

“Reimagining London: Building equity and empowerment with Jess Neil” 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.

We are back for another series of the podcast, and this time we’re gearing up for all things ‘Reimagine’. 2024 marks 20 years since the inaugural London Festival of Architecture. So we are really excited to spend the next few months celebrating how the festival has helped transform the way London thinks about architecture and public space, and celebrate the people and projects who’ve been a major part of this. As well as looking back, we are really excited to explore how the 2024 programme can be a real moment to reset and reimagine.

For those of you who are new to the festival, the London Festival of Architecture – or LFA for short – is a month-long celebration of architecture and city-making takes place every June across London and seeks to bring together anyone interested in shaping a more equitable and sustainable city. We’re really lucky to work with some brilliant people in order to do this, one of which is our wonderful Curation Panel, which works closely with the LFA team to shape the events, exhibitions, and public realm interventions that make up the Festival.

I am joined by one of our 2024 Curation Panel members, Jess Neil, who is Chief Exec for the Stephen Lawrence Day Foundation. Welcome Jess. To kick off, could you introduce yourself and the wonderful work you do at the foundation?

Jess: I’m Jess Neil. I’m the Chief Exec of the Stephen Lawrence Day Foundation. I work alongside my extraordinary team to inspire a more equitable society for young people from marginalised backgrounds.

We work across careers, communities, and classrooms, and the purpose of our work in all of those spaces is to inspire young people to dream really freely, be very ambitious for themselves, but also remove as many of the practical barriers as possible to them attaining those dreams.

Eliza: Amazing. And we are going to get cracking it on all things LFA2024 and the theme in just a moment. But before we do, I’ve got a couple of quick-fire questions for you. So, I just want you to say the first thing that comes to your mind.

Jess: Okay. [Laughter]

Eliza: So, the first one is, what is one word that comes to your mind when you think of London’s built environment?

Jess: Vibrancy.

I was born in London, grew up in London, and lived there as an adult for about 10 years before I moved down to the coast. And when I think of London, I just think of this rich tapestry of different people that come together, food, culture, spaces. There's something so vibrant and joyous about London as a city.

Eliza: I love that. And actually that leads very nicely into the second question. Do you have a favourite place or building in London?

Jess: This is a really strange one. I lived for about 10 years on Fulham Palace Road in South West London. And I love that particular place and space because it's beautiful, all this gorgeous Victorian architecture, but also it's full of history because the flat that we lived in, my grandparents lived in the fifties and sixties when they came over from Jamaica when Fulham and Notting Hill were completely different from what they are now. And there's something I love about the evolution of that area over time and what it represents to our family, but also to British society as a whole and specifically opposite where we lived, there's a cemetery in Fulham, which is now full, so it's been kind of dormant for a while and it's full of wildlife, full of people's stories of loss and love and it's this beautiful tranquil place. But also, there's a really incredible building in there that I assume was like a carekeeper's lodge that's been repurposed into this extraordinary contemporary home. And so, it's this amazing fusion of architecture and nature and it's a space that has so much significance. My grandma would've pushed my mum around in a buggy in that cemetery to get her to sleep and Anton, my husband, and I would've walked in that space. And yeah, it has real kind of magical significance to me.

Eliza: I love that and I love that peoples' memories and experiences really shape the city and what that can mean. It looks so different depending on who you are talking to. I absolutely love that, and I think that leads on really nicely to all things 2024 and the theme.

So, for anyone who needs a reminder, the theme for 2024 is 'Reimagine'. It's a chance to reimagine the spaces and buildings in our city, it's a time to think about the systems and the ways of working, whether that be in the industry or with communities across the city as well as a chance to rethink solutions, some of the biggest challenges we're still facing across the world. This is obviously not a small task and I'm going to ask you *not* a small question, Jess, what does 'reimagine' mean to you?

Jess: I think 'reimagine' is such a kind of powerful idea for me. Much of the work that I do and have done, but also kind of who I am as a person is about the role that imagination can play in making the world better. Ever since I was a child, I've always been that kind of troublemaker that has a lot of questions and wants to kind of challenge the status quo, not so helpful in a child, but very useful as an adult

working in the social justice space. And I think it's really easy to misinterpret imagination as something that's whimsical and intangible and something that only children should possess. But actually I see imagination as foundational to getting us closer to equity, foundational to social justice.

