

“LFA2020: Pews and Perches (Second Edition)” Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

Eliza: Hello and welcome back to building sound, one of the two podcasts watched you by the London festival of architecture. In this episode, we'll be discovering the second edition of the pews and purchase benches in the royal docks part of a design competition in collaboration with the Royal docks team and discovering the stories behind each of their designs, the conversations can be listened to from the comfort of your own home. However, for the best experience, we recommend seeing the benches on site as part of a self-guided walking tour. As you walk between the benches, you'll be able to pause the episode and restart in the next location when you're ready, our first designer will reveal the inspiration behind their bench; Water, water everywhere.

Betty & Quincy

Betty: Hi, we're Betty and Quincy, and our bench is called the water water everywhere bench. We've made this bench in collaboration with Helen Caulfield of the Redundant Architects Recreation Association and the artist Sophie Percival and Priscilla Wong.

Quincy: The concept of our bench was inspired by the water of the Royal docks and the Thames and found objects that washed up along the shoreline were inspired by trying to recreate the water quality, but also act as a commentary for how local people can preserve and maintain the natural environment.

Betty: So we wanted to use material that we could express the different strata that you'd find on the riverbed. So we lent towards and the use of jesmonite, and we also wanted to use a material that had transparent properties that you could sort of see things through, and have that more clear water like quality. So our design uses layers of pigmented jesmonite with crushed found objects in them to act as a sea bed, and then has resin pieces with items that we found suspended in the resin along the edges of the bench. So they're kind of accents that show a case the objects in a clear way. And they kind of are like pools of water on the sides of the bench. The materials that we selected mostly the found object. That's really the thing that we feel speaks to more of the people side, because the resident and the jesmonite speaks to the watery qualities of the site. But

then having these objects within it showcases how we as people have an impact on our environment. And by having objects that are from the area, we think that when people walk by, they will, you know, kind of go, oh, look like that's, that's that. And like, that's, here's something else, and having that sort of familiarity of things that we know maybe are in our homes, but then have end up in the water.

Quincy: When we've been doing our research, we found that historical items from the shipping industry have washed up on the shoreline, but also interested in plastics and non degradable materials that can capture the environmental impact that people are having on the water.

I think the key thing is allowing people to see recognizable objects within the bench itself, and then drawing that connection between how their everyday lives are having a negative impact on the environment. So it could be realizing that you've not recycled your plastic water bottle, and that appearing in the bench, seeing that physical connection, will hopefully instill a change of behavior. At least

Betty: we've kind of seen the construction two elements. There is the sort of larger bench that's made from the cast jesmonite. And then we also have the resin insert. The resin was kind of came first of the objects, and then we cast those into the layers of jesmonite. So with the resin, we've worked with the artist Sophie Percival, has worked extensively with resin, and we've worked together on casting the pieces that we found to showcase them in the resin. We've been really privileged to work with her and to have resin casting workshops where and we created these resin inserts that you see in the ventures today.

And when it came time to work with the jesmonite, we worked with two collaborators, and the first being Helen Caulfield of the Redundant Architects Recreation Association, or RARA, and the second, in a more advisory role, was Priscilla Wong, who is a multidisciplinary artist. We're really privileged and lucky to work with the two of them and without their expertise. Um, we don't think design would have come together as well as it has done so going back to Helen from RARA.

So RARA is a creative collective and cooperative workspace based up in Clapton. The makers and artists that work there do lots of work in in situ, products, in the public realm, and creating installations for art and architecture and participatory research. So when we reached out to them, we had a good feeling about it, and we thought was going to be a really good collaboration, working with Helen and some of the other makers at. Has been a really great experience. They've have so

much expertise, and they've really helped our bench and to be what it is today and to look so beautiful.

Working with Priscilla Wong as well was a really great experience. As a multi discipline designer. She's done lots of installations in the public realm as well, so her expertise is invaluable, and she gave us lots of advice about how to deliver the bench on a tight budget, but also to make it look as exceptional as possible.

So working with both Helen and Priscilla and their considerable jesmonite expertise, you were able to do the correct calculations for the different strata that you've seen the bench today to get the layered effect. And we also did lots of exciting tests with earth pigments, which we chose because of their natural quality and how they would relate to the earthiness of a river bed and like the wateriness of the river surface, and they gave quite a beautiful quality in the coloration of the bench.

