

Building Sounds – March Podcast – What can London learn from Fitzrovia? With Elliott Wood and Make Architects

0:00:09 - 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. So last month we unpacked the concept of placemaking and reflected on what it means to reimagine public spaces. In this conversation, we'll be zooming in on one particular area of the city – and one of our LFA 2024 destinations – Fitzrovia.

In the conversation, we'll be exploring the area's history and unique link to the built environment industry and the city, how this has transformed over the years and what the biggest challenges are that are currently facing the area and those within it. To break down this topic, we're joined by Andy Downey, director at Elliott Wood, and Ken Shuttleworth, founder of Make Architects. Welcome to you both. To get started, Andy, Ken, could you both introduce yourselves?

0:01:15 - Ken

My name's Ken Shuttleworth. I came to the Fitzrovia area in 1974 to work for Norman Foster at Foster & Partners. We were up in Fitzroy Street, a great ground floor office, glass front. It got blown out by the IRA when the bomb went off at the top of the Post Office Tower and blew the wall in. So we built a new wall and then we were in there for many, many years. We won the Hong Kong bank in there and then we went to Great Corn Street, which is just around the corner as well, right through to 1990 when we moved.

So between 1974 and 1990 I was here and then when I left Foster's in 2004 I came back to Fitzrovia, which is where I wanted to set up Make. So Make's been Fitzrovia ever since, for 20 years and various Arup offices and then our own office, which is where we are now and it's just. I mean, I think the great thing about the area for us as architects is all the engineers are in the striking distance of where we are and all the clients, you know, are a walking distance, pretty much in the West End. So all the developer clients tend to work in the West End. You can get to them without having to get out of the tube or anything, and so for us it's like the ideal place to have your office.

0:02:27 - Andy

I'm Andy Downey. I'm an engineer at Elliot Wood and my journey with Fitzrovia began in 1990 when I joined the Ove Arup Partnership and I worked in an office on Fitzroy Square and I worked there for a few years before heading with a lot of the design community towards Clerkenwell and I then worked in Clerkenwell before joining Elliot Wood and then coming back to Fitzrovia. It's an area that is somewhere where I have such fond memories of. It's my first place. I came to work, like Ken, we both grew up in Birmingham, so I left Birmingham and went to the University of Bradford but then came to London. And I didn't just come to London, I came to Fitzrovia. That's where it all started. I've lived in Fitzrovia, like most people, I've eaten and drunk all around Fitzrovia and Charlotte Street and now you know, I'm still here 34 years later, enjoying it as much as ever and enjoying the community. There's everyone else the clients, the people, the architects that have become friends.

0:03:51 - Ken

There was a lot of architects here. There were loads of architects around here as well as engineers, so from our point of view I might put a view was a great place to come. So when I first came from Birmingham, same as Andy, the first place I came to was Fitzrovia. This is why I brought Make back here, because it's a sort of, sort of spiritual home really. I've lived here for a few years as well, in the area, in a little tower building.

0:04:21 - Eliza

So I really want to dive into some of those details and kind of stories of Fitzrovia in just a minute, but before we do we'd like to start the conversation with a couple of kind of quickfire questions. So I want you to say the first thing that comes to your mind. So first question this year's theme for the Festival is reimagine. What does reimagine mean to each of you?

0:04:43 - Andy

Pretty timely in terms of where we find ourselves in the built environment and the challenges socially, environmentally, economically. Can we reimagine a better way of dealing with these things? Because, as an engineer, I'm quite bothered that I've not done enough and we've not done enough and we just seem to have not moved the dial anyway. So it's maybe now's the time to sort of roll one's sleeves up and create some action.

0:05:17 - Ken

I think reimagining for me would be trying to reimagine the city as a place the streets, the squares, the trees, the landscape, putting the buildings to one side at the moment. The squares, the trees, the landscape, and I think the, you know, putting the buildings to one side at moments, I think the way we live in cities and the way this is, you know, over the years, uh, become just like concrete jungles, and you know we need to swing the dial back towards a much healthier place to live. You know less pollution, more trees, more landscape, less cars, um, you know all the things that make you know why you need to live, why you want to live in the city, and I think the biggest issues at the moment are, you know, health issues and pollution. It never really gets talked about that much, but I think it's a massive issue for the future. And you know living in cities compares to living in the countryside.

