

“LFA on-location: how community power and collaboration are shaping Barnet” Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

Eliza: Hello and welcome to Building Sounds, the podcast exploring the stories, people and projects that shape London's built environment. I'm your host, Eliza Grosvenor, Head of Programme at the London Festival of Architecture.

2024 marks 20 years of the Festival, so for this June we're bringing you a special series of podcasts which highlight the unique and exciting people and organisations we're proud to be working with. To do this, we've tasked each of the LFA team to take you on site to share some of the projects they've been working on over the course of the last 12 months. For the second conversation, I'm passing on to Sophie, who will be diving into all things Barnet, exploring the idea of culture as a connection across the borough and giving a bit of an insight into some of the activities happening across the month.

Sophie: Hello, I'm Sophie Roberts, the Senior Programme Manager at London Festival of Architecture. I lead on our work with boroughs and BIDs, and I have the pleasure of working on our Destination and Neighbourhood programmes.

Today I'm joined by Synthia Griffin, the Arts and Culture Manager at Barnet Council, and Becky Lyon, an artist working at the Intercept of Art and Ecology, who's also based in Barnet. Today we'll be having a conversation about how culture is shaping the London Borough of Barnet and also start to tease out some of the wonderful events and activities that will be going on as we see London Festival of Architecture return to the borough for the second year.

For me, it's been a privilege to work with both Synthia and Becky over the last two years, as well as wonderful stakeholders from across the whole borough, to see the programme of activity come alive for London Festival of Architecture.

Synthia, could you start by setting the scene a bit for us, as it's been a really exciting couple of years for the borough in terms of putting culture back at the forefront of the agenda. Perhaps you can share a bit more about what's driving this and why now.

Synthia: Yeah, absolutely Sophie. So Barnet is a really sizable district in North London. It's one of the second largest boroughs in the city and there hadn't been

an established arts team for quite some time within the council for at least 10 years plus.

And I've been at Barnett Council for just under two years now, and we're really firmly putting culture back on the agenda in Barnet, but also looking at the really joyful and engaging ways culture can bring communities of all backgrounds together and, you know, thinking about how Barnet can become better understood as a cultural destination, how we can really strengthen that identity across London, and that's why it's brilliant to be able to connect with things like the London Festival of Architecture, because we join a much bigger conversation about the role of neighbourhoods, architecture and how it's understood city making, creative place making, you know, public art, all of those things, as well as how those initiatives can be really inclusive and how culture can speak to everyone. That really aligns with some of the thinking that's gone into our five year culture strategy, which we'll be launching later in the year.

Sophie: Fab and I think you know we've had quite a few conversations and really focused on kind of culture as a connector and so it'd be good to know you know what does. What does that mean specifically for Barnet? You know how are you using your burgeoning arts and culture strategy to really build communities and town centres across the borough?

Synthia: Well, it's really interesting, isn't it? I think, when boroughs are, you know as large as Barnet is. It's similar, I think, in South London you have the kind of issues around geography. So historically, you know, the travel routes in Barnet are very linear. So the Northern line takes residents and visitors to the borough in this very linear route from north to south across Barnet, and I think the connectivity between the east and the west, you know, has tended to be serviced by bus routes.

But we've got a green heart in Barnet, lots of green spaces in the centre of the borough. So I think there are kind of logistical challenges around the connectivity between the town centres to the east and the west and I think there's a really interesting opportunity. You know. It certainly came through in the engagement that we did with residents about how they currently consume culture, what they value, whether they've been to exhibitions or what their appetite is for culture and heritage.

It's just quite interesting how the geographical layout of the borough tends to perhaps work against communities coming together. And I think one of the things

that came through in quite an interesting way through that engagement was about how we make stronger connections across the east to the west, symbolically, physically, you know, in a lot of our borough of culture the kind of program that we'd got together for that bid really spoke to that idea of connectivity. But in our conversations with our culture strategy steering group there was some really interesting conversations about the potential for culture to connect people, place and, I suppose, the planet. You know that really aligns with the Barnett's corporate plan as well. There's lots of synergies, isn't there, around culture, how culture could, can be mobilized in these different areas.