Quincy: Although Betty and I have never worked together on a professional project, this is our first experience working on a piece of public realm as well. I think we have both a similar design methodology and way of approaching the project, but also working with the wider design team. And I think that collaboration and the way that we've picked the people that we're working with is something that we were keen to see throughout the design process,

Betty: it's been really fulfilling, actually, because usually when you work on a project, obviously in practice, you you might not even be in the practice long enough to see the project like build out and get all the way to that final stage. So to work on something with a smaller time scale, which we've been able to oversee it all the way from the inception and the birth of the design idea all the way to construction and then handing over and closing out to the royal Docks team. It's been an invaluable experience that I feel like we're both really lucky to have this and have more understanding of how delivery works, and like how to work closely with clients and also with the local community and doing community engagement activities and things. It's been a great experience.

Quincy: But I also think it's the immediacy. I think it was something that I wasn't expecting, but I've actually come to quite enjoy, I think seeing the project. I remember when we were doing the competition entry, it was quite manic and rushed, and we were trying to pull it together at the last minute, but now to see it actually on site and people interacting with it. I think it's been a steep learning curve, but one that I would definitely do again.

Rachel & Angus

Rachel: I'll introduce my partner first, Angus and myself, Rachel,

Angus: together, we formed RAB studio, a partnership that we concocted during lockdown. And this is the Ele bench.

Rachel: Sort of the start of lockdown. We've been looking at some kind of public realm projects, and we we saw the LFAs competition on the website initially, and we're really keen to look at some form of architecture which was starting to address the issues of of COVID, which were becoming very present in our lives. So we started just doing a few sketches, really at home together, and then came up with the idea once we did a bit more research about the royal docks and the history of them.

The inspiration for the Ele bench came specifically, really, from the history of London, Royal docks. So we were looking, and obviously, it's, it's trading history in the past. There's some amazing archive footage and photography that we'd found. And one in particular was, I think, was it George the fifth docks? I guess,

Angus: Yeah. So the George the fifth docks, when a strange delivery of elephants was brought in one day for destined for the circus, and this was a kind of image that stayed in the memory of a lot of the locals, and is always kind of recounted and recalled. So that was kind of something we thought would be quite a fun idea to bring back, and bring this moment in time, back to the docks.

Rachel: The other thing which we were always really keen to incorporate into the design was sort of a play space for families and children. There's obviously quite a lot of new development in the area. There's a lot more homes and a lot of play spaces and things being created in the parks. And something that we wanted to introduce to the docks was kind of a sense of fun and playfulness, which is why we ended up picking specifically the the elephants, and then also starting to pick up on some of the brief requirements of how do we design for public seating in our current climate with COVID and one thing that we started to play with was the idea of how many people you sit on a bench. Which orientation do they sit? Could we sit people back to back? Would that reduce the risk? And that's how we came up with the idea, sort of, of the spine of the elephant bisecting the bench. And then I think the other elements that started to feed into the design was when we were walking around the docks, it's a pretty windy it's an exposed place at times.

What would you want if you sat, probably a bit more shelter. So. That fed quite well into the idea for the the elephant's ears, which sort of wrapped the bench and start to give you that sense of enclosure and just a bit of a wind break as well from some of the extremes.

Angus: Originally, when we were thinking about the bench, we really wanted to go for something as soft as possible on the bench area, something kind of that resembled play, play furniture, play space design, and then, kind of through research and a bit of development with suppliers and manufacturers and looking at what may be suitable, we kind of landed on cork as a good example of something that could, could be durable enough to weather outside in the in the kind of Docklands landscape, and also, you know, be a softer type of finish, opposed to the backrest, for example, which is a solid surface of Hanex.

Rachel: What we were always keen for is that the bench could be something that could be not just for sitting on, but something that children could could climb on and play on. And that and that was driving our material choices. As Angus said, with the foam, initially was something we explored. We then, I think, looked into some rubber surfaces, and we ended up settling on cork because we well one for its robustness and it being able to deal with the being an exposed climate, but also its softness, its sustainability. That was one of the key driving factors.

Angus: We've had a good dialog with Crafted by Design. Who are the manufacturers for the Hanex element, the thermoformed backrest and the ears. So that's obviously kind of the most complex part of all the bench, and therefore required quite kind of specialist knowledge. Had a very good reception and feedback from the manufacturers as to the it's not every day then elephant lands on their desk. So they quite enjoyed that again, in a time where the day to day seems very familiar, it's quite unfamiliar for them. I think hopefully, I mean, the bench just makes, makes people smile, and they enjoy in the way that we hope they would. And that's, that's the kind of end goal, isn't it, to kind of have these moments where you're you're walking around somewhere, you have a place to say, a place to kind of enjoy, enjoy a view, enjoy a cup of coffee, maybe even read a book. Who knows you?

