



Humboldt Futures

Text and Architectural Concept:
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Fig. 1: Humboldt Jungle by Hybrid Space Lab, 2015, Hybrid Space Lab

In the heart of Berlin, the Humboldt Forum is a newly developed cultural centre of international renown and the most ambitious contemporary cultural project of the Federal Republic of Germany. Its location has a highly symbolic historical significance: this was the site of the Berlin Palace of the Prussian imperial family; it was bombed during World War II; and subsequently demolished by the GDR to build the Palace of the Republic as a representative building of the regime – which was then also demolished after German reunification. The Humboldt Forum's reconstructed baroque exterior of the demolished Berlin Palace evokes associations with the imperial German and Prussian past, while it houses Berlin's ethnographic collections and is promoted as a place of dialogue and cultural interaction. Yet these revived national historic symbols and the collection it houses clashes with contemporary ideas on transnational cultural

development and has stirred heated public debates on issues of transnational cultural networks, and the international role of the city and its (colonial) history.

In addition, the Humboldt Forum today stands as a stone monument without any green at the very place where Berlin's highest temperatures are measured in the summer. On such so-called urban heat islands, planting can help prevent overheating. The lack of greenery – and thus the lack of awareness of climatic factors as well as of aspects of biodiversity – is all the more surprising given that the Humboldt Forum's namesake, Alexander von Humboldt, was a sustainability pioneer who developed early sustainability concepts and espoused the idea that all nature is connected, warning of the dramatic consequences of man-made climate change.

Humboldt Jungle

In 2015, the funds needed for the Humboldt Forum's stone baroque façade were still missing, and consultations for alternative proposals remained open. Hybrid Space Lab therefore started speculating on what other possible futures the Humboldt Forum could host and what narratives it could voice. As an alternative to the palace's baroque façade replica, we proposed to wrap the building in luscious hanging gardens with lianas and a tropical forest on the roof. It is a radical proposal – an homage and a reference to the jungle explorer and sustainability pioneer Alexander von Humboldt – that would transform this controversial reconstructed palace façade into Humboldt Jungle!

Humboldt Jungle (Humboldt Dschungel), with its striking visualizations, was a conceptual contribution to the debate, opening up discursive and positive visions for the Humboldt Forum and the city. It was enthusiastically embraced by the cultural world and the press as a »wake-up call« (taz, 08.07.2015) and »the rescue of the Humboldt Forum« (Zeit, 18.02.2016), urging the city to »make room for the jungle« (Tagesspiegel, 01.09.2017).

Humboldt Volcano

Even though the German taxpayers ultimately financed it and the Forum's baroque stone façade was in the meantime indeed built, the jungle's provocative proposal remains topical, as the intense debates around the Humboldt Forum continue. In the same spirit of the jungle, Hybrid Space Lab developed a proposal for the Humboldt Volcano (Humboldt Vulkan) in 2016, a free-standing greenhouse pavilion placed in front of the Humboldt Forum, housing a vertical jungle. As an extension of the Forum, the vertical tropical garden and waterfall of the

Humboldt Volcano would contribute to the appropriation of the Forum, opening it up to the city. With trees from all over the world growing in its stacked jungle, the Humboldt Volcano references the volcanic explorations and botanical discoveries of its namesake. Public access to the roof of the Forum would be via a parcours of connecting elevated paths and terraces that opens to a multitude of views of Berlin's cityscape, giving the Humboldt Forum a more innovative, environmentally-friendly appearance – a contemporary face that would strongly radiate into the city. In his observations and descriptions of the characteristics of flora and fauna depending on their altitude above sea level, Alexander von Humboldt noted that the whole world can be found in the altitudinal stages of a single place. Taking up this idea, the Humboldt Volcano parcours leads through various »altitude levels« of botanical and cultural geography: the whole world in one place!

