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SPECULATIVE PERSPECTIVES: NAVIGATING LIMINALITY.

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This year's Cumulus theme began with the understanding that, in an age of polycrisis (Morin and Kern, 1999), refining existing practices is not enough; we must also critically reevaluate the foundational preferences and references of modern design at a systemic level. Our track aimed to gather diverse perspectives on speculative design, pushing the conversation beyond its traditional limits.

Designers have long been seen as problem-solvers, addressing a wide range of human needs and desires. However, as ecological and technological shifts challenge the market-driven, user-centered paradigm (Norman, 1988, Verganti, 2009), designers are increasingly exploring the complexities that arise when acknowledging that design's spatial and temporal dimensions extend far beyond the human scale. This change in perspective serves as a catalyst for new enquiries, in which design ventures into the realm of the speculative, the unconventional, and the transformative. Can design's role extend beyond its established boundaries? Can we consider distant futures, parallel timelines, or alternate pasts? Can we embrace a more expansive design philosophy? These questions guided our thinking about the track.

As co-chairs (Karina Vissonova, Ivica Mitrović, Ákos Schneider), we concentrated on highlighting speculative approaches that address more-than-human (Wakkary, 2021) considerations, broadening design to encompass the interconnectedness of humans, non-humans, the biosphere, and the technosphere. In addition, we explored post-speculative efforts aimed at evolving the practice to better tackle real-world challenges and foster bottom-up changes. Our intention was not merely to present speculative design as a method for imagining future scenarios but to foster a space for reflections that surpass the dominant human- and user-centered context.

The potential topics ranged from critical speculative design to unconventional timescales, material complexities, and the creative hybridization of digital or biological agents, extending to questions of design ontology. We received 70 full paper abstracts, of which 20 were accepted, and ultimately 11 made it into the conference program. Additionally, 19 submissions for slide decks, posters, workshops, and Format X were received, with 10 being accepted. All submissions underwent a double-blind peer-review process, with the involvement of international reviewers.

The selected submissions were organized into four sections. The Design Futures section (chaired by Michael Smyth and Karina Vissonova) explored speculative design practices with a focus on technological futures, space exploration, video game storytelling and urban food systems. The More-than-human Liminalities: Decenterings section (chaired by Ivica Mitrović and Ákos Schneider) speculated on design beyond anthropocentrism, addressing non-human agency, planetary futures, and artistic explorations of dark matter. More-than-human Liminalities: Entanglements (chaired by Ákos Schneider and Zolt Miklósvölgyi) featured presentations on multispecies engagement, ocean-object network relations, and prototypes for more-than-human coexistence. Finally, the Beyond Speculative Design (chaired by Bruce Tharp and Ivica Mitrović) section featured discussions on activism, political rhetoric, and marginalized local futures. Among the workshops, some aimed to ethically evaluate the provocative gestures of discursive design, others focused on the commodification of emotions, and some examined the post-humanist aspects of digital imagery.

Based on the presentations and discussions, we have formed the overall impression that contemporary design culture (Julier, 2006) is often perceived as being in a liminal phase, where traditional methods are breaking down, while new approaches are yet to fully take shape. This state of transition is marked by uncertainty and challenges to professional identity, making critical speculation a particularly relevant method. However, liminality also implies that any emerging practice may be met with skepticism.

The tools of critical speculative design are being applied across diverse regions and contexts, now clearly reaching beyond gallery settings and educational spheres. This growth suggests that the genre has matured over the past decade, establishing itself within the contemporary design field. Nevertheless, as speculative design becomes more mainstream, there is a concern that it might be absorbed by the very systems it seeks to critique, leading to provocative yet ultimately safe and streamlined visions.

At the same time, post-speculative approaches are increasingly merging with social design and participatory methods. While speculative design is typically associated with envisioning speculative futures or alternative presents (Auger, 2013), there is a growing recognition of the importance of grounding these visions in present-day actions. However, questions arise about whether speculative design retains its critical potency when applied to direct problem-solving. This dilemma fueled the most intense discussions by the conclusion of the conference.

Choosing “more-than-human” as a theme for the speculative tracks proved to be successful. Not only did it generate a significant number of submissions, but it also became the focal point for two out of the four sections. This reflects a growing interest in the convergence of speculative design and more-than-human perspectives, acknowledging that our environment is shaped by more than just human actors—incorporating non-human entities such as animals, plants, or digital algorithmic systems into the equations of design.

In the era of polycrisis, a critical question arises: can we shift our focus from immediate user needs, user experience and interaction to consider other temporal dimensions and material interconnections? Recognizing scales and relationships that extend far beyond the human is, in itself, a speculative endeavor. This may eventually require stepping away from fiction-oriented speculative design towards systems thinking, potentially adopting post-designer-centered, post-user-centered viewpoints. Amid radical ecological and technological transformations, embracing these decenterings and moving beyond the immediate here-and-now is crucial. In this context, critical speculative design may not represent an endpoint but rather a starting

point for departure and decentralization. The shape of a post-anthropocentric design culture remains uncertain; we find ourselves in an in-between state, compelled to speculate.

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