

“Royal Docks through the eyes of the next generation” Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

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.

We’re currently in our Key Actors series exploring the key people and projects shaping the Royal Docks. In this final episode, we’re switching things up a little bit and we’re chatting to four students from the London Design & Engineering UTC about what the Royal Docks mean to them and what they think the future of the docks should look like.

As you’ll hear this episode is being filmed quite close to London City Airport so listen out for the planes as they pass, a very fitting sound for our final episode of the Royal Docks.

With me I have Kev, Jericho, Mahia, and Tianna. To start with, does everyone want to introduce themselves and your connection to the College or the Docks?

Tianna: I'll start, my name is Tianna, I live in Essex, I would say more Greater London than Essex because it's closer to Romford, but obviously I choose to go to London Design and Engineering UTC because it offers engineering, architecture, design and I was interested in that field.

Kev: So my name is Kevin or Kev, whatever you would prefer to call me, and I just live in Ilford which is not too far from here, just a 15-minute drive, and I came to London Design and Engineering to study architecture and engineering because I have a vast interest in both of those subjects and I noticed that this school has to offer a lot of technical courses and a lot of hands-on stuff which I quite enjoy.

Jericho: Hi, my name is Jericho Cabalan, I'm the College president of London Design and Engineering UTC. I came here because I wanted to study the same thing as Kev: architecture and engineering.

I feel like the way we design the world around us, it changes how people feel about the places they want to be.

Mahia: My name is Mahia, I live in Whitechapel, so Jack The Ripper, and I came to this college too for architecture. I joined in year 10, and they gave us a letter home asking if we wanted to join, and immediately I saw the subject choices and options that they provided, so I was like definitely this is something I'd want to do.

Eliza: Amazing. So, you've been learning a lot about the Royal Docks for a while, I know in your studies particularly and potentially over the last few weeks you've been looking a little

bit more about the Royal Docks as well. Is there any stories that you particularly found really interesting?

What is it about the Royal Docks that you love, or you don't like? If there's something like that.

Jericho: If you go down the Docks, there's a few abandoned buildings and one of them is this giant, it's basically a white box, and the reason why it's abandoned is because in 1917 fifty tonnes of T&T exploded inside the building.

Kev: It was actually known as basically the greatest explosion ever to happen in London, 70,000 buildings just gone, 73 people killed. Because they were making, I think it was something like ammunition or something like that they were making there, like T&T based, just like for mining purposes because that's why we had the DLR going across because obviously a lot of the transports, or the ships and everything we were getting from the East India company and stuff like that were coming in through the Docks, and they obviously needed to clear out certain pathways, so they could transport things a lot easier, because that's the thing with marshlands, it's not just a straight plain, it's just like you're suddenly going down a straight thing then there's just a dip, and then another hill, so they had to basically clear out a specific path, and that's why we utilise the DLR right now for transport but previously they were actually used for shipping goods and stuff like that across London from different ships.

Eliza: Amazing, so can you still see this factory today?

Jericho: You can, if you walk along the Docks towards the O2, you can still see the building. It's surprising how it's still standing, but it's there if you wanted to take a look.

Mahia: I had no idea about that, this is the first time I'm hearing it.

Tianna: I had no idea either.

That's interesting, what year was that in, did you say?

Jericho: 1917 it should be, it was a fairly long time ago.

Mahia: There's something in North Woolwich where like there's, near the Royal Pavilion, if you know that place, there's like a couple of houses that lead towards there. And apparently, there was a couple that opened a pub that's basically haunted or something. I don't know, it's like a lot of old folk tales or something, and yeah I just found that interesting because there's not many people that I think believe in that kind of stuff, but then when I looked into it, there was like even police investigations upon it or something, so I was like wow ok, that's quite interesting.

Eliza: Do you think it might be haunted?

Mahia: I mean, I read through the whole story, and I was like maybe, maybe it is, I'm not sure.

Eliza: Have you seen these buildings from the outside? Have you ever been into any of these buildings?

Tianna, Kev, Jericho, Mahia: No,

Kev: I don't think I want to go to one that's haunted.

Eliza: I think one of the exciting things about the Docks, is that there's so many different types of buildings, just as you've mentioned. I guess you talked about the older buildings, and then there's some newer buildings coming around as well.

Do you have any thoughts about those ones as well?