In this central, densely built-up part of Berlin with scorching summer temperatures, the extremely intensive use of public space by Berliners and tourists leaves little room for conventional green spaces. Here, however, the vegetation of the Humboldt Volcano could help regulate temperatures and improve air quality. As a stacked oasis that incorporates vegetation into the built environment, the Humboldt Volcano points to solutions for integrating greenery into very dense urban situations. This will become all the more urgent when both megamuseums, the Humboldt Forum and the Pergamon Museum, are fully open, attracting visitors from all over the world. Berlin has not prepared itself for this tourist onslaught, which includes steering and welcoming visitors on site as well as citywide. This stacked oasis of the Humboldt Volcano could therefore accommodate even more visitors to Museum Island.

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KOSMOS

The third part of Hybrid Space Lab’s radical re-imagined triptych of this controversial building is KOSMOS. Whereas Humboldt Jungle formulated a strong vision for the re-wilding of the Forum and Humboldt Volcano developed a concrete architectural design solution that addresses many of the foreseeable problems in the Humboldt Forum and that could be realized in the (near) future, KOSMOS is a fictional universe based on Humboldt Forum that opens up a multiplicity of possible futures. It hybridizes the existing setting in the center of Berlin by superimposing imaginary worlds and stories on the Humboldt Forum. The current contested architecture of the Humboldt Forum, its layered history, and today’s deeply interconnected climate and biodiversity challenges are the starting point for infinite future trajectories in KOSMOS.

In ancient Greek, Κόσμος (cosmos) refers to the world or universe as a purposefully organized system. The term describes the natural world and is closely tied to the idea of the dynamic interconnectedness of all things, as well as to the concept of beauty and richness. KOSMOS therefore evokes, calls for, and provokes these meanings. The name also echoes Alexander von Humboldt’s work Kosmos, which explores the natural world in the interweaving of all its elements and dimensions. Published between 1845 and 1862, in the encyclopaedic spirit of the time, the work describes Humboldt’s travels and observations. This visually rich work is a beautiful, comprehensive, and insightful exploration of the natural world that continues to inspire and inform scientific thought today. Taking into consideration the current global climate and biodiversity crises, the fictional landscapes of KOSMOS weave together possible utopian and dystopian futures into imaginary worlds, in the most genuine sense of world-making and world-generating, as a cosmogony, creating possibilities for future existences. It is an attempt to create a public-oriented visual map of knowledge about the interconnectedness of our world, with the aim for its ever-expanding speculative worlds to provoke, inspire, and inform our thoughts.

Humboldt Futures

So far, the manifold problems of the Humboldt Forum have been addressed primarily in conventional formats such as text contributions, panel discussions, and workshops. But this is not enough. Taking the fictional universe of the KOSMOS as a starting point, Humboldt Futures turns it into a hybrid gaming environment that allows transcultural exchange and helps negotiate the multiple conflictual situations around today’s Humboldt Forum and its practices. Based on a digital twin of the Forum,

Humboldt Futures playfully addresses a whole range of challenges that are at the core of the Forum’s actual status quo, practice, and commitment in an online environment with immersive interfaces to the physical space. Humboldt Futures opens the Forum to all people and communities worldwide who have Internet access to participate in this co-creative gaming platform to interact with the Forum’s challenges and collectively envision new futures. At the same time, it is an arena to discuss big issues of our time through gaming: Who owns cultural heritage? Whose voices dominate the discourses and which minorities remain marginalized and invisible? How does climate injustice feel? How are transcultural narratives that go beyond the focus on narrow human interests in the Anthropocene envisioned?

The issues and questions are translated into entertaining, provocative, and forward-looking hybrid game scenarios; the passive reception of content is replaced by a proactive, action-based and solution-driven engagement with these challenges. In this way, users can overcome biases, co-creating and envisioning productive futures.

