The background features several thick, hand-drawn green lines that curve and loop across the white space, creating an abstract, organic feel.

An exploration
of the future
of human-cen-
tric design.

Practices
of Empathy

Foreword

Rooted in the themes of collaboration, human-centric design, and designing with empathy in the age of AI, this publication brings together voices from across the BA(Hons) Graphic Design and BA(Hons) Spatial and Interior Design programmes at University of Kent. Contributions from staff, students and practitioners explore the future of design through essays, project spotlights, visual provocations, and short reflections.

Part editorial, part showcase, and part conversation-starter, the publication celebrates interdisciplinary practice and captures the values that shape our creative community now and into the future.

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In_side

Now + Near

Our educators consider how empathetic, human-centric design can help shape social and environmental change in an evolving design landscape.

Rising with the Tide

Designer for Social Impact Greg Bunbury shares his approach to driving inclusive design and provides advice for future designers.

Future-Making Projects

Four projects aiming to make a big impact — we delve into our student's work and how they aim to make a difference.

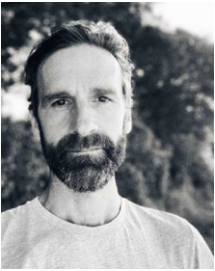
Empathy Archive

How do we ensure human-centric design is embedded in our practice? Students, staff and industry professionals share their thoughts...

Now + Near

‘The Evolving Design Landscape’

Making with machines



Matt Dixon
Director of Studies (Design)

There are valid concerns around the impact of AI on the creative process. But, these powerful tools, while extending our reach as designers, are also prompting us to think more critically about how and why we design. Design is inherently human-centric and rooted in a desire to understand and respond to the complexities of the human experience. A meaningful design process cannot exist apart from this.

Machine thinking, whether through generative tools, automation, or data systems, should not be viewed as a definitive threat. Rather, it is better understood as an evolving extension of our practice. An enhanced sketchbook perhaps, and a space where prompts and intuitions might grow, morph, and take new form.

But these rapid shifts demand our alertness, clarity of purpose, ethical awareness, and a strong grasp of context. The challenge is not simply to adopt AI, but to ensure it reflects and extends our values as designers – with empathy, integrity, and original thought rooted in the human condition. As these tools grow more powerful, it's our critical awareness, and our commitment to better understanding ourselves and communicating with others, that will ensure that our work remains grounded and relevant. The tools are addendums to our role as agents for positive change.

As AI becomes more ubiquitous and increasingly embedded in creative practice, our ability to question its influence becomes even more important. We encourage our Design students to approach AI with the same intentionality they bring to any design tool. This includes being transparent about when and how it is used, and ensuring it supports a learning and creative process rather than replacing it. We emphasise criticality, inclusion, and responsible use of these tools – asking students to question outputs, consider whose voices are represented, and engage with its profound environmental impact. These principles are not just about using AI well. They're about continuing to design with care.

The Design Council's Design Economy 2025 report 'underscores the growing importance of design in addressing pressing environmental and social challenges'. It calls for 'designers, future designers and design educators to integrate environmental and social value into their practice' by creating collaborative learning spaces and opportunities. A selection of our educators consider shifts and how empathetic, human-centric design can help shape social and environmental change now and going forwards.

Designers as agents of change



Becky Upson
Course Director,
BA(Hons) Graphic Design

As educators, we not only need to equip students with the knowledge and skills within a discipline, but equip them to respond to uncertainty, cultural influences, and societal changes. To be a designer is not to simply churn out an outcome to a set of specifications, but to understand the intent, interpret the purpose, and resonate with the audience and their needs. In doing this, future designers need to build and develop their own ethical awareness and engage with a critical understanding of how their work will be received and impact the wider world.

Designing for an audience and not just for themselves, is a big challenge that all designers need to tackle within their design journey. Are they truly designing for the audience? The client? Or are they purely designing based on what they think they may like? Designers need to develop the capacity to be able to remove themselves from the equation, as somebody who simply just likes the design, and transition to ideating purposeful work that is tailored to the intended audience. A strong sense of empathy and a true understanding of the placement of their designs within the wider context of the world, enables them to become fully aware of the impact their design will have.

