

“LFA2021: City Benches – Cheapside” Podcast Transcript – Building Sounds Podcast

Eliza: Hello and welcome back to Building Sound, one of the two podcasts brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture. Over the next two episodes, we'll be talking with the designers 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. To start with, we'll be exploring the collection of benches brightening the streetscape across Cheapside.

When you're ready, our first designers Jane and Arthur will reveal the inspiration behind their bench, It Takes Two.

Jane: So we're 10F, a sibling founded collaborative practice, and we are working between different scales, and in this case, it's the human scale for the bench. I'm an architect, I work mostly in public realm projects, so I have a slight obsession with public furniture, street furniture in general.

Arthur: And I'm Arthur, and if you don't already know, Jane and I are siblings.

Jane's still in London working in the architecture field and I am currently in Rotterdam working more in the architecture fabrication and prototyping field. And now that it has been a bit more than a year and almost two years since we last met. So participating in this competition was also a means for us to have more interaction, and maybe we missed a bit of arguments and missed a bit of conflict.

And this bench is, um, is a result of this as well.

Jane: So I think earlier in lockdown, the city of London was completely deserted. And it was to our surprise when we went on site in March, that people were really

starting to use the public spaces again. So there was a lot of observation of how people were interacting in different seating situations.

And the question that came to us was, how do you maintain this 1.5 meter social distancing between two people in a seating setting? And the form is sort of generated from that.

Arthur: I think it's quite inherent from the color choice. To the form that, uh, we really wanted to generate a bit of joy in a city because it is quite dire times the past year or so, and we sensed a bit of apprehension and anxiety in the city, but we would like people to come out again and interact responsibly as well.

So we would like to inject a pop of optimism and a spark of lightheartedness. When people see this bench, so the original intention of this bench has always been to make it out of recycled material or partially recycled material. And we were sourcing local construction aggregate from construction sites and demolition sites to mix it into parts of a terrazzo.

To create the bench, but in this weird and wonderful world, we know that even Terrazzo plans do not set in concrete and there were many other concerns and problems going on. So we have now considered to go full recycled material and with the help of small plastics. We are now using their fully recycled blue dapple sheets to create a CNC fabrication bench.

Jane: What's interesting about the material is that it's fully recycled plastics, almost like a hundred chopping boards per panel of plastic materials that they provide. So actually when you're sitting on the bench, you're sitting on a whole pile of chopping boards reconstituted in this bench.

Arthur: This bench is, apart from the hardware and fasteners, is 100 percent made from recycled material.

From the onset we also really wanted it to be colourful and Jane managed to find the perfect shade of blue that has a historical context to the city as well.

Jane: The blue is an interesting color. So the city of London, well, if you walk around, you might encounter these TARDIS looking public phone boxes that were made, I guess, must be pre war now.

And you can still see them in several sites around the city. And it was sort of this idea that for some public furniture, you have a strong color association with it.

So like with the red telephone box, everyone, you know, has this strong association with the London iconic street furniture. And when we sort of encountered upon this City of London phone box, it occurred to us that This color could potentially have the same effect and it was sort of paying homage to this idea that public amenities can be celebrated, you know, with such an iconic color.

So yeah, we literally took the same swatch of the police phone box here.

Arthur: But the coincidence in this Also comes from where Jane and I grew up in Hong Kong. In the neighborhood that we grew up in, there is this one house called the Blue House, and it is a four to five story building that on a bit of a cul de sac off the main road.

And that main road has been the road of parade for the Queen when she visited Hong Kong. And to celebrate this parade, all the, uh, main buildings on the street were refurbished and painted to look presentable for the Queen. But when it came to this particular building on this cul de sac, they ran out of paint and they ran out of budget.

And all they have left is blue colored plumbing paint used for pipes underground. But then they just used that paint and painted the whole building blue as well, and it's in the exact same shade. So now like looking back at it, maybe there's also a bit of a tenuous link to use this blue in our bench design.

