

LFA Building Sounds Podcast: LFA2023: Showroom Showcase (Third 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.

We're in festival month, and so we're continuing to explore some of the projects that form part of the LFA2023 programme and discovering the stories behind some of the designs.

In this episode, we're talking to the designers of this year's Showroom Showcase installations, a design competition in collaboration with some of London's leading showrooms – Gaggenau, Ideal Standard and Vitra Bathrooms.

Now in its third edition, this series of installations sees emerging artists, architects and designers transform waste materials connected with each of the brands into innovative installations in each of the showrooms.

We start with TIME, in Gaggenau's Wigmore Street showroom, and then move on to Clerkenwell, where we see Nebula in the showroom at Vitra, and Beauty in the Broken at Ideal Standard. The conversations can be listened to from the comfort of your own home, however for the best experience we recommend seeing the installations on site as part of a self-guided walking tour. As you walk between the showrooms, you'll be able to pause the episode and restart in the next location.

When you are ready, our first designers Raphaé and Sikander, along with Simon from Gaggenau, will discuss the collaboration behind TIME.

[MUSIC TRANSITION – MOVE TO FIRST LOCATION]

RAPHAÉ: My name is Raphaé Memon, I'm an architect and stage designer.

SIKANDER: My name is Sikander Pervez, I am a visual artist. And our installation is called TIME.

RAPHAÉ: Our installation focuses on some key themes we discussed with Gaggenau, which are perfection, craftsmanship and sustainability. We were inspired by the timeless nature of the appliances when we visited the showroom. We noticed their history and heritage from the Black Forest in Germany and the significance of the cuckoo clock as a key motif. This is something we thought was quite an interesting concept to think about.

Time is something we all have in common and it's something that we often have a complex relationship to, our own internal clock, but also our shared existence on this planet.

SIMON: I'm Simon Plumbridge, I'm Category Manager for Gaggenau and here we are in Gaggenau London, working really closely with the guys on the TIME structure, which I think works perfectly. The craftsmanship which is synonymous with Gaggenau and the level of detail which is something that we've been really known to focus on through our years of manufacturing.

SIKANDER: The brief for 'Waste Not, Want Not' was great for us because the brand itself doesn't actually produce that much waste, in how precisely they make their objects. So we took it upon ourselves to kind of go deeper into that and think of ways where we can present that actual subject of sustainability as well as other themes.

RAPHAÉ: TIME is a series of plaster cast clocks that are sitting in a vertically stacked orientation they resemble almost a cityscape of different heights and they have different depths which mean that they give you glimpses inside the showroom.

This kind of cast object is a clock which is displayed in an abstract conceptual form, it references the kind of architecture of the city, it references a key building material that Architects use.

The process behind making the clocks is mixing the plaster, pouring it into a mould, taking it out and then installing the clock mechanism. We also then made some holes in it, to mount it onto a structural frame and each clock then is hand numbered and stamped at the back, which correlates to them being limited edition art objects.

SIKANDER: The material of plaster, especially white plaster was very important to us because it does correlate to the facade of Gaggenau showroom in London. But also it's a material you find everywhere not only around this city but globally around many many buildings you see, so it's very common, it's very readable, it's very digestible as well.

RAPHAÉ: There's something about plaster being very domestic as well because it's something that we see in all our homes, with our plastered walls but also something that is used in a fine nature and a clock is a very domestic object and we thought that that domestic setting was also quite interesting when looking at the material of plaster and the object of the clock.

The collaboration between myself and Sikander is interesting because my background as a stage designer and architect meets with his background in visual art so what we wanted to do is within our practice look at the viewer and audience relationships how the viewers will view this installation from outside but when they come inside the showroom, they see the behind the scenes workings they see the back of the clocks, they see the steel structure that is holding it together. So very much similar to Gaggenau appliances there's a lot of hard work going on behind the seamless front or the facade.

SIKANDER: For us it was quite important to have the installation stacked in a certain way so it gives you glimpses within the showroom because then the viewer can consider their own movements around the installation itself, as well as place themselves within the showroom.

