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A GOOD

PLACE

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START

Now in its tenth year, the Design Museum's influential Designers in Residence programme has much to celebrate. But with the discipline breaking out of its traditional role, the set-up is also facing new challenges

By Riya Patel

There's a chorus of haunting voices at the top of the Design Museum. They come from a tall column draped in white tassels, exuding a strange calm. It's not out of place in the cathedral-like

interior of the museum's Kensington home. But the sound installation is actually the work of Yinka Danmole, one of the museum's 2017 Designers in Residence, made in collaboration with composer Michael Jon Mirza. Sounds of The People is an attempt to capture phrases from West African pidgin languages, giving them a fresh appreciation.

The theme for 2017's programme was Support. Like other years, the one-word brief has spawned diverse responses from the chosen set. Sharing the space with Danmole's eerie sound column is Chris Hildrey's Addressing: the Problem, Soomi Park's Embarrassed Robots, and Studio Ayaskan's Transitions. Hildrey's project tackles a paradox of homelessness in the UK. To access services and benefits that might help a person escape homelessness, a fixed address is required. His solution proposes to issue proxy addresses based on real but unused locations. Park's Embarrassed Robots urges consideration of the role of emotions in artificial intelligence. Her robot prototype blushes and fans itself when visitors come close. Studio Ayaskan (twins Bike and Begum Ayaskan) have explored the Earth's natural cycles for their work Transitions. The series of three abstract timepieces is inspired by freeze-thaw action, changing water levels, and the refraction and dispersion of light.

Now in its tenth iteration, the Designers in Residence programme selects a group of early-career designers annually. Chosen from across the UK, they are set up with a bursary and an eight-month timeframe to explore a set theme. It was initiated in 2008, two years into Deyan Sudjic's directorship. He is part of the jury that selects the designers each year. The residency remains a core part of the museum's programming, aimed at supporting young talent in their development between education and practice. Not all projects lead to a tangible, or even tidy, outcome, but the residents do usually make an accurate reflection of design's wider concerns. And where the museum's agenda lies too. This year's projects were defined by social conscience and ambition. While the discipline



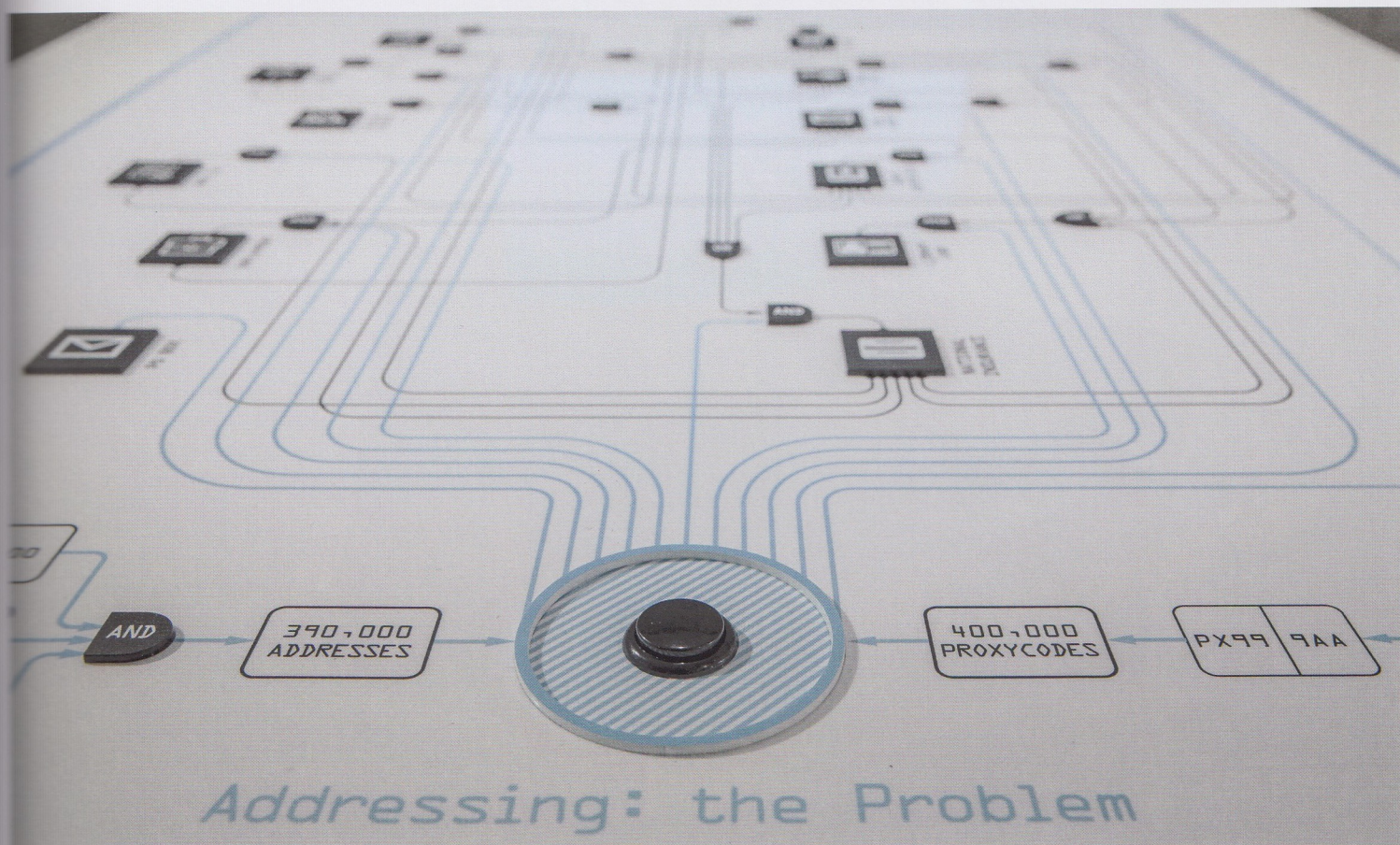
"We don't want the them to be taken too literally. It's purposefully broad and open to interpretation"

