

Building Sounds – January

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. Over the last few episodes we've been unpacking the LFA 2024 theme of 'reimagine' with some of our Curation Panel members and close collaborators. Conversations have ranged from topics such as equity in the industry and how we can design more inclusive cities, to the future of workplace design.

In this conversation we're taking it back – almost 20 years to be precise – to the start of the Festival. So 2024 marks 20 years since the inaugural London Festival of Architecture. So it's quite a big year ahead for us. We thought it would be a good moment to reflect back on how the Festival began and how it helped transform the way London thinks about architecture and celebrate some of the people and projects that've been part of it, as well as provide some inspiration and challenges for those who want to be part of the upcoming 2024 programme. To do all of this I'm joined by the founder of the Festival Peter Murray and one of our 2024 Curation Panel members, Moira Lascelles.

Thank you very for joining us now I've just hinted to your connections to the Festival, but for listeners who may not be familiar with you and your work, if you briefly introduce yourself further.

Peter

I'm Peter Murray, I'm co-founder of New London Architecture, but also the founder of the London Festival of Architecture. Or at least it was founded the Clerkenwell Architecture Biennale, but has evolved into the Festival.

Moira

And I'm Moira Lascelles, I'm Executive Director and Head of Partnerships at UP Projects. We curate and commission public art, we work with some of the most exciting artists working today, bringing their work out into public spaces and places across the UK. We have a very special focus on social practice, so working with communities to engage them through the process of creating public art. I was also an LFA Coordinator in 2008 and a Consulting Curator in 2010.

Eliza

Yes, so the perfect two people to be speaking to about the Festival this year. Before we get into the Festival, I just want to ask a couple of quick-fire questions. So what is one word that comes to mind when you think of London's built environment?

Peter

Trafalgar Square.

Moira

I was going to say vibrancy.

Eliza

I know I said this was a quick-fire question, but now I'm curious, why those answers?

Moira

I think London is an absolutely unique city in terms of its history, architectural history. You walk along and you turn and at every corner and every public space you can tell a story of what happened in London as a city. I think that is absolutely exciting and I am yet to find a city that kind of keeps me as excited as London to be honest.

Peter

Trafalgar Square because it totally changed the conversation about place in London it formed a part of a project that Richard Rogers showed the exhibition in the Royal Academy in 1986 about pedestrianising the area around Whitehall and Trafalgar Square and also a park The Thames. That then came to fruition as a part of a Millennium project that was supported by Ken Livingstone, as Mayor, and it created an example of how we can transform spaces. There were the usual complaints by motorists and taxi drivers that it was going to hold up the traffic too much, but experience shows that that didn't actually happen but it has created a place in London that we can be proud of, where before it was just a busy polluting deadly roundabout.

Moira

And I think it's testament to how London can change through the ages and how it actually adapts to what modern day life means and how we use public spaces in London, because I

totally agree, I was there recently for the Japanese festival – a celebration of Japanese culture – and that has transformed the way that people can occupy that space I think and its relationship to the museums there.

Eliza

And actually picking up on both of those points, the theme for this year's festival is 'reimagine', what does reimagine mean to you both, for London, for the context of your work, what does it mean to you?

Moira

Obviously I've got a bit of insight into the conversation we had around choosing the topic of 'reimagine' as part of the curatorial panel, and I think we felt like we're living in a very particular moment right now, of crisis it feels like, the climate crisis the housing crisis the cost of living crisis. And what's always really excited me about the role of architecture is it's a political act and it has power and I think that we wanted this Festival to be a moment to actually reflect and reimagine and it ties into what you were saying, Peter, is actually be bold and think differently and proactively put those suggestions forward and use the Festival as a catalyst to try those ideas out or voice those ideas publicly in a public forum because that's the power I think of the LFA. It is a moment where you don't have to have all the answers yet but you can start to say let's think about doing things differently and I really think currently where we're living, the moment we live in, and we need to be thinking these systems a lot of the systems are not working for us and we have to reimagine them.

