Design Museum puts the UK's geological landscape under the microscope in new display rethinking how we design for the 'green transition'

'Mineral' at the Design Museum, photo credit Henry Woide

Design Researchers in Residence: *Mineral*
Opening 13 June 2026 – 20 September 2026
the Design Museum, London

PRESS IMAGES AVAILABLE HERE

Tomorrow the Design Museum opens 'Mineral', a free display examining the UK's mineral landscapes and ways to design for a greener future. As the international geopolitical climate grows increasingly unstable, the questions and debates surrounding natural resources and the extraction and distribution of Earth's minerals have never been more urgent. Our Design Researchers in Residence ask: Should the 'green transition' be sustained through the continued extraction of finite resources? And how can design research help us navigate the UK's dependence on minerals?

Commissioned by the Design Museum's national research programme, Future Observatory in partnership with the UKRI Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the display will showcase four research projects centred on four different mineral-based materials native to the British Isles.

This year's cohort of Design Researchers in Residence comprises of Alfred Yatlong Yeung, Elise Limon, Rafael El Baz and Rosa Whiteley. Each resident has connected with local communities across the UK, recasting minerals not as passive resources, but as materials whose extraction has deep social, economic and environmental impacts on local landscapes.

The display opens with a map of the UK, designed by Milan-based graphic design studio LaTigre. Entitled 'Mineral Map', the illustration depicts mineral deposits of lithium, silica, chalk and copper across the country – the four mineral geologies under investigation by this year's residents. The map also identifies the residents' primary sites of research, linking their material investigations to ecologies, communities and industries.

Architect, researcher and writer Alfred Yatlong Yeung's presentation queries what it means to reopen a mine, interrogating tensions around reindustrialising a post-industrial landscape. As the UK Government's Critical Mineral Strategy predicts a 1100% increase in demand for domestic lithium by 2035, planning to reopen the decommissioned China clay mine, Trelavour, in St Dennis, Cornwall for lithium extraction is underway and fast progressing.

Fusing ethnography and co-design, Alfred's research culminates in a three-dimensional atlas of oral histories, examining the social and emotional implications of reopening a mine – factors Alfred advocates should be considered in planning policies beyond the standard biodiversity metrics.

Designer and artist Rafael El Baz shifts focus to Sunderland in the Northeast of England—a city with a rich history of Pyrex production facing a poignant turning point with the closure of the National Glass Centre. Inspired by Sunderland's decorative glass traditions, Rafael's research proposes new applications for the waste silica produced by glass manufacturing, encouraging circularity and challenging modern expectations of purity and perfection.

Rafael's body of work entitled 'In the Presence of Heat' is a testament to Sunderland's longstanding industrial glass-making history, documenting the tacit knowledge of one of the final commercial Pyrex flame workers in Sunderland. Produced through flame working in borosilicate glass, the objects record gestures and physical traces of making – including imprints of tools, the pull and tension of molten glass, and the maker's breath itself. The installation consists of nine smaller works and two larger wall-mounted pieces *Last breath in, last breath out*, positioning breath as both a physical act of production and a metaphor for the final moments of an industrial lineage.

The third mineral-based material in this display is chalk, presented through designer, writer and researcher Rosa Whiteley's exploration into chalk aquifers – natural underground reservoirs that supply millions of people with water in the UK and sustain 85% of the world's chalk streams. Increasingly, these systems are threatened by water privatisation, which is damaging the ecological relationships across aquifers, rivers and skies.

Rosa's presentation includes a photography series, shot with a waterproof camera on 25mm film, that traces the formation of dew ponds from their atmospheric beginnings – catching mist and fog – to the water's surface and depths. Also on show are a series of tools necessary for building and maintaining a pond, engraved with chalk geologies, extraction techniques and local folklore, alongside the creatures that make and maintain these ponds. Rosa hopes that by seeing how accessible these tools are, visitors of the museum will be encouraged to consider pond-making as a shared ecological process – one where humans and the natural world work together to sustain our delicate water systems. Rosa will work with the Design Museum throughout the Summer to produce a prototype pond in the museum's garden.

Travelling to northern Wales, the final research project by writer, researcher and architectural designer Elise Limon explores the long-term implications of copper mining and extraction in the region. While copper is no longer officially mined in the UK, the British Isles have a long history with the metal and are home to one of the largest Bronze-age copper mines in the world – Great Orme, Wales. With new and existing technologies for the green energy transition relying heavily on copper, former mines across the UK are now being reappraised as demand for the finite resource grows.

Elise's research studies the afterlife of mining on a geological landscape, using Parys Mountain in northern Wales as a case study. While the site has remained unused for a century, the landscape is toxic and acidic, contaminated by exposure to heavy metals. Elise asks: should we pursue finite resources – whose contaminations pollute the environment and whose excavations destroy natural habitats – to design and make green technologies and energy systems?

