

“Here East” Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

Eliza: Hello and welcome back to Building Sounds, the podcast exploring the key buildings and projects in our city. Brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture, I’m your host Eliza Grosvenor.

So today we’re looking at Here East which has been cited as one of the most successful redevelopments of an Olympic Broadcasting centre globally. The conversation can be listened to from the comfort of your own home but for the best experience we recommend being here on site to really experience the space for yourself.

With me I have David Bickle, partner and architect at Hawkins Brown architects, and Gavin Poole, CEO of Here East.

So to start with, this is a slight bit that people maybe familiar with people but might not be familiar. Can you tell me a little bit about Here East and how began?

Gavin: Sure so for those who don’t know what Here East is, it’s the site of the former Press and International Broadcast Centre for the Olympic Games so think of it as a huge great big TV studio with a whole load of offices alongside it which could support the delivery of the Olympic Games into living rooms around the world. And this was the focus for broadcasting the Olympics out of London 2012 globally.

It’s constituted by three large buildings, the first one over 600,000 square foot was the home for all the studios so very large scale, 10-metre floor to ceiling heights across two levels and it was just a huge great big grey and white shed. Opposite it was a more conventional three-story office block which was the home for all the media and there’s about 20,000 media uses this as their base during London 2012. And between the two, its called the theatre, basically its about 17, 18,000 square foot cube its just completely empty dark space which during the games was used as a production facility, presentation and briefing facility, where they could bring athletes, they could bring sponsors and they could do pieces to camera like this but it was at-scale and that now takes 1,000 people.

That's how we got it in 2013 when we finished putting the deal together with the London legacy company, it's then been transformed into something what it is today, which is a multi-award-winning Innovation Campus for open collaboration, where you bring large scale businesses, small startup businesses, a healthy dose of academia through top notch universities on site. And now it's home for over

5,000 people. Call it the place where they go to work or they come to study. And the people who led the transformation in the design was led by David who sits here on my right. Do you want to talk about the design of it?

David: Well, the design of it, the kind of major challenge around the design was the sheer scale. I mean, you mentioned how big the broadcast centre was. I mean, the broadcast centre, by virtue of being a series of sound stages and studios, was a blank box. Wrigley tin, plaid, blank box. And obviously that suited what it was for its own purpose, it was behind the velvet rope, so you didn't get any visitors to it. So that's all it needed to be. Was just to be a big blank shed. But with the opening up of the campus and the opening up of the building, we needed to kind of really think quite carefully about how that building was going to perform. The Press Center was a very different animal. This is we're sitting in the press center at the moment. That was, for all intents and purposes, a kind of Grade A office building where all the press and journalists used to come and file their reports. So if you can imagine that as just being a kind of normal office building, relatively normal office building. All we had to do was some fine tune adjustments, but it was the broadcast center which was the kind of biggest challenge.

Eliza: Where do you start with with all of that? So you've got these two spaces, but then it's quite different what it is today. So where did you begin with, and how did you start on the journey towards where we are today?

David: The first part of the journey really was to interrogate and understand the sheer scale and volume of the kind of challenge, to be quite honest, also kind of bringing some thinking around and understanding around the kind of community that might drop into it. So there's two things, the kind of human condition, the businesses that we were kind of imagining might drop here, plus the kind of architectural challenge of really big beast building, the challenge around the kind of community was really interesting one, because I think it's really important to say that we didn't start the project alone. We started working with other creatives. So we worked with DN & co, who are communications agency specializing in property and places, and another digital agency called poke, who really understood what was happening with the businesses in this part of London, the kind of creative ambition, the kind of digital disruptors that were kind of part and parcel of East London. And so together with DN& co and Poke, we were able to kind of imagine who might kind of make her home in here, East. I think that was very important, really east

Gavin: that was important to us because we had a very bold vision, which is to create a campus the likes of which London had never seen before. It was a place where startups and large scale businesses can come coexist, learn from each other, but a place where universities can bring their top students to come and study, do research about what was going on, have research programs which could

actually help develop the growth of businesses which are based with us as well, all of which has now come about. So we needed this place which encapsulated all of this sort of collaboration we envisaged. And of course, all developers talk about we need a place where you can come and collaborate. But the reality is, it doesn't often happen. It's a place where businesses go and base themselves to do their work. They come in the morning, if it's at large scale, they'll have their own canteens, their own places, their coffee shops, their r&r Rest places.

