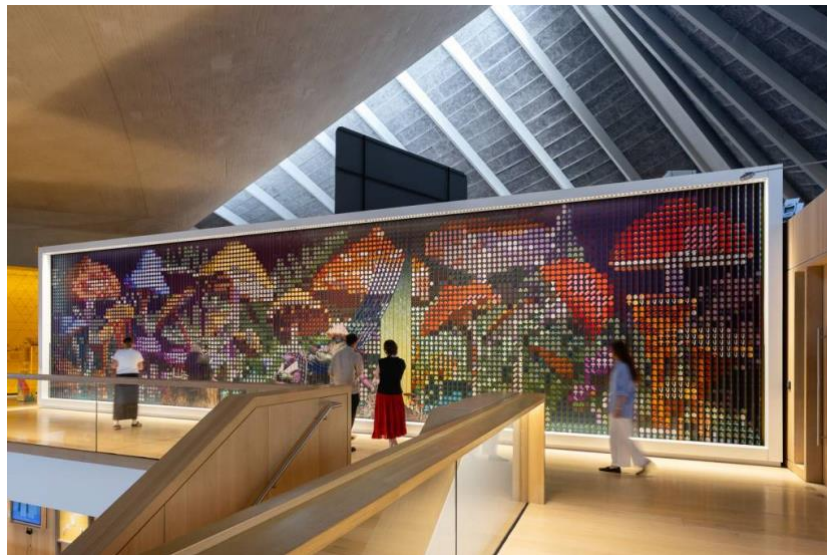


Emoji and folktales tell climate story in Design Museum's major new installation



Fables for our Time at the Design Museum. © Rob Harris for the Design Museum

[PRESS IMAGES AVAILABLE HERE](#)

The Design Museum today unveils a major public commission that uses folktales and a new collection of emoji to examine humanity's relationship with the natural environment.

Fables for our Time is a new 15m triptych on the museum's second floor. It features three panels, each of which tells a particular story about an ecosystem that is vital to a thriving planet: the ecosystems of bees, coral and mushrooms.

The three scenes are presented as contemporary folktales, with narrators in the foreground who advocate for the primacy of natural systems in the human story.

On view from today and free to experience, the panels consist of 176 constantly rotating prisms. They have been created by architecture and design studio Space Popular (Lara Lesmes and Fredrik Hellberg) in collaboration with architectural historian Shumi Bose.

Visitors are invited to contemplate the installation from different vantage points within the museum, and to think about how humans are entangled with the natural environment in ways that are both healing and harmful. The closer the viewer, the more the triptych reveals.



Fables for our Time at the Design Museum. © Rob Harris for the Design Museum

Conceived as a piece of visual research and communication, the work has been commissioned by Future Observatory, the Design Museum's national research programme for the green transition.

It marks a major new research theme at Future Observatory, which is exploring 'more-than-human design' as a way to reconnect to other species and the ecosystems that keep the planet healthy. The theme will play out across funding grants, Future Observatory Journal and a major exhibition in 2025.

The triptych has been made possible through funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, part of UK Research and Innovation. The work is a striking addition to the museum's iconic atrium space, and it sits within the Future Observatory display space and alongside the permanent collection gallery Design Maker User.

Each of the panels in *Fables for our Time* is made up of hundreds of emoji in a mosaic-like pattern, or a pixellated form of cross-stitch embroidery. The emoji represent both natural systems and human ones, from cells and species to pesticides and waste. There is insect, plant and marine life alongside batteries, cigarette butts and Wi-Fi symbols. All have been designed specially for this commission.

Fredrik Hellberg, Lara Lesmes, and Shumi Bose, said: “We chose folktales as the core of this commission because they have long acted as a means to share cautionary tales. And the climate crisis is, in a way, a crisis of storytelling as it is hard to convey the immensity or scale of ecological change. The twenty-first century needs a new set of fairy tales to imagine how we might design today’s planetary possibilities together.”

Justin McGuirk, Future Observatory’s director, said: “The green transition is a core part of the Design Museum’s mission, and it’s not just about carbon emissions, it’s about reconnecting to the living world. The stories we tell are central to that reconnection, and *Fables for our Time* puts natural systems at the heart of the museum. It is such a rich work of graphic communication that encourages visitors of all ages to contemplate the role of other species in humanity’s story. The work is so detailed that the more you engage, the more it reveals. It is stunning, and we are thrilled that hundreds of thousands of visitors will get to enjoy it for free.”



Fables for our Time at the Design Museum. © Rob Harris for the Design Museum

The first frieze shows an expanse of flowers, representing the work of bees, the crucial pollinators who cooperate with flowers to help them reproduce. The next panel shows a coral reef that is being maintained by a group of divers. Then the final panel shows the world of mushrooms, and their root networks, which are called mycelium.

Animating each frieze are the storytellers, who appear in the foreground and narrate or perform stories about their ecosystems. By wearing animal masks, they embody non-human actors in their tales: a fox, a mouse, a turtle, an axolotl.

Fables for our Time is now open at the Design Museum and is free to visit.

-Ends-

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About Future Observatory:

Future Observatory is the Design Museum's national research programme for the green transition. Based at the museum, it is coordinated in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which is part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Acting as both a coordinating hub for a nationwide programme, as well as a research department within the museum, Future Observatory curates exhibitions, programmes events and funds and publishes new research, all with the aim of championing new design thinking on environmental issues.

●● FUTURE OBSERVATORY

About Arts and Humanities Research Council:

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation, funds internationally outstanding independent researchers across the whole range of the arts and humanities: history, archaeology, digital content, philosophy, languages and literature, design, heritage, area studies, the creative and performing arts, and much more. The quality and range of research supported by AHRC works for the good of UK society and culture and contributes both to UK economic success and to the culture and welfare of societies across the globe. ahrc.ukri.org



About the Design Museum:

The Design Museum is a multifaceted museum, an ever-changing space for the public, industry and education to come together and explore new ideas. A registered charity, the museum's innovative exhibitions, partnerships, research and learning programmes evidence how design can enable this planet and its inhabitants to thrive. Our landmark building in Kensington is the centre of our national network and a global hub for the transformative potential of design.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Shumi Bose is chief editor at KoozArch. She is an educator, curator and editor in the field of architecture and architectural history. Shumi is a Senior Lecturer in architectural history at Central Saint Martins and also teaches at

the Royal College of Art, the Architectural Association and the School of Architecture at Syracuse University in London. She has curated widely, including exhibitions at the Venice Biennale of Architecture, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Royal Institute of British Architects. In 2020 she founded Holdspace, a digital platform for extracurricular discussions in architectural education, and currently serves as trustee for the Architecture Foundation.

Lara Lesmes and Fredrik Hellberg founded Space Popular in 2013 in Bangkok; an architecture studio that explores the relationships between media and the built environment through research, design and artworks. The studio has realised buildings, exhibitions, public artworks, furniture collections, and interiors in Asia and Europe, as well as virtual architecture for the immersive web. Lesmes and Hellberg have been Visiting Professors at UCLA AUD in Los Angeles for the past three years, and have previously held academic positions at the Architectural Association in London, the University of Toronto, and INDA Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. Clients, collaborators and commissioners include national institutions such as MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria, MAXXI – National Museum of 21st Century Art, Rome, Italy, the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design ArkDes, Stockholm, Sweden, the Royal Institute of British Architects, London, UK, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, South Korea, as well as independent galleries such as MAGAZIN, Vienna, Austria, and Sto Werkstatt, London, UK.