

Building Sounds – December 2024 - Designing tomorrow's workplaces: A conversation with Zaha Hadid Architects

Eliza Hello and welcome to Building Sounds, the podcast exploring the stories, people and projects that shape London's built environment. I'm your host Eliza Grosvenor, Head of Programme at the London Festival of Architecture. A new month means a new podcast, and we're back for another conversation on our LFA theme of Reimagine.

Last episode, we were joined by members of the DisOrdinary Architecture Project and Re-Fabricate to talk about accessibility in the city, how we can all work together to shape a more inclusive and equitable city, as well as the challenges that still lie ahead. In this conversation, we're shifting from the scale of the city to the office and exploring the present and future of workplace design.

To delve into this topic, I'm joined by Gerhild and Uli from Zaha Hadid Architects. Welcome to you both. To start with, could you both introduce yourselves? And maybe a bit about your work for the practice.

Gerhild: Hi, I'm Gerhild Orthaker. I work here at Zaha Hadid Architects since 17 years. I came here after my studies. I studied in Vienna at the University of Applied Arts where Zaha Hadid was teaching at that time.

So I came here to work here afterwards and I've been since working on a lot of exciting projects here, mostly on new designs or concept designs. And so we have a cluster in this office which basically focuses on early design stages, and I'm part of that.

Uli: My name is Uli Blum. I've been with Zaha Hadid Architects for 12 years.

I'm co heading the Zaha Analytics and Insights Team. We are a small team working with all the colleagues on a workplace project. We create algorithms to analyse space in order to help us to optimize floorplates and offices and other projects. And very much, we try to use data to enable better decision taking insights from how buildings are used now and feed that into how we design.

Eliza: Amazing. So we're going to come on to the project we're talking about in just a moment, but before we do, I've got a couple of quick fire questions. So first, what is your favourite place, space or building in London?

Uli: Because workplace is what I really love, I like Second Home from Selgas Cano. That for me is very amazing. It is colourful and amazing materials. It, it has a lot of green in it, thousands of plants. So it's very biophilic design and it's a community. And I think it's a quite a good thing to create places that form communities as spaces.

Gerhild: There's a lot of great buildings here, but I think I would say the Tate Modern just because it's something I love to go back to. It's evolved so much, it kind of gives space to everyone and everything.

Eliza: They're two very different but brilliant spaces. Second question, the theme for LFA 2024 is Reimagine. What does Reimagine mean to each of you?

Gerhild: I think it's a big theme for us here. We try to reimagine new ideas in every project, in every new project. Zaha was very big on trying new things and not just redoing and recycling or kind of doing the same thing. She would, like, throw things back at us. So I think that's something very, very interesting to us. Like something we want to keep alive and something we work on every day.

Uli: I think we need to reimagine all the time because architects build for the future and you need to already, be with your mindset, in the future. It takes from three to ten years for a project to be realized and if you don't reimagine what the building could be, then it can't be really futureproof. And also my team spends a lot of effort into understanding what the drivers and forces are that

shape the buildings for tomorrow. And yeah, and imagination is obviously what really drives us as architects anyway. Inspiration, imagination.

Eliza: I think this sort of response to designing and this changing world, the climate crisis, change of ways of using and working in the city, we can't design in the same way we have done previously. And this is something I think you probably had to think about when it comes to your new Alis pods.

For people who are unfamiliar with this project, could you perhaps give us a background to the Alis pods?

Uli: Well, it is kind of reimagining how a meeting room could work. In the past, we would build meeting rooms by building walls and doors. And if you wanted to change something, you would need to bring in several different contractors.

And with this one, you could take it apart and put it somewhere else. It can be put indoors, or it could be put outdoors. It could be a pop-up meeting room that's, that is located in an unused space and people can actually go there. The idea is that you go there, you book with an app to say, okay I'll book it from then and then and I could just go anywhere in the city where it's located and go into that room. That's the kind of bigger picture, which I find really interesting about it. It is an architecture that really makes it really nice to spend time in and meet in this place. And it's also so distinct that it's recognizable and has its own character. It also integrates technology into the architecture. So it's more than just a room.

Eliza: So it sounds like a lot of thought has really gone into how architecture and technology comes together, born out of struggles that have existed previously, but also a desire to rethink what this space could be. Where did the project originate?

Gerhild: The project started like quite a long time ago, and I think it was before the pandemic as well.

So it has not to do with the kind of, you know, new ideas of people rethinking the workspace throughout the pandemic. I think the first designs were even 10 years ago or something like that. Basically, it was just about thinking, how can we create something very different to what is existing and reimagine it.

