

# Walk Under the Midnight Sun: Mapping Capsicum Ecologies

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## **Abstract**

*Walk Under the Midnight Sun* is a large-scale carpet installation originally designed for the Hungarian Pavilion of the 2023 Venice Architecture Biennale, part of an exhibition proposal by Fuzzy Earth design studio and BÜRO imaginaire curator collective. The project invites the public to explore the entangled historical, social and architectural relationships within greenhouse cultivation practices. The protagonist of the installation is a regionally unique capsicum cultivar, the Hungarian wax pepper, known in Hungary as the Cecei paprika. The themes of the exhibition were inspired by Fuzzy Earth's 'Not Quite a California Wonder' research project.

## **Keywords**

greenhouse cultivation, capsicum, food systems, installation, carpets

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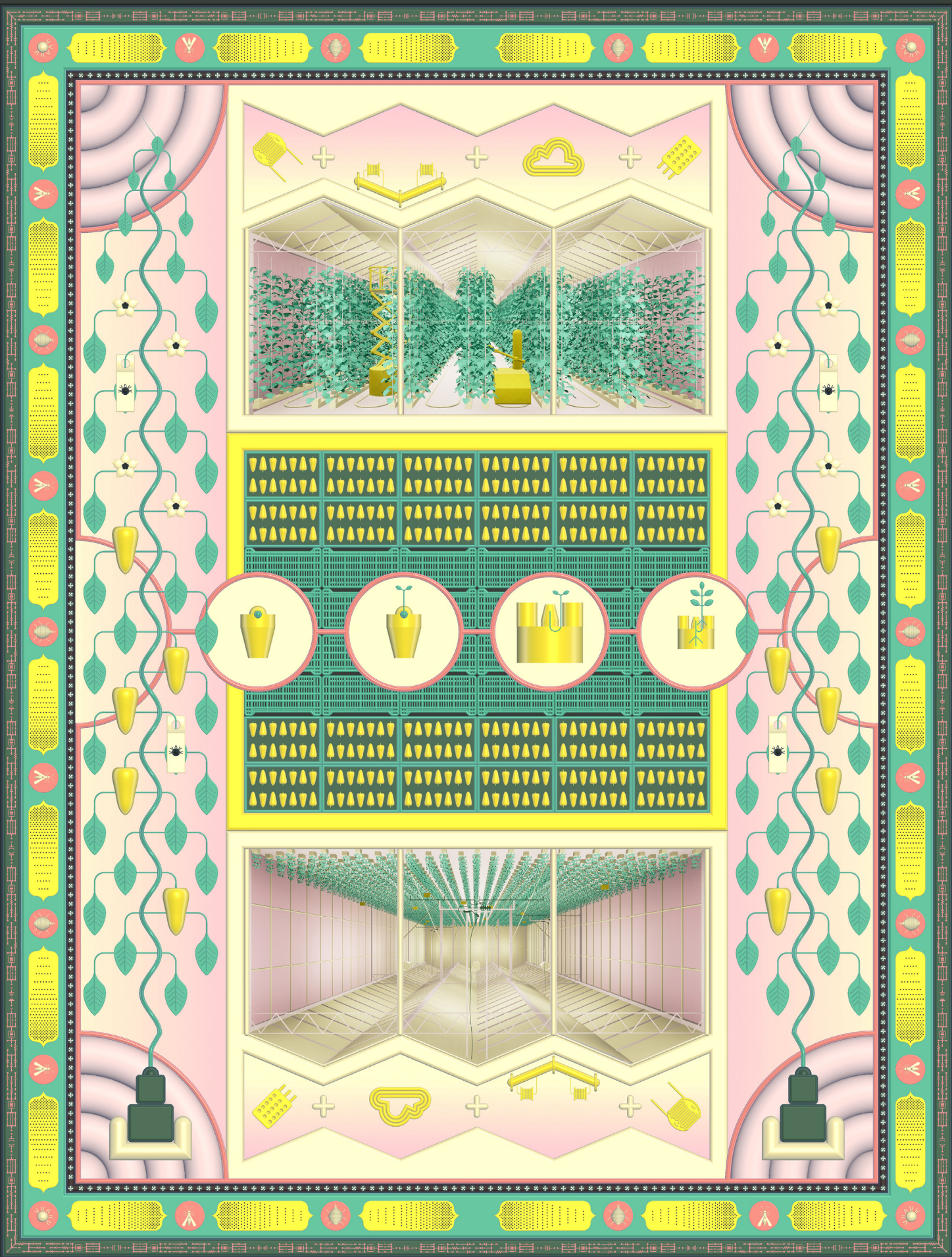
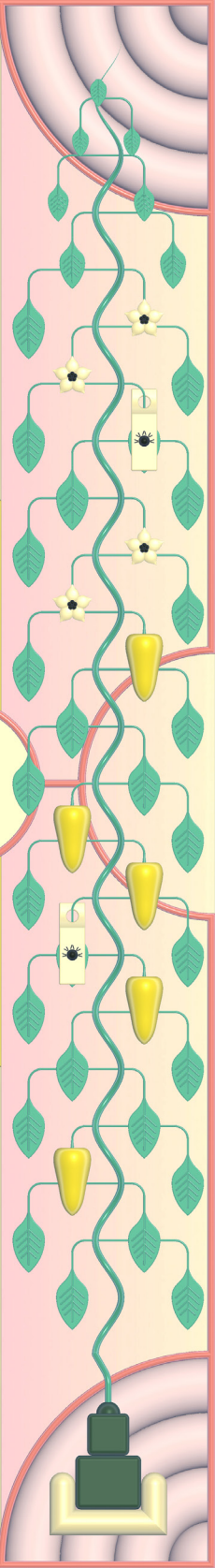
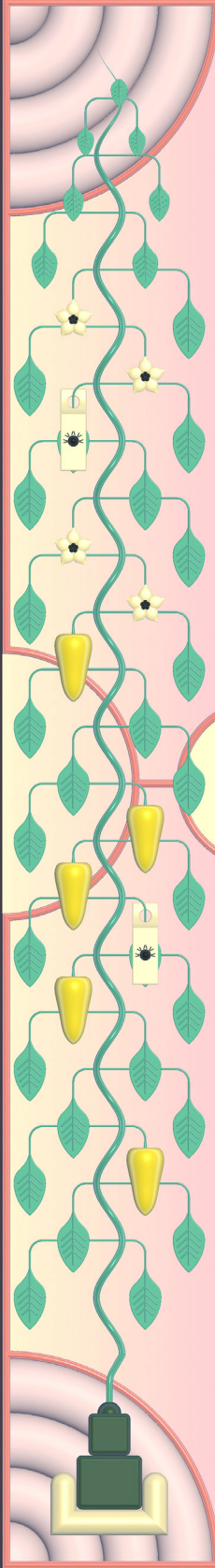
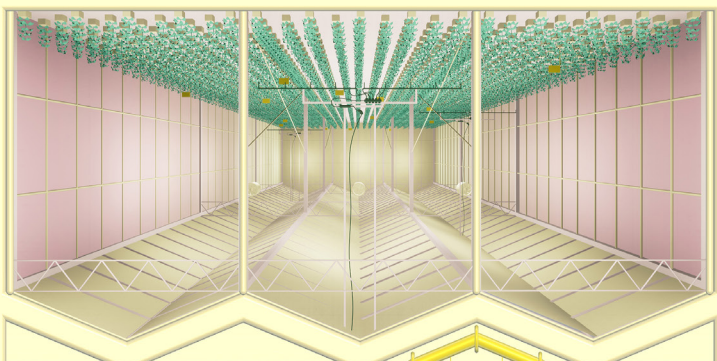
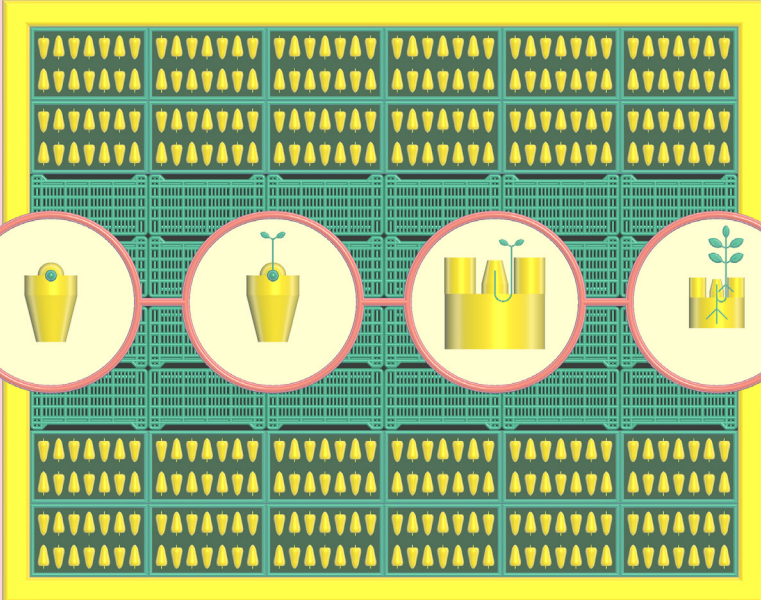
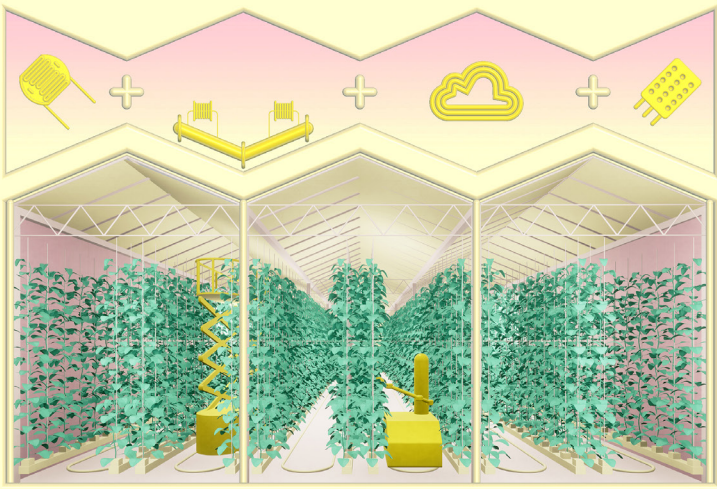
In light of the global food and climate crisis, it is crucial to focus our attention on food systems, since the modes of production, distribution and consumption of food have become one of the main challenges for the coming decades. Since the green revolution and the advancement of food-production technologies, an ever-growing portion of cultivation happens in partially automated greenhouse systems. These agricultural landscapes cover larger and larger parts of Europe, but the public understanding of them remains limited. Through this project, we invite all to explore the otherwise hidden, black-box spaces of food production.

