

“London Bridge Station” 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, taking a deeper look at the buildings that surround us. I'm Eliza Grosvenor, as part of our series exploring some of the key buildings in our city. In this episode, we'll be discovering the story and design of London Bridge station, one of the oldest and busiest stations in London. We'll be talking with Nadia Broccardo, chief exec for Team London Bridge, and Mark Middleton group, managing partner for Grimshaw architect. The conversation can be listened to from the comfort of your own home. However, for the best experience, we recommend visiting the station and experiencing it on site. To begin with, Nadia explores the role London Bridge station plays within the surrounding area, as well as the blurred boundaries between the two. Following on Mark uncovers the details behind the design of the station, how problem solving and collaboration acted as major parts in the process, and how the choice of materials and design impact the experience within the station. We hope by listening to this series, you'll learn something new about these fundamental sites that keep our city going.

Nadia: I'm Nadia Broccardo and the Chief Exec of an organization called Team London Bridge, which is the Business Improvement District for the London Bridge area.

Mark: My name is Mark Middleton. I'm a partner at Grimshaw, and I was the architectural lead for the London Bridge station redevelopment project.

Nadia: London Bridge station has been a key entry for London since 1849 when the actually even earlier, sorry, 1836 and then it got redeveloped slightly in 1849 and it's the oldest Station in London in Zone One. So it's always been a part of the of the history of London. It's right at the bridge of the London Bridge, which is one of the oldest points of crossing. So we at Team London Bridge have spent many years and many conversations of what makes London Bridge and what is the identity of London Bridge. And obviously the station is one of those pillars. It is London Bridge. And through the development and the redesign and the years that it took for the station to be redeveloped, it took on a completely new character, and it allowed for the area to open up, to be connected, we all didn't really understand it well. I'm sure some of the architects might have understood

it, but here in 2012 when when we were starting to redesign and look at the bus station, it didn't. Nobody understood. How was that going to connect to Lee Street, to the overground, and only when it was completed in 2018 Did you walk through it and understand how easily you can access the bus station to the overground to the underground, and the joiner street tunnels and the stainer street archways just seem to connect everything and allow for accessibility now, and I've done it myself. You can walk from Guy's hospital to the river in literally four minutes. So it opened up that whole access to to the south, and then potentially what we even say to the north, it really is the gateway to both the city and to Southwark, depending on whether you come from the north or the south.

So it's been a complete transformation. It's developed. It's moved on from the years where it was two separate stations, and nobody could understand how to access their trains to a seamless connection.

We've been with with the redevelopment right from the start. I mean seeing London Bridge came into existence in 2006 and actually, we really did consider and and want to, we had the expression of London Bridge a place to come to and not through, and that, I think Network Rail really looked at it and considered and we wanted that to be a priority. That whole journey experience, from the minute that your train arrives at the station, all the way through to your actual office, how does that all interconnect? And that was something in our thinking, in our responses and in our conversations with all of that is, how does the London Bridge station be the gateway to the 350,000 odd people that come through every day it's impacted on everyone, the even people at the hospital who have fundamental problems with getting people into the hospital, like car staff and patients can actually access the hospital through through the station, so it touches everyone.

So for London Bridge to be that flagship and to test a lot of these ideas is really, is really key. I think everyone's quite excited about being open to these ideas. And how can. An organization like Team London Bridge seed some of these thoughts and ideas and then take them to fruition, everything from accessing patients in difficult situations who need some support to poetry takeaway days. And it's endless what the community hub that a station can actually be to get a feel of London Bridge, I think, is really to imagine a beautiful quilt. Really, you've got everything from the Shard to the Thames River, between the London bridge itself and Tower Bridge, which is obviously the most iconic bridge in London. And then you've got the historic architecture that that it just kind of has always been that kind of cobble streets and the Dickensian aspect of that. And then you've got the most amazing new architecture that Grimshaw delivered within the station. And so you've got everything from the old to the new. It's an absolute mesh of vistas, of views, and it all seems to work.

