

## “Kamal Chunchie Way and the act of renaming” Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

[Music]

**Eliza:** Hello and welcome back to building sounds, the podcast exploring the stories behind 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.

A couple of weeks ago, we kicked off the Key Actors series, exploring the key people and projects shaping the Royal Docks.

Last episode we explored the move of City Hall to the Royal Docks and what this means for the area. In this episode we move just a few moments away to explore the road on which the space sites, Kamal Chunchie Way.

for this conversation I'm joined by Sophie Hardcastle, head of engagement at street space, and Asif Shakoor, independent scholar exploring BAME seafarers in the first world war.

we're going to hear from Asif in a little bit but to start with we're joined by Sophie to explore the process behind the renaming

[Music]

### 1:04 - Sophie

**Eliza:** Sophie could you quickly introduce yourself and your connection to the project.

**Sophie:** hi my name is Sophie Hardcastle I am the head of engagement at street space and street space is a social and enterprise-based in barking and we work with communities and people to help reimagine their streets and spaces to make them feel safer um more joyful and focusing on social connection

**Eliza:** amazing so how did street space initially get involved with the renaming of what now is Kamal Chunchie way

**Sophie:** to be honest i don't know i think because we're quite close to the royal docks area being based in barking and we have started to like branch out to do projects across london we were approached to create a series of conversations to have with people of the royal docks area around what siemens brothers way could be renamed as but also to create a kind of treasure trove of potential future names and a guide to guide the process of naming streets and spaces across the area in the future because it is kind of an area that's going through and a lot of kind of fast-paced change and regeneration

**Eliza:** amazing so what was the process where do you start on something like that?

**Sophie:** so i think we essentially did a very very similar process to kind of most of our engagement projects but i think essentially what we like to do is first start by the process of discovery so understanding who's in the area and how we can work with them to devise the process as not kind of enforcing a process of workshops or engagement or conversation on to the local residents but working with them to devise a process that they want to be part of that helps us come to useful interesting and meaningful names so we collaborated with radlac a community center in the area and also custom house bookshop a really really interesting bookshop in the area and just spoke to them about how they might go about renaming siemens brothers way and coming up with a treasure trove of future names from them and speaking with the royal docks team and a couple of other people in the area we understood that history is of course hugely important to the area in the people

there's also so many people you speak to are hugely passionate and have so much knowledge about the history of the area so through speaking with them kind of devised it around three sessions of the past the present and the future in the past conversation we brought in the royal docks history club who kind of prompted and provoked that conversation through sharing stories of the past

in the present conversation we work with the custom house bookshop and their networks to consider what's happening now that we really want to celebrate in into the future and what people are really really proud of and who those people are and what their identities are in the present

and then the future was more of a kind of young people-centered conversation that focused on imagining a future for the royal docks and what that might look like and what words we might want to use to describe it in the future and what words we want to see paving our paths in the future and how we will relate to them in the future as well and through those three conversations of past present and future really figuring out what the key threads are that are prominent when you think about the past present and future and what resonates um with the different kind of communities that you get coming along to those different conversations and through that we then created what i'm describing as a treasure chest of resources that then guided the royal docks team to shortlist a number of different names that were then voted on by the public and the final name was Kamal Chunchie way which is now kind of sitting proudly outside of the crystal building in place of siemens brother's way

**Eliza:** amazing are you able to tell me a little bit about Kamal Chunchie who was he why was his name chosen

**Sophie:** yeah so i think the name Kamal Chunchie came through kind of well conversations that we had in all three sessions from the past the present and the future that surrounded how proud people are to be part of such a diverse community in the area and how the docs have played a really influential role on creating that diversity of people so i do believe Kamal

Chunchie was a race relations campaigner born in Sri Lanka who set up the coloured men's institute in the royal docks in 1926 for the sailors and the dock workers and the local residents

**Eliza:** amazing so i guess it's a real idea of uncovering those untold stories and histories that a lot of people won't be familiar with um but are really important for the area and the people that are in the area and actually for anyone to know those stories

so what for you is the importance of the unveiling of some of these hidden histories and stories and people are linked to that what is the importance of the renaming process as a way of revealing these hidden histories or re-shaping a history or rewriting a history could you expand on that a little bit if you've got any thought

