

And you can use it in VR on your headset, but it also very importantly, works on a desktop, and even on a phone. And here, this is where the accessibility comes in. It's not the coolest looking, the fastest, the best and the most technologically advanced platform, but it is the one that kind of combines, you know, a spatial technology with a very accessible technology that everybody can access.

But I think there's a place and actually a need for architects to think about that, because we have a certain kind of training and theoretical background, practical background, to think about the spaces and think in a slightly different, different way. Because a lot of what I see out there is, you know, based on sort of the most typical spaces are kind of replica of a real space, you know, people we build things to know, the bar to build that. And there's sometimes it's hard to find really innovative spaces. We're thinking about and trying to figure out new ways of being together there.

I think we're living in a historical moment for this kind of virtual space, like for the virtual space in general, because the big – because we were all forced, all I mean, the entire world was forced to go on a lockdown. And the whole world, you know, was forced to communicate through some kind of digital platform I'm talking about from social media too soon, and start consuming, you know, digital content.

And most of this digital content, especially in culture, was trying to, as Bika was saying, replicating the kind of interior spaces in virtual space, typical people couldn't move. And it's interesting how that idea representation of something was physical now, it's slowly changing about trying to be more like a design-oriented technique.

The discussion, I feel, is now what, what that virtual space is going to look like. In order to build on that, I think, it's important that there's an audience for this thing, that before, it wasn't that clear, there was another audience that was interested in consuming that. And I think that's some kind of like, positive kind of outcome of the pandemic, like, every, all the time, it's kind of like more like the virtual agenda was kind of a repository on is this culture institution, and like, afterthought of the physical, you know, like the, the videos or the images, or even like, if you have the money and intentions and aims to do this kind of virtual replicas.

So, I think that's so important, because that's somehow going to, like, help us to kind of imagine how the future is going to look like. I mean, if there is an audience that been trained for eight months to try to consume that, it means that they're going to be interested in pursuing that for many different reasons, you know, like, because that kind of could be 24/7 available, that mean that we don't need to travel that we can we also can be exposed to new environments.

BR

I love that you have this view, but I think it's a little optimistic, at least in terms of what we're trying to do. My observation is that, yes, people are clearly forced to be at home and try to use, you know, existing technologies. But that's, that's been the problem. Most people are happy to use Zoom and chat services and social media, but usually it doesn't go beyond that. I think the fear of technology is still there. And I think there's still a lot of work and outreach that we have to do in order for people to embrace this a little bit more: engaging, but then sometimes also slightly more challenging experiences. You know, of course, young people, gamers, nerds, all these people are deep into it. And there's whole communities that exist online that exist in VR.

You know, people engage in friendships that have never met in person and all that kind of stuff. But most people our age of terror and older are still quite reluctant. And I've had the experience now with building these spaces, you know, people did it because mostly, they would be my friends who are interested, and they would come in, and I would teach them and everyone in my Grandma went in there, and she understood how to use it. So it's not that hard. But there is a hurdle. A psychological hurdle, I would say, for people to actually use these spaces.

But I think before the pandemic, I tried to do a lot of virtual projects, specifically with museums. And actually last year, it was – we had the wrong timing, but we went to a

bunch of different cultural institutions actually also in Vienna, and basically pitched, you know, tools for a show which was kind of an iteration of a virtual platform that will allow museums to design on in 3D on the web, and then also present their project. And they totally understood why it would be good, but nobody would be really interested in funding that. You know, because there's a premium on reality, there's a premium on sort of what we know, of course, and then pandemic, I think that that premium has gone. But the premium has kind of moved, I think towards what the other thing that we know, which is the sort of very flat online experiences that, you know, that are easy to use, and that people already know. So I think there's, yeah, there's just a lot of work to be done there.

AS

But I also feel that the future is going to be mixed. It's funny, because I was reading these articles you know, like, usually like this, this week about how a lot of museums and in Europe was star, like charging for the virtual tours, when before there was something that was kind of like not even thinking about it. And now like, again, like I feel like every kind of and I'm going to call it like, access to commerce, is able to play like a stream kind of service, you know, they started understanding like the cost of that content, and make sure they can pay for that, and monetize that. I'm not saying that's the best example. But I feel that there is an audience that's gonna go in that direction.