I think you know if you live in the countryside, you, I think you know if you live in the countryside, you have much cleaner air, you get less asthma. There's all sorts of different reasons. You know why you'd want to do that, but living in cities, because that's where we all live and that's how we do business. I think it made the cities a better place to be and in a way, Fitzrovia is just a little microcosm of that with squares. You know, we built Fitzroy Place, we did Rathbone Square, Charlotte Street, we did lots of different. We've done a few different squares around Fitzrovia which weren't there before, and there was always Fitzroy Square, but it was nothing else really, if you go further south than that, there's nothing else pretty much at all until you hit Rathbone. So for me it was about the one thing we have done here is creating a better environment.

0:06:45 - Eliza

And with that in mind, actually the second question what is your favourite place, space or building in London? And I have a feeling it might be very local to where we're sitting.

0:06:55 - Ken

It's typical to say there's so many fantastic places in London. The way I'd go and sit probably is Regent's Park, to be honest, which is you know I live in now. I live in Marlylebone, but I can walk to work in Fitzrovia, so I walk to Regent's Park every day and I think that's if I had the time I'd sit and have a look, I'd just walk straight through it. But I mean, I think you know the fact that you know I've got Regent's Park on our doorstep here makes lunchtime they go around Regents Park and people go and play rounders. I think Regents Park is pretty special as a place.

0:07:29 - Andy

I suppose with my engineering head up south of the river. I cycle on the Bromton back towards Waterloo and I always get a look across and see the National Theatre and I just think that's brilliant. It just sits there and it's a presence. It's great to go there, it's great just to sit there and have a drink there, but the space and it just feels like the most accomplished building ever and you and I use it. I go to the theatre there, I go to the cinema there, eat there, I drink there and I go cast it twice a day. So National Theatre. But I also have um, I drink there, and I go cast it twice a day. So National Theatre.

But I also have, I suppose, a building that was part of my massive interest in Arup and the role of architects and engineers and the fusion of the two together, and that would of course be Rogers' Lloyds of London building. And even now I will take a little detour just to go past and just stop. Look, I'll probably got 150 photographs on there because the light catches it a different way and I'll see something and that's for me it's a special building and I was lucky to work for an engineer at Arup who worked on the building and his sketchbooks were sublime, beautiful hand drawings of intricate details. It was him being an architect, being an engineer, but driven by architectural solutions. So sorry, you asked for one, I've given you two.

0:09:10 - Eliza

So to bring it back to Fitzrovia, before we dive into kind of the details of kind of the present and how you're kind of working, to kind of look back and think about for listeners who aren't actually familiar with where Fitzrovia is in London, what is the history, what genuinely in Fitzrovia, but also kind of what the importance of Fitzrovia is to the kind of built environment, history and story.

0:09:34 - Ken

I think when I came 50 years ago it was very much the fashion industry were here, because Oxford Street was just around the corner and one street back, two or three streets back, they were making the clothes that were being sold on Oxford street. So lots of buildings were light manufacturing buildings, making shirts and underwear and all sorts of things and I think that sort of spirit of that sort of craziness that went with that was still here and you could go out and buy a thousand coat hangers. So we sort of fed that industry because it was all being done onshore. It's all done in the East now of course, but at that point it was all being made pretty

much around the corner from here. So that buzz was there and I think there were lots of industries here which supported that. So the advertising industries were here, and they probably still are.

Those sort of industries were here as well and I think for us as architects we sort of joined into that I don't know that sort of social and almost bohemian scene, and it was just a great place to be and almost bohemian scene, and it was just a great place to be and there was, you know car dealerships on Warren Street, the guys you know selling second hand cars all the way along there, and it was a really exciting place to be. So I think, from the historical point of view, that you know, a lot of architects came, a lot. All the engineers were here, really because Arup were here. It became a place where all the engineers were and I think that point about as Andy's going to make, presumably about the idea that a lot of the buildings around the world have been done from here is absolutely true. So we run the Hong Kong Bank from here as Fosters and Hong Kong Airport from here as Fosters, and at Make we've won buildings in Australia from here.

You've got Charles Dickens just to live here. The poor house which is right next to our office, where they just refurbished that. They found all the dead bodies out the back when they were doing it. I think that sort of history that's here, that some of the buildings have been here since almost medieval times looking at them, that history is still here and I think that's quite interesting. But it's never really talked about that much. All the artists have been here, gives it a fantastic character. Lots of galleries around here as well, so there's a quite a sort of vibrant scene.

0:12:02 - Andy

I think it's the new history I find fascinating. I think other people might as well too. But we just walked... Make did the substation to the back of our building here and just walking past it it's like oh, and did you know that used to be Foster's model shop just on the corner there?