**Sophie:** yeah so i think for me it's mostly about why and what the local people now want to read and see and explore within their cities for me it's not necessarily about history it's not necessarily about revealing untold stories but through hearing that local people and these organizations and these community groups are really passionate about doing so that's the motivation for me so we went into it kind of very very open not even prompting the idea of retelling forgotten histories and yeah exploring the lives of people who might have been forgotten or underrepresented that came from the local organizations and the local communities and that for me is really really important because it represents something and it represents them and it's part of their identity and it's part of how they see themselves and it makes them proud and happy and that's a really wonderful thing to witness when a group of people can come together the very kind of open brief and conversation to think about what do we want our streets to say about us what do we want to see on our streets when other people come to our area what thoughts do we want to provoke in them when they read our street signs what kind of stories through words do we want to kind of display on our streets

**Eliza:** yeah i think this is a really important point to bring up and i think it's really interesting that that's coming through and it's interesting that history's been such a big thing sometimes if she doesn't get a good rap we spoke to Marieta a few episodes ago and about the way we can use history to actually ground us and connect us more to the area rather than it being just history book on the shelf so really interesting that that's come through in this process and been really important to to the resident of the Docks

am i right in thinking that you've created some guidelines or principles for either yourselves or someone else was interested in the renaming of another street as well

**Sophie:** yeah and i would say it wasn't actually all about kind of revealing forgotten narratives we did have some really playful conversations as well about how to rename streets and we had many conversations about creating for example really curious and catchy names that tell a kind of silly story that make people laugh and make people play on the street rather than it all being very momentous and serious and representative

we i think one of the references was a street in Loughborough that's called Ingle Pingle street and people just spoke about how curious and catchy names make them smile and and that's also something that they want to do in in the streets of the area but yeah we came up with a series of six principles to guide anyone really in the area who's thinking about the process of naming or renaming like we said the area is going through huge regeneration very fast-paced regeneration there's going to be lots of opportunities for considering the names of streets and spaces and places so we really wanted to instead of just coming up with a kind of fixed report that provides the answers we wanted to create a resource that can spur on more engagement it's better on more conversation and also something that can kind of provoke and prompt thoughts in other people's mind when they are renaming so through giving a series of principles rather than a list of names we hope to provoke kind of developers or anyone who's renaming in the area to think actively about what they're naming their streets not just choose from a list of names that we've compiled together

so yeah the outcome uh what we created through this project was first of all a bank of stories and stories that we heard from people that came to the conversations that really really stuck out as important to them to continue to reveal and continue to tell for generations to come we also on top of the bank of stories created a series of street renaming principles to be used for future areas of streets spaces and places that need to be named or renamed so an example of some of these principles was represent the underrepresented so that's something we've kind of touched on already but the idea of street names really really surfacing and standing for those people who might have been forgotten throughout history another example which i've kind of spoke about already is create curious and catchy names so things that simply make people happy and make people think and spark their imagination around where they came from and maybe help them to dare dream about something funny on their where to work another example of one of the principles was celebrate the ordinary so people mentioned in the royal docks area these like fantastical names that are popping up around new developments and how they make them sound so kind of utopian but actually people through the conversations did really want to celebrate the ordinary the everyday the human and the kind of on the ground rather than the kind of prestigious the royal and the famous it is really about those people living and their everyday lives and how we can celebrate the small and the everyday

**Eliza:** so that's super interesting you've just mentioned the idea of developers using it for new developments it's obviously in this case an existing street name that's being changed do you see this as a way of doing things that could be taken beyond street name possibly to statues or monuments or rethinking galleries or what are your thoughts on that