It's all within their own area, so that their staff don't leak out and go and talk to other people. And what we do is like we encourage people to do that, and all of that has to somehow be reflected through the design. So it's easy it's accessible, not just for the people who are here, but we used to use the expression around the local community, which is it cannot be seen as a spaceship that's landed in someone's backyard. It's got to be seen somewhere that they can come to, particularly the young people growing up in the area who for no fault of their own and no fault of the Olympics, but they had to make a secure location. There was this huge, great, big steel fence between their community and what was going on this side of the canal over on Olympic Park.

So for us, it was tearing down that steel fence, opening up this space, making it accessible, inviting it, running community programs, and our insight days to expose to young people and more mature people the sectors we've got it here east. So in fact, this is a place where you could walk cycle to and actually be gainfully employed. And actually, there's other ways you can actually study here as well. So that's when we got working with our own tenants to set up the scholarship program, and the university is putting their own scholarship program so people can come here and study for free within the local community as well. And all of that again, comes back to what is the brand value with DN & co helping us do the place making and the narrative around our vision. With Poke working up the digital strategy about how we can reach people, which all influences what Dave and his team up to to make sure the space represented everything we stood for, and gave us that opportunity.

When people did follow that call to arms, as we used to refer to it, they are able to come here, and they are actually able to get in. And I think that was really a breakthrough moment for us was to have all of us working together, and in fact, the vision team, as if we talk about the vision holder, it wasn't. It was an iterative process of a vision which was not just from the owner, but actually it was from the agencies who felt a responsibility to live on the vision we originally set out to achieve.

Eliza: So it really is a partnership between Here East, Hawkins Brown, the community, is that what's made it so successful in sort of playing out because it

was there right from the beginning, it's there now, and hopefully it will be in the future.

Gavin: I think so I'd be interested on David's comments on this. But the one thing that used to really irritate me in some quarters and not within the vision team, is, the reference to us as the client, and I suppose we are the client. But actually it was more than that. They were also equally responsible to make sure that the things that we promised we would deliver to the local community in 2012 which one is the right to deliver this as through an open tender process, but the things that we'd promised and committed to in that document. They also felt ownership of to make sure that it was delivered in a delivered in a way which we did something very unique off the back of the games. So for me, it was really quite important that we weren't seen as the client. And therefore the client says, do this. They will go and do it. It was more about actually, it was the challenge and the push and the pull, and what about this, and what about that? And everybody felt this shared responsibility for doing something which we all recognized as very, very unique in London, after London 2012 and I think that's kind of what we all shared.

David: It is it was very much a circular discussion that we had, and think that the way in which we worked together as a combined design team, was was extraordinary. I often say that it's very rarely replicated elsewhere. The kind of ability to be able to finish off each other's conversations, to be able to contribute to a really creative discussion about this place and how it might emerge is fundamental to its success now. And you know, I come here. You know, almost 10 years after starting the project, and I'm still surprised about how fantastic this place is, and the way in which people have really kind of taken it to heart. They've really, kind of made it their own place. They forge relationships that they wouldn't have made beforehand as a result of the hard work that Gavin. And his team does here, and you know, it's built around this kind of infrastructural architecture that enables those kind of conversations and those collaborations to take place. And I think that we saw in this an opportunity to kind of think about architecture in a different way, and that, for us is kind of amazing.

Eliza: How much do you think it's then design led. How has it played out with the communities that are here? What sort of relationship between that?

Gavin: It's interesting because go back to that point I made earlier about the push and the pull. The design is attractive and it works for the type of organizations which we were really wanting to design and build something for. But it also what we did, you know, for a while we were, you know, we built up to now 90% let now we're over a million square feet of space. So, you know, it's a big beast. But in the meantime, when we were letting the place up slowly, you know, we said no to people, which always causes interesting conversations with the

owners. But it's the right thing to do. Is that we had a lot of space, so we provided space for people for free to come in and use it for events, or for some studios, if someone's building a new business up, or offices for community-based projects. We could bring more people in.

