

## LFA Building Sounds: LFA2023 Theme, with Rosa Rogina and Binky Taylor (Transcript)

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

In this episode, we are looking at the winning theme for the 2023 edition of the London Festival of Architecture. With me, I have Rosa Rogina, Director of the LFA and Binky Taylor, partner in participatory placemaking organization, the Brixton Project, and one of our 2023 Curation Panel members. Welcome to you both.

So to start with, Rosa, for people who are less familiar with the LFA. Could you give us a little background as to what the LFA is?

Rosa: Yes, absolutely. The London Festival of Architecture has been going on since 2004. It's a month-long celebration of architecture and city making, taking place across London every June.

Our mission is to open up discussions around architecture, test new ideas, and uncover and promote new talent, all with an aim to create a better, more inclusive London for all in the long term. Aside from that, of course it's important that the festival maintains its relevance. So we are every year working with our community of event organizers and others to kind of shape the direction and wider thinking, around the festival.

Eliza: Amazing. And am I right in thinking, one of the ways that you shape the festival is through an annual theme. Can you tell us what is the theme? Why does a theme happen each year? What's that all about?

Rosa: Absolutely. So every year we have an annual theme. So far, it has always been one or two words, which hopefully are reflective of the conditions we are living in, but also open and inviting enough for different people to interpret it in many different ways. So, just to give you an idea, previous teams included everything from power, memory, to care, and yeah, very excited to be talking about 2023 team in this conversation today.

Eliza: Super exciting. So you mentioned 2023. Could you tell us what the theme is for 2023?

Rosa: Yes. Very exciting. So we have, uh, worked across the summers to consult with our Festival community. We had an open call for next year's theme, and then we

had a privilege to work with our Curation Panel for these year. And we have jointly decided that 'In Common' is the theme for 2023.

Amazing. So Binki, I wonder if you - and it's going to be a not a small question- what does in common mean to you?

Binki: Oh, what does in common mean to me? So much, many, many things... Which is why I really feel that it's a great theme for this year. It's really powerful actually... to give people that offer or something, which is so open for people to interpret. Because you know, it's been a strange time. We are now through pandemic, but we are living with all sorts of uncertainty moving forward.

Architecture plays a massive role for us all in how we live and how we want to reimagine life, you know, and we are at a point in time and so much has happened where reimagining life is kind of high on everybody's agenda, you know. Whether we're looking for social justice, understanding how we live in good relationship with the planet, how we live in good relationship with each other.

There are many reasons why 'In Common' is a very good place to start with those key questions, I think, for our time upcoming. So that's just for starters!

Eliza: I think that's really interesting, and you've brought up some really interesting ideas and how do you think it fits into the work that you do on a day to day basis?

Binki: Well, in communities, and I speak with my experience and knowledge of Brixton and working with lots of different people on some very common goals. Social justice is one of them, our environment and how we use public space is another, and who we celebrate and what we want to uphold in public space.

So we have a history in Brixton of the Brixton Design Trail, which was actually part of another festival – which will remain nameless for the time being. But the point of that was actually coming together to discuss and express and explore a theme collaboratively. Again, just the very sense of In Common is something which is really good for us to work with. It's a way that we like to work.

There are obviously lots of different groups of interest and all of those groups of interests coming together give you a picture of a moment and a time. So it's a very good way to look at how a community is working, what a community feels it needs. And it's a call, you know, it's an opportunity to say, Hey look, this is us. This is what we want from you, or this is what we want to see happen. And so if you're getting lots of people taking lots of different perspectives on one thing, in a place, then the impact on that place can be considerable, you know? So that's, I look forward very much to seeing that happen this year.

Eliza:

I think that's going to be really interesting, and I think... Sometimes people can think a theme, it's just a conversation starter, it's a good place to start, but actually what comes across in what you've just said is the real impact that it can have on our city and sort of shaping that.

I don't know if Rosa, you want to touch on that and how the festival uses a theme to make a real change to the city. Obviously, it's always going to be temporary in nature, but the festival actually has possibility to impact the city in a really positive way.

Rosa: Yes, most definitely. And I think, you know, we see particularly with all the current crisis, with environment being on the forefront, there is no point in producing temporary events unless they have a permanent role in the city. And I think that's something that is very much in the centre of the thinking around the London Festival of Architecture. And perhaps how we did it last year around the theme of 'Act' and thinking how we can ship, you know, the conversations into action will certainly translate and evolve in the next year's edition of the festival through 'In Common'.

Just kind of thinking back as well, what we discussed in the Curation Panel with all our panellists in one room, we started exploring the kind direction for the next year's festival around this idea that we do live in an individualized and fragmented society at the moment, but actually lots of challenges we are facing are kind of common and shared by us all. So how we can perhaps shift some of the current anxieties into more of a hope and kind of idea of collectiveness, especially to do with city making.

And actually it's quite interesting to think about that we have in common, much more than we know and how can we kind of shape and create spaces we have in common, which is essentially our city in a much more, let's say, horizontal, open and inclusive way.