Sophie: That's great and thinking about, you know, what the appetite for culture is and how it's kind of connecting people across Barnet. Coming to you Becky, now you sit on the other side of the table. You're an artist, you're a researcher, you're a Barnet local. What does it mean for you to see your local authority really prioritising arts and culture now?

Becky: A lot of what brings us joy is culture, so it's such a coincidence that Synthia used that word as well and culture means so many things. It's not just going to a theatre show or an art gallery. It's food from a different food hall or street stand, it's the music we enjoy listening to, which might be out in public or in our earphones, or it might even be a creative walking path that has enriched a visit to a local park which you might not have even considered as culture. However, it probably needs no explanation here, but investment in culture is really diminishing across the board. Production budgets are shrinking, fees for creatives often really low, if existent at all.

Public provision is tighter or deprioritised. Arts degrees are being actively discouraged. So to see this investment is both kind of really reassuring and impressive, especially as stepping into this world is a longer term commitment it's a long game. So seeing that commitment from Barnet is really exciting. And also I've seen from other councils across the UK there are arguments that in tight times there are other things to prioritise spending on. But actually, when everything else is a struggle, these cultural moments can be really important for maintaining morale, ensuring community cohesion and creating moments of joy and collective memory. It's about prioritising, fostering a culture of flourishing, not just surviving together.

Sophie: That really, I think, connects to what Synthia was saying before about you know culture as a connector, you know the kind of geographical challenges that

we sometimes face and really thinking about. You know this idea of access, that everyone should access culture on their doorstep. You know you don't have to travel into central London to go to the theatre, it's on your doorstep. You know you don't have to travel into central London to go to the theatre it's on your doorstep, it's in Barnet. And Becky I'd like you to kind of just expand a bit more on you know why is it so important to platform specifically local creativity within the borough? Why do we prioritise, I guess, grassroots local artists, creatives, architects, designers who are from Barnet?

Becky: Yeah, absolutely so I guess the first thing is that it can be a wonderful way of introducing ourselves to each other.

Potentially, we don't have the neighbourhood culture that we did a few decades back, so especially in times and places where there's a lot of change I'm currently living in Colindale, which I understand has gone through lots of change, with people moving in and out of the neighbourhood, and introducing culture is creating a shared language for us to get to know each other and share a little bit of our own life way with each other.

It's also a way of opening up an invitation to unfamiliar or maybe sometimes challenging subject matters, be it climate change or elements of social justice, and culture and creativity can be a way of taking these really complex subjects or topics and making them inhabitable, sensible and shared, and ultimately, it's also a way for people of all kinds and all life ways to fill more nourished lives. We're really lucky in London. Actually, we do have access broadly to lots of free festivals and museums and culture activated on the street, but yeah, the idea of bringing that locally. So, as you said, we don't have to feel that we need to have a certain set of resources in order to experience that by travelling out of the borough. Actually, we can feel pride and excitement and engaged with what's on our doorstep.

Sophie: I guess part of that is obviously about building and strengthening those different kind of partnerships, collaborations connecting with people on the ground for different groups. And so, Synthia, I want to explore a bit more with you what's the value for you as a kind of fairly new team that's coming together within the council, what's the value of collaboration and creating these partnerships with other organizations and groups and people like Becky to really drive that kind of inclusive cultural production process.

Synthia: Well, it's a really good question, Sophie, and quite kind of pertinent, particularly given the times that we're living in. I was at a really interesting meeting with the GLA last week and it was a convening of all of the arts and culture leads across London and we were talking about how critical it was to start thinking about consortium working, new kinds of partnerships, strategically and how we can think about different parts of London that might be, you know, that might be quite aligned with, you know, the work, the culture work that they're doing.

But I think in a in a very immediate level in within the council, we've just been convened with our colleagues in sports, leisure and green spaces to think about a summer of sport, a summer of fun program that would bring together lots of the cultural activity that's happening across Barnet. So things like the London Festival of Architecture will be launching a project called Barnet Legends which celebrates some of the historical figures in Barnet that played a role in music, arts and culture, design all who've made an incredible impact in their community. So those historical figures will be recognised. So it's as much as sort of collaborating with colleagues in different services across the council to think about what residents' experience is of Barnet and also how we might kind of permeate different audience groups. So you know, residents that might be interested in sport may not be as exposed to cultural activities, and vice versa. And I think when we work together in this way we're able to really sort of, you know, introduce new activities and events to different resident groups.

