

age of the
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steward

SEEING LIKE A STEWARD

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'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a civilisation in possession of a poor maintenance plan, must be in want of repair.'

Seeing Like A Steward

Yes, this is a direct riff off James C. Scott's seminal *Seeing Like A State* – an exploration of how 'certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed.'

Looking at trends in human culture, across centuries worth of time, from one civilisation to the next, I sometimes wonder if humans are more primed for solving problems, than they are at living the solutions.

Each empire, civilisation, dynasty, rises and falls – the time horizons vary but the general trend remains. As Austen may have said had she been interested in regenerative design practices; 'it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a civilisation in possession of a poor maintenance plan, must be in want of repair.'

It is on this theme of what gets tended to, that I propose this short but well-walked (quite literally) exploration of certain schemes to repair the harms that humans have created.

I myself am a prolific walker – being based in one of the world's most walkable cities helps, as does a body that suits being in motion; a slow, considered thrum of motion that allows spaces, places and people to unfold as they are, where they are, one step at a time.

This guide of sorts emerges from one of my most consistent practices, which I developed fairly unconsciously – walk + explore. It's very simple: I choose a particular neighbourhood, a specific exhibit, a cultural space, an innovative design or architectural intervention or greened space, as a honing mechanism. If within a certain distance, I walk the whole way to it, otherwise I'll get the bus or tube. Most likely though, I really commit and walk the entire way. This is not for the faint of tread.

It's not just about the destination – that well worn adage holds true. The number of things that can only be experienced through direct witnessing, has always exceeded any number of encounters I could have planned for ahead of time.

Once in the chosen vicinity, I explore that which initially caught my imagination, but within this I remain open to what else that location can reveal. It is a form of walking jazz, stolen glances inside cracked doorways, informal conversations with unexpectedly fascinating humans, the more than odd cinnamon bun and if I'm very lucky, discovering acts of delicious creativity, ingenious problem-solving and genuine acts of care and conscious stewarding.

Like an iceberg, most of a cityscape is actually invisible. Passive buildings, trees in stoic quietude, traffic lights running like clockwork – it's easy to believe that all that is seen, is all that there is.

It is not.

Seeing like a Steward is a way of seeing the ways in which the human (and non-human) condition has been improved. This lens is primed to spot the acts of responsible designing, making and building; conscious, co-created cultural and community interventions; thriving ecologies across species on land that is stewarded mindfully.

This was just a few hours of a walk + explore, and it is what revealed itself to me. The aim is never to be exhaustive with these explorations. I have noted, from years of traversing on foot, the inherent story, the beats of the narrative of that given walk, will form themselves into an eloquent symphony of their own accord. Or as Scott puts it,

'The new itinerary, I think, has a logic of its own. It might even have been a more elegant trip had I possessed the wit to conceive of it at the outset'

Here's to moving, thinking and seeing, like a steward.

H

Steward-in-Training

'One curiosity of being a foreigner everywhere is that one finds oneself discerning Edens where the locals see only Purgatory.'

— PICO IYER, THE GLOBAL SOUL: JET LAG, SHOPPING MALLS, AND THE SEARCH FOR HOME

CADENCE

AN ODE TO INDUSTRIAL SOFTNESS



The arches had caught my attention on a previous occasion, wandering through King's Cross with my nieces. Like Jonah's whale appearing out of a great sea of building blocks, a singular cascade of bricks crested the wave of blockish-ness with a certain vulnerable softness. It was not just the arched windows that gilded the utmost floor that soothed my inner child, but the tone and depth of bricks themselves – a reddish pink like the blush of a pink lady apple – were mesmerising. It wasn't the time to get up close, but a quick search revealed that the building in question was Cadence, by Alison Brooks Architects.

Weeks out, the building still called. I made my way back to King's Cross – starting at the cusp of Holland Park, I walked due East, up through Notting Hill, straight down the belly of the beast that is Oxford Street, steadily veering northwards through Bloomsbury, until I found myself on the approach to it.

