

“LFA2022 Pews and Perches (Third Edition)” Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

Eliza: Hello and welcome back to Building Sounds, a 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.

Over the next few episodes, we'll be exploring some of the projects that form part of LFA 2022 and discovering the stories behind each of the designs. To start with we'll be talking with the designers of this year's pews and perches' benches, the design competition in collaboration with the Royal Docks team.

Now in its third edition, this series of five benches aims to improve London's public realm, celebrate emerging architectural talent and connect people with the buildings and spaces around them.

We start with What a Water Waste at the Royal Victoria Dock floating garden and work clockwise around the docks toward Turning Tide at Thames Barrier Park.

The conversations can be listened to from the comfort of your own home however for the best experience, we recommend seeing the benches on site as part of a self-guided walking tour. As you walk between the benches, you'll be able to pause the episode and restart at the next location.

When you're ready, our first designers Leroy and Gemma will reveal the inspiration behind their bench, What a Water Waste.

1:22 What-A-Water Waste! by Leroy Yuen and Gemma Louisa Holdaway

Leroy: Hello my name is Leroy,

Gemma: And I'm Gemma and we're Against Studio.

Leroy: And our bench is called What-a Water Waste! It's a bit of a mouthful but that was considered and designed.

We are working mostly with recycled plastics for our bench and I think our focus or interest comes from this contemporary age of design, where plastic is consumed in a huge scale.

As we know it is highly versatile and almost infamous wonder material this is used in different industries like building and construction, packaging, transportation or electronics, and almost every everything.

And we kind of want to address this plastic wastage and excess by reacting to it and working against it to propose a different future or alternative of this material.

What-a Water Waste! is a co-created bench made of type 2 plastic, which is HDPE high density polyethylene, so this type of plastic is mainly in milk bottles and in capsule domestic waste like detergents, and we've collected them from local communities and businesses, and some family and friends, and last but not least ReCyrcl, which is a licensed waste carrier and dealer based in the Royal Docks and they primarily work with plastics.

Gemma: We want to introduce new methods of how to integrate local communities into the shaping and development of community initiatives, such as you know gathering this usable waste but on the other hand also to introduce new open source knowledge in terms of sustainable and more circular design practices that can integrate the waste of communities and turn it into a sculptural social cultural representation of the climate emergency and how we can act against it.

And it's not just targeting local communities but also tourists who visit the Royal Docks, because we're all facing this climate emergency together and we want it to be opensource knowledge.

As I mentioned you know plastic recycling in product design has become opensource, but it is very exclusive due to the cost of the machines that we use to do this plastic recycling, like a granulator to grind up the plastic and sheet press to form and melt these sheets.

Leroy: This very tangible process is what we also want to share with the communities. We're privileged enough to have access to machineries in order to make this possible, but I think it's also a process that should be accessible to the general public.

Gemma: I think it's just having an impact through something that's tangible because we read about the climate emergency in the news or you know statistics about it and you know they said we need to take action but as a local or just general public who don't engage with these kind of you know resources or information in their work it's just something that they hear on the news that's really important to have that tangible visualisation and interaction with the material that is a response to a climate emergency, because then you get to understand, okay this is what perhaps can be done and it's made from a material though as you said we all engage with at some point.

5:25 GAM by Fiona Hartley and James Parkes

Fiona: Hi I'm Fiona Hartley and I designed the GAM bench with James Parkes.

So, when we visited the Royal Docks we were kind of super inspired by strangely the DLR and we just thought that spatially it was really interesting.

We were really inspired by these huge man-made infrastructures in the area and how they kind of told the history of the area such as the DLR arriving and kind of reviving it and allowing all of these people that lived around there to then connect with other spaces around there much more easily.

And you can kind of see the regeneration in the area through all of these different things such as the DLR and the cable cars and like the ExCel Centre, and I just think around there it's like super spatially interesting, you have like this huge body of water of the Royal Docks. And then like these bridges overarching creating all these little pockets of space and there's just not really anywhere else like in London, so we wanted the bench to kind of be a sort of monument in ways to the DLR and the regeneration of the area.

So we quite literally took one supporting element from a DLR bridge and scaled this down slightly and then we played around with different configurations of how this could become a bench and then we arrived at this kind of modular idea, which was alternating this piece of the bridge turned upside down on its side.

