

“LFA2022: City Hall, Newham: A new centre for London?” Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

0:07 - Introduction

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

We're currently in our Key Actors series exploring the key people and projects shaping the Royal Docks. Last episode Marietta from the Royal Docks history club gave us an introduction to the history of the docks. For the second episode and the first project of the series, we thought we'd start with a project that's been talked about a lot recently: city hall, or as some may remember it as, the crystal.

With me I have Dan Bridge, Programme Director at the Royal Docks Team and Andrea Nolan, Project Leader at Architecture 00.

0:55 - Who are you

Eliza: So to start with, can you both introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your connection to City Hall?

Dan: Hi I'm Dan Bridge, I'm the Programme Director of the Royal Docks Team, the joint initiative between the Mayor of London and the Mayor of Newham, overseeing and managing the wider redevelopments and regeneration of the Royal Docks and Beckton.

My association with the site was, I've worked in the Docks since 2013 and my team were responsible for the original acquisition of the Crystal Building by the GLA in 2016 and then I've been involved in securing the planning permission.

I'm working at City Hall to oversee the refurbishment and redevelopment of the building into the new City Hall.

Andrea: I'm Andrea Nolan, I'm from an architecture practice in Hackney called Architecture 00.

We've been involved in the Royal Docks area for the last few years, we've developed a few workspace projects nearby and on this particular project we were initially actually appointed on the GLA Transformation Programme, so that was looking at kind of cultural shift within the GLA, adapting to new ways of working at the previous City Hall and then that kind of led to us being involved with the relocation to the new City Hall at the Royal Docks.

2:19 - What is the Crystal

Eliza: Amazing, well welcome to both of you and great to have you here. To start with, let's go back to the basics, what is the new City Hall, or some may know it as the Crystal? What is it and what is the history?

Dan: Yes, I can do that, so the Crystal building has quite an interesting history. It was conceived, I understand, in 2010 and 2011 as a project that was very much about highlighting the Royal Docks as a green enterprise zone as part of the Olympics in 2012.

Some people know this, but the O2 and the ExCel Exhibition Centre, which sits in the Royal Docks, hosted a very significant number of the buzzing events that took place in the Olympics and so as part of that olympic effort the Crystal building was built alongside the cable car, the Emirates Airline, as a 'Sustainable cities' exhibition centre for Siemens, the company Siemens, who very much wanted to showcase globally the innovations and activity that they were undertaking in environmental technologies and also as a space to bring together their teams from across the globe to work on big pictures to big global cities, to undertake big infrastructure engineering and sustainability projects.

It opened in 2012 and it welcomed about half a million visitors between 2012 and 2016 to its 'Sustainable cities' exhibition.

For a number of reasons in in 2016 Siemens were undertaking a review of all of their property across the world and decided that they wanted to move out of owning buildings and to leasing buildings, so the GLA took the opportunity at that stage to acquire the building because it's such an important gateway site in the Royal Docks, and then they worked with Siemens as a tenant for a couple of years and then they went on to agree the early release of Siemens as a tenant in 2018.

So that's a rough plotted history of the sort of, of the history about how the building came about. I'm guessing Andrea might be better placed to talk a little bit about the actual building itself, the design and the structure in the building itself.

Andrea: Yeah, I can probably take over on that a bit. So yeah the building itself, the Crystal, it was designed by WilkinsonEyre and yeah it was completed in 2012. It was a really state-of-the-art building at the time, I think it was the first building in the UK to have both BREEAM outstanding and LEED platinum, which are both like the highest credentials you can get for sustainability in a building, so yeah as Dan touched on this quite like iconic and prominent gateway location to the Royal Docks, which similar to the old City Hall, another kind of prominent waterside iconic building, but also quite different in their way in that so the previous City Hall was this sort of circular, much more compact plan across 10 stories, whereas this new City Hall building, where the Crystal building is a much wider kind of expansive floor place and across three stories, and as Dan was saying it was an exhibition centre so has these amazing kind of triple height volume building which has been something

and that's really enabled us to adapt the building for a civic function, creating these kind of voyage and atrium spaces which allow views from a lot of different areas in the building.

