

“LFA2021: City Benches – Aldgate” Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

Eliza: Hello and welcome back to Building Sound, one of the two podcasts brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture. Following on from our previous episode we're continuing to explore the benches across Aldgate as part of this year's City Benches, a design competition in collaboration with Cheapside Business Alliance and Aldgate Connect Bid.

The conversation 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 each of the benches, you'll be able to pause the episode and restart in the next location. When you are ready, our first designer, Nicola, will reveal the inspiration behind her bench, Conversation.

Nicola: My name is Nicola Barrington Leach. I'm an architect and director of MVBL. We're an architectural office dedicated mainly to design, architecture, construction, and research. The team is made up of Steve Webb from Webb Yates, who is the structural engineer for this proposal, and from the Stone Carving Company, and that's made up of Regis Chaperone and Anna Rees, and all together we collectively collaborated on Conversation.

Conversation is really a homage to the history of the material, but also to the exchange in the city of London. And so we started off very much with the site in mind and with the material in mind. So the design is really twofold. It's to celebrate stone, stone craftsmanship and its natural architectural qualities.

but we also wanted to create a space that was one of connection because we felt like it's something that we've really missed out on this year. The particular stone has been generously supplied by the Stone Masonry Company and so that was one of the starting points really, having the material provided to us so that we could design with it and provide a bench for London Festival Architecture.

It's actually called Limestone Massangis, it's from France and we've used only offcuts. essentially of pieces that they had in their site and they no longer needed to use. The idea is that we had a certain amount of pieces that we could choose from and very much truly through a collaboration between us, the

designers and architects, the engineer and the craftsman, we've worked out a method of essentially using a series of techniques to create a puzzle of pieces, only joints, that require no other fixings whatsoever.

We love to work with natural materials, but stone is something that we're quite new to, but we're working with it on another project. But having said that, the team themselves have years of experience of working with stone. Steve Webb has been advocating it for years through a series of exhibitions and projects and generally working with the stone masonry company who have provided us the stone.

And obviously the craftsmanship of the stone carving company, they've been working for over 25 years with it. And so really the idea is to advocate the importance of it as a natural, low carbon, very efficient, durable, sustainable stone. The use of the material being one that's very sustainable and carbon neutral is essentially one of the key elements that make up the bench.

For us, we wanted to really use this as a prototype to advocate the qualities and possibilities of developing stone design, but also, talk about stone technologies and in a way really rediscovering the use of stone structurally in architecture as it has been used for generations before but we wanted to sort of celebrate that in its location as well.

The location was really important to us because we felt that it has such a mix of materials as a whole but also such a dynamic sort of use of the site between residents and commuters and it can be very busy and very empty depending on the time of day or week. And so we were really excited about using the concept of bringing people together as one to create a dynamic conversation and that was inspired by the 19th century courting chairs as a whole.

So the bench provides very much an intimate space to basically bring strangers or acquaintances alike together and create a conversation. But the material also really reflects a moment so that you can touch and you can engage with the bench and the material and think about what's around you and potentially hopefully become more appreciative.

The idea of rethinking the bench was really important to us. We felt that often you sit next to each other or back to back and we wanted there to be more of a spatial relationship with this bench and one that you connect together and hopefully, you know, spark a conversation or engage by catching someone's eye.

And I think essentially it's very intimate as one that maybe, you know, we don't find as much as we should in the city and the public realm. And so being able to create a space that's actually very personal within a public setting is really exciting for us. The reason why we wanted to enter this year was very much because, uh, we could enjoy the process of designing it from concept.

That was one element. And then really putting together a team and learning from them. So the whole process of collaborating with them and making it with them has been a total joy. But also I think the idea of the brief, the one of care, was one that enabled us to really think about the issues that we're facing.

In architecture today and also the, the responsibility that we have and how we wanted to, even in a very small way, think about how our role as architects could, could apply.

Iara: Hi, my name is Iara Silva, and this is my colleague Ryan Hahn, and together with the Mad Hatters. Happy to be here talking about A Cuppa.