So it really is that drive, I think we have here for the project, how could that be different? And working with this company, they provide this more mobile kind of glass boxes, but how could that be different? And I think for me also being in there, right, you can see how it creates in a quite intimate space by these wings, Alis is wings in Latin. So it has these kind of wings around and it creates a really intimate space in a way what we need for a meeting but still have that opening and the kind of connection to the outside as well by the glass roof, the glass corners. It's very mobile and kind of flexible. You can dismantle it in a lot of small pieces to create it easily to bring it to a different place.

Uli: And behind that is also the bigger idea that we want to create spaces that can evolve, that can learn from how they're used and evolve. And if, if one learns that it's too small, you could make it bigger. And if you imagine the whole office be like an evolving organism, then I think that is much more future-proof than what we do in the past, where every 15 years, a new designer comes, rips out, everything, puts something new in.

Now we want to design space that are more long lasting, well, because they are able to change. I think this idea also applies to products. In the past, you would develop a product completely to be finished. You don't evolve it any further, even a product can, can evolve over time. You learn from things that don't work so well. And the next iteration that you build, you give it almost more abilities. Like with software, right? You download the latest update. And I think that could also apply possibly to products. And I know this one doesn't have yet air conditioning in it, but it could have, it might come in the next iteration with a more sophisticated AV system, also then the sensors can change and the projections and all sorts of things.

Gerhild: Exactly. That's what I was thinking. I think that's a big factor, which could be quite exciting that it adapts a bit more visually and potentially even with some artificial intelligence or something, how it adjusts to you slightly more when it knows the person who enters.

Uli: It might speak to you. I mean, you might've seen the latest speaking chat GPT, you might have a real conversation and ask it to search the internet for certain information. So you, you literally have this ability in the future space.

Eliza: So in many ways it's really a prototype of a new way of working, but also perhaps existing in the world, which they'll find a bit scary, but also it's something we can't ignore.

And obviously, thinking about the practice as an international practice, how have you found this has helped with a sort of collaborative experience of working?

Uli: That is something that is constantly evolving. You point sort of to hybrid meetings that not always are so seamless. And we've been experimenting a lot in our new office, and we've learned a lot, but I think there's more room for improvement. For this space, I think what could be great if it creates a seamlessness, I think seamlessness is really important and you could think of all sorts of things with even projection mapping or, or holograms, but what, what we really need is a space that has this personality.

Eliza: So this project was started pre-COVID and the pandemic has shifted many ways of working, particularly working from home, left in the office. Has this had an influence on choice of materials in this space?

Gerhild: It's a huge influence. I think we've been chatting about this before. I think the way how the office now thinks about working, working on a specific desk in a specific place has changed completely.

And I think Uli's team and the team that worked on the renovation of this office, which was decided on during the pandemic that we're going to renovate these spaces and make them more for the future working has done a great job to, to think about these things and come up with new ideas. We have much more collaborative spaces now in our office than before. We're using a hot desking system, so everyone can come in, book their space, on an app and you can sit wherever you want every time, like you can kind of be quite flexible and, and for me as a user, mostly because Uli knows much more about the background of the design of this, but it's been such an improvement and, and even the shift of how the leadership in the office thinks about how people should work together, collaborate, how often they get to work from home, all these kinds of things have evolved so much for everyone in the world, I assume in the last few years. I think it's a very positive shift.

Uli: I think this autonomy that, that we have to work in the office when we want and as many days as we want, but also if we prefer to work from home, we can do that. I think that that is really appreciated by many colleagues and we've looked at the booking system and we have installed sensors we get an understanding of booking behaviours and we find some really interesting patterns that I thought, 'oh, it will be great to bring teams back together on one desk.' But then we noticed a lot of people are quite happy to be spread out over, over the two buildings that we have.

Gerhild: Just choose their favourite space.

Uli: Yes. I think that's this personality. You choose what suits your personal needs in terms of space. What you do when you book randomly, you meet other people.

And that's very important for young architects here. And Gerhild said that when we talked before, how important it is that the new architects, that they learn from others when they sit next to others who already might be detailing a building. And so they learn from that. It's the ties between people that are not project related, but are really important. And that's what got lost during COVID. Also, because we have these many more collaborative spaces now, I have the fourth floor, which is a social space, really it's, it's brought people together that way as well. I think that is a really important part also of what the office is trying to do. To bring people together in many different ways.