We would like to acknowledge the help we received along the way from the people that took their time to assist us in realizing our design. From the expertise of our previous material option to the current iteration, their help has been invaluable. And the process we went through was also very enriching.

This bench is created with the help of Smile Plastics as our material supplier, CNC Projects for prefabrication, cutting and milling, and we have the great pleasure to have the mechanical savviness of Clever Mike Bike Shop from the local London area to help us assemble and install this piece of public street furniture.

And it has been truly amazing to have encountered this local community spirit, and also have the actual community that is not exclusively part of our design collective to come create, install, and help us on our bench.

Nick: My name's Nick Green, I'm an Edinburgh based architect, and my bench is called Do You Care About Your City? Thinking about the festival's theme of care, I started trying to imagine how that could relate to the urban realm in a kind of, like, pragmatic sense. It's not the immediately obvious interpretation of caring, but the idea of care kind of came to me as thinking about whether we care or not.

I guess a very literal kind of representation is the presence of litter or rubbish around us. The design of the bench is based on this idea that Litter, although a kind of transient, is actually quite permanent in its impact, and so I wanted to use that litter and kind of see if it could be used to create a kind of terrazzo, so a material that's usually associated with grandeur, with permanence, and so kind of flipping the litter that we normally see on its head into something solid, grand, almost impressive, to make people aware of the impact that it has.

Building on the idea of litter as a permanent thing, I was thinking about a range of different materials. You come across plastics, for example, that use recycled yogurt pots and coffee cup lids and things, and you see the flex of the colours and patterns in the materials. So I explored the route of using plastic to produce the bench, but at the same time I kept coming back to this idea of something solid and kind of with a like physical weight and presence.

And that led me down the route of exploring concrete, which is the kind of traditional, original route of terrazzo, of which itself comes from, like, waste tiles being reused in cement. So there's kind of a tie back to the first terrazzos being litter, in a way. And I started talking to this, to the firm Smith and Goat, who are a London based concrete manufacturer, and they explore different ways of using concrete.

And so working with them, and a bit of back and forth of developing a design, we've kind of arrived at the final bench, which is mostly concrete with litter fragments embedded in it with a resin layer on top. And we think that kind of combines the practicalities needed to make the bench with a sense of, yeah, permanence, grandeur, and also with the resin itself, it adds a bit of a sheen, kind of aligning it to more classical terrazzos and marbles and things like that.

So working with Smith and Goat, we've kind of gone through a process of kind of material development, where we've tested out which fragments of litter work best, and how to integrate them within the concrete, exploring different textures and things like that. And at the same time, we've been thinking about the form of the bench, My initial concept was that the bench would have a

relatively simple form, but one that kind of references the forms and architecture of the buildings surrounding us in the city of London, so ranging from things like St Paul's Cathedral down to the podiums of statues, where there's quite simple, solid, kind of cuboid forms, but with little flares, and you see that in the final bench design.

So it's a combination of the form and the material that creates this impression of permanence. Although I'm based in Edinburgh, I was really keen that the bench responded to its context being in London, but also specifically being in the city of London. It's a place of, at least pre pandemic times, a place where people would go to offices and there would be a culture of kind of takeout lunches.

And that's fed into the choices of litter, for example. I wanted the litter to be city specific in a way. So there's a lot of coffee cups and train tickets and things like that and the kind of things that you might just casually leave on a bench if you're in a rush to get back to your office. As an architect I'm obviously less used to kind of designing kind of furniture and smaller products, but in our kind of working lives we're constantly thinking about materials.

And that's played into the development of the bench in really interesting ways about getting to work directly with makers, getting to really focus on the material itself. In a way, the kind of form of the bench, for me at least, is secondary. And it's been great to work with Smith and Goat on developing the material and have that kind of back and forth to really get to what we want it to achieve in the end.

