

FUTURE SCAPES

ETERNAL BLISS

by Markus Albers



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FUTURE SCAPES



WHAT DO YOU THINK LIFE WILL BE LIKE IN 2025?

FutureScapes is an exciting collaboration project that aims to explore the potential of technology and entertainment to create a better, more enjoyable world in 2025. It's not about predicting the future so much as imagining the possibilities. There is by definition an infinite number of possible futures ahead of us. But one thing is clear: the world of 2025 will be very different from the one we live in today.

By starting with life in 2025, rather than today, FutureScapes aims to stimulate more creative thinking about how technology might help us live sustainably. By sharing immersive and entertaining stimulus material – such as short stories – this collaboration aims to invite the contributions of ‘futures’ experts and an eclectic mix of thinkers, writers, designers and the public to address the opportunities and challenges of life in 2025 and the potential roles technology will play in it.

FutureScapes is designed to be as open and collaborative as possible and is being convened by leading sustainability non-profit organisation, Forum for the Future, and leading consumer technology company, Sony.

To find out more or to get involved visit www.sony.co.uk/futurescapes or follow us on Twitter @better_futures and #futurescapes.

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by Markus Albers



Markus Albers is a Berlin-based journalist and writer of non-fiction books. Markus is Contributing Editor for Monocle and Brand Eins, as well as Managing Partner at media-consultancy Rethink. His texts have been published in GQ, AD, Vanity Fair, Spiegel, Stern, SZ-Magazin, Welt am Sonntag, and Die Zeit. He also is a columnist for Die Welt. Markus published two books, “Meconomy” (2010) and the bestselling “Morgen komm ich später rein” (2008). His books have been translated into English, Korean and Hungarian.

He woke with a start, not knowing where he was, or how he got there. Darkness surrounded him. He tried looking around, looking at his hands, but there was only blackness. “Light,” he said. “Check messages.” Then, “What time is it?” At home, these phrases would have prompted the room to react in a familiar, intimate way. To do things like turn on his vintage Arne Jacobsen lamp, the one he had kept after Renée was gone. Or to light up the bedroom’s VisuaWalls in gentle greys and reds with a stylised search window, a visualization of his search history. Or an oversized rendering of a classic digital alarm clock from 1985.

But here was only darkness. He tried to concentrate, to remember. He was not at home, so he must be in a hotel. He was most of the time anyway. Obviously not one of the big-chains, since his orders would then have prompted at least a standard reaction from the intelligent room. Must be some super chic design affair, too cool to bend to the universal rules of VoiceCom. Damn, how he hated these pretentious boutique joints, especially when waking up with the worst possible mixture of jet lag and hangover. He could still smell the single malt in the room’s aseptic cold.

Then it came back to him, one cerebral fragment at a time: the agency calling him two days ago. A research assignment, most pressing. Of course the client would pay his substantial daily fee without the haggling that usually resulted in a large discount, depending on his current credit rating. Him grabbing his packed Porter Long hauler bag and going straight to the airport. Everything was arranged. Flight reservation in his name. Spell-check: Robert Weill, Berlin, United States of Europe. Correct. One couldn’t be too careful these days. Especially when travelling to the UAE with their super strict secure-tech at immigration. He also remembered a detailed briefing sent to his machine which he had started beaming against the backseat of the old electric Mercedes-ElectroCab (the kind you only found in Europe anymore) on his way to Willy Brandt Airport.

Robert recalled briefly looking up from the data stream and out of the cab’s window. The city was still asleep in its melancholy mixture of slightly shabby high-tech architecture, run-down factories and fading graffiti. He boarded the Etihad flight to Abu Dhabi, and spent the five hours on board streaming videos and layered augmentations about the person he was sent to look for.

Abu Dhabi: The Eclipse Terrace. Probably a luxury hotel 15 years ago, but it had aged badly and was run-down. No iAssist, no VisuaWalls, just an old-school air con coughing ice down his neck.

His client wasn't lacking the money to pay for something better, that much he knew. But the Eclipse was supposed to keep him under the radar. Whose radar, he did not know. He got up, found a good old light switch, and checked his machine. It was now ten thirty in the morning, seven thirty a.m. in Berlin. The moment Robert always woke up, no matter what time zone. Renée used to joke about this, calling him "my alarm-clock." God, how he missed her. Whenever something strange or funny happened, he instinctively got out his machine to tell her about it. But of course he couldn't, not anymore.