The selected medium is the carpet, a traditional architectural element that creates a space for storytelling. It guides visitors through the installation like a map and reveals its content from various perspectives and paths: each frame, symbol, and pattern is carefully located and designed to draw out the kin – natural, technological, or material – of the capsicum plant and to highlight both their dynamics and their changing relationships with their environment, both in time and in space. The carpet installation consists of seven thematic segments.

### **'Welcome to the Greenhouse'**

The first carpet segment displays the Hungarian wax pepper in its own environment, the greenhouse. The vertically growing seedlings are surrounded by symbols that relate to the daily routine of greenhouse production: the circular flow of nutrients and water, the logistics of transport, and the yellow adhesive paper used to monitor insects. The patterns show a strong collaboration of the plants with their technological and digital kin. The use of computer-generated imagery and digitally printed patterns assist viewers in the exploration process.

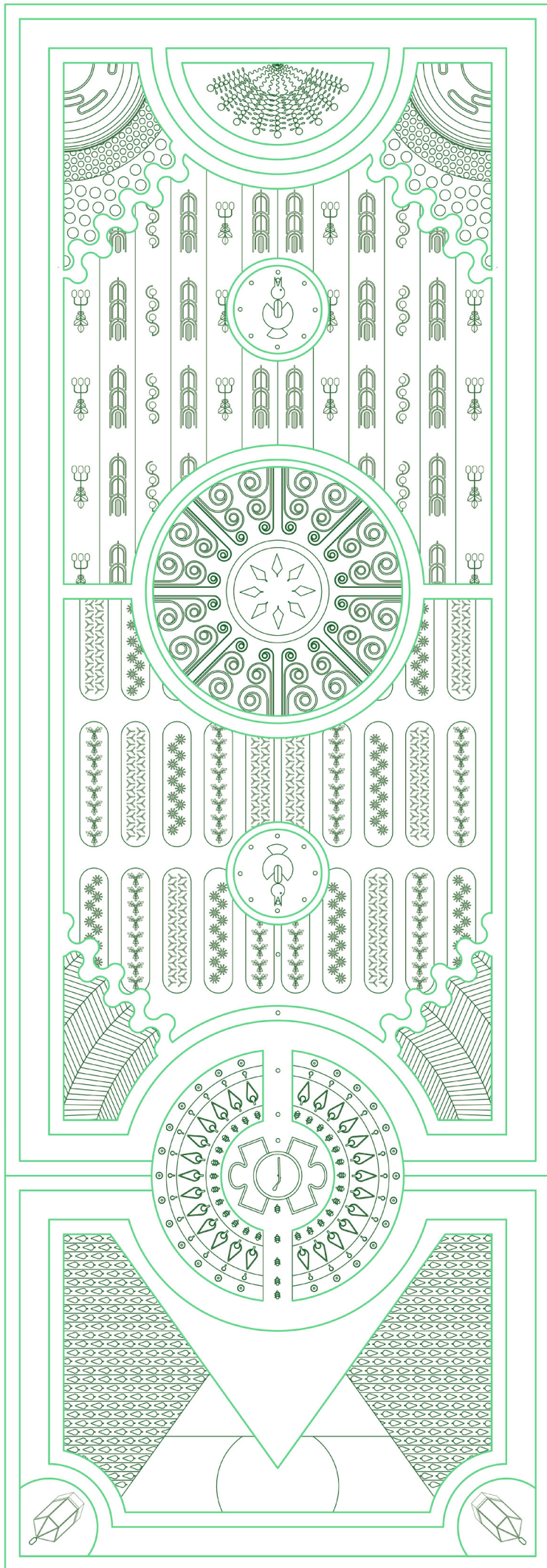
Greenhouses are, in Marc Augé's terms, non-places.<sup>1</sup> As consumers, we have little access to these structures, yet they are eerily similar to each other, regardless of their geographical location, not only in terms of structure and materials used to build them but also in terms of the growing mediums, chemicals, software, robots, technologies and the seeds themselves that support and facilitate their cultivation. Although we know that the year-round continuous supply of peppers is made possible by the coordinated work of a multitude of tools and infrastructures, we do not see these processes in their entirety, and the walls of greenhouses, despite their transparency, can seem symbolically impenetrable to the everyday person.