**Sophie:** yeah i think kind of sharing stories whether they be kind of histories or dreams or day dreams sharing narratives i think is a really good way of co-creating many things within the urban environment because i guess you can communicate well the idea of the story what's behind the story communicates what's in someone's heart and what's important to

someone it's also very open as well you're not asking what should we name streets after because that question is quite restricting it evokes names or people rely on their current idea of what a street name should sound and look like which is often very kind of colonial and royal and yeah it's a narrower view of what street names could be but the idea of using stories to reimagine a street name or stories to reimagine a statue is an open platform where people can share what's important to them rather than be restricted by the question you're asking them so stories of history can come up but stories of family can come up fantastical stories of um a utopic future can come up and those can all work together to paint a picture of really what is at the heart of what many people in the local community want to see and what words are we seeing here that might represent that and enable us to communicate that

so yeah i think stories because of their kind of open and creative nature really allow us to listen to what's important to local communities and feed into whatever you're creating

**Eliza:** amazing so having gone through this process is there one story or one fact or one reflection that you've found out through this project that you want to share with us

**Sophie:** i think this is quite a random one but it does come to mind every time i think about the project and i think it stands out to me because it's very different to my experiences and and what i've experienced in my life and growing up but one story really stands out and i've heard this from a few people throughout the conversations was when people were younger living in the royal docks area as children and kind of going to school and going about their daily lives and playing along the docks they really remember people coming from across the world and kind of handing them gifts and even words and sweets and they kind of described it as like a moving museum of people kind of coming and going coming and going and through that portal of the docks they learn a few words of a language they learn about a new type of food they learnt about lots of different things that then came to kind of form their understanding of the world and it just sounds like an amazing place to grow up experiencing that

obviously we also heard terrible stories of racism and the huge challenges that many people faced within that industry at that time but it was interesting to hear the memories of people who've lived in royal docks as children and how they perceived the people who were coming to that area in the from what we heard a very kind of excited and enriching way

**Eliza:** amazing and i think it's really interesting this idea of all these different types of stories and peoples and projects that are brought up and it's almost as if not more beautiful that process of uncovering all these stories these funny conversations as much as the final name um i think there's something really beautiful in that reset and it'd be really interesting as we see possibly more of these renamings or rethinkings the street names of statues as well so with that i mean we've covered quite a lot already i think

is there one final thing that you wanted us to remember you wanted to leave us on

**Sophie:** i guess my interest is in how we can continue to better include and involve local people in shaping their spaces and places that they live and occupy and work and i think this is this is an example of that how can that better look but i also think that projects of these kinds um can be open to or run the risk of being quite tokenistic in the way that they invite local people to comment or inform or shape a very small part of a huge and wider network of transformations and change and i think this is what we face across renaming and reshaping spaces across the country and the world so i guess from doing this project and wanting to do others and doing others in other contexts i think yeah we really need to be mindful around when we create such a small package of influence and involvement for local people how are we also involving them in shaping the wider spaces because at the end of the day even if local people have been part of creating the name of a place if the kind of amenities structures, bases, buildings on the street aren't representative of what they've said during that journey then it is just tokenistic involvement of local people and i think that's a huge shame and i don't think anyone intends to i certainly don't think that's the case in the royal docks here but yeah i do wonder how kind of the richness of information we've explored in this project and the resource we've

created for this project can be considered and used to inform not only the name but the wider context of transformation in the area and how that resource can be used to prompt and provoke projects that have been grounded in a conversation with local people

**Eliza:** completely and i think it's a really interesting point and we're actually going to be speaking to Asif Shakoor in a moment

he is a researcher who's exploring BAME seafarers in the first world war and he's going to tell us a little bit more about another one of the potential names and the stories that come behind that really looking forward to that conversation in a minute

sophie thank you for joining us today i've thoroughly enjoyed that

## **21:21 - Asif**

**Eliza:** so Asif could you firstly introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your connection to the project

**Asif:** i'm Asif Shakoor i was born and grew up in Newham i studied at university east london i presented at local and national events and my grandfather Mohammad Garma arrived at the Royal Victoria Dock in December 1917 he stayed there for a month while the kiva was refitted before they went on the onward journey to America to transport american troops