Tianna: I like how they're redeveloping, even when you think about Newham, you don't really think about all the new stuff, you think about all the old buildings, all the old flats, all the kids etc, but now because of the new apartments, and how they're refurbishing stuff, and just the layout of the new buildings as well, for example the crystal; how it's built and how it looks, the aesthetic of it is really really pretty, and it brings out a nicer side of Newham, it makes it look more pleasing, and more people will actually want to move into Newham because now they wouldn't think it's some poor or just not a very good area, it looks like a good area.

So I feel like the Docks help highlight that Newham is a good place, and it looks good, and it can just be the same as any other place in London.

Kev: I'm just going to add onto that with something. I'll tell you briefly, I quite like that, it's that post-modern architecture that we see in all these buildings in the docks sort of thing, where you've got all these like bright colours and you know, weird shapes here and there sort of thing.

And then you've also got certain features that are also borrowed from other periods, that like, contribute to it, it's like wow, that's actually quite cool. It changes your mind on your view on Newham in itself, because I remember my dad telling me back when I was younger sort of thing, he'd say 'oh Newham didn't have that great of a reputation', but because of these new buildings going up, we're basically bringing in better foot traffic and better people coming in sort of thing and more jobs and everything like that, all because a building looks so great and cool, it's just attracting more foot traffic and it's basically just boosting Newham's economy which is amazing for everyone who lives here, and it just changes most of the people around here because before it just used to be, like a long time ago during the explosion, Newham had this reputation of really poor working conditions and it was just horrible, dirty and scruffy, but within the past 30 or 40 years or so, the redevelopment of Newham, mainly the Docks, it's gotten rid of that idea of poverty and it's now bringing in all these great new structures that are quite enjoyable to see, and they're also practical if

you look at, for example, like when you came in, you were talking about the base and pumping station right next to new City Hall and DLR station, and the shape of the pipes, if you have a look at them, it shows function basically, you can see it's a pumping station of some sort, but then it's also got some colours that bring a maritime tradition in and it also adds a bit of joy and practicality to the building, because of instead of having just a simple pump station, that's it, drop it there, and then just go away, it's looks a bit more pleasing sort of thing, instead of just seeing some big metal pipe eroding from the ground.

Tianna: I feel like it shows you why certain parts of architecture are really really helpful, because them changing buildings and the land space and stuff, it opens up the area, it makes it, for the people that live in the community, they will want to walk through certain areas, they'll want to do more stuff within the area because they're more proud of their area because of how their area now looks, so that links to landscape architecture and stuff, because you need to, look after your area to be proud of your area. If it looks down, or poorer, or just stuck, and it's not opened up, it doesn't really feel safe. It's also comfort as well for it to be opened up.

Jericho: I strongly agree with that Tianna is saying, because I remember listening to this TED talk a while back on architecture, and how it's about defining spaces and giving it meaning and character and a sense of quality, and when people have that sense of quality, they value the place in which they live more.

So like you said, they take care of the place, they clean up after themselves rather than leaving litter around.

You can sort of see it here in London now with the, if you go to central most of the streets there are relatively clean, like you won't really see any litter there but if you go some places closer to Dagenham or where the industrial places are there's quite a lot of rubbish there and there's litter, the place generally isn't as clean compared to the more nicer looking parts, so of course there are few socio-economic issues with that but you do come from the right place with how the look of a place can change a person's view of where they live.

Tianna: And like when you go to London, Chelsea it's all painted with light colours, there's white houses, there's structures that are white, the floor looks brighter and cleaner, whereas, for example Dagenham as you said when you go there the houses are darker they're not as new builds they're like old build houses, the stonework, the brickwork are darker colours the flooring is just darker and it looks more dark and dirty I would say, compared to London where, because it's brighter it looks cleaner, like a white table if it's all white, it looks cleaner, if it's dark brown or dark black and just scribbling on it of course you're going to think it's dirtier and you'll also want to scribble as well to make a mark.

Kev: Those bright colours actually it's weird because just thinking about it how much difference it makes just using a darker colour and a lighter colour can split the

difference between a clean aesthetic and a really horrible looking aesthetic and you said the light colours there, its weird because if we use these beautiful bright and vibrant colours it gives a really nice clean aesthetic and it's so visually pleasing, its what makes what could be just a dull block building into something that is something of interest to people something that people just want to see from their balcony sitting at home or from their window they don't mind living across from a building that is so beautiful and colourful and vibrant its not a big stone brick wall basically.