We also have a lot of events downstairs and the gallery where, where we are connected to other artists, other architects, to universities, we have a robotics lab downstairs where we can bring working students and architects can work together and create imaginative new ideas. It's quite unique for practice to have almost everything take place in one building and not spread out over several buildings, which I think is really interesting.

Eliza: It's a unique way of working, particularly in London where space is limited, but obviously following pandemic, we're only starting to really notice the pattern of using the space, but are there any learnings that you've gathered already that have changed the way you're going to be moving forward with this space that we're in now, but also any other projects that you're working on, particularly when it comes to workplace design?

Gerhild: Oh, yes. Of course. Like Uli said, it's a process. The office now is not a static place anymore. You know, there's a continuous conversation about this, which is great, which never was a question before. And I think in projects it's the same, like, I mean, obviously there's a lot ongoing in office projects, but also residential, for example, like a very big shift in residential as well, because a lot of people are working from home.

Can they accommodate for that without having to buy a huge space? How can that be more comfortable for people in office? I mean, Uli can talk about this a bit more, I think in the office, we're trying to rethink and adapt and reimagine.

Uli: Yeah. It's somehow more changed in the last three years than the last 30 years and in the office field. And we are seeing exactly the, the issue that people don't naturally come to the office. It needs to be good. That's what you kind of hinted at. You can't build a space in what is all white and with bench desks because people are used to be at home, having a cozy atmosphere, a space they're completely free to change and personalize.

So you need to also offer this much more about what two people need to work well when they meet each other. So, so it's, it's about coming together and, and creating the spaces for that. So I think it changes a lot.

Eliza: Picking back up on your point of challenges, the practice is quite forward thinking, but have you found there are any areas where there are still challenges when it comes to clients or collaborators on projects who maybe haven't moved quite so quickly in either ways of thinking, ways of aligning, material usage, et cetera?

Gerhild: I think it's something also we are trying to help our clients to also see new ways and push them in a way to see. Those new possibilities and things we've recently worked on a project together Uli and I, which was quite interesting for an office tower and trying to think of how the core could be different, how people actually come out of your lift into a space which greets you in a way.

I think it was quite a challenge to also convince the client that it's, you know, they're spending potentially a little bit more of the saleable area on space which might be there just for people to socialize or feel better and want to come to the office. I think that's always something we, we kind of work with, like, how can we, how can we bring these new things and how can we convince clients especially to, to invest a little bit on, on those kinds of. More, more future proof spaces.

Uli: And in some way, what, what I find challenging is, is to convince client, uh, how additional cost for sustainability to convince them that it pays off later. And particularly with our architecture, it is, I think it is more long lasting. It costs maybe more upfront, but it's, it's very long lasting because it has a quality that,

that, that is more unique and therefore people may hang onto it longer and that is, that is a, I feel a challenge that to create this kind of understanding with clients. Yeah. Well, what we already can see in the future, it is more about experience rather than efficiency. Because space, the cost of space isn't so important if the people who work in the space are the most important resource and if you make them happy, then the cost of the building is negligible.

Eliza: I think there's something around confident building in case studies. It's a bit of a seeing is believing in some ways. So I think it's often quite challenging to be among the first, but at the same time exciting.

Although I do think more and more people are realizing how crucial. Innovation is, and the importance of breaking out of silos, bringing together science, art, geography with architecture. Has this been in your way of thinking about this project and why small ideas are practiced?

Gerhild: I think the challenges will always be there. I think there's always challenges. There's always also different ideas. I think the good thing that we are, that we are pushing that hard is that few things are always getting done. You know, a few things we always get through and, and maybe not all of them, but slowly, slowly you [00:20:00] kind of are able to have a repertoire in your portfolio, which you can show different things and you can show the clients and look, look at that actually, that has worked.

I think we're really lucky in general because obviously clients come to us which are already quite open to new invention or to something spectacular, you know. So we're obviously very lucky, I think, in that kind of thing.

Uli: I mean, another challenge I, which we are happy to work on is the integration of AI in the design process.

And one example is my colleagues created an algorithm that learns from existing Saha architecture and can apply it to newly designed architecture. So it's a kind of a, it learns a style that we're using and can be used as inspiration, which is

really great. And also what we want to do and what we are working on is to learn while we design, the performance of a certain building of the floor plate. Is it big enough? Is it, is it, does the core sit at the right position? How far is it away from light? And there's so many parameters. And I think while you design, you could have an algorithm in the background that churns out different solutions and even tell us which parts of solutions work well and that allows us to, to design better buildings. And I think we're, we're working on that and quite successfully already. And in the future, there will be more of that.

Eliza: That's going to be my next question. So, what is the future of workplace or is it too early to tell?