There are some brilliant networks and partnership working groups in Barnet so we've got a really active cultural education partnership called Barnet and Culture for Youth. They've been going a number of years. They have a brilliant strategy which draws their work together. They've secured some excellent support from the Arts Council and they're doing some really innovative work around cultural education in schools. We align our work very closely with them.

The culture strategy priorities will definitely speak to how young people engage with culture and you know they are future city makers, they're future culture makers. So I think that working to really drive inclusion amongst young people is really important. We also have the Arts and Culture Network which was established by Barnet Together and the Arts Depot which has been going for about a year now, I think, and I'm sure Becky is part of that Arts and Culture Network, but that's a great way of convening the artists across Barnet as well as cultural organisations, to come together, to work together, to identify challenges, opportunities. I think it's never been more important to think collectively, and it's just brilliant to see that there are some really good networks in place in Barnet to be able to really think in quite a considered way about how inclusive cultural programming can be.

Sophie: And you've also kind of tapped into something there which is around, you know, people's exposure to culture, their access to culture. How do you, how do you make that inclusive? And I think what's been really interesting from, from my perspective and our team's perspective, is, since working with you, the real focus really at the start of kind of meeting one another, is the focus on bringing arts and culture out into the public realm, capturing the public's imagination and really thinking about you know, how do you break down those barriers even further and take things to people.

It would be good to really, you know, reflect on, I guess, some of the challenges that you might face when you're undertaking this kind of work, particularly in the public realm, where these things perhaps haven't been done, done previously in the borough, and really think about what, I guess, the impact you've seen on these kind of projects.

Synthia: Yeah, well, it's really interesting, isn't it? Because people might not feel, you know, enabled to step over the threshold of an entrance to a theatre or an art centre or a gallery, you know, and it might be the same for a library, for example. So these sort of traditional buildings or places where people might experience culture haven't always been very inclusive, have they we? We recognize and understand that, and I think there's something to be said for how and where people experience culture.

Barnet is a borough with lots of town centres and obviously lots of green spaces as well, so we've been thinking about the potential for people to experience culture more visibly in those places. In terms of our town centres, we've commissioned some public artworks, murals, performances, events, you know, that really help convene people but also help them to relate to their local high street in a different way. I mean, I think it allows us as well, when we work with different artists and community groups, schools and young people, to open up a bigger conversation about ideas around what art in public space. There are some very immediate logistical challenges around how people experience that. We need to work very carefully with teams across the council to ensure we have the relevant permissions in place.

I think what's interesting in a borough like Barnet because there hasn't been perhaps as much direct cultural programming in public space when something is commissioned it can signify a bigger change. At last year's London Festival of Architecture we were able to do that in a really interesting way in Edgware with the Edgy Collective. Great example of working with local creatives. But we were able to create a new place for convening for the residents of Edgware and I think

it was a really interesting way of piloting and testing out some ideas of how culture can be experienced in these very familiar places town centres, high streets that are really well used by local audiences. And so you know you can garner a lot of learning from doing that. We've had some really interesting conversations as part of the London Festival of Architecture about meanwhile projects or short-term projects that help ignite ideas, you know, allow you to sort of test out a new way of working thank you for.

Sophie: Thank you for sharing that and, Becky, I'm going to put you on the spot of it here. But, just picking up from what was Synthia was saying about you know, this real drive to create space for kind of local creatives as well as residents to kind of come together to create spaces of exchange, conversation. What's it like for you on both sides of kind of both sides of the coin, for you as an artist, what's it like, I guess, to see kind of more opportunities being ready, made available on your doorstep? But also as a resident as well, because obviously we saw each other at the Let's Meet on the Edge project last year and kind of had that wonderful moment of gathering, and so it'd be good to hear a bit more from your perspective.

