VR-NeRF: High-Fidelity Virtualized Walkable Spaces

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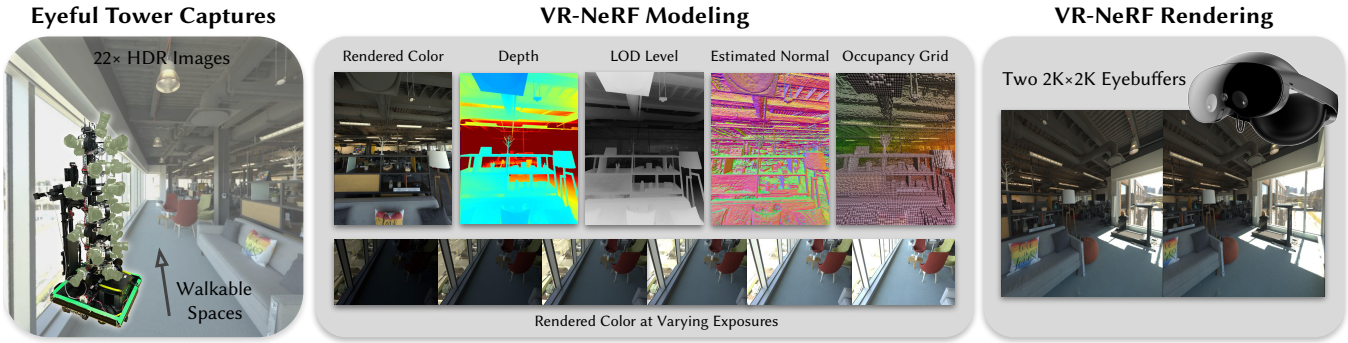

Figure 1: VR-NeRF brings high-fidelity walkable spaces to real-time virtual reality. Our "Eyeful Tower" camera rig captures spaces with high image resolution and dynamic range that approach the limits of the human visual system. We train high-fidelity neural radiance fields that exploit the high-dynamic range nature of our captured scenes and provide level-of-detail mip-mapping for efficient anti-aliasing. Our rendering backend leverages our accurate occupancy grid and a dynamic multi-GPU work distribution scheme to achieve real-time frame rates on dual 2K×2K eyebuffers for an immersive VR experience.

ABSTRACT

We present an end-to-end system for the high-fidelity capture, model reconstruction, and real-time rendering of walkable spaces in virtual reality using neural radiance fields. To this end, we designed

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and built a custom multi-camera rig to densely capture walkable spaces in high fidelity and with multi-view high dynamic range images in unprecedented quality and density. We extend instant neural graphics primitives with a novel perceptual color space for learning accurate HDR appearance, and an efficient mip-mapping mechanism for level-of-detail rendering with anti-aliasing, while carefully optimizing the trade-off between quality and speed. Our multi-GPU renderer enables high-fidelity volume rendering of our neural radiance field model at the full VR resolution of dual 2K×2K at 36 Hz on our custom demo machine. We demonstrate the quality of our results on our challenging high-fidelity datasets, and compare our method and datasets to existing baselines. We release our dataset on our project website: https://vr-nerf.github.io.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Computing methodologies** → **Virtual reality**; **3D imaging**; *Image-based rendering*; *Computational photography*.

KEYWORDS

Multi-View Capture, Neural Radiance Fields, Novel-View Synthesis, High Dynamic Range Imaging, Real-Time

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1 INTRODUCTION

The advent of consumer virtual reality (VR) headsets has led to a proliferation of highly immersive visual media, including breathtaking VR photography and video. However, existing approaches support either high-fidelity view synthesis with a small *headbox* of less than 1 m diameter [Broxton et al. 2020; Overbeck et al. 2018], or scene-scale free-viewpoint view synthesis of lower quality or framerate [Jang et al. 2022; Parra Pozo et al. 2019; Wu et al. 2022]. In this work, we present a comprehensive system designed to overcome these limitations all the way from capture to rendering for high-fidelity free-viewpoint exploration of walkable, real-world static spaces in VR. Our contributions address the following challenges:

(1) dense, high-fidelity capture of large-scale walkable spaces,
(2) high-fidelity neural radiance field reconstruction, and
(3) real-time rendering of our neural radiance fields in VR.

High-fidelity view synthesis depends on high-quality, densely captured multi-view images. While NeRF objects use 100s of views [Mildenhall et al. 2020] and light field captures around 1,000 views per location [Broxton et al. 2020], walkable scenes will need a minimum of several thousand input views to provide enough spatial coverage. Existing captures of walkable spaces tend to be handheld and usually comprise 100s of photos [e.g. Philip et al. 2021] or 1,000s of video frames [e.g. Knapitsch et al. 2017]. In both cases, the space of camera poses is undersampled: photo sequences lack sufficient density, and videos move along a 1D subspace that fails to sample the 6D pose space sufficiently uniformly. High-fidelity view synthesis also needs to reproduce the high dynamic range of the real world, which existing methods do not. To this end, we designed a custom camera rig that enables capturing walkable spaces in unprecedented quality and density: our datasets contain thousands of 50 megapixel high dynamic range (HDR) images. Several of our datasets exceed 100 gigapixels – two orders of magnitude more than existing datasets [Flynn et al. 2019; Philip et al. 2021; Xu et al. 2021].

Neural radiance fields (NeRFs) have led to an explosion in high-quality novel-view synthesis techniques [Mildenhall et al. 2020; Tewari et al. 2022]. However, existing methods do not support the size, scale, and dynamic range of our high-fidelity datasets, even when downsampled to 2K resolution. We propose VR-NeRF, which is uniquely adapted to our high-quality datasets and supports real-time VR rendering in full NeRF quality. Specifically, we introduce a new perceptually based color space for representing high-dynamic range radiance values of up to 10,000 cd/m^2, allowing our model to learn up to 22 stops[1] of dynamic range (or 4,194,304:1). A second crucial component is a real-time-capable mip-mapping technique that suppresses aliasing when observing objects at different distances using level-of-detail rendering. We also developed a principled pruning stage to obtain an accurate occupancy grid for speeding up rendering with a focus on improved geometry estimation.

The third and final stage of our end-to-end system is a custom multi-GPU renderer that brings high-fidelity NeRF rendering into virtual reality. On our custom-built demo machine, we can render our models at the full resolution of the Quest Pro VR headset, i.e., two 2K×2K eye buffers (~8 megapixel), at a consistent frame rate of 36 Hz, which results in a compelling VR experience that enables free exploration of walkable spaces in high fidelity.