And the role as a regeneration scheme, using real estate as the vehicle to deliver regenerative effect is say, How does this further our journey? How does this to help us deliver our vision about making an impact in the society which has given us permission to do what we do here and for us, having those spaces, having the theater when we designed our Innovation Center, having a space where we can put 250 people redesigning a space to make it fully inclusive for disabled people to come and disabled founders and organizations and businesses working within the disabled community, both here and also globally, these are all things which make sure that it is really engaged with the community, and that they can come in and they can participate. So you can see it's kind of like keeps on going around in many circles.

David: I think a really important aspect to that is spatial diversity. Peer East offers so many different kind of opportunities, different kind of scales of spaces. So everything from the gantry that sits on the park side of the broadcast Centre offers 21 very small, intimate, domestically scaled studio spaces, you know. And then compared to the kind of heart or the core of the broadcast centre, which is kind of gargantuan, 10 meter high spaces that can be anything from dance studios all the way through to soundstage or recording space to the crust, which is what Gavin was mentioning before, you know, some amazing, beautifully light filled studio spaces to, you know, regular office floor plates that sit within the press centre. This is kind of a real mix and a diversity of spaces that attracts different people for different reasons. And for that alone, it kind of that means that the people who come here are going to be diverse and rich and different, and that's really important.

Gavin: Our Vision's broad enough to allow us to sort of navigate through different sectors. So you know, when we first started out, David and I were talking a lot about content and TV studios, the medical robotics institute that works really well. The role of universities was cemented into our vision. When you look at cluster building globally, the key determiner is always, what about the research? What about the high-level academia? So that's been really important for us to make sure we anchor all of these things all together.

I think the other component to all of this, though, was making sure that when the designers were really thinking through the flexibility and versatility of the space, we just didn't think, Okay, this is for content and it's for content for evermore. This is a data center, and it's a data center for evermore. We successfully took out the data center and replaced it with the Victoria and Albert Museum for a

different type of data. It is our national collection, which we've sort of secured in London now for the long haul, over 100 years, to be opened up to the public here. So we went from digital data storage and distribution through physical data with a national collection for the study and research of design, fantastic, but we've still got TV studios, and we've still got choreographers and dance studios, and we've still got r&d dark space for automotive industry and a robotics Institute, and we've got a dance and Media Academy and a 3d printing lab. So we've got all of these things all together. It wasn't necessarily what we set out to go and deliver, but we just what's happened in the last two to three years, seeing a resurgence now for our studios and the requirement for our studios more around content creation, be it eSports, which we've had a lot of space, and we've got some news which will be coming out soon, around the eSports. We've got teams based with us. We've got games companies and publishers based with us.

But it's the flexibility which was inbuilt by David and his team, which is allow us to be so versatile in delivery of our vision. And I think that's the beauty of our vision. It does. It's not all things to all men, but it does set us down the trajectory which it gives us a little bit freedom to manoeuvre, but we can always make sure anchored back into innovative, cutting edge use of technology, creative industries, the intersection of those creative industries and technology and where that spark comes alive, and the opportunity that presents the young people who are all fascinated by these type of employment,

David: I'd say that the nature of work, if you like, has changed dramatically as well, almost like the nature of the reporting that didn't necessarily take place in this building at the time, because the advent of, you know, tablets and mobile technology meant that a lot of the press and the journalists were doing it actually in the stadium. So, you know, recognizing those seismic shifts in the way in which people work and what work looks like is how, you know, how we responded to the brief? You know, it wasn't a kind of traditional desk place to do work, although people do do that. It's the kind of richness of the other things that are kind of associated with work that happens at here East so that was partly a kind of driver to how could we spatially respond to the needs and demands of people coming forward and saying, Hi, I'm doing this kind of stuff. Can we come here and we'll go, Yeah, I'm sure we can, and we can test that. So it's an interesting kind of point, at times, the point at which services have changed dramatically, and they will continue to change as well.

Gavin: Yeah. And I think one great example about the flexibility of design would be the gantry project. As David said earlier, it's 21 studios on the gantry. We had this idea of democratizing it, and business owners could take a section of the gantry and then they could build their own studio, and then that became too complex, and we needed to control it, and we needed to give the planning

authority some sort of confidence, you'd have something which would work. So in the end, we built these 21 studios, and we got to work doing something at scale, the new concept, but our aim was to make it appealing to businesses in the local community.