Eliza: Amazing. And so these are all amazing ideas and thoughts that have been prompted from the theme already. What sort of things are you hoping to see in the programme for next year? I know we've got a little bit of a way to go for the, open call, we'll be opening that in January time, but to get people starting to think how they might respond to the theme. Is there anything that you are really hoping to see?

Binki: Personally? I would love to see interventions in public. And understand how, particularly from a community perspective, we can use public space to kind of increase our sense of ownership and agency in local areas. I would also like to see In Common, I know in discussion with the group, we came on a bit of a journey and that journey sort of began in a place which was sort of talking about Commons.

And for a long time there has been a growing interesting commons locally to me in Brixton, we have, I think, one of the oldest pieces of common land in London

that actually goes all the way down through Central Brixton, and it is a wonderful space that could be made so much more wonderful, you know?

But to think that that came from a place, a route where you could go and graze your sheep or your cow, very much intrinsically, a space that was a shared place of how we live, you know. Going to graze your sheep is productive, it's about work, it's about industry. So how are we using our space to, how can we be using them in lots of different ways, is something that I would really like to see.

And I think that also plays into how we interact with the environment upcoming. You know, are there things that we could perhaps test in common, that will allow us to come together to look at how we use space and land. You know, is it the kind of small, busy growing area at the end of your street? Is it how we use our public spaces for shared performance and culture?

There are all sorts of different ways that can now come through, you know, so what bit of the countryside or nature can we enhance is very in thinking how we viewed this theme. Yeah, I'd like to see what might happen in our parks and green spaces differently that is more inclusive and yeah... the world, I think In Common is our oyster. So yeah, let's come together and use it!

Eliza: Amazing, Rosa would like to you add anything about what you're hoping to see.

Rosa: I mean, I can only echo everything that Binki, has said so far. I mean, I'm really fascinated by the more traditional, let's say, description of what Commons in kind of, British context means. And, you know, I would be very interested for people to start to unpack what do they think are kind of contemporary commons we all kind of share and have in common. So whether we are thinking about physical or natural or material, immaterial, what are those today? You know, is a high street a new version of a common? Could it be how, how can we make it more kind of shared, accessible?

I think there is big questions around access as well. You know, if we are claiming that our city is something that we all have in common, is it very accessible to all of us or there are some things that have to be improved?

Also, thinking about natural resources, so the energy crisis, finite number of resources we have left, How do we manage those? How, by architecture, we are not only kind of help not use them all, but also can regenerate them long term. So I think there are lots of different questions.

And then perhaps if we go back to the kind of notion of in common or what we don't have in common, I think that other element is also very interesting. So what are our differences? How we can empower them, How we can, you know, design a city that accounts for how different we are to each other and doesn't design, you know, our public real and other spaces just for benefit of one certain, let's say user lens.

Binki:

So yeah, plenty of things to explore, but what I'm always the most curious about in the festival is explorations and interpretations I haven't taught myself at this point of the year, so I look forward to those as well.

That just sparked off a few things in my head, Rosa. You know, coming from a place actually where, you know, at the time being what we have most in common is a lot of challenges and those are cultural challenges, through to our resources and how we're using the planet, but also those that very personal set of challenges that you touched upon, which is kind of, yes, we are about to go into a cost of living crisis, so how is that feeling? You know, and not to dwell on that cause this is really a point of optimism. And so we can actually use that theme of in common to get at those, to look at those collectively, to look at those in a kind of 360 way. So it's not just a battle of perspective, but it is actually bringing everybody to the table to find that common ground, which is how do we heal things? You know, there's a lot to be healed.

It think what also interesting about what you said, was moving beyond what we have in common is also how can we remain distinctive, how do we keep our individuality, especially in place. And, you know, this is at a point of, I'm going to say the word gentrification because it's here, it exists. But, you know, having gone through the past however many years with this kind of rapid feeling of homogenization. So we have a lot in common, our high streets are pretty much in common with another high stree , you know, so how do we, in that context, hang onto individuality, distinctiveness, uniqueness, culture in a way that can be shared at the same time.

Rosa: So, yeah, there's some interesting contra, what do we call them? Contra indications going on. But it would be interesting to see them working off each other, see what comes out of.

Absolutely. And it just reminded me when you mentioned, you know, bringing people around the table, wouldn't it be wonderful for everybody taking part in the LFA to kind of speak with their neighbours and, and think about how the events could be core organized, in between different organizations that perhaps could be discussing what is in common, what is not, and how we can build for the benefit for all. Absolutely.

You know, I'm not an architect. And to see, I think an industry being able to reach out in this way and say, "Come and discuss with us. Come and play with us. Come and create. Come and imagine with us" so that it becomes, again. You know, it's multiple perspective, skills and experience coming to a table to create the next thing, you know. And I think certainly there are a number of those organizations, number of social organizations, creative organizations for whom, you know, that coming together could create some wonderful visions, you know, could manifest some really interesting work.

