Use What Comes Next to Make Things Now: A Response to the *Welcome Dear Futurists* Discussion Panel

“As designers, we are often called to create the future of something—but heeding that call was what these futurists explored that night in their discussions.”

by Jose Rolando Rojas

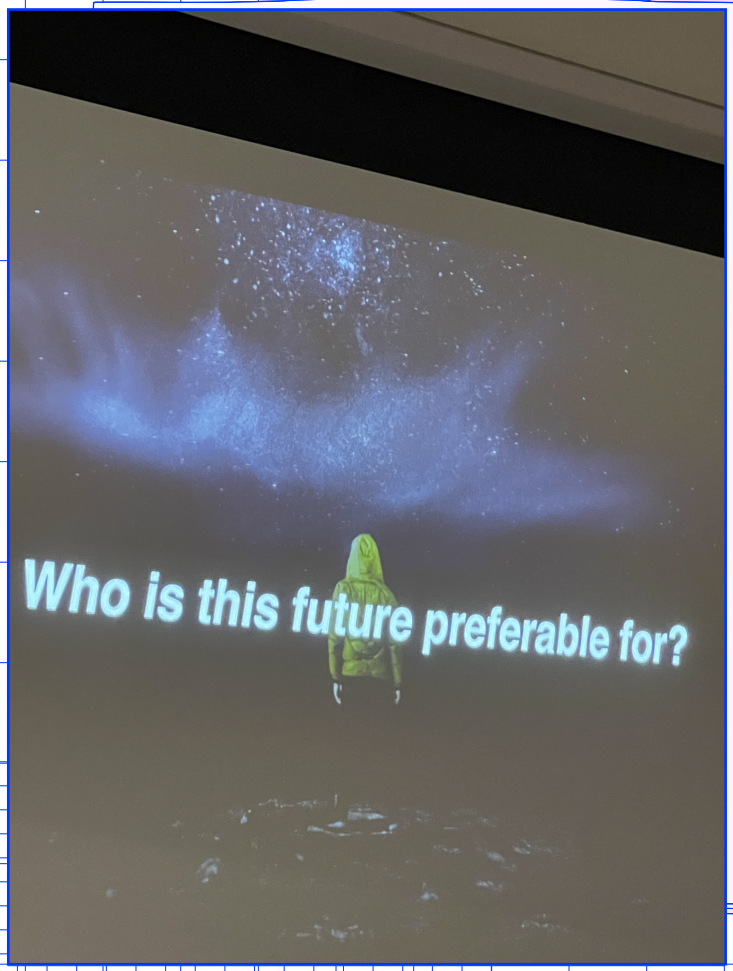


Photo courtesy of Jose Rolando Rojas

As a Design Strategy MBA student here at CCA, I am developing the ability to "see the future." Well, not literally see the future, but in our Strategic Foresight courses we learn to consider what might be possible. Based on indicators of change acted upon by external forces, we learn to envision hypothetical situations. These situations then provoke new ways of thinking and responding before they even happen.

This consideration of the future happened earlier in October, when three professional predictors and speculators—that is, futurists—hosted by CCA Dean of Design and fellow futurist Helen Maria Nugent, gathered to discuss how to define the future at all. Welcome Dear Futurists was a panel discussion held on the third of October in CCA's Nave Presentation Space, featuring Lonny Avi Brooks, Nick Foster, and Radha Mistry. This might sound cliché, but I realized that really thinking through hypotheticals helps you to stay ahead of the unknown. As designers, we are often called to create the future of something—but heeding that call was what these futurists explored that night in their discussions.

Nick Foster and App(lmp)lications
"The world is absolutely full of partially broken things."

The discussions began with Nick Foster, the former Google X Head of Design, when he said, "science fiction plays a dominant role in the way we talk about the future." Many think flying cars and meal tablets; I'd add giant robots and smell-o-vision. But speculation based on what sounds cool stops us from examining problems that persist or even worsen years from now. Foster wants futurists like him to break this habit.

