

LFA Building Sounds Podcast: LFA2023: Pews and Perches (Fourth Edition) - Transcript.

ELIZA: Hello and welcome back to Building Sounds, the podcast exploring the stories behind the people, places and projects in our city, brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture, I'm your host, Eliza Grosvenor.

Over the next two episodes, we will be exploring some of the project that form part of the LFA2023 programme and discovering the stories behind each of the designs.

To start with, we'll be talking with the designers of this year's Pews and Perches benches, a design competition in collaboration with the Royal Docks Team.

Now in its fourth edition, this series of benches aims to improve London's public realm, celebrate emerging architectural talent, and connect people with the buildings and spaces around them.

We start with Round The Neighbourhood in front of UTC's campus and work anticlockwise around the docks towards FLOAT at Royal Albert Wharf. The conversations can be listened to from the comfort of your own home, however for the best experience we recommend seeing the benches on site as part of a self-guided walking tour. As you walk between the benches, you will be able to pause the episode and restart at the next location.

When you are ready, our first designers Jericho and Nicolos – design and engineering students from UTC – will reveal the inspiration behind their bench, Round The Neighbourhood.

[MUSIC TRANSITION – MOVE TO FIRST LOCATION]

JERICHO: Our team is LVE, the bench's name is Round The Neighbourhood. The concept of our bench is a central spinning seat, surrounded by other seat of different parts, sizes and colours represented in different walks of life.

Many people commute through the Royal Docks, either to go to school or go towards the DLR station. Many people pass by there, so having our bench placed in that Central Area allows more and more people to come together and talk to each other and get to know one another.

One of the key inspirations of our bench is Andre Kong. Andre Kong was one of the previous winners and we wanted to promote the theme of rebirth, being sustainable is something that's more important as time goes on, so we thought it was a good idea to give Andres

bench a third life. It used to be scaffolding now it's an art piece of a bench and soon it will be reused for our bench.

After two years of avoiding social contact, it's about time we light up that social fire by getting to know each other again.

One of the key things about Round The Neighbourhood is a spinning central seat, it's meant to promote storytelling, different seats of different heights referred to different walks of life. So being able to share those stories by going around the neighbourhood that's the thing that we want to shine the most, talking to each other again.

Where we're situated is about next to a university, from my own experience not that many people talk to each other here, so being able to integrate between both uni and college is well quite important. Every person has a different story to tell, maybe in a different configuration we want people to spread around their own experiences and those stories towards each other so they can walk away knowing that they've made a new friend.

NICOLAS: When choosing the materials we were trying to think about the sustainability of the bench, so not only did we look for something that was aesthetically pleasing to the public and ourselves we also chose something that would link to the key ideas of our bench. So for those reasons we picked OSB board, because the strands that were using it were recycled from old timbers.

In order to make such large seats we had to use a band store with a certain configuration that would allow us to make the circumference much easier and have less time spent on finishing it off, in order to create an aesthetically pleasing look.

After we got through cutting all the materials down for the seats, we had to first prime it using a sustainable primer, after that was set, we were able to stain the seats separately with the colours being mainly red, orange, blue and purple.

JERICHO: We were in a separate team last year, we didn't win but we ended up taking notes after we lost, coming together and making a new team, learning from what we've done and now all of that hard work paid off - we now have a bench!

NICOLAS: Coming from somewhere where you don't get as many opportunities as near the Royal Docks or within LDUTC it was quite different from what I experienced, so not only did I find it such a nice challenge but it actually motivated me to kind of get outside of the box I've created. It was very invigorating and very life-changing basically.

[MUSIC TRANSITION – MOVE TO NEXT LOCATION]

KATE: My name is Kate.

ANDREW: And I'm Andrew and our bench is called the Chit Chat Chair! It's based beside the Royal Victoria Dock Floating Gardens.

We came to quite a strong concept in the end derived both of the festival's team being 'In Common' and the location being by the Docks, we quite liked the idea that in the past the Docks was being crazy and bustling and they've obviously gone through a decline and a quietening over 50 years but now there's a regeneration program, which is bringing a lot of public realm to quite a unique environment.

The Pews and Perches competition, you know, creates these little moments of public realm which are quite fun and the 'In Common' theme means that we quite like that idea of sparking spontaneous conversations by putting people on our bench, which is a rather intimate composition, so you almost you end up facing somebody directly, so you almost have to speak with them and so that brings a bit of the bustle back.

KATE: The bench takes the shape of a kind of s-curve so it means that when people are sitting at the bench they're indirectly facing each other which sets it apart from normal kind of park benches where people tend to sit in a linear line or sit as far away from each other as possible at either end of the bench, so I think this whole idea about maybe sparking spontaneous conversation maybe with people that you don't know people are sitting side by side facing opposite directions looking at different things but in a good position to be able to talk easily. What we really hope is that it's a kind of vessel for new conversations.