Drawing on the understanding of culture and of sustainability as a necessarily polyphonic practice and goal, the creation of the digital twin engages international cultural players, artists, game developers, and other experts in collaborative practices. The digital twin mutates the space into a fictional universe that is progressively enriched, narrated, and built through the participation of an international network of participants. This co-creative approach favours merging, mutual contamination and enrichment across different fields, practices, and backgrounds, allowing for experimentation and developing meaningful models to discuss, envision, and implement. Importantly, the game is designed for players to collaborate without violence and win-lose competition. By developing an international network of exchange, addressing cultural as well as environmental challenges, Humboldt Futures reflects the approaches of the Humboldt brothers, Wilhelm, who researched the networked character of culture, and Alexander, who looked at nature as a networked system.

While the platform can be accessed from anywhere at any time for any purpose, it can also serve as a possible preparation or a follow-up of a physical visit of the Forum. Humboldt Futures is a meeting point in the multiverse, where the experiences of the players are processed in online symposia, discussions and workshops. The content created – including texts, audio, video, and 3D virtual environments – gradually fills and transforms the digital twin. Thus, over time, Humboldt Futures develops into an archive of international contemporary cultural

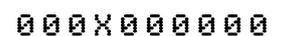
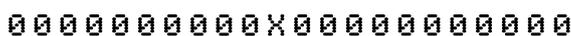