Robert opened the curtains to the sun, showered, plopped his wrinkle-free Uniqlo travel suit out its bottle-sized container and went down to the lobby for a double espresso. Then another to chase off the foginess. He had to be alert today. He would meet the emir.

The hotel's concierge beam screen confirmed that "outside" (a metaphor since the whole city was covered with a roof anyway), his Auto Drive was waiting. It was one of the Google-BMW six-seaters you see everywhere in the Middle East. There are almost no robocars in Europe, of course, not even back home in Berlin. After the euro went down in 2013, the continent had begun the steady decline everyone had predicted, just a little faster. Tanking economies. Aging populations. No money to deal with climate change in a sophisticated and high-tech way, so people were instead allocated individual budgets of CarbonCreds, and forced to conform to them. So you didn't see many cars in Berlin anyway, except for a few taxis. Most of the old boulevards in the east side of town have been converted to massive stretches of urban gardening. The capital of the US of E is now an agricultural hub. Who would have thought that, back when Berlin was chiefly a playground for artists and media slackers by day, and a booming dance floor at night. Robert smiled.

Of course, smart new technologies helped. People in Europe, as in most parts of the old world, got used to having their energy consumption monitored by the government. You learned to use your CarbonCred wisely. Among his friends, Robert was the only one to still travel long-haul distances on a regular basis. In his line of work it was a necessity, of course, and his clients paid for the Creds. But apart from that, he led a life that was pretty much confined to his community, much as anyone else. Walking or bicycling, finding comfort in spending time with friends and neighbours instead of the unbridled consumption of only a few years ago. "Shopping is so 2010," Renée always said, only half joking. And hey, he still had the good fortune of seeing other parts of world in person, not just via VirtuHolidays like his friends.

But everyone knew that the real cutting-edge innovations were coming from elsewhere; China mostly, and the Middle East. At first you didn't really notice it. But when getting back from his journeys he sensed the divide. In Europe the infrastructure had become a little shabby. Paris and London had finally acquired the seen-better-times look that always distinguished cities like Lisbon and Berlin. It was picturesque. Visiting Koreans and Kuwaitis loved the patina. Life wasn't bad. Especially in Germany, where the economy had stayed robust a little longer and people were used to recycle their garbage anyway. Now they were growing their own food. Even Robert was fond of the

four smallish apple trees on his terrace. All these vegetable patches and fruit groves, people lingering in cafés and on sidewalks (most were too old to work and there weren't many jobs to begin with) gave the city the slightly Mediterranean feel he liked. Temperatures having risen by two degrees Celsius on average didn't hurt either. But of course, what had once been called "progress" moved to other parts of the world. So did the money, and his clients.

The Auto Drive roused him from his slumber with a chipper chime. Its passenger door slid open. He half expected to be hit by an onslaught of torrid air, as would have been the case in earlier years when he had first travelled the region. But in addition to the whole city being roofed, the car now was already sealed airtight to the building he was about to enter. The intensified stream of air-condition from the lobby made him sneeze. OK, he thought, so the Mark Zuckerberg Foundation had extended our lifetimes by 35 percent over the last 10 years, wiped out AIDS as well as the most aggressive forms of cancer (and male impotence), but he still got his regular colds just like when he was eight years old.


"Mr. Weill, welcome to a Saabar Investment." A good-looking man with trimmed grey beard and sad eyes, dressed in traditional thawb and guthra, approached him, gesturing towards the lobby bar. He knew this guy from the briefing videos on the plane. The man had been running the country's transport department back when building infrastructure was still a top priority. "Rashid Al Dhakwan," the man introduced himself, "Director of the Department of Eternal Life." The DEL.

Back in Europe, people were living to be 90, 100 at most, which he considered pretty good. His father had died at 95 last year, his mother was 96 and still going strong. But over here? Cheating death was where the government put most resources. Already the Arabs' average life span was an impressive 120 years. And, after last years' massive brain drain from the West, they also had the brightest minds working on making their residents live even longer, maybe forever, starting with the royal family.

The latest technology, one that Robert had been researching, was called BB, or Brain Backup. It involved creating a digital replica of a brain through reverse engineering, and uploading the content of a deceased person's memories onto a powerful hard drive. As the name suggested it was only a backup – you couldn't interact with it. But one day soon you would – or so the experts said. The data would then eventually be downloaded into a replicate of the individual, effectively creating eternal life. This was bringing back the dead, at least the ones affluent enough to afford this procedure. Scientists believed they were about three to five years away from getting a handle on this.