Our material was actually kind of the starting point for the projects, we were interested in the industries in the area and obviously you have the old flour mill, but we kind of looked at what waste the whole area produce now and we quite early on were investigating you know using material or paper or something as kind of an aggregate in a moulded product.

So we arrived at the idea that we would use paper waste and then we kind of looked further into stuff like papercrete, paper and resin, and all of these different kinds of ways that you can use paper as building material, and then we loved that using paper as an aggregate in cement, you kind of almost replicate this effect of you know the weathered stone of the Royal Docks that's been like water damaged over time.

And then to further push that we saw an old image of the Royal Docks before it was actually filled with water and you could kind of see in the materiality of how deep it was. There were all of these gradient-like colours, so we kind of wanted to replicate that and we looked at Rachel Whiteread and other artists, who have this kind of graphic materiality to their work and we wanted to replicate that.

And then it also comes back to like sedimentary rock and that kind of material. It's quite natural but you know in contrast it has this man-made waste in it with all the paper formed in layers.

The bench being positioned on Canal Crossing is interesting because it kind of adds to the narrative that we were inspired by when we first visited the Royal Docks and it kind of comes back to this idea of these huge man-made structures that probably the general public would find quite ugly like the huge bridges, the DLR and it just kind of enhances these little pockets of space that these man-made structures create in this beautiful area.

I think it would be really interesting for people to see it and maybe at first glance it kind of camouflages in with the area, it doesn't look like a super new object or maybe it looks like something that has been there a while and I think that's quite an interesting provocation for people who may be new to the area or even frequently in the area, they're like "oh has that always been there?" kind of like hiding in plain sight type of thing.

10:18 A Cautionary Bench/Mark by Andre Kong Studio

Andre: Hi I'm Andre Kong and I designed the Cautionary Bench/Mark.

As the name suggests 'A Cautionary Bench/Mark' is about highlighting the mammoth challenge that humanity faces in terms of slowing down the climate crisis and to halt sea level rise and prevent flooding from becoming more frequent and severe, which it is expected to become.

And because its impact isn't necessarily very apparent or at least explicitly visible in real time, sometimes people, it's challenging for us to kind of grasp the sheer magnitude of the problem. And so this bench being on two levels tries to physically visualise that benchmark.

So one of the levels of the bench is for use today which is for sitting and the second level, which is unreachable today, is the level that you would be sat at during a severe tidal storm in 2030 which is above 2.6 meters.

So this kind of contrast, also with the the change in colour as you go up, that kind of alerts you to this kind of red zone that we hopefully won't get to but it invites passers-by to sit and look out onto the water in front of the college and to consider and reflect on the actions that will lead to the bench level that's kind of looming above you and urging you to join in on the action against climate change.

When I designed it, I definitely started by brainstorming how you could, with a bench, expose the challenges of climate change as an act of protest or an act of alert and then I kind of sketched out many different ideas and then very quickly this idea of two different levels emerged.

This idea of a future level of where you might be sat at in a climate crisis situation and the level that you can sit at now as a visual benchmark of these two points,

so, kind of almost being within a graph. So you often see these graphs showing sea level rise or flooding levels, but actually to be able to sit in a kind of a graph is something a lot more powerful, because it really allows you to see the scale of the problem at one to one.

So I felt like this was a strong idea and so then it was a case of testing different ways of expressing these two levels. So originally I even thought maybe we don't even have a bench to sit on at the low level because there's no time to sit, it's just time to act and you just have this really tall bench at the 2.6 meters, but actually I felt like that having that comparison of the two levels of like what is today and what it'll be in the future, is more powerful and also creates a more interesting structure to be able to interact with and not just look at.

The bench was designed specifically thinking about the Royal Docks context so when I looked at a map that's produced by NASA and Climate Central that's available online. It's this interactive tool that you can see the different levels of the water that are expected in different years depending on a series of factors in terms of flooding severity, luck and how on track we are with the IPCC recommendations.

All of those aspects that you can control it but then basically in a kind of a medium case scenario a lot a large part of London, including the Royal Docks are predicted to be subject to regular flooding by 2030 and that's what this 2.6 meters refers to.

And so seeing this data and seeing the data within the context of which the bench is going to be part of, it seemed appropriate to really highlight that kind of challenge that we are facing in this particular place. So it's not just an abstract benchmark, it's a specific benchmark for this particular place.