Cultural, environmental, and societal changes are ever in motion, with the need to allow students to have a voice and personal perspective on the world around them. Critical reflection and understanding of precedent work, develops their ethical and social awareness while also developing their skills to influence positive change. Through research and contextual understanding, students are encouraged to fully deep dive into the true intent and purpose of the work they are producing, while also asking them to question the work. Is this the right audience? What is the true message? Do I believe in the cause? Am I the right voice for this? How will it be received?

The role of an ethically aware designer is not to design for design's sake, but to fully understand the contextual placement and impact of their work on the world. Designers need to be encouraged to explore both socially and ethically engaged design, giving them the power to be an agent of change.

The role of design in a fragmented world



Becky Thomas
Lecturer,
BA(Hons) Graphic Design

Technological advancement, particularly AI, brings huge opportunities to bring us closer, but some are concerned it will divide and conquer. Where can designers maintain value, and aid cohesion in this rapid landscape? To answer, I'm going to use an example...

A design agency is approached by a museum to redesign its brand identity - aiming to attract younger visitors. The designers immerse themselves in the Museum's world - undertaking interviews and surveys with visitors, locals, staff and stakeholders. They look at opinion, satisfaction, needs and ethics. A visual analysis of the brand and its competitors is carried out. The outcome of this discovery phase is a holistic view of the Museum brand's landscape.

This leads to a new definition of the problem. The brand is very successful amongst its core audience. However young people feel intimidated by the space and collections. The brief is redefined to develop a Museum youth-hub. They discuss this with the Museum.

Solutions are developed by holding workshops with young people and using the results as inspiration for creative thinking. Together they mindmap and ideate; taking into account social and environmental impact. A range of outcomes are presented.

The outcomes are tested with the young people, and an informed decision is made on which best solves the problem. A new youth-hub identity is delivered, alongside a campaign for an outreach programme and monthly youth art exhibition. The ongoing success of the hub is monitored. Throughout the process the designers and Museum work together – engaging the young people and wider stakeholders. Communication builds trust.

The result is more than just a brand change. It provides an outlet for young people to engage with their local community, express themselves, find new passions, make friends, feel supported and celebrated.

AI can immensely speed up and enhance design projects like this one. Data can be gathered, processed and analysed at speed. It can help with brainstorming, rapid prototyping and project planning. The role of the designer is to lead through human experience. Technological results are controlled by the human and we must challenge them critically and ethically. We must work together to share insights and ideas and deliver socially and environmentally inclusive results. Human communication is required to foster trust.

By working *with* technology, designers can define the problem, develop and deliver an appropriate human-centric solution which is meaningful, has heart and contributes positively to society.

Still figuring it out (but quickly)



Hooman Talebi
Programme Director,
BA(Hons) Spatial and Interior Design

When I entered architecture school in 1993, I had already lived through one wave of technological fear. In the 1980s, automation sparked widespread anxiety about machines replacing people. By the time I began my studies, that anxiety had shifted. Now it was digitalisation causing concern.

That same year, Autodesk released AutoCAD LT for Windows—suddenly, design software was accessible to anyone with a PC. With Windows running on over 90% of computers, digital tools quickly became part of everyday design practice. The fear was real, but it didn't last. What looked like a threat became a breakthrough. Digital tools didn't replace creativity—they reshaped it.

They opened up new ways of thinking and making—but also, in a surprising turn, new ways of connecting. What began as a shift in tools became a shift in relationships. Digital technologies, initially seen as isolating or mechanical, revealed their potential to bring people closer: enabling collaboration across time zones, sharing ideas instantly, and making knowledge more accessible than ever before. These developments didn't make design less human; in many ways, they made it more so. They enabled more responsive and collaborative design practices—though not without challenges.

AI has entered our world so rapidly and pervasively that the question of whether it belongs in design already feels obsolete. It's here—not as a future concept, but as a present reality. The real question now is how we use it—and what we want from it. That starts by recognising the reciprocal nature of this relationship. We are not just learning from AI—we are teaching it. It lives in our experience, reflects our culture, and grows from what we create. And if we are shaping it, then how we shape it matters—with care, with intent, with empathy, and with a clear awareness of people, purpose, and impact. By 2026, it's estimated that up to 90% of online content may be AI-generated. That reality demands not passive use, but urgent, active, and critically engaged participation.