Peter

I think you're absolutely right it's the power of LFA but it's also the power of the architectural profession more generally. I think they are reimagining things all the time. I guess a lot of the problems they have is that they are having to respond to the situation as they find it to clients' requirements but actually if you start talking to the more generally about changes that could be taking place, then the Festival can give voice to all those ideas and I think it could be very productive and even those things may not be relevant right today or may not be deliverable today they do provide a pattern as to how we can change as you say to take into consideration all those critical issues that we're all facing at the moment.

Moira

And I think that picks up on something that's been in the Festival, or firmly in the Festival programme definitely since I was involved, and an example of that is when we closed Exhibition Road in 2008. It was a scheme that was going to happen, shared space vision by Dixon Jones

that did come to fruition a few years later but it allowed conversations to happen, it allowed people to actually say 'oh!'. You know it felt very progressive, it felt scary to people, but actually the Festival said, look, let's close it, let's have a look how you can start to tell this story to the public as well as to the profession and let's also have a look at if any issues come up, you know it's a test bed wasn't it? And I think that's what the Festival does offer I totally agree with you Peter, I mean that the profession is reimagining constantly and this is just a catalyst to kind of bring that to the fore.

Peter

I think actually the Exhibition Road had some quite sort of pragmatic beginnings really it was driven very much by Daniel Moylan who was then a councillor at Kensington and Chelsea and he put forward some proposals to improve placemaking at Sloane Square and had had huge kickback from local residents and the project had floundered. So he thought that actually in order to keep the momentum up, at Exhibition Road to close it off for a weekend so that local residents would actually see what the wider impact was, and also the museums who face onto Exhibition Road could see the benefits of it. I think that went along way to the success of the project and actually convincing local communities that it was going to be a good thing to do.

Eliza

That's a really good product actually to anyone on or around the area and I really want to pick up on that point in a minute around the impact the Festival has had in the previous years, but for people for whom this is the first time hearing about the Festival, or who know about the last few years, but not where it began – Peter could you walk us through the early days of the Festival?

Peter

Well I first had the idea that we should have one in London when I was at Venice. Two of my close friends Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic had been directors of the Biennale in Venice, and I guess maybe I was feeling a bit left out really, but I thought Venice is a fantastic architectural event and I've just from all over the world, there are great exhibitions and it's very good for the tourist industry but actually does absolutely nothing for Venice as a city there's no impact on the city, there's no communication or relationship with the people who live in Venice, and so I saw that what we needed was some sort of festival in London that did relate much more to local communities and involved the public in thinking about their place. So I got back to London and I spoke to somebody who wrote for the Architects' Journal, Zoe Blackler, and told her what I was thinking. So she wrote about it in the Architects' Journal, so after that there was no going back really, I had sort of committed to doing something.

And so I had calculated that there were more architects per square metre in Clerkenwell than anywhere else in the world so I thought let's focus it on Clerkenwell, where my offices were at the time conveniently, and so I got a few people together. Particularly a chap called Richard Jones who was our first treasurer which is really important, and we went out to get a bit of funding to support it and then went to meet a chap called Alfie Buller of BB Developments, who actually owned a large chunk of Clerkenwell at the time, and told him about it he was very enthusiastic and said I'll sponsor it. And I think I think he said £35,000, which seemed an awful lot of money at the time and so we went ahead with it, so we started planning it, we raised money in small amounts from lots of practices in Clerkenwell and beyond, and then we sent the invoice to Alfie Buller, which even today has not still been paid, but the thing was that it actually set the ball rolling, so I'm grateful, though it would be nice to get the money one day.

Clerkenwell was ideal, partly because also it had also then started to fill up with lots of showrooms which were attracting people from all over the city to come and look at furniture and carpets and all that sort of thing. But also one of the great benefits of it was that there was a building which was called the Farmiloe Building, which was a Victorian builders merchant which had been there since the mid-19th century and had recently moved out, but there was this wonderful Dickensian feel to the building and when we actually went into look at it there was still ledgers and so on in the basement dating back 50-60 years, just scattered around in the mud and grime of what was going to be building site. But it happened and they hadn't started development, it now has been developed to designs by AHMM, but at that time it was a rough warehouse with a shed that they used to cut Pilkington's glass in and that made a fantastic focus for the whole event.