RAPHAÉ: Each clock when viewed from inside corresponds to a particular World Time Zone, that at the first instance relates to the spread of the Gaggenau showrooms but also unites us in talking about global time and how we have all these different time zones but time is something that we share.

SIKANDER: We made sure we incorporated the time zones from the people that actually work at Gaggenau too, so it makes it a lot more personal as well as a shared experience amongst all of us.

SIMON: I think what works really well with the installation is sustainability. It's a really serious subject and it's one that is very difficult for a brand like Gaggenau to engage with as much as we'd want to because we're talking about products that have a long shelf life and what I mean is that part of our sustainability messages you won't need to replace the product for 10, 15, 20 plus years - which is a real positive because it's less products going to landfill etc but it means that there are certain elements of energy saving technology that may not be able to be introduced into our product because we're not making technological changes as other brands are, so we have to focus on other areas.

Where we can make positive impacts is on the materials we use during production, how we produce right down to any of the scraps of stainless steel from our cutting machines are taken to other parts of our factory and used in other processes. It's a matter of looking at what the status quo is and seeing where we can challenge that without compromising the detail on the manufacturing in the production.

I think one of the key things here is we look at Global time zones, and Gaggenau is a global brand so the message that we speak about and the story that we tell doesn't change whether you're in New York, London, Paris or Shanghai. And there is one consistency to everything that we share - that's time.

RAPHAÉ: The idea of the installation is that after the period is over of the install they will be donated to people who can take them home, so the idea is that the clocks have a life after the installation and we thought it was really important to have that and not design an installation that just goes to waste after it's finished.

SIKANDER: It really has been a great collaboration between us and Gaggenau now because we were heavily inspired by their sustainability, their perfection, the craftsmanship. We've really considered what was important to the brand but also what was important in terms of the global conversation.

RAPHAÉ: The mixing of the plaster with the water is something we have controlled to ensure that there is little waste produced in this process, so very similar to zero waste cooking where we make sure that the excess by-product that is produced is either minimal or if it's produced we re-use it as aggregate to reform some of the clocks.

The clock is a very simple object but the clock is very important in telling time, it makes us think about how we use time and we can also then think about time as a crafted element and something that is designed to last.

SIMON: That handcrafted element is really important for us and it's one thing that I always like talking about. The general question I get asked is so how many of your products are still handmade and my answer to that is always the same. What surprises people is that I flip that round, if I was to tell you that there is only one production method in our factory this is fully automated everything else has hand construction element involved in it because I agree machines can do things quicker but they cannot do them better the biggest surprise when you come to the Gaggenau factory in Lipsheim is the number of people that are there. It was fantastic working with the guys because it's about having those shared value, the fact that the attention to detail, craftsmanship, sustainability - everything that we do has a purpose.

It's not about doing it for the sake of doing it, it's about doing it because what we do actually makes a difference and that's why when you meet like-minded people, it's almost not work it's just what you do, it's just such an easy thing to to get involved with, to engage and then it has a life of its own.

RAPHAÉ: This is the collaboration of multiple creative disciplines to create something. So it's it's architecture, it's interior design, it's art installation and Sikander and I felt this would be a great starting project to combine these different skills together, to create a piece of artwork that would hopefully speak to the public and also encourage the public to have more conversations and we do encourage the public to come and think about time from their own perspective.

[MUSIC TRANSITION – MOVE TO NEXT LOCATION]

ANTONIYA: My name is Antoniya Stoitsova and my installation is called Nebula. I'm an architect and a generally speaking designer based in London. My background is in mass-events architecture but I also tend to get involved in smaller scale installations, they give me the opportunity to experiment with innovative materials, with fabrication technologies but also I get to experiment with different types of user involvement that I don't necessarily get to tackle with large-scale buildings.

NICOLA: My name is Nicola Friel, I'm the Showroom Manager for Vitra London. Vitra is a Turkish manufacturer of ceramics and that encompasses tiles, bathroom sanitary ware products right through to other bathroom products including furniture, brasswear and everything you could really consider for those environments.