### **'Origin Stories' and 'The Fifth Sun'**

In the next section of the carpet, we explore the origin story of bell peppers. On the one hand, the capsicum plant is considered to be truly Hungarian and used as a vegetable or spice depending on its variety. However, we cannot ignore the fact that bell peppers originated in Central America and spread throughout the world during the colonial period, including to our country. The untamed ancestor, the chiltepín or bird pepper (*Capsicum annuum* var. *glabriusculum*), and its companion species are given special attention in the pattern by mapping their natural habitat in dry, rocky soils in poorly cultivated areas. The depiction also highlights the bird pepper's early co-species: the shade-providing feather bush (*Lysiloma* sp.) and the birds (for example, the northern mockingbird) that transport the seeds to distant places. Other plants, such as maize, tomatoes and potatoes, that are native to the region but later spread and bred throughout the world through colonisation, are also shown in symbolic forms alongside the bird pepper.

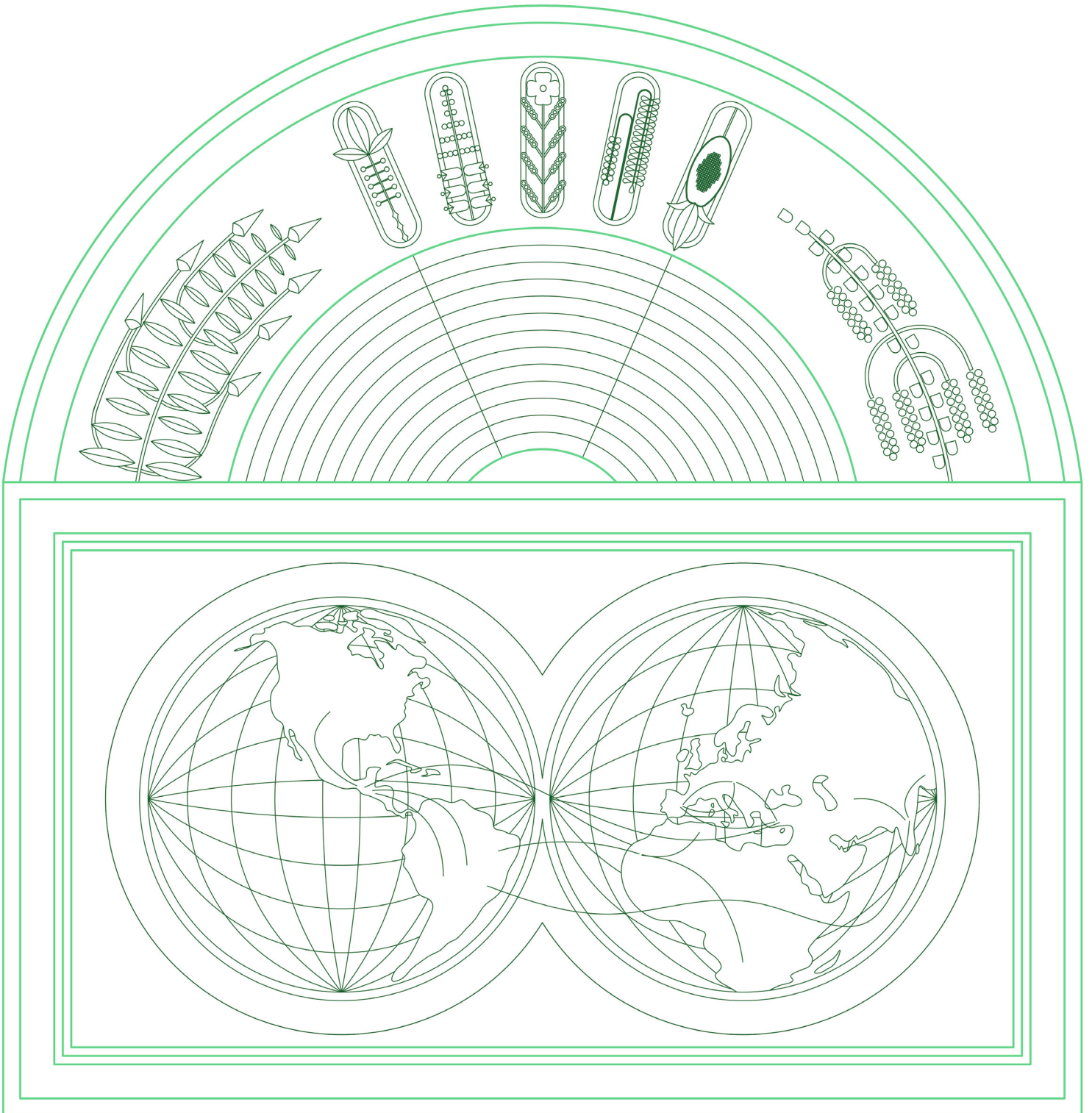
The carpet segment titled *The Fifth Sun* illustrates ancient production methods, knowledge and rituals. The expression 'fifth sun' refers to the Aztec spiritual worldview; each sun represented a catastrophic event and a successive revival of society. This belief, which foretold the end of Aztec culture, heralded the Spanish invasion. The capsicum is shown here in the form of seeds. Among others, the episodes depicted on the carpet reveal pre-colonial processes such as the practice of drying seeds in mountainous areas to prepare them to cross the ocean and conquer the world. Seeds can be collected from their original ecosystem in the hope that they will germinate in their new home; they must, however, leave behind their co-species, their climate, and the traditional, ancient knowledge that nurtured them.