Also, its kind of prominence there along the Royal Docks, the extensive use of glazing throughout the building has allowed us to create a much more public-facing City Hall, where you can look in from the Royal Docks and the London living room and the other public facing parts of that building we've placed them along the public Royal Docks side of the public realm, so we're kind of seeing it as an extension almost of that public realm within there.

So I've kind of jumped a bit from what the existing building was, the elements of it that have enabled us to make this much more of a home for Londoners.

Why is City Hall in East London

Eliza: Amazing and I want to expand on that a little bit in a minute, I think it's a really interesting idea, I guess for some people who are less familiar with City Hall and why it's now in East London in the Royal Docks, could you tell me why City Hall has moved to the Royal Docks and what that means for East London, for the Royal Docks specifically?

Dan: Yep, so I'm happy to take that one, so I think that some people know the the old City Hall sitting opposite Tower Bridge was built and opened I think in the year 2000 and it was very much a statement of London government but also regeneration of a, of a pretty undeveloped part of London actually, so many of us won't realise today but when when City Hall was first built the rest of more London didn't exist and it very much sat within a very large development site in an area quite a windswept empty Tooley Street and London Bridge hadn't been redeveloped so it was very very much a sort of project that was designed to help regenerate a riverside part of the city that at that time was was not very well developed.

And it did that very successfully obviously and it's become well known as one of the centrepieces and symbols of London, I think the way that the building was built and financed meant that the city GLA didn't own the building, it's actually owned by a private developer and an opportunity arose to break the lease so there was a lease break point after the 20-year period, which meant that the GLA were able to vacate the building rather than accept a rent review and stay in the building for a bit longer and there was a combination of two things that I think led to that decision, so the first thing was that we'd thought about this for some time, we've been thinking about it for some time but then at the start of the pandemic there was a very significant threat and risk to the GLA's income because the GLA is funded quite significantly through business rate income so there was a period of time in the early part of the pandemic, where there was a very significant threat to the GLA's income so thinking about how it would fund and spend money and what it should spend money on, I think the Mayor Sadiq took the very strong view that you know in a pandemic he

would prefer to be spending taxpayers money on things that are important to London as rather than I think as he described it 'a fancy building with good views of the city'.

So I think that was very much a cost consideration point and the relocation of the building, that saved the city in the region of about 55 million pounds over a five-year period, so that was one of the first perhaps biggest consideration, but the second one was that the regeneration potential, that the relocation of City Hall can have on a really important and exciting and changing part of London, so very much in the way that the original City Hall did to more London and that area around Tooley Street in the early part of the 2000s.

I think Sadiq saw a really big opportunity to really demonstrate political commitments to the Royal Docks project and was very interested and excited in all of the things that are happening and the developments that are happening around there and he was also really excited to be in a very sort of a diverse and representative part of London, so if you see the new City Hall and some of the neighbours and the adjacent uses and some really interesting and exciting city scale buildings and activities that happen there, like ExCel Exhibition Centre or Tate & Lyle or City Airport, and so it means that the new City Hall in the heart of London government is sort of right in the center of a very diverse and rapidly changing part of the city but one also that plays a really important role in London's economy.

10:17 - Architecture Zero Zero

Eliza: Amazing and Andrea I guess you picked up on this a little earlier. Where did Architecture 00 come into the process and how has that experience been?

Andrea: Yeah so I'd say we've been involved pre-pandemic, so 00 were first involved with the GLA Transformation Programme at the London Bridge City Hall, so that was looking at how the GLA could adapt to future ways of working because the GLA had been based at previous City Hall for almost 20 years you know a lot of their kind of priorities and ambitions had changed both with you know kind of flexible working and different working styles but also ambitions for inclusion and improved health and well-being, a lot of these agendas that you know weren't as visible and yeah weren't as much priorities 20 years ago, so the Transformation Programme was about updating their kind of HR, IT infrastructure and then our part in that project was how spatially that could be incorporated at the London Bridge City Hall so yeah we then kind of brought that learning with us, when the decision was made to relocate to the Royal Docks.