Fig. 2: Humboldt Volcano, 2016 Hybrid Space Lab

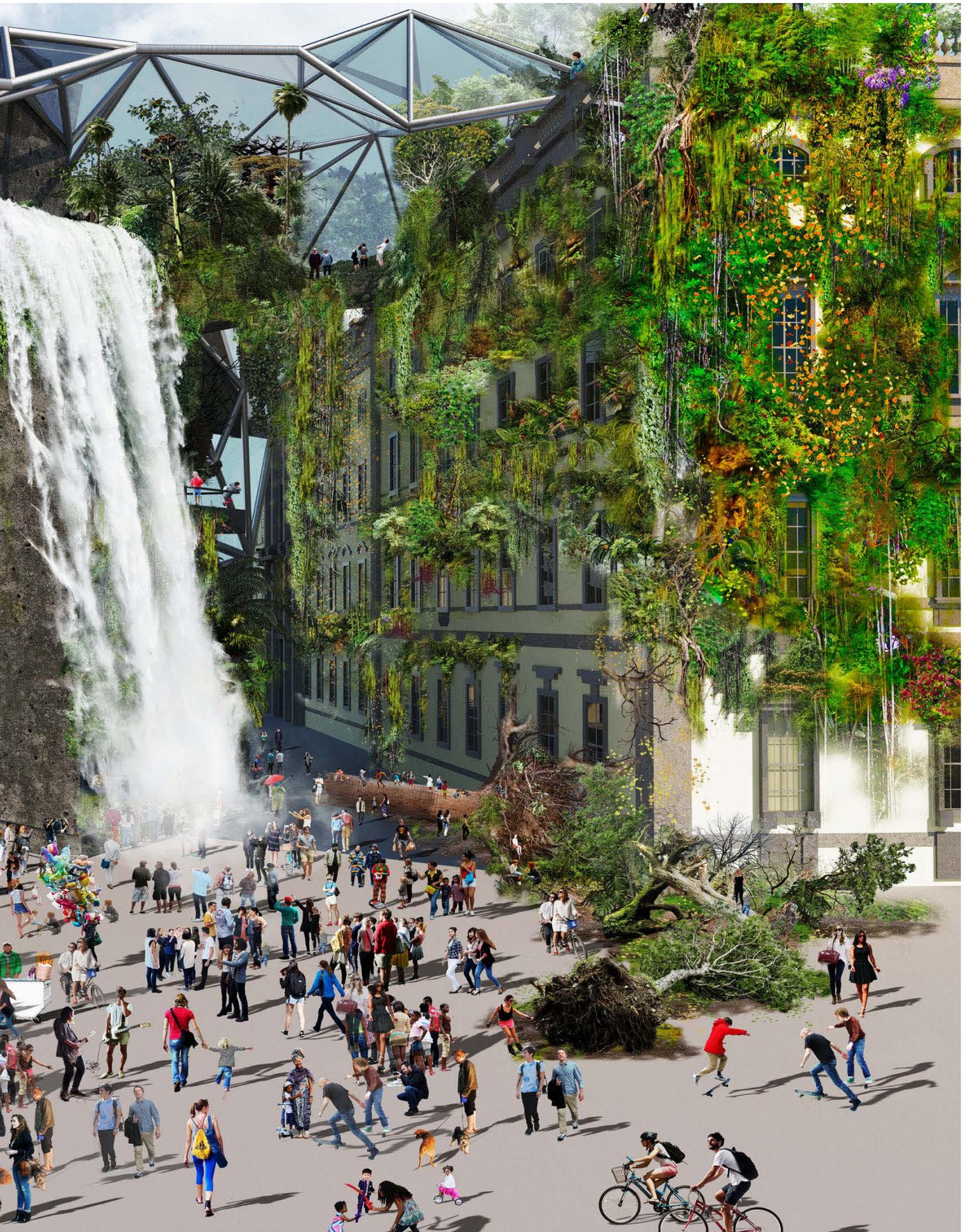




Fig. 3: KOSMOS, 2020 © Hybrid Space Lab



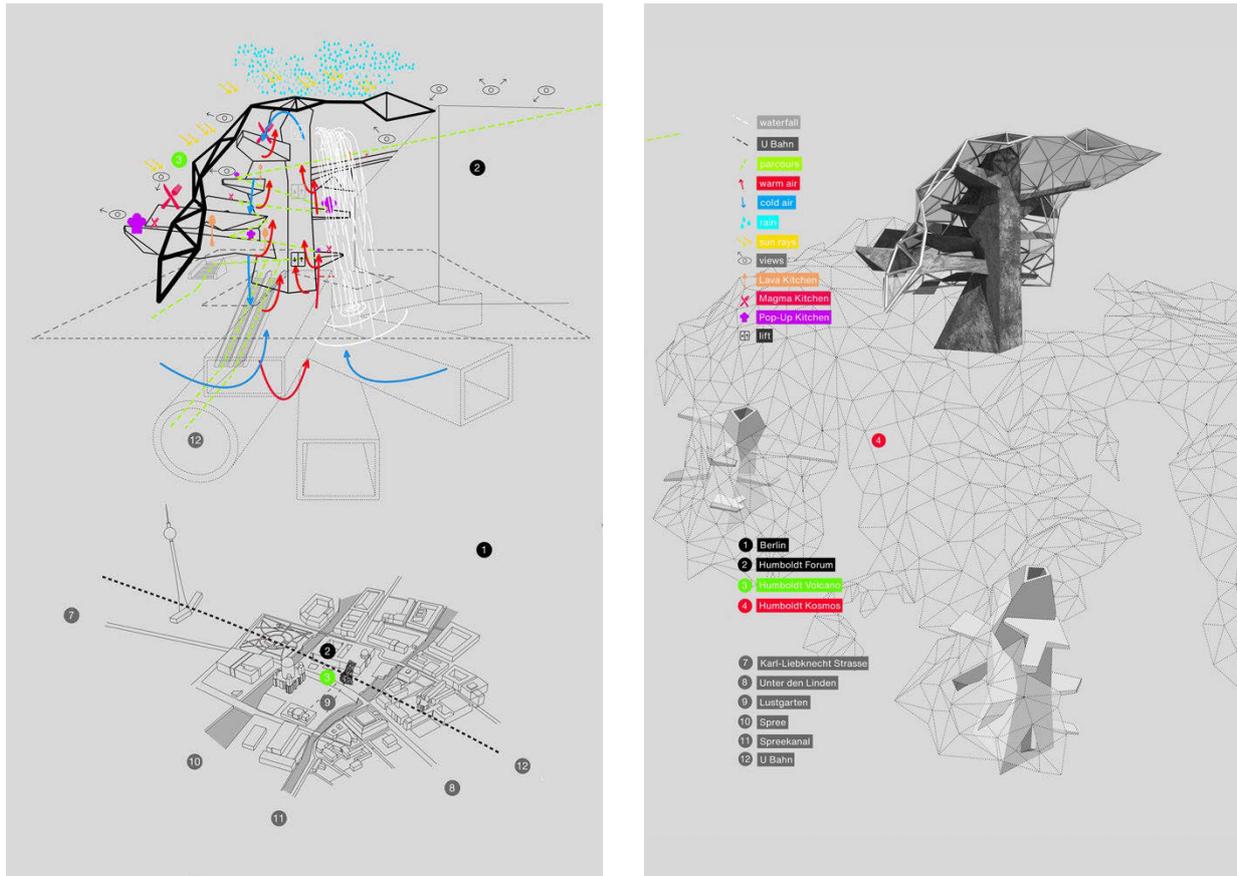


Fig. 4: Diagram of Humboldt Volcano, 2016 Hybrid Space Lab

debates and discourses. Simultaneously, Humboldt Futures is anchored in physical space with the help of AR applications, VR installations, and mobile interfaces that can travel internationally and enhance hybrid format workshops around the globe. It is therefore embedded in sociocultural environments – both in the Humboldt Forum and its urban surroundings as well as around the world.

Contemporary challenges such as the climate crisis and accelerating biodiversity loss urge us to go beyond the nature-culture divide, as this dichotomy between humans and their environments is closely connected to world views that consider humans separate from and superior to the context from which we emerge. Humboldt Futures stands in the continuity of the projects Humboldt Jungle and Humboldt Volcano as hybrid building typologies that fuse green and architecture, developing new solutions for climate adaptation and ecological upgrading of the city. It also builds on the hybrid landscape of KOSMOS that merges nature and the built environment. Humboldt Futures fo-

cusses on conflictual situations around global climate (in)justice and looks at alternative narratives that integrate other systems of knowledge and ways of conceiving the world that could help us address the challenges of the Anthropocene. Humboldt Futures focusses on a broad range of interrelated challenges around the Forum's building, its site and history, around the controversies concerning the artifacts and man-made objects but also around our habitat as our common networked heritage that needs to be preserved and positively developed into the future.