That's the most incredible aspect of there's always been such high quality architecture within the developments. They're not all they're not all competing against each other. They all work to this. You know, the wonderful fabric that is London Bridge. It is that that Patchwork, that that magical quilt, really

Mark: big projects like this are quite, quite interesting, because there's been a lot of a lot of hands on it. So in terms of design, it's always quite an interesting question, you know, where does the initial thoughts come from? And really, there been other architects, the British Rail architects, TP Bennett, there'd been other people had been kind of fiddling around with with kind of plans for the station for some time. So when we were, when we were invited to tender, there was a kind of coalescing of a kind of master plan, effectively, which had the bare bones of it, really, the kind of had had the concourse in the kind of middle underneath the tracks, and had a kind of track configuration, really, because the station itself was driven by getting more, more track capacity, doubling the track capacity, you know, from 46 million to 96 million passengers a year through the station.

So those kind of bits of brief were already there. And it was very, very much technical. But for us, it was about, what can this do for the community? You know, what can we do to change the typology of the station? Can we make this into something more so for us, we always start with kind of interrogating the brief and then working with our client, network, rail, what are, what is the additional kind of values and qualities that you want to bring to the station? I think a lot of a lot of design for us, especially when you're dealing with something as historic as London Bridge station, which is the first station built in London in 1836 it kind of been built over years, and actually it got progressively worse. In many ways. It become a kind of hodgepodge of different styles. It was disconnected from the street. It was hard for passengers to use. There wasn't much shelter for passengers. There wasn't much space to wait.

It sort of organically grown into a sort of quite a big problem. So for us, that makes it quite easy for you to look at, because you go, okay. We want to make it legible. We want to make it kind of covered and spacious. We want it to be a nice environment. We want it to have a street presence and a connection. We want it to be a kind of lively place and something that does something for the community. So it's not just kind of black hole within the middle of kind of Southwark. It actually people who aren't getting trains can go into the station and use it for things, or even if they're just passing through. It's a kind of covered Street. And also then kind of, you know, stitched together some of the architecture that was emerging at that time. Obviously, the shard was was being built. The station was actually planned to be built before the shard before the shard, but because of kind of difficulties with permissions and things like that, it

ended up being being the other way around. So there were quite a lot of problems. But that's quite good for an architect, because when you get into it, you think, Well, I'm just going to solve all these problems, because that's kind of your job, really is. You're solving problems. So soon as you've got those big ideas and you sell them to the client, and the client and the client goes, Yes, that's absolutely what we want. You can then set about designing those spatial things that meet those aspirations, but also the client's budget and also its program. We also, we really wants to bring a really big kind of environmental and sustainability agenda to the project as well. There's a lot of benefits from the project just being a rail project, which is the moving of passengers from road-based transport, from cars and busses onto onto the train, which is going to save us over something like 23 million tons of carbon a year, which is a phenomenal amount. So it was a it was a significant project in that regard. But then there were other things we could do in construction and in terms of energy use that we wanted to bring to it too. So that was a really early thought, which was to try and make it the one of the most environmentally sustainable stations that we could and that actually started with something very humble, which is that it's an existing station. Let's try and reuse rather than rebuild, because reusing is a lot. More environmentally friendly than rebuilding. So we, we set about trying to reuse a lot of the old arches which have been built up over, you know, 60, 70, years. Try and repurpose those and then just add the bits that we that we needed. So that was kind of a, again, an early aim for the station, The station design.

Little bit about the station, it has got a rich history, but it's also got a lot of heritage there. So what's interesting about it is you've got Tooley Street, which is very different, than St Thomas street. So St Thomas Street, as an example, has a heritage listed facade, and we had to work with the planners to get a solution that kind of matched the rhythm of the existing listed facade. It was something that they really wanted. We wanted something a little bit modern, but in the end, we, you know, designs about compromise. I know that there's a lot of people think, Oh, the architect did this, or the architect did that, but I always believe that the client and planners are as much part of this process, and they can really affect how it looks and and I think it's a successful facade, even though it does incorporate some some historic elements, whereas Tooley Street is just really putting back that kind of muscular brick fire duct, but it's built in a different way, so they aren't laid bricks or actually concrete panels with brick slips into them. So we tried to use modern technology. So it's a bit of, it's a bit facadist, which I know all of the kind of staunch modernists out there won't work like, but you've got to be, got to be practical when you're an architect. And, you know, program is king. And I think it's important that that kind of brick facade was kind of was complete, because if it wasn't, then it looked like a, kind of a, slightly like an old

friend with a with a missing tooth. So I think we, you know, we did a good job there.