**Eliza:** amazing you've got a history that goes back quite a long time how did you discover this history

**Asif:** it's really interesting how i found about this history it was junior visits 2011 to Pakistan when we had our family home refurbished or should we say demolished and rebuilt again

during this visit my mother was saying that my grandmother had a box a wooden box which she had held placed high on a shelf and she would never let anyone touch so my mother mentioned me to look for this box and i was searching for this box and and i thought what's special about the box because it's all old duvets old beds all furniture it's all a load of rubbish i'll throw away so my mother instead just look for this box because my grandmother never let her touch it and

so i searched for this box and under the rubble i came across the wooden box and i opened this box and i found loads of papers some in zordo language land ownership and a property somewhere in english and i came across the english language which were interesting a5 size quite small um as they would have been for that period and these letters were from the ministry of social security from the overseas group in Newcastle upon Tyne there was some address to my grandmother acknowledging you know my grandfather had two war medals and I came across another letter which acknowledged when the medal was sent back to pakistan then again i came across another two letters which were from her she didn't actually write herself though because someone from the local registry of this world was less full of learning english because she couldn't actually speak or writing so she imprinted her thumb print as in place of the signature on these letters and one of the as i mentioned that is

my husband served in the war 1940-1918 in the emerging navy i could submit the woman if and when required and then from the other as we know that there was a made so i came across these letters i came across also a certificate of service in the mercator marine for roma hasa also referred to as a continuous discharge certificate and this certificate was for roma it wasn't for my grandfather i presume that during the period when my grandfather applied for his medals because he was not educated he wasn't able to write or speak english i presume that the wrong one was returned to him after they applied for his law medals and he the wrong statistically returned to him which he kept not knowing this is until the pension came which my grandfather identified that is not his and and whatever searched into this difficult service i found out that actually this certificate service for the mercantile marine the merchant navy by the time i didn't know what the mercantile marine was so i came across the names of various vessels like you know ss kaiser hint which stood for the empress of india which is in the order like language cassari hint cancer as an empress and um hindu mean you know india again then again it came across as other vessels such as ss Syria, ss multan and various other vessels ss delta and i came across these vessels and i researched these vessels and i found out that actually these are vessels that were hospital ships or troop transport or various others serving the various other theatres of war

**Eliza:** amazing how did that make you feel discovering all this history that you knew in a tiny bit but then discovered more as time went on how did that make you feel and did that change your feelings about the royal doctrine your connection to the area at all it

**Asif:** it certainly has made my feelings for the royal docks change i was actually quite shocked and my eyes couldn't actually believe what i was seeing and i was reading he actually when i first found the letters and the documents i actually started them all the way through the night this morning like four a.m after finding a box something like four three four pm during the day and I read the letter still four am trying to make a sense that was my grandfather in the war or was it someone else rama hasa whose papers have ended up in my grandmother's belongings so i was trying to work out what did he do i mean if he was in the war how come none of my uncles mentioned this before

but um going back to the royal docks I researched through and various race records at the national archives the crew list for the ss kiva which my grandfather was on so i found out through this cruise that my grandfather arrived on the kiva and they arrived at the pilbara dog and i know that arthur cindy bacon a british crew member actually died and his body was released at target.com then kiva proceeded to the royal victoria dock where he finally the voice terminates so i didn't know what victoria dock was then because i've always known as the royal victoria dock and then i found out through the memoirs of dr ahmed had the khan he wrote a moment was changed to lose which is published in pakistan in 2007 but it was again published earlier in 1989 the first edition and i had a read of that and i found out that the kiva stayed there for a month and it was refitted for the onward journey and ahmed had the khan describes his experience of staying there at the docks he says that we could his noise of bombs and thunder and the lights would go off and there'd be sirens and so i found out my grandfather stayed at the docks for a month whilst the kiva was refitted for the onward journey to america to transport america's troops from new york

and i i always wondered what my grandfather had done there and then i began feeling that crash of the docks and again it was dr georgia beams she was generous took me i pointed it out this is where the royal victoria docks starts and this is where it ends and this is the actual victoria dock and this one brother is the royal albert dock so i feel a great sense of connection to that dog knowing that an ancestor who i never met i never saw physically in my life and the sister whose history was not known to a decade ago in 2011 and knowing that an ancestor arrived stayed at the royal Victoria dock for a month it's actually i feel a great collection of docks and

i've actually been there several times since then alone years old i spent time with the at the rocket tour i spent time there pondering where would he have stayed for what they have done and so forth