Hackney Wick was going through this little bit of a turmoil as it was starting to go through a regeneration of its own, and we were really pleased that the gantry 70 over 75% of the businesses that took up, you know, first residency on the gantry came from the wick and fish Island, just across the canal. And those businesses would have been potentially lost to the area, so able to pick them up and recreated something which enabled them to be in the area they really wanted to be in and stay, but providing some sort of affordable space, which we thought people would come for a year, and they got people there three years, four years, five years. Now this. Really enjoy being here, and we enjoy having them here, and that shows you the sort of the versatility and the design cycle and the process we went through to end up with that. I mean, it was, it was not easy, and it certainly wasn't easy to build the first ones, you know, on a massive learning curve, but it was worth it, and it was, and again, you know, won many awards what was delivered by the team at wiki house.

David: It's making me an opportunity out of constraint as well, because the gantry, for those who haven't seen it, is a big kind of gridded structure that sat on the east side of the broadcast center, which originally held all the air conditioning plant for the studios, and within the original brief from the legacy Corporation, it was meant to disappear. It's meant to kind of reveal another side to the building. And we kind of thought differently about it. We didn't want it to kind of go to scrap or to be recycled, because the energy to take it down would be quite extraordinary. Take a long time out of the program, and we just thought there must be a better way in which we can reutilise this, this piece of infrastructure that sat on the side of the building, and it's had a heritage

Gavin: It did and that was the point. The Heritage piece, if you look to what was going on the wick in the fish Island, they were trying to preserve the heritage of the buildings and do the refurbishment, keeping their identity. And we were saying, this is the identity. You know, in 60, 70, 80, years, this forms part of the identity, and it shows you the use and the irony now, having won the argument, the irony now is we've got residential buildings just the south of us, which have got external steel structures, just like our gantry, almost copying it. So it's amazing how things change. Isn't over time.

David: Yeah, it does. So we just imagine it as this kind of, well, the original, the original kind of thinking was around the kind of enlightenment idea 17th century idea of a cabinet of curiosity, which was the prototype of a museum. And at that time, people were scratching their heads trying to make sense of the modern

world as it was then, you know, philosophers and scientists and artists were kind of putting together objects of the natural world to try and understand who we were, what we were doing. And we found ourselves in a similar sort of position, where the people, you know, the kind of digital disruptors, artists, the craftsmen, designers were all kind of scratching their heads doing the same thing. So it was an easy thing to kind of go from, you know, that kind of cabinet of curiosities to a place that imagine what the future might be. And so that's where those, those kind of crazy studios came from, as those objects on the shelf,

Eliza: I think listeners will very much have to come and visit experience. I think I definitely found there's so much you don't quite realize this area at first. You should just hear here East is one space, but within that, there's so many different, well, communities and types of people, but also types of buildings. And it's really unique project in that sense. So I think it's one that definitely has to be experienced in person.

Gavin: I think for us, that ability for people to come over here and just have a wander around and stick their head in and go into the open spaces, or we set about out in 2015 to open up here east in a way that was very much a community focused environment. And we've got the west facing canal site where what was back of house, we then converted it all into restaurants, bars, coffee shops. Means then those places are always open, and they are independent traders, boutique in nature, ranging from whether you want a spa or a barber shop, or whether you want vegan food or a 1980s themed video game cocktail bar or American wings. We landed Italian or pub or the Breakfast Club. It's all here and it's it'd be focused on building a community which didn't actually require here east, the occupant of here east, to support it. We wanted to be a continued destination along the canal, which fed into the network, which is already down on wick and fish Island, and that that's worked really, really well, and it's paid dividends during, you know, the pandemic lockdowns we've just sort of been through because local people knew it. Local people supported them. And it's it knitted through that part of here east into the wider community.

The response we often had when we were doing sort of local focus groups, what a community want when we going through the design phase, was always, you know, the park's been cut off. We've had no access in 2007 we've got this steel fence I alluded to earlier, and we really, really feel that we need to get take access back to our park. And David used to describe it as a handshake between what's going on the park and the local community across the canal. It was literally that that striking a difference between those across the canal who had literally been cut off from this beautiful park, which was built for the games and then is going through this transformation to be open to the public, and we wanted to reestablish this handshake.

