

THE SAPIENS LAB

A CRAFT AND CULTURAL LABORATORY IN LONDON

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PART I · THE LABORATORY

1. WHAT THE LABORATORY IS

THE SAPIENS LAB is a craft and cultural laboratory conceived in London, where a person enters culture through action: making, seeing, writing, sounding, gathering, caring, building.

The Laboratory is the first form THE SAPIENS GARDEN takes in the city. THE SAPIENS GARDEN is a long-term cultural undertaking of architecture and craft in Britain, founded on three things: a timber Beacon forty-two metres high, a Memory Garden of seventy-seven trees, and the thought of a cultural place built to outlive those who made it.

If THE SAPIENS GARDEN is the far horizon, the Laboratory is its first living body and its first voice in the city. It works as a public room before the architecture and the drawings begin, and from the very start it creates teaching programmes, gathers a community, keeps an archive and builds the public life of the project.

Here, within one space, a person may move from one practice to another, each woven into the next: timber and joinery, drawing, painting, calligraphy, music and singing, floristry, voice, the stage, chamber evenings and shared work. An artist comes to work with wood, a musician begins to understand the craft, a carpenter tries calligraphy or sits down to the piano. Someone comes simply to practise, to share what they know, to meet people and to find their own rhythm in the Laboratory.

The curatorial logic runs in a single line: from material to form, from form to word, from word to sound, from sound to public action and to the archive.

2. SEVEN ACTIONS

The Laboratory is gathered around seven root actions, which together hold the life of the space: to make, to see, to write, to sound, to gather, to care, to build.

Timber gives structure, the making of things by hand, and a connection to the Beacon still to be built. Drawing teaches form, light and proportion. Calligraphy turns a word and a name into a material trace of memory. Music, voice and the stage give the room sound and public presence. Plants connect the Laboratory to the seasons, to care and to the Memory Garden that is coming. Building holds the prototype, the models and the work still ahead.

The space is shaped around the senses, around practice and around attention. Timber, paper, ink, sound, voice, colour, plants, light, silence, conversation, the smell of shavings, of flowers and of coffee, together make an atmosphere that belongs to nowhere else.

By day the Laboratory is a place of practice, and in the evening the central hall becomes a chamber cultural platform for readings, performances, concerts, lectures, small productions and gatherings around the growing project. The Laboratory lives in two rhythms at once: the inward and the public.

3. WHAT IS INSIDE

The Laboratory consists of four working studios, a shared stage, a café and a living archive wall.

Hands & Wood

The room of handcraft, tools and timber, where the practices of the joiner and the carpenter meet. Carving, joints and the theory of the craft, small wooden objects, work with timber samples and models, the repair and care of furniture, the Norwegian laft tradition and the timber frame, the care and sharpening of tools.

Eyes & Colour

The room of drawing, colour, calligraphy and visual thinking, given over to the practice of seeing: form, line, proportion, light, texture and the visible mark of memory. Drawing and architectural sketching, work with colour, form and composition, graphics and calligraphy. Botanical drawing, visual diaries and archive pages, needlework and work on paper.

Ears & Sound

The room of music, voice, rehearsal, stage presence and small recordings. Piano and strings, simple improvisation, work with the voice, small sound recordings, preparation for performances on the Stage.

Breath & Flower

The room of flowers, plants and living material, which connects the Laboratory to the seasons, to care, to the senses and to the future Memory Garden. Floristry, the making and delivery of bouquets, work with the plants of the season. Flower compositions for evenings and for the café. Memory bouquets bound to names and seasons. Sessions of supported participation.

The Stage

The chamber public platform of the Laboratory, where work made in the studios becomes part of a shared programme: concerts, exhibitions, lectures, readings, literary evenings, chamber performances, monologues and storytelling, evenings of unfinished work, showings, and meetings with partners and with people from the cultural world.

The Archive Wall

The unbroken record of THE SAPIENS GARDEN through the shared rooms: sketches, materials, models, names, texts and photographs, added to as the project moves.

4. OBJECTS AND TRACES

An important part of the Laboratory is what remains once the practice is over. Wooden objects, calligraphic cards, bouquets, drawings, small editions, archive pages, sound fragments, photographs, samples from the prototype, and other small forms made within these rooms.

