



The Future of Experiences

Inspiration and anchor points for
experience creators in the next few years

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Introduction

Hanging out at a music festival.
Taking the family to Disneyland.
Entering a packed sports stadium with goosebumps.
Going to a conference.
Yeah, that was clearly not 2020.

The so-called experience economy has gone temporarily a lot this year. Like almost no other industry, it was curtailed by Covid-19 health restrictions, to the point that the [*New York Times* declared it dead](#). Bringing large groups of people together for special, emotional, worthwhile moments—in short, for awesome events—wasn't even remotely feasible.

But while from a consumer point of view, with a vaccine now on the horizon, there's hope things might get “back to normal” soon, those of us responsible for creating experiences need to grapple with a new world: the pandemic has shifted culture, business, and much of our lives online; an influx of new virtual experience formats over the last months have set new standards; and, more and more, a new hybrid reality is emerging, where virtual and in-real-life experiences are closely interwoven.

Introduction

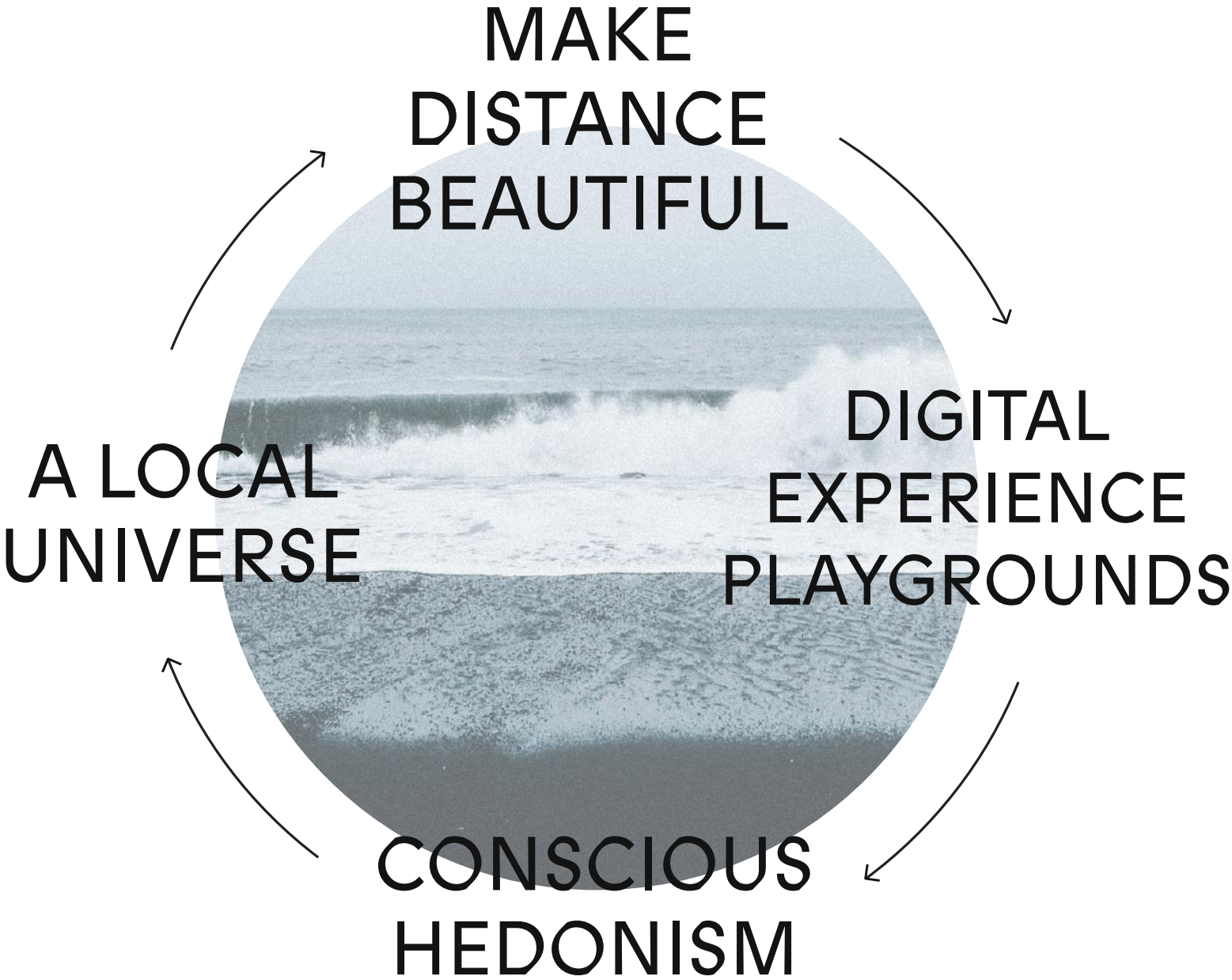
So what will the future of experiences look and feel like in a few years from now? What are new design principles and strategic anchors that those creating experiences must embrace? What are new skills that brands and organizations need to have if they want to use experiential marketing to reach and impact their customers or employees?




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Broadly speaking, we
see things evolving along
four major STORY LINES



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Make Distance Beautiful

At the core of most events and experiential marketing efforts is the idea to create a sense of collective belonging and personal excitement, to touch people emotionally. For a long time, creators of experiences have had one basic recipe for that, no matter whether you think of sports and music experiences, conferences, or lifestyle events.


2. Make Distance Beautiful



1. Assemble people in a place where they can feel one another's energy
2. Choreograph a tight experience, and leave some room for serendipity and spontaneity
3. Offer content as a reason-why, but always design for connections
4. Repeat

This recipe worked well for in-person events in a pre-Covid-19 time, and without a doubt, people will gather again in large numbers in time.

But it's not out of this world to think that (at least) one year of social distancing will have had an impact on our comfort level being in close proximity to other people.