More broadly, many futurists and designers see only from their point of view. They privilege people from similar backgrounds by creating products that address needs similar to their own. Worse, they go around (I was also guilty of this as a new designer) calling their 'innovations' solutions, and because we mistake our conviction for objectivity, we have to cut back on our designs to make them usable by other people.

This is best seen in how tech companies rely on proprietary components to profit and 'innovate.' If you design something that plays music better over Bluetooth but that can't simultaneously

hold a charge and play audio over wired speakers, “you also invent the dongle and the adapter,” as Foster described in one example. Those who are unable to adopt new releases or are ambivalent about them are thus excluded, unless dongles and adapters are released alongside them.

Although Foster acknowledges “we're trying to move towards some agreed notion of better,” he wants to reframe designers’ need to improve something, so that the goal is to make things more useful or even usable through what he calls The Future Mundane. This notion describes a future where we move away from the flashy-yet-impractical or the vaguely-defined ‘sexy’ bosses use to describe system menus whose clever use of color we should emulate but are hard to read.

Foster says that the world is always a little bit broken. It’s up to us to create products that help save older products from neglect and decay, and to create solutions that complement existing products instead of eliminating them altogether, which companies often do. In The Future Mundane, mitigating negative consequences is the game; when you start designing to help those hardest hit, your designs work for everyone.

(Left to right) Moderator Helen Maria Nugent and panelists Radha Mistry, Lonny Avi Brooks, and Nick Foster
Photo courtesy of Jose Rolando Rojas

Lonny Avi Brooks and Afrofuturism
“What it means to be Black, in this age, really comes down to now that we've already lived through a post apocalypse."

Foster was succeeded by Lonny Avi Brooks, whose eye-catching statements about the future, as informed by Black American histories and experiences, still strike me long after that October evening. As the AfroRithms Futures Group Creative Director and California State University Professor of Communication and Afrofuturism, Brooks works with Afrofuturism by using potential futures and inherited cultural knowledge to visualize and invent ways to improve Black American life in the present.