Becky: My art involves ecology but also themes of social justice, so I'm actively invested in wanting to activate in my neighbourhood. I think traditionally, especially before the pandemic, a lot of artists would seek opportunities further afield, especially within the themes of ecology and nature. You would look for a residency somewhere in the peaks or somewhere in Scotland and actually the pandemic really brought the neighbourhood closer to home and that's a sentiment that is not only echoed by me but many other creative and creatives and artworkers um as well. They want to take the resources and knowledge and kind of creative energy they have and actually see it ripple out in the places that they inhabit, that they walk every day and the people that they are in their orbit. Especially in London, there's no shortage of peer-to-peer opportunities. I can put on something for an arts audience quite easily in terms of I know where the spaces are, I know how to reach those kind of people.

But again, because I'm working in themes of ecological and climate justice, actually the area that really needs activating is in my backyard. So, yeah, it's been really exciting to see that and I guess over the years, when we're looking at these really big issues, this idea of start local and grow out feels like such a trite cliché, um, it feels boring to listen to, but it really does make a difference, um, and actually what it does for your energy in terms of being able to connect up with others. In your backyard and the LFA was a wonderful example really kind of

shook everybody out of the corners and you know, I was meeting, uh, painters and musicians and choirs and other performance artists etc. And seeing us seeing what can happen when we all connect up. That is where that cliché really starts to come to life and you kind of really start to believe in its possibility and it also fuels your own energy. So, yeah, it's been wonderful and kind of critical, really navigating these really difficult times.

Sophie: And, yeah, we're hoping to continue that energy and I really like the way that you described that kind of creative focus on locality and really having that ripple out effect that you see yourself. And so you know we're looking forward again to this year's edition of LFA. It's an extra special edition as it's our 20th anniversary. We're obviously back working in Barnet for year two and you know we have obviously the destination program and also a very special project which will be delivered at Copthall Pavilion in Hendon. So, Synthia, I was wondering, can you kind of talk a bit more about, you know, why we're focusing in on this specific site and the opportunity that we have to reimagine this council asset for the benefit of the local Barnet community.

Synthia: There has been a pavilion there, I think, since the mid-1800s, so there's a real heritage and significance to that site in terms of sport and how it's being used as a place for residents in the borough to come together to play all sorts of different sport.

And I think what the built project enables us to do is to reimagine that space in a very contemporary way, so to respond to the theme of this year's festival, but to think about what a sporting pavilion can be and how its use can be reinvigorated.

We know, you know, that how can we reignite its purpose in those playing fields and how can we work with creatives to think about the facade of that pavilion, to make it a place for convening, where residents can enjoy it again, I mean, we've worked in a very interesting way with our parks and open spaces team, who are who have a number of park buildings across our open spaces, and I think we're beginning to think about, you know, how those spaces can be really made vibrant, how they can be places for new audiences and residents to come and make use of. And I think the brief was a really interesting one because it was looking at the exterior of the building but also how we might convene communities in engaging ways to you know, to think about that sporting heritage but also to think about the future of the building. And I think it will help us within the council to think about, you know, some of the other parks across the borough and how those park buildings are used going forward.

Sophie: Yes, it's an incredibly unique project, I think, not just for you as a council but also for us at LFA, and I think you touched on it before. Thinking about you know what, what the impact of these new projects can be and you know, rethinking what is for a possible future and I think for that project we're so excited to be joined by POoR Collective and GPAD. Just thinking more about you know how we've been working together with stakeholders from across the borough to really kind of collaborate and co-create on not just these built projects but also programmes of activity which stretch across the borough and really reflect the creativity and the heritage of the different neighbourhoods across Barnet. What are you most excited to see in this year's programme?

Synthia: Well, obviously, you know we have a brilliant art centre called Arts Depot and they are putting on a really interesting talk called I Never Imagined that Would Happen Retrofitting and Repurposing Cultural Spaces, and I think that's a really, you know, going to be a really interesting conversation where we'll look at, you know how, buildings and organisations like Arts Depot you know they are also celebrating their 20th anniversary this year but how we can consider those spaces, particularly as the needs of audiences and communities shift. You know, going forward as we look, you know the spaces of the future, what they look like. So this panel talk will really bring together some industry experts, I think, to learn from other organisations how retrofitting and repurposing buildings can be considered, and organisations like Arts Depot that are starting to think about, you know, their future programming but also how their audiences might experience their venue. So that's a top pick for me. That one, yeah, that's great.