We've embraced AI at SPIN—cautiously. It's woven into every module not as a shortcut, but as a provocation. We explore what it can do, what it should do, and how it might deepen, rather than dull, our creative awareness—towards empathy, responsibility, and context.

AI will be part of the future of design—in what we design and how we design—but the why will still be shaped by us.

Greg Bunbury is a designer for social impact. A Black British Graphic Designer, Diversity & Inclusion Consultant, lecturer and public speaker of Caribbean heritage, he helps mission-led, purpose driven organisations connect with audiences, engage diverse communities and drive inclusion. We ask Greg about his approach to design and he shares his advice for future designers.



Rising with the Tide

What does empathy mean in your design practice today?

That empathy is discomfort. Over the past five years, I have learned that it is relatively easy to be empathetic to those who are like us. Who sit on our political divides and share our backgrounds and cultures. Empathy is easier when we are already on the side of those who deserve it. It feels righteous and even virtuous. But it is much harder, and perhaps necessary, to embody empathy for those who are different from us. As designers, we cannot expect to solve important problems that only affect silos of humanity. This is why design processes and frameworks are so crucial, when they force us to move out of our comfort zones to ask the difficult questions. Our world is a series of systems built on systems, so we must take more of a systemic view if our creative work is to engender measurable change – however that change should manifest.

In an age of automation and AI, how do we keep design human?

The unfortunate reality of AI is it will prove to be a great leveller. That is, whatever task can be automated will be automated, and perhaps did not hold as much value as we believed. The role of design in our world must evolve, to meet this new landscape. When graphic communication design becomes untethered from marketing and advertising ephemera, what place does it hold in our society? If a client cannot tell the difference between an AI generated logo, and one drawn by hand – and more importantly, they simply do not care – what does that mean? What will it mean after another five years of AI models?

Yes, we can plead our case for our craft and the value of the work we produce. But I suspect this will only go so far in certain areas. Therefore, design in all its forms must rise with the tide. It must become more concerned with the strategic and structural. With societal transformation. To solve bigger and far important problems, we must cultivate and prioritise our perspective, insight, and vision – all the processes that cannot be automated.



Image: Black History Addendum by Greg Bunbury, 2022. Billboard donated by Brotherhood Media. Photograph © Greg Bunbury. All rights reserved.

Can you share a moment when empathy directly shaped a project's direction or outcome?

A year ago, I worked on an event around an activist organisation in Hackney, that sought justice for the surviving families of police crime in the 1980s and 1990s. At a group meeting early in the project, some of these family members were invited to speak, as well as the organisers and other creatives. Following the session, one of the survivors sat next to me at an empty table. And even though we had not met, she told me her story and the harrowing event she witnessed some 30 years ago. And for the longest while I was quiet. I simply listened. This moment was not about me being a graphic designer, or a creative director or an artist. It was not about me at all. Sometimes our role is to just to be present and really listen.

It is not for me to say whether this moment made my work on said project, objectively better. But I can say that what I produced was not for me, it was for them - the families that continue to live and campaign for what was taken from them. I can say that whatever transformation took place, whatever impact was created, began with myself.