And then in terms of the design and the materiality and the architectural language of the bench itself also draws a lot from the Docks' context in the maritime language using these kind of galvanized tubes and standard clamp connections that are seen in other parts of the Royal Docks like the Tidal Basin Pumping Station or even actually the Thames Barrier itself where you see a lot of handrails and a lot of the kind of infrastructural pieces that are made from these standard connections and pipe elements, which was also important in terms of the design being a kit of parts being able to be disassembled and then in the future reused in its future life, so the materials themselves can be sustainable and have a life after they are no longer a bench.

And actually the materials themselves not only will they hopefully have this life after they are a bench, the pipes themselves have had a previous life so they're not new.

It was a big challenge to find these materials that we could transform into this bench but it was definitely worth the extra effort because it speaks to the very message of the bench, which is that we need to design and build in a more sustainable way, thinking about how we can reuse materials in the future.

The specific context of the bench being in front of the UTC College, I think is really important because it presents a great opportunity for the people who most see it and sit on it and interact with it to be students, who are studying engineering and architecture and design.

Well, hopefully the bench will inspire and alert that next generation of students who are in college today and who will graduate into thinking and imagining new ways of tackling the climate crisis from all different angles.

So the construction industry today and the built environment generally account for almost 40% of carbon emissions, so the designers and engineers of buildings tomorrow have this enormous responsibility in tackling this crisis.

So with the bench standing in front of the College as a reminder to these students of the absolute urgency to only design it in a sustainable way from now on, I think it is really great and important in terms of the location.

The other great aspect about building this bench right in front of UTC was the ability to have the students get involved and be a part of building the process and building the actual bench itself, which makes everybody feel included and involved in and it also offers a great learning opportunity for design students to see how something goes from an idea to being made within a very short period of time.

I really wanted to enter this year because of the theme of the LFA, so the theme of act, that this idea of this cautionary benchmark that sets out the physical scale of the problem that we face is an act of warning, it's an act of protest, it's an act for change and it's also an act to protect the environment and humanity, so it portrays the present and a bit like a Greek tragedy it shows a potential tragic future unless we act now.

18:33 Sail-Phone by Lo²

Alcina: My name is Alcina and this is Ben and together we're Lo² (Lo Squared) and we have designed Sail-Phone.

So, we were inspired by the cultural heritage of the site, so we researched into the cultural heritage and elements along the Royal Docks.

Ben: We found out the theme of maritime played a major role in the Docks' character so we knew that the form of a ship was the obvious answer. The LV95 light ship, which was located at the Trinity Buoy Wharf, stood out to us because of its bright, engaging red colour, which incites playfulness, which was what we wanted to incorporate into our bench design.

The talking tubes were also integrated into our design as it was an activity which multiple generation of people could enjoy. It's also fitting with its maritime theme, since talking tubes were used on actual ships to communicate between decks.

Alicina: We also wanted a design to link to the community design principles so it's multifunctional as a playground element and also as a seat. Because of the speaking tubes it's a multi-century experience as well and also because of its abstract shape as the Trinity Buoy Wharf lightship, it reflects the living heritage of the site.

Ben: So the colour of our bench was inspired by the lightship located at the Trinity Buoy Wharf and the colour which is the the red, bright red colour, before that was engaging and it's quite eye-catching and also incites playfulness.

Alicina: Yeah, originally, we wanted to use an old boat as a basis for the bench. However, because of the high price of an actual boat we decided to use an abstract shape of a boat and use timber instead and after the use of the bench, we hoped that it could be re-situated in another park, which could also be used as a playground element or it could be dismantled and a timber could be used for something else.

Ben: The main idea of what we wanted to do was to connect the community together and hopefully get more social interaction going. This is quite important in today's society like since Covid-19 just happen.

Alicina: Yeah and also as a playground element as well as a seat which is situated not in a playground, it decentralises the playground element, which is usually in one corner of the park to the rest of the park.

We really wanted a multi-generational kind of element to it, so to connect people together especially others after Covid-19, people have been quite isolated, so it's great that if we could use this bench to make people play together and use it together, we hope that it can ignite the togetherness that we used to have.

Ben: One of the reason why I wanted to do this competition and why I entered into this competition is because the Royal Docklands is actually one of my favourite places in London.