2 RELATED WORK

Kanade et al. [1995] coined the term "Virtualized Reality" to see a previously recorded event from any perspective. Our goal is to virtually walk through previously captured scenes at high fidelity in virtual reality. We, therefore, call our work *Virtualized Walkable Spaces*. There are three crucial components to enable high-fidelity virtualized walkable spaces: (1) a mobile high-resolution multi-view camera system to densely capture large-scale scenes; (2) an efficient neural representation to compactly and accurately encode a large-scale scene with high dynamic range and level of detail; and (3) optimized real-time rendering at VR resolution and frame rate.

High-Resolution Multi-View Capture System. Capture systems can vary from a single moving camera [Bertel et al. 2020; Davis et al. 2012; Gortler et al. 1996; Hedman et al. 2016; Kim et al. 2013; Knapitsch et al. 2017; Levoy and Hanrahan 1996] to multi-camera rigs [Broxton et al. 2020; Flynn et al. 2019; Parra Pozo et al. 2019; Wilburn et al. 2005] and synchronized camera arrays in big studios [Joo et al. 2019; Orts-Escolano et al. 2016]. Existing multi-view captures are either limited to a small headbox [e.g. Overbeck et al. 2018; Parra Pozo et al. 2019] or are sparsely captured [e.g. Knapitsch et al. 2017; Yoon et al. 2020], which restricts freedom of motion. We built

[1] One stop is a doubling or halving of the amount of light reaching the imaging sensor.

a multi-camera rig that densely and efficiently captures a wide variety of walkable spaces to create large-scale multi-view datasets with high-resolution details (50 megapixels) and high dynamic range.

Large-scale Novel View Synthesis. Our focus is on real-time VR rendering of high-fidelity walkable spaces; recent surveys cover the full range of scene representations [Richardt et al. 2020; Tewari et al. 2022]. While mesh-based reconstructions [Straub et al. 2019; Whelan et al. 2018] are ideal for fast rendering, they tend to lack fine geometric detail. Image-based rendering [e.g. Hedman et al. 2016] achieves more visual detail but struggles with reflective surfaces. Several follow-up methods use neural representations for explicit reflection support [Philip et al. 2021; Wu et al. 2022; Xu et al. 2021] and achieve interactive frame rates. NeRFs [Mildenhall et al. 2020] have become the de-facto standard neural representation due to their versatility and ability to represent complex scenes with high fidelity. They have been extended in multiple ways to represent large-scale scenes even at a city scale [Tancik et al. 2022; Turki et al. 2022; Xiangli et al. 2022; Xu et al. 2023; Zhang et al. 2023]. High-resolution concerns have also been addressed [Jiang et al. 2023; Wang et al. 2022]. However, these methods do not support level of detail and high dynamic range, which are required for high-fidelity VR. LocalRF [Meuleman et al. 2023] and F^2-NeRF [Wang et al. 2023] tackle large unbounded scenes, yet only support limited view extrapolation and thus cannot provide fully immersive free-view exploration. Methods built on implicit surfaces, like signed distance functions, tend to focus on high-quality 3D surface reconstruction rather than view synthesis [Li et al. 2023; Rosu and Behnke 2023; Yu et al. 2022; Zhu et al. 2023]. We build our model on Instant-NGP (iNGP) [Müller et al. 2022], as it supports real-time rendering without model baking, and provides easily extensible model capacity via its hash grid. However, it lacks support for high-fidelity rendering of large-scale walkable spaces, such as level of detail and perceptually based HDR support.

High Dynamic Range (HDR). The human visual system supports a significantly higher dynamic range than current camera or display technology [Reinhard et al. 2006]. When recreating highly realistic walkable spaces, it is therefore important to accurately capture and render the scene in HDR. RawNeRF learns linear radiance from raw sensor measurements using a weighted L2 loss that approximates a tonemapped loss [Mildenhall et al. 2022]. Several methods learn to reconstruct linear radiance from low dynamic range images using differentiable tonemapping models [Huang et al. 2022; Jun-Seong et al. 2022; Rückert et al. 2022]. We train our HDR model directly using HDR input images in a novel perceptually uniform color space that does not require custom losses or tonemapping modules.

Level of Detail (LOD). Takikawa et al. [2021] and Barron et al.'s Mip-NeRF [2021] introduced the notion of level of detail into neural signed distance and radiance fields, respectively, to reduce geometric and visual complexity, e.g. to minimize aliasing when viewing objects from a distance. As Mip-NeRF's integrated positional encoding is incompatible with efficient grid-based NeRF approaches like iNGP [Müller et al. 2022], Zip-NeRF [Barron et al. 2023] uses supersampling as an approximation, but multi-second inference times still prevent real-time rendering. Aroudj et al. [2022] store the scene redundantly at multiple LOD levels in a sparse voxel octree. We introduce an efficient LOD approach designed for iNGP that enables high-fidelity real-time VR rendering with anti-aliasing.

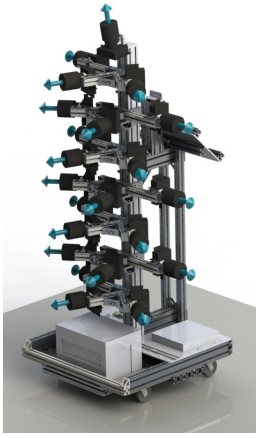
3 THE "EYEFUL TOWER" CAPTURE RIG

Capturing scenes with a hand-held camera quickly reaches limits: taking hundreds of photos is tedious, achieving consistent coverage of viewpoints is difficult, and hand-held exposure bracketing is tricky due to camera shake. To capture real-world environments with the highest visual fidelity in terms of spatial resolution and dynamic range, we designed, built, and refined a custom multi-camera capture rig affectionately referred to as the *Eyeful Tower*. The design of our capture rig was guided by the following considerations:

(1) *Coverage:* Place cameras for approximately uniform light field capture, and parallelize data capture across cameras.
(2) *Fidelity:* Match human visual perception in terms of acuity and high dynamic range.
(3) *Mobility:* Allow single-person operation, and be usable without external power or network connection.
(4) *Rigidity:* Support multi-exposure bracketing for high dynamic range (HDR) reconstruction without camera motion.
(5) *Storage:* Record photos on-camera, so no server is needed. Offload all photos via a single network cable.

3.1 Capture Rig Design

We built our capture rig using extruded aluminium around an 80×80 cm base with a 1.8 m vertical pole for 22 cameras that are distributed on 7 levels with 3 cameras each, plus one upward-facing camera at the top (see right). A 1.5 kWh Li-ion battery powers cameras, a 24-port network switch, and a Raspberry Pi controlling the cameras. We chose Sony α1 mirrorless cameras for their high-quality 50-megapixel raw images with 14 stops of dynamic range. Please see our supplement for details on the rig design and camera/lens choices.