What do you think about – how is there going to be that kind of like human interaction within that virtual space? Besides that, you can choose your avatar and talk and chat with people – do you think that something's going to happen?

BR

I think there'll be new rituals and new ways of engaging, I think with avatars, I think it's too a little bit too young to really, to really find out what happens, one thing I've noticed hanging out in VR is that each world has their own small talk.

So, you know, when you are in one particular environment, you're gonna mostly be talking about that environment, and what's happening there. And then you're going into talking about maybe your gear and you know, so conversation get, they get very directed by the environment you're in, rather than maybe your personal connections because usually you would meet people through a friend, or, you know, even if you meet them online, you you have certain things in common let's say, but but you have in common, there's actually space.

And so, so that's quite interesting to me in terms of like the content that people talk about. But we are in this very skeuomorphic moment, right? Like, when we started to have iPhones, the library looked like an actual sort of library with, you know, wood wood in the background, with like a little bookshelf. And I think now we've learned that the library on your phone doesn't need to look that way. And we still understand

that it's a library. And I think that transition hasn't quite happened yet in VR, or in 3D social spaces. And I think that's, that's going to be a really interesting process.

SM

I love that example. I mean, to me, as a non-architect, it sounds very exciting to say: in traditional architecture, when you were building physical spaces that take a lot of time, cost a lot, you only see in the end, how are people going to interact with it? So let's say you build a public square, Will people adapt it and use it and get creative with it or not? You will only see once it's there, right? Whereas in digital spaces, you can basically build a new space every day and tested with people to see how they interact. Is this something you actually do, Bika? You test a lot to see how do people adopt and create these new rituals and behaviors?

BR

Yeah, absolutely. I think that, you know, some practices that come from software design – and I'm very critical of sort of that hip adoption of, you know, everything needs to come from the way that everything is called an incubator and has to be associated with that because it's hip right now. But there are some practices that are really useful. And that's something that actually got exposed to at New Inc. It was a cultural incubator in York City at the New Museum. And the whole idea was that it's an incubator for artists or for people who are in the creative fields, but teaches them some of these methods that are usually used in software design. And I think that that's something that I actually now apply to try to apply to physical spaces as well.

So we are big fans of mock ups of you know, getting people to, to be involved. And sometimes it's really as simple as in the early design process, putting yourself into a kind of first person perspective, literally, but even just mentally emotionally, kind of walking through the space. And that's something I asked my students, my students always do, like, adding yourself into space. And that's not, it seems so obvious, but it actually isn't traditionally, a necessary part of architecture, architecture has always been a very, very bird's eye view profession, right? The master plan, the idea that we have to kind of think large and think of the system and think of the organization. But the idea that you actually think of the user, and the affordances of your architecture is still quite new. And something I'm really excited about.

SM

I feel like there's this eternal balance between the audience and the producer or the audience and the architect, right. So what you said, because I thought was quite interesting to say, well, technology is still flat. So people are still basically using very easy things that are convenient, because it's so easy in the digital space to just switch off. And we see that with tons of content that's being produced, like if a Netflix show doesn't capture you, in the first two minutes, people just switch off, which means, you know, a lot of things get just much more streamlined and less critical or less challenging. I'll just put it out there.

I guess it's the same when you design an exhibition at the Met, is like you basically you probably want to challenge people in their approach and are thinking but you can't always challenge them too much, because it might get overwhelming and overbearing. So what do you both have you think of this balance of? How much can you push an audience to adopt new ways of thinking about things or new ways of adopting new technologies? And how much do you have to maybe scale back a little and still make sure it's not overwhelming, it's still a very broad mass of people can actually access it and use it?

I mean, when you're working with with bigger institutions, I mean, probably, that the topic more broad, you know, and the audiences are more general, and you have to, you know, scale back, as you were saying, but when they had the money to work, you know, for example, recent project that deals with the pandemic was working with Americas Society that it's a very interesting organization in New York with a long history of promoting Latin American artists, from New York to the world, I guess. And it was the very first time we managed to bring contemporary architecture to them, you know, so again, it was like, the challenge for us was trying to see how deep we can go into the language and how specific, not only because the execution was more about art, it wasn't about architecture, but also understanding that we were bringing those Latin American practitioners to a broader public that wasn't, you know, didn't have the language.

