

Ex/changing knowledge: What shared discovery reveals



On a Tuesday morning at Central Saint Martins' campus at King's Cross, second-year students on [BA \(Hons\) Graphic Communication Design](#) started the Knowledge Exchange project by forming teams, aligning their creative attributes, and establishing how they'll work.

[Knowledge Exchange](#) brings students and partner organisations together to share specialist knowledge and develop industry-relevant skills. The unit is coordinated by Paul Finn, Strategic Knowledge Exchange Lead; Jaap de Maat, Stage Leader; and Kira Salter, Programme Director and Course Leader.

Its emphasis extends beyond technical skills to the negotiation and communication of ideas across contexts. As Finn puts it, "Knowledge Exchange is about sharing perspectives, insights, and knowledge: from the specialist expertise that our partners have, to the diverse array of skills and experiences our students bring."

Partner organisations increasingly recognise the value of working with students as active contributors who bring curiosity, experimentation, and critical questioning. Students approach challenges unburdened by institutional constraints. Partners bring experience within real-world systems. When these forms of knowledge meet, new possibilities emerge.



Five partnerships, five platforms, five weeks

This year, five London partner organisations collaborated across five platforms, each led by senior lecturers.

01. Narrative & Voice, led by Andrew Hall in partnership with the [Natural History Museum](#): activating archives to help people become “advocates for nature”.

02. Strategy & Identity, led by David Preston with [Wellcome Collection](#): reimagining the visitor journey as an inclusive brand experience, designing near-future interventions for 2030.

03. Time & Movement, led by Michelle Salamon with [London Museum](#): creating a documentary on London’s food markets as living sites of labour, culture, and exchange.

04. Information & Systems, led by Paul Finn with [Transport for London](#): designing speculative wayfinding systems for a London journey in 2036.

05. Experience & Environment, led by Benjamin Cain with [Museum of the Home](#): imagining domestic life in 2056 through multisensory room-sets and handmade artefacts.

Briefs began not in classrooms, but in the institutions themselves. Over five weeks, students move between sites and studios, working across galleries, archives, markets, and transport systems. Midway through, work-in-progress presentations open the process to dialogue. The final weeks shift to refinement and documentation, culminating in the Open Studio.

What happens when students enter institutional archives, visit food markets at 4am, or design wayfinding systems for 2036? When they rethink how an institution can mean more to more people, or imagine domestic life a century from now? Over the five weeks that follow, that exchange begins to take shape.



Where exchange takes place, knowledge moves

Across the unit, projects evolve through cycles of challenge and reframing, each round of feedback shifting the work into new territory. As Andrew Hall notes, “The relationship is built across the whole project — it’s not just at the end.” Work-in-progress presentations are key moments of exchange, where students test ideas against organisational contexts and partners respond with both openness and constraint. As Michelle Salamon observed, “There was a real range of knowledge and skills being exchanged.” Knowledge does not move in one direction. It shifts between students, partners and tutors, between speculation and application, and often lands somewhere none of them predicted.

Five recurring patterns emerge across the unit as ways of working that appear in different contexts:

01. The turning point as a method

Almost every project reached a point at which the initial direction was abandoned, and the work fundamentally changed. These were not setbacks; they were the process itself. What the unit builds, in part, is the capacity to absorb disruption and keep moving. For [one TfL team](#), partner feedback sent them back to square one: their ideas were too grounded in the present. “This could exist today — where’s 2036?” The next day, one student proposed flipping their perspective entirely. If cognitive offloading was already reshaping how people think, why would navigation in 2036 be any different? The blackout wasn’t a problem to solve. It was a behaviour to push to its logical extreme. As they put it: “That shift unlocked everything.”

At the Natural History Museum, [a 1921 bill banning the trade in bird feathers proved more powerful than any broad argument about climate change](#). The archive provided a point of view. Sometimes the turning point was not a redirect but a disappearance: [one London Museum team arrived at Southall Market to find their subject had gone](#), the market was closed, and a building site had replaced it. As they put it: “the biggest shift was learning to let the process become the content.” In each case, the shift was not a failure of direction, but the work itself taking shape.

02. Speculation as provocation, not prediction

Alongside these shifts, several projects used extreme or dystopian futures to expose present-day assumptions. As one TfL team observed, “the most powerful speculation doesn’t invent problems. It follows existing ones to their logical conclusion.” This shift moves design from individual experiences to the systems behind them. The team [imagined a London where AI systems had consumed the city’s water supply by 2036](#), “not as a prediction but as a provocation.”

One Museum of the Home team [imagined a home governed entirely by corporate subscription systems](#), pushed into dark humour: “a warning of what could happen if we continue the system of enshittification,” questioning who controls the future of the home. Another Museum of the Home team [used the absurd to explore entirely real concerns around immigration and belonging](#), imagining a co-living space shared between humans and aliens in 2226.

In all cases, speculation becomes a way to confront what realist design often avoids: who holds power, and who gets to shape the future.