For me it's about looking at the status quo, looking at our understanding of things and then shifting our perspective slightly and thinking about things from a different angle, challenging ourselves to dream and be a bit bolder and a bit more ambitious for the good that can come, whether that's from structures in society or places and spaces and think more broadly than we currently do. And of course in the work that we do, thinking more broadly isn't about an individual perspective, it's about how we can create structures of power and communication that allow lots of different perspectives to come together and look at the same thing from lots of different angles.

Eliza: I think that is really important and something that we all know is important to do but actually doesn't happen as much as it should do. But I'm just thinking, so going back a few weeks when we gathered as a panel to select the theme as a team to think about what 2024 was going to look like, what was it that you were particularly keen to have in the programme for next year's Festival?

Jess: That's a great question. I think maybe taking a step back a little bit about how I felt stepping into that space. So I am the Chief Exec of a charity. I've only been in the charity sector for a few years and through the course of my career I've worked in all sorts of different leadership roles across the private and third sector. And all of us, I often step into new spaces and have that sense of kind of imposter syndrome like what am I doing here, what do I have to contribute, what do I want to contribute to this space? And particularly in this chapter of my career and my role at the foundation, I try to really lean into that. And I love the fact that stepping into spaces that aren't necessarily within my zone of genius, I'm not an architect. I don't have loads of professional experience in the built environment.

So what I, in answer to your question, what I hoped to bring to that space was a different perspective. I sometimes think when we are talking about ideas like reimagining our built environment, if we can't explain it to somebody who doesn't know all the technical terminology and doesn't have a whole career's worth of professional experience, then possibly we don't understand what we are trying to do as well as we think we do. And so I was really looking forward to being in that space so that rather than communicating something I could be asking questions. That's also something that I, working at the foundation with Baroness Lawrence as the Chair of our board, having a black female leader of a charitable organisation, she really sets the tone for working in that way. Baroness Lawrence has got an extraordinary legacy of her own in architecture and the built environment and she steps into that role on judging panels for the Stephen Lawrence prize, for example, as somebody from outside of the sector. And I think her contributions in that space and in those conversations are absolutely invaluable.

Eliza: I couldn't agree more, and I think it's one of the really beautiful things about the festival. Obviously there's a lot of architects involved, it's an architecture festival and it's really important that we create a space to hold architects in the industry accountable and move forward, whether it's around sustainability, accessibility, but also we're inviting anyone who wants to be in that conversation to be a part of it. The theme, it's just one word in some ways, but also impacts and shape the whole of our programme and the whole of our focus for the upcoming year. So I think it's really important to have that right at the start.

Was there anything in that conversation that was unfamiliar or surprised you that you hadn't maybe thought about before or were keen to explore further?

Jess: I think there were so many things that I was keen to expand and to discuss with other members of the panel and you guys as a team. One of the things that really stuck out for me was this idea of co-creation and how we actually build the mechanisms of allowing people to be involved in the processes of creating a new place or space or building right from the very inception of an idea all the way through and how we can facilitate conversations in a way that feels inclusive. I was reflecting on the fact that, I guess reflection is a key part of the idea of reimagining and I was thinking about how do we look back at our histories and thinking about how you can step into a heritage building and embedded in the way that that building is constructed as ideas of power and dominance and who was included and who was excluded from those spaces.

And I was really reflecting on how do we look back on what has happened through time historically, what the sector has looked like, and really have those difficult conversations in recognition of the fact that if we want to move forward differently, we have to know where we are coming from, reflect on where we've been, but really translate that into tangible action. What are we going to do differently today and what do we aspire to do differently? Which is very much where 'reimagine' comes into it, what do we aspire to do differently in the future in order that we can address some of the challenges that we are currently facing?

Eliza: You've just got me thinking, is there a particular place, building in London or a way of working and being in the industry or slightly wider that if you could just change automatically you would reimagine or would change?