But then, in terms of mediating the history. One of my favourite parts is actually the Western arcade. So this is the oldest part the station. It was the first bit that was built in 1836 and it really has these beautiful quadripartite arches from brick arches, but some of them, over the course of time, had been, had been removed. We actually, you know, we're extending that, because that was going to be the new link between the underground and the new concourse. So there's a lot of people walking at about 40% of people kind of traverse that arcade. We were turning it into a shopping arcade. It was actually the old viaduct when it was first built. Was actually the site of a market in the 1840s so we felt we were kind of, we were kind of, you know, negotiating and touching history a little bit. But we decided to recreate the quadripartite arches, but in concrete, but in kind of board marked concrete with the these horizontals. So you got a sense of the brick lines, but it was built in a kind of fast way, a modern way, but also, I think architecturally, and maybe it's not everyone's favourite building, but the National Theatre, the Dennis last and building a little bit further down there has got a kind of the South Park's got a kind of brutalist past. So I thought it was also a little bit of a nod to that. So it was kind of pulling kind of little threads of history from the South Bank in into the project. And then, you know, we've kind of uplift that, and we've put some really nice kind of core 10, which is a type of steel, weathered steel bases that do all the acoustic absorption. Because, you know, obviously got lots of people walking from down there can be quite echoey. So that's, it's like one of my favourite parts of the station, but it's kind of where old meets new. I think a couple of things about the station, how the station feels, are really important.

I think for us, there's a couple of things that we bring to it, in terms of how people feel in a station. I think connection with light is a really important thing. I think it's a common theme in most of our projects where we try and get daylight. And really that's to connect, you know, humans with the outside. If you're in a side of massive building, and you don't you don't know where you are, you don't have views. There are great views in the station, but you've got these. What we did was we arranged the viaducts, which have the new tracks on it, and then a gap in between them to get daylight down. And that was also where all the vertical circulation. So you get up to basically get up to platforms, which helps people with their kind of intuitive way finding, so that they know where there's light. That is, that is the way up to a platform. So it's a very kind of ordered space. It's actually quite a lofty space. I think there are two heights, and actually the terminating tracks are about two meters lower than the than the through tracks. So there is a kind of step in the building. There's a triangular kind of atrium,

actually, where that denotes the difference between the two. But I think that connection is really important.

I also think there's this kind of, there's a haptic, kind of touching with your eyes, kind of quality as well, about the wood and having a kind of natural material in there. A lot of stations that, you know, just because they've got to be maintained, have got hard wearing finishes, but we were really keen to get kind of self-finished material. So we've got wood that's really nice concrete, that kind of the granite on the floor, because not only the hard wearing, but I think that they're familiar to people, and I think the warmth of the space, it's really accentuated by those timber batons, but they also provide a really good bit of sound absorption, because obviously, there's lots of announcements and there's lots of noise and there's a big space, but, like, it's kind of cathedral, like space or that kind of size, so it helps with the sound absorption and the sound attenuation within the space too. So I think that collection of kind of light. In natural materials, long views, kind of lofty spaces, creates a unique experience, but one that I hope is very welcoming and kind of it's a nice start or a finish to someone's day. And really, in many ways, we hope that it humanizes the journey for people.

In terms of material choice, we always wanted to keep a kind of relatively limited palette. Actually, we had the brick. Brick is a very big part of the external of it, so that's very it's kind of warm in its own way. And then we've had the timber in the soffits. We had the concrete. And then I think glass plays its part. Then, of course, we've got the sinuous canopies above, which, again, kind of lift and rise in section, but also in plan. So really, all of the shapes we were given, you know, they're quite sensuous in their own way, these little ribbons of silver that kind of wrap around the shard. So it's got a kind of, it's got a kind of dual life. I think if you're ever in the shard and looking down on it, it's got this quite, you know, heroic view within the city. It's kind of, you know, it's got, it tries to get its own place within the city, certainly from an aerial perspective, but then inside, it's like opening a jewelry box or something like that. It's warmer, it's more human. It's like it's got a carapace, and it's got a kind of softer interior, which I quite like about the station.

The I word, the 'iconic' word, is often bandied around, and you know, certainly the client didn't ask for an iconic roof, but it certainly wanted character and wanted its own identity. And for us, London Bridge was a pretty sad station. South London, you know, was desperately underrepresented. So we wanted to have an identity. It also, architecturally speaking, had the shard, which is a kind of, you know, muscular, kind of very tall thing next to it. And actually, compositionally, having this lovely, kind of low, sinewy form ribbons wrapping around the shard was actually quite it's actually makes quite a nice, pleasing composition.

