

Building Sounds – April Podcast – The role of design and photography in shaping a city, with Otto Tiles and Gareth Gardner Gallery

0:00:09 - Eliza

Hello and welcome to Building Sounds, a 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.

Last month we were discussing all things Fitzrovia – past, present and future. We're back in Fitzrovia this June for a really exciting programme of festival activity, which you can find out more about on the LFA website.

But for this conversation we're exploring all things design, photography and the importance of collaboration, joined by Damla from Otto Tiles and Design and Gareth, a London-based photographer, gallerist and journalist.

So I've just introduced you slightly now, but could you start by sharing a little bit about yourself and your connection to the industry?

0:00:59 - Damla

My name is Damla. I was born and raised in Istanbul and lived there for 30 years. I went to a French high school and then I went to a law faculty and I became a lawyer, practiced law for three years and I went to London to study a Master's degree at Queen Mary University in the fields of banking and finance law, and then I went back to Turkey.

I couldn't find a job in my field for a very long time and I decided to pursue a new career and it was a tile business and I founded Otto in Istanbul and I applied for the Ankara Agreement, which is a special visa agreement between Turkey and European countries which allows you to form your company in the European countries.

And I did that and I moved to London with two luggages. One was full of samples, one was full of catalogues and my clothes. And I literally started from zero, like Googling the best interior designers and architects in London and emailed them one by one, introduced my tiles and now we are in. We have three showrooms one in Istanbul, one in London and one in Miami. We are trying to build up and we are growing and growing every single year.

0:02:46 - Gareth

My name is Gareth Gardner and I am a photographer, an architectural photographer. I write here and there and I also run a gallery down in Deptford which is all about photography of architecture and the built environment and what I call the altered landscape. I originally many, many years ago, trained as a civil and structural engineer before moving into journalism and working on various different magazines. Construction, and then into

architecture and finally editing FX magazine interior design magazine before going back to university to study photography and now working mostly with different architects and designers and institutions photographing projects.

And I was originally I'm originally from the Midlands and I was brought up on a very modernist housing estate in Leamington Spa that I recently found out was designed by Frederick Gibbard and, I think, living near Coventry, which was still very new and exciting at that point after the Second World War, and Birmingham, but also all the historic buildings of Warwick and Levington Spa where I grew up. I think I always had this real passion for architecture which is still with me to this very day.

0:03:56 - Eliza

Amazing. And before we dive deeper into the main part of this conversation, we always like to start with a couple of quickfire questions. So, first up, what's one word that comes to mind when you think of London's built environment?

0:04:13 - Gareth

Oh dear, that's a complicated one. Um, chaotic possibly. I always think it's such a layered city with so many different buildings of different periods. It's never been really kind of redesigned. It's not like Paris, for example, with its sort of very set Haussmann boulevards, or New York on its grid. It's very much historical evolution and I love the layering. So layered would be another good word, especially in areas like Clerkenwell and down here in Deptford where I live, where you have so much history existing alongside new developments and everything in between, and I find that such a fascinating aspect about London and that is so different in different places and it's just there's something for everybody and it's just constantly changing and I love that about it.

0:05:06 - Damla

That's funny because I would say not chaotic, but classic and historical. The reason is I lived in Istanbul for 30 years that's what I call chaotic, and then now I moved to Miami and I don't see any classiness or any history. So still, London is in my heart. I will describe as historical, beautiful greenery and respect, like respect to the architecture, to art and design.

0:05:44 - Eliza

Love that and I think it's quite nice that actually the answers are so different. I think it really reflects how everyone experiences the city in quite a different way and particularly which parts of the city you're in. I think, for example, east and west are very different kind of spaces. And another quick question for you both this year's theme for the festival is reimagine. What does reimagine mean to each of you?

0:06:08 - Gareth

I would say, for me, reimagine is looking at what we already have, differently, where we can. And I think, especially as a photographer, most people experience cities and places with, with blinkers on, almost they don't look around them and they don't fully kind of experience the places that they're in. And almost they don't look around them and they don't fully um kind of experience the places that they're in. And I always say to people just look around you, it's amazing, there's so much to look at, such a sort of rich tapestry in the city.

So yeah, I would say, for me it's about re-looking and then sort of in a more sort of broader perspective, it's about, I think, about taking a sort of braver approach to reimagining cities, and I think at the moment we're kind of there's a model of regeneration that we've had here, something that we should always be examining about how we develop cities and improve them.

0:06:59 - Damla

Wow, Gareth, it was so well said. I was just thinking, it's very inspiring to me. Reimagine is re and imagine. So imagine is the creativity creating something which is already there, but using the same roots you already have, and then transform into something else.

0:07:31 - Eliza

Amazing and I think that probably I'd imagine something that you both have to do with your work quite frequently. I'm thinking particularly when you started, the materials and how that needs to evolve.