Eliza: I feel like you could all talk so much about how the buildings make you feel and what your thoughts about them are, is there anyone that wants to be an architect or, you've mentioned about being local and making an impact and really caring for your environment and the spaces around you, is that something that you'd want to be involved with as well in the future?

Tianna: Personally yeah.

Jericho: I'm pretty sure all of us here are interested in built environment and architecture being the main thing but, just very simple ways of changing the shape of something can make it drastically different.

You can even look at the automotive industry and how old cars were like giant blocks and they weren't that efficient but then you look at newer cars now they are sleeker and smoother, all they have done is change the shape and all of a sudden their design is more effective than it was before and I think we can use that same mentality on buildings.

You can sort of see it now since we have more curved buildings as we progressed into more modern ages because we find curves more appealing, it's more aerodynamic or it reduces the amount of material you'll need it's just small changes like that that can really make a massive difference.

Kev: You can actually see that in the O2, that's one of the biggest things in the dock is the O2 and it's massively famous and you can see it from space and that's in the shape of a dome and it attracts in so many people and in fact architects drew that inspiration from time and space, they literally looked at the trajectory of stars and comets to create panels on the canopy and the O2 in itself is a testament to optimism and innovation and hope for the future.

Tianna: I feel like the O2 is a major attraction, now I wouldn't say "oh I really want to go to the O2" but when I was younger and I heard the O2 and I saw the O2 and I saw people dining in the sky it just seemed like something that everyone would want to do and it's good for bringing people into the area as well and it's really really local to the docks too.

Mahia: It was such a step up from before I think, before that I didn't, because I'm obviously from Tower Hamlets, so I'm not from Newham so there wasn't much that I knew about

Newham but after the O2 I was like "oh" and I felt like that was the main attraction to Newham, that was mostly the only time I would come into Newham.

Tianna: Same, because I wasn't, because I'm not from Newham or East London, once Stratford was made or Westfield and everyone was going to Westfield for the different restaurants and then the O2 there's an arena and concerts and food, it was like yeah I want to go to East London, to Newham, I want to see these places I want to try new stuff and it just it's a good attraction for people that are not really from around here because it's nice.

Eliza: You touched on a really interesting point, we mentioned earlier the Docks are changing quite a lot but if you had the power to say what could be included and what shouldn't be included in the new or future Royal Docks or not necessarily just the Royal Docks we can think about East London we can think about outside of east London as well, what's really important to you? I think you're the generation just below I am so there's a bit of an age difference there so for your generation what's really important for you, what do you want to see more of in London?

Tianna: I would say within this specific area like Royal Docks, by West Silvertown Station is actually just land, there's a factory next to it which is the golden syrup or I think Britvic, it's just empty space so if they were to turn that into either more apartments like modern apartments like the ones that they have near the Sainsbury's or if they were to turn that into a big shopping centre, like a new Selfridges, that would bring in a lot of people and it would just up the area's value as well and also I've seen how they are creating a new school there I think called Oasis and I feel like that's good for the community because there are obviously a lot of people in the flats now and the apartments and the houses and the little villages that they have so it's like them children need to go to school in their own area instead of always travelling it's great that we have the DLR and it's easier to get to different places because the DLR is quite quick and there's so many links within it but it will be good that they have their own school of their own rather than just a primary school.

Jericho: To build on what Tianna said as well, creating buildings and regenerating old areas seeing things get made, I think with making a school like what you said with Oasis it's not just about the building itself it's about the processes that go into making the building because when you construct the building you need to hire labourers you need management you need engineers to come in and see the building and for that to happen it gives people jobs so all throughout that building's life it's constantly giving towards the community from just being a piece of rubble to being a massive building that people can go to and learn it really helps seeing more places like that go around the Docks especially since Newham is seen as an impoverished part so having more jobs having people come in and create jobs or start things and to really put themselves into the community so they can give back, it's really quite inspiring to see something like that happen around the Docks.

Tianna: I feel like in terms of new stuff to build, building housing because it is currently a housing problem within the UK so building new houses is good because we're housing more people especially as there is also space for it obviously we don't want the area to get overloaded with different houses and apartments because that would make, we wouldn't it to be compact however a few more houses would be great because people need places to live and the housing issue.

