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The Learned Environment

On knowledge, curiosity, human practice, and the value of what we learn by living

The Learned Environment · Greta Penney · 18 October 2026

There are many ways to know something.

We learn through formal education, through reading and research, through observation, and through the accumulated experience of doing something over time. We learn from other people, from places, from materials, from mistakes, and from the work that occupies our days.

Yet the systems we use to organize knowledge rarely reflect this richness.

Information is generally divided into subjects, disciplines, professions, and categories. Education has its institutions. Work has its qualifications and hierarchies. Personal experience, practical knowledge, and the observations of everyday life often occupy less visible positions.

The result is a peculiar separation between what people know and what is recognized as knowledge.

I created The Learned Environment as an exploration of another possibility.

A broader understanding of knowledge

Consider the knowledge involved in restoring an old house, tending a garden, caring for an aging parent, preparing a meal, or understanding the history of a neighborhood.

Each activity draws upon multiple forms of intelligence.

A gardener works with botany, climate, soil, design, and seasonal change. A builder understands materials, geometry, structure, and the behavior of things under pressure. A

caregiver develops an extraordinary awareness of routines, relationships, physical needs, and subtle changes in another person's condition.

A real estate professional may develop a deep understanding of architecture, geography, economic patterns, neighborhood histories, and the ways people inhabit places.

These aren't simply collections of tasks. They are bodies of knowledge, developed through attention and practice.

The Learned Environment begins with the idea that such knowledge deserves to be examined, connected, documented, and respected.

It makes room for the scholar and the craftsperson, the researcher and the caretaker, the professional and the curious beginner.

Their experiences are different, they are not interchangeable, and each can contribute something to a more complete understanding of the world.

An environment for curiosity

The project takes inspiration from a time when encyclopedias, illustrated reference works, field guides, atlases, and educational publications invited readers into subjects they had never considered exploring.

A page about architecture might lead to geometry. A study of birds might introduce migration, geography, color, or sound. An illustration of a mechanical device could open an entirely new understanding of how something worked.

These publications offered more than answers. They encouraged a particular kind of attention.

Their illustrations, diagrams, photographs, annotations, and unexpected connections made learning a visual and intellectual experience.

The Learned Environment draws upon that tradition while exploring what a contemporary digital environment can make possible.

Rather than presenting knowledge as a fixed sequence of lessons, it offers connected subjects, practices, perspectives, and opportunities for discovery.

A visitor can begin with something familiar and find themselves somewhere unexpected.

A question about a material might lead to its history, its properties, the people who work with it, and the places where it is used. A practical activity might open onto scientific principles, cultural traditions, or new ways of seeing an everyday object.

The intention is to make exploring knowledge more interesting and engaging, without turning every discovery into a lesson.

The dignity of knowing how

One of the project's central concerns is the dignity of human practice.

Much of what makes our lives possible depends on knowledge that is difficult to capture in conventional educational structures.

There is intelligence in knowing how to repair something, organize a household, manage a complicated process, prepare food for others, or recognize when a familiar situation has changed.

Some of this knowledge is documented. Some is passed between generations. Some is learned through years of repetition, experimentation, and adjustment.

It may be highly specialized without being formally credentialed.

It may also be so familiar to the person who possesses it that they no longer recognize its significance.

The Learned Environment is interested in making this knowledge visible.

That doesn't mean treating every opinion as expertise or removing distinctions between evidence, interpretation, and experience. Those distinctions have value.

It could mean recognizing that rigorous knowledge can have many origins, and that human work deserves serious intellectual consideration.

There is something important in giving people a way to see their own work as part of a larger body of knowledge.

A person who has spent decades caring for gardens, repairing machines, raising children, or running a small business has developed forms of understanding worth examining.

That understanding can be placed in conversation with science, history, design, economics, and other disciplines.

The connections enrich both sides.

Learning without a prescribed destination

Most digital learning systems begin with a defined outcome.

Complete a course. Acquire a skill. Pass an assessment. Earn a credential.

These are useful purposes, and The Learned Environment is not intended to replace them.

But learning also happens when we follow an interest without knowing where it will lead.

Sometimes a person wants to understand a subject more deeply. Sometimes they want to investigate a problem in their work. Sometimes they encounter an unfamiliar image, idea, object, or practice and simply want to know more.

The Learned Environment accommodates these different starting points.

Its structure includes ways of looking at subjects through different lenses, following relationships between ideas, and moving between practical and conceptual understanding.

Images and visual references are part of this experience, not merely decoration. They can provide context, demonstrate relationships, reveal details, and encourage closer observation.

The aim is to create an environment that rewards curiosity without requiring visitors to arrive with a particular academic background or objective.

It should be approachable to someone who has never thought of themselves as a scholar, while remaining substantial enough to reward someone who has.



Shaker Spiral Staircase, George V. Vezolles, c. 1938. Watercolor and pencil. National Gallery of Art, Index of American Design. Public domain. Explore The Stair in The Learned Environment

A place for connections

Knowledge becomes especially interesting where disciplines meet.

