

Super Ordinary Lab

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MANIFESTING FUTURES OF CREATIVITY AND COMPASSION:

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE
2025 APF-OCAD NEXUS
EVENT

By Suzanne Stein, Roberto Pires,
and Zan Chandler





“It is essential for us to be integrating these other ways of knowing into our work.”

One of the many powerful statements that emerged from the *Futures of Creativity and Compassion Nexus Event* inspired the following piece. For those of you reading this who joined us, we express gratitude, and for those who were not able to participate, let this piece be an invitation to join us to share and explore varying ways to center creativity and compassion with us.

Over three days in August 2025, OCAD University’s Toronto waterfront campus became a hub for foresight practitioners, designers, artists, and changemakers gathered to explore how creativity and compassion may shape more inclusive, desirable futures. This was not a typical conference; it was a convivial exploration co-hosted by OCAD University’s Super Ordinary Lab (Super O) and the Association of Professional Futures (APF).

Honouring OCAD University as Canada’s oldest and largest art and design education institution, design expression became critically central to the concept of this conference, foregrounding ideas through meticulously chosen visual and experiential integrated elements.

The Super Ordinary Lab (Super O) under the direction of Suzanne Stein, focuses on methods for complex problem solving, fostering futures literacy through evolving foresight methodologies in both strategic foresight and experiential futures. It created the founding vision, principles, and rollout. Through Super O, the graphic design system and layout were led by collaborator Laura Stein, Chief Creative Officer of Bruce Mau Design, in conjunction with OCAD graduates Gonoush Mir Salari, Orus Mateo Castaño-Suárez, and Kelly Kornet. As the APF, whose collaboration was led by Seth Harrell, is no stranger to innovation and exploring the vanguard of futures work, they were on board with experimenting with the question: “How might we incorporate compassion into our futures through creative mechanisms for engaging others in the exploration?”

There were no keynotes, no panels; instead, the event embraced conviviality – a design choice that prioritized participation over presentation, dialogue over hierarchy, and embodied experience over passive listening. In a world grappling with uncertainty, polarization, and systemic disruption, the Nexus offered something rare: a space for collective care, imagination, and experimentation.

The theme – *Futures of Creativity and Compassion* – was more than a slogan; it was a call to rethink how we convene, learn, and co-create. By centering emotional intelligence and sustainability, the event invited participants to experience futures, not just theorize them. What started as a question became a place of emergent explorations in somatic futures and possibilities of collective intention.

Mohawk Soda Co. designed the Interconnectedness Mocktail specifically for the Nexus opening reception, choosing ingredients for symbolic meaning. This offering was led by Mowhawk Soda's founder Ross Maracle and in consultation with Super O Research Associate Orus Mateo Castaño-Suárez.

The Interconnectedness Mocktail



Poster design by Orus Mateo Castaño-Suárez
Photo credit: Andre Arruda



“Thoughtful details – the paper name badges, vegan meals, donating excess food to those in need – made this event feel aligned with its values.”



Photo credit: Andre Arruda

Toronto Poet Laureate, Lillian Allen, opened the conference, inspiring us into action with dub poetry. She disassembled her books for participants to respond to through writing, drawing, or rearranging. Poignantly, she also donated her honorarium to OCAD University's Creative Writing program student ticket purchases.