**'Across the World'**

As part of the next segment, we follow the routes of the capsicum across the planet. The map consists of two globes that illustrate the rapid spread of the plant from Latin America to Europe and then to Asia between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries. The carpet shows the process of transformation that took place during and after this period: the breeding of capsicum in different areas led to the spread of different varieties by the end of the eighteenth century, such as the Aleppo pepper in Turkey and the Cheongyang chili pepper in Korea. These new environments differed significantly from the capsicum's original habitat. The absence or replacement of companion species, such as birds or even shade-providing shrubs, contributed to the expansion of the pepper taxonomy in parallel with the breeding process.

The arrival of capsicum in Europe coincided with the first greenhouses, the construction of which was made possible by the developing steel and glass industries, and new heating technologies. These greenhouses were luxury buildings designed to house exotic plants, where capsicum was used purely for decorative purposes. There were many reasons for the spread of capsicum as a spice, but much of it was due to scientific experiments with a number of Latin American plants as a substitute for black pepper, which was the gold standard.

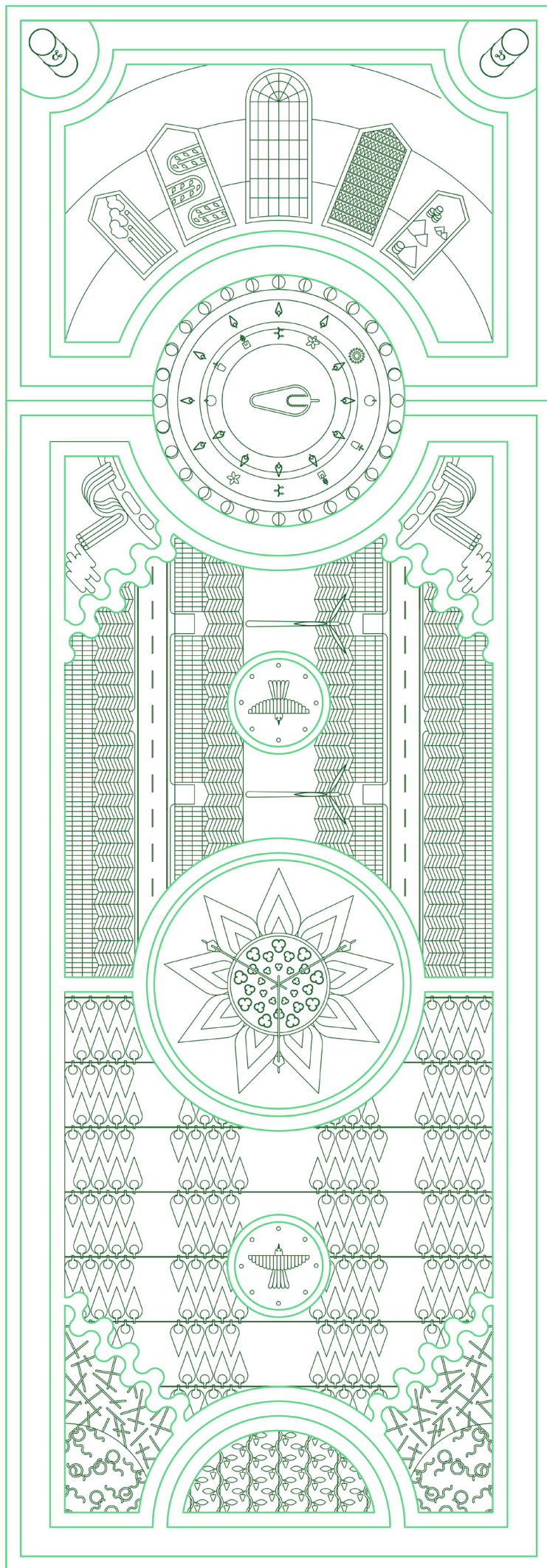


