



UCL

Paris Summer School Digital Exhibit

Laidlaw Project Report

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Introduction

The City of Light and Shadow, also referred to as the Paris Summer School, is a four-week interdisciplinary module based in Paris that integrates diverse modes of creative practice and critical inquiry. Drawing on the work of cultural theorists, artists, philosophers, writers, and journalists shaped by their experiences of Paris, the Summer School invites students to develop a holistic understanding of the local and global forces that have shaped the city, with attention to how dominant narratives about Paris itself are produced, reproduced, and contested.

Students were then invited to respond to the city's histories, geographies, and cultures through producing creative-critical works in diverse media. These ranged from screenplays and short stories to digital zines and experimental narratives, each engaging and challenging Paris as both a physical and imaginative landscape.

As a Laidlaw Scholar, my project this year was to curate and present these student works in a digital format. This was the first time the module had an online exhibition, to make it possible, I took on the role of integrating the work of different teams—academic, technical, and communications. In addition, this task required me to work with the integration of design, writing, and digital infrastructure. I had to think about how to present student work in a way that respected its individuality but also fit into a collective framework. This new site not only housed the exhibition but also serves to promote both the Creative Arts and Humanities programme and the Summer School to future students.

This report documents that process. It details the project aims, methodology and outcomes. It also reflects on what I gained from the experience both professionally and personally. Finally, it considers the future directions and the long-term value of this digital exhibition as a resource for students, staff, and the wider public.

Project Aims and Objectives

The project is guided by four main aims.

First, I set out to curate student submissions from the Summer School. This meant obtaining consent, collecting files and student responses, and presenting them in ways that were accessible to a general audience.

Second, I collaborated with the Faculty's Communications and Digital Content Officer to create a permanent Drupal webpage. This site serves as the main entry point to the exhibition and provides clear information about the department and Summer School for prospective students.

Third, I launched a companion blog on UCL's Reflect platform to showcase the exhibition in more detail. Each student's work is presented on a dedicated page, linked directly to the main website, allowing visitors to move easily between project overviews, individual projects, and the broader exhibition.

Finally, the framework I developed, such as templates for student pages, the blog and the webpage will be used and expanded in future years.

Together, these aims ensured that the project could be the start of an evolving archive of the Paris Summer School.

Methodology

Immersion in Paris

I began by joining the Summer School in Paris for the first two weeks. This gave me first-hand experience of the course and a deeper sense of 'What is Paris'. I immersed myself in the city both in and outside the course, aiming to unravel Paris through its people, lifestyle, culture, and inevitably its perceived stereotypes. While Paris is often framed as a city of romance and beauty captured in postcard images of the Eiffel Tower or Galeries Lafayette, I came to see another side of it: a city shaped equally by the ordinary and the nuanced. This tension between the mythical and the everyday, perhaps echoing Walter Benjamin's reflections on the urban experience, revealed itself in striking ways.

Visits to the Musée Méliès, Maison de Balzac, and the Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé made this clearer. These experiences showed how ideas such as urban memory,

psychogeography, and the politics of street art were explored through lived experiences, not just theoretical discussion. In this sense, Paris emerged as both extraordinary and ordinary, a place that invites critical inquiry as much as personal reflection. The experiences I had in Paris allowed me to understand and connect with individual projects at a deeper level.

Early Discussions and Gathering Materials

Before I began building the website, I had detailed discussions with my supervisor and the department manager about how we should use the student work. Since this is the department's first online exhibition, a key question was how to handle permissions. I raised the example of the Bartlett Summer Show, where students are asked to sign a consent form before their projects are displayed. We decided to adopt a similar model.

We designed a consent form that gave students the choice of whether or not their work could be published online. To ensure authenticity in how their work was presented, we also asked them to provide short responses in their own words. This approach gave me the material to represent their work fairly, while also protecting their agency.

Once permissions were secured, I collected the projects along with their accompanying texts. I organised all submissions in a spreadsheet to track consent, files, and missing information, which provided a clear structure for the exhibition.

From there, I focused on curatorial writing. I wrote concise overviews that complemented the students' voices, highlighting both the individuality of each work and the coherence of the collection as a whole. In addition, I also wrote descriptive texts about the department and the course to give the viewers an overview once they open the website.

Developing the Drupal Webpage

The official UCL webpage was built using Drupal. At first, I could not access the system, so I had to reach out to the department to request permission. Once I was given access, I started learning the platform from scratch. I became familiar with its basic structures, which were very different from design software I had used before. On the page, I added the title, the department and module description, and a gallery of student experiences in Paris.

Moving on to the exhibition area on the website, my initial idea was to design a grid of cards, where each card represented a student project and clicking on a card would open a detailed

page. However, I discovered that Drupal did not support this structure directly. The solution was to use external links. Each card on the Drupal page now links to a project page hosted on a separate blog. This way, I could achieve the layered structure I wanted while staying within the constraints of the platform.

Building the Reflect Blog

To host the detailed project pages, I requested an individual blog site through UCL's Reflect platform, which is WordPress-based. I worked closely with the Reflect team to set up the categories and technical details. Once the blog was approved, I began curating the content.