A lot of that kind of learning informed the brief development and our design approach for the City Hall relocation, so yeah the kind of brief priorities of improving health and well-being, including like inclusivity and gender neutrals WCs and showers and changing places and accessible amenities, parent rooms and then the kind of health and well-being agenda which includes the City Hall and anyone, the importance of this kind of internal landscape and using a lot of sustainable materials, such as kind of British timbers and

materials with high recycle content and locally sourced materials, all of these sort of priorities and agendas that we've been able to incorporate into the relocation.

So yeah I think the kind of key ambition beyond those priorities was just making sure that we could adapt the Crystal into a new City Hall and a home for Londoners and trying to kind of break down this large scale and with the quite, like geometric shark building, in some ways trying to make sure that we could adapt that and make that feel more welcoming to people and breaking down that scale from those large volumes into a much more intimate space, and ensuring that we could encourage a lot more participation in democracy and in these sort of civic activities going on in the building, so we made a real effort both placing those activities along the kind of public realm sides and the Royal Docks so you can glimpse in to this, so I think also as part of the brief, kind of looking at the journey of participation with democracy, so not just presuming that everyone will be actively involved in the Chamber, in the Committee Rooms and Gallery, but that some people maybe it's their first glimpse of this sort of specific activity in London and so breaking down these spaces we've incorporated a lot of kind of interstitial areas, they're kind of like porches where with kind of maybe lighter lighting, so these darker, more comfortable spaces where you can glimpse into these activities by this kind of safer space without necessarily having to feel you're directly involved with this.

So I think kind of yeah encouraging that participation through design has been really important to us.

14:13 - City Hall Street

Eliza: Amazing, so there's a real feel of opening up the building both as a concept but also physically and the idea of rethinking space doesn't just stop at the building if I'm correct, it actually extends to the street in which the City Hall sits. Are you able to tell me a little bit about this project?

Dan: Yes, that was a really interesting process to go through, so the the address of the Crystal when it was originally built was Siemens Brothers Way, obviously a reference to Siemens, who interestingly actually another reason why Siemens were very interested in the location was that historically there was a, in 19th century, sort of a part of the company that started Siemens discovered petrochemical which enabled the delivery and development of petrol, which is another reason why Siemens were interested in the Docks, but yes the road was originally called Siemens Brothers Way so obviously it felt appropriate to change that and we worked very closely with the Mayor's commission and diversity in the public realm, to work with communities, to look at a really rich source material, to think about a new name for that road that was very much more representative of people that had been involved in the history of the Docks, that weren't very well recognised and so we did a lot of work with that and Kamal Chunchie Way was the name that was chosen.

Kamal Churchie was a famous race pioneer that worked with Seaman in the Docks in the 20th century, so it's very nice that he's been recognised in that way.

15:37 - Royal Docks

Eliza: Amazing, there's been a lot of excitement about the City Hall moving to the Royal Docks and what that could mean. There's also been some people who are not so happy about the move or a bit confused what it means, is there anything that you could share on that?

Dan: Yeah, I think it is, so I think it's been very interesting, so I managed a team overseeing the redevelopment of the Docks and the enterprise zone and a big part of that is encouraging businesses and organisations to relocate their businesses and their workspace to the Royal Docks and -- has talked about because she's been involved in a number of projects around the new City Hall, so it's been I guess a fascinating journey for us as an organisation to take a workforce through you know all of the things that come with relocating a building to a new part of the city and it's absolutely fair to say that that has had a mixed response, some people are really really pleased because they didn't, as good as the previous City Hall was, there was a lot of complaints about how that building was designed and functioned and it was getting tired, so some people have been really excited about moving to a new space but then you know for other people possibly depending on whereabouts they live in the city and how much longer it takes them to get to the new building, it shadows their view on what they think of working in that new space.