### **'New Materiality' and 'New Roots'**

The 'New Materiality' section of the carpet focuses on the different materials and technologies that have radically transformed the built environment and therefore the capsicum's life during the second industrial revolution from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. The extensive use of glass and plastics created the first enclosed, controlled spaces for agricultural industries. The consumer demands created by globalising trade were met by increased crop yields. The transformation of energy production is represented by various symbols, and the accelerated concept of time is visualised in the sowing-and-harvesting calendar.

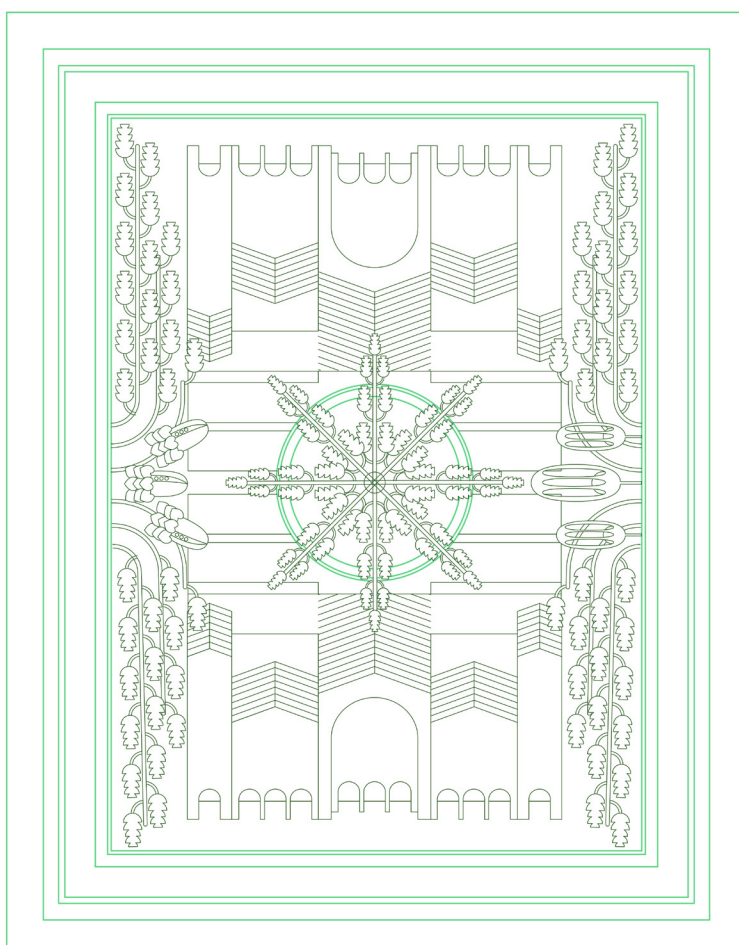
The next part of the carpet, titled New 'Roots', presents the bell pepper in a contemporary Hungarian social and agro-architectural context. The hot or sweet spicy paprika, as well as the sweet yellow Hungarian wax pepper bred from it, are local landmarks and symbols. The capsicum is one of the cornerstones of traditional Hungarian gastronomy, the basic ingredient of many dishes considered 'Hungarian', as presented on the carpet in the central Lecsó-scene (Lecsó is a Hungarian bell pepper stew traditionally prepared outdoors in a cauldron over an open fire). In addition to the place of the bell pepper as a plant in popular culture, the illustration also depicts the key elements of cultivation today. Inspired by the greenhouse complexes of the capsicum farm in Szentés, the ancient elements (such as soil quality, the importance of shading) are retained, but new solutions (the use of geothermal energy, sensors) are also referred to, to show contemporary Hungarian greenhouse infrastructure.