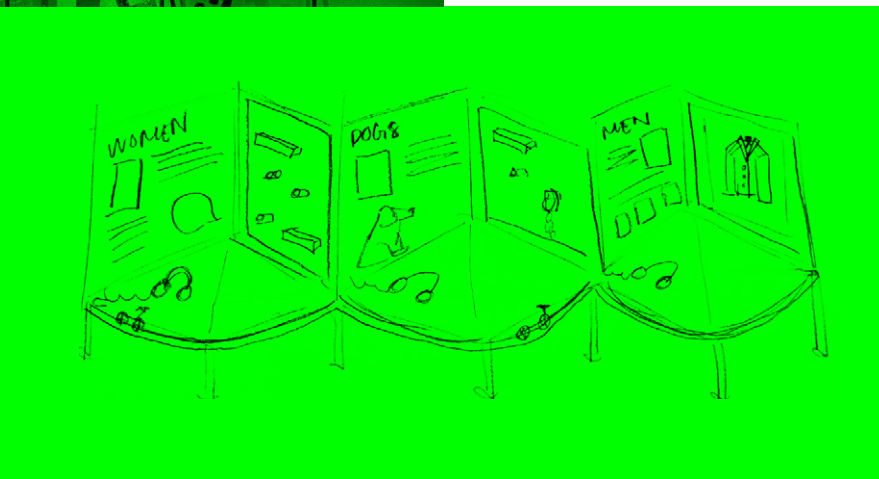
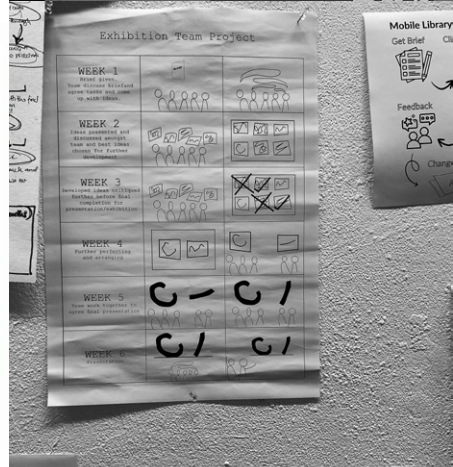
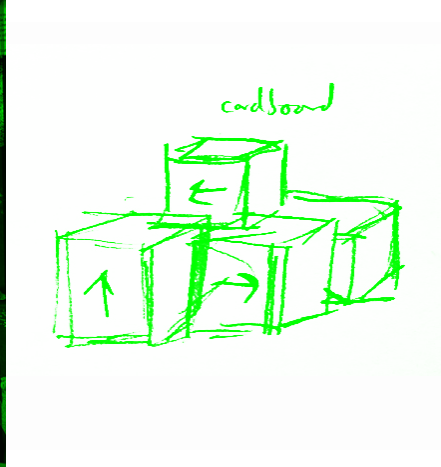
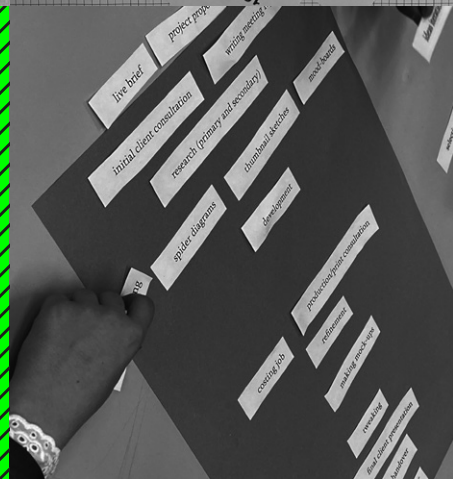
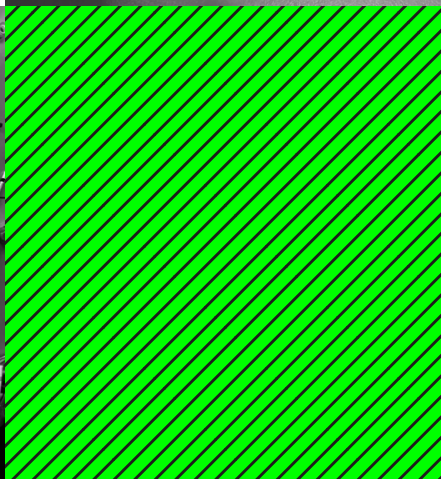
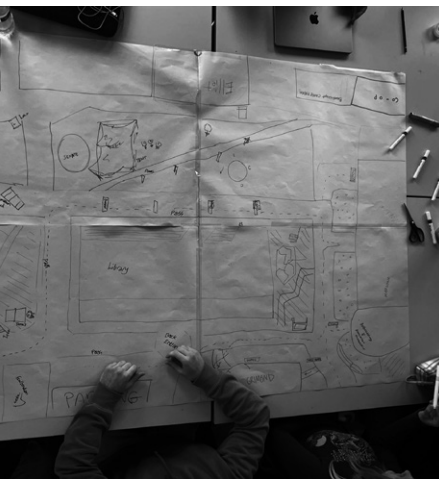
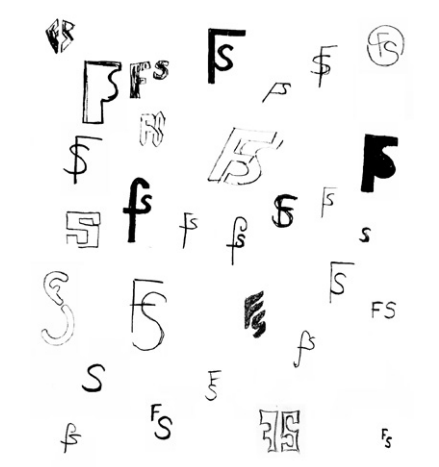
How do you approach inclusion—not just as a goal, but as a process—in your creative work?