So in that way, we were showing them that architecture was beyond just like a little, you know, building in some place or some right, and we can talk about, you know, from racial issues, to affordable housing to door tours, you know, specific design constraints through to human planet.

BR

I mean, even at the Met, you know, people have to actually go there and put some kind of commitment into and probably stand in line and go through a crowd so you can actually expose them to quite a bit and they won't just leave right away because they already made some effort to go there, and when you're clicking onto a website, and like you said, if you don't like it immediately, you're just going to close it. And that's it, end of experience. So I do think we have to, again, be thinking of the user journey in virtual space as well, and kind of, you know, pick people up where they are, and help them engage in these journeys in different ways.

And, for example, when we do Hubs events, we always have a Zoom call going on at the same time, just because that's something that we know people are familiar with. And so we often start with that, you know, we kind of explain the idea there, and then we switch over and there's always kind of like, a safe space, you can go back to forget loss or something happens in, in the VR space, you know, that there's people

there in a format that you're familiar with. So I think creating these, these bridges, and the sort of padding around experiences, is really important.

And, you know, there's a lot of innovation this year, there's definitely been a lot of different ways that people have, have thought about that, not always successfully. And that's what's interesting, you know, sort of how you can really look at this year, I should probably do an analysis, pandemic, sort of accessibility in virtual space or something like that.

SM

I think something you touch upon here is the word 'access' in a way, you mentioned that in the early in the beginning of the conversation, you know, when at the Met you designed for wheelchair use, and so on. And I think, besides the pandemic, what 2020 has also brought upon are these movements, like Black Lives Matter, is an increasing focus worldwide on the topic of inequality, diversity, exclusion, inclusion. So what do you think about when it comes to designing for access, understanding that maybe all of us are biased, because we come from a certain background? Because we come from a certain philosophy, and so on. So how do you try to include that in your practice to not fall into these biases and exclude people or design for as many diverse people as possible?

BR

One way that we start to think about is, is our office structure. So we have actually always been remote first, because our office is distributed between Vienna, New York, and we also travel a lot. And so our entire infrastructure is online anyway. And I think we always had this idea that maybe we'll have a physical office at some point. And we gave that up this year, also, with a thinking of hiring practices. So we just had our fully first, our first fully remote intern. And what that allows us to do is actually hire people who are not necessarily like us, who don't live in cities, who might have a different background. And that in itself, I think it's important to bring different voices to the table.

SM

And Argus, can you share something from your current thinking about how to do that especially, I mean, we talked about the Mile-Long Opera, where you really try to involve the local communities bring lots of diverse people in there. So when it comes to a new project, how do you make sure to address so many diverse needs and personalities and backgrounds to actually access these productions that you do?

AS

Two things: I think that, being based in New York, even though is still a very unequal place, it's force myself coming from and coming to understand that there is there is a word is an urban space extremely diverse for a second is like I always think, and

especially thing like now more than never I think they said there is a responsibility as a producer, as a practitioner, to bring over as Bika was explaining with her office, like make sure that somehow you bring the most diverse group of voices and narrative to whatever projects you're working on.

And that's again, going back to that small like virtual slash infiltrator project that we did with the Americas Society for me, like trying to find those practitioners are Latin American practitioners that weren't the basic rich, white male was so important.

The interesting thing that happened is after you put out there I mean, where are the connections you are seeing those people having when other similar groups or have been with those practitioners invited to places that they weren't invited before? How do you make sure those names are circulated among scholars or other practitioners or other curators? And I think that we have to acknowledge the power position that you have, when you are in that place, and making sure you do your responsibility, and making sure that whatever decision you're going to make it, you're going to have an impact.

Let's say, you talk to an institution, an institution that could be a museum, a theater, an association, a society that has a physical space, and they want to put up a new exhibition, or they want to put up a new production? What would you suggest to consider cultural institutions of how to adapt to this new world of technology that works with spaces in order to reach an audience and do something exciting?