3.2 Capture Process

3.2.1 Desirable Capture Density. Reproducing the appearance of a static scene from any viewpoint in theory requires observations for the entire 5D plenoptic function [Adelson and Bergen 1991]. The widely used NeRF synthetic dataset [Mildenhall et al. 2020] has viewpoints densely distributed on a hemisphere, which allows the renderings to generalize continuously across the whole hemisphere of viewing directions. For scene-scale rendering, we are lacking such a densely captured dataset, which results in the *limited capability to extrapolate novel viewpoints*. However, this is critically important for virtual reality, where we want to deliver walkable spaces with 6-degrees-of-freedom allowable head movement.

3.2.2 Capture Procedure. We capture scenes by 'tiling' the available floor area with rig positions that are spaced roughly 30 cm apart. For complete captures, we capture forward- and backward-facing views, while trying to stay at least 30 cm away from walls or

objects. Near walls, it is often sufficient to only capture the direction facing away from the wall, as defocused close-ups of a wall usually add little value. Before each capture, we also place scale bars (for automatic scale estimation) and a Macbeth ColorChecker (for color verification and white balance) into the scene. During the capture, we try to stay out of view of any camera, avoid moving any objects, such as chairs or carpets, and aim to minimize lighting changes and shadow casting.

3.3 Data Preprocessing

3.3.1 HDR Image Merging. We use LibRaw 0.21 to debayer the raw images captured by our cameras to 16-bit linear TIFF images. We then merge 9 different exposures into one high-dynamic range image using a robustified version of Hanji et al.'s Poisson photon noise estimator [2020], which provides an unbiased estimate of scene radiance. We observed that the Sony α1 raw image values do not saturate as quickly as expected, which produces outliers that can reduce the estimated radiance sufficiently to cause visible color changes. Therefore, we keep track of the minimum radiance estimate per pixel and color channel, so that we can ignore it when merging the input exposures. In addition, we set fully saturated pixels to the lowest radiance that saturates in all images.

3.3.2 Camera Calibration. We estimate camera poses and intrinsics using Agisoft Metashape Pro 2.0 [Agisoft, LLC 2023], a professional photogrammetry software that supports rig calibration, in which the relative pose between cameras is constant across all positions of the capture rig within a scene. Metashape effectively handles our large-scale datasets with up to 6,300 photos at 50 megapixel resolution [Over et al. 2021]. It also automatically detects the markers on our calibrated scale bars, such that camera poses are in metric space for 1:1 scale rendering in VR.

3.3.3 Captured Datasets. We captured multiple datasets using our Eyeful Tower capture rig, which are summarized in Table 1. Our captures took between 5 minutes and 6 hours, depending on the scale and complexity of the scene, with an average speed of around one minute per m^2. The resulting datasets comprise 29–303 billion pixels, or rays, covering spaces of 6–120 m^2.

4 HIGH-FIDELITY NEURAL RADIANCE FIELDS

Volume rendering using neural radiance fields is a compelling choice for photorealistic scene representations due to the versatility of representing semi-transparent surfaces and finely detailed objects while being suitable for delivering scene-scale rendering. As our focus is on maximizing rendering fidelity in the available compute budget, we use neural radiance fields as a foundation and leave alternative representations as future work. Instead of constructing a large, complex model with extra capacity to account for various effects, our goal is to design a simple yet general model that facilitates real-time VR rendering for large-scale scenes.

We therefore build on the Instant NGP architecture [Müller et al. 2022] with its efficient and *scalable* multi-level hash encoding for *fast* rendering of large-scale static scenes. We make several contributions to improve the visual fidelity of high-resolution room-scale

Table 1: Statistics of scenes captured using our Eyeful Tower rig: We show the number of cameras, rig positions, and images, as well as the capture time, surface area, and the number of rays at full resolution (5,784×8,660) and 1368×2048 ('2K'), our typical training and rendering image resolution.

Scene	Cameras	# Pos.	# Img.	Time	Area	Rays	Rays @ 2K
APARTMENT	22	180	3,960	60 min	55 m^2	190.6 B	10.7 B
KITCHEN	19	318	6,024	43 min	54 m^2	302.7 B	16.9 B
OFFICE1A	9	85	765	23 min	20 m^2	29.1 B	1.6 B
OFFICE1B	22	71	1,562	16 min	20 m^2	78.2 B	4.4 B
OFFICE2	9	233	2,097	39 min	35 m^2	79.8 B	4.5 B
OFFICE_VIEW1	22	126	2,772	31 min	18 m^2	138.9 B	7.8 B
OFFICE_VIEW2	22	67	1,474	10 min	33 m^2	73.8 B	4.1 B
RIVERVIEW	22	48	1,008	5 min	6 m^2	52.9 B	3.0 B
SEATING_AREA	9	168	1,512	22 min	16 m^2	55.9 B	3.1 B
TABLE	9	134	1,206	14 min	24 m^2	45.2 B	2.5 B
WORKSHOP	9	700	6,300	364 min†	120 m^2	239.4 B	13.4 B

† Includes 121 minutes of capture time and 243 minutes of data offload mid-capture.

rendering, including a perceptual color space that enables perceptual optimization of high dynamic range images using a simple L_1 loss. We further introduce an efficient and effective level-of-detail scheme for anti-aliasing using multi-level hash grids. To faithfully represent unbounded areas, such as views through windows or long corridors, we adopt a cubic space contraction based on the L_∞ norm [Wan et al. 2023], which is a good fit for grid-based representations. We discuss implementation details and additional components that contribute to the high quality of our view synthesis model in our supplement.

4.1 Perceptual Modeling of High Dynamic Range

Our Sony α1 cameras capture raw images with a dynamic range of 14 stops (i.e., 14 bits of usable information). The 9-step exposure bracketing adds a further 8 stops, for a total of 22 stops of dynamic range (see Figure 2). In other words, the brightest input pixel value can be up to 4,194,304 times as bright as the darkest non-zero pixel value. Applying common image losses like L_1 or L_2 directly in linear color spaces of this range leads to poor results as the losses are dominated by errors in bright areas. For example, an error of 0.1 is significantly more noticeable at a base level of 0.1 (+100%) compared to 10 (only +1%), yet would be penalized the same. The solution is to either use a more complex loss function, such as RawNeRF's relative

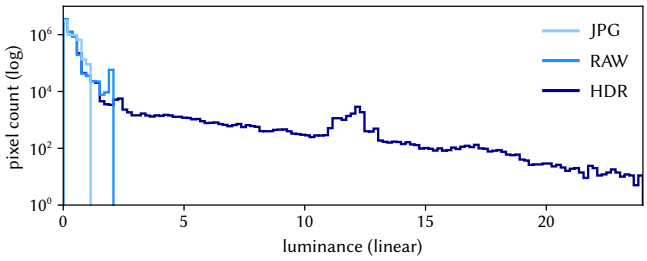


Figure 2: Comparison of the dynamic range of a JPEG photo (range 0~1) with the corresponding raw image (0~2) and the full HDR image (0~145).