Architecture is connected to materials, mathematics, climate, culture, and the organization of human life.

Food is connected to agriculture, chemistry, geography, migration, economics, and family tradition.

Care is connected to medicine, psychology, ethics, design, technology, and the practical organization of everyday life.

These relationships aren't incidental. They are often essential to understanding the subject itself.

The Learned Environment is designed around the possibility of moving among such connections.

A subject can be approached through its history, its underlying principles, its practical applications, or its relationship to other fields.

Visitors are invited to explore these different perspectives rather than encounter a single authoritative pathway through the material.

The environment is therefore both a collection of knowledge and a way of navigating it.

Its value lies not only in the individual pieces of information it contains, but in the relationships it helps people recognize.

What technology can contribute

Digital technology, offers new possibilities for organizing, relating, and exploring large bodies of information.

But access to more information isn't, by itself, a better learning experience.

The challenge is to create structures that help people make sense of what they encounter.

In The Learned Environment, technology serves the larger intention of making knowledge more accessible, connected, and useful.

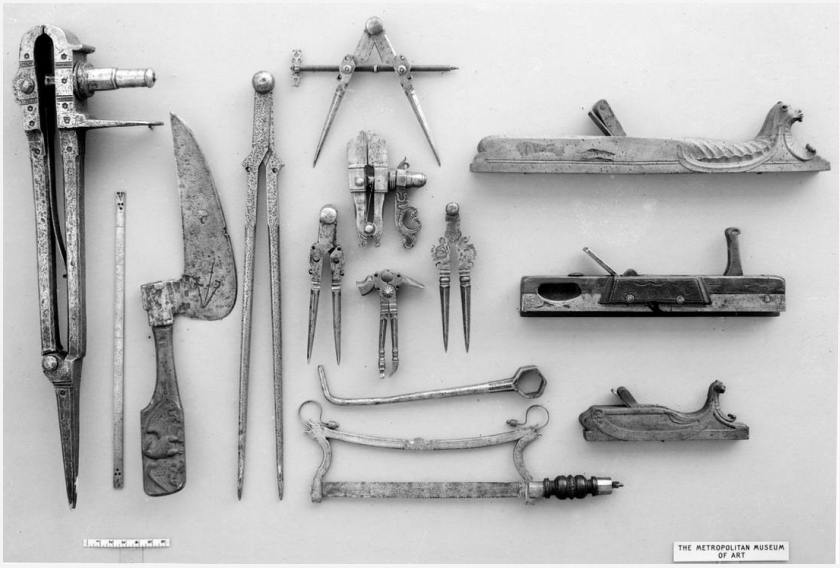
It can help reveal relationships between subjects, support different routes through material, and make room for expanding collections of information and experience.

At the same time, the project maintains an important distinction between established knowledge, interpretation, and lived experience.

A useful learning environment doesn't obscure uncertainty or make every statement appear equally authoritative.

It helps visitors understand not only what is known, but how something came to be known, where the evidence comes from, and what remains open to interpretation.

Technology provides new means of exploration. Human judgment remains essential to understanding.



Workshop tools, including a vise. Makers unrecorded; early 18th century. An archival study of the tools, materials, and practical knowledge involved in making and repairing things. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public domain. Explore Repair in The Learned Environment

A resource that can grow

The Learned Environment is conceived as an evolving body of knowledge rather than a finished publication.

Its subjects and collections can expand. New perspectives can be introduced. Connections can be developed as the environment grows.

There is also a broader possibility.

The same approach could support environments created around a particular field, community, institution, professional practice, or educational purpose.

Imagine a learning environment devoted to the knowledge of a particular place, the accumulated practices of an industry, the history of a craft, or the work of an organization.

Such environments could bring together documentation, images, historical material, practical instruction, research, and the experiences of people who know the subject firsthand.

They could become valuable resources for education, professional development, cultural preservation, and the transfer of knowledge between generations.

This is part of the longer-term ambition of the project: not simply to gather information, but to create meaningful structures through which knowledge can be encountered, understood, and carried forward.

An invitation to pay attention

At its heart, The Learned Environment is founded on a simple proposition.

The world contains more knowledge than our conventional categories allow us to see.

Some of it lives in books and institutions. Some lives in workshops, kitchens, offices, gardens, and communities. Some emerges through scientific investigation. Some develops through years of careful observation and practice.

All of it becomes more valuable when we can examine it thoughtfully, understand its origins, and recognize its connections.

The Learned Environment is an attempt to create a place for that kind of exploration.

A place where practical knowledge receives the consideration it deserves. Where subjects are allowed to connect. Where visual discovery and intellectual inquiry work together. Where curiosity is sufficient reason to begin.

And where the ordinary experience of learning about the world can become something expansive, absorbing, and deeply worthwhile.

The Learned Environment is an invitation to look more closely at what we know, how we know it, and what else there might be to discover.

Explore The Learned Environment

thelearnedenvironment.com