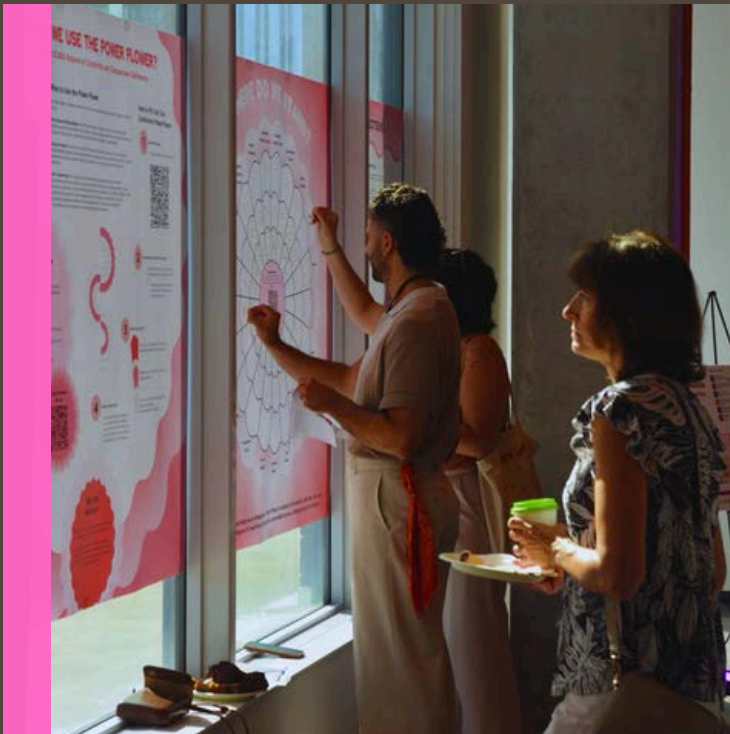


Photo credit: Zan Chandler (flower)
Photo credit: Andre Arruda

The Where Do We Stand? installation by Danny Ghantous and Morgan Bath invited us to reflect on our intersecting standpoints of both oppression and privilege. The dots reflect the collective identities of conference participants, providing a consciousness of voices and experiences present, and, more pointedly, absent from our journey together.

CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

The APF-OCAD partnership was rooted in shared interests: advancing futures literacy through design-led foresight and fostering spaces where imagination meets responsibility. The Nexus event eschewed traditional conference models – dominated by presentations and passive consumption – that often prioritize ego and hierarchy and fail to cultivate the relational and creative capacities needed for systemic change. The Nexus set out to do things differently. Every detail reflected intentionality, where all contributors were greeted as collaborative participants, embodying the conference’s ethos of care and sustainability.

Beyond logistics, the event embraced a participatory, multisensory approach. Installations such as *Space for Grief* created room for emotional processing. Other installations invited imaginative exploration. Workshops offered opportunities for participants to embody futures through gesture, voice, touch, and text. Although far more difficult than planning a sequence of talks and panels, we set out to push the boundaries of what it means to belong in a space and to create room for participants to interact however they needed to, while at the same time, curating flows to ensure all 170 attendees could be meaningfully engaged at any point in the proceedings.

By weaving creativity and compassion into its design, the Nexus challenged assumptions about what a professional gathering can be. It modeled a future-forward paradigm – one where foresight is not only intellectual but relational, embodied, and grounded in care.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE EVENT

The heart of the Nexus lay in its participatory experiences, where attendees collectively imagined alternative futures through creative prompts and collaborative storytelling and offered immersive journeys into speculative scenarios, blending art, design, and foresight to provoke reflection on long-term possibilities.

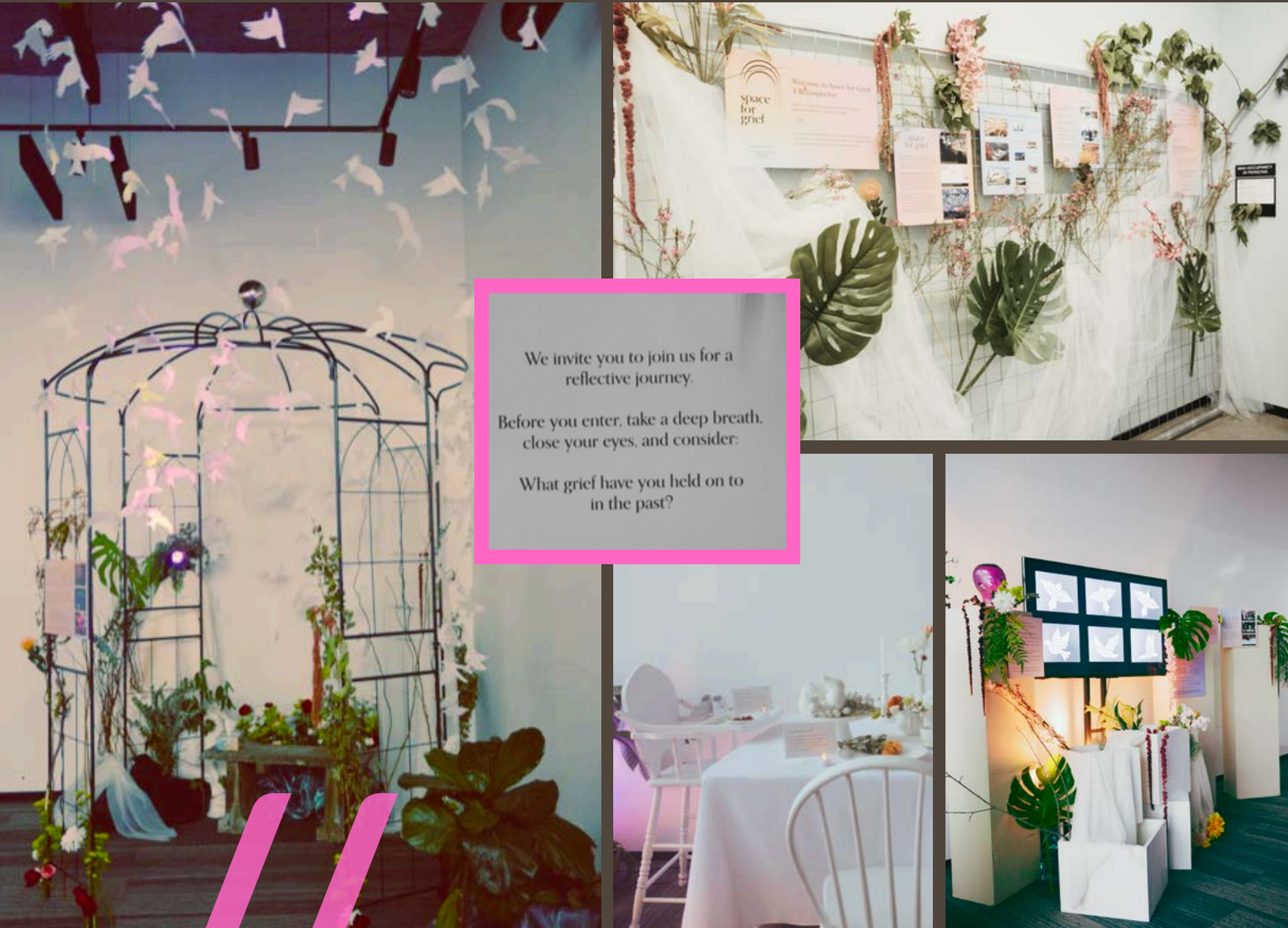
Multiple workshops, inviting participants to step outside of well-trodden rational, cognitive processes, explored how the body anticipates and experiences pasts, presents, and futures through the use of theatre, dance, and humour, and engaged senses of sight, smell, and touch.

