

LFA Building Sounds Podcast: Design Future London, with Jules Pipe, Natalie Wells (GLA) and Hussain Akil Sadliwala, Alina Klimenteva and Mohan Ukabhai Dungrani (UEL) (Transcript)

ELIZA: Hello and welcome back to Building Sounds, the podcast exploring the stories behind the people, places and project in our city, brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture, I'm your host, Eliza Grosvenor.

Last episode we explored the RSBC Life Without Limits Centre and the process of designing genuinely inclusive spaces.

In this episode, we're touching on a different aspect of our LFA2023 theme: In Common, and we're exploring a project that saw a group of students come together to find a solution to a challenge. And the challenge in mind is the Design Future London challenge - a design challenge led by the Mayor of London, alongside MOBIE (The Ministry of Building Innovation + Education), which aimed to inspire young Londoners to develop an interest in designing beautiful, affordable and sustainable places to live, work and visit.

So to start with, I'm join by Jules Pipe and Natalie Wells from the GLA, we'll later be joined by three students from the university.

Before we kick off, Jules, Natalie, could you say a couple of words about yourself and your involvement with the project.

JULES: Hello! I'm Jules Pipe, I'm the Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills at City Hall. I'm responsible for implementing the London Plan. I oversee community led regeneration projects, and big ones as well, like redevelopments of big bits of London. And also I oversee skills as well, and that's trying to create a creative skill system in London that properly addresses the needs of Londoners and the economy. And I also oversee ensuring London's infrastructure really supports good growth and meets the needs of London's communities - which you know the big picture is making London cleaner, greener and smarter.

NATALIE: Hi I'm Natalie Wells, I'm the Senior Communications and Engagement Officer for the GLA Planning Team. And also my role involves being Project Lead for the Design Future London challenge, which is really exciting piece of work engaging young Londoners in the built environment and talking about careers and how our future city's going to look and feel.

ELIZA: Amazing! So, to start with, could you give us an overview of the challenge, what's it all about, how does it work?

NATALIE: The Design Future London challenge was an opportunity for young people to tell us how the future of London should look. Last year we picked the Royal Docks as we were moving City Hall to that location. And we gave students a couple of blank sites including Silo

D and the Limmo Peninsula and ask them to design a home or masterplan the site as to what they would like to see and how they would like to design the future of London. This year we are working in the centre of Croydon, one of the most exciting parts of London. It contains opportunities for us to take a fresh look at how we can live more sustainably in the city and how we can design spaces and facilities that work for all Londoners, regardless of their background.

The challenge is open to all schools in London, that's primary schools, secondary schools, colleges, university students - so it's from 5 to 24+. And we've got all sorts of materials and resources that are available to schools and colleges to use to complement the challenge and make it easier to deliver in the classroom.

This year the Mayor was partnered with Minecraft as well, which is particularly exciting, and that's to deliver another platform for the students to use. We provide other free licences from Esri for instance for ArcGIS and that gives opportunities for students to embed themselves in digital skills and also green skills and think about all of those careers that can perhaps be part of their future in the built environment.

ELIZA: Amazing. So you've touch on it slightly already but what is the impact or the importance of the challenge?

JULES: Well, the whole Design Future London challenge has a number of objectives – three big ones really. I mean first, it's just about giving space to hear the voices of young Londoners and give them a chance to say what they want to see in their city and draw it up, model it whatever and let us know. It's an opportunity for us to ask them that question and those questions about what they want in their locality.

And you know previously we've seen fantastic responses everything from those that are in college who give us architects drawings and masterplans worthy of architects practices all the way down to five-year-olds you know and it's crayons and egg cartons. And working with Minecraft was great coz that's a whole new dimension and also obviously it's very attractive to the kids to get involved with, to it's another route to hear their opinions and their ideas.

I mean secondly, I think it's really important opportunity to highlight the career opportunities that are available to young Londoners all too often I think people just automatically default to 'architects' - that's who builds cities. And of course there are so many more creative jobs and careers that are part of the sector, urban designers, landscape architects, planners and you know we just wanted to sow those seeds in young minds - minds of all ages - that this is a potential you know exciting career for them.

And thirdly, I think it's about getting the question of sustainability firmly in the minds of the next generation. There are a lot of difficult decisions facing all of us on this planet and London is no different - huge huge issues facing us about climate change, and the impacts that that will have and how we live in our city, pushing us to live in a more sustainable way - so we just hope that you know this will help get that conversation going with a wider audience,

ELIZA: Fantastic! And there's some really exciting opportunities that come from each of the points there I think. And just for those who might not be aware, how does this fit into the wider work of the GLA and the wider work of the organisation?