The aim is to have a gradual impact with the bench. It's not an immediate bold sheet statement that it makes. It's a relatively modest form, but when you get up close to it you might start to realise what it's made of. I think people aren't aware of how much single use or disposable cardboard plastic they produce or use because they only have it for a moment and then it gets thrown away.

It's when you see it all gathered together and made permanent in the form of a bench, in the form of something solid and concrete, that you might start to realise

Alexander: I'm Alexander De Caries of Design and Build Practice X Architectures, and we're collaborating with Flu-or Arquitectura in Spain. We met through a professional exchange scheme, and we collaborated on this project, which is the bench called Quick Getaway. I think the inspiration behind the bench was really

thinking about during COVID, you know, how one of the things that people have really been lacking, the thing that I feel people around me have been quite vocal about.

is, is that feeling of wanting to kind of get away and have a, you know, be able to maybe leave London or maybe be able to go on holiday somewhere else. So I think what we were trying to do with, with this bench is to kind of create an opportunity for people to, to get away a quick getaway in the center of the city.

I think what we tried to do is we started to take some of the, the kind of fundamental elements of holidays as a way of kind of generating the design for the bench. It's quite difficult to do that sometimes, whether you take things too literally. So we started to develop these kind of abstract forms of possible diving boards, possible recliners, possible plants that you might find while you're away.

And then started to assemble them together into the, the structure that you see in the bench where it has these kind of steps up to a diving board. It has this kind of palm tree element, this, this recliner element that you can start to lean back on and start to observe some of the buildings that are around you, but through the kind of shade of these palms and you get that feeling of being on holiday or, you know, having that quick getaway.

And I think at the same time, once we come up with the form, also quite an important feature was the colors. You know, when we were talking about the design, we started thinking about places abroad, and specifically we started talking about Costa Nova in Portugal, and the kind of colors that come from the houses that are there, and that kind of, and then that kind of has some reference to, you know, the kind of beach huts that you get in the UK, and I thought that was quite an interesting aspect.

Once we'd kind of generated these slightly abstract forms, I think what comes up quite regularly in maybe some of my work, some of the work of Flora as well, is the kind of details that really influence people's kind of inhabitation of space. And those kind of steps, when you create a step, you don't, it doesn't necessarily just mean something that you can kind of walk up.

But it also creates an opportunity to sit down. And I think that's what's kind of become quite important is about taking these abstract forms and actually presenting them to a public that might use them in different ways. Such as, you know, lying down, if the bench is long enough, you know, suddenly there's an opportunity to lie down.

Or if the recliner is positioned in a different way, you know, maybe you can, people can perch slightly differently. So I think it's really about creating opportunities. I think when you start to create kind of horizontal surfaces, you can start to create opportunities and then people can start to use them how they use their imagination.

For me, it's kind of, it would be quite nice if it was an opportunity to kind of have a break from, you know, especially a site like Cheapside. where it is very professional, you know, it's in the heart of the city, it's kind of in that Liverpool street zone. And then to drop something in that is kind of, especially the brightness of it, to take something that is kind of out of context in that way and present it, I think it's also about, you know, catching people's eyes and kind of creating that break in the city that doesn't really exist very often.

So in terms of the material choice, I mean, part of this collaboration and part of the exchange that I went on was also about finding out about sustainable sources of wood. And Galicia, where Flu-or is based, has a really strong timber industry. And one of the companies I came across was Finsa, and one of the products that they've got is thermally treated pine.

And um, this thermally treated pine, it's a process of heating the wood, which makes it resistant and makes it suitable for exterior use, without the need for kind of some of the chemicals that are used in other exterior wood products. So I think that became using these kind of individual elements. And then the next thing was about choosing what surface finish, how to get those kind of bright colors of costa nova to be communicated through the bench.

And so through that, we kind of came looking at different kind of cladding finishes and we came across Rubio Monaco and, and they've got quite a nice variety and it's, it's more of a, a wood exterior oil as opposed to a paint. So you do get to kind of read some of the grain in the wood through this surface finish.

