

Gateway to Other Futures

A St. Louis symposium imagines alternate urban futures inspired by Afrofuturism

By [Joseph Altshuler](#) • June 13, 2018 • [Architecture](#), [Midwest](#), [News](#), [Urbanism](#)



A St. Louis symposium imagines alternate urban futures inspired by Afrofuturism. Maxi Glamour's performs 'Manifestos for a Future St. Louis' over a concrete partition. (David Johnson)

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We have to imagine a place before we can actually be there. So [St. Louis](#)-based artists and curators Gavin Kroeber, Tim Portlock, and Rebecca Wanzo invited their fellow citizens to imagine the [urban future](#) with “a two-day [festival of art and ideas](#) that explores the collisions of race, urbanism, and futurism, providing a platform for alternate visions of the St. Louis to come.”

The name of the event, “Dwell in Other Futures,” comes from the novel *Dhalgren* by the Afrofuturist writer Samuel R. Delaney, who also served as the keynote speaker and underpinning force that bound together a number of the program’s participants. To open the event, Delaney recited a chapter from his most recent novel that bolstered the role that intimacy might play in how we understand our spaces.

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Maxi Glamour's performs 'Manifestos for a Future St. Louis'. (David Johnson)

Held on April 27 and 28, the program included a collection of workshops and presentations, with special emphasis on performances. For example, the multidisciplinary artist Eric Ellingsen, along with his team of Tyvek-hazmat-suit-clad landscape architecture faculty and students from the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts, invited the public to join as they performed a choreographic ritual on an empty land parcel across the street from the Pulitzer Foundation. Inspired by the spray paint markings that often indicate underground utility lines, Ellingsen's team challenged the audience to assume agency over the colored ground markings that make up our cities in order to speculate how infrastructure may connect us in more creative ways. Children and adults took charge of rolling paint applicators to inscribe the site with colorful lines while an overhead drone recorded the real-time mapmaking from a bird's-eye view.

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Landscape Architect Eric Ellingsen and team performs 'the earth is blue like an orange (landscape performances welcoming the future now Chouteau Greenway)'. (Michael Thomas)

Inside, artist Autumn Knight invited audience members to offer impromptu proposals for civic institutions as part of her La-A Consortium performance, posing playful yet bureaucratic titles such as “Shephanique Center for Literacy” and the “Jadavian Center for Creative Ecologies” as a starting point. By leveraging the power of intentional naming, Knight prompted the audience to consider how they might creatively impact the identities and activities of the organizations that constitute our society.

The event closed with a bang as six different local participants delivered “Manifestos for a Future St. Louis.” These brief, bold, and highly choreographed proclamations required each participant to articulate a scenario about a possible future through whatever artistic means necessary. Architectural historian Michael Allen delivered a prescient soliloquy set to a Hollywood soundtrack, warning of a “non-topian” future that intensifies our troubled present, brimming with privatization and distrust of the public sphere. Maxi Glamour, the self-proclaimed “Demon Queen of Polka and Baklava” projected a nonbinary, gender-fluid future enacted by a spectacular drag performance. Social practice designer De Nichols closed the series with an optimistic call to action, imploring us to consider what parts of the status quo need to be destroyed in order to make space for “audacious” culture-makers and “fearless” justice-makers.

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Landscape Architect Eric Ellingsen and team designed the earth is blue like an orange (landscape performances welcoming the future now Chouteau Greenway). (Michael Thomas)

What conclusions did the festival draw? Its participants proposed more questions than answers, implicating the audience every step of the way. As the symposium progressed, the celebratory collective voice proclaimed that the future will be black, the future will be queer, and the future city demands all of our emphatic participation.

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