JULES: Well I mean in any number of ways. Clearly the London Plan sets that headline ambitions for London, about the way it should grow, the way it should be built out - it sets those kind of good growth objectives front and centre, in guiding how the city should develop. But as I said it also goes to the heart of who should be deciding that and doing that. London should be designed and built by those who look and feel like Londoners, and it shouldn't be something done by others and imposed on people. So you know it goes to the heart of the big issues of what London should be like but also, it's asking the right people and asking them to get on board for the long term and help build a better city to the future.

ELIZA: Amazing. And you've mentioned the challenge really aims to open up what architecture is and who it's for, much like the festival actually, how's that process been and has it changed for this year's challenge?

NATALIE: Yeah, thanks for that Eliza. I mean we've done this in several different ways. I think one of the key things from last year is listening to feedback, from teachers and also students, on what we could learn from, what we could improve, what we should just put in the bin. So actually, we took those ideas onboard and we looked at the challenge afresh. And this year we really simplified the ask – so we're asking to identify an opportunity and design a solution and you can pretty much do that in any way you want to, and that specifically for the older age group - the younger age group is just Minecraft only to make it simpler for schools to implement. And our core messaging is about: be inspired, be creative and have fun. And I think it's really important that young people have fun with the challenge!

Some of the learnings from last year was to reach more schools by providing a lot more free resources - there are schools struggling there and support for teachers specifically. So actually doing a programme with three organisations to deliver to 15 schools, so one class in every school, and that's to students might not necessarily have had the opportunity or had this exposure. So they're working with higher than average pupil premium schools, with mentors to take them through the process, and support the teachers most importantly. There was one college in in North London, where the students are staying after to class because they're so enthralled and challenged, which is amazing feedback.

We're supporting with resources as well we've got lesson plans, we've working with educational specialists on those resources and also local artists - doing free workshops in Croydon itself, we've got like a self-guided tour that students can go on. And I think the support for teachers is especially important, cause we're creating a platform as well - where built environment professionals can get into the classroom and mentor these students directly. Because we've got a huge number involved and it's just brilliant that professionals can get into the classroom and inspire directly about careers and all these things that we're talking about, and the future of the city.

ELIZA: That's absolutely amazing, and I think we're going to come onto the next steps of what the challenge looks like this year in a moment. But before we do I just wanted to introduce three students from the University of East London who took part in the challenge this year to tell us a little bit about their experience and touching on exactly some of the points just there. Could you quickly introduce yourselves?

MOHAN: Hello, my name is Mohan, I recently moved to London about like a year ago, to get my masters over here. I recently graduated from MA Architecture and Urbanism and I work with the Digital Fabrication Lab at the university.

ALINA: So I'm Alina. I just graduated, I did my master's in architecture and Urbanism at UEL. And I'm lucky and proud that I work at the Digital Fabrication Laboratory.

HUSSAIN: I'm Hussain. I'm an architectural designer. So I just finished my masters at UEL and right now I'm just taking a sort of break and then looking for jobs and stuff.

ELIZA: Amazing, So we've heard a bit about the challenge as a whole so far, could you walk me through what the challenge looked like at the University of East London?

HUSSAIN: So it all started with a three-day design charette, which was a three-day intense design workshop. So it was a joint event organised by Mayor's office - the Mayor of London's office and UEL, where we were sort of like the advisor or leader, team leader, for each team. So the teams were off like 10 to 20 people/students and the interesting thing about the groups was that they had a lot of diversity in terms of field, like students were coming from computer science, finance, architecture, interior designing, product designing, and not only limited to architecture. So like for example in my group it was more influenced from fine art and photography students.

Initially we were ten groups for the projects STEAM, and then it took all the inputs from ten different groups into one group and then we tried to propose a housing masterplan. So it was sort of divided into three categories, like I was personally leading urban design part of the masterplan, Alina was leading the architecture and Morgan was more involved with digital fabrication and technical drawings and how it could be actually built on site - like working sort of with robo folding and digital lab at UEL - which is an excellent facility! So like we were working on one project, but it was divided into three sectors different: like urban design, architecture and digital fabrication. So that's how we think we were able to do such an amazing project in short time.

ELIZA: Amazing. So just going back a little bit - what was the site that you were looking at? What was it that you were trying to achieve with that site?

HUSSAIN: So initially we had an option to choose from two sites, one was Silo D and one was Canning Town. So we went further with Canning Town, so I'm just going to go sort of overview of this site.

So it's located just next to Canning Town station in East London. So if you see the surrounding, the surrounding is much sort of like high rise residential areas and if you go that you feel a lack of social life and cultural aspects and cultural character in the area. So

the main aim we had, to develop and enhance the social and cultural part of the - not only the housing - but also to develop the social and cultural aspect of the user group.

ELIZA: And how was your experience of designing a space that is real and is really close to where you're studying? How did it feel working on a project like that?