Mahia: Something I'd say I'd like to see, from what I've seen in the Royal Docks, most of the housing is similar in how they look so maybe more creativity with the design aspect of it, but there are problems with that because I do know it would cost more probably when making it more creative but if there was a way of doing that it would really increase everyone's mood in a sense because at the end of the day everyone goes back to their home so where you live is the most important aspect of your life I'd say.

Tianna: And even like when you make it or you move on with your life and your career and you may move out of the area it's good to be happy about where you've come from, and be proud of where you've come from and speak about where you've come from instead of it being negative it's good for it to be positive so to help make it more positive I think adding stuff like what Mahia said that would be great.

Eliza: Am I right in thinking none of you live in the Royal Docks?

Tianna, Kev, Jericho, Mahia: No.

Eliza: But do you have, obviously you come to college in the Royal Docks do you still feel even though you don't live here do you have a real connection to the Royal Docks you study here and what's that been like?

Kev: Definitely I've been in this college in fact for a few years now, everyone sort of knows me for being here forever basically and it's weird because I'm discovering a lot of new things about it even though I've been coming here for so many years now, it's that bond you sort of create that bond like going to the chip shop with your friends and maybe going to the park with your friends and stuff like that, that's the thing you want somewhere with that emotional attachment to do so well because if you spend a certain amount of time in a certain area you're going to be attached to it I suppose that's why I have a sense of passion to improve this area because I want to see it thrive I don't want to come back here in 20 years or when I finish my university degree come back here and it's gone downhill and it's back to poverty again I want to see it continue development I want to see it thrive I want to see this area be one of the better areas in London to go to I want this area to be like tourists from different countries going we need to go to Newham because that's got that there instead of saying let's go to somewhere like Tottenham, why bother, come to Newham instead.

Because that's the thing you want this place to do well you want to see people here you want to see people happy you want to see good people here you don't just want to bring and I don't mean to be rude to anyone but you don't want bring people that are just going to ruin it you want to bring people that are going to respect the community you want to build a sense of community you want to know your neighbour you don't want to be like I don't know this person next door you want to know your neighbour. That's the thing with these different structures with this clean aesthetic like you were saying with better looking residential areas, we can bring in better people and build better community and homes that will really form a connection in this area and seriously boost this area a lot.

Tianna: But I would say that from having people that I know that live in Newham and different parts of Newham I would say they are a community already, they do know their neighbours everyone knows each other on their roads and just walking in certain parts of Newham with my friends that live in Newham, they all say hello to random people in the area because they've known each other they've all grown up with each other so I would say that they already have a community they already all socialise with their neighbours and know their neighbours so I would kind of disagree with the community thing.

Mahia: I think because the negative is portrayed so much people sometimes forget about the positives.

Kev: So I suppose it's more become like a stereotype, and maybe perhaps breaking down that stereotype, I've just been proven wrong here so this is coming from the stereotype that I just know I think again, circling back to better infrastructure we can break down that stereotype.

Tianna: I feel like I would hope Newham would get a better stereotype because before I came to Newham I didn't have much of a good perspective of Newham but once I've been around Newham and been around this uni and I've walked around the Docks many times to get to my friends' houses and stuff or like, I wouldn't say played out I'm a bit too old to play out but like hanged around or not even hanged around but been around that type of area I would say that I have a way better perspective of Newham even with the whole poverty crisis maybe, I would say a lot of people in Newham have good jobs and they are doing good stuff and they have a lot of good things going for them so it's not just all poverty and I would say that a lot of places in Newham are not very dark they are very bright or they are quite open especially around the new bit I think it's Pronton Dock, they have a new bit and it's open and it's nice and it's by the water there's even a nice gym place they have made there and there's little grass places

Mahia: I think that kind of links the architecture like the landscape architecture. Have you seen their benches? They are all weird shapes but they're really nice to see and sit on because you are like I've never seen that let me sit on it.

Tianna: It's so aesthetically pleasing and a lot of areas don't have that and you wouldn't expect Newham to have that but Newham has that so I feel like there's a lot of good things about Newham and a lot of things that separate it from the stereotypes and the poverty types, there's a lot of positives about Newham already.

Kev: Not even I knew that so yeah I didn't know about that until now so fair enough.

Eliza: What has been really nice is that you've picked up some things that are needed in the area so things like housing is needed but also it's balancing that with the history that is here and the people that already live here. How do you think we could balance the history, where we are in the present and then the future as well? I know that's quite a hard question.