Make Distance Beautiful

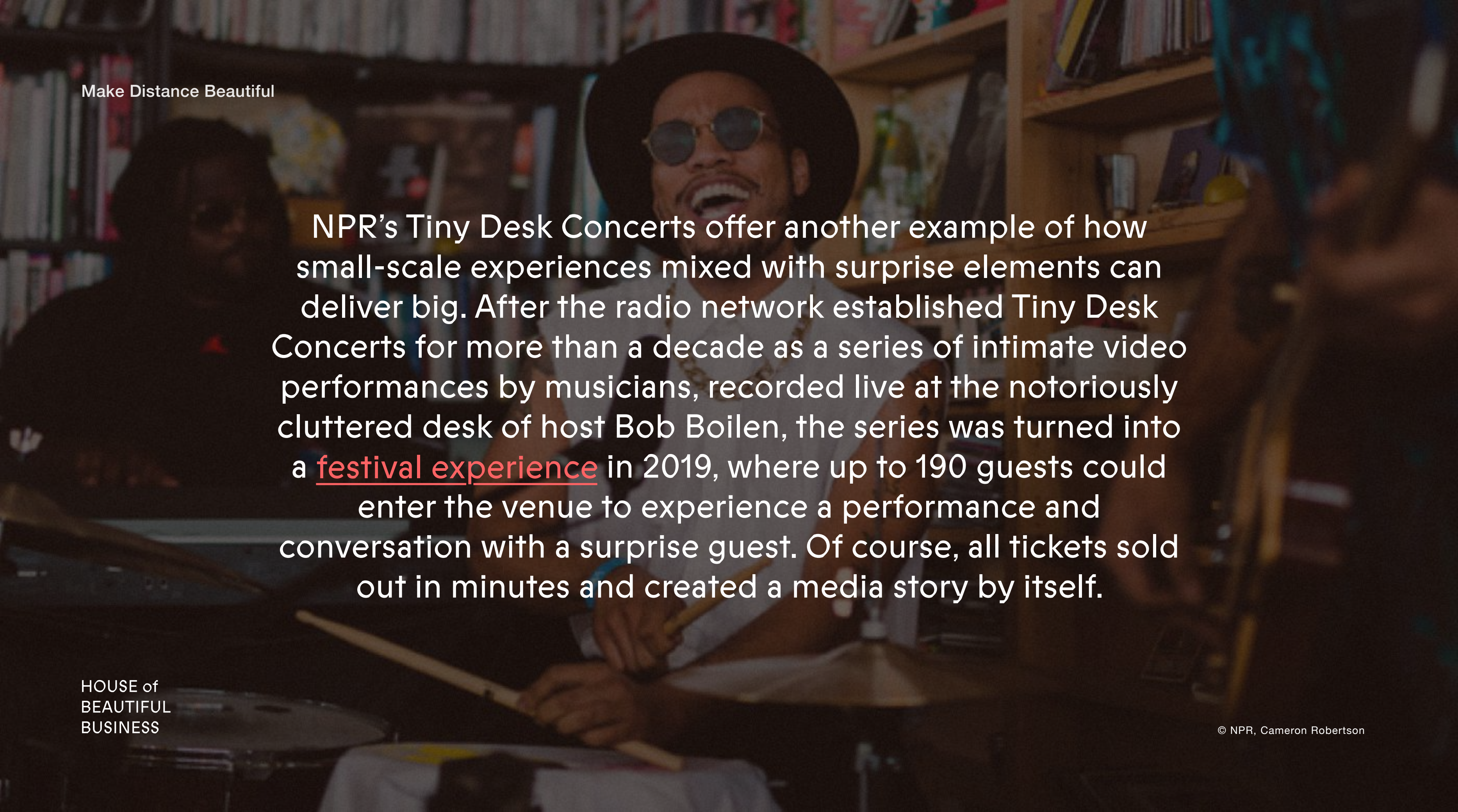
Experience creators should think now about how they can create big emotions and belonging at a smaller scale—to think small to deliver big, once people are comfortable being up close again.

This will not make the job of experience creators easier; small is often much harder than big, or as Mark Twain famously said, “I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.” Small requires more intent, more decisions, more curation, more courage.

But it will make in-person experiences so much better going forward.

An example that takes this idea to the max are the [one-on-one concerts recently held by the State Opera in Stuttgart](#).

For several days in a row, one musician from the orchestra faced one guest and played a 15-minute concert in a highly personal and intimate atmosphere, respecting all Covid-19 social distancing guidelines.

A man with a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses is playing drums in a cluttered room. He is wearing a white shirt and a gold chain. The room is filled with books and various objects on shelves. The text "Make Distance Beautiful" is overlaid in the top left corner.

Make Distance Beautiful

NPR's Tiny Desk Concerts offer another example of how small-scale experiences mixed with surprise elements can deliver big. After the radio network established Tiny Desk Concerts for more than a decade as a series of intimate video performances by musicians, recorded live at the notoriously cluttered desk of host Bob Boilen, the series was turned into a festival experience in 2019, where up to 190 guests could enter the venue to experience a performance and conversation with a surprise guest. Of course, all tickets sold out in minutes and created a media story by itself.

Make Distance Beautiful

But making distance beautiful is not just a requirement for physical events. It is the essential challenge of any virtual experience that we enter into, physically distant but still with the hope of finding belonging and excitement. Here are three starting points that we've seen work:

#1 Make virtual attendees appear

During our own recent festival, The Great Wave, we decided against an easier-to-use webinar solution and used Zoom's meeting tool instead, which allowed attendees to take part by turning on the camera on their laptop. Sharing a virtual space with 700 strangers and familiar faces, and being able to see others' reactions, created an immediate sense of togetherness.



Make Distance Beautiful



#1 Make virtual attendees appear

The 2020 NBA finals, played in a “bubble” without any fans physically present, used a similar approach in allowing fans to jointly watch games via Teams, and putting them on the stands of the arena, where the players could see and, to a certain extent, even hear them.

At home, it created a unique social co-watching experience for the participating fans, which even allowed them to discuss the game and get to know each other during commercial breaks.

#2 Audio

There's no better medium for creating a feeling of intimacy than audio.

It's highly personal, can be intense, and leaves room for imagination.

From collective audio journeys to audio-centred social networks like the much-hyped [Clubhouse](#) app or [High Fidelity](#), look for opportunities to include audio-only spaces and moments in your experience.



Make Distance Beautiful



#3 Rituals

Rituals can make moments meaningful and help to overcome a feeling of distance.

Think about what a distributed group of people can meaningfully practice together: from creating a shared silent space (a signature experience at the House of Beautiful Business has always been “Silent Hour,” and we were able to evolve the format from an in-person phenomenon to a virtual experience without shedding impact) to sharing a meal (a recent seasonal trend: instead of an in-person holiday party, companies are sending dinner boxes to their employees and then connecting with them on virtual channels, so they can eat together in a distributed way).