MSE [Mildenhall et al. 2022], or a carefully designed non-linear mapping to a perceptually uniform color space.

One such non-linear mapping is the Perceptual Quantizer (PQ) developed by Dolby [Miller et al. 2013] and standardized by SMPTE [2014], which is the foundation of many consumer HDR image and video formats. PQ was designed to optimally encode the large luminance range from 0 to 10,000 cd/m^2 in 10–16 bits while minimizing visible banding artifacts. This was achieved by approximating the integral of just noticeable differences based on the contrast sensitivity function of the human visual system [Kunkel 2022]. The function

$$\mathrm{PQ}(Y) = \left(\frac{c_1 + c_2 \cdot Y^{m_1}}{1 + c_3 \cdot Y^{m_1}}\right)^{m_2} \quad \text{with constants} \tag{1}$$

$$m_1 = \frac{1305}{8192}, m_2 = \frac{2523}{32}, c_1 = \frac{107}{128}, c_2 = \frac{2413}{128}, c_3 = \frac{2392}{128} \tag{2}$$

maps the input luminance $Y \in [0, 10{,}000]$ cd/m^2 to the 'PQ space' in the unit range. For our experiments, we map linear color values of 1 to a luminance of 100 cd/m^2 in order to allow a conversion to the PQ space. Operating in the unit range is also a natural fit for the sigmoid activation function, which eases the learning of model output distributions. Applying an L_1 or L_2 loss in the PQ space now penalizes errors according to human visual perception, and is able to produce colors in full high dynamic range. See Figure 7 for a sweep of different exposures at rendering time.

4.2 Feature Grid Mip-Mapping for Level-of-Detail

Level-of-detail (LOD) rendering is desirable for large-scale scenes, as objects observed at different distances reveal varying levels of geometric and texture detail. Single-LOD methods like NeRF or iNGP can cause severe aliasing in highly textured objects seen at a distance, while details seen in only a few views might be washed out due to many overlapping distant views. Multiple levels of detail can reduce aliasing as the LOD level can be dynamically adjusted based on the distance of objects from the viewer. In computer graphics, texture LOD is usually implemented using mip-maps [Williams 1983]. Mip-NeRF [Barron et al. 2021] introduced mip-mapping to NeRFs and Zip-NeRF [Barron et al. 2023] recently extended these ideas to fast grid-based feature encodings, as used by iNGP. Unfortunately, this approach is unsuitable for real-time rendering (1.1 FPS on 8×V100). Instead, we introduce a simple but effective mip-mapping scheme for grid-based feature encodings that enables learning of continuous LOD while actively supporting real-time rendering.

4.2.1 Feature Grid Mip-Mapping. Multi-resolution feature grids are a natural fit for LOD rendering as they already represent features across multiple scales. By considering a ray as a cone as in Mip-NeRF, and by comparing its cross section with the size of grid features at each level, we can efficiently determine which feature grid levels are theoretically resolvable at the ray level, and can down-weight or even ignore finer levels that would introduce aliasing.

For a specific ray, we start by calculating its base radius r at unit distance along the ray. At a sample location, the pixel footprint is then determined by multiplying the base radius with the metric distance t along the ray as $\hat{r} = t \cdot r$. For contracted spaces, Barron et al. [2022, 2023] and Wang et al. [2023] consider the Jacobian $\mathbf{J}_C$ of the contraction function $C(\cdot)$ at the sample location $\mathbf{x}$ to calculate the scale factor for variance or step size estimation. Similarly, we could derive the contracted pixel radius via $C(\hat{r}) = \hat{r} \cdot \sqrt[3]{\det(\mathbf{J}_C(\mathbf{x}))}$. In practice, we compute the contracted pixel radius directly from corresponding sample points on adjacent rays in the contracted space. The optimal LOD level can then be calculated from the configuration of the multi-resolution feature grid as follows. Suppose the base resolution is s and the scale factor between levels is f. For the L^{th} level (with $L = 0$ being the base), each level has a grid voxel size of $(sf^L)^{-1}$. Based on the Nyquist–Shannon sampling theorem, we dampen features whose size is less than twice the footprint $\hat{r}$ in the contracted coordinate space (see diagram in Figure 3). The optimal LOD level for a sample is therefore $L^* = -\log_f(2s\hat{r})$. For a piecewise linear LOD transition, we use these per-level weights:

$$w_L = \begin{cases} 1 & L \le \lfloor L^* \rfloor \\ L^* - \lfloor L^* \rfloor & \lfloor L^* \rfloor < L \le \lceil L^* \rceil \\ 0 & \lceil L^* \rceil < L \end{cases} \tag{3}$$

For distant points, we only need to sample the features of the lowest few grid levels, which reduces rendering time, while gradually revealing high-frequency features for closer points. Feature sampling of the finest hash grid layers is particularly expensive due to the highly incoherent memory access patterns. Skipping these features results in substantially faster rendering (Section 5).

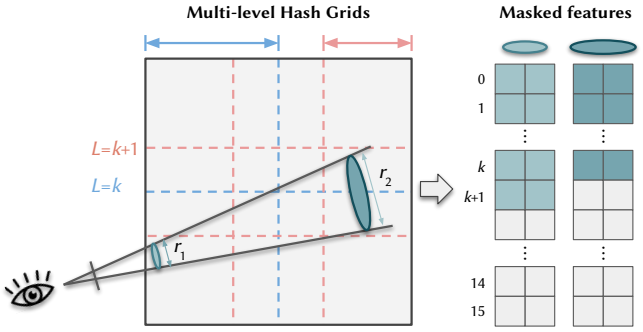


Figure 3: LOD Masking. Smaller sample footprints like r_1 return more features from the multi-level hash grid than larger, more distant samples (r_2).

4.2.2 LOD Bias. Similar to standard mip-mapping, we can optionally add an LOD bias ΔL to the LOD L^* used for querying and weighting the grid features. This continuously adjusts the sharpness of details to balance between blurred and aliased rendering. In fact, the LOD bias can be viewed as a unifying framework that encompasses coarse-to-fine training strategies [Lin et al. 2021; Park et al. 2021; Yang et al. 2023]. Such progressive training approaches start with low-frequency models and gradually increase the number of feature scales to improve details. This is equivalent to starting with a large negative LOD bias, such that only low-frequency features are used, and annealing it towards zero during training. See Figure 8 for the visualized LOD bias sweep on the APARTMENT scene.