ABOVE Soomi Park's Embarrassed Robots explores the role of emotions in AI

RIGHT Designers in Residence (seated) Bike and Begum Ayaskan, Yinka Danmole, (standing) Chris Hildrey and Soomi Park



PREVIOUS Transitions by Studio Ayaskan is inspired by the Earth's natural cycles



continues to struggle over whether it should charge itself with solving the world's problems, these residents showed they're ready to jump in, tackling complex and loaded subjects in a sensitive way.

Each theme is as much about the micro conditions of the museum as macro topics affecting the wider world. 'We don't want it to be taken too literally,' says Margaret Cabbage, programme curator for seven out of the ten cycles. 'It's purposefully broad and open to interpretation. We encourage different disciplines to respond to it.' Migration was chosen for 2015 – a nod to the museum's move from Shad Thames. By chance it coincided with the peak of the European migrant crisis, lending the theme more pertinence. Support, Cabbage says, came about from questioning the role of the residency in its tenth year. Thanks to the larger building in Kensington – the former Commonwealth Institute – the designers can be actual residents for the first time, working in a dedicated studio.

"This wasn't about me sat alone in a room making something, but having an idea that needed lots of people's input"

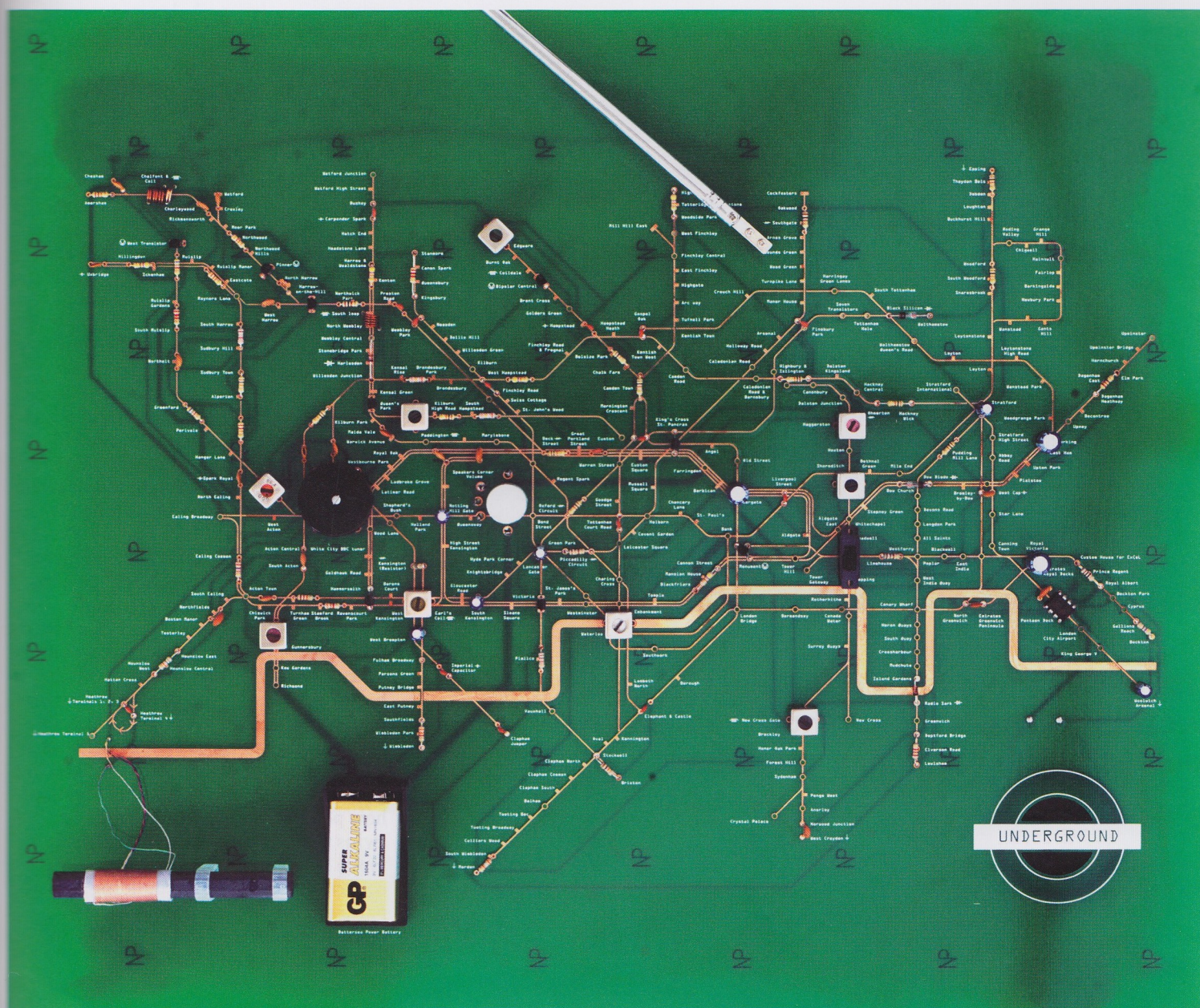
The wide scope of the projects reflects the encouragement of a cross-disciplinary approach, although the curator acknowledges that the resulting display might be too abstract for many to fathom. 'Some of the ideas are quite far-fetched, and people might question if they are design at all. But I guess it's a presentation of the potential of what design could be.' While the designers might already have experience in one field they are expected to explore and engage with others. 'What's important now, more than ever, is a sense of engagement,' she says. 'We look for how open-minded the designers are, how keen they are to collaborate, and if they really have a broad outlook.'

Hildrey is a practising architect who used the residency to break out of the traditional role. 'In architecture there's lots of things you come across, but not many you can do something about,' he says. 'With the opportunity to explore interests beyond your day-to-day, I was

looking at the idea of a municipal network within a city and how austerity cuts have been stripping it away.' The strength of Hildrey's project is the thorough research he has undertaken to test his proxy address idea: with homeless people, policy-makers, Royal Mail, councils and more. Of the four, it's the project that speaks most about the modern condition of design. Rather than a linear process, it shows design as a web of interconnected processes. He says: 'This wasn't about me sat alone in a room making something, but having an idea that needed lots of people's input. It was my job to orchestrate it.'