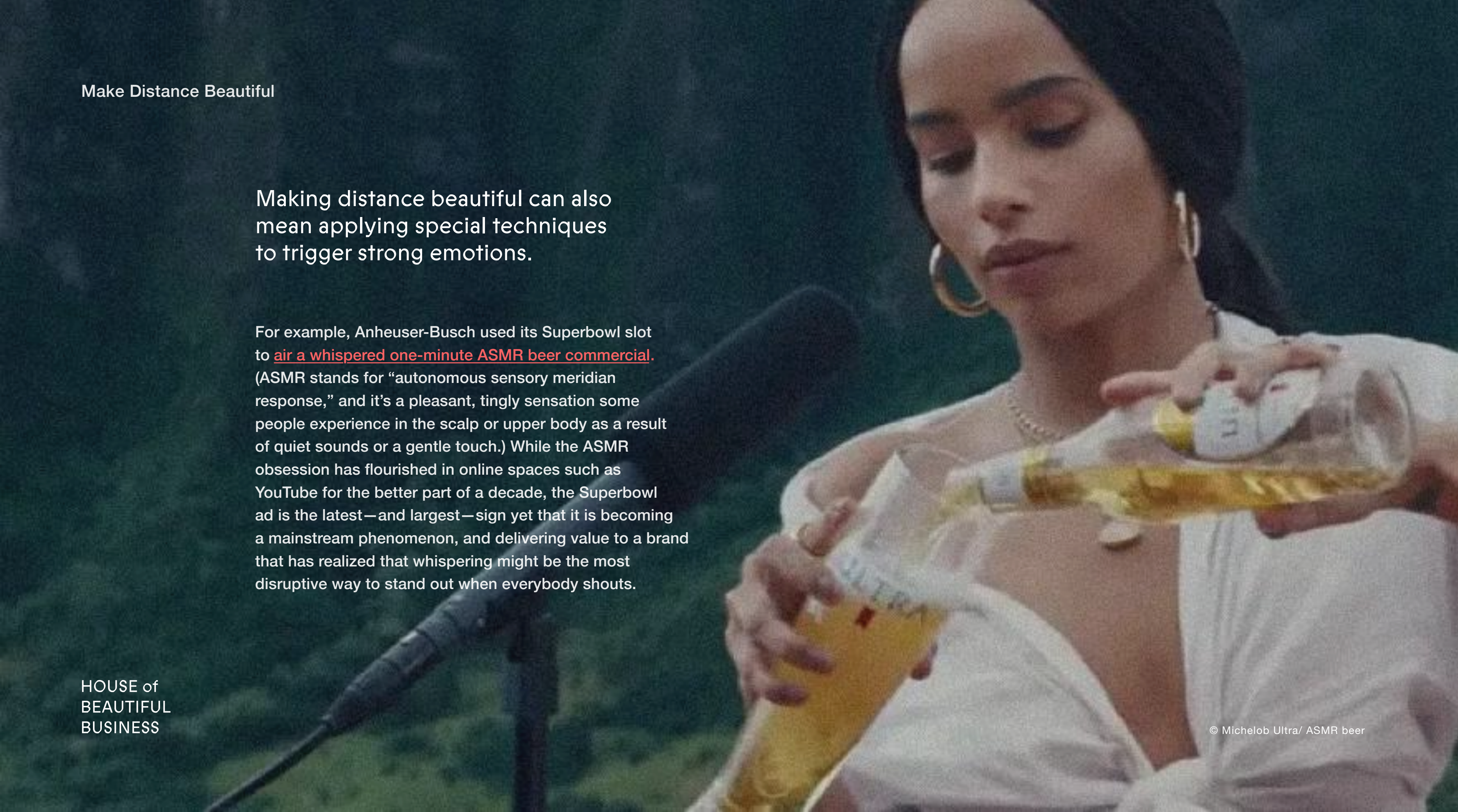
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Make Distance Beautiful

Making distance beautiful can also mean applying special techniques to trigger strong emotions.

For example, Anheuser-Busch used its Superbowl slot to [air a whispered one-minute ASMR beer commercial](#). (ASMR stands for “autonomous sensory meridian response,” and it’s a pleasant, tingly sensation some people experience in the scalp or upper body as a result of quiet sounds or a gentle touch.) While the ASMR obsession has flourished in online spaces such as YouTube for the better part of a decade, the Superbowl ad is the latest—and largest—sign yet that it is becoming a mainstream phenomenon, and delivering value to a brand that has realized that whispering might be the most disruptive way to stand out when everybody shouts.



Make Distance Beautiful

And of course, the notion of small-is-beautiful is also expressed in private, branded communities such as the [Beauty Pie Addicts](#), a Facebook group for cosmetics enthusiasts and fans of the Beauty Pie brand, set up as a 'closed' community with a joining questionnaire to prioritize quality over quantity. This represents a larger trend of branded communities that enable deeper, higher quality connection and engagement between members, and which are not designed to scale.

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Clearly, virtual experiences have become a new standard. Suffice it to say that we all live and die by live-streams these days. But within just a few months, we have started to expect so much more from virtual experiences. The bar for creating a compelling one is much higher now than it was just six months ago.