MOHAN: So like when the site was introduced to us, and we got to know that it's really close - like a walking distance to our university campus - the first thing we did was in the morning is just like, with all like 20 students, we walked to the sites and see like literally so the surrounding and see how the environment are there.

The Silo D site was the first one we visited, and we didn't know that there's some you know monumental structure existed in surroundings as well. So everyone was surprised, and they were taking photographs and we making a research as well - like what's the nearest train station is, what's the nearest bus stops. So this was like first thing we did and then it was amazing that we got to know that there are some areas which is unexplored by us as well, the nearest which is like a walking distance, but we didn't know that the site is there already.

HUSSAIN: Yeah, we got to learn so many new things about the area, from students, professors, who are actually from East London - so in that sense it was a very new experience for us and very interesting.

ELIZA: And how did you find that experience? I know you're all from slightly different parts of the world, how did you find not being from London impacted your relation to the site then the way you the designed for the site?

MOHAN: In the beginning it gave us some little bit of trouble. Because like where I'm coming from India, site development is quite different, buildings are quite different as well. But when we started studying over here, we had to start from the weather's - how weather is affecting building how, like building is going to be there or like how the soil works. So we had to start from the researching from the base, so we had to go into history, we had to look for the cultural and we got to know that the area is like currently very much developing and there are so many high-rise buildings over there. And the nearest place there was no marketplace, there is no area where people can go and have fun or something. So there were some discoveries we made when we were doing some research on it.

ALINA: At the moment when we started making this project, I felt that how differently society is organised in different countries. And for me, it's a kind of another approach of thinking about the way how you can encourage people to specific site, how to involve people to attend different parts of the city. And also, it's not about architecture as a rigid form and to just a shape of the building it's more about the system which can adapt and grow and it's adjustable for different needs and different group of people. So I think yeah this is the main difference for me, in comparison to experience that I had in Russia, yeah.

ELIZA: That's really interesting and thinking again about something you mentioned earlier - as well as having sort of your own experiences of working and thinking, which you were bringing to the project, you also working across different departments in the university. What was that experience like, and have you got any examples where this influenced the way of designing or thinking or responding to the project?

HUSSAIN: In my group, people are people working - like it was more influenced from fine arts and photography students. So one thing which they proposed was to have a place within the housing masterplan which could promote local artists. And I think in Alina's group, they were proposing urban farming and hydroponic farming and stuff like that.

ALINA: Yeah, and I personally was surprised that this impact of each specialty on each other it's been unpredictably great for me, and the way how it complemented each other. Yeah, because in my team, as Hussain mentioned, there were people who studied computer science and cyber security and they were sitting with the graphic designers' students and thinking about how to develop the application in a way to combine and to make a community based on this application, for the people who are going to live on this peninsula - which is Canning Town.

I think this competition for me, it just opened a new perspective to see how great the outcome can be if you will collaborate, if you use this kind of like collective intelligence to express your ideas your thoughts, I think yeah.

HUSSAIN: So I would like to say, like initially when given the opportunity to guide a group of students, I was very sceptical about how I could lead a team of such multidisciplinary fields of students but I was really surprised how everyone was really interested in like giving their ideas, no matter like from fine arts of photography, they were like trying to you know give their inputs and like sketches or just by words or like collage a photo or stuff like that. So in that sense it was very like interesting experience as well.

ELIZA: That's really amazing to here and I want to touch on all your experiences of the project in just a moment. Just before we do that, going back to the project, and I right in thinking that the charette and sort of next stages of that, was not the end of the project for you and it actually influenced your masters?

MOHAN: So like once we've done the projects STEAM, we came to conclusion that we can work on this more and we can finalise the master outlet, we can finalise the drawings and we can actually submit it as an architectural project. So me and Hussain and Alina, we thought, and we got an opportunity from the university as well - they provide us, they told us if you can do this, you can submit it as your master as well.

So as a Canning Town site - and we had like a different idea from Canning Town site and Silo D site - we combined it together and created a whole new project, with the prospect of computational design. And was really good outcome and we submitted the Design Future London competition with our final project as well and we got our master on it! And we came third on Design Future London competition, and so it was a very fulfilment of our joy as well.

ELIZA: That's amazing and it's really great to hear and it sounds like it's been such a great experience for all of you and I just want to dive in on that, exactly that, for a second and just see what's been the impact on you for this project, what's one thing that's going to stick with you, now it's sort of come to a close?

MOHAN: Most likely, in our experience, it's quite different because like the moment I came to London was like a year, about a year and a half ago, not even complete year and a half. But everything was new, everything was like 'how I'm going to join the community over here?' 'how I'm going to join the architecture like people from the architecture profession?' 'how I'm going to communicate with them?' 'how I'm going to be with them?' - so this particular project helped us to push us to the limit and we got to meet so many interesting people.

