

At SXSW, the future is a place where robots make your latte and grocery shopping is like gaming

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At South by Southwest, as entrepreneurs and celebrities mingle to discuss the future of tech, a lot of the hype focuses on attention-grabbing projects such as flying cars. But there also are ideas on display with a more practical bent—projects that could get into consumers' hands sooner.

Thousands have flooded downtown Austin for the annual event that includes a tech conference, film screenings and music concerts. For techies, there is so much to see, do and experience that it's easy to miss the new ideas that could transform whole industries.

But tune out the noise, and you could find prototypes for products that could shape everything from how we buy groceries to how we build houses in the future.

Gaming grocery

Remember Pokemon Go? The augmented-reality technology that made it possible for people to chase and catch the cartoonlike creatures with their smartphones may be coming to a grocery store near you.

Imagine using your smartphone and augmented reality to more easily check items off your grocery shopping list and personalizes the store for each shopper. That's the idea behind a prototype from Fjord, a design

and development agency that's owned by consulting giant Accenture. It created an augmented-reality app using the example of Whole Foods Market 365, a smaller, more price-conscious store started by the Austin-based organic grocer in 2015.

Greg Carley, who leads innovation at Fjord, said he believes augmented reality will become a popular way for pharmacies, department stores and other retailers to tailor the shopping experience for customers at brick-and-mortars.

Here's how it works: Grocery shoppers first put together a shopping list, adding items manually or through voice commands to a virtual assistant such as Amazon Echo. When shoppers go to the store, they can hold up the smartphone app and see labels pop up above store aisles, which indicate where desired items are located.

A cartoon-looking yellow brick road guides shoppers to each item. When shoppers scan a QR code next to an item, they can read reviews of a wine or find suggested recipes for a particular box of pasta. The app also detects whether the product meets a shopper's preferences entered into a personal profile. For example, for a shopper looking for gluten-free products, it would suggest alternatives when that shopper scanned a loaf of regular bread.

Robo-barista

Do robots make the best baristas? That's the thinking behind Briggo, a connected coffee company that's based in Austin. The company built a system, called a Coffee Haus, that enables robots to make coffee and other espresso beverages that customers can personalize based on temperature, flavor, caffeine strength or numerous other preferences. The coffee-making robots have become a popular attraction at the SXSW trade show.

Charles Studor, founder and chief technology officer of Briggo, came up with the idea after frequent travels to Central America, a major exporter of coffee beans. Studor, who has a background in chip design, said he noticed many U.S. coffee shops spent more money on sofas and air conditioning than coffee beans. And he said, depending on staffing or time of day, the coffee could taste delicious or terrible. By designing a connected coffee system, he said, customers get a consistent cup of coffee and "more of the cost of the cup can go into the quality of the ingredients."

Customers order through a mobile app and they receive a text when the cup of coffee is ready for pickup. Robots inside the Coffee Haus do every aspect of drink-making, from grinding the coffee beans to heating and frothing milk for cappuccinos and lattes. If the robots decide the temperature isn't hot enough or the coffee beans weren't weighed properly, it'll toss the cup and start again. The robots can make up to 100 drinks per hour, Studor said.

Dell and Samsung employees already order coffee made by robots at their Austin campuses. Austin residents can find it at ice-cream shop Moojo. Starting this spring, travelers can order [robot](#)-made coffee at the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. And Studor said Briggo is looking to expand to Dallas and Houston this year, too.

Printed houses

In an Austin neighborhood near downtown, one home looks a little different than the others. Its walls are made from layers of cement and finished with cedar window panes and a metal roof. Its builders believe 3-D printing could soon speed up construction and lower the cost of safe, durable houses for families in the developing world.

The project is brainchild of Icon, an Austin construction technology

company, and New Story, a San Francisco-based nonprofit. Jason Ballard, one of Icon's co-founders, said he saw 3-D printing as a way to build affordable, energy-efficient homes that create less waste. (Ballard and Evan Loomis, two of the three Icon co-founders, are also co-founders of TreeHouse, an Austin-based eco-friendly home improvement store.)

Last summer, they began working together to develop a large 3-D printer that can work in an environment without reliable access to power and a user-friendly design so it can be operated by people in the community. It can build 600- to 800-square-foot homes in 12 and 24 hours. The goal is to build the homes for \$4,000 each—cheaper than the \$6,000 cement-block homes that the nonprofit typically builds.

By end of the year, the nonprofit will print its first few homes in El Salvador, said Alexandria Lafci, chief operating officer and co-founder of New Story. It hopes to print a community of at least 100 homes next year, she said,

Ballard said he believes 3-D printed homes won't be a novelty when his 7-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter are grown up. But for now, he said, "it feels like a dream." When his daughter saw the printed house in Austin, she asked him if he could print her a castle.

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