So I think that was another kind of important feature of the bench. Through my own work, I'm always quite keen to use wood just for its sustainability factor, obviously. It's a carbon store, it can be produced kind of ecologically, and it can kind of be recycled. For me, it was quite important to use an element, a material, as part of the bench that didn't have negative environmental impact.

But at the same time, it was something that quite human, kind of, Something that people can connect with.

Kelly: Jennifer and I, we actually met, um, when we were studying our master's at the Bartlett. We separately worked on different outdoor installations, pop ups and public spaces. And now we're working on this bent, the friendly blob. When we first kind of came across this competition, we knew we wanted to design something that was very fun and playful.

And we've seen these benches scattered around the city. of London the year before. So we were very excited to even just take part. And now we get to part of London Festival of Architecture as well.

Jennifer: The concept of the friendly blobs sprouted from our experiences during the lockdown. I think the feelings of isolation during the pandemic and lockdown is something that most people have experienced.

We have been deprived of meeting up and socializing with each other. It seems we as humans are craving public spaces more than ever. So we wanted Bob the Friendly Blob to be a bench that invites people back into the city of London and encourages people to meet up again. Socially distanced, of course. To take care of our mental and physical health.

So this is how the idea of the friendly blob started. The City of London has such a dense architectural history. From the beginnings of the Roman City of London in the 12th century, to the destruction of the St. Dunstan's Church due to the blitz, the fragments of London's history are embedded into the architecture and urban spaces.

This became the inspiration for the design of a friendly blob. The bench acts as a miniature of the City of London, engaging and encouraging visitors to explore and learn about the dense history through its architecture. The red arrow on the bench points towards north, so the blob becomes a sort of compass for visitors to see the various sights in the city.

And of course, it is also a social space. The friendly curves and playful colours invite visitors or weekend walkers to rest, chat, gather and laugh. The friendly blob is very much embedded into the city of London. The footprint of Blob Bench is inspired by the boundary limit of the square mile and the arms are sticking out, acting as side tables to rest your coffee or croissant.

We have also designed a doggy drinking bowl and a planter. It sits within the bold churchyard, which will hopefully activate the space and encourage people to engage with each other in this small pocket of public space in the city. The bright

yellow colour will attract people to walk towards it and hopefully sit down, rest or even read a book.

Kelly: You know, we were interested in this idea of creating play spaces in the city, which is quite rare, and these little pockets of spaces in the city of London, and this idea of, you know, children's right to play and introducing this idea of playfulness and cheerfulness back into the community when we've been just so deprived of engaging throughout the lockdown, you know.

So it doesn't matter whether you're a child or an adult, you know, you should come to see the Blob and You know, to climb on it, to sit, to rest, and hopefully just seeing it will just cheer you up. I think the name of the project provides a bit of a hint. It will evolve to become the Friendly Neighbourhood Blob.

Hopefully, the bench will bring people happiness and become a place where everyone, both young and old, will want to play and rest. The main material of the bench is made of plywood, which I think is a material that is perhaps widely known and seen in the public yet. We really wanted to show off this perhaps mundane material by experimenting on how.

You know, technology such as CNC can reveal something more about the material. So, which is where we've been working and collaborating with. with suppliers and different makers, carpenters, et cetera, in order to build this bench. But I think what really comes through is actually the color of it. You know, that we wanted the bench to be playful and inviting, and hopefully the bright yellow color is also very intriguing.

So, you know, when you walk past, the site. Just seeing that yellow blob will attract people to work towards it and then see what's going on and the form of it. We wanted these organic and ergonomic forms. I think it works really well with this idea of the friendly blob, you know, that it's, it's welcoming and hopefully, you know, when you sit on the bench, it's kind of also giving you a little hug, etc.

So yeah, that's the friendly blob for you. I mean, I do think just walking, I can imagine someone walking down Cheapside and then catching a glimpse of the yellow blob and already giving, smiling and being like, Ooh, what's that? I think it's even a tiny little moment like that. It means a lot to us as designers.