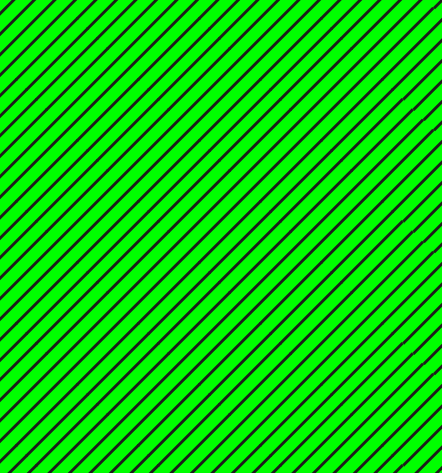
In general, inclusion for me is not a conscious process or an activity. It is who I am. It is my history, my experience, my daily reality. I grew up in a world where we had to make space for others – other cultures, groups, those with opposing politics – before anyone knew what the word 'inclusion' meant. I believe society has been taught that inclusion is an

add-on. An additional consideration to the status quo. But I believe it is the natural state of things. Having said this, I appreciate that it is necessary to continually reaffirm this perspective to others throughout the life cycle of a creative project. So, at each stage, I might stop and ask if myself and the stakeholders of this project, have done enough to embody the values, the inclusion we espouse. And such considerations can cover anything from typography to stock imagery and accessibility concerns. While it is not always possible to leverage changes on these fronts, the importance is to maintain the approach that an environment of inclusion should be the default, our 'normal' as opposed to something extraneous.

What advice would you offer to emerging designers who want to work with purpose, empathy, and impact?

My prediction for the future of creative work, is that purpose, empathy, and impact will not be optional considerations – they will become necessary ones. As automation increasingly removes much of the everyday requirements of the design field, creatives will have to elevate the remit of their work. Design does not exist in a vacuum, whether creatives like that fact or not. For it to survive and accommodate future generations of designers, design in all its forms needs to become even more human-centred to remain valuable. This means our practices will need to embody and reflect humanity. Emerging designers should actively think and invest in their process. They should design it, document it, build frameworks around it. They should cultivate a curiosity about people, about culture. Understand that this space is not about apps and outputs, it is about transformation and outcomes.





Collaborative practice
on the Graphic Design
and Spatial and Interior
Design programmes at
University of Kent,
including:

Design Agency logo develop-
ment (Joanne Green, Michelle
Sturrock, Kiani Patel, Dimitar
Terzov and Benjamin Wamba)

Group visit to Templeman
Library zine archive

Design Fundamentals poster
design

Information Design group crit

Research methodology work-
shop (Image: Molly Sims)

Design process group task

Markmaking workshop

Audience persona development

Print and texture workshop

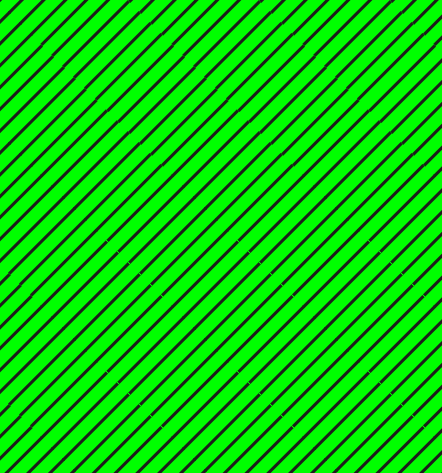
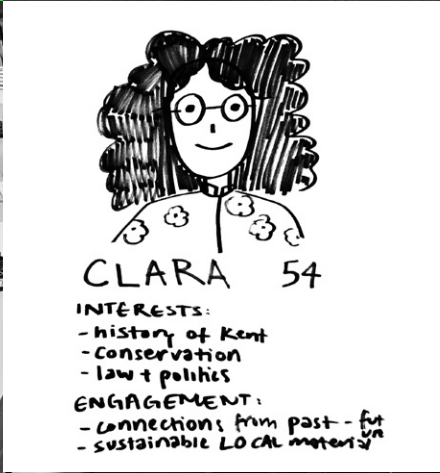
Wayfinding & Signage group
live project with UKCF (Samuel
Deeprise)