We didn't really look outside of ourselves, really, which I know is going to sound incredibly kind of selfish or arrogant. I'm not, I'm not sure which, but we'd finished the station, which I wasn't involved with. It's called IJburg station for Amsterdam Marina, and it's a sort of, it's a different resolution. But some of the things that it did about opening up and light were really good themes. So it's my fellow partner of my firm called (inaudible). But also we'd been, you know, I just finished the reading station as well, which had a very canopy solution. So we are looking, I think, to change typologies in that kind of nerdy rail architect kind of way we were looking to, you know, what problems always annoy us about railway stations, and how can we solve them?

So we were really looking to say, Well, look, we're making a giant a concourse, which is, you know, bigger than the pitch at Wembley. And you know, it's underneath all of the tracks. We want to make it light. We want to make it warm. We want to make it easy for people to go around. We want to make it fun for people to be out. We want, you know, all of these things. And I think those challenges, you just try and solve those problems one by one. You know, I don't think you could, you could find somewhere that had the same set of problems. And that's the beauty of architecture. I think everything's like slightly different. We love structures. We love structural engineering. But I think the work was very technical. I think going back a bit for certainly, Nick Grimshaw, our founders, you know, early work is very, very technical, but I think we've added a kind of urban sensibility to it, which I think the London Bridge station embodies. Really, it's about the ground plane. It's about activating all of the edges. It's about having other uses. And certainly, you know, the stainless street link that we've got, that I know team London Bridge used. They put on some great events and different kind of pop ups there all the time. It becomes a really well used kind of community space. And I think that in terms of a kind of leap forward and an outreach into the community is incredibly successful. I think it also helps with the kind of passive policing of it. If that's the way, you know there's there are people around and it's busy, feels less threatening. Just takes that whole thing down. Makes it safer for single people walking around at night, especially, you know, especially women. So I just think it's we can kind of humanize these papers and kind of populate them. I just think it makes our urban realm a lot more accessible, active and kind of equitable.

There's a lot of problems in the city, but you can only, you've got to heal them one, one block at a time. Obviously, London Bridge is a pretty big block, and took, you know, took us eight years to get there, but actually, it's going to be a catalyst. It's gonna be a lot of development around there. I think that, you know, the character and the importance of that place is going to change. And I think it's, it's because of the station. It's interesting to think about the station now that it is iconic, or it's, it's sort of like that, because then, you know, you do begin to think about, you

know, the genesis of the ideas and how it sort of came about. But really, you know, there was only when we were doing the planning, which is, you know, the kind of the scheme design for the stage, the kind of vision of it, there was really only three or four people at the the office working on it alongside the client. So we're working very much alongside the client and the engineer. So there's a very small number of people actually collaborate to come up with the vision. You then move to a phase where you're going to build it, and then in this particular case, it was a great degree of collaboration, probably the best sort of collaboration I've ever experienced, which is that we all had to move to site. We all moved to site, and we are actually. A four story, kind of portico next to the station, and we had engineers, project managers, architects all together. And instead of kind of breaking us up by floor, you know, architects and one, engineers and another, they actually broke the station up into different kind of work areas and packages that were all on the all on the program. So there was a conquest team, there was a kind of canopies team. And they put project managers, architects, engineers, m&e engineers, and then, latterly, kind of contractors, when contracts were let you then have the subcontractors in there as well, and they all sat together, and it created a really, kind of one team approach. Was a, you know, a very, very high degree collaboration. It didn't, you know, there wasn't this kind of, there's no blame, you know, they're all altogether. It's not the architects fault or the engineers fault. It was kind of out, you know, this, this was a challenge for all of us, and we had to kind of solve it.

