

“The Factory Project - The revival of a former sugar warehouse” 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. Last episode, we explored the history of Tate & Lyle and one of their connective projects. In this episode we explore two more of these, The Factory Project and the Community Food Enterprise, two great examples of how old factory warehouses can be transformed and reused.

To start with, I'm joined by Nick Hartwright, CEO of Projekt and later on we'll be chatting to Eric Samuel, founder and CEO of Community Food Enterprise,

To start with, Nick could you introduce yourself and Projekt?

Nick: Yeah hi my name's Nick from Projekt and I guess I'm the boss of Projekt and we've recently, well, I say recently a year ago started working on the Factory Project site which is down in North Woolwich.

Eliza: Amazing, you've just mentioned the Factory Project, people who are not familiar... what is the project? what is the factory?

Nick: Sure, so we mainly do workspace, so we're kind of an affordable workspace, kind of, it's really hard the language is really strange at the moment because we've sort of come from this sort of meanwhile into sort of permanent kind of development world. I hate to think of us as developers because we're not really, I guess we activate sites that otherwise get forgotten about, so the Factory Project is a five and a half acre sort of post-industrial landscape down by the Tate & Lyle sugar refinery which is in Newham, right in the Royal Docks. It sat abandoned for about the last 20 years, it's a really interesting collection of industrial buildings that we're now bringing back into life.

Eliza: Amazing, we'll get on to a little bit about what it's going to become in the transformation but the space itself has got quite a nice bit of history. Are you able to share a little bit of that?

Nick: Yeah, I mean I think it's really interesting, although it's in what people think of as North Woolwich, it's actually Silvertown, it's the location of the first factory of Mr. Silver who gave his name to Silvertown, so it's really where this kind of area started from and grew up from. Following this kind of transitional phases with

different factory buildings being built and knocked down and built again we ended up with what was called the Thames Side Industrial Estate which is sort of 1960s, which kind of kind of brought these different lumps together. It's got some really interesting kind of modernist 60s architecture down there which has been kind of forgotten about and hidden away for years which we're uncovering.

Some beautiful like 1930s warehousing and earlier Victorian stuff, so I feel that we're kind of doing something really important by preserving those buildings and reusing them, repurposing them and discovering really nice bits of architecture that otherwise get forgotten about. I think they're nice, other people might think they're kind of you know scruffy old rubbish warehouses but I think there's some really cool stuff down there.

Eliza: I mean I can personally vouch for that scrapping, because I mean it's a very beautiful space and I think you often don't find these days things that are quite quick to change and get redeveloped. Obviously you're doing a bit of work on sort of making it safe and making sure people can use the spaces, bringing it to life again but keeping some of those old histories there which I think is really lovely.

Nick: Yeah I mean it is, as you said there's some really interesting spaces there, it's got this amazing light down there so beautiful like light. One of the main warehouses is about 25,000 square foot, so pretty big space, all top lit so you get this really nice like constant flat light through the space and I do think it's important, you know, obviously there's this huge change that happens across every major city, London in particular going through this giant sort of regeneration of post-industrial landscapes and the Royal Docks being like kind of very much one of those places where the pace of this change is happening so quickly that you're losing all these spaces which I think are really important.

You know cities need industrial spaces and need work spaces they need places where people make and build and experiment and try new ideas especially you know this weird sort of creative industry stuff which isn't you know it's not kind of necessarily clean digital stuff, it's making and building and manufacturing still, so being able to kind of safeguard those, I think it's really important.

The fact that lots of our more traditional stuff or traditional sites that we have are you know potentially pre-development sites where you have a finite amount of time, this being permanent I think it's really interesting for you know for the future of London, the future of this area and it kind of for me what I think it's really important and what I love about what we do is that it creates this sort of grassroots spaces where you know we're not talking about building the next Google campus or Apple whatever, do you know what I mean, we're talking about the place where people have ideas and perhaps don't have huge amounts of money behind them but want to grow their businesses into something interesting.

Eliza: Definitely and you've mentioned a little bit already this idea being within the Docks. Are your tenants mostly local people? How does this new space affect people who are sort of already in the area?

Nick: Yeah well I mean we've been working down here for six years! Longer than I thought, so we've done a site down here called the Silver Building which again was a bit similar to the stuff down at the Factory but not quite as much of it and this is a development site so you know one day this goes, which is a shame but we've kind of established ourselves down here I guess as an organisation and we have a pretty mixed tenant base down here, I'd say like off top my head the Silver Building was probably about 60% Newham residents and businesses, so it's mainly people from the area or who have started things in the area which is great.