So we decided now, how do you actually get the public to attend something which is related to architecture, which most people think is outside their area of direct interest? So that's where we came up with the idea of using Longhorn cattle to drive down St John Street, which was traditionally where drovers would bring cattle from the North and they would be slaughtered at Smithfield. But the interesting thing is that shape of St John Street is actually generated by that historic usage, it widens out in the bottom and still it is, rather like sort of in cowboy westerns when the drovers come in there are pubs all along the street and actually that is still full of places of refreshment, and of course St John, that they might say is the architects' restaurant was right next door to the Farmiloe Building.

So everything came together there so we grassed over the street, we had quite a lot of trouble with the TfL and buses over the cows, so we couldn't actually drive the cows north of Clerkenwell Road but they came down the grass street and were coral in the centre of Saint John's widened space, which we hoped Islington Council would then turn into a park later on. It never happened, but it did work. It's amazing, when you put turf down on the street then it changes the way people use it totally, and I can remember 4:00 in the morning of the Friday night before we kicked off for the weekend, people coming out of Fabric, the nightclub under Smithfield, and they came out to their and there was this park in front of them they were all laying out on the grass as we were preparing for the next day, when we had about 50,000

people turned up to see these wonderful Longhorn cattle drive down St John Street and with those sorts of numbers that we realised that we had hit on our hands really.

Eliza

Amazing, and actually animals were a big part of exploring how we could use space and playfully demonstrate ownership, or rules in our public space, could you tell us about the sheep drive which I think is another sort of iconic moment that was part of the early Festival?

Peter

We decided to drive sheep across the Millennium Bridge which is a reference to the fact that liverymen of the City of London are able to drive sheep across London Bridge. But at that stage the Millennium Bridge was a fairly new piece of infrastructure, so we wanted to look at the impact that new infrastructure like that had had on the economies of the area. So we asked Norman Foster – the designer of the bridge – if he would shepherd the sheep across, which he agreed to do, but two days before, he said sorry ‘I’ve got a client meeting, can’t do it’. And so I thought well what else can I do, so I rang up Richard Rogers and I said ‘are you free on Saturday?’, and so he said ‘yes I am’ and he said ‘oh Renzo’s with me here would you like Renzo Piano to join me?’, so I said ‘yeah, absolutely’ so we had Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano leading the sheep across the bridge and so Richard and Renzo managed to successfully shepherd the sheep up to Smithfield market where I have to say they weren’t slaughtered but they were sent back to Cumbria where they come from.

Eliza

Moira, coming on to you now, so prior to being a Curation Panel member, as you mentioned you were closely involved in the early years. When did your journey with the LFA begin?

Moira

So I came in when it had kind of definitely grown from what Peter was describing, but was actually being delivered by the NLA at that point, or we were sitting within the NLA, so we were very small team Sarah was the deputy director, Nick McKeogh was working on it, and then big shout out to my fellow coordinators, Amy and Zoe.

And we were a small team but we were told that it was kind of one of the biggest years, the 2008 one, which kind of was when I had the impression that the Festival had kind of grown in popularity, and I think we had something like 800 events taking place across the city at that point. It was the year of the closure of Exhibition Road. And I think what I’ve always enjoyed or

interested me as a curator was this point that Peter talked about how you bring architecture to life, to the public, because it is something that people sometimes don't feel that they have enough knowledge about or can't participate in that kind of dialogue, so I think it was really exciting to see how the Festival through events, through installations, through its programming, could open up those conversations as you said to a broader public, not just the industry.

And then it went on from there so, in 2010 I sat at the Architecture Foundation so at that point it was actually delivered by a number of different partners RIBA London, NLA and the Architecture Foundation. I was sitting at the Architecture Foundation and curated a temporary installation called the Union Street Urban Orchard which was bringing a meanwhile site to life kindly lent to us by Roger Zogolovic of Solid Space, and we activated that space into a temporary orchard and community garden that was very much about, you know how do you curate architecture, let's curate in a live way, let's actually activate this public space that at the moment is underused and raise awareness of the of a broader masterplan that was being looked at introducing in that area, which was the Bankside Urban Forest Vision. And that project left a legacy of 85 fruit trees being planted onto estates across Southwark, so I think again kind of brought in how can you use the Festival as a vehicle for legacy, as a vehicle of raising awareness of what's happening today, but also making proactive steps of what's going to happen tomorrow.