Ryan: We sort of looked at the theme of care and thought about what care means during a pandemic, and we reflected on that and came to the conclusion that self care has become more important than ever, and that there is no greater form of self care than a cup of tea.

Iara: Yeah, and then, um, we also thought about the fact that making tea actually, it's a whole ceremony that unites people, different cultures, different communities. And normally you always make a cuppa when you're nervous, you're scared, you're tired, or when you have been excited and inspired. So I think we thought it was something that just applied to anyone, everyone.

So it's something that literally everyone could relate to. So we had the, the main inspiration that was tea but we hadn't decided how we're going to represent that. And then we, Actually decided, because we quite like playful things, we decided the most obvious approach would be to create a giant teacup. What else could represent tea than a giant teacup?

And the best thing about that, that type of object, is the sculptural qualities. I'm going to pass it on to Ryan so he can talk a bit about how we decided to construct it.

Ryan: To achieve the teacup's double curve, we realized we would need to investigate and experiment with materials and processes that neither of us had used before.

As the bench was a one off piece, we decided not to make a mold to cast the teacup from, but rather create a structure, taking the rough shape of the teacup, moldable material to give a smooth finish. Brilliant, a bespoke furniture company, provided the CNC cut plywood waffle structure, which once bolted together was infilled with foam blocks donated by the University of East London's Department of Architecture and Physical Design.

Once carved to create the curves of the teacup, the blocks were secured in the frame. We applied a few layers of fibre glass reinforced putty, sanding it smooth between each application and finishing it with a couple coats of paint.

The painted teacup was then bolted to a base constructed from timber and plywood.

Several plants donated by Jen's Plants and Florists sit inside a teacup, adorning the bench with its protruding foliage.

Iara: We didn't know exactly which tree it was going to be placed on, but we knew it was going to be in a very urban setting, and it would have very traditional colour palettes surrounding it.

So we wanted something to break away from the monotonous day to day of people, and we wanted something to grab everyone's attention, not only by its shape, but also by its colours. Regarding the planting, ideally we want to have the whole teacup filled with tea. But we felt like it might be cold in London.

So we decided the best next thing would have something that alludes to the idea of tea and how it's just, um, the boiling of plants. The entire idea is very reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland tea party. And that's the part of the film, if anyone remembers it, I remember it. The part of the film where Alice. The basic fundamental concept of time is challenged the way the conversation that she had with all the guests at tea party and that's something that really really attracted us.

We like the idea that this cup invites you to pause and to slow down. So you want people to be able to slow down in the city and just sit down and just have a chat or not and just, you know,

Ryan: I mean, I hope that when people see our bench, it's sort of something that will brighten their day. Something in which they'll see this sort of ray of sunshine or this like bright bit of colour and see the sculpture and it's just It was fun for us to make, it looks fun itself, and so we thought it would be a fun thing for people to walk past every day, sit down, have a drink with their friends, very reminiscent of Alice and her tea party that she had with the Mad Hatter.

The entire construction was a steep learning curve for us, with constant adaptations and developments. We would not have been able to create The Bench without the advice and generosity of our sponsors. Derwent London's donation, the University of East London Department of Architecture and Physical Design, Brilliant, Bespoke Furniture Company, and local plant shop Jen's Plants and Florists, to all of whom we are grateful for their support.

Sohanna: My name's Sohanna and my benches are called Monuments to Mingling. I was initially inspired to enter the competition because I was really excited about the fact that there were new sites in Aldgate this year and that was something that I found really exciting. It's such an interesting area with such a diverse community and I really wanted to reflect that in the design of the benches.

I've spent a lot of time in Aldgate. I think it's a really interesting area just because of its, um, sort of history. It used to be one of the oldest and busiest gatehouses into London, and it has this Roman history with the old Roman wall and the Roman gate, but then it's also at this sort of threshold space in between the city and city workers, and then obviously White Chapel, which has a really amazing diverse community all the way from Brick Lane and the East London Mosque.