4.2.3 Distance-aware Features. By mip-mapping grid features, we are effectively making the features used for radiance computation

distance-aware, as different features are used at different viewing distances. This offers an additional degree of freedom to handle inconsistent data during the capture process, such as the distance-dependent shadows cast by the camera rig. Rig shadows are most prominent when the rig approaches walls or corners. With limited training views in these ambiguously captured locations, the model is likely to fake the shadows with incorrect geometry and/or appearance. On the other hand, distance-aware features allow our model to learn distance-dependent appearance, which reduces visual artifacts. We further noticed that the mip-mapped features encourage the model to better allocate model capacity for fine-grained details.

4.3 Optimizing the Quality–Speed Trade-off

Our goal of high-fidelity real-time NeRF rendering requires some challenging trade-offs between visual quality and rendering speed. For example, while conditional latent codes and wider and deeper networks can improve rendering quality [Barron et al. 2023; Müller et al. 2022], they come at a significant run-time cost. Similarly, using a proposal network for sampling adds overhead at render time as multiple networks need to be evaluated sequentially. To maximize rendering speed without model baking, we implement an explicit binary occupancy grid for efficiently skipping free space and minimizing the number of sample points for which hash grid features need to be queried and MLPs evaluated. An example grid is shown in Figure 9, along with the corresponding image results. While occupancy grids are widely-adopted acceleration structures [Chen et al. 2022; Liu et al. 2020; Müller et al. 2022; Sun et al. 2022], we propose two novel extensions that help us prune more accurately.

4.3.1 Cylinder Pruning. We initialize our binary occupancy grid based on the known rig capture positions to carve out as much free space in the scene as possible. For this, we first approximate the geometry of our Eyeful Tower capture rig as a cylinder. We then mark all occupancy grid voxels that are completely inside any such cylinder as free space. This type of pruning has two key benefits: (1) it prevents the model from cheating using floaters in front of cameras, which leads to more view-consistent models, and (2) it speeds up the early stages of training and thus helps improve convergence speed.

4.3.2 Joint History- and Grid-based Pruning. We explore a more conservative pruning strategy that combines pruning based on training history with dense grid sampling. History pruning keeps track of the maximum density observed for each voxel in the occupancy grid during the training process. This only considers rays seen during training, so some parts of the scene may not be observed. Grid-based pruning makes up for this by evaluating a dense cubic grid inside each voxel of the occupancy grid to estimate the maximum density for each voxel. As the density depends on the step size used in training, we use a worst-case estimate for this, i.e., the minimum step size possible inside each voxel based on the ray from the closest camera. For our datasets, we start the pruning process after 100K iterations, when a relatively clean scene geometry is obtained. Every thousand iterations, we prune grid voxels for which both maximum densities fall below the current pruning threshold (which we anneal linearly from zero to $\alpha = 0.2$). We start with a coarse occupancy grid of 128^3 resolution, and upsample the occupancy grid at predefined iteration milestones to prune scenes more accurately over time.

5 VR NERF RENDERING

Rendering a room-scale NeRF model in VR requires high resolution, high frame rates and low latency. Our target is native rendering on a Meta Quest Pro VR headset, ideally dual 2K×2K eyebuffers at 72 FPS. We approach this task with a combination of hardware, software, and model optimizations. Specifically, we present a custom multi-GPU CUDA renderer with efficient in-register MLP evaluation and automatic work distribution, a compute-efficient LOD technique (see Section 4.2), and a 20-GPU workstation for peak VR performance.

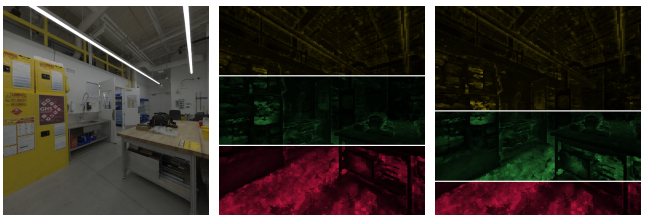
MLP evaluation is the most computationally expensive portion of model inference, and thus a prime candidate for optimization. Our MLP implementation is specialized for small iNGP-style networks by taking advantage of Nvidia's Tensor Cores and evaluating all layers within registers. Inputs and outputs of the MLP are stored in shared memory while per-layer activations are stored in register-backed arrays, with outputs from one layer being shuffled in an architecture-dependent way to become the inputs to the next layer. This limits memory traffic to just the input and output features, which are typically small (32 inputs, 16 bottleneck features, 3 output colors) compared to the hidden layers (64 nodes), and the network weights, which are shared across the kernel and typically cached. This structure also allows the MLP evaluation to be interleaved with ray marching and hash grid sampling in a single kernel. This enables the neural features to be passed to the networks without staging through global memory (which can suffer from capacity problems with a large number of samples per ray) or across multiple kernels (which would incur extra launch and synchronization overhead).

We further adopt a dynamic work distribution strategy for improving the utilization of multiple GPUs compared to a static work split that would often be suboptimal as some rays take longer to compute than others due to differences in pruning in different parts of the scene, as well as GPU caching and overhead effects. For every frame, we measure the throughput per GPU in rays per second, and assign contiguous rows to each GPU based on its ratio of the total throughput. We use dampening for smoother convergence to an optimal distribution. Figure 4 demonstrates a 49% increase in FPS. Each GPU stores a separate copy of each scene (~700 MB VRAM).

We also built a custom 20-GPU rendering workstation to evaluate our walkable spaces at the highest possible fidelity in virtual reality. This machine comprises a Dell R7515 server with an AMD Epyc 7313P CPU and 256 GB of RAM, and is connected to 20 Nvidia A40 GPUs via a PCIe switching solution from Liqid Inc., all in a 24U server rack. We detail our design considerations in the supplement.

6 RESULTS AND EVALUATION

For our room-scale scenes, we use hash grid configurations with $L = 16$ levels of two features, with a base resolution of 128 and scaling factor of 1.4. Following iNGP, we use a 1-hidden-layer density MLP and a 2-hidden-layer color MLP, both 64 neurons wide. For each ray,



(a) Color image (b) Static split: 49.3 FPS (c) Dynamic split: 73.6 FPS

Figure 4: (a) In this example, we render a novel view using 3 GPUs. (b) A static split distributes work equally (indicated by colors; brightness is proportional to #MLP evaluations). (c) Our dynamic work split achieves 49% higher FPS.

we sample 1024 points using exponential distances for integration. We use the Adam optimizer [Kingma and Ba 2015] with $\beta_1 = 0.9$, $\beta_2 = 0.99$, $\epsilon = 10^{-15}$, and a batch size 12,800 rays (256 random rays from 50 random images) for all our experiments. We use far-field contraction for the subset of unbounded scenes. We use learning rate 0.01 for the hash grids and 0.005 for the remaining modules. We discuss a series of additional techniques for per-scene quality improvements in the supplement.