The showroom has been opened in Farringdon for just over two years now. This is our third exploration into LFA and the Showroom Showcase and we're really excited to be continuing in the program and in the festival. Each year has been a different kind of installation, with a

different kind of design team and that's something we've really enjoyed and this year looking at all of the proposals we were drawn to Antoniya's work because it's so beautifully architecturally sculptural and there was a really nice range of materials and then having worked on the initial concept conversations Antoniya has built on those to create this incredible structure in our space.

We've really enjoyed that collaboration and getting somebody else's creative input, and you know sharing our Showroom space. The idea of the Vitra London is that it is a hub in Farringdon for our client groups, for architects, for designers to come in and be inspired as well as specifying for their products.

ANTONIYA: The installation is a result of, to a big extent, I would say a collaboration with Vitra predominantly because it all started with discussion, I didn't have anything in particular in mind. After we had a chat we established that we wanted to work with a material that is not just a waste product from the showroom but it's a material that they work with as they develop their own product.

It was very easy to reach the conclusion that we should be working with ceramics. Now ceramics can be quite challenging it's not so easy to upcycle them, in comparison to other materials, let's say paper or plastic so we had to get very creative about it and that's how I came up with the idea of using broken down Ceramics and then mixing them together in a mixture with gypsum and some other materials and then cast that in a digitally fabricated formwork.

Vitra were very keen on developing an installation that is very sculptural, three-dimensional, which I'm always welcome to do. Since I'm an architect my brain just works in 3D!

It definitely encourages visitors to have a walk around the installation, to peek through different areas of the installation and engage with it a bit more than just observing it from from a distance.

Given that part of the brief was to work with a brand delivering this installation, I was very keen on drawing a connection between the overall look and form of the installation and Vitra's branding, so there's definitely a correlation between the visual logo and the overall form and line and curvature of the installation.

NICOLA: We're really fortunate that the showroom is based on such a busy thoroughfare on Turnmill street, with very very large open windows so having this installation in this key area means that many people will pass it. And we certainly are enjoying people noticing it and being visually intrigued by it!

What we're hoping it would do is obviously draw people in to open that conversation about that shared vision of repurposing something in an unusual way, it's about opening those conversations, it's about engaging people in in the space, having a conversation about our products and our vision.

In the showroom and we have very little operational waste because we don't supply products but as a business we are aware and working constantly to improve manufacturing processes and improves deliveries and improve everything to try and make it better and one of the things that has always been something that needs more work is what happens to these products that can't, in current methods be repurposed, what can be done with them.

ANTONIYA: Sustainability is definitely a big thing for me. At some point especially as an architect as a designer you realise that the biggest impact you can make is through the work you're doing. Especially if you're talking about larger scale pieces where the impact is so significant in comparison to my personal impact, that it will be much more relevant if I tackle my professional output. So that's why I've been working on smaller installations and art projects to a big extent because they allow me to experiment a bit more. That's the reason why I was very excited about the brief and I'm definitely working with materials that I haven't worked with before.

Even though I have experimented a lot, that particular experiment I hadn't done. So for me it does contribute to my personal growth in a way and my growth as a designer.

[MUSIC TRANSITION – MOVE TO FINAL LOCATION]

ISABELLA: My name is Isabella and my installation is called Beauty in the Broken. My work comes from the spatial perspective that's rooted in artistic practice I'm a London-based multi-disciplinary designer, so I really love to sort of adopt quite a colourful and playful approach to a project with their underlying sort of aim to make life better.

Studying in sort of an art school context always encourages this multi-disciplinary approach to projects, often dipping into graphics ceramics, products even sometimes fashion design - I love to sort of tie multiple disciplines together to create a spatial outcome.

I've been working as a freelance designer for a couple years now and sort of developing my own personal practice.

YIOTA: My name's Yiota, I work for Ideal Standard, as a senior designer based in the London showroom and our specification centre. I've been with the company since 2019, when we first opened the showroom here.

SILVIA: I'm Silvia, I'm the host in the showroom, so I'm a little bit who welcomes everybody that comes to see us in the showroom to appreciate all the beautiful products that we display here. We have sustainability in mind this year, so we're really pleased to to work in in the company as Ideal Standard.

YIOTA: Ideal Standard is a really exciting company to work for, really working with amazing designers and collaborating with designers and creating lots of new designs and technologies behind bathroom ceramics and brassware etc.