I think the other thing that's really interesting in this scenario is because everybody, because of the way that we've all been working during the pandemic, there's a mixture of things going on here and the vast majority of staff at City Hall like lots of office workers across the city have been working predominantly at home during the pandemic and as we've come out of the pandemic, have been working in very much a hybrid way and so I guess Andrea might say something on this, because she was advising the GLA before the pandemic on changing ways of working but I think that the new building and the new property set up for the GLA was very much been influenced by work that was happening before the pandemic and the way that the building's been designed has very much been designed to accommodate and support much more different types of working and particularly hybrid working and use of tech, so I would say you're absolutely right I think there's been varying views, mixed views but what I would say is we're relatively new into the building so we've, I think the Mayor formerly moved in and held meetings there in January but actually the staff and team working there on a day-to-day basis only probably for about four or five weeks and actually the response of people that are coming into the building to work in the building are that they're really so probably pleasantly surprised just about how good a space it is and the quality of the space that Andrea and her team have created.

I'd say it's definitely viewing to the sort of positive side of the experience rather than the negative.

Eliza: Completely. Now going back a little, I know we have a lot of architects listening to this conversation as well as people who are just very interested in how buildings are made or in this case remade, where do you start on a project like this?

Andrea: We usually at the beginning of any project, so yeah it's usually pretty nerdy I'd say at 00, there's a lot of spreadsheets at the beginning trying to just map out who are all the different users, what sort of spaces will they need and trying to figure out kind of reverse engineer from the kind of maximum areas that someone will require backwards, so yeah I'd say a lot of kind of spreadsheets at the beginning, all the quantitative elements of the brief and then kind of space mapping that across this building, so as I was saying the London Bridge City Hall is very different spatially with kind of ten floors, all a circular plan so trying to figure out where, which spaces should be adjacent to each other first of all, then of course at City Hall security is a really important thing to consider, so as part of that kind of overlay on the areas, the adjacencies, the secure line is a really important thing there and also what characteristics do those spaces need.

So in terms of privacy, public access to them, and yeah trying to kind of bring all those together, to a kind of initial straw man plan that's probably how we'll first do it and then iterations of that.

This was quite a fast programme, so yes there was a lot of kind of quick and fast iterations at the beginning until we got to a brief that we were all really happy with.

We also worked closely with Arup Engineers, who are engineers, who, they actually did the London Bridge City Hall and also the Crystal building, so yeah a really great team who understands both buildings really well, so working very closely with them to figure out the kind of mechanical, electrical requirements, security requirements, even AV IT and making sure that all of those different teams, that we understood their requirements and how they could all fit together.

Yeah it definitely was a complex brief and quite a few kind of conflicting requirements to try and synthesise, so yeah we hope we've come up with a design that works pretty well for everyone.

21:08 - Sustainability

Eliza: Definitely and it'll be really interesting to see how the space is used moving forward but before we get to that I'm keen to touch on the sustainability comment you made just before about that being such a big part of the original Crystal. Was it something that was really important in your redesign?

Andrea: Yeah so the Crystal building itself was exemplary in that it was the first building to get both BREEAM outstanding and LEED platinum, which are the kind of highest

sustainability credentials that a building can get in the UK, so that was one of the key parts of our brief like ensuring that we could retain that BREEAM outstanding which we have managed to.

In order to retain the BREEAM outstanding credential, it meant that we have to even continue to be as innovative as they were when this building was first realised, so that included things like incorporating promoting active travel, so through enhanced cycles fans which you know the requirement for that has really increased a lot in the last 10 years in London and the Mayor of London is a champion of promoting active travel and then through to the specification of materials that we've used so ensuring that we prioritise locally sourced UK materials, materials with a high recycle content and even just sustainability-wise, I mean managing to adapt a vacant building to breathe a new life, no new use, that will hopefully be here for you know a considerable amount of time in the future, that's kind of the best thing that we can do, as well assist in doing as architects so also just ensuring that the building itself has amazing kind of water efficiency systems so under the street and the London living room area there's tens of thousands of rainwater harvesting tanks, so the engineers have been pivotal in making sure that those sort of systems, all the building management systems can help the GLA to use the building in a really sustainable way also.