**Eliza:** really wonderful and such a unique story and a way of discovering it i think it's so wonderful to hear and it's something that you've different talks about this and trying to allow others to know about the story and about your grandfather as well why is it really important to you to share the stories that are slightly less well-known but really interesting and really important to our wider history



**Asif:** i feel that it's so important to highlight and make stories that are unknown told I originally unearthed this story from a box which belonged to my grandmother and had i not actually looked at this box and dismissed it as being relevant and she would have thought it was a lot of garbage and throw it all away and i probably would have this part of history would have gone in this box and been destroyed and lost forever i feel that these stories should be known because uh many south asian seamen arrive at the docks from early as 1600 or 1800 when the Royal Victoria docks were broke and and arrived they stayed then their history is probably not known and and when i first began it was like during the centenary celebrations first world war when i literally mentioned my grandfather it was like to academics and non-academics to scholars and librarians historians um it was like if it was this first world war soldier it seemed like to me that they would be more keen and annoying but if it was a seafarer it was like there were literally or no interest and so i felt that this story should be known because south asia made a huge contribution to the united kingdom in war and peace as my grandmother remarked but my grandfather he served britain in war and peace in one of the less history business and so i think that these stories will be known because of the contribution in the first world war the second world war of south asia seafarers as well as the bold war uh we also find that in peace time south asian seafarers contribute to and work for the ships of the east india company

**Eliza:** i couldn't agree with you more i think these contributions are so important by really thankful for people like you who sort of sharing your knowledge and your histories with us so i think we all feel very privileged to be able to hear that and i guess thinking about that in connection to the recent renaming this is also about this idea of sharing stories and celebrating people that have not been talked about before i wonder if you could tell me a little bit about your thoughts on that process and the idea of renaming something and celebrating the people in the history

**Asif:** i think as the mayor of london Sadiq Khan was due to move to the new city hall at the royal victoria dock so it was decided that in celebration of diversity the existing road there that it should be renamed as something that's a diverse name so i thought that it'd be good that it'd be renamed after a south asian seafarer or BAME because of the contribution that they made and i i came across numerous graves at west ham cemetery for example of I say a few dozen south asian seafarers who are praising unmarked public graves aren't consecrated who didn't receive a funeral service would just literally died at the docks or at this seamless hospital have a braid at west ham cemetery in unmarked public graves so i visited one of the graves and that was for abdul rahman who the registrar actually pointed out to me where the actual grave is because I couldn't actually find it there's no headstone no a grave marking there but um she told me that there would have been several other people buried on top of him and that doesn't mean that they will seafarers if there could be anyone so i thought that seamen should be known

i would mention that Kamal Chunchie arrived as a merchant seaman on a merchant vessel to the uk and he eventually stopped the men's institute which was catering for the needs of a destitute seamen that arrived at the Royal Victoria dock as well as other people that were resident in the uk so i thought that it'd be great to rename it Kamal Chunchie Way after someone who arrived as a merchant seaman here set up the culmination institute celebrates the diversity of the dogs and in the process um something like 50 names were sure listed my grandfather's name occurred in this list of 50 names Mahomed Gama and eventually it was shortlisted down to eight names and again it was surely just three names and then it was put again to a public vote and then i i by the way wrote it for Kamal Chunchie i thought that he has a great history connection with the docs with the college men's institute what he done for the seafarers his contributions so i also got him and eventually from among the three names his name was the actual one that was selected

**Eliza:** amazing how did that make you feel obviously your grandfather wasn't chosen as the final name but you did have someone who had a connection to the seafarers still how does that feel having someone who was connected to the seafarers be selected and be there now on the road for hopefully quite a long time