Approaching Cadence from the north, what first registers is not scale but temperament. The building doesn't announce itself so much as lean into view, its arches softening the hard edges of a district still in the process of becoming. Red brick – deep, varied, quietly referential – does much of the work. It recalls the infrastructural heft of King's Cross without mimicking it, holding onto something familiar while allowing the form to remain distinctly contemporary.

The clear touch of artistry had hooked my attention, but what's less immediately visible at Cadence is the discipline behind its making. The building was Designed for Manufacture and Assembly (DfMA) with much of its structure produced off site: columns, slabs, cores and façade panels arriving as finished elements rather than raw materials. Fewer vehicles, less waste, a shorter and cleaner construction process – decisions that register not as spectacle but as absence. Operationally, the building leans on The District Energy Network that underpins King's Cross, keeping day-to-day carbon demands comparatively low.

What also feels steward-like here is the refusal to treat sustainability and heritage as separate concerns. The robust concrete frame, generous ceiling heights and adaptable layouts suggest a building intended to be lived in, reworked, and maintained rather than replaced. At the same time, the arches – contemporary in their geometry – carry forward a spatial memory of the area's railway viaducts and industrial rhythms. Not preserved, not erased, but translated.

In a neighbourhood shaped by ambitious repair – of land, of infrastructure, of identity – Cadence reads as a measured contribution. It doesn't claim to solve anything outright – there is no discretely placed explainer sharing the process of making, and there are still many learnings of how construction can be regenerative from inception. Instead, it demonstrates a way of building that is careful about what it takes, attentive to what came before, and conscious of the time over which it will need to endure.

Cadence had been my primary site of inquiry. I circled it first, reading its edges, watching people drift along its perimeter, but there was another gesture seeking my attention – a nearby playspace, Chilton Square designed by Root And Erect – and towards that, I meandered.



CHILTON SQUARE

A CALL TO EMERGENT JOY



Here, care takes a more kinetic form. Root And Erect's sculptural playscape is open to the local community 24 hours a day, designed primarily for children aged 4 to 12. Its central tubular steel structure, helical like DNA, nods subtly to the nearby Francis Crick Institute, while supporting climbing rungs, nets, sofa and basket swings, ropes, balance bars, and other features that invite experimentation.

The playground's design was informed directly by children from King's Cross Academy and Frank Barnes School for Deaf Children. Workshops allowed young participants to test spatial configurations and feed back on proposed concepts, shaping quieter sensory zones, willow dens, and areas for role play. Although I visited during the day, I learned afterwards that a responsive lighting scheme by Speirs Major animates the space, allowing for safe, illuminated play to extend late into the evening.

Stewardship here is emergent, operational, and generative: a space shaped by its users, attentive to experience, and designed to evolve. Watching children invent their own rhythms while adults hover or linger, it becomes clear that a city endures not through control, but through spaces that allow improvisation, risk, and joy to flourish.



FISHTANK WORKSHOP

A SIGNAL, A COMMUNITY, A SANCTUARY



FISHTANK
WORKSHOP



Once I had a sense of the Square's temperament, I widened the frame, moving through the grid-like expanse of the surrounding development. Many of the buildings stand complete but uninhabited, held in a kind of architectural suspension. The area feels reserved, expectant, as though life itself has yet to fully bed in.

Making my way back toward the main square, I passed a discreet storefront where a small hatch had been lifted open. Inside sat two people behind a simple table: a large urn of coffee, biscuits laid out without ceremony. I hesitated, barely a moment, and in that pause met Guy and Bianca. Guy offered me a cup of coffee; freely given, quietly perfect.

It turned out I had stumbled upon Fishtank Workshop, home to Fishtank Social Enterprise – a Camden-based organisation supporting young creatives and artists aged 18–30. The Workshop offers desk space, structured training, guidance, coaching, mentoring, and access to opportunity. A rare ecology in a city where space – especially free space – has become increasingly elusive.

The coffee hatch, so to speak, is open for a few hours each Thursday – a subtle, caffeinated act of outreach to any passing soul who takes but a moment to engage with their surroundings.

Guy and Bianca spoke to the ethos underpinning the Workshop, rooted in a belief that the redevelopment of King's Cross should serve existing local communities as much as it does incoming tenants and residents drawn to this latest chapter of the area's transformation. The space is stewarded as a genuine home for creative practice: access without cost, but not without care. In London, this feels almost anomalous (because it is).