Each student project received its own page on the blog. These pages included the artist's description, my curatorial overview, their experiences in Paris, and links to the project files. I standardised the formatting so the site looked cohesive, but left space for each project to show its individuality. The blog was then linked back to the Drupal webpage. This integration gave me the effect I had envisioned, an official webpage that could act as a gateway to a more detailed exhibition site.

Collaboration and Feedback

Throughout the process, I had regular check-ins with my supervisor and the department team. These involved many back-and-forth decisions. Some were large, such as the general layout of the webpage and the overall title of the exhibition. Others were very detailed, such as deciding whether the project titles should appear before or after the student names.

We also refined small but important design details, like the ratio of the cover images on the blog. Even the grammatical accuracy of the artist descriptions was carefully reviewed. This collaborative editing taught me how to balance creativity with institutional expectations. In the end, this ensured that the exhibition was both professional and true to the spirit of the students' work.

Outcomes and Future Directions

The project resulted in both a finished exhibition and a framework for future cohorts. The Reflect blog now hosts nine student projects, each on a dedicated page combining text,

images, and downloadable files. The new Drupal webpage serves as a stable overview page and an entry point, linking the exhibition to UCL's wider communications and recruitment efforts. The exhibition also strengthens the department's identity by making student creativity visible beyond the classroom.

Additionally, I found this way of showcasing work very rewarding for students. Through engaging with their projects, I saw how much effort each had invested, and I believe that having the option to share their work online can be really motivating. For prospective students, the exhibition also provides a tangible sense of the what to expect.

Importantly, the exhibition is designed to continue. The curatorial templates and navigation structure I developed make it easy for future cohorts to add their work, gradually building an archive that reflects how different groups respond to Paris and maybe other cities over time. Looking ahead, the platform could expand to include multimedia elements—such as video, sound, or interactive maps, or short reflective essays, continuing to strengthen its role as both a teaching resource and a record of student works.

Reflections and Learnings

The Paris Summer School Digital Exhibition was a unique project, as it centred as much on leadership and collaboration as it did on digital design. Through this work, I learnt a lot both professionally and personally.

In terms of professional learnings, I developed valuable skills in digital design and publishing. I learnt to use both Reflect and Drupal. Although I currently study architecture, I have long been interested in website design, and this project gave me a first chance to explore it in practice.

Project management was another important skill. I had to manage permissions, deadlines, and technical requests while coordinating with several people. This process showed me how to plan, prioritise, and deliver under real institutional constraints. Collaboration with staff also gave me insight into how academic projects are shaped by wider communications strategies.

Concluding this project also gave me ideas for improvement. First, the collection of permissions could be streamlined. Due to the nature of the Summer School, the timeline was not continuous, as I had to wait until the module assignment deadline in early September before beginning my work. It was not efficient to distribute the consent forms after this date, since it added delays of another week or more, and some students were already on vacation and did not see the form promptly. If consent forms were distributed at the start of the course, students could confirm early on whether they agreed to share their work, reducing delays later in the process. Second, the connection between the Reflect blog and the Drupal webpage could be strengthened. At present, the link works through external redirection, which is functional but not seamless. Closer integration such as embedding blog content directly into Drupal would create a smoother user experience and present the exhibition as a more unified platform. This change would likely require technical development within UCL systems, but it would increase the long-term effectiveness of the site. If the exhibition continues to grow in future years, alternative solutions may also become available.

In terms of personal learning, living in Paris for two weeks gave me a direct sense of the city as layered. Every city has a unique identity, and Paris is one of the most distinctive I have ever experienced. With my long-standing fascination for films and literature about Paris in mind, this visit was much richer than just a trip. I saw and experienced how theory and practice overlap when walking the streets or visiting museums. It felt as if each block in Paris breathed its own life, with the unknown and the familiar coexisting in ways that were both exciting and unexpected. Beyond small discoveries, such as how baguettes in Paris really do taste different, and how the so-called “effortless chic” is often “effortful”, learning in Paris deepened my appreciation of place-based learning.

I also learned about leadership in practice. Starting with no template, I built a structure that others can now use. This gave me confidence in my ability to set up projects from the ground up, hand them over, and trust that they will continue to grow.

Another important lesson was learning how to work in a team that was connected but also fragmented. Each person I worked with had expertise in one area but not in others. My supervisor guided the academic side but had no technical knowledge. The department manager could give me access to the webpage but could not advise on Drupal, so I was referred to the Faculty’s Communications and Digital Content Officer. The Reflect team managed the blogging platform but had little to do with the departmental website. I often

found myself in the middle, integrating information from different directions and making sure the process worked as a whole. This required me to communicate both ways, translating between technical and academic needs. It was the first time I had worked on something so new, where even staff did not have a complete plan. It taught me how to navigate uncertainty by building bridges between people.

In the end, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Temenuga Trifonova, for her support during the project, the Creative Arts and Humanities Department for guidance on the website. the students of the Summer School who produced such creative work, and the Laidlaw Programme for providing an amazing community and resources that made this project possible. I truly enjoyed the experience and believe it will shape how I approach future collaborations that combine creativity, research, and digital practice.