What many designers find on the residency is the time to consider where they want their practice to go. Asif Khan was an early resident in 2010. In a conversation with Hildrey in the *Designers in Residence* catalogue, he says: 'That was the purpose for me: to establish a mode of practice that suited my personality and what I wanted to spend my time doing.' In

ABOVE Chris Hildrey's *Addressing: the Problem* tackles a central paradox of homelessness



the eight years since, Khan has designed a Summer House for the Serpentine, a pavilion for the 2012 Olympics, and been shortlisted for the Guggenheim Helsinki. With Stanton Williams, his practice has been selected to design the new Museum of London.

In the same cohort as Khan was Bethan Laura Wood. Her Moon Rock cabinets were the first glimpse of an approach to colour and pattern that would play out in projects for Nilufar Gallery and Hermès. Of the 45 design residents so far, Khan and Wood are among a handful that have enjoyed exceptional success. Other alumni are less recognisable. It seems the strong-minded fare well with the loose brief and relaxed guidance, whereas others struggle to capitalise on the opportunity at a volatile career stage. As the programme evolves it seems less suited to launching

stellar careers, and more towards growing designers' professional connections. In 2017, the residency is still a chance for a young designer to find direction. Studio Ayaskan says: 'Since graduating we've been going from one thing to the next. We used the residency to re-align what we do and explore a lot of things that have initiated projects for the future.'

The curator notices a playfulness in the early residencies. Yuri Suzuki's Tube Map Radio is one example. A response to the 2012 theme Thrift, the radio has a circuit board laid out like Harry Beck's 1931 London Tube Map. Its aim was to help users to understand how simple electronics work, and enable them to fix their own devices. Ilona Gaynor's examination of a courtroom, and Patrick Stevenson-Keating's challenge to the future of finance, designed around the

ABOVE Yuri Suzuki's Tube Map Radio (2012) used the iconic map to explain simple electronics

"That was the purpose for me: to establish a mode of practice that suited my personality and what I wanted to spend my time doing"



"It was only when I'd engaged the real world with my project that I realised how powerful the residency could be"

ABOVE Asif Khan's Harvest furniture (2010) was made by weaving common London plants

RIGHT Bethan Laura Wood's Particle furniture system (2010) was based on crates and packaging materials



2014 theme of Disruption, seemed to mark a change. Both projects look at design through an acute critical lens. Cubbage says: 'There's more speculative design now, more looking at future scenarios. Certainly 2015, the Migration year, was all very much about challenging stereotypes and existing systems.' She adds that the nature of the commissions have also changed with the modes of display. Originally the works were showcased in the museum's 'tank' – a container-sized glass box interspersed with the public life of Shad Thames. In 2011, a move into the galleries prompted outcomes geared more towards interactive display.

The new space is aimed at facilitating live exchange between the designers and the public. The designers are asked to spend at least one day a week in the studio, where the public can drop in to ask about their projects. 'The studio is really the space where we can show visitors where an idea comes from, what the designers are inspired by, and track their journeys,' says Cubbage. The theory, like more straightforward residencies, is also that the designers can make the most of proximity to the museum's collections. In practice, it has worked to varying effect. Hildrey says public feedback on his project has been useful, owing to the social relevance of it. He says: 'It was only when I'd engaged the real world with my project that I realised how powerful the residency could be.' The twins wish they'd been bolder in asking to see and use more of the museum's collections. 'Because the building is new, parts are not very accessible. That will change of course,' they say. 'I don't think we demanded enough.'

Many challenges of the new set-up will be ironed out over time, but the live nature of the programme still poses questions. This year's residents have disproved the idea of the designer as sole practitioner making physical things in a limited space. If the practice of design is becoming less hands-on, and more socially engaged, will there always be something stimulating for visitors to see? Even when hands-on work is involved, it's often limited as to what can be done in public. As design breaks out of its disciplinary boundaries, containing the residents within their studio and a gallery set-up seems an ill fit. Like their ambitious work, the designers could interject more into the social life of the museum, challenge the institutional context, and create surprising encounters. In its new location, the museum has made itself a temple of 'good' design, with a shrine at the top for showcasing the future. Its residents show the reality of design is far more complicated and messy than that. ♦