**Asif:** i felt great about that because um there's actually a crosstalk which actually has two panel art panels by sonia and those two panels mentioned about Kamal Chunchie and the color event institute so now i feel that now we've actually gone a step further to have actually a road named after Kamal Chunchie called Kamal Chunchie Way so i feel like she's a great connection knowing that he's named after someone who is who's celebrated for diversity and also the fact that he was actually a merchant man who arrived here and catered for the knees of merchant seaman that arrived at the Royal Victoria whatever Dock who had destroyed you poor and needy found on the streets without no money and often weighing it for months until they could reboot another vessel back to india get home so i feel it's a great connection that is actually someone has a connection with a seed fearing and i also feel that i have a connection with that so because my grandfather was a safety rather than having a toy dog so there's also that country come out of Kamal Chunchie

**Eliza:** amazing i think it's such a lovely story and i wonder whether do you think more of names and buildings should be renamed to reflect some of the histories that have not been told as well should this happen again all over london or the uk

**Asif:** i think i particularly at the royal victoria dock i think that more buildings or places should be named after seafarers and seafaring heritage because it has a rich connection to the docks and you find that early south asian seafarers began arriving there in the late 1850s when the victoria dock was actually constructed in 1854 and it sort of could be in 1855-1856 we find that a large number of them arrive here and you find something that for doesn't build up a stamped symmetry so i think that the legacy that they left behind seems to be forgotten and not receive the recognition it should have received then and now so i think that to have more places named after would be great

i was even keen on perhaps having a stone or something or my mineral stone put in place at west dam cemetery in memory of the 40 or so seafarers buried the south asian seafarers who had heard no relatives here had no home here had no extra collection here who arrived to serving on british vessels of bathing and it'd be nice to see a memorial plaque or even a stone erection in each grave but i think there's maybe too much um to be quite costly so perhaps a single plaque was stolen at the cemetery to mark the fact that they're buried here and they contribute to brave in war and peace or perhaps even a plaque at Victoria Royal Dock or a street named after seafarers because i know there was also alaska's club on victoria dock road which doesn't exist anymore there was even an and his cafe for the tourist doctoral which was to cater for the needs of south asian seafarers who arrived here and afterward south asian food curry or more so it would cater for them and and nothing remains now from the victoria Dock world to even indicate that ali's catholic district here will cater for the needs of south asian seafarers there's nothing so it's interesting and then you could say many societies even like the pinot had a society called the de pino Bhatti wallace society and it was actually bodhi what actually meant the literal sense but he means light but he actually meant electricians and he stood for the electrician so all the electricians were part of the british electrician all part of this society is this club and it was a name from the language bhatti wallace or punjabi name so um it would be nice to see something at the docks in memory of the south asian seafarers.

**Eliza:** amazing and i think we've covered so much already but i wondered is there one final thing that you'd like our listeners to know what would you like to leave us on

**Asif:** i can't think of anything just yet but um i just like to thank the london festival architecture for giving me this opportunity to speak about my grandfather and speak about his war service and speak about the lush girls of the last class we've been serving britain for over 200 years 400 years united states on ships the east india company as well as ships the piano ships and british industry level education company as well as the clan line and various other lines so i'd just like to say thank you for giving the opportunity and then just like to create greater awareness on the contribution they made and enlightened by other young asians born in the uk to come forward and you know search their histories perhaps they've got a grandparent who's a seafarer and i'd like to hear this we used to allow to you know these stories to collect together bringing together perhaps build upon it and create a better awareness in it

**Eliza:** Amazing i think that's all we have time for today but thank you to our guests Sophie and Asif.

You've been listening to Building Sounds brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture. To learn more about the Key Actors series head to [lfa.london/Keyactors](https://lfa.london/Keyactors).

We'll be back with a new episode next week exploring Tate & Lyle and the unexpected future of sugar in the Royal Docks. We'll be joined by Chris from Tate & Lyle and Alan and Armor from the University of East London.

Until then, if you've enjoyed this conversation and would like to listen to more of our recent conversations, search for building sounds on apple podcasts, spotify or wherever you find your favorite podcast