So I really wanted to create something that reflected all of Aldgate's identities and fuse them together to create something that perhaps were new symbols of tolerance or identity or a shared communal sense of belonging, I guess, um, in a way that we haven't really been able to experience this last year because it's been so difficult and so disconnected.

So it was really about creating benches that brought people together but then also reflected this really unique place that Aldgate is, um, in terms of identity and its communities. So I picked architectural motifs from the sort of three main identities of Aldgate itself. So I looked at, um, old designs for the Roman gate, which doesn't stand anymore, but I was able to find pictures online.

So I use that as a sort of nod to the area's Roman past. And then I was really interested in the Aldgate pump. You know, in the olden times, it used to be this place for gathering. Everyone would come around the pump to sort of collect water, etc. And so it was really symbolic of this, a place of gathering, which is obviously what I was looking at with the benches.

And it also signified the sort of gate into London. So it was the end of East London and the start of the City of London. And I liked, because I was working with thresholds and junctions, I really liked that it was very symbolic of that junction. And then, um, I chose East London Mosque because I thought it's this amazing building.

It's a really, it's the sort of heartbeat of that diverse community in Whitechapel. And again, it's this place for gathering. So all three of the monuments that I've chosen to integrate into the design of the benches have been in their own right sort of places for gathering, places for the community to come together.

So I choose to use timber primarily because of its sustainability, but also because I really liked the idea of using something that was really cost effective. So making something quite ornate and quite decorative and ornamental, but using a really, really simple material that was easy to cut, to carve, to paint, to spray and finish.

It's a material that I haven't really worked very much with before, and I'm really lucky to have collaborated with Oli from Joyce and Joyce Joinery. He's a brilliant fabricator, really, really experienced in working with timber, and usually specializes in cabinets and kitchen furniture and things, so he was really excited to do something with the same material, but in a completely different way and for the outdoors. So it was really, it's been really nice working with someone who has a really good understanding of the, of the material and then sort of fusing that together with my sort of ideas for the design. So the idea of mingling was really, really important when I was designing the benches.

I think after a long lockdown of, you know, not being able to see my friends, not being able to see family and everyone having the shared experience of feeling really disconnected from, you know, a hug or a drink at the pub with your mates, I thought it was really important to bring this idea of mingling and coming together because this summer, I think, really symbolizes one where we'll finally be able to meet our friends again and to hug our family, for example. And so what I was really inspired by in this really weird way was Boris's roadmap out of lockdown. Suddenly every single plan that we were making was tied up to these

dates that became these important milestones that were imprinted in [00:15:00] our minds where, you know, okay, the 12th of April I can get a haircut, like the 17th of May I may be able to go on holiday, and you know, on the 21st of June I can actually hug my friends, and so on the top of each of the monuments or benches is engraved in Roman numerals the sort of date that each of these restrictions ended to sort of celebrate this, um, coming together of people and a sort of return back to normal life.

The benches are a celebration, as I've said, about people coming together, about lockdown ending, but they're also a celebration of Mary Von Johnson. She was my brilliant, brilliant teaching partner at Kingston University, and she's sadly not with us anymore, so it was really about celebrating her life. She really fought for diversity, she was a brilliant educator, and As much as they're a celebration of people coming together, it's also about the sort of things that she was really looking forward to doing, and I'm sure she would have absolutely loved to have a glass of red wine, her favorite drink, on one of the benches.

So they're really about celebrating her as well. I would hope the impact of the bench, benches I guess, really encourage conversations between different communities. So the hope is that through using different architectural styles and motifs from Aldgate's various identities and histories, the idea that you Perhaps recognize something similar to what you're used to seeing in your culture, but see it sort of next to something that is perhaps quite unfamiliar.

Sort of encourages conversations between different people. And you know, the most amazing thing would be if someone perhaps tried a samosa on Eid because another family was there, for example, or tried something new, or had a chat or sat next to someone that was perhaps from a different community. And I think I would really hope that through the fusing of architectural motifs and the remixing of all these different styles into these three monuments, that we can actually really start to encourage different conversations between Aldgate, which is an amazingly diverse place in itself.