Straight away I'm almost peering through the window hoping to see some discarded Foster models in there. Of course there's not. There's a few people sat at PCs. But I think that history, that recent history and married alongside the older history that is there, that richness is part of all of these layers helped build up such a great place. If you walk around Fitzrovia you cannot but not notice the BT Tower, and it's almost like a lighthouse, a beacon that basically says this is the heart of Fitzrovia. You always find your way back to the studio. Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. As a symbol, you know, as a sort of anchor for Fitzrovia, the BT Tower is the place to go, and I think Ken mentioned the wealth of architects of course as well.

There is the wealth of engineering practices. And it's interesting how other significant engineering practices have come to be based in and around this area and maybe some form of symbiotic relationship with the clients, with the architects and other engineers. Because we work in this sort of ecosystem of um of businesses, we all know each other that we either work collaboratively or we're trying to work against each other to win something. And what then happens is you then find that people with the engineers. You might find that somebody will move from uh, if you have, from Whitby Wood to Elliot Wood, to Price and Myers. Back in the day you could literally walk out the door with half a dozen CVs and an hour later you might have three job offers. Just by walking down the road or bumping into people would know

everyone in different places, and I think that almost continues to this day. I think the structure, the skeleton, is there to make good stuff happen.

0:14:49 - Eliza

You mentioned the village and this ecosystem. I guess it's quite a unique kind of aspect to have in such a central part of London. A lot of places are moving East and different other places across London that keep that space right in the heart essentially of London, right in the heart of the tube map, if you're looking at that, and I guess how has that changed since you've arrived?

0:15:11 - Ken

I think it's still here because you know, with architects, when Fielden Clegg decided to get rid of their model shop, we just bought all their kits, so they literally phoned us up. I think there's that within the design community I think there's still quite a very tight and it still happens very close community. But I mean, you've got to imagine when you had car showrooms and you had Tottenham Court Road where it was all about hi-fi. So you can get, every shop was a hi-fi shop and you could go and buy bits to make a hi-fi. You could get bits to modify an hi-fi.

You know, there was a radio shack place where you could just go and buy bits and people actually did that back in the 70s, used to make televisions and things. Plus you had all the fashion stuff that went with the fashion industry. So you had this quite sort of almost like workshop quality to the whole area. I think the car mechanics and the guys making clothes and the guys making hi-fis and we were making models of buildings. So I think there was that sort of workshop feel.

0:16:18 - Eliza

You mentioned this idea of workshops earlier and I guess this village ecosystem kind of community that you have existing, which has lots of kind of quite big industry leaders but also has kind of schools of architecture and different places of education and different other types of organisations not too far from the vicinity as well, is there quite a lot of collaboration that could help to tackle challenges, or do you think there's something else that's needed to help fulfil that?

0:16:48 - Ken

I think there is a collaboration. I don't think it's enough to do that much, because it actually has got a vibrancy. Of the big, new, shiny buildings that we've been responsible for as Make, you know, brought Estee Lauder here, they've brought Facebook, here, you know, we've got the new Arup building, we've got consultation. But now buildings have actually tried to bring more people in and create space as well, create gardens and space for them as well, and I think they've all tried to be, rather than just dumping a glass box in the middle of Fitzrovia is actually try and work with the local characters.

0:17:31 - Andy

So they are divided up, there are smaller buildings that make up the bigger buildings and try and keep the character of the area and keep the routes through and keep them keep that sort of, um, our younger team, are absolutely passionate about getting involved with the local businesses. But the other thing that is really exciting from my perspective is the energy we get from The Building Society. So we have 45 businesses. We try to focus on smaller businesses within the built environment.

These are people who are doing interesting things, good connections to academia and being able to bring them into Fitzrovia, surrounded by other people who are doing things, make architects, and so they're really building, and they may not be working right now with these organizations, but you get a feel, uh, of what is happening in the energy, which is this ecosystem that that exists. And you know, our sort of our vision would be to foster greater links with some of the schools, the teachers, so we can get a transfer between engineers and fine art or sculpture. What we're doing is really bringing the art back into the heart of Fitzrovia and enhancing our engineering and then vice versa. So we sort of hit this again symbiotic relationship to our neighbours.

0:19:27 - Eliza

I think it's breaking down very much those silos between engineering, architecture, arts and actually to create better place, and you mentioned the presence of squares, for example, previously, where they just hadn't existed before, but that contributes massively to an area which can be quite an urban setup. And I'm thinking is there projects that you've particularly enjoyed working on in the area of that sort of nature which have started to tackle some of those challenges that you've spoken about?