23:24 - Future plans

Eliza: That's super interesting and you've just mentioned the use of the building. Obviously we're still in the early days of the space being used in its new form and function, but what are your sort of hopes and plans for the space in the future and the next few years?

Dan: I think the building is very much designed to have the sort of very much the function that people will recognise from its home in Tower Bridge and the design of the London living room and the Assembly Chamber and the Committee Rooms, it very much is the home of London government, all of London's government business is done in that space and the events team again you know we're coming out of the pandemic but the events team is very keen to now start to build up all of those activities and events and welcome people from London into the building.

Interestingly actually on the second day that the building was properly operational the Centre for London hosted a conference in there about the future of East London and all of the exciting things happening in East London and I attended that and there were over 250 delegates sitting in the new London living room.

You know with a view right the way down a very beautiful and sunny Docks which is 5 kilometres long and it looked really amazing. I think the immediate locale around the building is also really really fascinating, so some of you will know that it's adjacent to the Silvertown Tunnel project so that the piece of land behind is currently a significant site where they're constructing the new Silvertown Tunnel, which will link Greenwich Peninsula

across to the Royal Docks and the Tunnel Boring Machines I think are being lowered in as we speak at the moment but that is a site that we own in joint venture with a development partner and have secured planning permission for 5,000 homes, a new park and significant amounts of commercial development and so we're expecting to work alongside the development of the Tunnel to create this new community on the river behind City Hall, which will give it this direct access to the river and the new park, so again very much in the way that more London developed following the arrival of City Hall, a similar transformation will be happening in around new City Hall.

I'd also say that just the importance about you know the nearest Jubilee line station at the moment is Canning Town which is only a 10-minute walk away so it's actually closer than London Bridge was to the old City Hall and there's an incredible transformation happening in Canning Town at the moment, with over about 3,500 homes being built in a new town centre and I think what the arrival of City Hall has done is really bookended the redevelopments of Canning Town and created a real sort of anchor or a draw for people to walk from the Jubilee line station to Canning Town, into the Royal Docks so it's creating that really interesting gateway opportunity and then just immediately behind the building is what we call the Fly Under project which actually apparently was the first flyover that was ever built in this country in the 1930s, Expressway there's an amazing workspace that operates from under part of that fly under at the moment of which I think Andrea's practice was involved in as well, in a really interesting refurb and we've secured planning permission to redevelop the rest of that fly under space, the space that sits under the flyover into really interesting workspace and we're planning some quite interesting meanwhile use project in the meantime as well, so it's a really fascinating and fast-changing, dynamic part of the city and it operates really well at the moment with very high quality public realm in front of the building, but some sort of really exciting significant projects sort of happening just adjacent as well so you know over the next I'd say the next sort of 5 to 10 years, the place is going to really significantly transform.

26:55 - The Royal Docks

Eliza: Amazing. So the Royal Docks as you've just highlighted is really a place of change and transformation and obviously there's a history of the Royal Docks as an industrial hub, that is where we are today and then there's all the plans that you speak of for the future.

It's probably one of the most changing areas of the city would you say, so I guess on that point where does City Hall and the connected plans fit into the idea of transformation of the Royal Docks? How does that fit in with the existing communities, how have you found that so far?

Dan: I think clearly the Royal Docks has been a very long-term regeneration project, I think the Docks closed in the 1980s, the you know first London Docklands Development Corporation invested huge amounts of infrastructure through the 1990s and projects have

emerged over time, things like ExCel or City Airport and some of the earlier residential development but since I've been involved in 2013, firstly under Boris' administration Mayor and then more recently with Sadiq and the Mayor of Newham Rokhsana, who was elected four years ago, there's been a very very significant political shift in the way that they want growth to happen in the Royal Docks and that's very much around social environmental and economic furnace and so we've been on a process of making significant changes to the sort of the projects that they developed to ensure that there's much more, much greater levels of affordable housing being provided, that communities are much more engaged and involved in the design and the delivery of a number of significant interventions, that we're encouraging lots of forms of active travel, and environmental sustainability is at the core of everything that we do.