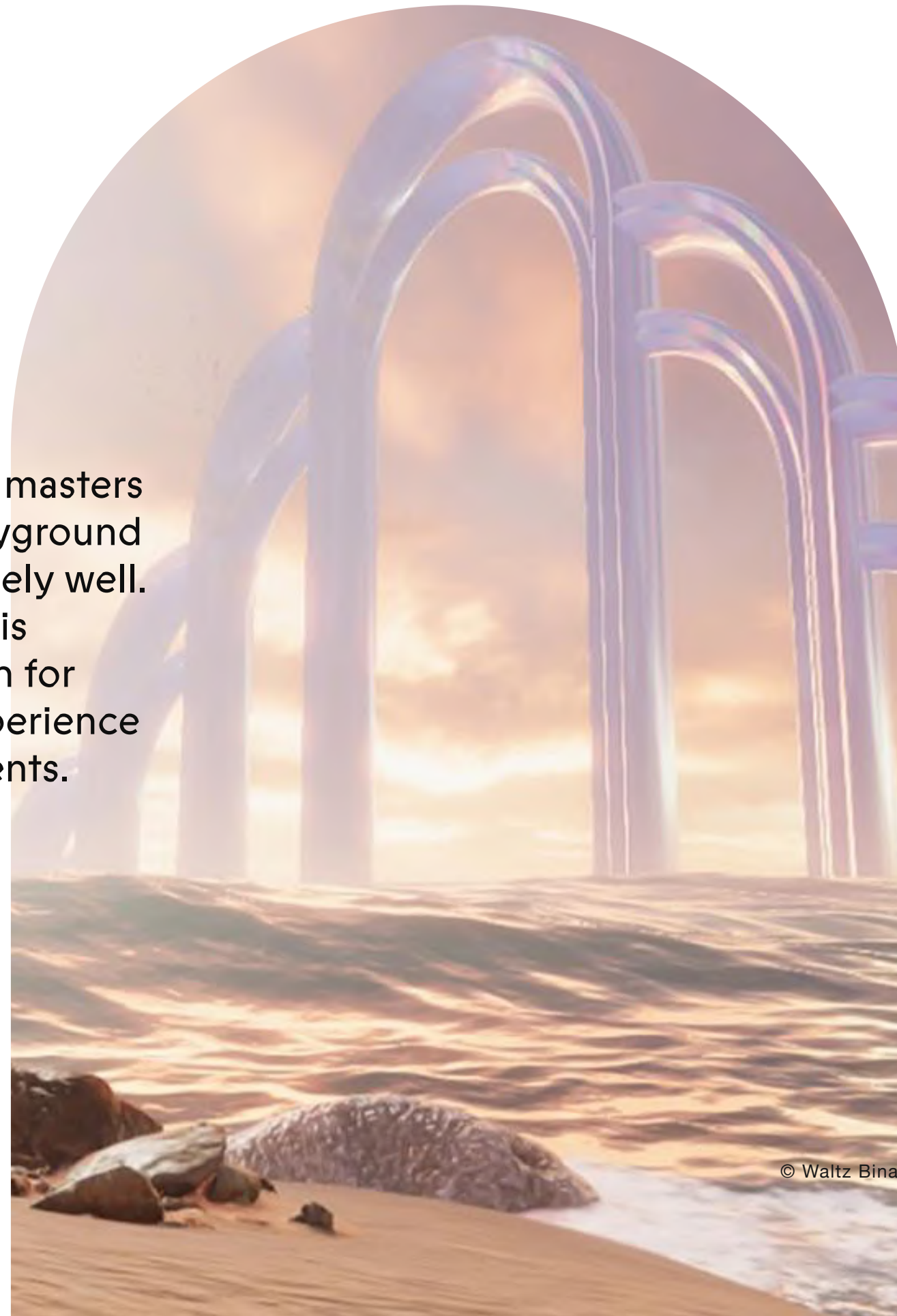
Digital Experience Playgrounds

- Out: using a virtual channel only as a broadcast medium for what we already know; mimicking something that would have probably felt better in person; not delivering 100 percent on the basics
- In: being invited to encounter entirely new perspectives and emotions; creating real-world impact through a virtual experience

For experience creators, this means walking on a tightrope. On the one hand, they must take real risks and bravely experiment, but at the same time, there's no room anymore for technical and conceptual glitches. Things have to work and deliver from the very beginning. Virtual experiences demand an even higher level of entertainment, and need to be compelling at every moment, as attention spans are shorter and a distraction is always just one click away.



Journee is a new 3D web technology that masters this dualism by offering an innovative playground with rock-solid, first-class delivery extremely well. The Berlin-based collective Waltz Binaire is currently developing Journee as a solution for people to gather in virtual spaces and experience the future of sustainable social environments.





Journee.

At our The Great Wave festival, we created a first prototype of Journee as an explorative experience.

In a photorealistic, surrealist, and fully interactive environment, we invited attendees to get lost in digital space. Walking around a large virtual island we had built, up to 250 attendees could have sensual audio experiences that were triggered and responsive to a user's movements, discover artefacts and content snippets of our conference while they explored the island's varying landscapes, and at one point even wander out into the virtual sea surrounding the island on a 20-minute walk through eternal questions that appeared on the screen and literally flew into the user's face.

While the solution also allowed for meeting and chatting with other users, attendees used the experience more as a retreat from digital connectedness they experienced all day during The Great Wave, as an open-ended playground of exploration that could be experienced alone with others.

At The Great Wave, we didn't just add Journee to the conference-like experience hosted on Zoom.

We also added additional virtual layers through curated WhatsApp Groups that further extended the experience. The emergence of such multi-layered “multiverses” is itself an example for a playground-like approach to virtual experiences.

Burning Man—the community and festival experience that is usually emerging as an annual in-person happening in the Nevada desert—turned its 2020 installation into what they called a global quantum kaleidoscope of possibility.

Several groups and individuals of their community imagined and co-created a multiverse of virtual experiences, from excessive VR worlds to more straight-forward Zoom party places. The variety of experiences found within this multiverse points to an interesting fact: Rather than orchestrating one seamless virtual experience, think of your virtual experience as a playground of small virtual universes, both across all kinds of newly custom-built and already well-established, and glued together by a shared purpose.



The Power of Platform

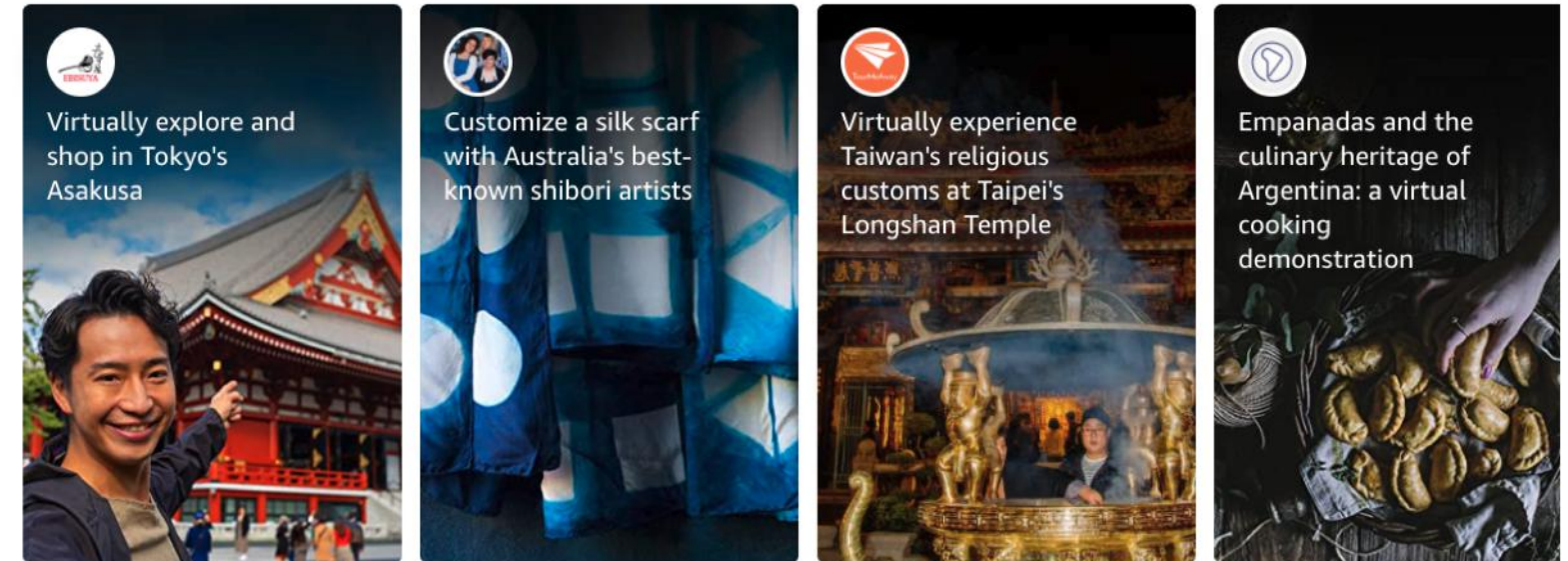
The quintessential embodiment of virtual experience playgrounds at the Champions League level can be found with Airbnb and Amazon.