Eliza

Yeah and I think that still stands very true to what we aim to do with the Festival today and it often takes a lot of work to make that a reality but when it does go right, it pays off in a massive way. And I think we can see that Festival events and projects of all scales really have an impact on both the city and individuals in a really positive way, whether that be in terms of confidence when thinking about architecture and the city, or with people's careers and projects. Have there been any events or projects that have particularly stood out to you or shaped your ways of thinking or practising?

Moira

I mean I've already mentioned the Orchard so I probably shouldn't talk about that one, but I did a project in the same year called the Ecos Project, which actually kind of goes under the radar, but it was a 30-seater theatre created out of recycled and reused material again in Bankside, and using a space that they wanted to activate and it was a partnership with a theatre company. And I think the power of the Festival to galvanise kind of interdisciplinary dialogue as well is quite interesting, and then raise awareness of the climate emergency in that case was quite exciting, and I mean it's definitely influenced my practise – I'm a curator that works outside the walls of the gallery with communities activating public spaces in ways that maybe people haven't imagined before, so from the trajectory of my career it's definitely you know being super informative.

Peter

I think there are so many things, those things which have fun together with learning I think are really memorable, and I'd the first festival in Clerkenwell, there was a competition for schools where some people brought a relatively small inflatable swimming pool and children had to build a bridge out of plastic bottles strapped together to create a bridge that their parents had to walk over and that was that was a really good exercise in construction and engineering for the children and also showed faith their parents had in them as potential engineers I suppose. A lot of them fell off so it was quite amusing I think for everybody else, not so much for the parents! But as I say it was it was a lesson and it was fun. Another one of the things that was quite interesting, which I think was the same year, Bompas and Parr, who have now become very famous as one might say food curators, they held a jelly competition, people designing buildings that were jelly moulds, and that ended up with a festival outside UCL with all sorts of jelly events where prizes were handed out and I thought again that was something really interesting, it was a lot of fun but it made people think a lot about actually how things stood up what things you didn't make out of jelly and those things that actually really worked in this very complex building material, but also it did then actually create this environment where Bompas and Parr went on and became global figures in food.

Moira

I think that is a really good point about emerging practitioners and how the Festival supported that. I think that's something that you do a lot of now currently through your competitions is giving people a chance isn't it, and those kind of projects were a platform to allow young practises to give it a go and to put on their own events and station themselves and the Festival is a platform for promotion in that sense as well.

Eliza

That support of emerging designers and practitioners, and any individuals, is something that's really crucial to what we do today and there's different spaces depending on where you want to sit within that, whether that's winning a competition, running an event, or simply attending an event. Was this a driving force in the early days of the Festival?

Peter

I think that was very much part of the programme. We started off with tours round studios in and around Clerkenwell and then over the years that that spread out, so I think opening up to a wider audience is really important, so if studios want to open their doors, invite people in

discuss their work, they put on a bit of a show, which is interesting. Then it instantly that helps them not only get work, but it also I think increases the confidence of local communities.

Moira

I mean to add to that, I think in, it may have happened in 2008 as well, but there was always the Student Festival, so we worked to encourage the universities to see the festival as an opportunity to showcase work of their students or to do live projects with their students, so that was very much in the early days something that was focused on as well as the international showcase, so working with embassies culture institutions to showcase the work of architects from abroad, so both of those were kind of priorities from the start.

Peter

Studio Weave who were then students at London Met, they did some of the first installations in Smithfield and then they did the later but they did the London's Living Room in 2008 as well and they've gone on to, I'd say greater things as a result of that, so I think the Festival is very instrumental in creating not just the profile but actually giving projects which could show that they could deliver.