BK

The future is going to be mixed. I think, you know, that this idea of hybrid design, or the idea that our physical spaces are going to be kind of contingent, or really intermixed with our virtual spaces. I mean, it's already happening with our smartphones, in our pockets, and so on. But I think museums and cultural institutions at large, maybe haven't been taking full advantage of that. And so I think that integration will increase.

And that's also something I think, that we're quite interested in, as an office, is to explore these intersections, to explore, you know, I talked a lot about a lot about VR, but AR is actually also really, really interesting in that regard. Right? In terms of like, mixed reality, MR – augmented reality is AR – so it's, I think, those are even just current technologies, I think it will even increase. And, again, it's not about using a fancy word, it's more about thinking about the itinerary of somebody and, and picking up people who are already online, bring him to the physical space, then picking up the people who are in the physical space and bringing them online. Right. I think it's, I think it's a little bit about that exchange. Yeah, I think that's what I would tell museum

AS

I think most of the institution realize that your audience is not just the number of, you know, people get into your physical space that goes through the doors, you know, I think that idea of having someone come in there with a counter, I think is just already like, totally off, outdated, you know, like, I think now, the institutions understand and understood, hopefully, that, okay, that needs to happen, because I think those souls talking about the future, that the one on one relationship with exhibitions, but also like the possibility of like, expanding their mission and the programming worldwide, period. I mean, that's going to happen, and then how that kind of going to come back to them like as a member, as people, they're going to support institution in many different capacity, not only money, you know, I think that they start realizing that they're, they're not geographical limits anymore.

BR

Yeah, I have an example actually, um, this year, the Future Architecture Platform, which is I used to be a participant in it, and Agus was in it as well. And I've been on the advisory board for a few years, they're very physical event, the whole idea is to connect a number of institutions across Europe, architecture, museums and galleries. And yeah, they have slightly different profiles from very large and very small ones. But it's kind of a network between all the different institutions. And the idea is to support young architects by basically flying them all over Europe and bringing them to these institutions, and doing various projects, lectures and events there. So this year, you know, it was a total dilemma, what to do now, I mean, the whole premise is that it's about social connection, but people getting to know each other and doing things together.

And so the platform then, under guidance of Anastassia Smirnova built a platform called Rooms, and it was quite simple. It was basically just a website that allowed every institution to kind of showcase their work through a video or some other online format. But it was really helpful actually, in bringing everybody together. And you know, now we're talking about the next steps, and they want to keep it of course, you know, it's already there, we can expand it. And it's a great, it's not that we're gonna go back to normal and forget about that, I think it's people are going to just have both and kind of those, the physical and the virtual formats will feed into each other.

I do think that geography is still important, actually. I don't think we we will, and I don't think we want to get rid of it. You know, I think in terms of language, it's important to actually cultivate local languages. And also in terms of audience, I think it's important to, to speak to very specific audience and not try to make everything entirely global. So I think that's going to be an interesting negotiation where, you know, museums, and institutions can sort of fine-tune or define which kind of how big or you know, how specific they want their audience to be.

But I mean, it's a it's a kind of simple example, but with our own website, you know, I can see that most people who go, you can go into analytics, and sort of see where

people look at your, at your website. And obviously, anybody in the world could look at it. But you know, most of the hits are in New York and in the US, and in Germany, because we have a project there now. And when we had a project in Austria, there were more projects, more more hits in Austria. So there's something extremely local about how people use the internet that we are not acknowledging we also do yeah, it's global. Everybody can go Yeah, but no, it's not. Right, again, to my point earlier, you have to kind of, you have to put a lot of work in to people actually accessing this these spaces, just putting it online is not going to make it accessible, was going to make it accessible, it's putting in really hard work to promote it to advertise it to, you know, make podcasts to do all these different things to bring people in.

AS

It's true that the virtual has a different type of competition, you know, the offer is, is out there. And you I mean, and if you have the privilege, you have a device to access, that's another thing that we need to acknowledge, you know.