Quickly after Covid-19 restrictions were introduced, Airbnb pivoted its already established Experience offering (originally conceptualized as a platform for local tours in popular destination cities) to virtual experiences. It's now possible, for example, to explore Prague with a Plague doctor to relive the 1713 epidemic and do some armchair travel while you are at it.

Digital Experience Playgrounds

At the end of September 2020, Amazon launched [Amazon Explore](#), a new service that allows customers to book live, virtual experiences led by local experts.

Both experience platforms focus on creativity, learning DIY skills, and taking virtual tours of far-off places or cultural landmarks, but what distinguishes Amazon Explore is the opportunity, in some cases, to shop local boutiques from around the world, putting the shop owners of these small businesses front and center (and available for conversations), with all the comfort of an Amazon fulfillment of any order. By combining standard live-streaming technology with e-commerce convenience, Amazon Explore may have created a new formula for explorative shopping experiences around the world.



Burberry Kicks Off London Fashion Week With a Twitch Livestream

Well-established experience formats are also getting reinterpreted. Fashion weeks, for example, are giving the stage to multidimensional digital presentations of the traditional catwalk experience (for example, [Burberry livestreaming on Twitch](#) during London Fashion Week).





Digital Experience Playgrounds



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The Helsinki Fashion Week created an all-digital, full-on 3D concept that took place through a platform called [Digital Village](#), a newly launched metaverse where all fashion, buying, showcasing, and networking are combined.



The Power of Platform

Look also at services like Discord to get a sense of how virtual experience playgrounds will evolve. Originally a place for gamers to organize during multiplayer online games through voice, video, or text, Discord has become a system of servers that allows any kind of special interest group to hang out, co-consume media, or co-create content, resulting in a new class of GenZ artists who push emerging musical genres like hyperpop.

Maybe the most relevant space to watch for a new generation of digital experiences unfolding is indeed in the gaming sector. A common trope is that gaming will eat the internet, and indeed it seems gaming is turning into a metaverse of its own, with the highest possible relevance for experience creators: shopping, advertising, entertainment, and social media will all be included, and some of the largest game platforms are showing the way.

The online video game Fortnite has started incorporating concerts on its virtual stage. The rapper Travis Scott (in digital form) was one of the first performers. The goal is to have artists launch their new albums on the Fortnite stage in the future, just as they would on Saturday Night Live.

Hybrid crossovers from in-person experiences to virtual platforms and all the way back to physical events again can also be observed at the crossroads of the gaming and classic entertainment industry, whether it is a [DJ set on Fortnite's Party Royale Island](#) with Colombian musician J Balvin that took also place in the real world or the recent [League of Legends opening ceremony](#), where music stars and dancers performed with the virtual group K/DA in an augmented reality experience created with live in-camera digital effects. The experience was live-streamed to the world and broadcast on the big screens of a football stadium in China where 6,000 fans had gathered.