For fair evaluation, we hold out a fixed camera from the training set, which has the same number of frames as all other cameras. For ablation experiments, we show results trained for 110K iterations on 1K resolution Eyeful Tower datasets. The demo videos are produced by models trained on 2K resolution images and longer than 200K iterations. In the supplement, we include additional results on the Inria [Philip et al. 2021] and mip-NeRF360 datasets [Barron et al. 2022], as well as ablations on pruning strategies.

6.1 Comparative Evaluation

To model HDR images, iNGP [Müller et al. 2022] suggests using an exponential color activation for linear RGB space. RawNeRF [Mildenhall et al. 2022] further suggests using a weighted loss to prevent extremely bright areas from dominating. Table 2 and Figure 6 show the comparisons of our designed modules with iNGP baselines: (1) the effectiveness of using PQ color space for HDR modeling, and (2) the use of the LOD feature grid.

We choose the baseline of using iNGP with linear color space with truncated exponential activation for the color network to avoid the issue of exploding values weighted by the predicted color value, as practiced by Mildenhall et al. [2022]. "iNGP with PQ color space" reflects our modification of directly training in the PQ color space, and replaces the original exponential color activation with a sigmoid function. "iNGP with PQ color space and LOD" represents our core model of adopting mip-mapped grid features based on the estimated LOD level for each queried sample point on the ray. We report the standard PSNR/SSIM/LPIPS metrics in tonemapped sRGB space, and additionally report versions of these metrics in PQ color space for better evaluation on extremely bright and dark areas. More results and analysis with supporting plots and visualizations on each ablated module can be found in our supplement.

PQ color space. Table 2 shows that the PQ color space consistently outperforms the linear color space for all test scenes and all metrics. We noticed that during training, color predictions using

Table 2: Quantitative comparison results on the Eyeful Tower test set. All results are trained on 1K resolution images for 110K iterations with 1024 samples per ray. We report the average PSNR/SSIM/LPIPS both in sRGB and PQ color spaces. The best results are highlighted. See the supplemental document for the breakdown by individual dataset.

Methods	PSNR ↑	SSIM ↑	LPIPS ↓	PQ-PSNR↑	PQ-SSIM↑	PQ-LPIPS↓
iNGP (our implementation)	31.93	0.918	0.183	37.39	0.957	0.133
with PQ color space	32.47	0.926	0.170	38.15	0.962	0.122
with PQ color space and LOD	33.30	0.930	0.146	38.95	0.964	0.108

the exponential activation baseline continue to grow to excessively large values. This poses an ambiguity for predicting correct density values and their derived weights, which are multiplied with the point color to obtain sample colors. Directly modeling colors in linear RGB space poses additional challenges in regressing and interpolating accurate color values, especially when a large range of radiance is present. As shown in the second example in Figure 6, the base model fails to model the color on the checkerboard correctly.

Mip-mapped features. The combination of LOD and PQ color space further improves the rendering quality and leads to cleaner geometries, as seen in Table 2 and Figure 6. This is critical for pruning and VR rendering, where a good geometry is desired. Figure 6 shows four scenarios where the mip-mapped features can help. The first scene shows an annoying dark appearance baked into the rendered scene due to dynamic shadows from the rig in the training data. These are modeled by the high-frequency levels and well addressed by the distance-aware features. The second example shows both cleaner geometry and appearance in the ambiguous space near the whiteboard. The third example shows how LOD helps eliminate aliasing for distant areas, especially when observing the scene from a wide angle. The last example shows how LOD can also reveal more detail compared to non-mip-mapped features, not just a cleaner appearance. This is expected as the features corresponding to high-resolution hash grids are specifically allocated to areas rich in fine details in the training views, which allows the model to automatically allocate more capacity for these parts. Note that while the quantitative metrics are similar to the baselines, the visual improvements are easier to spot and critical to the high-fidelity rendering results that contribute to a pleasant VR experience.

6.2 Performance Evaluation

Figure 5 plots the rendering frame rate when using a varying number of A40 GPUs. Native VR rendering for a Meta Quest Pro headset requires rendering two 2064×2096 eyebuffers at 72 FPS. However, Asynchronous Spacewarp (ASW) [Beeler et al. 2016] can help close this gap by reprojecting frames when they are rendered at least at half the native FPS, i.e., 36 (dashed line) instead of 72 (solid line). But even ASW fails if rendering is slower than that critical threshold. Thus, we found the 'p99' metric (the 99$^{\text{th}}$ percentile of FPS) to be a better proxy for the quality of VR experience than mean FPS — as long as the application is typically (i.e. 99%+ of the time) above 36 FPS, ASW can deliver a smooth experience. Any slower, and the user may notice stuttering frames, and experience motion sickness.

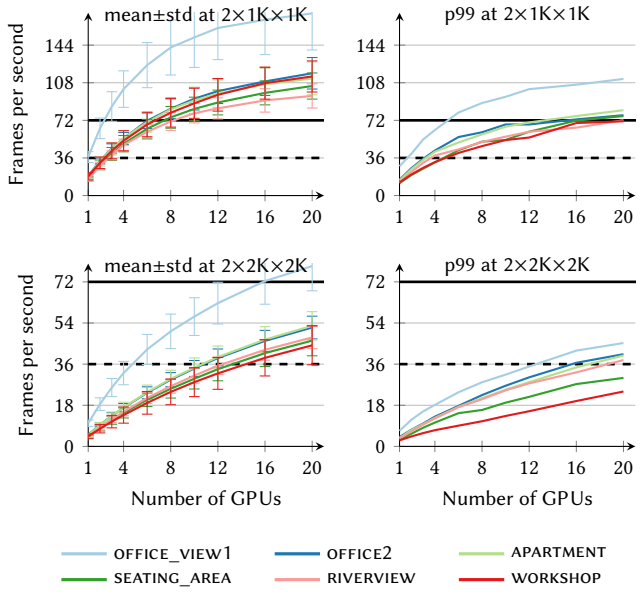


Figure 5: Runtime performance at half (top) and full (bottom) VR resolution (for a Meta Quest Pro) over a prerecorded camera trajectory. Left: Mean and standard deviation of frame rates. Right: The 99th percentile frame time (expressed as FPS) is indicative of the worst-case frame rate.