GF Smith paper samples session

Creative Narratives group live
project with Docking Station,
Medway (Julian Barretto)

Expressive typography work-
shop with Typo Circle

Research methodology work-
shop (Isabelle Uings)



Ideal Outcome
What other outcomes
could have occurred?

Future-Making Projects

Four projects aiming to make a big impact. We delve into a selection of our students' work, ask them what they really care about and how this might make a difference.

Resonance Spaces is a spatial and interior design project developed with the Air Ambulance Charity Kent Surrey Sussex (AAKSS), focused on enhancing the working environment for emergency crew members.



What inspired you to take action on this subject?

I was inspired by the people behind emergency services—how much they give and how little space is often dedicated to their well-being. I wanted to create something that truly responded to their needs, balancing high-functioning spaces with areas for rest, care, and quiet moments to recharge.

How do you feel your design will make an impact?

This design supports the crew both physically and emotionally. Clear pathways allow for fast response, while calming tones, soundproofing, and custom furniture create a sense of peace. I believe it will improve everyday comfort, reduce stress, and help them feel valued—ultimately contributing to better mental and emotional resilience.

The project reflects a broader commitment to human-centred and socially responsive design—demonstrating how space can actively support performance, recovery, and well-being in high-stress professions.

Uwaila Ebizugbe
Stage 2, BA(Hons)
Spatial and Interior Design



In the late 80s - early 2000s, sociologists came up with the concept of the 'Triple Shift', a phenomenon where women who work full time are still expected to do a majority of housework and childcare. Fairshare is a community support forum website targeting older women living within or immigrated from the global south, experiencing the effects of the 'Triple Shift'. It is designed to be a safe space to connect, listen and share with like-minded individuals and to seek support without fear of backlash or social shame.

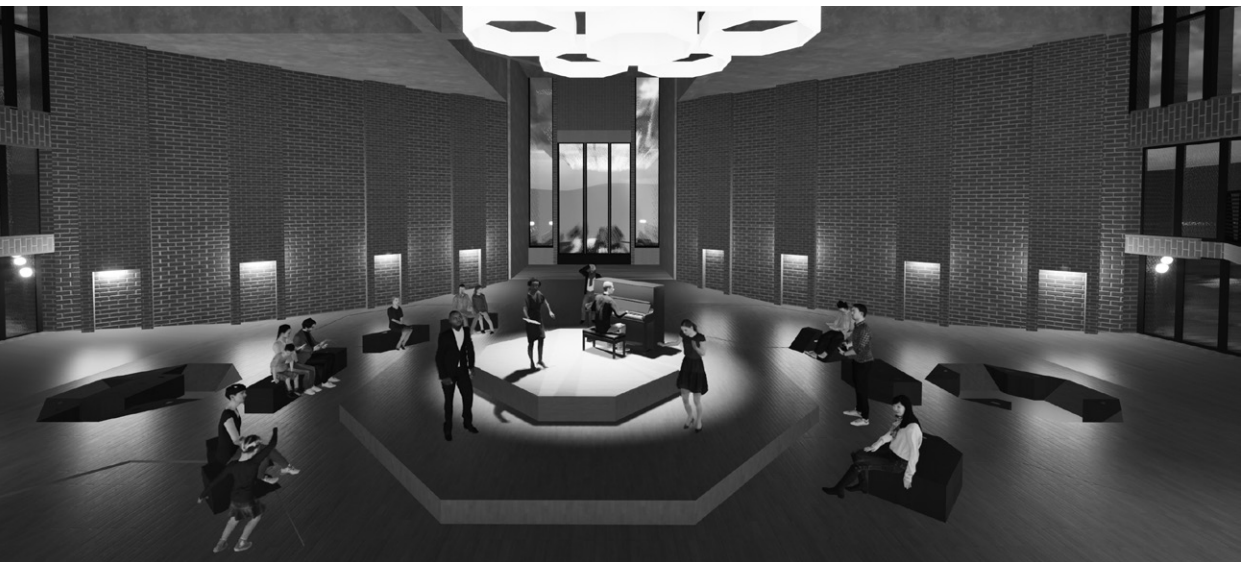
What inspired you to take action on this subject?