And there's a local artist, Gavin Turk, had a studio over there, and then his studio came to us for a while, while this new Studio's been built, and we said, look, Gavin, we need a piece of art which is going to signify that we want the local population to be with us. We want to be part of the community, and we want the community to be part of us. So as you walk on the from Hackney week, across the bridge from the railway line, the railway station and walk towards the southwest corner, which is the Southwest point of our development, now you have this huge, great, big cast bronzed door, painted distressed, and the doors open, and it was a signify to us and to the community that we know you've been cut off, but we've opened the door, and we want you to come and engage with us. We really do. And I think for us at s worked, it was a real big statement, and we'd use someone who has literally had a studio just across the canal from us, but it also signified to everybody that we're open. Please come. We want you here.

Eliza: Leads quite nicely into the amount that's been done in 10 years since the games, we're coming up for the anniversary of the Olympic Games this year, from sort of a lot of evolution that's happened in that time, what's the future looking like?

Gavin: I think there's a question I've often been asked before, which is, now what happens when you fall and of course, we're close to 90% we're close to that point, and I've always said that's when the fun begins, where we've had so much fun along the way. It's where the fun accelerates. I suppose, for me, it's looking at opportunities around us where we can continue the growth of what Here East is about is that, how do we expand the footprint within the area that we've got available to us, and how can we make it comes back to that flexibility and versatility we were talking about earlier? How do we create additional space which will meet the needs of a growing community in this part of London, around the technology and the content creators and the culture, particularly with East Bank and the V&A opening up here as well.

So we're looking at a range of range of options. You know, what does the theatre use look like? 1000 people of space in there, which is used from time to time. Obviously, last two years is haven't been able to use it as much, but I can do 250, to 350, people in plex. Saw in the event space, which is slightly easier to use. So we're looking at, okay, what does that offer us in the future as well? Is there something we can do there? And there's a range of other options as well. We've spoken a bit about the gantry and everything to the south on the gantry split into two parts. We had the North End and then we got the south end. The south end was all going to be data centre support, because data centre's gone. So what load more gantry come back? So what is the future of the gantry there? Do we just do the same and provide more space, or do we do something a bit different? So we're working through that as well. So there's a range of opportunities.

And then for us, it's not just about the real estate, it's the opportunities around well, what sectors are there? So five years ago, we embarked on this journey around eSports. What does an Esports facility look like, and what does an Esports facility at scale look like, and where else are they being? Yes, you've got them in Singapore and AsiaPac and Taiwan, but we probably need one in London. If you look at London, London is the fastest growing city for Esports and competitive gaming in the UK and in Europe. So we did quite a lot of investigation into what this could be. Worked with David's team to say, Okay, I think we need something like this, this, this and this, then we took it to the market. And again, we're very hopeful that we'll be announcing some points and big news about the future of eSports in London being on the Global Map of eSports in the future, which will be exciting.

So I think there's a range of I said, we've gone full circle from 10 years ago when we put the bid together, to back into broadcast, TV, film content production, of which eSports content production sits. So we've got all the full circle 10 years into where we were, and it still endures today what we set out to achieve 10 years ago. So I think as long as we are true to our vision, as long as we make sure that remaining 10% that we got left is also left to like-minded businesses who wish to participate and collaborate, then the cycle will just keep on going,

David: As we probably haven't spoken about, but which is also about equipping. Here is the future is the yard space, which is the kind of biggest space that we've got to play with, or Gavin and his team have got to play with on the campus, to be quite honest, it's the biggest external room, if you like, which plays host to a whole load of programs and activities throughout the year, whether it's food trucks that kind of come to feed the community of here East or whether it's sporting events which are being played out onto a big screen, or playing host to the people's pavilion last year. You know it's, it's, again, another piece of infrastructure that enables things to happen, and that's, that's a wonderful thing to have. You know, the fact that it's only restricted by people's imagination. So it's, it's a kind of an important kind of component, which is quite rare again, in a workplace situation, because you're often confined to your plot. You ever have a roof terrace, or you have a number of kind of mid level terraces or balconies, but you don't have that kind of heart, a kind of workplace that you get here. So I would say that's the kind of you know, watch this space, if you like, for the future.