A person leaves holding something: an object, a name, a line, a sound, a flower, a text or a story, a material trace of having taken part. In this way the Laboratory gathers its own living archive, slowly and by hand.

5. HOW IT WORKS

The Laboratory rests on practice. Sessions run mostly in small groups, and individual sessions are possible too. People come with no experience and begin with accessible formats under guidance. Sessions are led by practising masters, artists, musicians and invited members of the community.

All the work is organised with attention to safety, to the quality of materials, to clear instruction, and to safeguarding wherever the law requires it.

The Laboratory works in rhythms: weekly workshops, monthly salons, seasonal programmes, evenings of material, showings of the prototype, chamber evenings, open days, and a yearly programme of exhibitions and performances.

Each programme may leave a trace: an object, a drawing, a name, a bouquet, a fragment of sound, a text, a photograph, a note in the archive, or an addition to the Archive Wall.

6. SUPPORTED PARTICIPATION

Breath & Flower is one of the core strands of the Laboratory and, at the same time, a space of supported work and participation. It is intended for adults of eighteen and over who need additional support, among them neurodivergent adults, disabled people, and people living in social isolation or rebuilding their confidence and their routine.

The work goes on in small groups, under the guidance of a skilled practitioner and within a clear professional framework. Participants carry out concrete tasks: preparing flowers, making up bouquets, preparing and packing orders, and taking part in the everyday life of the Laboratory.

Those it suits take part in deliveries across London as well, going through the whole circle: the preparation, the presentation, the journey through the city, and a courteous word exchanged with a stranger at the door.

What matters here is a completed circle of action and a visible result. The process joins material, attention, responsibility and contribution, and opens a way into real work through rhythm, care and completion.

This programme is part of the working life of the Laboratory and does not exist apart from it. It brings together culture, meaningful labour, dignity, and a road towards steadier forms of participation.

7. WHO IT IS FOR

Londoners and local communities

A place to make something with your hands, hear music, come to an evening, meet people, and meet living culture in a room that is easy to walk into.

Architects, designers and students

Rare practical contact with timber, with material, with prototypes, with joints, and with architecture grown out of craft.

Artists, musicians and performers

A chamber setting in which to work, rehearse, show, read and take part in a programme that crosses disciplines.

People in supported participation

Regular practice through plants, simple tasks, small groups and respectful company.

Patrons and partners

The first visible urban form of a far larger project, where community, programmes, archive and cultural value are already taking shape.

8. THE PROGRAMMES

The Sapiens Object

A small wooden object bound to memory, heritage and landscape.

Axe and Timber

A demonstration of working timber by hand, led by the author.

An Introduction to the Timber Joint

The basic joints and the logic of a structure.

From Sketch to Structure

The drawing, then the model, then the timber detail itself.

Name and Memory

Chamber evenings devoted to people whose thought changed the world, drawn from the names of the Garden.

Flower and Memory

Seasonal bouquets bound to the future Memory Garden.

Voice and Presence

Voice, reading, monologue and presence on the Stage.

Sound, Word and Timber

A chamber evening in which music, text and wood stand together.

The Sapiens Salon

Quiet cultural evenings for partners, patrons and invited guests.

The Prototype Table

Regular gatherings on how the work on the fourteen-metre Beacon is going.

Breath & Flower Sessions

Supported participation: flowers, simple tasks, a safe room.

PART II · WHAT THE LABORATORY LEADS TO

9. THE GREENWICH WEATHER BEACON

THE GREENWICH WEATHER BEACON is the first public and responsible step towards creating THE SAPIENS GARDEN in Britain. It is a hand-built timber structure fourteen metres high, seven-sided in plan, of solid oak and clad in larch. It is conceived as a temporary and reversible public structure.

The Beacon carries a working revolving lantern and a restrained evening light that changes its hue with the weather of the city. Short quotations from the great thinkers are carved by hand into the outer cladding and climb in the same order as the seven halls of the great Beacon that is to come, philosophers at the foot and, at the top, those who thought beyond their own time. Outside there are no ladders, no ledges and no holds, nothing on it to climb. In character it is quiet, calm and honest in its material, as though it had always stood there.

The terrace around it works as a chamber stage all the year round, under one absolute rule: acoustic instruments and the human voice only. The piano lives inside the Beacon and is wheeled out onto the terrace before a performance. Volume is limited by the nature of the instruments themselves, so chamber music stays chamber music, the park stays quiet, and the evening stays alive. London artists perform without a fee, on an open programme run by the Laboratory.