This s shape is made up of 100 vertical batons, most of them have had to be cut to a small taper to make that curved shape, which is quite a labor-intensive process but again because we're using materials that are all individually small pieces it's meant that we've been able to build the bench ourselves in the workshop and assemble it on site.

ANDREW: Both timber and steel feel very apt for a former Port, it's the material you always think of when you think of ships or barrels or anything that you imagine coming on and off ships by the quayside and there's a quality to those materials that weathers in a way that you also associate with post-industrial sites. There's also a familiarity and a tactility that people quite like, especially with timber, it feels natural but it changes over time which is quite nice.

KATE: I think we were also keen to use a off-the-shelf material and something that's very manageable piece by piece but when all these pieces are assembled hopefully make something quite unusual.

ANDREW: We've stumbled across sort of an accidental objective theme where in designing our s-shaped bench we've almost got these two cylinders that sit side by side and because they're composed from strip timber that's held together with steel braces we realize that we've accidentally created two contemporary barrels sitting side by side and you see that throughout all the historic pictures of the Royal Victoria Dock.

KATE: I think it's something really nice about doing this kind of work and a little team and kind of problem solving as you go and nothing is quite how you expect it to be things always

take longer than you expect but I think being kind of flexible about the way that you do things and the amount of time that you need to do it it's just great to be doing something practical.

ANDREW: We've built up a steady portfolio of small scale bespoke projects, ranging from anything from sheds to staircases to bits of furniture in the house - even a classroom. Because every design we do is different we always end up having to work out new processes, new tools in the workshop so we've built our confidence of handcraft which helps us go forward with our projects.

KATE: We met studying architecture and now both work as Architects so it's great to get the opportunity to actually see something that you've designed and then able to build in a relatively short period of time because most of the projects that we're involved in take years. We've always done things either for ourselves or for family or friends but doing something that's going to be in the public space and can be used and interpreted by hopefully lots of people is really exciting!

[MUSIC TRANSITION – MOVE TO NEXT LOCATION]

AKMARAL: My name is Akmaral, I'm originally from Kazakhstan and I have lived in the UK for almost 10 years now and currently I'm a London-based architectural designer.

My bench is called Together We Hold. During the making of the bench I have been reflecting on the concept a lot - I believe that the topic is not something that can be taken easily.

The competition deadline was at the end of 2022, and I remember there was a lot going on in the world, at the time and still going on. Just to highlight some of like the big issues it was a mass protests in Iran against women's dress code violations and a very scary terrible war in Ukraine and I personally have friends who used to live there and told me stories about women who were left to learn, always child care and houses without heat and electricity and like spanning all the way to the US, where kind of the abortion rights issue which is a basic human right issue happened in June 2022.

And with all that being said there is the other side, where people were creating safe space for women together and whether it's women-only Cafe in Iran where women don't have to obey the dress code or I saw Ukrainian women standing together on a Trafalgar Square in London singing, just comforting each other and creating that comforting safe space. And I find that very inspiring that standing together we can build a safe space for women and make it one of the priorities because I've modelled this now.

The bench was hugely informed by standing together, holding things together and like moving forward and trying to fight for our rights.

The design intention was that there are four women figures holding the bench up. And although the shapes are kind of flowy and curvy and it looks very joyful it almost, if you look

closely to the bench, it looks like the top is very heavy and you can see that the figures are trying to carry the weight of the top of the bench with all parts of their body no matter if it's back or face or a hand and the figures look almost uncomfortable that they're holding the bench together.

As for materials and kind of the whole structure, I was very wrong in the beginning when I was applying for the competition with my like submission. I thought there would be one piece welded together from steel and I thought that the entire part would not need any structural elements which was very silly of me but within the process and considering that we have the budget, and the fabricators sketches the materials have changed.

Initially I was using steel only so the shapes and everything looks very light and almost then like in one piece. But eventually ended up being a plywood cladding around the bench and the steel frame on the inside to hold the bench together.

With the plywood because it has a certain thickness to it, we managed to integrate an etching line where the shapes cutting through and that's why you can see that kind of in-depth and the shapes almost pop out from the bench.

It's a very inspiring once you do certain projects and once you commit yourself to something and the amount of support that you would get from people around you.

I was desperate to find a fabricator and not many Fabricators were willing to work with me because I'm kind of young and probably not very professional. But I asked my colleague if she knows anyone and she referred me to her previous manager I reached out to the manager and then her previous manager referred me to the fabricator, so that's how I found my fabricator.

From the visual perspective when the LFA reached out and said that the bench will be installed in Lyle Park I was very happy because I was designing it for this location, and I love London parks and I think colourful objects look very good surrounded by the greenery.

I think this bench is kind of a bit odd because it's so colourful and so curvy. I think it's always fun to have something odd and out of the place, especially in the park.