ISABELLA: I wanted to sort of think about waste not as something that's discarded or thrown away, I think there was a nice opportunity with this brief to turn that on its head and sort of turn the trash into treasure if you like.

The idea was to sort of utilize those waste materials from the manufacturing process in order to create the installation, so instead of sort of hiding all of that process away really kind of celebrating it, bringing it right to the front and sort of celebrating those as objects next to the final product. So both show off the innovation of the brand and the technology and all the design processes and the craftsmanship but also to give passers by an opportunity to really see the process amongst the final piece.

With the showroom being mostly based around ceramics I took a trip up to the factory to kind of explore all the processes and obviously the main material used within the process is ceramic, so we're using a lot of the waste materials from that process so it's completely constructed from ceramics.

When visiting the factory there were all these checkpoints where there was quality control measures being used so at the end of one part of the process whether that be glazing or the formworks being created or like hand finishing or drying. Along all sort of those parts of the process there would be inspections and where some pieces might have been warped, scuffed, scratched or not exactly right and then they get discarded, they get reused and turned back into a slip to go back into the beginning of the process.

The concept of the project was to reveal the magic of the process and celebrate that beauty and the imperfection we want to take those pieces instead of kind of re using them within the process to take the sink that might have not been beautifully finished or slightly warped in the process and actually take that object in and celebrate it and have that in the window as well.

The showroom is beautifully curated and has all these finished pieces in situ and we wanted to kind of explode from those little moments of perfection into the process so taking those pieces from the factory and we have suspended them from the ceiling.

Pieces are sort of hanging weightlessly, they're using these waste materials broken pieces we really want to sort of showcase those different processes during the design and doing that craft.

Some pieces are glazed, some are unglazed, some haven't been fired yet and some came from right at the beginning of the process when the ceramic was delivered and sifted through. The overall concept of the design was to sort of collect these pieces and by products from the factory and the showroom that would otherwise have been discarded or thrown away and so these pieces that were seen as sort of imperfect, broken flawed or faulty, elevate these pieces and display them within the window sort of bringing the factory down to London, showcasing the process and the history of the craft by presenting them as the sort of beautiful artefacts in conjunction with their final finished pieces, to sort of showcase that nothing needs to be wasted.

YIOTA: This is the first time that we've worked with a designer to come up with a beautiful design for our window displays, so it's super exciting. There's a huge focus from Ideal Standard this year, and obviously moving forward, which is a huge focus on sustainability across lots of different parts of our manufacturing process, and even down to the parts of our plants and functional ways of working in our warehouses.

This focus on celebrating the waste elements through our manufacturing process is really amazing, it's actually nice to take those pieces and those offcuts and really celebrate them and make them into something beautiful - which is what they should be celebrated for.

SILVIA: Before the pandemic we were doing some events in the showroom but they've been always linked with fashion, with healthcare, with natural foods and we always have in mind that we wanted to do something related with art because the showroom is beautiful is the perfect canvas to do an installation like this - the perfect match.

ISABELLA: I think we all just kind of had a really similar vision for the installation I think we're all super passionate about this idea of celebrating the process so it's come about really nicely.

YIOTA: From first concepts through to design, I think we've fully trusted Isabella with her vision and from first instance we kind of gelled and really understood the output that we wanted from it.

SILVIA: The installation itself is quite thought-provoking, so it's like it's quite visual itself, you can understand where it comes from and where it goes but also it's like a conversation starter.

ISABELLA: I think it would be really nice for people to just reimagine waste. Instead of it being something to look upon us like un-useful or sort of discarded, I guess sort of visually celebrating it in a really beautiful way can hopefully have a bit more of an impact on how we how we see waste generally, especially in the design industry it's really nice to use those pieces and present them proudly. Things that aren't necessarily perfect can actually be really beautiful.

[MUSIC TRANSITION]

ELIZA: You've been listening to Building Sounds. This episode was produced and edited by Katya Spiers. To learn more, head to lfa.london/ShowroomShowcase.

We'll be back with a new episode next month, exploring some of the built projects that are part of the 2023 programme.

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.