You know there's a really interesting kind of young, diverse population down here that this type of space is vital to happen.

The same sort of thing will happen with the Factory, you know we'll have some transition of people who are looking for more space from Silver Building to move down there, we've got other organisations that are coming into the area, some larger kind of companies that are coming in, some fashion distribution stuff and things like that which is really interesting because that creates more jobs and you kind of, you know the stuff that spins around from it, so yeah it's that. We work very closely with the Royal Docks GLA and Newham teams to make sure that we're kind of reaching locally and that's kind of how it works really.

I guess the other thing is making sure that it's there, I know that sounds really stupid right but you know once the doors are open sometimes you just have to wait for people to find it. My experience and I've been doing this for about 12 years now is as much as you try and sort of reach out especially into local communities which sometimes haven't perhaps had spaces like this before, it's just time you know where personal connections might start making a difference.

Eliza: Definitely and I think it's really interesting just to watch projects like this over time and see how they grow, how they develop, particularly as well in different places I think depending on where it is, the communities that already exist there, the tenants that come in, each case is quite different.

Nick: Totally and you know you go into these or I go into these, me and the rest of the gang, with like an idea you know an initial idea of what we're trying to create what the kind of concept is but often what you find is that it moves and changes. I think what we're quite lucky with is because we're quite small organisation we can be very flexible with stuff, so we might say 'okay so our plan is to deliver you know 30 small workspaces which are going to be, you know, two or three people working and small businesses' and then you might find out that actually what somebody needs is a big space because they want to manufacture

you know electric bicycles or whatever and you just flip the whole thing around and because we are you know quite nimble we can work with that, so you're absolutely right, seeing how these spaces develop, it's horrible language again, but almost like organically is the best way to do it.

It's really difficult to kind of plan them out, you know that might work when you've got vast new complexes or big massive budgets to work with but when you're doing them the way we do you kind of have to be like that and that's more interesting I think, because you're reacting to what people need rather than going 'okay everybody this is what you want, here's your box, can you go and sit in it please?' Does that make sense?

Eliza: Definitely. So there's a lot of sort of unpredictability and unknown but within that there's a desire to sort of connect to the area. Yeah. I think part of that, am I right in thinking you've also got tenants who existed there previously as well so it's not just new tenants that have come in?

Nick: Absolutely, yeah, there's two charities actually that had been weirdly kind of isolated on this sort of derelict industrial kind of wasteland. One is Community Food Enterprise, which is a food bank distribution centre, which has been down there for about 25 years I think to work in India for about 20 years. Great organisation run by a guy called Eric. The other one is called Community Links. So Community Links is event and production kind of organisation which does lots of charity stuff in Newham as well, and down there they have a social enterprise called Community Links or Event Solutions, which generates revenue which then supports the charity.

So both of those have had their spaces or well being done, Eric's has been finished; Community Links, we're going into next at no cost to them and then also they'll continue with rent free and rates free and bills free for the length of the project so we are directly supporting them financially as well.

Eliza: Amazing, so there's real sort of history to the space it's present, what's going on now and the future as well.

Nick: Yeah, totally, you know I think it's quite a beautiful site down there and it's got this great collection of buildings, this amazing history of the Docks and Silvertown and all the stuff that's come out of this area. Then there's kind of you know what's been going on there and happening now and then the future and you know there is this enormous march of development along the river down here and and this is a bit of a, I guess, a buffer against that without wanting to sort of stop them happening but it's making sure that the spaces which people need, you know, the places to do their business and to generate the revenue from and opportunities and start things are in there as well and I see this as being a real interesting one to move forward. I'm really, actually out of all the projects that we've got on at the moment, this is probably my favourite. Well it actually is my favourite, it's definitely my favorite.

Eliza: You've picked your favourite child...

Nick: Yeah totally you know it's the kind of coolest one by the river!

Eliza: So, I do agree, I'm really excited to see how it's going to evolve over the next few years and I guess switching a little bit and going back. What was the starting place and was there any particular thing that you really wanted to keep within the site?