Robert had been wondering why Rashid was meeting him at the country's biggest investment company instead of his government office. He knew that Saabar was deeply intertwined with the DEL. And he had learned in the past that asking too many questions too early was not exactly helpful. Robert was a good listener, and over the years, that had proved to be an integral part of his professional success.





The bar was an elaborate affair in green and white serving over 30 kinds of coffee-related refreshments and boasting the name “Saabarbucks.” Nine years ago, he remembered, Saabar had bought the then-popular American coffee chain Starbucks. A sensible move, given the long-standing and rather irrational fascination Arab business people had for Starbucks’ products. Saabar outfitted all official buildings with Saabarbucks coffee bars. Rashid ordered an Iced Hand-Ground Pour-Over, though obviously there was no person behind the bar with hands to grind, just the usual screen, and a double espresso for Robert.

After some small talk about travel, health, and the latest CarbonCred riots in the USA, Rashid got down to business. “Unfortunately His Highness Sheikh Muhammad will not be able to see you today,” he said without even trying to sound apologetic. Muhammad ibn Zayid Al Nahyan, the country’s ruler, had taken over four years ago from his brother Chalifa. “But I will proceed with your briefing so that you can start your work immediately.” Robert just nodded. He knew he had never really been scheduled to see the emir. That was just the typical pretence of courtesy. It was always the henchmen you spoke to, often distant relatives of minor importance. Just as well. Robert had learned all he needed to know for this job from studying the info on the plane. This was going through the motions of hierarchy. For them, he was a mercenary from a poor country. A man for odd jobs with a special skill.

Years ago, Robert Weill was what people then called a “journalist”. Today that was a desperately old-fashioned concept, one he had trouble explaining to kids. There were no newspapers around anymore, and no TV stations. People streamed their individually tailored content via their machines onto any desired surface these days. The content came from other individuals. When Robert was young they were special and called “bloggers,” and today it was simply everybody communicating. Or it was high-end branded content from companies. Which wasn’t really as bad as it sounded: you got exactly the information, or entertainment, you wanted, when you wanted it. Your fine-tuned social filters chose what was relevant for you, matching your needs much better than those editors and program directors of the past. Brands had learned to interact with you on a personal instead of a commercial level. You really wanted to stay with them for the rest of your life. Of course privacy was history now: otherwise how else should the brands and the streamers know how to feed your deepest desires? The system was convenient, context-sensitive, and personalised. It just definitely wasn’t journalism anymore.

So he had conceded years ago that he was part of a dying breed. If editors were not calling anymore, he had decided, then other businesses would buy his unique capabilities. He had long stopped calling himself a journalist. “Reporter” also sounded desperately passé. Robert’s Global Business Profile (GBP) read: “Research Professional.” This was sufficiently vague so that all kinds of customers were calling him, at least after his client list started boasting big corporate names. And call they did: branding agencies looking for trend pattern recognition, R&D labs wondering about their competitors, assigning him with all kinds of silly jobs he was sworn to never reveal.

Robert learned that with this special kind of freelance work – and that was all there was today with unemployment figures in Europe around 30 per cent – he could actually earn good money without working all the time. Especially if you lived in a cheap city like Berlin and grew your own fruit. True: today people could let their screens search the invisible clouds of data that surrounded every person, every city, every business, and within nanoseconds they would find exactly what they were looking for. Except when they didn’t. Which was when people like Robert came into play.

Because Robert would search not only tags and keywords and metadata. He was no algorithm. He would actually talk to people. Would check into the physical world that was still out there, beyond the augmented reality projectors in people’s living rooms. He would question the data. Would search with a tool that machines still hadn’t learned to use: cynicism.

That was why he didn’t buy the info this Rashid guy had been sending. Peter Masch, a German scientist from Munich, had been hired by Saabar and the DEL. He was widely considered to be the world’s best neuro engineer. And, so it seemed, he was onto something, having to do with Brain Backup. But then, just five days ago, Masch disappeared from Abi Dhabi. Now Saabar wanted him back, and quickly. Robert asked: “20 Million dirham per year plus citizenship and you still couldn’t make him stay?”

“We don’t know whether he left voluntarily”, Rashid replied fiddling with his paper cup. “In fact many at DEL think he didn’t. After all that’s why we contacted you.”