Tianna: Looking at Jericho hopefully.

Jericho: Well, I think similar to what the London Festival of Architecture does what they do they have this programme called Pews and Perches where students come along they design a bench and they put it along various places in Newham. Some of them you can find literally scattered across the Docks so you can have a leisurely walk and take a look at the pieces of art that's on display.

I think we can recreate that but have the Docks seen almost as a museum, where as we mentioned before 1912 the huge big explosion we could have a little plaque there with an article on it or with historical documents and what really happened there and then people can come along and be like oh that's new and then they see a picture of the building and they see the actual thing in front of them and all of a sudden they learn a bit about the history I think it's important that we have that, that we're able to remind ourselves of what this place used to look like and then at the end when you go to the more modern places you'll see more newer, more modern buildings and it sort of makes you think that we are traversing from history from barren land to some place that's so grand and huge and amazing with a bunch of companies and people working there, I think that should be the way that we see the docklands, we should be able to read up on the history to see it but also remember to live in the present and look for the the future.

Tianna: I really like how Jericho wants to incorporate the past because I feel like the history of Newham is so important especially to the people that live here and have grown up here, the history of it will be really really important to them, so I don't feel like in the future it should be concealed or

Mahia: something to be ashamed of

Tianna: Yeah. it's good to put the history into it I like how people could educate themselves on it when they come here. It's like how Jericho is saying that they should put up panels and you can read it that is really good because you can read about the past and know more about the past as it is just as important as the future of Newham.

Kev: I totally understand that if you look at Silvertown, not a lot of people actually know how that's name and it's actually named after a clothing factory - Samuel Silver's Waterproof Clothing - so that's something interesting again just those small things here and there that contribute, it's important to pay tribute to those things.

Mahia: There's more value when you know the context behind something instead of just knowing it flat out so I think that is a good point you made for bringing up the past.

Jericho: Like you said we want people to come to Newham and be like you know what I don't want to go to central I don't want to see Big Ben or the London Eye, I want to see the Docks for once I want to take a walk around the Docks I know right now it may seem funny but imagine in the future you get people coming here and they think that wait a minute this place looks unrecognisable from what it used to look like, our history and the past of what this entire place used to be I think it's amazing that we can see how quickly and how drastic the changes are.

Tianna: I feel like, the other day I was in the car with my dad - this is irrelevant to what I'm about to say - but he was telling me, we were driving past Stratford and he's into housing and real estate so he was telling me how he was offered an opportunity one time to buy a flat in Stratford but back then in 2002 Stratford wasn't a place you would want to buy a flat in, he wasn't interested his friends were interested and in 2016 when Stratford started to peak when Westfield was made and everyone started coming and loads of people from different places started coming out to Stratford, and he really regretted that he didn't invest in Stratford, sad for him but he should have invested in Stratford.

So people should invest in Newham invest in the docks because in the future it's going to be such a great place, it's already come such a far way to now have the City Hall which is going to be in Newham you would never think the City Hall would be in Newham 30 years ago or 10 years ago but for it, to now be in Newham it's bringing up the value bringing up the attention, it's just going to show such a drastic change it's going to peak so much as well.

Eliza: I think we are coming to the end of our time, we've covered so much already but is there one final thing that you'd want, if people are listening and they don't know the docks very well, there might be some people who live in the docks and they know the docks very well but if there's people and it's the first time they are hearing something about the docks is there one final thing you'd want them to know?

Jericho: If you're looking to invest, invest here.

Tianna: Yes invest, come down to Newham, come to the docks, come take a stroll, stop by, there is even a nice cafe, there's an Italian they do some great pasta you know just come down especially in summer it's really really beautiful the sun's out you can even do wakeboarding and there's activities for kids as well.

Kev: You can walk your little pooches down along the docks.

Tianna: Yeah just come down, come have a look come to the docks, try it out, be open-minded.

Eliza: I would definitely agree with you there. Well I think that's all the time we have for today, but thank you to our guests Kev, Jericho, Mahia and Tianna.

You've been listening to Building Sounds and that was the last conversation in our Key Actors series. If you've missed any of the conversations, you can catch up by heading to lfa.london/keyactors.

We're going to be taking a short break over the next couple of months but we'll be back in October to announce the theme of LFA 2023 and to explore some of the things in store.

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