I learned about the Triple Shift while studying sociology at A Levels and in that moment felt validated that there was actually a name to describe the experiences I've seen many of the women in my life are still experiencing. Since then, I have had conversations with these women about the topic, and many did not know what it was or the ways it was affecting them in their everyday lives. Nor were there many resources available to help them navigate this situation; knowing this I felt emboldened to take action in an effort to honour these women and offer a refuge for them.

How do you feel your design will make an impact?

Although Fairshare is not incredibly dissimilar to other support websites currently on the market, I believe that its focus on 'Triple Shift' will make a significant impact for my target group. Talking out about the negative effects of this type of household dynamic is still considered taboo by individuals within the global south, so I hope fostering a space for open discussion while providing resources, articles and support will over time help break down these barriers.





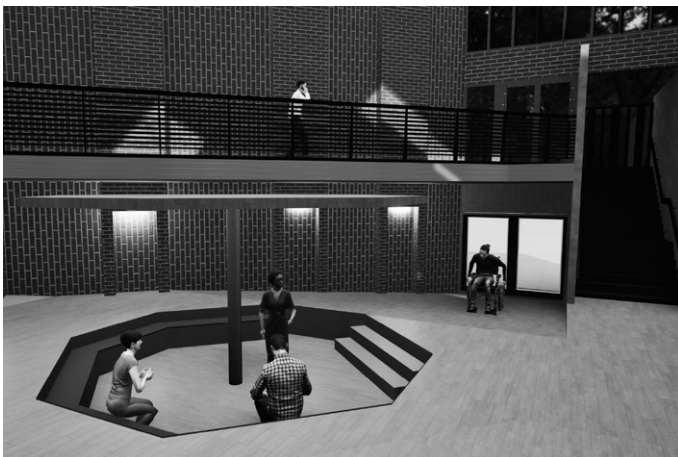
The Hexabloom is a proposed enhancement for Eliot Hall at the University of Kent, designed to transform the space into a more dynamic, accessible, multi-functional environment. By elevating the ground floor and integrating adjustable stages and seating, the design supports a wide range of activities—from lectures and performances to informal gatherings. The flexible staging allows the hall to adapt to different needs quickly, encouraging creative use of space. The replacement of stairs with ramps ensures full accessibility, making the hall inclusive and future-ready.

What inspired you to take action on this subject?

The space is big, but there's very little happening within it. It feels empty and underused. I spent some time there and started thinking about what it could become. The more I observed, the more I saw its potential. I realised it didn't need to stay that way—there was a chance to create something useful and meaningful. That's what pushed me to come up with new ideas and imagine how the space could be improved for everyone.

How do you feel your design will make an impact?

As the space is centrally located on campus, my design has the potential to become a vibrant hub for activity and connection. It will support a wide range of events, encourage collaboration, and foster stronger relationships between students and tutors. By offering flexible, multi-purpose areas, it can adapt to various needs—whether for performances, workshops, lectures, or informal gatherings. This inclusivity and versatility will help develop skills, spark creativity, and build a sense of community. I believe the design will have a lasting impact by making the space truly valuable and engaging for everyone.



Renee Doger de Speville
Stage 3, BA(Hons)
Spatial and Interior Design

Alex Sidnell
Stage 3, BA(Hons)
Graphic Design



Resist exploitation. Resist abuse. Resist mass murder. Resist animal cruelty. Resist exists to give a voice to the voiceless, the systematically mistreated and abused animals that should share our planet as equals. Created for those unsatisfied with the lack of attention and action, we take an individualistic view, acknowledging sentient beings as worthy and personal. We create and inspire tangible change. Learn from the past. Shape the future. Resist now.

A zine released sporadically throughout the year, championing those standing up for our animal friends and fighting back against cruelty worldwide.

FEAR IS
✿✿ FEAR
BLOOD IS
✿ BLOOD
RESIST

What inspired you to take action on this subject?