Sophie: And it's been wonderful to work with Monique and the rest of the Arts Depot team and really see, you know, like it is a quite incredible cultural asset for the borough. Quite incredible cultural asset for the borough that's not only, you know, there for kind of barnet locals but also is open to anyone in London to go and visit. It's quite incredible space with really fantastic programming, um, and so it's great to have them part of this year's festival and see that really those conversations really come alive on stage and also see those conversations, kind of pan-London conversations, happen, as you said. And so, Becky, similarly you've been, like Synthia, very much embedded in the work that we've been doing together and you've really become a champion for the festival and from being an event organiser in year one to now becoming one of our LFA mentors and really sharing your pearls of wisdom with different event organisers from across

London. Could you reflect a bit on your experience and, you know, what are you also most looking forward to seeing in this year's festival programme?

Becky: Yeah, absolutely so, I think what the LFA does really uniquely is kind of create spaces for possibility and of course this is manifesting like really wholeheartedly with this year's theme and I was really surprised when I became more closely affiliated with the LFA how much scope there is for experimentation, sharing process and how this is expressed in kind of really surprising and juicy ways people activating spaces with performances, university research being unpacked, kind of statement making and almost like the word architecture doesn't quite do it justice or it could throw people off. And of course, like as we mentioned before in Barnet, huge borough, great excuse to meet the neighbours but also meet people from out of town. And I think sometimes when you're thinking about activating within the neighbourhood, you feel like, oh, everything must be about kind of community public art. But actually sometimes we underestimate our local audience. It doesn't just have to be around something about happening in their local park. They can take on kind of really complex subject matters and they can take on things beyond what's just um, what we think they need to hear. Um and the LFA obviously.

I think we had 70 events in Barnet or something. It was kind of really diverse um, and yeah, it was wonderful to introduce people that wouldn't normally get on this end of the northern line. I had people come in the pouring rain all the way to Edgware from Bexley, someone from Hertfordshire to come to this walk, which was incredible and just shows the appetite and the willing for people to kind of learn about somewhere new.

And in terms of this year's programme, I was really lucky in that I had to had some preview conversations as part of the mentoring I offered and I was really blown away by people's commitment to catalysing conversation with their audiences. So I've been doing various work in the design industries for kind of around 16 years and there's a real shift from kind of this passive exhibition making like here's something I've made, come and take a look at it to here's something we're reckoning with, kind of what do you think? Here's a bit of process that we're working on and also creating spaces to co-create with audiences. So I'm really interested in not only the things that are um presented but the conversations that we see um in the uh, in the events that we attend and the conversation online um, and kind of those residues that will have a long-term effect way after the 30th of June when everything closes.

Sophie: That's great to hear and, you know, I think for us as well from the LFA perspective, the kind of the beauty of the festival in many ways is that it is that kind of expansive testing ground. You know it's yes, we're looking for kind of solutions or ideas, but we're also looking for the work in progress. We're looking for the opening conversation, progress. We're opening for, looking for the opening conversation and really thinking about how, you know, we can build on that year after year. So one festival doesn't just conclude but they kind of flow from one into the other. So the conversations that you were having, Becky, last year up in Colindale on our walks, they can then be continued by different people into this year as well I just like I really like that just to give Barnet some props as well.

Becky: What Synthia and the team are doing, which I haven't seen potentially in other places, is kind of there's a real openness to experimentation like and testing things out. I think every time I speak to Synthia, oh, this is happening, it's like actually having that courage and confidence to say we're going to pilot this and kind of pilot multiple streams of activity Also feels like a really great kind of conceptual spiritual fit with what's happening at LFA as well.

Sophie: So respect to Barnet Council again, Synthia yeah, I love that and Cynthia for you, what have you what? I guess, what impact have you seen so far, from not just the programs that we've obviously collaborated on, but other programs, activity that you've been doing, and I guess, what's the next aspiration for the future of arts and culture within Barnet?