0:07:37 - Damla

Of course. First of all, there's design trends – every I can't say, I wouldn't say every year, but it's not like clothes, fashion that change every season or every year. So the tile or interior design trends maybe evolve or change every two, three years. It's a bigger span. But what I will say, when I first started I didn't have that many modern designs. It was more like my country and I was changing the colours of those designs and it was the encaustic tiles were everywhere. But right now, when we reimagined these ones, we changed them into a more contemporary design, changed them into a more contemporary designs and now I'm seeing that more bold and different styles and designs that you will never imagined back then.

0:08:34 - Gareth

And also material-wise terrazzo material was very trendy only like three or four years ago and I would say I've been hovering around the design industry now for nearly 30 years in London and things have changed an awful lot in that time and I think it was interesting what

Damla was saying there. I think there has been an increasing cycle of fashion and change within interiors and I think that's been very much driven by the thirst of the consumer press for new products and the whole marketing strategies of manufacturers and different organizations which has brought things onto a shorter cycle. It's definitely shorter than when I first started out. We're not on a fashion cycle by any means, but I think there is always this pressure and thirst to be launching new materials and new products which resonates then throughout the industry. And I think if I was looking back recently magazines that I edited back in about 2000, 24 years ago, it's very depressing. I can't believe it. In my mind it's still 1998.

But the style you could just see, especially with interiors in my areas commercial interiors really more than anything else workplace museums, exhibitions with interiors uh, in my area's commercial interiors really more than anything else workplace museums, exhibitions and the use of different materials and products is very, very different at that point and there's, and you can with retrospect, really see a stylistic change, um, and then in architecture, obviously, um, everything has. You know, there's a much stronger emphasis now on sustainability that's been coming through for a long time and the different materials and products, and you know there's innovation happening all the time and as a photographer, I look at materials. Now I think very much in the way of which ones photograph well, which ones catch the light, and I think that's also a consideration that designers have as well as when they're launching projects or designing buildings is about how they'll be perceived externally, not only for the users.

0:10:32 - Damla

Really well said about the industry that we are in interior design industry for residential. It is very much like fashion that you have 2024 Pantone Colour, you have this, you have spring, you have summer. I mean that kind of like a new change. You have to be on trend in order to be in the market. But luckily I think in the tile business that we do like handmade tiles, we don't have to pursue that much of like seasonal new products launching.

0:10:56 - Gareth

Right I think if I could make an observation about architecture, I would say over the last 10 years or so, there's been a much bigger emphasis on so we've seen a lot more brick, obviously, and it's become in some ways something of a cliché. There's the pink architecture that seems to be very popular, and a lot of that has then been reflected in the image making of photography of architectural projects, and there's a definite sort of trend at the moment for these very muted photo shoots of buildings and interiors. Uh, whereas, 25 years ago it was all about your buildings were still being shot on transparency film. At that point it was always about having deep blue skies, strong shadows, and now it's much more about, you see a lot more buildings photographed without direct sunlight and often in very sort of muted colourblocking tones of beiges and pinks.

And it's quite a significant change that I feel has been led by a few photographers and now is being more widely adopted as in a sort of acceptable way to show the work of architects and designers that has also spilled over to interiors as well. We've been through the marble years, we've been through the terrazzo years. They always have a long sort of tail off afterwards, but I think at the moment, you know, I think I see a lot of like really nice sort of more handmade looking materials, which is why I think you know Otto's products have a real sort of lovely texture and physicality to them. That's something that I really enjoy. Photographing are projects where you feel that the hands have been involved somewhere along the line and people have really cared about what they're specifying and doing the line and people have really cared about what they're specifying and doing.

0:12:58 - Damla

Yeah, that's correct. When I first started I was not that experienced right, so I was just trying to understand the client. I'm in a new country, I'm in a new business, so I had no idea what's going on. But at that time the clients were asking that could we do the tiles more perfect? Or like they were even complaining if the tiles were not perfect. But now it's completely different. People are choosing our tiles because they are literally imperfect.

0:13:26 - Gareth

I think I think we're in a period at the moment where the word authenticity always pops up, not only with products but, you know, in photography as well. Again, these days, because of AI and all the digital imaging and all the photoshopping you can do for people to shoot projects again uh, you know, on film, actually on old-fashioned film stock, and that's happening a little bit more. It's a very expensive way to go about photographing your building. Unfortunately, the materials are much more expensive than they used to be, but you're seeing that kind of evocation of that kind of analog, authentic look pervading photography.

And one thing with my gallery here is that we're not about showing really glossy images of buildings. It's not about that. It's about documenting towns, cities, buildings, architecture, places in a more authentic way. So we don't tend to show new projects in here at all. It's more about looking at the world around us and finding new ways of representing that.