Eliza

Amazing and it's really great to reflect on some of the projects that have been part of the Festival over the last few years, we don't spend enough time doing that as much as we'd like to at least. I'm curious have there been any events or projects that you haven't yet seen in the Festival that you wanted to, or projects that haven't quite happened whether that's down to quite practical reasons or other challenges you've come across?

Moira

No I think I think the only thing that sometimes I found when I was working on the Festival, I do think that has been addressed to certain extent, but was the sprawling nature of it means that it's very hard for some of the headline projects or initiatives to actually get the visibility that is required or that they deserve and I do think that that definitely back in my time was a challenge.

Because it was being delivered in a multi-headed way it was very hard to kind of cure rate the festival with an overarching theme. I think you guys have actually solved that little bit now with a with a more stable team that's happening you know that's in place each year and you've introduced themes and a curatorial panel so I imagine that is absolutely improving but I do

remember feeling that back in the day that it's sprawling and there's something brilliant about that because there's so many people involved in this so much enthusiasm, but how do you make sure that that which projects come to the fore and that you allow people then to access the Festival without going 'oh gosh there's too much'.

Peter

I think that's a very good point, one of the benefits of being in Clerkenwell right in the beginning was that it was a defined neighbourhood, so I get the question, should there be a central place or how do we actually get out into other areas and I would say one of the things that is really supported that ability to create local areas some intensity are the Business Improvement Districts, so that's very helpful in terms of defining area but also giving us a support to do it, helping things be delivered. So I think in a city as you say sprawling as London, a polycentric city, that's always going to be an issue and I guess you know that is one of the great benefits of London as a city that it has these many centres but it also does make it more complicated to produce a single focused event.

Eliza

It's a really fine balance between having something for everyone on their doorstep, particularly if they can't or don't want to travel but also having those moments together everyone in one space already key memorable moments and I think it comes back to that question that we have around thinking about what we want to do and be as a Festival, but also think about how we can benefit the city and industry. And one of the things we actually keep going back to the question of what it means to be a festival, particularly an architecture festival, in 2024? And actually thinking about 2024 and the programme that will happen this June, are there any learnings from the past 20 years that you think would be particularly useful for people to have in their minds when thinking about their events or involvement with the Festival this year? Whether that's someone who's been involved before or someone who wants to put together an event for the first time?

Moira

I've got some very practical points, I guess. I mean the first one I would if you're thinking about putting on an event or an installation I think about who is it for and what you're looking to achieve I think that's really important in terms of the audience you're looking to engage through the activity that you want to stage and then I think as always, legacy. So the Festival is brilliant, it's on for a month, it is a moment that as we've talked about throughout this whole conversation what is the longer term goal for that temporary installation or that event that the Festival can help you seed that change and I think that really does feed back into that idea of

used the Festival as a place to reimagine and for blue sky thinking, but have that underlying goal of what does legacy look like as a result of these activities and I think that's really important.

Eliza

Yeah that idea of impact and the impact of even one event as well as the accessibility and sustainability of all events in the programme is something that is really key and something that we've increasingly become even stricter on to allow for a more meaningful and inclusive festival, one that has a real purpose and legacy.

We're going to wrap up very shortly but I wanted to come back to this year's theme of reimagine, and ask the impossible question of if you could reimagine one aspect of the Festival, of our city, industry, a piece of policy, what would that be?

Peter

I would say actually outside of policy, I think in this present very difficult time in London when doing things is actually difficult for all sorts of reasons, self-initiation projects are something which can be very advantageous and I think with the benefit you can test amount in the Festival then you could actually carry them through, particularly now there is some funding from the Mayor for projects like that if it's supported by crowdfunding can actually then make things happen, and I think there are all sorts of examples where local communities have improved spaces or even we one year Guerrilla Gardeners played a big part in the Festival and improved all sorts of areas which I'm sure the seeds of that still continue to grow, so that's a very minor level but also there are installations which could improve sites in a meanwhile way.