What became clear is that custodianship here is not abstract but operational and relational; it is the ongoing labour of creating the conditions in which creative work can take root and endure. This tending – of space, of people, of possibility – is the work Guy and Bianca quietly undertake through management and programming alike.

As for the architecture itself, it was a gratifying discovery to learn that the refurbishment had been carried out by Material Cultures – a practice whose work in regenerative architecture and contemporary place-making is, frankly, pioneering. The building sits above the old Goods Depot, which occupied this site from the mid-nineteenth century until the early 2000s.

Rather than replacement, the approach here was retrofit: working with what already existed. The methodology was disciplined and wonderfully pragmatic – low-carbon materials throughout: timber, wood wool, clay paint, tile. Nothing superfluous. Everything considered. A building not just adapted for new use, but recalibrated for a longer life.

In the context of a district defined by large gestures and long timelines, this smaller encounter – coffee through a hatch, space held open, materials chosen with restraint – offered a different register of repair. Less declarative. More human. Quietly stewarded.

After the surprise encounter of Fishtank Workshop, I was reminded of another place I make a point of returning to whenever I find myself in this part of the city. As I swigged the last of my coffee, it appeared almost on cue: the Aga Khan Centre.



'The world reveals itself to those who travel by foot.'

— WERNER HERZOG

AGA KHAN CENTRE

CULTURAL CUSTODIANSHIP



KING'S CROSS
SLOW DOWN
SHARED PEDESTRIAN
AND CYCLE SPACE

The exhibitions at the Centre are always so thoughtfully curated, touching and for such a humble gallery space, the narrative is striking in its depth.

Entitled Canticle of the Birds the current exhibit is an exploration of the mythic and spiritual symbolism of birds within the Sufi tradition, through the revered poem of the same name, by twelfth century Sufi poet Farid al-Din Attar.

While the exhibition stands confidently on its own merits, what most held my attention was the way it had been made. This is a deeply collaborative project, one that honours craft, ecological awareness, and youth participation as integral rather than supplementary. Organised in partnership with The King's Foundation School of Traditional Arts, the Royal School of Needlework, Drawing for the Planet, SongBird Survival, King's Cross Academy, and Wendy Morrison Design, the exhibition brings together international artists, artisans, and young people in a shared act of making.

Among the works is The Gathering of Songbirds by Jane Lee McCracken, founder of Drawing for the Planet, which incorporates drawings by Year 5 pupils from the local King's Cross Academy. Created in collaboration with SongBird Survival, the piece draws attention to the fragile state of UK songbird populations, weaving ecological concern into both process and outcome.

Here, care is not announced so much as embedded – across generations, disciplines, and species. The exhibition listens as much as it speaks, allowing attention, patience, and responsibility to surface through how the work is made and who is invited into its making.

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After leaving the Centre, the walk does what walks always do – it dissolves back into the larger stream of action and reaction. Linear pavements return, traffic resumes its low hum, attention loosens. None of what I encountered was loud. Nothing claimed to be definitive. And yet each gesture – architectural, social, cultural – shared a commitment to embodied care rather than spectacle.

What remains with me is not a single building, workshop, or exhibition, but a pattern: care expressed through use, through an attentiveness to newness as much as to what already exists. Not grand solutions, but conditions patiently shaped; space held open; materials chosen with foresight; people invited in rather than planned around.

Perhaps this is what it means to see differently – not from above, not all at once, but from within. At walking pace. Close enough to notice the small decisions that accumulate over time into places that create the conditions for individuals and community to create a life of dignity, creative expression, and connection.

The desire to see the deeper story at play, attentively, creates an *itinerary* that is inherently emergent; the logic will reveal itself only in retrospect.

But what this walk in particular revealed is not a future imagined, but a present already underway – seeded within the old, carried forward by ordinary decisions made with uncommon care.

As for me, I keep walking – into a more-than-possible future that allows for all-life flourishing.

H

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‘Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.’

— JUDITH BUTLER, UNDOING GENDER