An off-the-shelf 3-GPU workstation is sufficient for reliable half-resolution VR rendering of half the scenes at 36 FPS (see Figure 5, top right), which demonstrates the practicality of our method. For maximum rendering speed and fidelity, we use our custom 20-GPU rendering workstation. All scenes but one achieve a p99 of 72 FPS at half-resolution, and thus provide a smooth VR experience even without ASW. At full resolution (top row in Figure 5), 4 of the 6 scenes shown in Figure 5 (bottom right) exceed the critical ASW threshold of 36 FPS for a smooth, high-fidelity VR experience. Interestingly, halving the resolution only approximately doubles the FPS, even though only 1/4 as many pixels are being rendered. This may indicate a substantial amount of per-frame overhead (e.g. due to kernel launches, the VR compositor, or OpenGL display pipeline) or insufficient parallelism available at lower resolutions.

7 DISCUSSION

Aggressive pruning. Like most pruning approaches, we threshold density for determining if a voxel is occupied or not. For bounded scenes with mostly solid surfaces, more aggressive pruning can be applied with a larger threshold (e.g., $\alpha = 0.3$) and finer grid resolution (e.g., 1024^3), which results in significantly faster rendering (see 'OFFICE_VIEW1' in Figure 5). However, aggressive pruning does not work well for complex real-world scenes, such as reflective surfaces, transparent objects or unbounded scenes. This becomes particularly apparent in VR, where over-pruned areas show box-like artifacts that may not be easily seen in rendered 2D images or videos.

Distance-aware features. Our level-of-detail feature weighting provides our model the flexibility to reproduce distance-dependent appearance such as varying level of detail, or rig shadows. At the same time, we observed that this reduces our model's ability to extrapolate to unseen viewpoints or viewing distances, as feature vectors with unseen weighting may be used at render time. In particular, density can vary depending on distance, which is undesirable. We work around this by pruning as much free-space as possible, so that density cannot suddenly appear when moving through free-space.

8 CONCLUSION

We presented VR-NeRF, the first holistic approach for capture, reconstruction and rendering of high-fidelity walkable spaces in virtual reality. We made several key contributions across all stages of the pipeline to achieve the significantly higher resolution, frame rate and visual fidelity required for comfortable VR viewing of neural radiance fields. We built a one-of-a-kind multi-camera rig that captures thousands of uniformly distributed HDR photos of a scene, integrated a novel perceptual color space for HDR model optimization, devised an efficient feature mip-mapping scheme for level-of-detail rendering, and implemented a multi-GPU renderer that achieves comfortable VR viewing on our demo machine.

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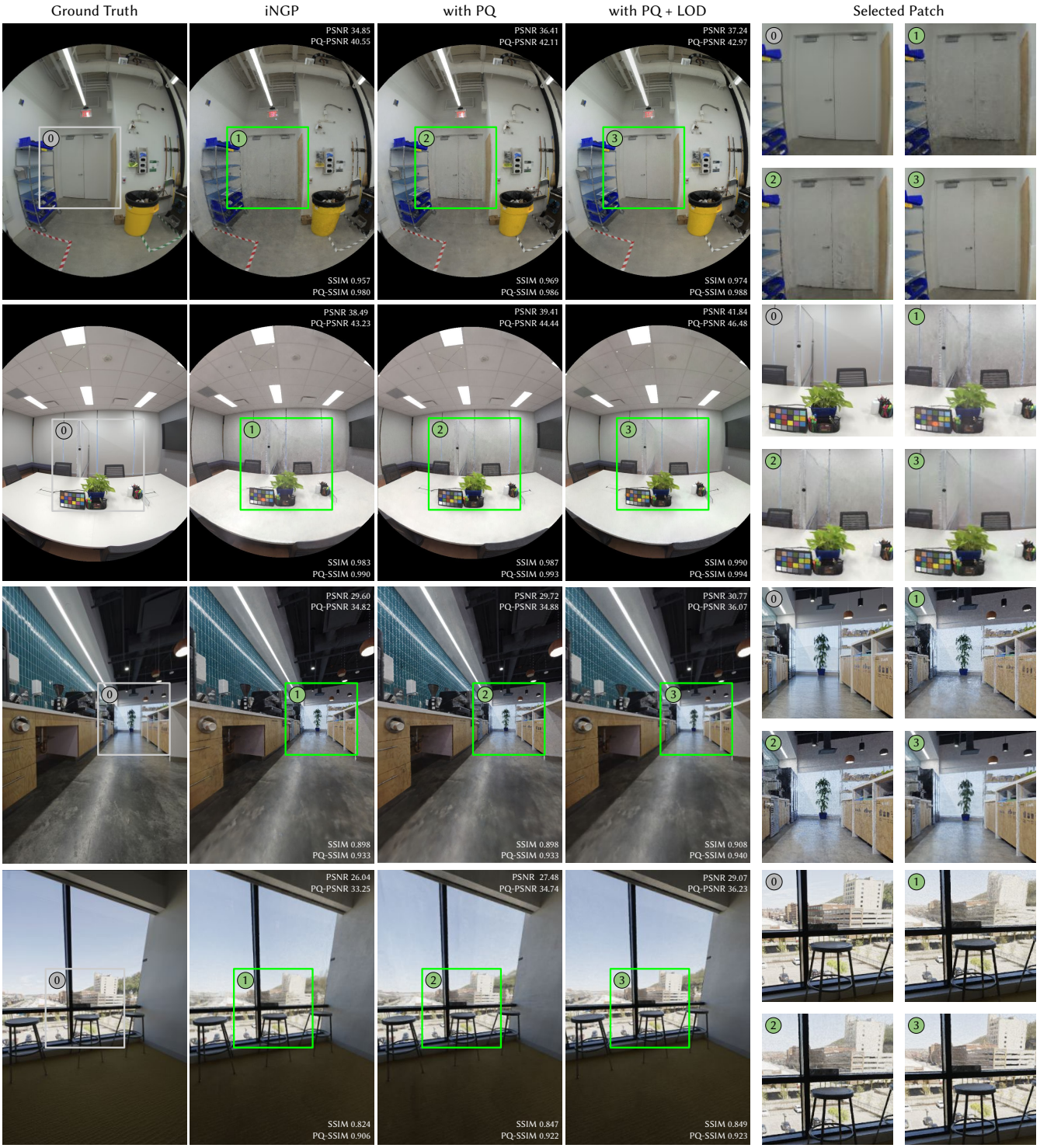

Figure 6: Qualitative comparisons between (1) iNGP, (2) iNGP with PQ color space, and (3) iNGP with PQ color space and LOD. The four selected examples show the improvements over the baselines by adding PQ color space and LOD in combination, which leads to cleaner appearance and geometry finer details. The use of PQ color space stablizes the learning of correct radiance values, while the inclusion of LOD helps to learn a cleaner appearance and geometry that is robust to distance-dependent appearance variations. By dynamically allocating model capacity to the sampled points based on the needed level of detail, it further reveals more details over the ablated counterparts. (Images are white-balanced and tonemapped for better visualization.)