One of the most poignant anchors for the conference was *Space for Grief by the Method Collective* (led by Ziyen Hossain, Calla Lee, Fran Quintero Rawlings) – a quiet, contemplative installation and enclosed room where participants could process emotions tied to loss, uncertainty, and systemic disruption. This initiative underscored the conference’s recognition that futures work is not only intellectual but deeply emotional. Unlike other convenings (meetings or events), *Space for Grief* held participants in the processing of hard feelings, rather than requiring them to “take a break” or exit the

proceedings. It was designed to include this human need to feel and process a range of emotions in solitude, rather than excluding it, forcing the need to solo reflect and process into an isolating or alienating experience.

Space for Grief by the Method Collective offered a quiet, contemplative installation where participants could process emotions tied to loss, uncertainty, and systemic disruption.

Photo credit: Andre Arruda



We invite you to join us for a reflective journey.
Before you enter, take a deep breath, close your eyes, and consider:
What grief have you held on to in the past?



“Space for Grief was remarkable. It gave me room to process feelings I didn’t expect to bring to a futures conference.”

CONTRIBUTORS AS COLLABORATORS

Our caterers: Mohawk Soda, Karine's, and Butter and Spice were chosen for their environmental and social justice values alignment and were invited to curate menus to highlight this, as well as notions of community care. Sponsorship (including Autodesk and Jackpine) reflected organizations that aligned with the conference theme and ethos.

The David Binet Design Leadership Fund, recently created to support OCAD's Strategic Foresight & Innovation master's program and its students, was also a major contributor and enabler of the event to support inclusion and costs to participants. This financial support fostered greater accessibility by ensuring entrance fees were not a barrier to participation, rather than a singular branding opportunity.

Swag was not destined for landfill; participants received pollinator packets from LEAF (Local Enhancement & Appreciation of Forests) via Rebecca Black – a symbolic and practical gesture toward regeneration. The pollinator theme was also echoed in collaboration with Kelly Kornet and Ruslan Hetu, in the daily conference badge stamps that matched pollinators to their plants. This included daily pollinator posters with fun facts and a conference quiz for a prize of local Ontario Raw Golden Honey donated from Auld Castle Farms. Caring for the environment, plastics (including dastardly single-use creamers) were cut out as much as possible; all materials were recycled or reused - printing was done on recycled paper and mounted on discarded wood discards from OCAD woodshop studios. All unconsumed food was donated to local shelters twice a day.

These decisions were not afterthoughts; they were integral to modelling futures grounded in compassion and responsibility.

THEMES AND INSIGHTS

Across installations and conversations, several themes emerged. Creativity was affirmed as a driver of systemic change – not merely an aesthetic pursuit but a strategic capacity for navigating complexity. Compassion surfaced as a critical lens for futures literacy, challenging participants to consider not only what is possible but what is humane and just.