Nick: So it's got a couple of really lovely big spaces like I said these big warehouses with like top lit like north facing lights, then there's two really quite sweet kind of like, well I say quite sweet, they're big bumps there's sort of unit A, which is at the front 1960s and unit C, they're the two buildings that were kind of built to connect the whole site up, so unit A has become our kind of, sort of front of house, bar, reception, cafe you know place where people come in the morning say hello, grab a cup of coffee, and have a beer at the end of the day. It's got these amazing like mosaic columns that run up from the ground floor through the first floor, like just terrazzo everywhere you know, beautiful staircases, the first floor has this kind of weird hall which I can't understand what it was built for but it's again huge windows, wonderful like iroko parquet floors, and just full of like little bits of design which because it was derelict and left nobody had ripped out so you know great light switches or fantastic little bits of you know architrave around doors and things like that so we're keeping you know rather than trying to reinvent the wheel we're just keeping everything as original as we can because there's not many spaces like that you know it's almost like a set from Mad Men or something that's got a bit derelict. So yeah keeping those, and then block C, which is now going to become studios and offices and shoot space on the top floor has these wonderful like circular skylights in it and it's amazing like on a soaring staircase which is built on concrete with this kind of almost Barbican kind of chiseled out concrete staircase, so it's really, I mean it's a great building and like hopefully when it's open properly, which will be later this year, kind of publicly open, if anybody's interested then they can come down and have a look around because there'll be lots more stuff going on there.

Eliza: I mean personally I definitely recommend people going around, I think, I for one, I think with a lot of people are quite keen to get into spaces that may have been hidden away or not accessible for years, there's just a pure curiosity within a lot of us, I think to see though but particularly I can comment because I've seen the space not in its complete stage but in its current day and it is just beautiful. People can come down, like the Docks for a lot of people are quite far away and quite unknown to people, but I think there are some really beautiful gems.

Nick: They totally are, I mean it's this thing of the Docks were kind of isolated you know there literally was a big wall built around the Royal Docks because unless you worked there you didn't go in there, so it was just industry and then just empty, I can see it changing you know it's changing the time we've been down here, it's going to continue to change and being able to kind of preserve some of this stuff I think is great, it's really really exciting.

Eliza: Amazing, and you've just touched on a question that I wanted to ask. Your hopes and ambitions for the future as well, because obviously it's still in those initial stages but thinking one, five, ten years down the line, do you have any particular hope and ambition for the space?

Nick: Well, we don't own it, you know, unfortunately it's owned by its owned by Tate & Lyle, we have a long commercial lease on it you know hopefully that's going to retain. I can't see Tate & Lyle leaving, you know, they are as you said, you know, a main industrial occupier of the area and I don't think they're going to find another place to put a giant sugar refinery.

I mean what I get most sort of enjoyment out obviously the people that use the space doing well from it so as long as it's full and their projects and their businesses and their opportunities are going well then that's a sort of success for me you know.

Eliza: Amazing I think we're coming to the end of time. I think we've covered quite a lot already but I guess is there one thing you want our listeners to know about the project?

Nick: It sounds really stupid but just it's there, you know, as we said earlier on it's quite hard to kind of reach out to people and you need people to come and find it and use it. I mean we're very lucky because we do have quite a wide network so people kind of tend to know what we're up to but just the fact that there is a way to make these buildings not only financially viable but culturally and locally and community viable as well and do something better with them than just either knocking them down and just building up loads and loads of high dense housing or turning them into like giant data centres, so that's it.

Eliza: Perfect. A final question for me, you're on a site that's right next to Tate & Lyle, you've mentioned it used to hold sugar in some of the buildings if I'm correct? Yeah, yeah, yeah. Is there still a smell of taste of sugar around?

Nick: So one of the big warehouses where Tate & Lyle used to keep all their like faulty sugar if that makes sense or sugar that they made wrong somehow and it had a kind of a treacle floor which is about six inches deep, which we kind of got rid of, finally we're starting to lose the aroma of treacle in that room.

Eliza: What a place or smell to end the conversation on, and actually we're not moving too far for our next conversation with a big link to food being there also. So, for the next conversation I'm joined by Eric.

To start with, could you introduce yourself and Community Food Enterprise?

Eric: My name is Eric Samuel and I'm the Founder and CEO, Chief Executive Officer of Community Food Enterprise (CFE). CFE was founded in 2000 and it was founded in Newham, where we are based but I am not from Newham originally.

You know I'm from a beautiful city called Saint Albans and it wasn't my intention to stay here. I actually came down, my sisters have always lived here since they left home, and my

mother was at City Hospital, oh sorry, Newham Hospital and she subsequently died there and before she died, her last words were all she wanted was to taste a piece of yam and it was refused so she subsequently died and I stayed on in Newham just to fight why is it only one race could have access to food and the others can't and I'm happy to say that fight I won so today after all those years ago, after my mother died in 1998, anyone could get whatever they want to eat you know in Newham Hospital today.