To begin to answer these questions, Elise has studied the metallophyte plants thriving in Parys Mountain's harsh environment. These plants' ability to live in contaminated areas is rewilding former mining landscapes, as well as inspiring a new process dubbed phytomining – an emerging method that uses plants and bacteria to absorb and harvest valuable minerals, such as copper, from the earth. As part of her display, Elise has cast metallophyte plants in bronze, exhibited in a seed propagation tray (designed to gather field samples) representing botanical samples from Parys Mountain. These bronze works will be displayed adjacent to photographic prints of North Wales's emerging renewable energy infrastructure, developed using copper salts and washed in local stream water.

Tim Marlow, Director of the Design Museum, says: *"For this edition of our long-standing Design Researchers in Residency programme, we're delighted to welcome the next talented cohort of emerging design and ecological thought leaders of the future. Their research and display on the theme of Mineral engages deeply with the complexity of designing for the green transition."*

Justin McGuirk, Director of Future Observatory, says: *"We are incredibly proud of the Design Researchers in Residence Programme, which continues to nurture new ideas by emerging voices. As the UK and Europe look to resume extraction at home in the name of clean energy sovereignty, the way we read our mineral landscapes is newly urgent. This year's residents have navigated the topic in ways that are both thoughtful and surprising, producing work that looks to the future but is also deeply aware of the past."*

Abbie Adams, Curator of Mineral, says: *""This year's residents have each spent a year entangled in minerals; walking the copper-stained trails of Parys Mountain, cycling the fenced perimeter of Cornwall's new Lithium pits, diverting silica waste from North London Factorys and gazing into the*

reflective surface of chalk ponds. These minerals are embedded in designed objects and circular systems, from circuitry to solar cells, waste streams and waterways. Within the display you will find a spade for digging, a community atlas, a stained-glass window and heather memorialised in bronze - each framing minerals as matter embedded in deep time and contemporary culture."

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Notes to Editors

'Mineral' will be on display at the Design Museum from 13 June 2026 – 20 September 2026 in the Design Researchers in Residency Studio on Level 2. The free display will be accompanied by a free publication containing essays by and interviews with the Design Researchers in Residence. This display follows the publication of Future Observatory's newest journal issue, 'In Abundance', exploring how abundance might instead be found in circularity, reuse and repair – that isn't about having excess, but enough. The Journal can be freely accessed here: https://fojournal.org/

The exhibition's graphic identity, developed by Birmingham-based practice An Endless Supply, draws on the raw textures of the four featured minerals: lithium, silica, copper, and chalk. Inspired by cartography and lithologic mapping, the studio created a unique visual key of rubbings utilized across the display's interpretive panels and publication. This material-grounded, playful approach connects visitors directly to the physical elements of the earth, inviting them to unearth the layered narratives within the research.

Complementing the visuals, London-based studio Mitre & Mondays transformed the gallery space into a site of industrial activity. Mirroring the theme of mineral extraction, the exhibition design features chalk-washed windows, scaffolding, and workshop trolleys, alongside plinths and seating crafted from quarry stone offcuts. Grounded in low-carbon and circular

design principles, the entire build prioritizes bio-based and reusable materials to ensure every element has a functional life beyond the museum.

About the Design Museum

The Design Museum is a multifaceted museum, an ever-changing space for the public, industry and education to come together and explore new ideas. A registered charity, the museum's innovative exhibitions, partnerships, research and learning programmes evidence how design can enable this planet and its inhabitants to thrive. Our landmark building in Kensington is the centre of our national network and a global hub for the transformative potential of design.
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About Future Observatory

Future Observatory is the Design Museum's national research programme, established in partnership with the UKRI Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC). They act as a catalyst for the green transition by supporting design research that can have real impact. Future Observatory curates exhibitions, programmes events and funds and publishes new research, all with the aim of championing new design thinking on environmental issues. In 2022, AHRC and the Design Museum launched a £40m fund bringing UK design researchers, universities and businesses together to catalyse the transition to net zero and a green economy. It has already awarded over 100 higher education institutions and 75 industry and local authority partners across the nation, making it the largest publicly funded design research and innovation (R&I) programme in the UK.

Future Observatory

About The UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)

The UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funds internationally outstanding independent researchers across the whole range of the arts and humanities: history, archaeology, digital content, philosophy, languages and literature, design, heritage, area studies, the creative and performing arts, and much more. The quality and range of research supported by the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council works for the good of UK society and culture and contributes both to UK economic success and to the culture and welfare of societies across the globe.

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