Duncan

Duncan: Hi, I'm Duncan Graham. I'm a part two architectural assistant, and I've just recently graduated from the London School of Architecture, and my bench is the rocking bench. So the initial inspiration for the rocking bench kind of came from the requirements within the actual brief that was originally sent out. So these ideas of being completely playful and creative and actually encouraging interaction, but then also the requirement of being safe in this weird pandemic world which we're living in, and keeping people two meters apart, for example, so sitting two people on a bench, but then keeping them apart, that can feel quite sort of isolated and and lonely, and I guess that's how we're all feeling at the moment.

And so I want to try and find a way to connect people while sitting two meters apart. I guess the best way to actually form some kind of connection is to bring motion into it and create all of these motions and interactions with the bench in the same way that you might have a seesaw and a playground, or in terms of the actual Royal docks, I remember going to the docklands Museum in Canary wharf at the start of the year and seeing all of these pieces of machinery that were used to move things and transport things, And you had these kind of beam scales that there was the customs officers would use to measure all of the sort of imported goods that would come in. And that was essentially a seesaw. So there is that kind of connection back to the docks itself that I had sort of in the back of my mind. But it was primarily that idea of actually creating that interaction and that movement and something that would connect two people sitting far apart.

So the rocking bench is made of sheets of plywood, in effect, which have been sort of cut to size, to this kind of shape, and each one sort of comes after the other to form the shape as a whole. Constructing or assembling the bench was quite a big task. I guess the only outside help I had was actually getting these sheets of plywood cut. So I got in contact with a CNC manufacturer. So they use a sort of computer controlled router which cuts out from large sheets of plywood, and they cut out the shapes. And so it was kind of like a cookie cutter, kind of set up in effect. And then I got to work actually assembling everything. And it was actually quite a straightforward construction. After that point, the big thing was actually sort of finishing the plywood and painting it all. I wanted this kind of bright colour, this playful colour, so kind of picked to yellow in the end, and I needed to sit outside and paint it all, which is a bit of a task when you have, I think it was 68 different pieces of plywood, and you've got to sort of sand it all down first and then paint it all to make sure it's all weatherproof and that kind of thing, and has a nice finish to it. The Royal docks, quite interesting, because it's this place going undergoing massive regeneration, and so you have so many different types of people, so much range in what's there. You know, you can cross the street and find yourself in a area which is industrial, and you've just come from a really residential area.

In terms of actually how much the royal docks themselves inspired the bench design. It definitely sort of was in the back of my mind. And I think in an area where you have all of these big structures, these kind of the cranes and so on, movement does become sort of part of the area. The initial idea of the bench was to respond to this kind of disconnected way that we're all interacting with each other. And, you know, we can't hug anyone. We can't, you know, come close to anyone. And so this movement was meant to find a way to actually connect two people together. And so it might be nice. I think it's nice that the bench can act as a meeting place, perhaps for two friends or neighbours or or family or whoever, for two people to come together and have you know their daily conversation, or something like that, and have a nice, sort of gentle rock on on the bench as well. But also, I kind of considered the idea of, if you might be sort of by yourself. I know quite a few people myself, who've sort of spent a lot of the different lockdowns by themselves, and it's been tough on them, I think, as it has on everyone. And so the idea of perhaps going and sitting on a rocking bench, which doesn't necessarily cater for one person all the time. I think the idea was that the bench, in a way, calls out for a second person. And if you do and go and sit down on the bench, and there's someone walking by, it's my hope that they might stop and sit down with you. So that was part of the idea as well. Is both catering for the people who know each other and and want to sit down, but also sort of catering for someone who might be by themselves and need some support as well.

Luca & Ben

Luca: Hi, I'm Luca. I'm from Italy, and I did my BA Studies at the University of Kent.

Ben: Yeah, and I'm Ben. I hosted my undergrad at University of Kent, which is where me and Luca met, and now we're studying together at the Royal College of Art, and this is our first competition together. So it's interesting to look at like an everyday, ordinary object, like a bench, and then try to work out what you actually like about it. So the first step was to do that, and we set up a series of things that we think would make you actually want to go to the bench and use it, such as an interesting view, or a comfortable bench, a place to rest a coffee, or somewhere to sit alone or with a friend. So then that created a series of parameters which we could then create a design from. And then we had a conversation over the phone after we both read the brief. And I think one of the things that we're most interested in about outline of the brief was this idea of reusing materials, recycling materials. And I think you suggested using a wooden rowing oar. Right?