Eliza: That is absolutely amazing and I didn't know that past, the history of how it started. So, you've got a really strong and powerful reason for wanting to start that.

How did it turn into the organisation as it is today? Obviously that's quite a few years, quite a lot of change within that, have you got any thoughts on that?

Eric: Well the organisation as it is today started in 2000 itself in Newham, I was very very concerned because I lived in an estate called Cranberry Lane and it was a horrible estate and it was landlocked, there was only one way in and one way out and right at the back there was a massive, massive walled fence and behind the fence you had shops but if you wanted to go to the shop you had to walk around, it took you about 15-20 minutes to get there. And I was just horrified that kids, we're talking kids five years old etc, and these guys were climbing over the fence just to get to the shop so what I thought one day is 'would it be a lot simpler if you know these guys had what you know something like a food co-op?' so people from the estate could come to the co-op, buy their food and go home.

So this would be food of their choice, not food that's given to them, what they don't want of their choice and we started a food co-op and that food co-op you know it went from strength to strength, you know it really was so so fantastic and what we did after that, you know, the co-op was so successful people used to come there and by the time they get there all the food was finished, so we decided to go to the local school, have a word of head mistress and see whether she would let us have a co-op and she did and it was start school and that's food co-op you know that turned out one of the best probably for us the best in the country and everyone, I mean all sort of people came down, you know, politicians, you name it, it was so so successful.

One of the amazing thing that I'll never forget about the food co-op, believe it or not, you know the size of me, I'm a former boxer and when I was young that is, I was damn good, I was good, believe me, you go to any club today after all these years you know they'll still remember me, and some of the best fights I've ever seen believe me, some of the best fights I've ever seen was at the food co-op and these were people fighting over yams, you know we'll have one box of yam left and actually literally the last bit of yam and two people you know two ladies will grab hold of the yam and they would not let go at all, the only time they were let go is when one of them was throwing their right or their left you know some of the best fights ever you know about the food co-op, it was so amazing following that food co-op, we had a total of 22 food co-ops in schools in Newham.

22 because of that, and I'm trying to remember the head's name, she was so accommodating we had so many politicians coming down there to see what was happening in Newham and that's where you know obviously from that I really got to know Newham, you know the poverty we have in Newham. Newham has always been known for you know the poverty which is a shame, you know, you've got some lovely lovely people here but it has been known, all has been known that label poverty.

Eliza: I think it's something that people aren't really familiar with actually, the depth of poverty that exists in Newham, it's one of the most overcrowded spaces as well so it's an area that you're right there's some amazing people within it so it's amazing that you're doing something that helps that in such a strong way and have been doing for so long and I guess you've mentioned quite a few different places, you've mentioned Cranberry Estate, all the different co-ops, you're in a slightly different space now for the main distribution centre, I'm not sure if that's the word that you call it but you're sort of based.

How did you end up there and is that sort of your main space and you still work with lots of other locations across Newham? How does that work?

Eric: It's actually called a food hub where we are is actually called a food hub and I mean a lot of people use the term food bank but it is not a food bank. For us there is a difference: a food bank, people come to get food; a food hub, people take food to people.

And how we got here is we needed our own space you know we've had different spaces before here but we needed our own space, so where we are here, it belongs to Tate & Lyle and from my background I had an idea about what to do. I approached Tate & Lyle and I actually asked them we wanted their support in the sense of management you know we wanted someone from Tate & Lyle to sit on the board and we were introduced to a lovely chap, his name was Michael Gray, and Michael actually came to one of the food co-ops in fact he came to you know the Star Lane food court and he just loved what he saw.

Within a week he came back to us and said he's found a place for us, we should come down and see it and the place is where we are today so you know we've been here all these years, so for us this is an ideal place and we've always had the support of Tate & Lyle.

What we have done in Newham we believe it's really unique, you know, what we've done, the support we've got from Tate & Lyle and other organisations. That's how we started, that's why we're here now.

Eliza: Amazing and you just mentioned CFE now for people for who this is the first time they're hearing about the Community Food Enterprise, what is it that you do? How would you describe CFE in a nutshell?

Eric: We're a registered charity and we were set up, our mission is to alleviate food poverty and we do this by distributing food that is surplus to requirement to frontline

organisations, vulnerable people and homeless people from our hub in Silvertown. So rather than people come to us to collect their food we actually take the food to them.