So the exhibition that I'm just in the midst of at the moment putting together is all about hedges. I know it sounds bonkers, but it's all celebrating the hedge, which is, I think, partly a very British phenomenon, but we've got a lot of international hedges coming in. And then for London Festival of Architecture we've got an exhibition here that hopefully will relate to the activity that we'll be doing at Otto as well, which is all about brutalism in colour, but it's photographing buildings in a totally different way to how they've been captured before by a very talented photographer called Christopher Hope-Fitch, and bringing out the hidden, really super saturated colours that are lurking within buildings like the National Theatre, Welbeck Street car park, places like that.

0:15:18 - Eliza

So you've segued very nicely onto my next question. It's really nice to hear you've had this similar mindset you've got around acts of care and the hands-on nature of projects, and you're both working on another project for the Festival together, which is really exciting.

It would be great if you could give a bit of an overview of the project and how someone who's in the background of law, ceramics, and a photographer, ex-civil engineer have come together on this project.

0:15:30 - Gareth

I'm always looking for interesting projects and things to take on, and also one of the things I really love doing in this gallery space here is not just showing work, but it's supporting people into photography, especially architectural photography, and giving opportunities that I didn't have necessarily when I started out. And so one of the things I really love doing is doing workshops and sharing my knowledge, whatever knowledge I have, with Otto and, and just loving that their output so much and just the beautiful colours and textures. There's a nice sort of synergy with what I'm doing here and the opportunity to get some people in and to explore the local area and photograph it.

0:16:35 - Damla

It seems really exciting to me at the end, I just love the experience and learning about something that I have no idea about. So I'm not, I'm not a photographer but I always love art and photography and, and it's just something that I will be like, merged these two different disciplines in a place which is in East London, where our showroom is, and also we will meet with a bunch of different people, maybe from an architectural background or maybe some students, or we will see, and it's like learning together at the same time, which is really exciting me.

0:17:34 - Gareth

One of the things I really love about these things is encouraging people to explore, walk around, look around them, and people say, well, how do you take a good photograph? And I always say, just look, look carefully. It's really important. It's about observing and seeing things in a different way, and I think it's a really good discipline also to go out with the intention of looking at things and taking photographs. I think it will be really exciting to get all these different pairs of eyes from different people, from different backgrounds and get them looking around that area and everybody will have a different perspective and we'll see things in a different way and it's kind of like an insight into different people's ecology and perception and hopefully we'll have quite an interesting range of work to show as a result of that process.

0:18:14 - Eliza

Amazing, and I think the idea of kind of perspectives and observation is a really interesting one, and obviously this event is part of London Festival of Architecture. But neither of you are architects. I think that's really something interesting in that and I wonder for you both what do you see as the important of having a variety of voices involved in the conversation around the city?

0:18:37 - Damla

From my perspective, I think it's more like listening to each other and trying to understand to have a better outcome.

0:18:49 - Gareth

I would say at the gallery here, one of the big objectives and it's something that is quite difficult to fulfil is to try and have a real cross section of the population, the community, coming in to experience photography and think about what's being shown and the narratives and stories behind it. It and so I think it's really, really important to have different viewpoints, different voices and different perspectives when it comes to cities and architecture. That can be very difficult in terms of engaging with different parts of the population, and architecture and architectural photography, as we know, is very much a sort of male, white heterosexual discipline in many ways, and so one of the things I'm really trying to do here is to bring in some different voices and perspectives, to get people thinking differently and to encourage more people to contribute and participate in those debates about cities and architecture.

0:19:58 - Eliza

I think that's a really interesting point that you just brought up. I think is there a particular impact that you hope your legacy, that this event, wider project is going to leave on the city, leave on each of your ways of working and practicing or the kind of industry?

0:20:21 - Damla

I think, different, as you said, different people will come together and you will look to one building from different perspective and you're just inspired. We're just going to inspire, we're just going to get different angles and we're going to share our opinions and that's. I think this is what I'm hoping to get at the end.

0:20:43 - Gareth

But I would say I hope you know, especially if we do get a diverse mix of people in terms of age, in terms of all sorts of different demographics, that you get just different people looking at the city in ways. One of the things I find funny about architectural photography is

that most of it is practiced by people who were or are architects, and I think there's this thing about them flattering the architects who commissioned them, so you've got a voice speaking back to you showing your building, that is, you know, they're one of us kind of thing and to get different people's views and eyes looking at the city and hopefully some of them will carry on thinking and looking and photographing as a result of turning up.