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Conscious Hedonism

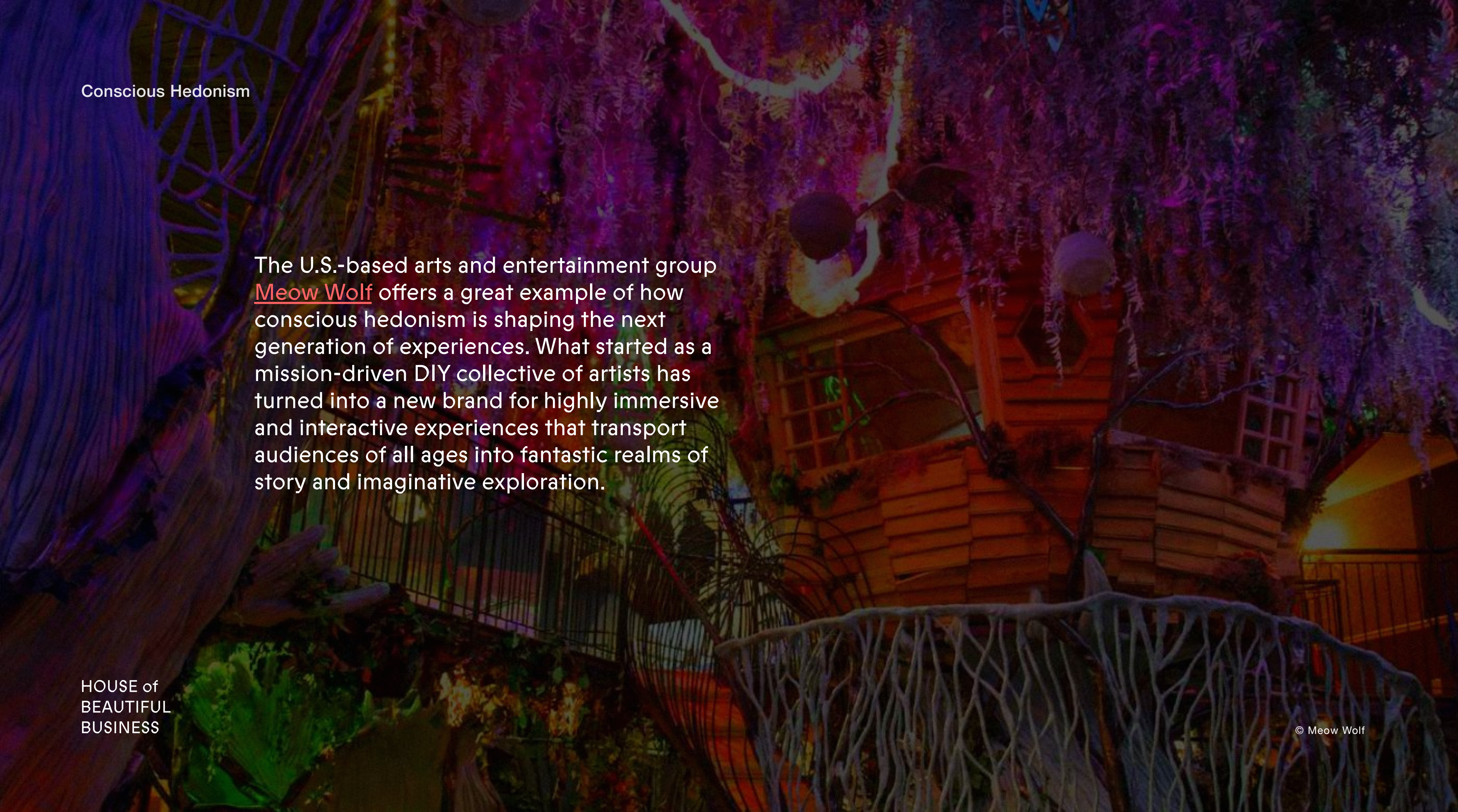


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Once a vaccine is widely distributed and the pandemic begins to feel somewhat under control, expect nothing short of an explosion of real-life-experience desires across generations.

There will be a nostalgic urge to relive what the world used to be like, and to sample all that the world has to offer in real-time and in real life.

This new hedonism will be closely tied to a new consciousness surrounding self-care and its corresponding routines and habits; a consciousness of our interconnectedness with one another and with nature; and, maybe most importantly for experience creators, a consciousness of climate change, as climate change will remain as the dominant narrative of the 2020's.

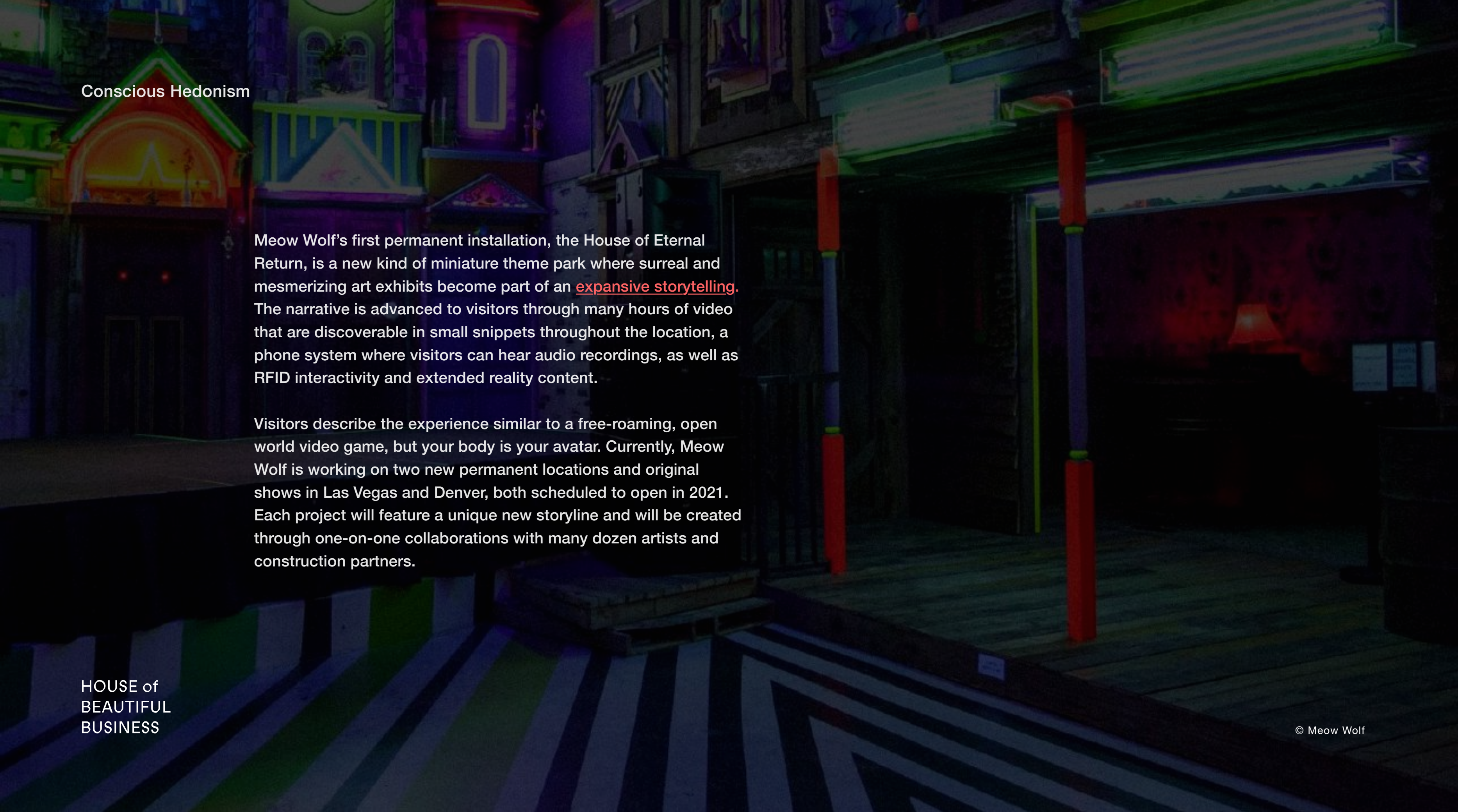


Conscious Hedonism

The U.S.-based arts and entertainment group [Meow Wolf](#) offers a great example of how conscious hedonism is shaping the next generation of experiences. What started as a mission-driven DIY collective of artists has turned into a new brand for highly immersive and interactive experiences that transport audiences of all ages into fantastic realms of story and imaginative exploration.

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© Meow Wolf



Conscious Hedonism

Meow Wolf's first permanent installation, the House of Eternal Return, is a new kind of miniature theme park where surreal and mesmerizing art exhibits become part of an [expansive storytelling](#). The narrative is advanced to visitors through many hours of video that are discoverable in small snippets throughout the location, a phone system where visitors can hear audio recordings, as well as RFID interactivity and extended reality content.