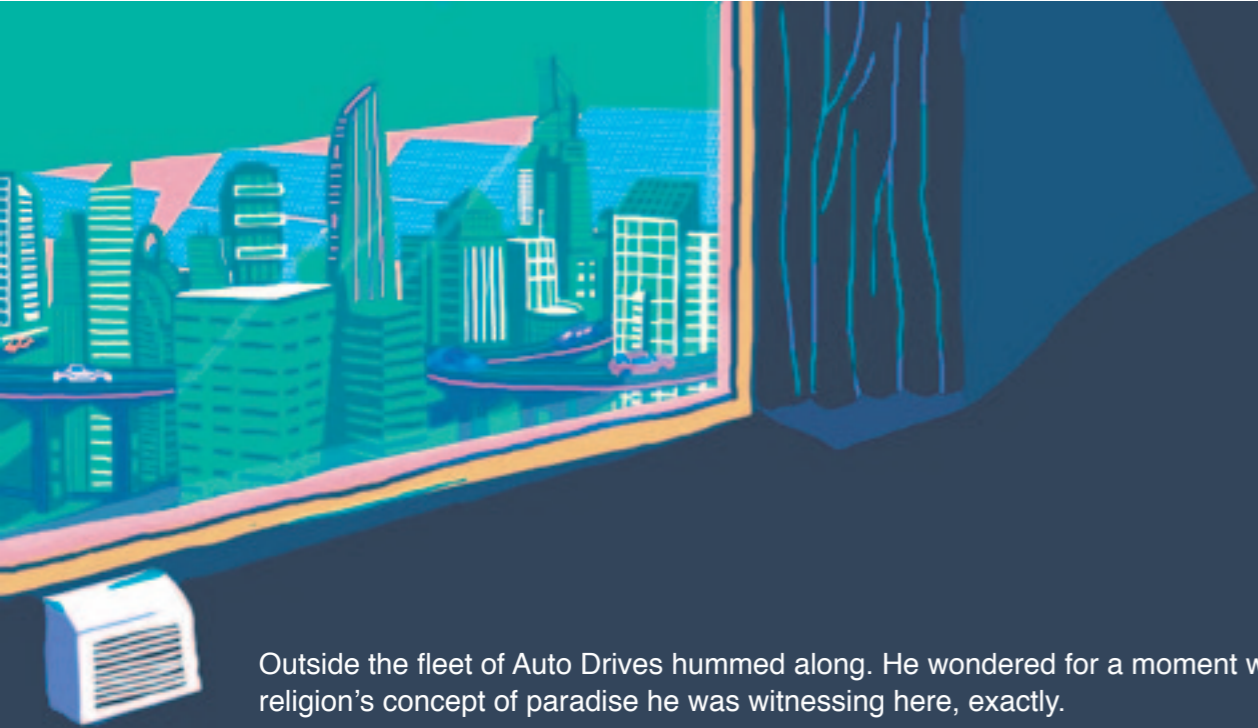
“What if he took your money and ran?”

Rashid looked sincerely surprised: “Where would he run to... back to Munich?” He said it with a subtle smile. The smile then widened to a grin with just a hint of contempt: “To the US?”

Robert didn’t reply, but he knew what Rashid meant. No one would leave here unless he had to. This was 2025, and compared to many other parts of the world, the UAE was paradise, if you liked your Auto Drives gold plated and your air con 24/7. Robert didn’t, really. But with Renée gone, and Berlin becoming a city of farmers in its post post-industrial way, he knew he at least would do anything to stay. Also maybe these sheikhs could help him get back the women he loved. “I need one month,” said Robert.

Rashid shook his head, his eyes even sadder now: “Twelve days counting from today. On February 26th we have our quarterly presentation to the emir. If Masch isn’t back by then ...” His voice trailed off. He pulled himself together. “Twelve days”, he said. “100,000 dirhan bonus for every day before that.”

Robert didn’t say anything for a while. He looked at the empty paper cup in his hand, at the vast lobby with glassy VisuaWalls and Floors moving with animated graphic metaphors of Saabar Investment’s many activities.



Outside the fleet of Auto Drives hummed along. He wondered for a moment which religion's concept of paradise he was witnessing here, exactly.

He did miss his micro apple orchard and the dirty, friendly mess of Berlin. "I want citizenship", he said, looking back at Rashid, being careful not to blink.

"Impossible," Rashid replied.

"Then I can't accept."

Rashid met his stare for what felt like a minute then broke off and breathed out heavily. "Let me look into it. I'll get back to you this evening."