I think the architects role in in these mega projects, or these civil engineering projects, is quite key, because I think you're kind of jack of all trades, you know, you we know a bit about structures. We know enough about civils. We know, we know the principles of these things. So you kind of stand at the kind of nexus point of all those, but you actually, I think you represent the customer in every conversation as the architect, but also we kind of practical problem solvers. I'm always a little bit, you know, the authorship in architecture. It's always kind of be Grimshaw or, you know, maybe associate my name with it. But there's a whole bunch of people at my firm who are an amazing part of that project, and wouldn't even be half as project it was without them. So I know I'm here representing it, but it's the representing of, you know, thousands and thousands of hours and dedication of lots of people. And actually, that's why you become a designer. It's not because I'm getting my ideas built. It's because I'm working with great people, and we've been, you know, we challenged and we kind of that camaraderie every day. And you know, that project had 45 architects working on it, as well as hundreds of engineers and contractors and things like that. So it's all down to them. They've all got their own stories to tell, I'm sure, and their own pieces that they contributed and that they should be celebrated as much as as much as, you know, I've got this opportunity to talk about it.

I think there could be definitely a direct correlation between the successful realization of the station and the fact that there was a great degree of collaboration. And I think the reason why it garnered so many awards is because of that. Because I think it was, you know, not only was it such a massive open heart surgery in the middle of the city, you know, creating that while people were still using the station and managing to do it, you know, without that much disruption, is an amazing achievement. And I think people kind of respected what had been done, and the fact that it was, not only was done technically, but then when they went in, it was actually a lovely place to be. It was a really nice and beyond it was easy to use. It's nice to look at. I think that, you know, pulling all those threads together, you can't help but be you know, when I walked around it afterwards, as I did many times, as I was pleased, I thought, walked away thinking I've done a good job here. It's been good my little bit.

If I were to describe the station to someone who'd never been there, I think they almost might be surprised that they're in the station. I think they might walk through thinking they're in a street, or a covered street, which I think is a good thing. I think it's part of the street. It maybe looks like a, kind of like a, like a modern cathedral. This, you know, it's top lit. It's got uses warm materials. It's easy to get around. You feel really safe, because you can see from one side to the other. You can, you could, you can take a seat. You can see, you can you can enjoy life going by. I know my father, who lives in Yorkshire, he comes down, he just, he walks down there, and when he's down with me, and he goes and just sits in the station and enjoys it, just because of the space. So I think people would enjoy it as a space, and they probably wouldn't even think of it as a station. That's what I hope, that it's just another part of the city. It's just part of the urban fabric. It's how they get from St Thomas Street to Tooley Street. It's how they walk through Southwark. And, you know, sometimes they get a train there because they can.

It's an interesting thought on how COVID would affect, you know, the station, or the designer station, or looking back, Would would you change anything, you know, given, given where we are in the world now and and I don't, I don't think we would, because, you know, the station is designed to be, you know, it's quite a spacious, quite easy to use. So I don't, I don't think, you know, in terms of people's once they get the confidence back, I think people will, will, will use it. Maybe the ridership will go down, so maybe it won't be as kind of busy, because I think there'll be a there'll be maybe a different pattern of work in terms of, you know, I think people still going to work, but there'll be a much more working as we've kind of had this kind of lesson in, in remote working, this kind of kind of shock to everyone's system, which, which, which, I think most People have dealt with exceptionally well. I guess my lingering hope with COVID is that things do, do get back to normal, that we can kind of learn some valuable lessons from it. But I think there's a need for human interaction. As soon as things can get back to

normal, they will. And I think, you know, the doomsday kind of scenario that everything's going to be like this forever. I don't I. So maybe I'm just an optimist, but I don't think it will stay like that.

Nadia: The fundamental part is that it has to work as a station, but it has to change with the with the priorities as stated. And one of the main aspects of that is what people are demanding, and people are demanding a sustainable aspect that that is pleasant and is healthy. We also have different means of transport, e scooters, even the number of people on bikes. How are they going to be able to move through the station? What are we going to do? How are we going to look at the different way our communities are using our public space? We always see London as the coming in for for for services and things, but potentially there'll be a slight shift in that and people moving, whether that be for the walks in the country, or accessing education or things that might be located outside the of London. So I think that it's always moving. It's always changing. Will we require certain policy because certain things won't work, but it will if people have an open mind, and we can really look at the priorities of the different communities that that we've we've discussed, we can find a happy medium, because the ingredients have been so strong right from the beginning. It won't always be seamless, but if the partnership continues to be as strong as it is, we can look at the opportunities before they become problems really, and then really celebrate those, and then test some aspects, see what works, what doesn't work.

Eliza: You've been listening to building sound. This episode was edited and produced by Eliza Grosvenor. If you've enjoyed this episode and would like to listen to more of our recent conversation, search for building sound on Apple podcast, Spotify, wherever you find your favourite podcast.