The Nexus demonstrated that foresight can be relational and embodied, moving beyond abstract scenarios to lived experiences that engage the senses and emotions. Participants left with a renewed sense that imagining futures is not a detached exercise but a civic and ethical responsibility – one that demands care, collaboration, and courage.



Participant discussion during the Prosocial Futures workshop - by APF members Nicci Orbert and Karessa Torgerson.

Photo credit: Andre Arruda



Participant discussion during the Signs of Change workshop, by Angelika Seeschaaf-Veres as part of OCAD Research Lab Radical Norms with founders Koby Barhad and Daniel Daam-Rossi.

Photo credit: Andre Arruda



Participant discussion during the Pathwaves: Futures Worldbuilding workshop, a co-production between Envision Management and Super O, led by Patii Schmidt and Rebecca Black.

Photo credit: Andre Arruda

“I loved that it was participation-focused. The installations really brought the theme to life throughout the weekend.”

A DIFFERENT APPROACH AND LOOKING AHEAD

The Nexus was more than an event – it was a prototype for how futures gatherings can be reimagined. And demonstrated that foresight thrives in spaces designed for participation, care, and creativity.

This approach signaled a shift in the futures field. Instead of centering authority through keynotes and panels, the Nexus embraced radical hospitality and co-creation. Every detail – from pollinator seed swag to food donations – reinforced the idea that the way we convene reflects the futures we aspire to build.



“The way this conference was designed spoke volumes – not just talking about what we ‘should be doing,’ but actually doing it.”

The success of this experiment opens new possibilities. Participants called for biennial events, unconference streams, and deeper engagement with communities beyond professional futurists – artists, youth, and others who bring fresh perspectives. There also is an appetite for international or global collaboration, with suggestions to partner with networks such as Women Who Futures and Centro.

For APF and OCAD, the Nexus set a precedent: futures work can be convivial, embodied, and inclusive, whilst allowing for grief and joy, imagination and rigor. Most importantly, it can model the values – creativity, compassion, sustainability – that will shape the futures we want to live in.



“I loved that all the workshops were hands-on. We laughed, we cried, and we cared for one another.”



Participants at work in the *Designing Beyond Decline* workshop, by Sean Park, Zayna Khayat, Nicole Knibb, and Victoria Bui.

Photo credit: Andre Arruda



Participants at the *Improvisation for Creative Connection* workshop led by Christopher Leville.

Photo credit: Andre Arruda



Image from the *As Tulips They May: A Compassionate Arc for Wayward Times* workshop by Rodney Frederickson.

Photo credit: Andre Arruda



Participants from the *Time in the Body: Embodied Futuring* workshop by Julienne DeVita.

Photo credit: Andre Arruda

GOING FORWARD

The Futures of Creativity and Compassion Nexus was more than a gathering – it was a living experiment in how we imagine and enact better futures. By centering care, creativity, and sustainability, it reminded us that foresight is not solely about anticipating what’s next, but about shaping what matters. As participants reflected, “We need more of this – it’s not a nice-to-have, it’s essential.”

The challenge now is to carry this ethos forward: to design futures work that is participatory, embodied, and grounded in compassion; the way we convene today is the future we create tomorrow.



Post-conference group photo of those who could stay back for the snap, and regrettably missing those who needed to depart to attend to other aspects of their lives.

Photo credit: OCAD LIVE

With this writing, we underscore and reiterate a profound thanks to all who shared this remarkable experience with us.



From left to right: Suzanne Stein, Roberto Pires, Zan Chandler.

Photo credit: Andre Arruda

Suzanne Stein is Associate Professor and Special Advisor on Strategic Foresight for Graduate Studies at OCAD University. An internationally recognized futurist and strategic foresight practitioner, she is a founding faculty member of both the Digital Futures undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as the Master's program in Strategic Foresight & Innovation. She founded the Super Ordinary Lab to advance futures literacy and innovation across sectors.

Roberto Pires is a Master of Design candidate in Strategic Foresight & Innovation at OCAD University, and a Research Associate at the Super Ordinary Lab with a background in UX research and design, and over a decade of experience in the film and television industry. He has contributed to major productions including Hockey Night in Canada, several Olympic Games broadcasts, and Family Feud Canada.

Zan Chandler, Adjunct Professor at OCAD University, is a founder and Producer of The Futures of Creativity and Compassion conference. She is a long-time member of the Association of Professional Futurists (APF) and recently completed her term as Executive Board Member. She is a Member of the Global Foresight Advisory Council for TFSX and leads a team of foresight analysts and researchers at Policy Horizons, the Government of Canada's centre of excellence in foresight.