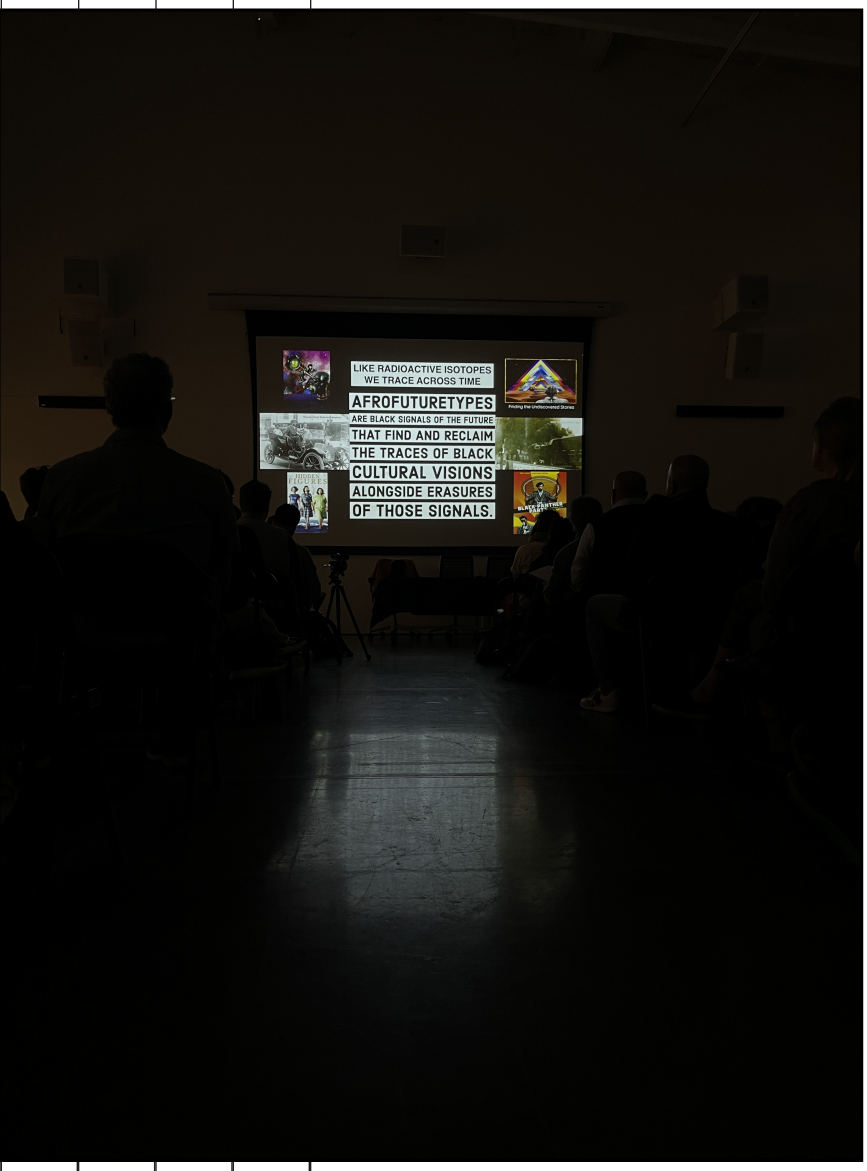


Photo courtesy of Jose Rolando Rojas

He defined the importance of the Black Imagination in the context of the African slave trade as a tool for keeping enslaved peoples alive as they lived through circumstances that were in a word, apocalyptic. Enslaved peoples from the African continent, Brooks says, were futurists, developing their own liberation, music, and food traditions, under conditions that rejected their humanity as they worked towards a future.

What drove much of this creativity and preservation was ancestral knowledge, used to survive in the present. One example he gave to describe the relationship between past traditions and innovation in contemporary contexts was how jazz, rock, hip hop, and almost every genre of music rests on African rhythms. Drawing from the past to create what hasn’t been done before is what Brooks calls the Black Imagination.

The Black Imagination is still relevant post-slavery, as it drives Brooks' particular application of Afrofuturism. Guided by a second AI Brooks calls 'ancestral intelligence,' stretching back hundreds of years on the continent, Brooks employs Afrofuturism in Strategic Foresight by making sure his signals and sources of information are rooted in ancestral knowledge, "to ensure that long oppressed racial minority diverse voices can articulate themselves in futures imagined."

One outcome of this application Brooks discussed was a hypothetical VR walkthrough featuring activist and scholar Angela Davis. Through this experience, civil rights activists and other Black thinkers could share their experiences. While VR tools are usually thought to facilitate escapism, Brooks shows that these tools can potentially be used to make tomorrow's reality liberating.

Radha Mistry and Subjectivity
"Something that feels like it's gonna work for me might not work for you, right?"

Where Brooks showed me you can iterate on progress and use cutting edge tech to drive it, Mistry discussed how foresight is created by human perspectives. Former CCA professor of Strategic Foresight and Arup Americas Foresight Leader, Radha Mistry struck me by asking, "who is the future preferable for?" As a foresight leader, Mistry guides architects, urban planners and other designers to 'future-proof' their practice by envisioning city life in the next decade.