Lisa: Hi, I'm Lisa, and this is. It's my design for one of the London Festival of Architecture's City Benches. I've been working in collaboration with Richard Maher from Mahers Model Makers, and together we've designed this fun break in the city for people and children and families to enjoy over the summer.

This sort of concept behind the bench was quite simple in a way. I just, I really wanted to create something quite lighthearted, a bit of a break from what's been quite an intense year, I think for everyone with COVID and not being able to get

out and not being able to enjoy the city and feel comfortable in our surroundings.

So in the light of that, when I was designing this bench, I, I wanted it to be a sort of simple, um, hopefully beautiful form that people could kind of relax on, maybe play around on, and just kind of take a moment to, to sit, to look up, um, to enjoy. Being out and about again to enjoy being in the city. In a way, COVID's been quite, uh, an interesting kind of design parameter because normally benches are quite sociable and, and, you know, you sort of want people to share that experience to, to be side by side or looking at each other.

So I think part of this design is actually to allow separate groups of people to share an experience without being too close together. So that's why there are multiple benches rather than just the one to hopefully allow people to kind of have a visual connection, but make it COVID safe at the same time.

I think a bench is normally something that's quite one directional in a way. It's often facing one way attached usually to its surroundings and often not really directed at anything, even though it is. It's, it's, by it's nature, directed at something. So I think what I wanted to do with this, was actually to, To face the two together.

To have a conversation between two objects, So that as well as them having a direction, which is, Kind of at each other. It's also looking up. Something that was quite key was that I wanted people to experience the city from a different angle. So the idea is that, is that you sort of lean back and look up and maybe you spot something that you didn't before.

And it's kind of finding those like small bits of joy in the city. And I think that's maybe what's so good about this competition and about the brief. It's about bringing a bit of joy to some otherwise just passing places and finding some new experiences there. Yeah. The materials are as much as possible all natural, that was a key consideration.

I wanted them to be tactile, I wanted them to be soft, so that, you know, children can play and it's not fragile, it doesn't have any kind of bits where you can put your fingers. So there was a kind of practical element to it, that I wanted it to be something that was a solid form, that was kind of, you know, Smooth and playful and child friendly.

So the choice of cork was because it's, it's a natural material. It's sustainable. It's very flexible and quite durable as well, and suitable for being outside. You can paint it. So I thought this was quite an appropriate choice of something that kind of ticked all the boxes. I also haven't worked with cork before, but it's been something that I've always been interested in doing.

And I think being able to kind of mold something to a form gives you a lot of flexibility to create something that. sort of a bit more natural feeling in its form as well as in its material choices. And I think that also kind of works with the planted element of the bench. The frame is made of timber and then cork as a kind of cladded layer.

All kind of brings together this idea of something that's natural and as sustainable as possible really. The process was really back and forth between myself as the designer and the architect and Richard from Mahers Model Makers who's been absolutely amazing at helping me to construct this. And [00:21:00] he's got a bit more experience with building kind of smaller scale works because my practice experience is more actual buildings and architecture really.

So it's been great to work with him and sort of understand. How to work with this new material and actually form it kind of with the timber and what's possible with both those materials. And then obviously there's a sort of, there's the ballast element of it because the design is such that it, it looks like it could kind of rock over.

And I think that's kind of the fun of it. That's the point it's meant to be a kind of, you know, reclining shape, but obviously we don't want it to actually fall over. So making sure that it's weighted appropriately has been quite key into, into the success of it. So that's been something that we've been working through as well.

It's been really great working on a project like this, which is so kind of fast paced and such an immediate kind of response. I think that the process from conception to completion is only a matter of a few months, really. It's involved a lot of work myself, and that's great. It's a great experience. It's great to kind of get hands on and take a break from sort of normal, normal architecture work, which is quite, you know, time consuming and you often wait years to see something actually built.

So this has been really rewarding.

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