0:19:55 - Ken

I mean, the first one we did here was Fitzroy Place. It was a large Middlesex Hospital site which they'd moved out to somewhere out of London. We tackled that site by creating a big space in the middle and we bought all the trees they were all being grown out in Milton Keynes and we also kept a church, a little chapel, and made that into a part of the site and then the buildings around really created that space. It was residential offices.

It was done by other architects, by Sheppard Robson and if she's taking some, but the basic idea is still there, the basic shape. Space is still pretty much as we did it, but that that in a way brought in the school as well, which is across the road. Uh, it brought in the idea of the church and what to do with the church and society, putting new landscape, um, you know, new, um little cafes and restaurants around the edge of it and you know, and a mix of uses from um some health care, some, um some residential and some offices. So that was the first one we did in this area.

But we also looked at other schemes as well, and Rathbone was much more office-based. They had residential as well, but it was actually creating again another place, another space, the new square. In fact, I think Rathbone really was the first new square in London for about 100 years. But they're all about, I think, trying to create more, a better environment, because I think you know I've forgotten there was car parks around Fitzroy Square. That just reminds me, I just can't remember that. So I think, more pedestrian-friendly, less cars, less pollution, better air.

0:21:49 - Andy

From that point there's a project with the Fitzrovia Partnership to create a link between Tottenham Court Road through to Fowley Street, which goes literally straight past our office.

Well, this used to be your office and that is very much focused on I try not to use the word green, but a green pathway for people and for nature, just to link these things through, which would be a great thing to do, because just walking around um before we started here, the it perhaps isn't as green as it could be. It does feel. It may not feel noisy and massively dirty, but when you put your critical head on, it's not as good as maybe we think it is. So there's work to be done, and a building that I'm fond of, that we helped engineer, is a building called corner house with DSDHA, which is a sweet, contemporary, uh brick building for Fitzrovia. It's very much back to back to the craft and the making of something that's demonstrably good. It's a warm, crafty, beautiful building made out of beautiful bricks with beautiful wood, and it just doesn't sit till age, even though it's probably 15 years old now, and so that's a nice building. So I think I think Fitzrovia has this opportunity to um sort of repair and reuse the buildings that we've got in a more um creative way, build new, beautiful, relevant buildings and just keep the balance right.

0:23:40 - Eliza

It's all about balance yeah, so you would say that kind of changing environmental need is probably one of the biggest things to be thinking about with the area and I wonder what role you see your practice playing within that?

0:23:59 - Ken

So I mean, practically everything is, um, everything we start with now is do we need to do the building at all? You know, can the building uh, you've got now is do we need to do the building at all? You know, can the building you've got work for you? Do we need to knock it about? Or even knock it all down and start again? So that conversation we've always had that conversation for the last 50 years, but that's actually become much more poignant the last 18 months. So you know that conversation about retention is being much more top of the agenda. Making buildings that are actually energy-sufficient as possible is also top of the agenda.

I mean, we talked about that for 30 years but now it's much more critical, obviously, as we now know more about climate change. But I think, going back to my first point, I think that planning is really important. The spaces we're creating. What used to be just called master planning, it's now called place making. All that is now, I think, is much more important because the buildings come up and down. Some of the buildings will be demolished within 20 years I don't know if we'll be adding 20 years but the spaces remain. You know the roads, streets, you know our situations all remain. I think that's the bit to get to make sure that's right and they all link together and we haven't got cars in every single one of them and we make it as green as possible.

0:25:17 - Eliza

At Elliott Wood, you've had the Ethics Manifesto a few years ago now. I wonder how you see your role as a practice, but also with these projects as well?

0:25:28 - Andy

Yes, we wrote the Manifesto probably six years ago now, because we recognised that things were changing much quicker than we could ever imagine. Economically, socially, climate change, nature. Things were accelerating, and where our industry was perhaps doing very little or obsessed with, dare I say, the various greenwashes, various green washes. So as we approached the 25th anniversary, it made us think that what do we need to do ourselves where we can just change our outlook, put a different lens across this? Can we just think about a different set of questions that we can be asking ourselves and those around us, and not just looking for the engineer's guide of how to design and build it? Because if that existed, it doesn't work. So you've got to change your habits, change your culture and then add the engineering teams around you and trust yourself to find better solutions.