Robert watched as about 20 cleaning robots, each the size of his hand, swarmed over one of the VisuaWalls removing invisible stains, trying to further polish the immaculate surface. He looked at his reflection behind the swirling info graphics. He needed a shave, he thought. His shirt was wrinkled. He looked tired. Or maybe it was just this environment that made him feel so really, really Old World. When he snapped out of his stupor, Rashid was gone.

"Still water," Robert said to the bar's screen: "No, make that a Hendricks and tonic."

"Sorry Sir, no alcohol in this facility," the screen replied in a vaguely Swiss accent.

Robert took the water and stepped out into his waiting Auto Drive. On the way back to the hotel he thought again about what it might be like actually living here. Immigration had been even stricter than last time. They don't want to let anyone in here anymore, he thought, and no wonder. Between about 2000 and 2020, the UAE had used it's oil money to boost tourism, and culture. Then they realised, with climate change gaining speed, that the Old World became more and more obsessed with monitoring its citizens' carbon production. Many Europeans and Americans felt their governments were now baby sitters. Those who could still travel went to Asia and the Middle East, trying to emigrate. With its gigantic solar farms in the deserts, the Arab world now was one of the few places where you could still mindlessly churn out those CarbonCreds and live the good life.

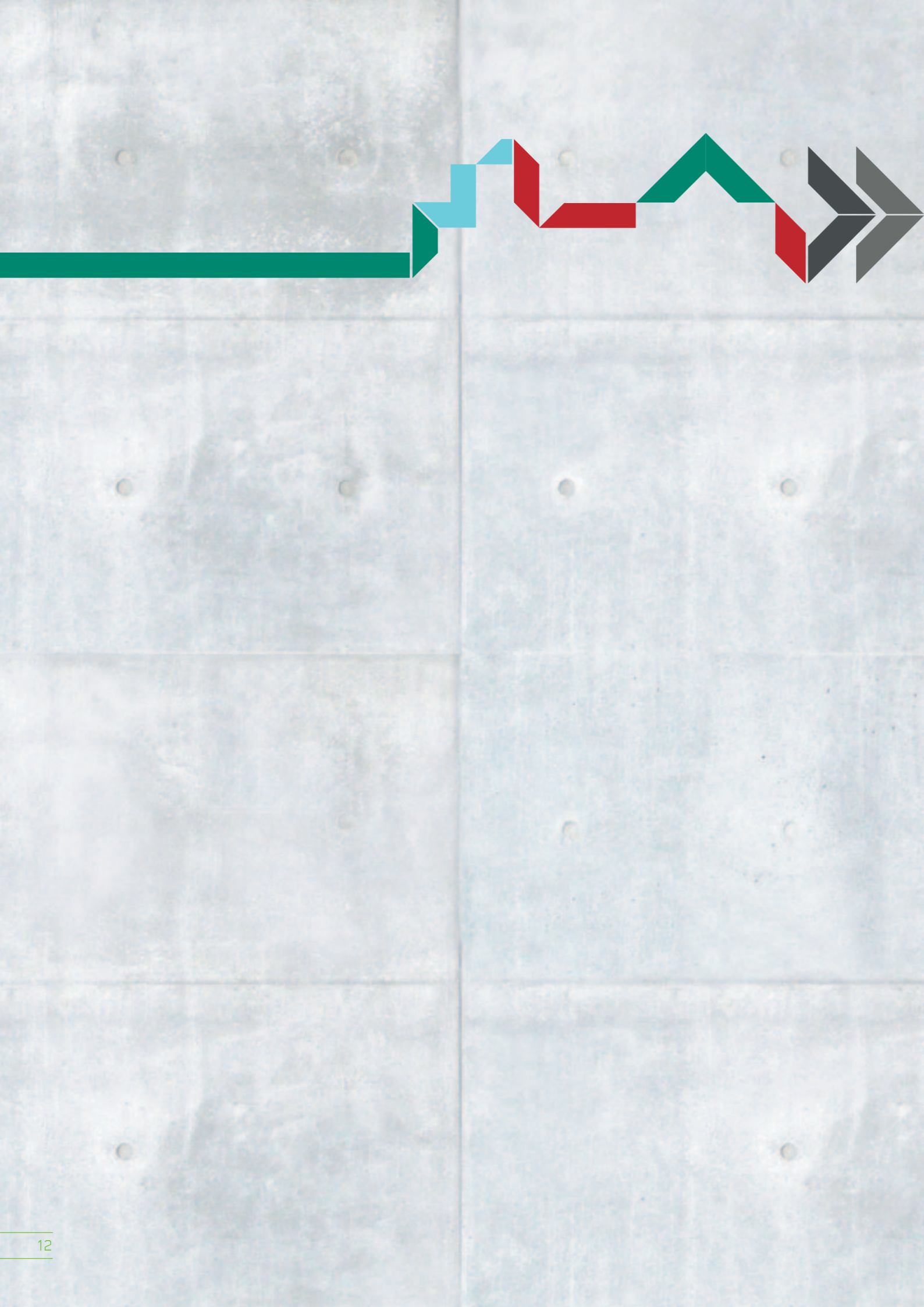
So the UAE began turning down the number of visitors, investing less of their petrol dirhan into hotels and even more into technology. One that promised them the only thing up until now money couldn't buy: a substantially longer life. Abu Dhabi today was the centre of a prospering LPM business. The super rich all over the world craved for LPM, or life-prolonging medicine. And the emir had realised that by promoting it, he could make even more money than on ordinary tourism and might find eternal life for himself at the same time. If anyone could pull off transforming Brain Backups into real people again – to bring back the dead – it was the sheiks and their international crew of scientists.