Jess: There's not a specific space that comes to mind, but one of the things that I've often reflected on, particularly in London actually, is how spaces are designed and what it communicates about who is and isn't welcome to use them. There are features of architecture in the environment and the way that we design benches. Have we specifically designed a bench so that somebody who might need somewhere to sleep cannot sleep on them? Is that the same for spaces outside of really premium apartment buildings, for example? And what does that communicate about our values as a society? I think we could very easily look back on a historical building that might have, well, I say very easily we could collectively look back on a historical building that has kind of references to colonialism and

slavery and say we've moved on as a society from that. But I think that we could also look at some of our more contemporary architecture and say, does this really reflect our collective values?

And if it does, potentially we need to revisit that if we want to have, and spaces that are more inclusive of people whose lived experience is really different from our own. And so I think that is probably what I would change if I could. I think I would look at spaces and say, how do we place those who are most marginalised in society at the very centre of the development of these spaces? So that, I dunno if it's a ridiculous thing to say, but that buildings and spaces are designed with kind of love and a recognition of our collective humanity at the very centre. And I think if we we're doing that, we would have a much easier job of addressing some of the issues we have around lack of diversity in early careers pathways, et cetera. I think if we really aligned our actions with our values around some of these things, I think our spaces would be more welcoming for everybody.

Eliza: You've hit on a really interesting point and I think there's a sort of tangible building level, but there's also this sort of systems that allow for that to happen. And just in thinking about the diversity that's needed in the industry to therefore create a diversity of spaces and what that looks like and how we can make sure that we're creating more spaces for different individuals and organisations to exist and what support needs to be rethought, how that can be made possible in order to then affect each of these different levels.

Jess: I completely agree. I think the thing about these issues is that they're all completely intersectional and I think that that's what the solutions also need to be. We can't have addressing lack of representation in early careers pathways or how we shape our buildings, et cetera. We can't treat those things in isolation. They all completely intersect. And I think what we sometimes frame the work of for want of a better term, D&I in the sector, we sometimes frame it as doing it because it's the right thing to do. And actually I think this brings us right back to this idea of 'reimagine'. It's not just about doing the right thing, although it absolutely is the right thing to do. It's about the fact that we cannot possibly reimagine effectively if we are not coming together and looking at all of these issues from through an intersectional lens and from as many different perspectives as possible. Diversity and including the voices that are not currently represented is how we get outputs and answers that we are not currently finding.

Eliza: A hundred percent. And with that in mind, we'll be opening our call for events in January time. Is there anything that you are particularly looking forward that will come through as part of that? Any individuals or organisations who either have been part of the festival before or would previously thought maybe an architecture festival is not a space that they can see themselves a part of but actually are crucial to exactly these conversations that we're talking about?

Jess: I think it would be absolutely fantastic to see people, I suppose I probably have a real privilege in the position the Foundation of meeting lots of extraordinary organisations who have aspirations to drive change in the sector. And we are thinking really hard about how we can leverage our platform at the foundation to bring lots of those different strands of the exceptional best practice that's already happening together and amplify that work and those voices. So for sure I'm hoping to see some of our partners getting involved in the festival. But also from a personal perspective, I would love to see individuals really engaging with the festival and thinking about how they can contribute, how they can enjoy, how they can be part of and individuals from right across society. As an organization, we focus on young people from marginalised communities and our aspiration is to deliver services and reach young people from all marginalised communities. But at the core of who we are, we always centre young black people in our work because it's who Steven was.

We can't forget to mention in this conversation that Stephen had aspirations to become an architect. He was really creative, he was gifted at maths and he had so much potential ahead of him. And I think I imagine that his aspirations to become an architect were about reinvesting in his community. And so I would love to see young people like Stephen who have aspirations to get involved in the built environment in a way that will help to shape it for the future. I would love to see those young people kind of getting involved.

I don't want Stephen's legacy to just be something that is wheeled out on an annual basis as a means of saying we are doing something for the community. I really want Stephen's involvement or kind of representation in the sector to be a provocation to people to say we can't undo the harm that was done. There's no amount of awards or things that kind of undo that. The work is about what you're doing for other young people like Stephen. And so I hope that people respond to that and think about that as part of their involvement in the festival.