I think something of this complexity, you know, it might just seem like a blob that's sitting in the middle of Bow Church yard, but the making of it and, you know, talking to all these people who are so, you know, they're craftsmanship

and we, we got, we're learning so much as well. Like, so I think this has been such a great opportunity for us to learn from blob.

Yeah.

Jerry: I'm Jerry.

Andrés: I'm Andrés.

Dominika: And I'm Dominika.

Andrés: Together we are Pebble Haus. I think that the three of us, we have had like a very, I suppose, deep connection with coffee. And for our lockdown, I think we were just between, you know, jobs and trying to stay creative. I think we decided to come together and then make something in relation to coffee.

Dominika: And we were really interested in this sort of way of reconnecting with people that we've missed over the course of the different lockdowns that have happened last year. And the most natural way for us to address this was to meet for coffee. We're also really interested in like this, how many stories get told over a cup of coffee or tea, whatever your preferred brew is.

If you were to imagine a film shot from a perspective of a cup of coffee, you would have quite a lot of very interesting plots and storylines. And this is something that has been really sort of inspiring to us as we designing the project.

Jerry: Adding on top of all of that, it's this whole thing of in Spain and in Latin America, like sitting down and having a cup of coffee, like especially sitting out in the streets.

I was discussing with Andy yesterday that benches are so ingrained in like Hispanic culture, like everywhere you go in Spain, there's just a bench everywhere. We also thought that that was quite a meaningful aspect of this, uh, project and let alone the fact that, you know, I'm from Colombia, we make coffee, so does Peru.

So there's like all these different layers that just matched up perfectly and we were like, yeah, this is it. This feels right.

Andrés: I would say that our bench is not a bench, but a stimuli. It's a object that, uh, bridges people to reconnect

Jerry: Instead of the bench being the primary function, having the primary function of sitting on it, we thought of it as, what does bench mean?

Like, rather than as a functional instrument, we were like, okay, but what does a bench actually mean in our culture or in how we connect with other people? So we didn't really think of deconstructing the form of a bench and then redesigning it from scratch. It was like we thought of the meaning behind it first, and then we just sort of thought, yeah, you know what?

This monolith shape just, it just works. It really translates the materiality that we're expressing. We wanted to keep the material something that was really evident.

Dominika: We sort of wanted to embody the material within the monolith of the piece of furniture that we're making, the bench, in order to first and foremost reflect the concept in numerous different layers, not only the social but also the material.

We've done around 20 different material samples to understand how much, how brittle does the material get proportionately to the amount of coffee grounds that is used within it. And we experiment with different mixtures, either sort of mixing the dry coffee beans with the jasminite or using the coffee brew, which is made of leftover coffee beans from the local coffee shops.

We were just really fascinated with the whole process. And it's also addressing the context of the location of the benches as well. The place in front of the stock exchange where coffee was sold for the first time in the UK. And since then it kind of spread around the whole country.

Andrés: If you look at the Lloyds building originally back in the nineteen, eighteen hundred, was named basically the first coffee house.

So it, it still follows that story of gatherings and talking and engaging.

Dominika: We have always been heavily inspired by the area, by Cheapside and by Aldgate. Because we have actually met, like all three of us, on different walks that we used to do around London. Just kind of strolling through the whole city, just witnessing the different spectacle of life London has to offer.

And time and again we always come back to Cheapside because it's just such a magnetising area.

Jerry: I think when we were making the bench, we were thinking about it as if we were sitting on it. We have the intention of whoever sits on it to have this feeling of closeness with whoever they're sitting with.

And also if you add like the material to it, it's kind of interesting because the result covers most of the senses. And so, you know, yeah, there's a textural aspect of it. And then you can imagine how it tastes if you're sitting on it with your coffee. So it's kind of, it's kind of covering all these different planes.

Andrés: I think, I think we want to take into account that idea of closeness. invitation and engaging and reconnect more than anything.

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