So it's a more holistic way of looking at these things and that's what the ETHICS Manifesto is all about. It's challenging our thinking to find better versions of our engineering selves, but perhaps more importantly, finding a way to have just a better balanced conversation. So can we have a real conversation between reuse and demolition? Just judge before you get there, just have a balanced conversation about these things, so that for us would be the next step is to have more balanced conversations about really challenging subjects.

0:27:21 - Eliza

When you say balanced conversation, what do you mean by that?

0:27:25 - Andy

I think at the moment it's quite difficult. We all have projects that have been impacted by planning legislation around carbon demolition and what is perceived to be the right thing to do, and I don't think that the answer is as straightforward as saying we cannot knock anything down ever again or we have to reuse everything that we find because that's the that we've got to. We've got to debate that when we meet and have this conversation on humorous occasions, find can we have a sensible conversation about what this middle ground looks like?

0:28:12 - Ken

If you keep everything and don't knock anything down, a lot of things you're keeping aren't good enough to sort of be sustainable over, you know, the next decade, next 20 years, but all you're doing is, you know, trying to make an existing building stand up, to go to new regulations, trying to.

You know you're adding carbon fibre strips on the side of bits of brickwork. You know you're doing all sorts of things, road, and then you've got a new pit down. You know, or you can see something else, a major problem.

0:28:40 - Eliza

So I think there's that debate about you know what, what these could be there's a lot of thought that goes into projects and a lot of these topics and just thinking, is there any particular lessons learned that you've had over the last year, either in sort of more recent

times, as it we are in such a rapidly changing world as you mentioned, or over the last kind of 10, 20 years as you've been in the area?

0:29:06 - Ken

I think the space is for me, the um, the space behind, actually just behind Gigs here, um, you know that's been as about the fourth version of the. I'm saying I think that's without trying to make that into a place one side, which used to be one way, is now two way, which is better. I mean, there's been lots of things happening there, but I think that that space, you know, which you wouldn't walk through 20 years ago, that's changed. I think that by making the this place a better place, making the uses around the edge much more vital, it's actually basically made it a much better place to go, and people are sitting there now today reading newspapers. So I think that those little lessons about those places and spaces can almost fit through as a microcosm of what's happening around the world.

0:29:59 - Eliza

Of what you just said we mentioned. The theme this year is reimagine. Yeah, is there anything that is left that you, if you could wave a magic wand, that you would reimagine? Whether it is something quite physical in the area, whether it is in the ways of working and the law that needs changing in the industry to allow for more sustainable, whatever it might be.

0:30:22 - Ken

I think in the area you would try and reduce the numbers of streets that have actually got cars on them. There's still cars. You can't get rid of cars completely, but you don't need every single street to have a car. You can just go round the block. So I think there's that, and then more landscape, more trees, more of everything to actually make it a nice place to be.

0:30:43 - Andy

I'd like to reimagine from the Fitzrovia perspective, trying to create some of the food and beverage village feel that you get in some parts of Europe.

Fitzrovia's version of that now is a long way short and I do worry about not fixing that. We just might take the edge away. Petrolia could be, or better still, with the things that Ken's talking about in terms of environmental changes you can make and then do that as well. I would like to see that would then make people come here not just five days a week but maybe seven days. And I think the engineering architectural skills I think we have them. We know what we need to do, we know how to deploy those. We have that creative ability and the technological skill set to do all of that stuff. So I'm not worried that we're not going to be able to face up to the challenges.

0:32:24 - Eliza

Brilliant. I think people can obviously find out more about that when we launch the programme in May, which is coming around very closely, but in the meantime, where can people keep up to date with some of the work that both practices are?

0:32:36 - Ken

Come into the office, have a look at the office, have a look through the window.

0:32:42 - Andy

No, I couldn't agree more. I mean, we're the Building Society. Knock on the door, come in and have a seat and have a conversation with anyone. We're happy to talk about what we're thinking about, what we've done, what we're doing.

0:32:58 - Eliza

Amazing and I think that's all the time we have today, but a big thank you, Andy and Ken, for this conversation.

Listeners, if this conversation has got you inspired, then check out the show notes for all the important links to the projects mentioned and make sure you'll sign up for the LFA newsletter. On May, the 8th, we'll be launching the LFA 2024 programme, which is a full pack of talks, workshops, performances, installations, interventions all thinking about how we can work towards a more inclusive, sustainable and equitable city and industry.

We can't wait for you to join us. Keep an eye on the website and the newsletter for more information. Back to the podcast. We'll be back next month with a brand new conversation. Until then, if you like the conversation, why not share it with a friend? Until next time.