Why Greenwich

The place already holds the vocabulary of the idea: world time, the prime meridian, the Royal Observatory, navigation, maritime history, weather, measurement, astronomy, and the public landscape of London. A timber Beacon reads here as a small urban observatory of atmosphere, culture and memory.

Only one lighthouse survives in London today, a small experimental brick tower at Trinity Buoy Wharf, where the River Lea meets the Thames, built in 1864–66 and never used for navigation. There is no living timber Beacon in London that a person can walk up to. The place for one is still empty.

10. WEATHER AS CULTURE

The Beacon's weather system is a way of feeling the city. Clear sky, overcast and wind, rain, storm, fog, heat, frost and snow: each of these states answers to some inward state of a person.

The scheme is simple: the month sets the theme, the weather of the day gives the tone, and the archive brings the works forward.

A weather station is built into the Beacon: sensors for fog and visibility, for light, rain, wind and temperature. These readings govern the hue of the light at the summit and of the twelve lanterns of the circle, following sequences written in advance. When the weather turns, the whole circle changes with it, little by little.

At the foot of the Beacon stands a small sign with a QR code. A person points a phone at it and opens the app, where the Beacon can be seen in real time, and the same address works as a website from anywhere in the world. Inside, everything is presented as handwork: calligraphy, notes and poems written by hand on paper, photographs and paintings tuned to the tone of the day, musical fragments sounding quietly.

The seven tones

Clear. Overcast and windy. Rain. Storm. Fog. Heat. Frost and snow. Each tone rests on music, painting, photography, calligraphy, poetry, prose and a short scientific note, so that the same park speaks in a different voice every day. Bach and Satie on a clear day, Debussy and Pärt in fog, Chopin in the rain, Rachmaninov in the storm, Britten when the wind gets up, Delius in the heat, Friedrich and Frost when snow is falling.

Alongside the weather of the day, the year is at work: the white of spring, the clear gold of summer, the pale yellow of autumn, the silver of winter. The same fog glows and sounds one way in April and another in December, and the circle lives the year through as one long score.

11. THE LIVING ARCHIVE

One shelf for everyone. A great name on the plaque beside a tree and yesterday's work by a person living in London stand together, under the same theme of the month and in the same tone of the day. The historical figures give depth, local artists and performers give life, and the weather gives rhythm.

The year is laid out in cells: four seasons crossed with seven weathers, each season taking only the weather that belongs to it. Spring rain and November gloom are different cells and different music. Each cell holds forty-four places and divides again into dawn, day, dusk and night. Half of the cell is the canon, which stays in place and is reviewed once every few years. The other half is open to what is being made now.

The rarer the weather, the more rarely a piece sounds and the fewer neighbours it has. An overcast piece is heard dozens of times a year. A storm piece waits for its sky a year and more, and therein lies its power.

An open call, and the terms

Work already made is accepted on the same terms as work written for the Beacon: a painter may offer a canvas ten years old, a composer a piece from the drawer. Copyright remains with the author, who is free to publish, perform, record and license the work anywhere without asking us. The Beacon takes a non-exclusive licence to play it in the clearing and in the app, in full and unedited. Nothing is broadcast beyond the park and the app, nothing is posted for download, and nothing is sold or sub-licensed. The author's name stands beside the work in the register, and the licence ends with a single letter.

It is the Laboratory that gathers this work: open calls, a local jury, clear rights, credit and care. For composers there is a separate note setting out the cells, the numbers and how to submit a piece.

12. THE CIRCLE OF TWELVE

Around the Beacon stands a circle of twelve apple trees, which reads as a dial, with the Beacon at its centre as the axis and the hand.

Each tree bears the name of a person who changed what we are able to measure in time, or what time itself proved able to measure: Harrison, Caroline Herschel, Huygens, Su Song, Wang Zhenyi, Jai Singh II, al-Jazari, Elisabeth Hevelius, Henrietta Leavitt, Airy, Nicole-Reine Lepaute and Ruth Belville. Six women and six men from nine lands, and around the circle the famous and the forgotten stand side by side.