I would love to see kids interacting with their pedestrian interacting with it as well. I hope the bench will bring joy to people in the first place, that's the most important thing I think, with its flowing shapes and colours. I'm a big believer in colours and curves in everyday design, that they can make us feel better physically and mentally. It looks one thing but then if you look closer to it looks like completely another thing it just opens your interpretation really for pedestrians and people passing by.

We Hold Together bench is hugely influenced by my practice, which I called it side gig, both conceptually and visually - as I create prints on the side to my full-time job. The first print I created in 2020 was during my Master's thesis, at the Architecture school where I investigated hidden homelessness amongst women in the UK and the lack of access to menstrual hygiene and sanitation and the first print was a diagrammatic zoning plan which looked like a figurative shape to women and I was exploring a soft transition between

spaces for my project and the print just ended up being there in this kind of feminine flowing shapes with lots of colours in it.

What I'm exploring today through my prints is our bodies rights and the softness associated with the feminine forms and kind of trying to understand how to live joyfully within our bodies no matter what they look like and no matter what we think they should look like.

Prints, I've been doing it for three years and I've always wanted to do a physical object, which is why I think as a whole like the London Festival of Architecture provides a phenomenal opportunity for young professionals to Showcase their talent and share their thoughts and concerns. I believe there is a substantial lack of support for young creatives in general and I think we need more competitions like this.

[MUSIC TRANSITION – MOVE TO FINAL LOCATION]

KENTA: My name's Kenta.

ESTRID: And I'm Estrid.

KENTA: And we are running a practice called Akasaki Vanhuyse in South East London. Our project name is FLOAT.

Our bench is basically inspired by the site elements and the design matches to the environment.

ESTRID: The first thing we did was to go on site, to visit the site, and to walk around, take picture. Also because the brief was 'In Common', so we really try to understand where it's going to be. We noticed the site was very industrial and the maritime heritage, so we were really inspired by that for the design.

KENTA: The brief asked us to design bench which is standing on the site for more than one year, in the outside environment, so of course we care about the material which is good for water like laying or wind. We didn't want to attach to the ground so somehow we try to think the bench should be bit weight it can stand on the ground. Finally we chose a material like a bricks which is a kind of the best solution for the design this time.

ESTRID: I mean when you were there you would see only bricks. All the building from the past are made from bricks like some factories, also all the new builds they have like a brick finish ,so yeah for us it was really logical to use this.

KENTA: The bricks are modular, so the new started we were interested in the method of cutting and stacking the bricks. So the objects around the site is also carved so directly like we got the idea of the shape of land or cutting from the land around.

ESTRID: It's very unexpected to have this kind of float soft shape made from bricks, we like that it's a round shape so it creates a kind of flow around the bench it's not very intimidating you can just arrive, walk around.

KENTA: There's no hierarchy for the direction, so we can sit any positions.

ESTRID: It's quite a playful shape!

The bricks were donated by a company called Mission mesh so it was really kind. The brick we are using is actually is unused stock from the brick company.

KENTA: So it's kind of waste for the brick supplier and so they don't have the way to use them, so we decided to use those bricks turned into this bench for the public.

ESTRID: We entered the competition because Kenta's an architect, and I'm a product design. So it was a really good opportunity for us.

KENTA: This year is our year two and last year we more like focus on smaller projects like such as like stationery or writing, a very small scale but our goal is doing many type of scale of the design not only small so then let's say this year could be furniture or this kind of street furniture design as a next step - then we found this opportunity so yeah why not to challenge we think!

ESTRID: Yeah we thought the brief was really good for us.

KENTA: It's a bench design but we use kind of process of buildings actually like a material is bricks and also we are working with not only brick supplier but also contractor who is building actual real house so it's for us a really collaboration like a perspective of architects and designers.

We always try to make something in between let's say architecture and industrial design, like always using knowledge from both. I think this time it's kind of architectural language plus furniture industrial design language. It looks like a simple brick bench but actually in a very small scale we had a lot of detail actually to achieve this design. Architecture is usually we are thinking like 1:200 1:1500, this kind of scale. On the other hand like product design we think more 1:1, so we mix two type of scale of the perspectives, maybe quite this time mixed knowledge!

[MUSIC TRANSITION]

ELIZA: You've been listening to Building Sounds. This episode was produced and edited by Katya Spiers. To see learn more about the benches head to lfa.london/Pews.

It's festival month, so we'll be back with a new episode next week hearing the stories behind the 2023 Showroom Showcase designs, a design competition which sees waste

materials being transformed into innovative installations by emerging architects and designers, and then displayed in some of London's leading design showrooms.

Until then, if you've enjoyed this episode and would like to listen to more of our recent conversations, search for Building Sounds on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you find your favourite podcasts.

Until next time!