I know I shouldn't be doing this when I was like a kid, but I used to go to a music school and I used to take like the local bus to Canning Town and I just used to walk there for hours just in awe of how clean and how beautiful the architecture is.

So it's a privilege for me to actually contribute to a place which I absolutely love.

22:37 Turning Tide by Mvuu and Amir Zinaburg

Toko: I'm Toko, so I'm part of Mvuu and we've created the bench The Turning Tide. I am a recently qualified architect so I come from that background, bringing a little bit of technical design and that kind of feeling for the bench. So I'm one half of Mvuu.

Tim: I'm Tim, I'm the other half of Mvuu, I'm a graphic designer so I've come in with the more of an artistic flair to the bench.

Toko: So, we started off by looking at the Royal Docks and looking at the history of the Docks, so we had an idea of wanting to use materials as the starting point. So we looked at Docks and looked at "okay what's around there?" okay, well, you've got three very distinctive materialities there both historically and currently, so you've got the timber from previous ships timber and steel for the ships and the history of the Docks and also you've got all of the aggregate there that they've had to scoop out as time has gone on for the Docks and what's there now you can see on the riverbed. So we wanted to combine those three elements in some way.

So that was our starting point and then the narrative of act and how you can act on climate change was something we really wanted to bring into the bench.

And we had this idea of "okay what if we can, well firstly what if we can have someone like a previous generation influence the current generation to act. And okay how can we do that? okay, well we can use the bench to create messages".

And that was the idea of okay well the younger generation can write messages for their current generation to act on their behalf because it seems to be their world and so that was the idea.

Okay, how can these messages take a shape? And we got this idea of "okay well what if the messages are on the stones that create part of the bench?" and so that was where that kind of came about.

I don't know Tim if you wanted to talk about the form and the shape and how we came up with that?

Tim: Well, yeah, so with the form - not to get too pretentious - but we started to question what is the idea of a public bench and what does it mean for people?

And you know for most people it's just you don't really think about it, you just sit on it before you go and do something else. So we tried to put that into the form of the bench, so there's two places to sit but the middle is almost like this transformation into another seat.

It's almost like from one state to another and that's essentially what an action is or acting is.

Toko: It was quite important to us as well because it was all about sustainability. For the materials we didn't want to use any plastics and once you start looking at materials that can heavily impact what you're able to do with the shape and how you build it, so you know we want to be able to dismantle this and move it to another place or reuse it in a certain way. So that was quite key to us and starting off with the materials was the jumping off point.

So we went through, well firstly when we got the materials we went through a lot of different sketches, so Tim and I, we spent quite a few evenings you know sketching and just throwing ideas between each other and sending WhatsApp and just like "what do you think about this? what do you think about that?" that kind of thing, which is really fun, really good and it's a hell of a lot easier now that you can do it all like sharing your screen and all of that even if you're just on lunch.

Tim: For me it was a massive learning process because this was more Toko's world with architecture, even though i'm interested in it. I've never really had much experience in the technicalities of materials and how structures can work, so it's interesting and yeah it was really a big eye opener for me to see like from ideation to actual creation of the bench.

We're quite creative people so we've always worked together creatively and had the same interest but I think this is the first time that we've worked on something like this.

Toko: I've always had a look at previous competitions, every time, every year that they come out and I see all these amazing benches.

You know like the Roly Poly was brilliant one year and then the 'Buoys are back in town' that was like I just loved the name, I think it was just a great name but you see all these amazing benches and you always say "okay I'd love to give it a go, I'd love to go".

You know, Tim and I, we we always speak about going for something and doing something creative together, and yeah it's still crazy that we're actually here and

it's done and it's there. I'd never expect it to be picked but yeah really really thankful for it.

Tim: Definitely 100% and I think also it's just the chance to work together, you know because sometimes like when life gets in the way and you know, you don't see each other as much so it's a chance to also work together and stay close and creative and it's been like a really like great process, definitely.

27:23 Outro

Eliza: You've been listening to Building Sounds. To learn more about the benches head to lfa.london/p&p.

It's festival month so we'll be back with a new episode next week hearing the stories behind the winning showroom showcase design.

Until then if you've enjoyed this episode and would like to hear more of our recent conversations, search for Building Sounds on Apple podcast, Spotify or wherever you find your favorite podcasts.