We got to meet like professionals, and it kicked us, it really pushed our communication to the different level and now we are connecting, now we feel that we are connected to London. In the beginning, we were like we are so different from London, our cultural aspect is different, our beliefs are different but the moment after the whole competition, after like connecting with so many people, making networks with so many people it feels like we were here before, as well we belong in London sometimes - it feels like it now, we belong to London as well.

And the most thing I could say like you know, that stood out for me, was like when we were developing our masters project, I was in charge of digital fabrication and I was like mainly focused, my research was mainly focused on how we can fabricate all of this design that we have created digitally, and that particular thing kept me thinking like why not pursuing a career in digital fabrication. Because for me it's particular more recent, because in India I didn't have this exposure and I didn't have this opportunity to do all of these things what I'm doing right now and currently working with the university digital fabrication lab for about three months now and it really kept me thinking that I should pursue myself into digital fabrication research, creating new ways to developing buildings, rather than just designing them. And this whole experience gave me one thing that like I'm more confident now, I can say like I can explain everything to anyone, I can say that I'm not much shy person anymore I'm just like more talkative in every sense.

HUSSAIN: In that sense, I would say like those initial workshops and those initial competition STEAM workshops helped us in a way to find which direction we want to focus on like personally, as like we were initially were confused, like what to do, what topic to choose for dissertation, which direction to go and like what to write but that initial competition workshop helped, personally for me it helped a lot to finalising my topic and stuff like.

ALINA: I just wanted to say that yeah at the moment, when we started presenting our work like in different places - let's say, because there's been like a few presentations - we've been like less than one year, and for me it was surprising and amazing experience to be presented to world known architects, like shake their hands and say to them like 'oh hi my name is Alina'. Yeah, because when we were at City Hall, there were people from Zaha Hadid, Grimshaw, and everyone is so kind, so open, ready to communicate and share their experience and knowledge with you.

For me it's also important, that I kind of gain and still improving the skill of presenting my work and talking about myself on the public, because I believe that it's important skill if you want to develop in a career because if you will not say about your achievements and how people would know about it. This is something what I need to improve still but all this competition and these roads related to competition and my masters as well, it's about seeing your strong sides and expressing them to people to let them know about it.

ELIZA: Amazing, I think we're coming to the end of the conversation now, but I just wanted to come back to Jules and Natalie. What are the next steps for this year challenge?

JULES: Well I mean perhaps Natalie wants to talk about sort of the next steps in what we're going to see over the next few months and building up to the big reveal in June.

NATALIE: Yeah, thanks Jules. So the next steps for the challenge, really, are working towards supporting schools in doing the challenge. And we're doing that in various ways but that's all leading up to the closing date which is the 25th of April - so that's particularly exciting. And it's at that point that will know how many schools have taken the challenge on board. We know that lots and lots of people are doing the challenge in the classroom but then on the 25th or get all of the entries together. And then that's going to follow on to a finals event in June, June or July, where we'll invite some finalists to present to us and then decide on the winners of the challenge!

ELIZA: Fantastic! And just to finish off the conversation, is there one thing you really wanted our listeners to know about the project? If so, what would that be?

JULES: I'm really looking forward to June, having seen the fantastic results that we got last year and this year's going to be even bigger and better. Having gone to the launch at UEL and seen the standard of the work that students there did, in just a few days for the launch, both in the designs they did and how they expressed it through Minecraft as well - it was terrific. I would just recommend everyone talking about this if they know someone who might be interested, or schools that could be interested in taking it up. I mean we've already had 17,000 applications for licences, which is terrific -for the Minecraft aspect of it - but you know more is always going to be better. We can just never have enough people talking about the future of London and what it should look like, and we can never have a diverse enough crowd of people doing that, that's what really important. And having seen the excellent works being produced, you know it's really satisfying to know that there is this next generation of talent that's out there - so we should be nurturing it, we should be paying an interest to it.

That's another thing, even if you're not going to get involved, if you're senior planner or you're in a architects practice or urban planning practise, take a look! Go on the site and take a look at the standard of work that are being produced in June when it's all announced, and they'll be blown away.

ELIZA: Amazing and if there are people listening, who want to get involved what are those next steps, who is the best person to contact?

NATALIE: We have a central e-mail designchallenge@london.gov.uk. And we've got, our team will direct you in the right way to the right resources, whether you're a school, a parent - whose child wants to get involved, or a built environment professional that once again bold as a mentor so please do get in touch!

ELIZA: Amazing, So I think that's all the time we have today, but thank you to all our guests today, Jules, Natalie, Hussain, Alina and Mohan.

We will be back with a new episode next month. Until then, if you liked this episode, make sure to follow the channel. Or if you really liked it why not give share it with a friend or a family member. And if this conversation has got you inspired to explore the festival or the challenge for yourself, head to lfa.london/get-involved or take a look at the show notes for all the important links.

Until next time!