Figure 7: Sweep of exposure values. For scenes with high dynamic range (e.g., bright outdoor views in the RIVERVIEW scene), one can freely adjust the exposure setting at render time by manipulating the tonemapping from PQ color space to sRGB space.

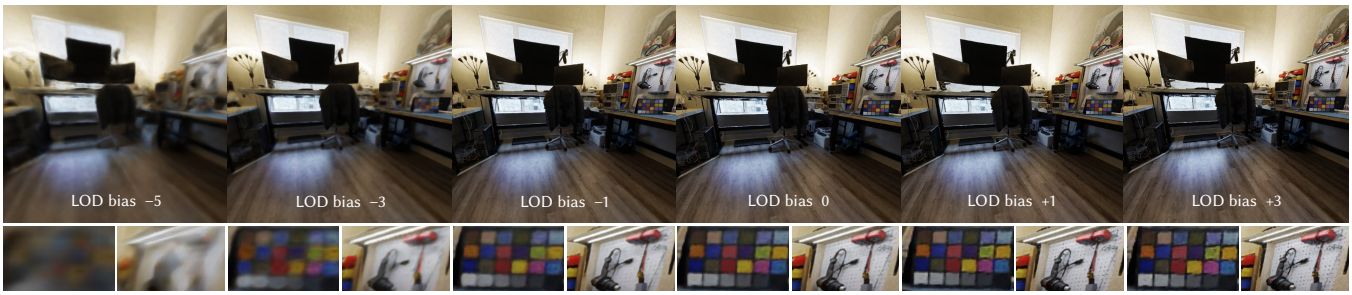

Figure 8: Sweep of LOD bias. We interpolate between a negative LOD bias of −5 and a positive LOD bias of +3 applied on top of the original estimated LOD value for each sample point on the APARTMENT scene. A negative LOD bias blurs the rendering by masking out grid features representing high-frequency details, while a positive LOD bias helps reveal sharper details.

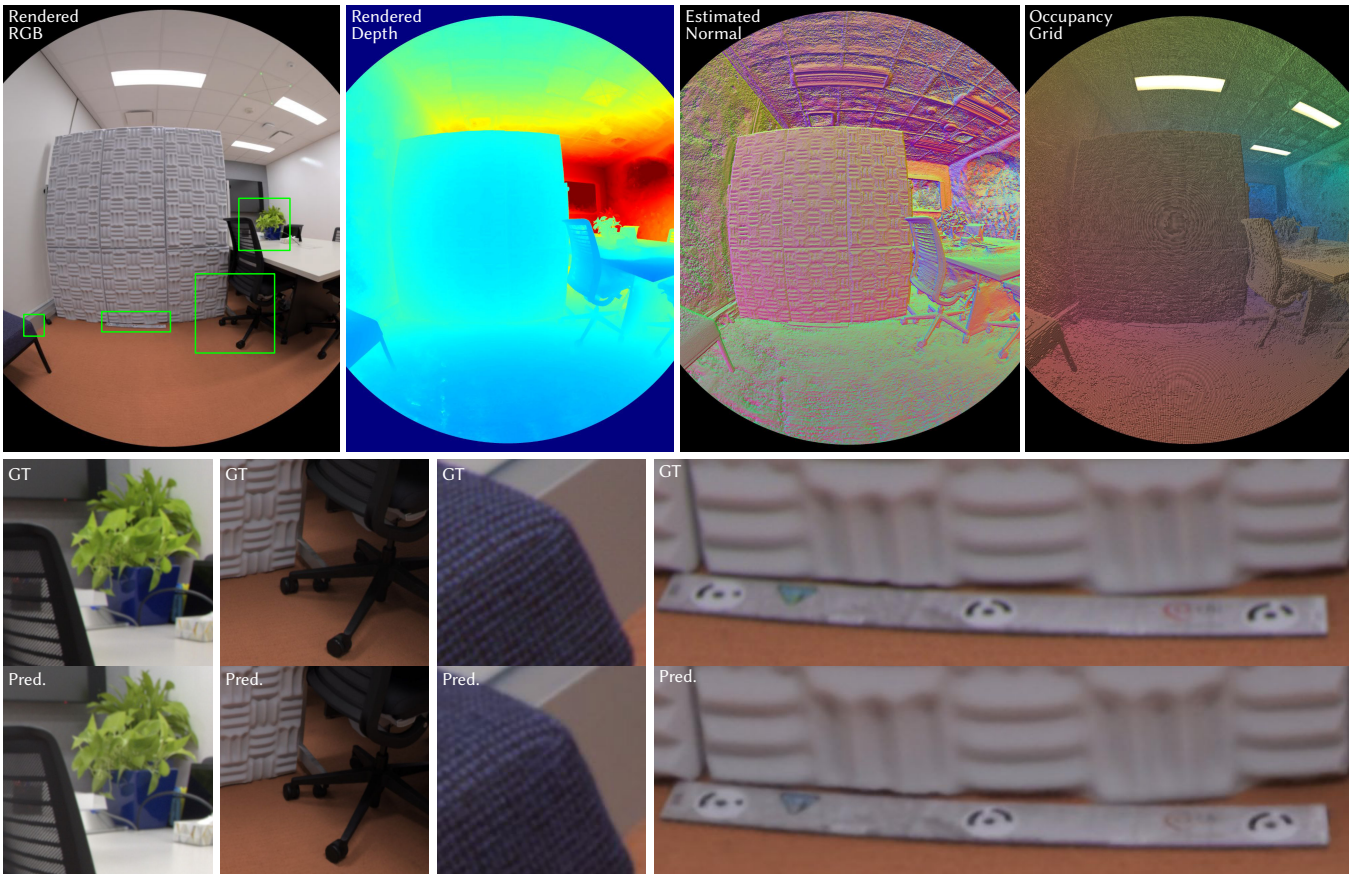

Figure 9: OFFICE2 results rendered at 4K resolution, trained with 400K iterations. Top row: from left to right, we show (1) rendered RGB image, (2) estimated depth map, (3) estimated normals, and (4) the occupancy grid. Bottom row: The highlighted patches reveal sufficient fine details.