And I think as I mentioned at the beginning that was one of the things that really I guess attracted or sold this to the Mayor in that it really you know for him to be able to sit at the heart of perhaps one of his most important regeneration projects but be seeing that to be delivered in a way that him and Rokhsana Fiaz, Mayor of Newham, want to and see, you know, amazing opportunity to really embed that into into a new community, I think was incredibly attractive.

So a couple of examples of things, small examples but we mentioned earlier about the renaming of Siemens Brothers Way to Kamal Chunchie Way I think that's just an interesting small example of what that means and all of the things that Andrea was mentioning around the exemplary sustainability of the building and the claims for this building was when Siemens built it, it was the most sustainable building in the world, it was the only building I think that they could find that had achieved both of those accreditations and this is an incredibly important priority for Sadiq and he's recently elected as the president of the C40 Climate Change Cities so for him you know making sure that everything was being done to make the refurbishment as sustainable as possible but building on all of that good work that had been done previously was really attractive to him.

So one other thing that I would say was just for us as a team that are delivering a whole range of projects on the ground from development projects to public realm upgrades to work with community to a cultural programme and events, there's an interesting dynamic, when you welcome the Mayor in the London Assembly to your patch, you know the level of interest that we've had from the London Assembly across all of those issues has been really really fascinating, so you know the level of scrutiny and interest that that gives but the amount of traction that enables us to have conversations with people like TfL and I guess just the additional level of support because City Hall is now in that area to do things like improve cycle links, transport connections, to have a better understanding of how people live in these parts of London and understand the issues that people face on a daily basis has provided really you know a lot of support to the team to get things done but to get

things done a lot more quickly than perhaps we would have been able to do if City Hall hadn't relocated to the area.

Eliza: Completely, now I think we're getting to the end of the time now, is there one final thing you want people to know about City Hall or the Royal Docks before we close?

Andrea: I think the new City Hall will have a really positive impact on the area as Dan was saying, it's an area undergoing significant change, there's going to be thousands of new homes, work spaces and I think this is a prominent location on the Royal Docks and kind of moving it from a vacant building to this incredibly interesting, activating this frontage and also the kind of flexibility and the diversity of uses that can be housed in this new home for Londoners, I think it's a brilliant amenity both for existing residents of the area and future residents as there will be a lot in the next 10 years or so, but it's also really helping to put the Royal Docks on the map as the real destination I think, so yeah I hope that it will be a really brilliant public amenity and that it will help members of the public to get more actively engaged in kind of civic activities and democracy, whether that's just sitting in the London living room, having a tea in the afternoon and watching a Committee meeting going on, or glimpsing into the Chamber or whether it will actually empower people to get more actively involved in politics in London with this activity.

Yeah it's been a really great project to work on and yeah we're really happy with the results.

Dan: And what would I say, I mean we talked about a lot of me, I mean, I guess one of the things that I would do is really encourage members of the public to come and take a look, so I think Andrea's described very well some of those sort of challenges that her and the team and we've had to grapple with in terms of creating a building that's you know very much open to the public and the living room is an open public space and managing some of the security requirements that there are around designing and managing a building like City Hall, so I would really encourage people to come and poke their head in, look through the windows, have a look, grab a coffee and watch the London Assembly in action in what is I think you know you're right you're saying that the Royal Docks and that area of East London has undeniably seen the most significant change of any part of the city and the type of development and the building typologies that we're seeing are very different to any other part of the city and you know I suppose that the legacy of the regeneration will create a very significant sub-regional district for London that will feel a very interesting, modern, cosmopolitan, diverse, hopefully more socially just part of the city and I just encourage people to come and take a look.

33:52 - Conclusion

Eliza: Well, that's all the time we have today but thank you to our guests Dan and Andrea.

You've been listening to the Key Actors series on Building Sounds brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture. To see more about the Key Actors series head to lfa.london/keyactors.

We'll be back with a new episode next week hearing more about the renaming of Siemens Brothers way with Sophie Hardcastle from Street Space and Asif Shakoor, independent scholar.

Until then if you've liked this episode make sure to subscribe to the channel and share this episode with a friend, colleague, or family member.