I think you're right. I think the best world in a really unique position that it, in the type of people that it brings together. I think it's a London Festival of Architecture, we have a lot of architects who are involved in the festival of course, but also developers, there's community groups, there's people who don't have a background in architecture, but just love the spaces around them, which aren't necessarily buildings. They're the spaces in between the buildings, they're the parks as well. So I think it's really the festival as a whole, but also this theme in particular, it's hopefully going to be a really nice opening to get more people talking about their built environment and thinking about what that means to them and therefore the impact that we can have.

And I guess you both picked up the idea of things we have in common, but also things we don't have in common. Is there any worries around in common? There's a lot of tensions in different aspects of the world, whether that's environmental, whether that's social injustice. Is that something that you're worried about or is it really that idea of hope and optimism that you think the festival could really be a place that people can gather and move forward to, as you mentioned, heal the city and the people within it?

Yeah, I mean, I would like to think that individual groups and people will pick it up and make it their own. It is a time where, you know, there's a lot that people don't feel in common with. And well, it's a moment in time, isn't it? It's a, moment of kind of expansion in consciousness and, I've been talking a lot about allyship this week and actually how we share the burden of decolonizing, how we share the burden of representation.

You know, this is not just a subject for one part of the community. It's a subject for everybody. So that's a big subject and it's a content subject. And it's been in a very, you know, necessarily angry, active, dynamic place. And I think what we are doing now, or what the offer is here is what does allyship look like in this sense, you know. So you can use In Common, as in we now have to do this healing and we have to do it together, you know? And changing the way people relate to each other, changing or opening up to histories being different, and actually being shared in extraordinary ways. Not always good, but they are shared, you know? So people kind of getting to grips with all of that and understanding that at quite a deep level, you know.

And in some ways good and in some ways bad, you know, are what is stored in our buildings over time is really quite significant. If we're talking about empire and colonization, you know. We have in London a lot of buildings where the history of that is stored and the kind of financial weight a bit is literally in the buildings and they were built in a particular way to symbolize a certain thing and you know, so there's a lot to look at how that might change for people. And there's also a lot to sort of understanding how that might be making people feel. So, you know, to create now common spaces that perhaps symbolize, well, not perhaps, that need to symbolize something very distinctly different. And something else. This is a very good starting point for that conversation

Rosa:

And I do think it's also, I mean, it would be slightly naive to pick a theme that has only one angle of exploration. I think it's crucial to be open also, you know, to perhaps some, let's say, slightly less positive, but you know, really important kind of discussions around the theme that that have to be there. And I think the festival, as a vehicle that engages so many organizations and individuals, it has to have that plurality of approaches. Otherwise, it doesn't really, I would say, work.

No, it absolutely does. And a theme that not only allows that openness and that that space to grow and is prepared to kind of, you know, really sit with what comes back and what comes, comes out. Because that will then inform us to who we are right now in this space and where we wanna be going and what we need.

And you're absolutely right. You have to have that integrity. And I think it's, as a festival, it's all the more powerful if it is prepared to kind of explore and, you know, grow knowledge and insight around those questions. Yeah.

Amazing. And I think we're really excited to see what events come in, but also the conversations in the lead up to the festival. I think is really interesting opportunity to really dive deeper into the theme and all the conversations that come from that. I mean, we've already, in this conversation, unpacked quite a lot of things already. Is there anything else that we've not yet covered, or is there one thing that you'd want our listeners to take away from this conversation?

Well, from my, from my perspective, it's just get involved. Collaborate with others. Stretch yourselves. Take the opportunity to really let your imagination fly and to apply it really to how we come together to heal and move forward.

I hope that doesn't sound too happy, clappy, but I think we have to be able to share an aspiration to live in a world which is better than this one right now. And it's absolutely opportunities like this. Can allow quite a big move forward in a way, you know, can involve lots of people, lots of different constituent parts. It can be shared by lots of people. So yeah, it's a great opportunity to make some, make some moves people!

Rosa:

I would just like to add, uh, on that, that we see the festival as a live laboratory and it's really about, kind of, testing, exploring, debating, acting. You know, there is no right or wrong, it's not a kind of blank exhibition space. It's our city ultimately. And yeah, we want everybody to get involved and get their imaginations and kind of ambitions up and to see it all coming together next June.

Eliza:

I think that's all time we have for today, but thank you to our guests, Rosa and Binky. We'll be opening our call for events for LFA 2023 on January 10th, 2023.

We are really looking forward to seeing all the submissions that are going to come in. We've got lots of resources on the website to help you get thinking about what your event might look like, what might you explore and what would your take on In Common be?

We'll be back with a new episode next month. Until then, if you'd like this episode, make sure to subscribe to the channel and maybe share this conversation with a friend or a colleague. And if you're interested in running an event as part of the festival, head to the LFA website to find out how you can get involved. Until next time!