Synthia: Yeah, I think, I mean in terms of the impact, one of the things that's coming kind of quite clearly in my mind, you know, participating in the festival for the second year, one of the things that we've done is establish a micro grants program so that event organizers in Barnet can feel enabled to deliver activity in their local town centre, green space, anywhere they choose. In actual fact, and it's, you know, giving that agency, so that the events can be truly community led. You know, when we launched the scheme last year, I was wondering, you know, what interest will there be? Will we get creatives applying? And of course you know they did in their many, and likewise for this year, we've been able to welcome some new community organisations that are staging some really interesting walks, talks, events all across the borough, and I think it's brilliant to be able to support and encourage that kind of creativity.

In terms of the future focus, we're really excited to be launching our five-year culture strategy later in the year in September, which will lay out a set of strategic

priorities for culture in Barnet over the next five years, and I think it's going to be a really exciting moment for us to be able to share. You know how that strategy was co-produced. It was one of the first strategies in the council to be developed in that way. It's very much being shaped by the thinking of the cultural strategy steering group. There was lots of engagement that we did as part of our Barnet Canvas the residence survey. So we really hope that that strategy will lay out our thinking and how we'll work together with partners across the borough as well as across London to really deliver, to really make a difference in terms of how people experience culture in Barnet and how they can see it prioritised and visible in their respective towns and communities.

Sophie: It'll be such a significant moment being able to kind of publicly share something very tangible. That is kind of a collective focus, not just for you as the council, but then also the creatives and then all of those kind of wonderful groups that we've had the privilege to collaborate with over the last two years of the addition of LFA and Barnet, and what we've seen is a great appetite locally. There's a lot of people in Barnet who care very deeply about their neighbourhoods, their town centres, their neighbours, the communities around them, neighbourhoods, their town centres, then their neighbours, that the communities around them, and you know that kind of really taking on the baton of active citizens within the borough and contributing to, yes, the future of the borough, but also the culture and how people are brought together, which is great to see.

I mean this has been a fantastic conversation and feel very lucky to be able to sit down with you both today. Perhaps, Becky, you could, you could maybe finish us off with kind of maybe, what's, what's your aspiration for, the kind of next evolution of Barnet's cultural movement, as it were.

Becky: Yeah, well, that's exciting, isn't it? That's a nice way to end. I guess the first thing I mentioned at the beginning is that kind of this cultural it. That's a nice way to end. I guess the first thing, like I mentioned at the beginning, is that kind of this cultural project will be a longer term project and I guess over time it'll be great to see infrastructure gradually build to resource creative so folk stay here I don't take their, their creativity outside, which is classically what happens.

Obviously, East London has a lot of provision. South London tends to be where the critical mass of artists and creators are. So seeing some of that infrastructure in our own borough would be really wonderful, whether that's kind of studios, project spaces, exhibition spaces, and there's, as part of that, there's also scope to kind of make the broader northwest of London become a bit of a

destination. So there's really interesting things happening in Brent and kind of Park Royal in Acton. So seeing this is not just a siloed project that we need to take on ourselves, but actually between us, how can we kind of galvanize people to come? Come to this end of the um, of the tube lines, as it were, um, in terms of how we take culture into those spaces. That's really exciting and previously kind of what's the point of any of it if we aren't addressing kind of social and climate justice at the same time? And there are kind of uneven and profound effects that we'll have on various different communities.

Sophie: So hopefully the right seeds are in place to kind of start kind of sprouting and fruiting some of these things and kind of really maximizing, um, yeah, this really incredible part of town that we call home great well, I think we can all agree there's lots to look forward to in Barnet, not just this summer for LFA, when it returns in the month of June, um, but beyond as well, as the cultural strategy is launched and then, I'm sure, many more programs of activity for people to look forward to. So thank you both for joining us.

So if you're interested in finding out more about what's going on in Barnet this June, please head to lfa.london/barnet. Do go and see Copthall Pavilion it will be up beyond the month of June and then also, if you're wanting to hear more about our destinations, programmes or the work in Barnet, do reach out to us.

Eliza: You've been listening to Building Sounds, the podcast brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture. We'll be back next month with a new conversation. In the meantime, head to lfa.london to find out all the exciting news and updates from the festival. If you've enjoyed this conversation, you can follow Building Sounds on Spotify, apple Podcasts or wherever you find your favourite conversations. Until next time.