Visitors describe the experience similar to a free-roaming, open world video game, but your body is your avatar. Currently, Meow Wolf is working on two new permanent locations and original shows in Las Vegas and Denver, both scheduled to open in 2021. Each project will feature a unique new storyline and will be created through one-on-one collaborations with many dozen artists and construction partners.


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Advancing to new levels of consciousness is also a core motivation behind a new category of experiences that is gaining increasing mainstream popularity: psychedelics-driven experimental journeys.

Synthesis, an Amsterdam-based retreat center for professionals to experience personal growth, emotional breakthroughs, and spiritual development, offers legal and medically supervised group experiences that exemplify this emerging trend, one that could be described as transformational wellness.

The expectations for this field to take off are high, if you follow the money: After stocks of cannabis companies took off the last two years, there now seems to be a “psychedelics renaissance” in motion, with a rush of investor dollars and public-market debuts in this sector.

A large cruise ship is docked at a pier in a harbor. The ship is white with a blue hull and has many windows. In the background, there is a city skyline with several tall buildings. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. The water is dark blue.

Conscious Hedonism

Cruises and flights to nowhere

Conscious hedonism can also be found as an underlying principle in a much more mundane newly launched experience: in November 2020, Singapore announced destination-less pleasure cruises that don't actually visit any ports.

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© Tiffany Fumiko Tay

Conscious Hedonism



This might be a problematic concept from an environmental perspective, but they offer travel-starved locals an escape back into the world of first-hand travel experiences in a Covid-safe, responsible way. Previously, several airlines pioneered a similar concept: [“flights to nowhere”](#) were introduced earlier this year by multiple airlines; Thai Airways took the idea even further by offering the special experience of a “sacred flight” that cruised over 99 holy sites, allowing passengers to chant Buddhist mantras from the sky, before the plane landed again at the same airport it had departed.

Experiences like this might not continue after the pandemic, but do represent a wider, consciously hedonistic trend of travel experiences that put the onus on the journey, not the destination.

Conscious Hedonism

These travel events can also be interpreted through the lens of escapism. Escapism is no new trend, of course, but conscious hedonism now moves aspects like self-care and fairness into the center of classical escapist experiences.

For example, beer brand [Desperados hosted a party](#) in Poland where the 2,000 partygoers' phones were linked together and used to create a light show on the dance floor. If you gave up your phone, you received a free beer, and you could enjoy the party to the fullest by escaping the blackhole of Instagram or Twitter.

Many larger events before the pandemic purposefully moved closer to values like diversity and inclusion, sustainability, radical expression, and communal efforts. Those events that originally had their core in these values—like the aforementioned Burning Man and the House of Beautiful Business, or Africa Burn—have often been referred to by visitors as a family away from home.

Combined with the transformative experience these community events are providing, they symbolize an interesting genre of experiences in sync with the zeitgeist, offering participants both a short-term escape from routines and the mundane, as well as a long-term destination that is essential for their personal growth and development.

Conscious Hedonism

Another form of conscious hedonism consists of experiences that pair a feeling of nostalgia with modern lifestyle relevance, offering consumers the opportunity to partake in a futuristic experience with the comfort of a cherished memory.

One example is Atari's recently announced venture in the hotel industry, offering futuristic on-brand hospitality experiences in flagship buildings in Las Vegas and other cities to a community of gamers and beyond.

The experience, announced as an “aesthetic of cyberpunk dystopia and '80s-era low-bit nostalgia,” will be a place where visitors can make video games the centerpiece of their vacation, with rooms equipped with access to multiple gaming systems and a deep library of games, high-speed broadband, large-screen TVs, and an IT help desk.

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A Local Universe

One consequential shift that took place as a result of the movement and travel restrictions during the pandemic is a reorientation toward local experiences. As more and more companies introduce work-from-home policies, to the point of some (mostly tech) firms committing to WFH forever, another reorientation is taking place: a focus of attention away from city centers toward places that offer a better quality of life and new options for self-expression.

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A woman with short blonde hair is sitting on a green metal park bench, leaning back and reading a book. The book's cover is visible, showing the name 'KATE ATKINSON'. She is wearing a light-colored top and dark pants. The background is a lush garden with various green plants and trees, slightly out of focus. The overall lighting is soft, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

A Local Universe

While this development in all likelihood will not break the megatrend of urbanization and the growing relative importance of cities, it points to an emerging opportunity for creators of experiences, especially those that target an urban audience: How can you bring the full potential of a city and its surroundings to life in surprising ways, and not just for visitors, but also for those who live there?

Airbnb's experience platform—the way it was originally conceived before the pandemic, as a potpourri of local in-person experiences delivered by locals that couldn't be found in any travel guide—was already a first hallmark for expanding the local universe for those in town.