So, living here? As a not-so super rich person? It was worth a shot, Robert thought, back in his hotel-room, lying spread out on the mattress. Here he could offer Renée a new life, Robert thought; a life of eternal bliss. He just needed Rashid to let him stay. And for this, he needed to find Masch. Tomorrow he would start his search in Munich.

In the old-fashioned hotel room there were no screens to monitor his activity, no machines waited patiently for his orders. A room, strangely free of the multifeeds, and the pattern recognition AI, and the CarbonCred scanners that usually accompanied you every moment of your life. Their absence gave him a cosy feeling of anonymity. For the first time today he felt the muscles around his eyes relax.

Robert again thought about having a drink, but instead pulled a flexible Visual Page from his pocket. He looked at it for a long time, his fingers hovering over its moving image as if wanting to caress it, but not quite. From the display a tiny sound of laughter drifted through the room. When he finally fell asleep, the tool slipped from his fingers to the floor. On it, a short movie of a black-haired young women making funny faces for the camera played in a loop. Superimposed over the image was one line of simple Helvetica script: "Renée Hoffman – 1993-2025."





About Sony

Sony is a leading global innovator of audio, video, communications and information technology products for both the consumer and professional markets. Offering a complete end-to-end HD value chain and with its electronics, music, pictures, game and online businesses, Sony is one of the world's leading digital entertainment brands, employing approximately 170,000 people worldwide.

Sony recognise that our businesses have a direct and indirect impact on the societies in which we operate and we see sustainability as a critical part of our company ethos and activities. Our partnerships with NGOs such as WWF, UNICEF and Save the Children ensure we play our part as a responsible global company. Our "Road to Zero" global environmental plan sets out a long-term goal of achieving a zero environmental footprint (through curbing climate change, resource conservation, control of chemical substances and biodiversity) throughout the life cycle of our products and business activities by 2050, as well as specific mid-term targets in line with that goal.

Sony believes that technology can make a positive contribution to tackling social and environmental issues, both today and in 2025. We have a strong track record in open innovation for sustainability with our Forest Guard and Open Planet Ideas initiatives.

Sony's role in FutureScapes is to use our brand's reach and our expertise in technology, imagination and innovation to engage the widest possible audience in an open collaboration to help everyone better understand – and innovate for – an uncertain future.

To find out more about our corporate sustainability activities, visit: www.sony.co.uk/eco

About Forum for the Future

Forum for the Future is a non-profit organisation working globally with business and government to create a sustainable future. We have 15 years experience inspiring new thinking, building creative partnerships and developing practical innovations to change our world. Our aim is to transform the critical systems that we all depend on, such as food, energy and finance, to make them fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

Forum works with more than 100 partners across business and the public sector. We specialise in a 'system innovation' approach to sustainability and use powerful tools such as 'futures', innovation and sustainable business model development to help companies succeed. We communicate and share our thinking and tools widely, including running a Masters course for future leaders and publishing the leading magazine on environmental solutions and sustainable futures, Green Futures.

Forum for the Future's role in FutureScapes is to design and deliver the futures process and provide sustainability expertise.

www.forumforthefuture.org

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