Eliza: So, what you do is quite a lot. How do you manage to do that? Is there particular partners that you work with?

Eric: Yes, we're very fortunate, we get our food from an organisation we've been working with for quite some time. Although we mentioned we are supported by Tate & Lyle, we also have strong local organisations who support us and they've been with us as well from the outset.

We have two tiers of partners: the first partners are local partners like Tate & Lyle Sugars, ExCel London, London City Airport, Royal Docks Trust and we have food partners, which are important as well: Compass Group, Marks and Spencer, Lidl's, Innocent, Sainsbury's and Neighbourly from Bristol.

Eliza: It's quite a big list. How do you work with them and is it something that you enjoy working with so many people?

Eric: Well we do, I mean we get surplus food from all of them you know so obviously we're always in regular contact and we do enjoy working with them, because without their support what we do will not be possible.

Eliza: Just thinking about what you do, there's quite a lot of work if anyone wanted to get involved, either brands or individual capacity, is there any way that people could do that?

Eric: Absolutely, this is always an open door you know. I mean all they have to do is contact us and you know we will be there immediately, it is an open door and we are always looking for volunteers, always, you know volunteers, you know, anyone, any food partners, our doors are always open, because they're the ones who make this happen.

Eliza: I couldn't agree more. Listeners, you know where to go now if you want to get involved in CFE.

We're coming to a close now but one final thing I wanted to touch on, you've obviously been in the area with the food hub for quite a long time, how has the Royal Docks and the Silvertown area that you're in, changed over that time? Have you got any thoughts or reflections on that?

Eric: The Royal Docks is a fantastic place to work, it really is, over the years millions and millions of pounds have been spent in the area on houses etc but despite all those millions have been spent, poverty is still rampant in the area, it really really is. When you talk about poverty, we're talking about food poverty, it's rampant in the area and my concern if you look at the area there's two estates and I can't see much being done there, one of them is North Woolwich and the other one is Custom House.

And it will really really be good you know when I then start seeing work, I know where the Royal Docks Team will be doing work on those Estate but when I start seeing things happening in the Estates, that's when I will say 'yep we're finally there'. But you know I have concerns, you know, for the people that I serve you know the people from frontline services and homeless and vulnerable people.

Eliza: Definitely, yes sort of in that vein, what are your hopes for CFE and the Royal Docks in general? In the future where do you see things in a year, in 10 years?

Eric: Goodness me I hope I'm still alive then, we're all still alive the next few years but I think I am really looking forward it would be really good I don't know whether you know where Millennium Mills is, it's in the Silvertown area, I just can't wait until they start the work there, I just can't wait until the work that they're doing there is finished, because I look at Silvertown you know this is going to be the new Stratford, this Silvertown where Millennium Mills is, when that is all finished this will be the centre of Newham, I really do believe that and I can't wait until work starts there and I see. I mean Newham is up and coming, I mean you know already one of the things you know, I know it's outside the area, when I moved here in 1998, all of our schools literally all of them were in special needs but it's so fantastic you know, the other day I saw a report and the report said that in, what's the school called Brampton Manor, 84 students I think who had been accepted, 84 in Oxbridge, 84!

The last time I heard that a few years ago it was 42. Now it's 84, so many people. You know that school, it's just, I mean, it's just incredible, if only we could find ways of retaining those students once they finish Oxbridge etc, and they come back you know and inspire other students in schools etc wouldn't that be so fantastic?

Eliza: I definitely agree with you on that. So final question, is there one final thing you wanted to leave us with that we've not covered so far?

Eric: One of the things I really really wanted you know to talk about as well I mean you will know, if you know the area, you will know this but one of the best views in London, certainly the best view in Newham is the Connaught Bridge, and what you can see right in front of you is the beautiful towers in Tower Hamlets straight in front of you and to the right you have the City of London and you know the two views you know they're so, a hell of a view, for me it's one of the best views in Newham.

If you were to go there in the morning, you know, when the sun is coming out from behind you and it's shining into London, it really is unbelievable, you know, it really really is unbelievable.

Eliza: What a lovely image to end on, I think that's all the time we have today but thank you to our guests Nick and Eric.

You've been listening to Building Sounds. To learn more about the Key Actors series, head to lfa.london/keyactors. We'll be back with the final episode of the series next week, chatting to four students at the London Design & Engineering, UTC.

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