Luca: yes. So we started to the principle of creating a project that would be able to adapt to one of these recycled and upcycled elements, or could be adapted to different different types and to contextualize our bench. We decided to use oars.

Ben: On the seats of the bench. We've decided to put in these two drawings of rowing boats in plan view. There's one on each plank, so they're sort of sitting within their rowing lanes. And we like the idea that people won't immediately recognize them as being rowing boats, but once they sit at the bench and study a little more it will be revealed. We kept the marine theme going throughout the material. So we used wooden rowing oars for the structure of the bench. We used marine plywood for the seat and backrest, and we also painted it in a teal color.

Luca: We named the bench Afloat retrospectively, you know, once we had completed it,

Ben: yeah, There ended up being this interesting relationship between the heaviness the plywood pieces being the seat in the backrest and the lightness of the oars. And we thought it gave the impression that the bench was almost floating.

Luca: We really enjoyed how we were able to achieve this dynamic with this relatively low tech system of clamping the seat in place over the cross doors. You. We were really interested to analyze objects which are not actively in an architectural discourse, but to introduce them in an architectural background, or make them part of that sort of language. And the earth just came really naturally as a solution. And there, it's quite a simplistic form, but in its own way. It's quite refined.

Ben: It was sort of surprising when we thought of it that it hadn't been done before, because as soon as the idea of using the rowing oars came up, it sort of seemed perfect to be used as the structural element within the bench. If you light on its edge, it can be used as a structural element. And then if you lay it flat, it can be used as an armrest or a place to place a coffee or something.

Luca: It's similar enough to the idea of a bench, the standard of a bench, that when someone would approach the bench, they wouldn't think too much about it,

but just upon sitting and resting their hand on the oar, or they would engage only at that point with the bench. So I guess it prompts discovery, and it prompts to get intimate the found object.

Ben: Also I think something about the position of the bench within the royal docks is that sitting at the Royal docks is like a real moment for contemplation, for silence, and like a moment of peace. And I think we really hope that our bench will provoke that and enable people to sit down and have a quiet moment by the docks.

CAST

Sonam: Hi, together, we're cast Chutimon, Austin, Sonam and Tyler. We're a team based in Thailand and London. This year, our bench is called the royal resonance, which allows people to social distance in public spaces at a comfortable distance, and sitting one seat apart,

Tyler: as we are our UEL students who are familiar to the site of the waterfront, the first thing we notice from our side is how strong the wind is. Therefore, we would like to incorporate this unique environmental aspect into our design by using the technique inspired from an interactive sculpture art by Henry (inaudible) to capture the movement of the wind and resonance into the royal docks.

Chutimon: The bench was inspired by the natural element in this routing as the dockland is effected, predominantly by wind. We implemented aluminium poles, which would rip it in the wind, creating the Riverside (inaudible), as well as an art form, these interactive features of the bench respond directly to its natural windy environment.

Tyler: So in a way, you could capture winds and transform that into kind of like a Sound

Austin: The casting has definitely been a major part of this design. We had all worked with plaster in the past, so the casting experience wasn't new to us. The use of concrete, however, was it's an interesting method of creating something,

having to create the mould first. Architects often have to think about the negative space that surrounds the designs, and this was no different. We are proud of the imperfections seen throughout the casts, a reminder of the learning that took place and a memento to the many test casts that came before it. I particularly enjoy the layering of colours you can see on the seats, a visual mark for each pour of concrete into the mould. We adapted a design during the build, realizing its potential once we could see the physical product in front of us. One of those adaptations was the differentiating heights of the seats originally designed to be level. The thought of this was to offer the user a choice, a moment of interaction, whether to pick the tallest seat, the seat most suitable to their heights, the seat that face the water or land. The choice is theirs.

Chutimon: The social distance bench is the portrayal of our current pandemic period. This modular design used curving partitions reflecting the measure of the pandemic, allowing people to spend time in public spaces at a comfortable distance. The Royal resonance becomes a device that can promote a public relationship between people, nature and isolation, forging local intellection as well as social distancing together as a comedy safely

Eliza: to see pictures of the installations or to find out more information, head to LFA.London/perches.