When I was in my last job as a journalist, I did a it was more than a workshop I did a week's course in architectural photography at London College of Printing, as it then was, and I managed to persuade the publishers to pay for me to go. I said I'd write a feature about it. Really, I had a hidden agenda that I wanted to go and learn about architectural photography and it completely changed my view of the world and I got back to work and I handed my notice in and decided I was going to give everything up. It was just such a transformative moment and I hope you know that people will maybe not give up their careers but hopefully enjoy and get a sort of fresh energy in taking photographs and thinking about representation of cities and buildings.

0:22:14 - Eliza

And I guess, with that in mind, how have you found the process so far, particularly the collaboration between the two of you? I believe it's the first time that you've been working together.

0:22:23 - Gareth

One of the things I love about doing my job is just the collaborations and the people that come together on the day for a photo shoot, and one thing I really like doing when I'm on a shoot is actually persuading the architect or the designer or the client to come along on the shoot and have a discussion and a dialogue about the building and what we're shooting and the narrative and what story we're trying to say and get them to look at it through different eyes. And one of the things that immediately struck me when I came to see Otto a few months ago to discuss this was that they had a similar idea, that they wanted different perspectives and they were excited about the whole process of image making. So I'm hoping it just seemed like a really good match.

0:23:06 - Damla

what is interesting is like, literally without photograph we can't, we are not able to show what we have. So the products itself, they might be so beautiful, but without a beautifully photographed scenes or beautiful photographs that we receive from the clients, we are not really able to influence our potential clients. So photography for us is literally the main, main thing. I guess the creative part of bringing these beautiful designs and also the photographs is the most joyful part of my business, I will say.

0:23:57 - Eliza

So I'm going to come back to another rapid fire question, the last one, I promise. So we mentioned reimagine earlier, to think of this year's festival. If there was one material, if there was one space in London, if there was one way of working that you could wave a magic wand and reimagine, what would that be?

0:24:21 - Gareth

That is tricky, isn't it, reimagining...

0:24:23 - Damla

One of my favorite buildings in London is the Whitehall Gardens, you know, next to the river and I don't want to change it because it's my favourite place and I love everything about it. But if I want to reimagine, maybe I could say like having more people inside, so so I'm reimagining having more visitors there, kind of like a concert or festivals inside. This is how I'm, just because I like that place and I like festivals. So I want to reimagine by combining these two. That just came to my mind.

0:25:02 - Gareth

And I think I'm going to be a little bit less utopian now. I would like us to reimagine the way that we build and design and plan whole new parts of the city, and I just find areas that have been very intensely developed over recent years. I'm thinking of around Vauxhall and down to Nine Elms, Lewisham Gateway, as it's known. There's an awful lot of really strange typologies that are very much driven by developers and sort of private ownership and things like that, and I would just like to see at least one attempt at a much more sort of democratic and public way of delivering a community, delivering a community.

I love buildings. My favourite building in the whole world just about is Preston Bus Station, which I photographed on many, many occasions. I absolutely love famous brutalist building that was refurbished very brilliantly a few years ago by the architect John Puttick and when it was refurbished, instead of filling it up with Costa Coffee concessions and posters and adverts and video screens, it stayed very uncommercial inside and I really enjoyed the fact that that was a refurbishment delivered in a different way to how these sort of projects are normally kind of driven, which is to kind of monetize them in every way, shape and form. So I would just like to see a little bit more of that in London.

0:26:29 - Eliza

And a final thing if people wanted to find out more about the event or learn more about your wide of work, where's the best place to do so?

0:26:38 - Damla

There are the internet platforms that people they can come and then explore our products. But also we have a beautiful shop room in London, in East London, very close to Broadway Market, and it's in a beautiful place because everyone is very creative and young and it's a really nice area neighbours I love. Our website is ottotiles.co.uk and we have Instagram and Pinterest all these channels that they can come and then explore the products.

0:27:11 - Gareth

Yes, the best way to find out what the gallery is doing is on Instagram. Normally it's [garethgardner_gallery](#). I also have my own professional account on there so you can see what work I've been doing. So, yeah, we have a mailing list as well. I would just like to urge people to come and visit my tiny gallery space down here in Deptford and come and see the exhibitions that we've got on, and I think there's such a synergy between workshop and the little exhibition that we'll be doing at Otto and the exhibition that we'll have on here during the London Festival of Architecture, with all the brutalism and hopefully people will.

One of the great things about the LFA is it gets people to come down here and visit and see what we're all about. So very excited and want to urge people to come and also any enthusiastic photographers out there. You don't have to be a professional, but I want to see your projects. It's a great opportunity to show your work to people and get feedback, and I'm always looking for work to and to meet people who are really interested in photographic cities.

0:28:15 - Eliza

So I think that's all the time we have, but thanks to Damla and Gareth for this conversation. If this chat got you excited for all things LFA 2024 head to the LFA website to check out the program launching on May the 8th, or for more information about the project mentioned, check out the shownotes. We'll be back next month. Until next time!