Between the trees stand twelve lanterns, and on them twelve instruments, to be read round the circle in the order of time: the gnomon, the clepsydra, the astrolabe, the verge escapement, the tower clock, the mainspring and fusee, the pendulum, the balance spring, the marine chronometer, the transit circle, quartz and the caesium standard. Twenty-four points, twenty-four hours. One turn of the circle runs from shadow to atom.

Every tree of the circle is an apple tree: one genus, twelve varieties, each with its own name and its own land, and all twelve in flower within the same few weeks of spring. Twelve wooden benches face the Beacon from beneath the lanterns, so that the twenty-four points alternate all the way round: a tree, then a lantern with its bench, then a tree again.

13. THE GREENWICH TRIAL

One day in the year, on 13 October, the day in 1884 on which the Greenwich meridian was adopted as the meridian of the world, a public trial of timekeepers may be held in the clearing beside the Beacon, under the name borne by the Observatory's own tables. Twelve chronometers, each made by the hand of a named maker in their own country, each under one of the twelve names of the circle, run under seal for the appointed term, and on that day their rates are taken and published. Alongside them runs the watch of anyone who has come.

Britain once had such a thing. The Kew certificate, which a watch received after forty-five days in five positions and at three temperatures, was the measure of a British watch from 1885 until the Class A trial closed in 1951. The last trial of craftsmanship was held in 1978. Since then the place has stood empty.

14. THE GREAT BEACON AND THE MEMORY GARDEN

The far horizon of the project is a timber Beacon on the British coast, some forty-two metres high, seven-sided in plan, broad at the base and narrowing towards the top, of oak, clad in larch after the manner of a ship's hull.

Within it are seven halls joined by a central spiral stair. The first is given to the philosophers, the second to the scientists, the third to the architects and artists, the fourth to those who live and create today, the fifth to poets and writers, the sixth to composers, and the seventh, under the dome, to those who thought beyond their own time.

Around it the Garden grows: seventy-seven trees, each bearing the name of a philosopher, a poet, a scientist, a composer, an artist or a physician whose labour, thought and courage helped shape the course of human civilisation.

The principal siting hypothesis is Beacon Hill near West Runton in North Norfolk: the highest point of the county, one hundred and five metres, some 1.7 kilometres from the shore, on the glacial sands and gravels of the Cromer Ridge, a terminal

moraine, with no chalk at the surface. The fourteen-metre Beacon at Greenwich is the responsible first step towards it.

15. A NETWORK OF BEACONS

Once the architectural and engineering language of the prototype has been tested at Greenwich, the idea may grow into a network of hand-built timber weather Beacons in British cities, carried out with discipline and with all the necessary consents. Each city would have its own view, its own hue and its own character, its own artists and musicians, its own small Laboratory and its own weather score. London and Greenwich, Edinburgh, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol, Oxford, Cambridge and Norwich would sound together as one family.

PART III · WHERE THINGS STAND TODAY

16. WHERE THE PROJECT STANDS

Everything described here is, for now, a concept. Today the Laboratory, the Beacon and the circle exist in drawings, in calculations and in correspondence with makers and institutions.

The foundation that will hold what is made, EVERHELG FOUNDATION, is being prepared for registration, and the site in Greenwich Park remains for now a working hypothesis.

No premises have been taken for the Laboratory. Where it will stand and how large it will be remain open questions, and they are among the first the author would wish to discuss with those who read this.

17. THE DIALOGUE BEGUN

The project rests on letters. Some three hundred replies have come back from more than twenty countries: from national UNESCO commissions and ministries of culture, from architects, engineers and makers, from museums, cathedrals and livery companies, from composers, musicians and artists.

THE SAPIENS LAB has begun an early cultural dialogue with the Secretariat of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. The Secretariat noted the project and its approach to culture, craft and community engagement, and wished it well as it grows. This matters as an early sign that the Laboratory is legible within an international cultural context.

A reply constitutes no endorsement, recognition, support, partnership or funding, and none of the institutions named has reviewed or approved this document.

18. THE AUTHOR

Alex Skarshelg is an independent timber craftsman with more than fifteen years in the Norwegian tradition of timber building. He takes bespoke timber houses through the full cycle of the work, and has built more than forty of them.

In Rauland he trained in the Norwegian dry-laft log tradition under the master Ottar Romtveit. The carpentry school he founded has been running since 2019, and more than twenty-five people have been trained there in his own Diamond Notch joint.

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