Food, film and futurists: Here's what's happening in the Wonder House at South by Southwest

University Communications
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The Wonder House is making its return to Austin, Texas, as the University ramps up its presence at South by Southwest Conference and Festivals this year with a larger space and a longer stay.

The University will take over Café Blue in downtown Austin from March 11-14 for presentations, performances and immersive experiences led by dozens of faculty, staff and alumni.

“We had a blockbuster performance last year,” said Misha Harrison, executive director of experience in Marketing and Brand Management. “We saw over 10,000 people who really didn't know much about us in an area of the country that we're trying to woo as we recruit students and faculty and look for commercialization and research opportunities.”

The name "Wonder House" represents the the University of Arizona's brand: WONDER. As a humanistic brand, it encourages people to engage with and develop relationships with the University through authentic articulations of our contributions to the world.

Harrison says the Wonder House will bring scientists, artists, entrepreneurs and others together with a focus on sustainable systems. Much of the University's programming is part of South by Southwest's "2050 Track," which centers on long-range, big-picture thinking surrounding discoveries in areas including life extension, next-generation agriculture and artificial intelligence.

"We're coming at it as futurists and showing what the world could look like if we apply what we are learning in our research here at the University of Arizona," Harrison said. "Our faculty are talking about breaking the political gridlock, culinary medicine, climate change, water sustainability and more.”

Tapping into University creativity and expertise

Faculty in areas including history, space science, health, architecture, arts, journalism, environmental science and other disciplines will be sharing their expertise over four days at the Wonder House.

“South by Southwest really sets the tone for innovation, new ideas, creativity and change in a number of different fields,” said Shad Marvasti, director of public health, prevention and population health for the College of Medicine – Phoenix, who will present on food as medicine. "It's a gathering point for ideas and for next steps in terms of evolutionary strides forward in whatever field you're in.”

Elizabeth Tellman, assistant professor in the School of Geography, Development and Environment, will join Joellen Russell, Distinguished Professor of geosciences, in a presentation on climate data.

“The South by Southwest festival has become known for high-tech innovation, great food and music and urban outdoor living – exactly the same things that draw so many people and students to Tucson and the University of Arizona,” Russell said. “There is no better setting to promote the University brand, our diverse and welcoming community, our world-class research accomplishments and our vision and goals to a receptive audience than in Austin at South by Southwest.”

Tellman says the networking and collaboration opportunities – especially with those in other fields – are also a major benefit of participating in the festival.

"I've been thinking a lot about connecting with non-scientists," Tellman said. “I'm excited to connect with people who are entrepreneurs, artists and musicians and people building non-academic organizations and seeing what they are doing about the climate problem and how they're leveraging science in ways I haven't thought of.”

Some of the other University and University-affiliated presentations include:

- "Political Common Sense in Four Easy Steps" Keith Allred, Executive Director, National Institute for Civil Discourse
- "Immerse Yourself: How VR Can Revolutionize Learning" Bryan Carter, Director, Center for Digital Humanities
- "Gaming the Past: History as Time Travel" Alison Futrell, Associate Professor, Department of History
- "A Guide to Inventing the Future" Paul Milliman, Associate Professor, Department of History
- "Myth Busting: Women, Competitiveness and Equity" Erika Hamden, Assistant Professor, Department of Astronomy
Mary Rigdon, Director, Center for the Philosophy of Freedom

Take a tour

For those who won't make it to Austin for South by Southwest, Harrison offers the next best thing: a detailed description of the Wonder House.

"Before you even walk in, you'll feel a part of the Sonoran Desert on the patio," Harrison said. "University ambassadors will be there to greet you. You'll sample local food, hear the sounds and see the sights of the desert from the Santa Cruz Sound Experience accompanied by epic images from Visit Tucson and animations by an alumna who goes by the name Alex! Jimenez."

That patio will be the venue for the Wonder House Movie Night, which will feature 16 short films from current and past student directors in the School of Theatre, Film and Television.

Once visitors enter the house, multiple virtual reality experiences will be on their right. They include "Virtual Harlem," produced by Carter. The experience takes users to Harlem, New York, as it existed in the 1920s and 1930s during the Harlem Renaissance, a time of revival in Black music, art, dance, theater and more. Another, "Phyto Oracle 2," was developed by Duke Pauli, assistant professor in the School of Plant Sciences, and Devin Bayly, data and visualization consultant with Research Technologies Department in University Information Technology Services. The experience shows how farmers and scientists are fighting climate change and drought through sustainable agriculture practices.

As visitors walk further into the house, they will come through the Slot Canyon, a space with large digital pillars displaying various experiences. They include CAST’s "CyberApolis," which illustrates cybersecurity threats and the strategies and operations being developed to fight them, as well as large-scale digital ocean models developed by Russell.

Past the Slot Canyon is a space with more local food and drink options provided by the University's Arizona Catering Co. On hand will be Michael Omo, senior executive chef, Lawrence Sanchez, assistant executive chef, and Manja Blackwood, senior dining services supervisor.

Then, as visitors head to the back of the Wonder House, they reach the Surroundscape, which is where the presentations are held.

"Audiences will be fully immersed in speaker's worlds," Harrison said, "and at all other times, SXSW attendees will experience the Sonoran Desert and Tucson in HD as created by Drew Bourland and Visit Tucson."

On the way out, visitors will be treated to art pieces by Jimenez along with Nicole Antebi and Marcos Serafim, both assistant professors in the School of Art, as well as a conversation about the future between Lori Poloni-Staudinger, dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, and Noam Chomsky, laureate professor in the Department of Linguistics.

Those staying in Tucson can watch the University of Arizona YouTube channel for daily highlights as well as full talks shortly after the experience.

Additional resources

- Speaker list
- Experience list
- 2022 Wonder House recap

Watch the video below for highlights from the 2022 Wonder House at South by Southwest.