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Capital ideas at London's Design Museum

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An exhibit at the 'Super Contemporary' show at the Design Museum. Photograph: Graham Turner

It is a vision of a city where people drive electrified 1949 Mark VI Bentleys, enjoy floating gardens high in the air, renew their car tax in kiosks updated from old phone boxes and put their rubbish in bunny-shaped bins that light up with delight.

Today the Design Museum in London revealed the results of an idea first talked about more than 18 months ago. What is it about the capital that brings so many designers to it – and what can they give back? In total 15 designers were asked the question and they tackled everything from lamp-posts to bus shelters to CCTV.

Not that bunny-shaped bins will be seen any time soon. "We're trying to drop ideas into the London design gene pool rather than have them certified for use next year," said the museum's director, Deyan Sudjic.

The fashion designer Sir Paul Smith was behind the 5ft-tall bins that are meant to appeal to children and get them into good habits early in life. He said: "I happen to hate litter."

Smith said the good thing about Britain, and London in particular, was the free and lateral way of thinking. "In my industry a lot of people often say, 'Don't people in Britain dress really badly?' And I say, 'Well, I think we dress individually.' And that's more

interesting. It's very much about people having the confidence to wear clothes the way they want to wear them.

"Yes, you can go to Italy and they are very beautifully dressed but in a way they are very uniformly dressed. The prime minister, Mr Berlusconi, will have a blue shirt on and so will the taxi driver. There's a lot of insecurity there. They like to be part of a club."

The exhibition's curator, Daniel Charny, said his talks with designers had begun with the question of why they were in London.

"One of the great things that has come out of conversations is that they're here because they can do whatever they do and they don't have to do it in the same way as other people. They're here because of the free-thinking."

He said the 15 designs were all very different – from the pragmatic, to the reflective, to "thinking about the future in a very free way".

The designer Paul Dixon tackled transport and the idea of people taking personal responsibility for what they drive. He decided that the 50-year-old Mark VI Bentley – parked in the first floor exhibition space of the Design Museum – was an excellent candidate for conversion to an electric car because of the ease with which the body can be separated from the chassis.

The result may sound and drive like a milk float but it will always be a Bentley.

The design practice El Ultimo Grito took as its starting point annoyance at always having to look up to Nelson on his column in Trafalgar Square.

They came up with designs for a sky garden 46 metres up where you can see him properly.

While the UK may wait a very long time for that to happen, Kim Colin from Industrial Facility believes they have a much more pragmatic idea: the K9 Post Office kiosk. Or "the world's smallest post office" as Colin put it.

It is named after the old Sir Giles Gilbert Scott-designed red telephone boxes – the last one was a K8 – and consists of a street-level kiosk which you can walk into, talk to a person on a screen, and do things like buy stamps or get your driving licence.

Colin yesterday reeled off statistics in favour of the kiosk: 82% of people go to the post office to buy a stamp, almost a quarter of people have to wait at least 10 minutes and the Post Office lost £184m last year.

The graphic designer Neville Brody is tackling surveillance – "we are probably captured on camera at least 400 times a day if you are travelling through London," he said – and has created The Freedom Space. People will be able to step inside the pod-like space and rather than it being used for covert observation, what people say and do will be publicly broadcast on a website.

Brody said the banking crisis and expenses scandal could have positive benefits. "It's the first time in 30 years that we've had the chance to take new risks again, to take individual risks and dare to be different. Hopefully our space is a call for people to tear up the plans and make new rules."

Sudjic said the exhibition, called Super Contemporary, was "one of the most ambitious things the museum has attempted to do in its 20-year history".

He added: "This is not an exhibition about triumphalism. We're not trying to say that London is the best place in the world, but there is something about this city that since the 1960s has gone on attracting very gifted, very creative people from all kinds of areas.

"You can't say there's such a thing as a London style; there isn't. London has become a place that allows you to get on with things that you want to do and co-exist and have your own approach to the world."

Super Contemporary runs at the Design Museum from today until 4 October.

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