03. Participation as practice

Across the unit, teams encountered the shift from researching a subject to building a relationship with it. This distinction only became real through time. Working with London Museum, [one team found that early visits to Brixton Market felt extractive](#): “Arriving with a camera and asking questions was quite exploitative to the people hard at work.” At East Street Market, traders became willing participants by the third or fourth visit.

At Billingsgate Market, arriving before dawn and staying long enough to listen, [surfaced the human story](#): as Lenny, a fish trader, told the team, “Everyone knows it is coming in the next couple of days, we just aren’t sure when.” That single voice reframed the entire project, from a documentary about a marketplace to a portrait of a community shaped by change. In each case, the work only deepened when students stopped extracting and started belonging.

04. Storytelling as structure

A recurring discovery across platforms was that introducing a specific character or viewer position unlocked the whole project. Museum of the Home teams found that naming their inhabitants transformed how audiences connected with speculative futures: one team introduced [Amelx](#), a named character who was an amalgamation of the group members themselves. At Wellcome Collection, one team [developed a](#)

[system of character companions to guide visitors through the museum](#), each supporting a personalised journey through the collection. The character was not decorative. It was the navigation system. Another team [used taste and smell to build a connection](#).

One Natural History Museum team reversed the approach: rather than invent a character, [they asked the audience to become one](#), placing visitors inside the belly of a whale, reasoning that empathy with a species had to come before advocacy for it. In each case, the character or the viewer's position structured the work's storytelling.

05. Accessibility as a creative driver

Inclusion did not emerge as a separate concern, but as something that reshaped the entire design approach. As one Wellcome Collection partner challenged from the start, "Nothing about us without us. Have you spoken to anyone from the communities you're designing for?" Visiting the gallery, a team [quickly identified a gap between stated accessibility commitments and the visitor experience](#). Many accessibility features felt procedural, requiring visitors to actively seek them out. That gap became the brief.

The most effective solutions were not retrofitted for accessibility; they were built around it from the start. One team found that [designing with children in mind transformed their thinking about communication](#), using tactile interaction and colour to improve the experience for every visitor. Solutions designed for one group consistently expanded the work for everyone. Accessibility, they found, is a creative starting point, one that begins with listening.



Perspectives shift

Partners are looking for perspectives that genuinely surprise them. As Hanna Kops, Head of Experience at TfL, noted, "It's always interesting to see how the next generation of designers thinks about the topics we deal with — not just what is made, but the knowledge generated through the act of exchange."

This shift in perspective is shared across partners. Andrea Hart, Head of Special Collections and Archives at the Natural History Museum, reflected: “It helps us understand how we need to communicate differently — we're speaking to a different generation.” Marina Maniadaki, Exhibitions Manager at the Museum of the Home, added: “It takes you out of the loop and brings fresh ideas while breaking established ways of working.” At Wellcome Collection, Alice Sophie Evans, Marketing Manager, put it most directly: “With their creative ideas, students made us think about our blind spots.”

The process of collaboration is equally revealing. As Debbie Armstrong, Designer at London Museum, observed: “It's very interesting to see how each team works together and organises themselves differently.” For many, collaboration is a primary outcome. As one student reflected: “I realised that everyone has different steps and different timelines. Learning to work with that, to let someone else's strengths carry what you can't, was what mattered most.” Another simply said: “How to communicate with people. And how to communicate with myself.”

The most transferable outcome of Knowledge Exchange is not a skill or a method, but a way of seeing and working.

Making thinking visible

Alongside the projects themselves, teams documented their process, not just outcomes, but the decisions made and the directions abandoned. For partners, understanding that thinking matters. As Helen Cornell, Senior Project Manager at London Museum, puts it: “Seeing how they come to the answer is very important.” What you want to find, she adds, is “a partner you can work with in the long term — and that's about sharing your thinking.” The full projects and the process behind them are documented on the GCD.STUDIO pages.



Open Studio: When the work is shared

The Open Studio is a lively and dynamic space where five weeks of work are shared. In the morning, teams present directly to Knowledge Exchange partners, a moment that, as David Preston notes, requires the ability to articulate decisions and communicate the value of the work.

In the afternoon, the work shifts into a different mode: from explanation to encounter. A wider audience moves through the work, experiencing how five weeks of thinking have taken form across the different platforms. Benjamin Cain, Platform Leader for Experience & Environment, noted that “students have pushed their speculations further than I’ve seen before, considering how challenging the brief was and the time they had.”

More than a presentation of finished outcomes, it is, as Ben put it, “a chance to celebrate everybody’s hard work.” For partners, it surfaces unexpected angles on their own challenges. For students, it is an opportunity to situate their work within a broader field of approaches.

What exchange leaves behind

What remains is not just the projects, but the knowledge produced through them, captured, reflected upon, and shared. The space between education and professional practice is one of discovery. Within that gap, new ways of thinking and making take shape.



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