Moira

Yeah, I mean I guess I was going to say that Festival offers a great opportunity to look at methods of co-production and co-creation with communities and if you're working on projects where that moment would naturally fall within the Festival period, it's a great time to start to bring communities together and think about projects that you might already be working on and I mean you talked about policy before and I was kind of thinking that I was really encouraged by an event I went to at the Building Centre on Monday evening, it was the awards of the Thornton Education Trust and the focus on empowering young voices I think is something that feels to me people are starting to get excited by and understand a little bit more. Architecture has been an exclusive industry, you know you've got to study for a long time, it's hard to access, it's hard to start to get into practice as a young person and I think that event was really inspiring to look at initiatives that were actually thinking about alternatives or reimagining alternative ways into the profession and how young people and how the next generation can actually engage with the profession and I don't know if that relates to your policy question but that's something that I

think is super exciting and is something that I would absolutely love to fast track if you could in terms of policy. I think there are steps already and people are starting to recognise it.

Peter

To a certain extent, I don't think the Festival should be too fussed about policy partly because that's what we spend all our time dealing with the NLA really I think it's stuff which is outside policy and allows people initiatives to get involved, and I think the Festival has to just make it easy for people to feel they can come through the door you know if you have a gallery which says 'architecture gallery' on the outside people the general public hesitate to go in there and in fact I mean NLA used to be in the Building Centre and it was often very difficult to get the general public through the door because they thought this is not for us and I think you actually get over that barrier get people in is really important. So I think it would be attractive to all ages, to families, and people to engage in. We did at one stage have an installation in Paternoster Square where children painted rough rather Monopoly-style houses and they really enjoyed themselves and that left a really nice installation which was there for all of the Festival and I think it was it was very good for the children who did it but also I think good for the people who actually enjoyed it for the rest of the month.

Eliza

Yes of course we're reflecting back on the last 20 years but also very much looking forward to the next few decades and young people are definitely going to be at the heart of shaping that. We are hopefully going to be around too, but joined by a host of young voices and people so in order to allow all of that to happen we need to make sure they're receiving the right support, skills, opportunities, and everything else that comes along.

So on that point I think we've now come to the end of the conversation, but if there was one thing you would want the listeners to take away from this conversation or any upcoming projects you want to flag, now is your chance.

Moira

We've got a great mural created by an artist called Holly Graham launching in 2024, she's engaged young people over 100 young people in Edgware. Barnet's one of your focus areas for 2024, I know. And it kind of is a great example, the mural looks to raise awareness of access to green space and clean air and has been developed through a process of community engagement over a six month period which has culminated in improving you know a blank wall on the High Street but really the larger impact is in in the process of developing that project in the engagement of young people, in the learning that's taken place and then hopefully translated in actually activating the High Street as a public space for people to enjoy. So go along and see it!

Eliza

Brilliant, and you're correct Barnet is one of our 2024 destinations. Listeners, you can find all our 2024 Destinations and other key information by heading to the LFA website.

Peter, to finish this conversation, I'm going to ask you the impossible task of summing up and leaving us with a reflection about the last 20 years of the Festival.

Peter

I think first of all it's amazing that it's still going after 20 years and particularly that we've been through I say a second period of economic hardship so I think it's very good we've kept going I think it's a sign of the volume of support we've had from local communities but also from the architectural profession itself and I think it has a positive impact. In terms of what I sort of think about how people can engage is that we did have one year the title 'Love Your Street' there is just so much as you go round, so much people could do about odd bits of land that are sitting there doing nothing, general sort of problems of maintenance and I like the idea of people taking more responsibility for their own areas but I think there's more that people do. Say, I don't have to wait for everybody else to do stuff, we can get together we can do stuff and if they can do stuff during the Festival provides very good mechanisms for helping to develop ideas and make changes.

Eliza

Well I think that's a lovely place to end, so I think that's all the time we have. Massive thank you to Peter and Moira for reflecting back on the Festival's history. Listeners, if you felt inspired or challenged during the conversation and want to be part of the programme this year head to lfa.london/getinvolved to find out different ways to do so, or to explore resources and guides for your new journey as well as sign up for the newsletter. Don't leave it too long, our call for events closes on March 8th, so make sure to check out the website before then. We'll be back with a new episode next month, until then make sure to follow Building Sounds on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever you find your favourite conversations. Until next time!