**'Sky-High Tree'**

The story of the capsicum does not end in the present; the carpet series also looks to the future. What speculative capsicum ecologies can we imagine today? How will the spaces of research, cultivation, purchase and consumption change, disappear, or merge together in the future? Will bell pepper plants continue to live their life as a plant subject to human control, or will they rebel against continuous delimitation, shortened life cycles and rushed production calibrated for aesthetic perfection and profit maximisation? Will they pierce the panels of the greenhouse with their branches, symbolically opening up and reuniting inside and outside?



## Notes

1. Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1992).

## Biography

Fuzzy Earth creative practice in Budapest was founded by Tekla Gedeon and Sebastian Gschanes.

Tekla Gedeon works with architecture, ecological storytelling and speculative design to create optimistic collective visions to respond to the current climate challenges. She was trained as an architect in London at the AA School. Her works internationally infiltrate unexpected spaces such as market halls, beaches, domestic spaces and gardens. She has taught architecture at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics and she has given lectures in a range of disciplines in the UK and Hungary.

Sebastian Gschanes is a gardener, landscape architect and horticultural researcher. He builds alternative worlds and reveals unseen layers of entanglements across species in the era of climate crises to inspire a more inclusive and resilient future. He creates spaces, objects, and events that explore our relationship with nature and technology. He studied landscape architecture at TU Delft and HSWT Weihenstephan-Triesdorf, and has designed and built gardens bringing together human and more-than-human participants in Vienna, Munich and London.

BÜRO imaginaire is a curator collective founded by Anna Tüdös, Judit Szalipszki and Emese Mucsi.

Anna Tüdös has a range of experience working in the cultural sector as a facilitator, curator and creative producer. She holds an MLitt degree in curatorial practice from the Glasgow School of Art and is a postgraduate student of health humanities and arts at the University of Edinburgh. Her recent work explores contemporary artistic positions concerned with physical and mental health, with a specific focus on the politics and social entanglements of urban playgrounds.

Judit Szalipszki is a curator and cultural worker. Following her BA studies in liberal arts at Eötvös Loránd University and in contemporary art theory at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, she attended the Arts and Society MA programme at Utrecht University, and obtained a master's degree in Art Sense(s) Lab, a programme focusing on the senses of taste, touch and smell, at PXL University in Hasselt, Belgium. As a curator, her recent field of interest is the practice of artists and designers who regard food as a medium, the frontiers of art, design and gastronomy. Currently, she is working at Trafó Gallery in Budapest.

Emese Mucsi is a curator and art critic. Her projects bring together artists and photographers with photojournalists, writers and other thinkers to experiment with new approaches to photography. She graduated from the Faculty of Contemporary Art Theory and Curatorial Studies at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in 2013, and from the Faculty of Hungarian Literature and Linguistics at the University of Szeged in 2017. She has been a curator of the Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center in Budapest since 2018. She founded DOXA exhibition space and editorial den in 2022.