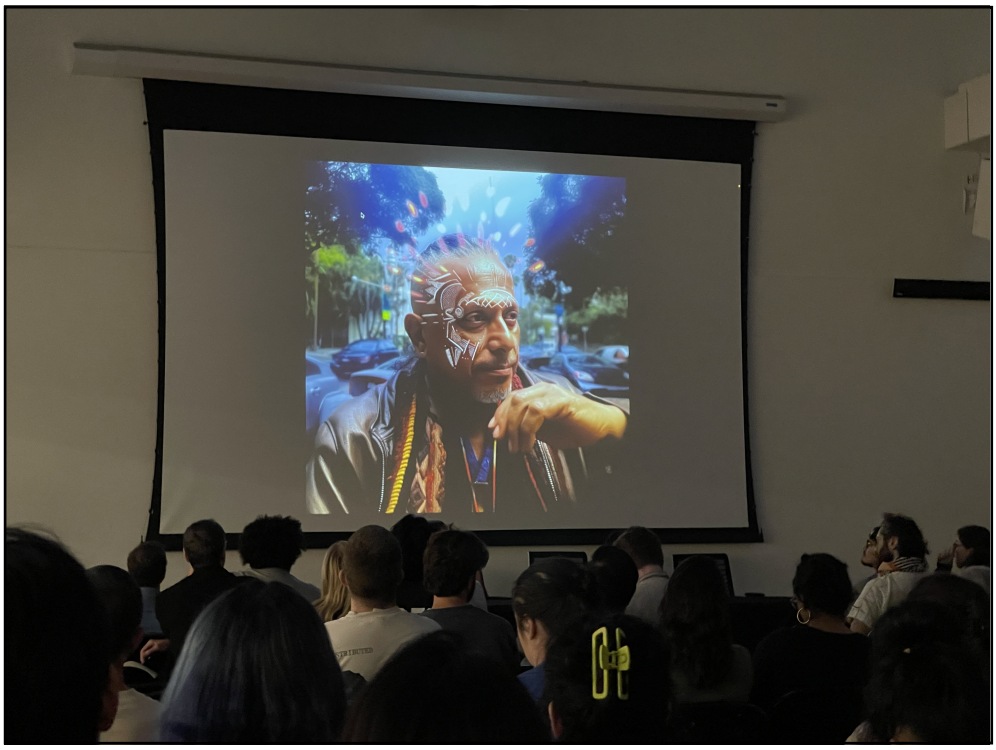
In 2013, Mistry and her team used strategic foresight to speculate the impact of smart technology on London residents in 2023. Revisiting her predictions actually in 2023 left her baffled—she predicted that Londoners, among other things, would still rely on 'Boris bikes,' though Boris Johnson is no longer Mayor. Mistry made her predictions based on then-recent experiences and signals (a design term which refers to indicators of some change happening), but there were still unknowns.

After 2013, Brexit, countless elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the escalation of the climate crisis, as Mistry mentioned, greatly shaped foresight. But even ten years later, many designers still design without considering how potential futures could make

their products irrelevant. Worse, many tech leaders assume they are game-changers, but ignore that they might exclude and disempower people who want to use their inventions, but can't. Their products then fizzle out.

This might be what Mistry calls "a fetishization of technology." When I see products labeled 'innovative' enter public discourse, I wonder about those unable to use them due to cost or different abilities. Thankfully, many designers are now guided by accessibility, inclusiveness, and a commitment to making products intuitive for everyone. Tactile pavement in urban planning and alternative controllers in video games, for example, are innovations because they expand the userbase.

This leads Mistry to remind us that "scenarios are never the final product," and instead should be treated as provocations; that is, scenarios that prompt us to imagine and envision. What is the future if not a collection of scenarios iterating on one another? By asking that question, we can continue to redesign—we can develop to-do lists, plans, and systems that help make tangible a better future for us all.



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Helen Maria and Molding Tomorrow
“Every form of design futuring is also an act of erasing.”

I recall how Dean Helen Maria began: “you are all futurists.” I’m still adjusting to that new title, but at the very least, I know that creating “the future of something” sets that new product up to, sadly, fail. We design more effectively by using the future, “not as a destination but as a medium to aid imagination,” continues Dean Helen Maria, quoting speculative designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby.

It’s okay to admit that our imagination isn’t perfect—even if products now are a little bit broken, they are still actionable. The iterations by those before us are a resource from which we pull the most to keep predicting. So long as we expand their scope and mitigate the pain of consequence, we ensure that even those who couldn’t use our supposed solutions are accommodated and able to move forward. Treat the future, as Dean Helen Maria says, “like clay,” and knead at your dough to make tomorrow playable today. By doing so, we earn our welcome as dear futurists.

Photo courtesy of Jose Rolando Rojas

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