As a young adult very passionate about animal rights I have found myself feeling frustrated and helpless about the world around me. Although there are plenty of charities and amazing people trying to help, none resonate with my tone and personal approach. Whilst building it around my own ideals, I am confident there is a huge audience of like-minded dissatisfied young adults who want the same change. Awareness is not enough. Action is necessary now.

How do you feel your design will make an impact?

We believe in inciting practical change that will be felt by the animals, going beyond raising awareness. Resist is a movement that will tackle the problem at its root by shifting ideologies. Through unique and desirable physical releases and a consistently updated digital presence we will build up passionate and motivated followers. We will share upcoming events and opportunities to take part in, from protests to animal rescues.

The inherently proactive tone of the brand fuelled by punk ideologies will draw attention, encourage discussion and crucially create lifesaving action.

Empathy Archive

‘Feeling as a Form of Knowing’

How do we ensure human-centric design is embedded in our practice? Where does empathy begin? Students, staff and industry professionals share their thoughts...

Does empathy begin in the brief, or the outcome?

‘Empathy is everyone’s responsibility. If humanity and the wider world is not considered in a brief then it’s the job of the designer to change that.’

Becky Thomas

Lecturer,
BA(Hons) Graphic Design

‘Empathy is a mindset. It begins before the brief is set—shaping how we frame it, how we interpret it, how we carry it through the process, and how we reflect it in the outcome.’

Hooman Talebi

Programme Director,
BA(Hons) Spatial
and Interior Design

Describe a moment you designed with empathy.

‘My ‘Paws’ project truly deepened my empathy in design. I created the app to address cat hit-and-runs, support grieving families, assist volunteers, and to enable anonymous reporting to help reunite pets with their owners. The extremely sensitive nature of the topic required thoughtful consideration of both emotional journeys and user perspectives, reinforcing empathy as a core design principle - shaping everything from the app’s interface to its broader advertising strategy.’

Lucy Children

Stage 3,
BA(Hons) Graphic Design

In the age of machine thinking (or AI), how do we ensure human-centric creativity is embedded in our practice?

‘Human creativity comes from being human. Being truly human means accepting all the experiences you have – from the torturous to the sublimely peaceful, from the crude to the refined, from the ontological shocking to the drearily mundane – as deep deep experiences that only you are having in the way you are having them.

Being human is an astonishing gift, sometimes horrible, sometimes confusing, sometimes excitingly sensuous, but always a gift.

When you turn up to make something, bring all of the above with you.

The machine-thinking you’ll discover in all of the stunted systems that surround us will want you to create with your brain. You can’t. You can only create with your heart.

Don’t fall for their tricks and become like them. Stay chaotically human.’

Thomas Sharp

Creative Director, Poet

thepoetryofitall.com

‘As creators, we must stay in touch with the greatest inspiration we have: our humanity. Everything meaningful in our history has come from this source. If we lose touch with it, we cede our greatest superpower to a form of technology that doesn’t feel, that cannot connect and has no concept of the struggle and wonder of being a person. Build your work around peo-

ple by pouring your own experiences into every aspect of it. If you can do that your work will always stand out and speak to your fellow living, breathing, feeling humans in a way that no machine can ever replicate.’

Nik Huggins

Creative Copywriter
and Producer

nikhuggins.com

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As an independent business committed to community, colour and creativity, we are known for our exceptional range of creative papers, technical expertise, specialist services and warm, friendly approach.

We are proud to have been supporting generations of creatives since 1885. Our GF Smith Paper Consultants visit creative courses across the UK, offering paper expertise and printing advice, 'how-to' workshops, and showcasing inspirational design work. We offer a free student sample service and a 20% discount on our papers when bought online (via Student Beans). Beyond our papers, we proudly support creative learning through partnerships, exhibitions, and collaborations.

Recently, we set up the GF Smith Charitable Trust to support access to creative education and creative-industry careers for the community in both GF Smith's home post-code of HU2, the city of Hull, and more widely across the UK. With this, we aim to break down barriers to opportunity and ensure that talent and potential are never limited by circumstance. We want to support and further the education, creativity, and capabilities of students and graduates entering the creative industries.

gfsmith.com

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University of
Kent

School of
Arts and
Architecture

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