

THE COMMONS, COMMONPLACE, AND A SENSE OF PLACE:

What traces does the past leave on a city? The architecture, street names, conservation areas and landmarks are all visible marks of time on the urban environment. But there's another thing, not as visible, more personal, possibly even harder to shake: memory.

Tottenham Court Road was where you would go to buy a transistor radio or a Walkman, the place where you would get your computer fixed. The area became a hub for consumer electronic shops after World War II, when a surplus of military radio and electronic equipment was sold there. It stopped being that kind of centre in the early to mid 2000s, when new technologies, from online shopping to camera-enabled smartphones, disrupted this kind of commerce. Few remnants of that period are still visible. There is no monument to consumer electronics, and so this brief history now remains invisible.

In 2015, The Bedford Estates, Exemplar Properties and Ashby Capital commenced work on the building you see here today. As part of that they commissioned artist Lilah Fowler to celebrate this unseen history, retaining a link between the building to its location and its socioeconomic history – the result, the architectural lightwork piece, Commonplace.

At first, it looks simple—an exacting placement of neon lights in rows alongside the windows of One Bedford Avenue—but it's actually a complex data channel: the straight lights and square windows form a binary code of 0s and 1s, representing an encrypted text. Fowler also collaborated with Dan Browne, a physicist researching the use of quantum mechanics as a foundation for secure communication at University College London, in order to use this new quantum cryptography technology, based on an experiment by CRNS scientist Eleni Diamanti at University of Paris VI, to encode an image as a pattern on the windows' glass.

When decoded, the two encryptions spell out a single line and a page from its origin—“Our knowledge is nothing but the glass of our own imperfections”—which Fowler found in the archives of The Bedford Estates, the family who has owned the land on which Tottenham Court Road was built (in fact, a plot of land stretching from Covent Garden to Bloomsbury) since 1669. It's from the Commonplace books—which gave this piece its name—a set of annotations taken by the Fourth Earl of Bedford Francis Russell, documenting his engagement with the intellectual, financial, and political society of the seventeenth century. The image on the windows is from the “History see Chronicles” section of the book.

Our knowledge is nothing but the glass of our own imperfections: it's a complex idea about the use, span and constant change of knowledge. As we chase progress, as is visible on Tottenham Court Road, we need to remember: it's nothing but simple forward movement. Together the text and the system to convey it make up information about the place and a reflection of the different layers of its past, from its 17th-century ownership and development to its recent history as a centre for electronics. As it stretches across time, Commonplace—a permanent installation that is communicated via advanced, new quantum technology—extends this long history into the future.

How to read this artwork? Quite literally, though the work is encoded it can be deciphered and understood by people passing by. It can be seen as a public display of a memory many of the residents and visitors to the area share. Or as a documentation of the area's history. Or as public, large-scale use of new technologies. But it can also be viewed as what it is: as art. At night, when the neon lights shine on the building, they add one more layer to this project—its beauty, its visual effect. A reminder that even while this work is meant to be read, it can also be looked at.

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TOTTENHAM COURT ROAD