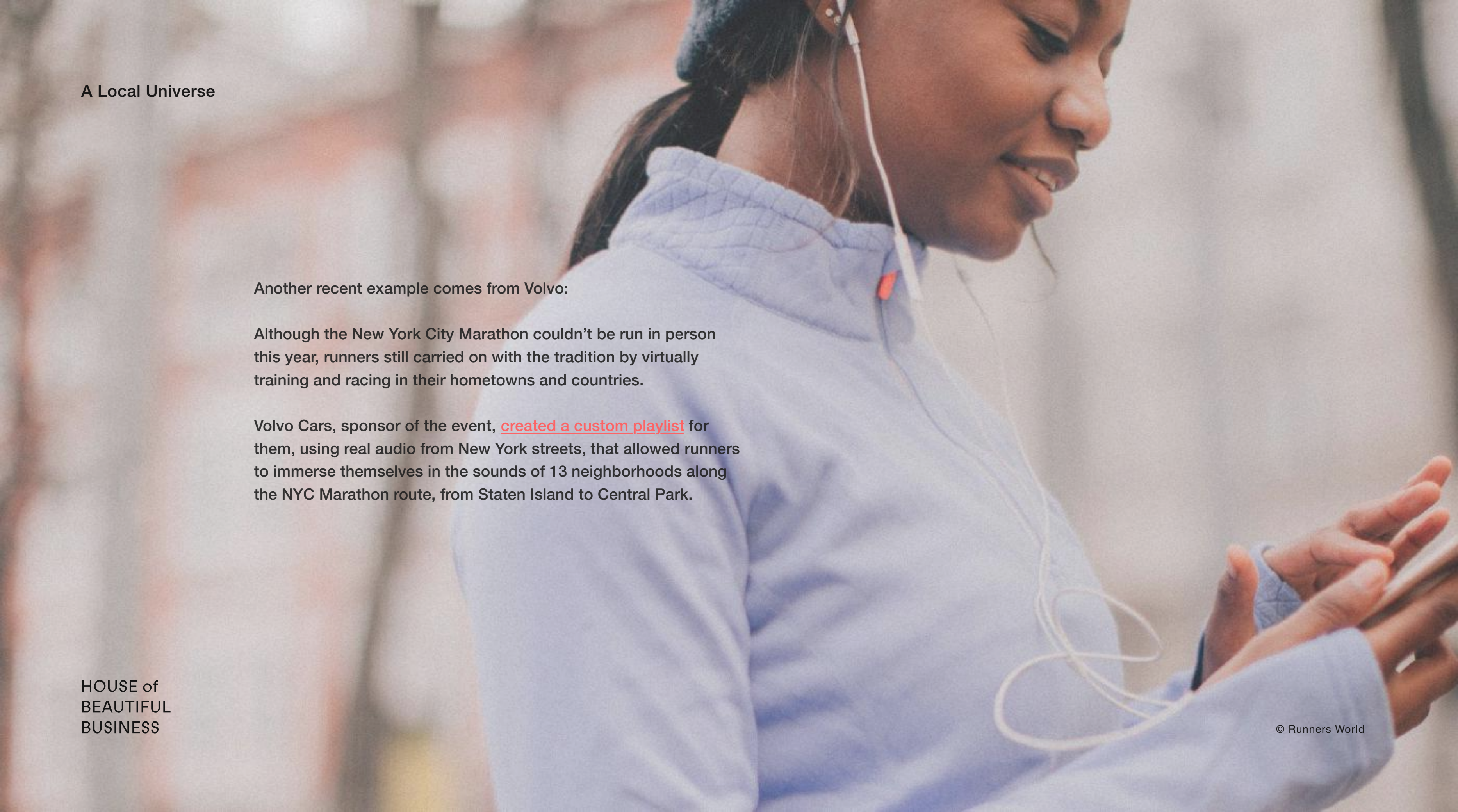
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A Local Universe



But many other examples show how to deliver a local universe as a remote experience.

For example, the team at Color Factory walked more than 50 miles through Manhattan and took more than 1,000 photos to map the city in a new way: as [a 265-street, color-coded portrait of New York,](#) bringing to life the stories and colors that make the city unique.

A close-up, side-profile shot of a woman with dark hair in a ponytail, wearing a light blue quilted jacket and white earbuds. She is smiling and looking down, with her hands clasped in front of her. The background is a blurred crowd of people, suggesting a marathon or race event.

A Local Universe

Another recent example comes from Volvo:

Although the New York City Marathon couldn't be run in person this year, runners still carried on with the tradition by virtually training and racing in their hometowns and countries.

Volvo Cars, sponsor of the event, [created a custom playlist](#) for them, using real audio from New York streets, that allowed runners to immerse themselves in the sounds of 13 neighborhoods along the NYC Marathon route, from Staten Island to Central Park.

A Local Universe



Even global events can put the idea of local universes front and center. At our recent global festival, The Great Wave, we set up 36 local hubs around the world with the help of some passionate community members.

A Local Universe

Select moments from local hubs were included in our global virtual program, while each hub also provided special programming with local speakers, artists, and themes, for small groups of attendees who were either physically present in one of the 36 cities, or remotely connected thanks to a special interest in a locale.

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A Local Universe



The most consequential way of enabling a local universe may be creating a permanent co-living experience that allows people to fully dive into a local reality.

Although the co-living market, heralded as a next-big-thing for some time now, hasn't taken off yet, numerous initiatives now underway bring new value propositions to market.

Entities like [The Embassies](#) or [Willa](#) focus on an audience aged 55 and beyond, with community experiences and meaningful entertainment that connect customers—in this case, affluent silver-agers—with neighbors and friends.

A Local Universe



Another interesting take on co-living experiences to watch is [KoDorf](#), a German initiative to set up small villages in the countryside and build a community of long-term tenants with a strong shared purpose.

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In Closing

Whether global or local,
virtual or IRL, synchronous or
asynchronous, the experiences
of the future will be hybrid.
It's a buzzword but also our
new reality that is here to stay.

It will require hybrid thinking: on the one hand, playful artistic vision, on the other hand the analytic mindset of a data scientist; on the one hand an appreciation for the fundamentals of memorable experiences (which have not changed), on the other an insatiable appetite for constant novelty, and especially for novel mixes of existing ingredients; on the one hand a recognition of how to create emotional intimacy in times of digitally bridged social distance, on the other an anticipation of the multi-sensory experiences made possible by post-pandemic in-person gatherings; on the one hand an emphasis on the power of fleeting moments, on the other hand a deep connection with values that last—and matter.

In virtual or hybrid environments, the bar has been raised for all types of experience. They must be even more unique and at best transformative, or they will not be remembered.

The image shows two women sitting at a wooden table in a dimly lit room, possibly a bar or lounge. They are both smiling and laughing, looking towards the left. The woman in the foreground is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt. In the background, a projector screen displays the word "ME" and some text. The overall atmosphere is warm and social.

In Closing

- Hybrid is a big buzzword these days, but it's here to stay. It's not just a way of organizing events: It's everyday reality.
- Experience creators need to create community online and offline, and ideally, both at the same time.
- Consequently, experience creators will need a holistic skill set going forward—from event experience design to media broadcast to data science.
- Digital experience should be designed for serendipity, spontaneity and intimacy, and while being experimental in nature, they need to be delivered perfectly as there's little room for error.
- The strategic core of the work of experience creators in the next few years should be the insight that large is out and small is in.
- Related to this, deepening and expanding one's local experience is a value-adding strategy that meets the zeitgeist.
- Conscious hedonism is a post-pandemic mindset to embrace now. Rather than pursuing one-offs, experience creators should focus on building platforms and pursuing long-term initiatives.

About the House

The House of Beautiful Business is a global platform and community to make humans more human and business more beautiful. Through in-person gatherings, online programs, publications, and art, we inspire and enable our members to reinvent their organizations and themselves, and to shape better futures for business and society.

The House of Beautiful Business was founded in 2017, and since then our community has grown to 10,000+ members around the world.

As a think tank, we work with partners including Airbus, Boston Consulting Group, Galp, Google, Grupo Ageas Portugal, IEEE, Porsche, and SAP.

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