Gerhild: Well, I think in general yeah, in the office we have, you know, we have quite a few research groups, different ones, which look at sustainability as well and potential coding or manufacturing processes, things like that.

I think we always look for what could be new in different ways without even having a specific project in mind. And I think that's something very important that we keep alive as well in our, in our business. I think that's what makes it so special as well, that there are these people who have a bit of freedom, like what Uli was just saying as well with the AI testing and things like that.

Where we not specifically say, okay, we focus just on our projects, but we focus on the repertoire and we focus on creating new designs, on new ideas. Generally it's what we do all the time. What it exactly is, I don't want to give you a specific answer to that because there's so many things, so many things.

I mean, the AI is one part of thinking more sustainable is a huge part of it, but technology in general. And I think also, not forgetting about the humans and the people.

Uli: And I may add to that, what we're working on in the area of office is to think of space as self-learning, self-evolving, so that space can be changed or has the means to change itself, to be always in the perfect condition for the particular

humans at a particular time for me, that is also one of the big solutions for topics of sustainability, because if you use a building more intensively, that's the most sustainable thing you can do right now, most buildings are barely used offices are used 35 to 50 percent university buildings, seminar rooms, maybe 20 percent or less.

I think if we are able to design buildings that have meaning at different times of the day and week and weekend and over time, then we don't need to build so many specific buildings that have only one function.

Eliza: And this sort of rethinking of space and of the practice is something that does happen. And actually I came to the gallery space a few months ago for performance and it was really amazing to see it activated with lighting, sound, performance artists. really shaping what that space could be. But thinking about that idea of rethinking, reimagining again, is there a part of the building or the industry or city more widely that if you could, that you would reimagine?

Gerhild: Reimagining ideas on the buildings, but also the cityscape and the urban kind of landscape. How do public spaces work? And there's a lot to learn with what cities do, how they, there's a lot of new pedestrian areas are created in the city, as you know, there's a few in London now opening as well, where they pedestrianised the areas and streets. And I think it all has to do a little bit with this coming together and trying to make people more comfortable.

Uli: I mean, one aspect of that could, for example, be to design a building where all the amenities are not just for the use of the building, also given back to the city. So the city. becomes sort of an extension of the office and the office building becomes an extension of the city.

So the inside and outside spaces seamlessly merge together. And I mean, that is, it's a very powerful thought that, that buildings can be so integrated and that's what we try to achieve.

Gerhild: And I think that was also the reason for the gallery downstairs. Yeah, you know that was somehow pushed for that when we first moved it to this building in 2012.

Uli: It needs to be thought together, the soft stuff and the hard stuff, the building, I think that's a challenge, but I think we have a mindset shift that, that thinks of architecture in a much broader way.

Eliza: If people are interested in all the things you're talking about, or want to visit the space for themselves, where can they find out that information?

Gerhild: We are often doing tours of the office as well, like we have people come, we have students coming in, looking around, we, I mean, obviously there's a lot of public events downstairs in the gallery.

Eliza: Great. And online, where can they find out about the Alis pod or any other projects that you're working on?

Gerhild: We are working at the moment on our new website, so that's something to hopefully kind of come out in a year or so or next year at some point. But it's something quite important to us, I think, and it goes together with this new identity also, which we have here in the office.

And I think it will be quite exciting, but generally for users, I would say. You can find, you can find it quite easily if you look for new things to do. And then many of us speak now at conferences, workspace related or sustainability. We go to fairs, trade fairs, exhibitions. Also trying to work a bit more with NLA and other kind of London based organisations.

Eliza: I think we've come to the end of the conversation, but is there one final thing you wanted to, wanted our listeners to take away from this conversation?

Uli: Well, I feel that the most important note is that one should see architecture, not just as building, but much more than that. One should think it more from people point of view and what it does for our people. How it brings people together, how it increases and strengthens and, and encourages networks of people and, and their experiences.

Gerhild: I think I would have said something similar, like always push. I think for us, that's something I think we've learned. We kind of like, you know, we always want to push to find new things, new approaches, new imagination. I think that's something for anyone. It doesn't have to be a designer or an architect.

Eliza: What a great place to finish! So, thank you for being part of this conversation and exploring what reimagined means to practice and for workplace design.

Listeners, if you have any thoughts, ideas, or questions about the LFA theme of reimagined, please do send us an email to info@londonfestivalofarchitecture.org. We'll be back next month with a new conversation. Until then. If you liked this conversation, you can follow Building Sounds on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, wherever you find your favourite podcasts.

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