Humboldt Futures is therefore committed to a world view that considers nature and culture so tightly interwoven that they cannot be considered separately. And as Humboldt Futures is developing into a dynamic digital, networked archive that enables the integration of side-lined voices, it also considers issues connected with digital heritage, bolstering innovative ideas on (the future of) heritage in the digital age.

Humboldt Futures futures

Open to speculative artistic practices, Humboldt Futures starts with a twin of today’s Humboldt Forum, covering the Forum’s exterior with lush vegetation and with a triangular (infra)structure. This gives space for all sorts of digitally supported translocal interactions, exchange, and negotiation – ranging from role-games, mini-theatres and improvisation sessions, to new symposium-formats, supporting the development of new narratives. Over time, the digital twin will slowly be consumed by the lush vegetation until its digital baroque façade is crumbling. In our times of uncertainty with climate emergency and biodiversity catastrophes and the questioning of the belief in the trajectories of progress, this decay explores dystopic futures with the ruins of human institutions and the afterlives of built-

dings while simultaneously offering space for more-than-human alliances and innovative venues dedicated to global cultural interaction and exchange. Humboldt Futures thus integrates worldbuilding gaming methods and artistic processes of constructing imaginary worlds, feeding into and contributing to making other future worlds possible by imagining them and telling their stories. Humboldt Futures is an experimentation space for our common nature-cultural futures!

Note: The first Humboldt Futures workshop, co-organized by gamelab.berlin and Hybrid Space Lab, took place on 12.01.2024.

Fig. 5: Humboldt Futures, 2023 Hybrid Space Lab