SM 49:30

Another topic you just touched upon is data. I think, you know, we have an episode on its own about data. But I think what's so interesting about what you both just said is that in the past that are like that seen in a non digital non technological world, a lot of the things you do is guesswork, in the end or is based on experience and curation and and you know, councils of experts coming together thinking, We think this is the right approach or this is the right approach.

Essentially what we have now because of digital experiences is so much data about the audience – like, let's say, if I was an institution, I'm going to put up an exhibition next year, and I'm going to put a lot of money in it, it's probably a good idea to test it in a virtual environment first, to see how does the audience respond? And then I take these insights from 100 people have been to my virtual exhibitions and saying they like this, and they like that. And then I put it into the real world for a 10,000 people to see it, possibly. Is this something you're also thinking about these data points that you get in order to design and be closer to? You said bigger the user, the so-called “user”?

We are super interested in that, in general, I think the data is quite an issue in terms of like, how do we organize it? You know, how do we deal with all the data, my friends have channels who do – they're graphic designers, but build websites that work with AI and data collection? And they're doing, I think, really, really interesting work in that realm. And they said something beautiful, once where they were saying, you know, how can we sort of bring all the data that we've produced together into one world, because right now, it exists in so many different formats. And I think that thinking applies to exhibitions, because exhibitions in the end are also just a bunch of data. But traditionally, that data has been, you know, kind of treated in a certain way, put on a show with lots of love and effort, usually by everyone involved, and

then it disappears. And that's fine, that there's something poetic in that as well. But I think in terms of, you know, how, how do we archive that kind of data? How do we bring it together into one ecosystem? I mean, that's, that's actually probably the challenge of our generation really, you know. I don't think any individual is going to solve that. But it's something that I think we should be also thinking about, as designers and think about kind of the whole lifecycle of these exhibitions that again, something where the digital individual can influence each other because the digital can become a repository or an archive of the physical.

AS

I'm gonna leave this here, because I think it could open to a new podcast, but I mean, of like permanence and then impermanence, you know, and I think that the whole, we're the thing that we need to work on what's going to be the one-on-one physical experience in the future. I mean, talking about the future, not in the next six months, I'm talking like in the next 10 years.

SM

I think the question of permanence and impermanence is a very important one, right? Because you could also argue, yeah, that a lot of the virtual stuff is also so fleeting, right? I mean, you can build this amazing spaces in a virtual world and people engage with it for two hours, and then it's gone. Whereas physical spaces have this permanent structure to it, that make it the experience of it, the cultural experience of it make it different, per se. I don't know, Bika, do you have some thoughts on the virtual? Is there permanence to virtual experiences?

BR

I think the physical isn't as permanent as it's made out to be, buildings are constantly changing. And, you know, I'm not talking about the human horizon. But historically, buildings tend to disappear. In some cultures, like in Japan, they're actually also designed to not last for a very long time. We talked about exhibitions earlier, I mean, all the work that you know I did at the Met, for example, is long gone. And the only archive of that at this point is virtual.

So I think we just haven't figured out how to really preserve virtual memories and how to create a virtual archaeology. That's the challenge I was talking about earlier. And that's, I think, what's really important because I think it would be a pity if all these formats and URL experimentations are lost, because we don't figure out how to preserve that data. And inevitably, a lot of it is going to be lost. And that's okay. But, um, you know, I think, I think developing these tools and data sets to collect that data is just of utmost importance. But yeah, I think, you know, there's also people who print out all their digital photos as a backup in the physical and put them in certain conditions to make sure that they're preserved. So I think the answer isn't on one side, actually, I think it's kind of a two-sided coin again.

And that's it for today. As usual, you can check out the show notes in your podcast app to discover more references and links to the concepts, projects, and great minds that accompanied us throughout our virtual salons.

I've learned a lot over the last six conversations and I hope you have too. We'll be back with more episodes soon... so please subscribe to this podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts to stay in the loop.

The Culture and Technology Podcast is produced by the Vienna Business Agency – The Vienna Business Agency supports businesses, the economy and the city, developing Vienna's creative industries further and therefore changing the city.

Bye for now.