Gavin: The work moved beyond the box with the People's pavilion, where getting people engaged in architecture and design when they're 16 to 18 year olds at sixth form, and then encouraging them to think about university, to follow that profession. But having 12 or 14 London based architects supporting that, taking groups from schools, working with them, written at HB, supported, and then realizing their concept and designs, making the models, putting the models on

display in our yard for a period of four weeks. The public can vote the winner of that vote, we then created and built in the yard, and then another team then programmed it for two weeks with spoken word performances, music, fashion shows, art lectures.

So it was a designed by young people, designed for young people, programmed by young people, and delivered by young people. And that was an amazing, amazing event that we did in the yard. Again, it's about what impact can a project like this have on those which are going to grow up in this part of the world, going, Oh yeah, through here East. We had access to this. Through here East. We had access to that. Through the work of the Olympic Park and what the legacy company have done, and now they've got the good Growth Hub, which we work in partnership with. We've got access to this, this and this. And I think as long as you keep that in mind, which is, we're doing a regeneration project, we're using buildings as a vehicle to deliver it, the building's got to be designed to enable us to live our vision around innovation and collaboration and go back to what's the purpose for all of that. Yes, we love UK PRC, yes, we love international business. Yes, I have a responsibility to, obviously, make money for the fund. Just do it out of philanthropy, but also go back to but we must make an impact into the community and also develop the future talent of the next generation who are actually going to work here.

Eliza: So. Very exciting times ahead, to say the least. I think, I guess I was coming to the end of the conversation now that if there's one thing that you wanted people to sort of remember or know about the site, what would that be?

Gavin: I get asked this question but it always changes because there are always so many different things. I think for me if people come here, you'll be amazed at the design, you'll be amazed at the openness and opportunity it presents but the one thing I would ask people to take away from here, remember what this is about, is the opportunity a development like this has in the wider local community. And it doesn't just happen you've got to build a team to make sure that it's delivered otherwise it just sits here and it doesn't get delivered. So its more than just being about the property and the beautiful design and the wonderful vision and a great brand and a great team, is about how you then use this to benefit a community which through democracy, the power of planning, they've given you permission to do this in their backyard so how do you actually respond and allow that to then play back to their lives. I think if you hold that and they come here, that's really important.

Eliza: and David?

David: I think it's the fact that design is incidental to the fact that a place like this can change people's lives which is just what you've said Gavin. It's the catalyst,

and I'll use the infrastructure word, for change. And for me that's probably the biggest impact that it's had and it's that it's almost not replicable, the conditions of this place and its location and the time have meant that this has become a very special project in London. So I'm not entirely sure whether we've spoke about the transference of the ideas and whether or not you can replicate them elsewhere and I suspect not because it's about a whole series of circumstances that have made this what it is through the people that have either worked on it, through the politics that have happened at the time, through the Olympics that kind of made this place originally, it stands for a whole series of different things but architecture is quite incidental and I think it should be, I think it's much more important to focus on what architecture can do rather than what it is and here is a really great example of that I think.

Eliza: Definitely agree, So I think, I'm afraid that's all the time that we have I think we covered quite a lot already in that, but it's been so lovely to talk to you both and I think it's so lovely to hear you sort of talk so passionately about the project and obviously the partnership between you two and the future for what this space looks like. You mentioned what's a space and I think it could be really exciting to see how the next 10 years looks as well.

So thank you very much for sharing your insights and stories behind the project. I think it's been really interesting to listen to and where can more people learn more about the project.

Gavin: so if you just google Here East, HereEast.com is our website. Look on twitter Instagram, any of the social feeds. Sign up to our newsletter, you can get weekly updates on a Monday morning, how to get here is on there, the events programme will be on there, and if all you want to do is come down and have a wander around then just make sure you book into Canal side and go and have enjoy yourself a meal when you're here as well.

Eliza: Amazing and how can people find out more about Hawkins Brown.

David: Through the same channels really, just Hawkinsbrown.com, Instagram, and twitter as well so yeah come and say hi. Ask me some questions and I'll hopefully answer them.

Eliza: We'll be back with a new episode next month. Until then, if you've liked this episode make sure you subscribe to the channel or head to our website where you can find all of our previous episodes. And if you've really liked it why not share with a friend, family member, or a colleague. Until next time.