Eliza: I absolutely love that and particularly the idea of reinvestment 2024 will mark 20 years of the Festival. And hopefully we'll be around in 20 years, but it's particularly those young people that will be at the heart of thinking about what the future of the city is. I really hope in a lot of ways we're not where we are in 20 years right where we are today. So there are some amazing organisations and there are some amazing individuals and projects that do exist and we really want to celebrate those both in the Festival and more widely. But also there are a lot of areas that we still need to challenge. I think it's brilliant organisations like yourselves who are really working in that space and I think it's amazing that organisations like yourselves exist. And I don't know if you want to say anything further about your work that you'll be doing, I know it's had a bit of an anniversary gear recently as well, and if there's been anything on your mind as you've been going through that experience and in light of the conversation that we've been having today.

Jess: Yeah, absolutely. So April this year marked 30 years since Stephen's passing. And I think for you with the 20th anniversary and for us with the 30th anniversary of

Stephen's death, we are talking about the amount of time in which we are handing over responsibility for these conversations from one generation to the next. And we were reflecting a lot as a team about what that actually means practically. And I think there's a danger that when we talk about something that happened 30 years ago, like Stephen's murder, it implies that we are talking about something that's historical in the past couldn't happen again today. And I think the power of looking back and reflecting and retelling these stories is that we know that if we are not retelling them, there's every possibility that we will be reliving them. And actually in many ways we have relived many stories like Stephen's over the last 30 years.

And so I suppose that's why for me 'Reimagine' was the core of what we came to as a group when we came together to talk about the theme. Because whilst reflection is incredibly important and we can't ground our thinking about the future or our imagining about the future if we are not truly examining where we've been, but ultimately what is the purpose of examining where we've been? If we aren't going to use that to come up with tangible action for today, that will impact the future. And so that was very much on our minds at the 30th anniversary. And I think the other thing for us is just on a really practical level, there will be people who are stepping into the early stage of their careers in the built environment, but also beyond who were not born when Stephen was murdered. And therefore if we are not doing the work now to retell his story to the next generation, there's every possibility that we lose the power of that story and that kind of visceral reaction invokes in those of us who are old enough to remember his death and Baroness Lawrence's subsequent fight for justice.

So I suppose the reason all of that is relevant to this conversation is that we really need to use the stories of the past to inform the future. So for Stephen Lawrence Day next year, looking ahead to 2024, which is what we're obviously also doing with the festival, our theme is the power of learning. And that is very much a reflection of what we've just said. It's about how do we look back, reflect on our collective history, tell those stories that haven't been amplified in the way that they should look at the stories we know from a different perspective, but then how do we bring that into the present day? And we are hoping to launch a whole series of holistic interventions for young people that sit around the formal education structure and support them with the practical skills that they need to get us closer to a more equitable society.

So that might be everything from financial literacy through to conflict resolution, through to wellbeing and breathwork. And so we are really thinking about what a programme would look like that encourages young people and empowers them with all of the tools that they need in the, that they will be the ones that kind of carry us forward to a more equitable society. And when I have the opportunity to speak to young people, the thing that I'm always hoping to communicate to them about our work and why we do it is the fact that their voices are not currently represented in these spaces, leaves those spaces infinitely poorer. Empowerment is something I think we overuse the phrase and I think when we talk about empowering young people, we actually want to transfer power over from one generation to the next so

that these young people who've got the lived experience and the imagination and the ideas that are required to do things differently are actually empowered to deliver on that change. And I think that's very much what the Festival represents and hopes to achieve next year.

Eliza: I couldn't agree more. And I think there's something around that idea of empowerment and it's crucial to what I think we both do as organisations, something that there's an incredible amount of value in, and I think sometimes it's just the creation of spaces to allow that to happen. So I think there's quite a lot of conversations that we had about the past, but if we just have those conversations and don't move it forward and think about that both in terms of conversation data, but also quite practical tangible ways, as you have just mentioned just now, we aren't going to move forward as quickly as meaningfully as we should be. So I think that is absolutely brilliant and I'm really excited also for what that is going to look like for yourselves and the foundation as well.

I think we might be coming to the end of the conversation, but is there one final idea or challenge that you wanted to put forward to anyone who's listening to this conversation about the theme, about any of the things that we've been talking about?

Jess: I think my challenge to anybody listening would be, I often say that the hardest thing about my job is that however well we do as a team, however much we succeed in our ambitions, we can never really know what Stephen would have done in his own name had he been afforded the opportunity. So however much we feel we've kind of upheld his legacy, we have no idea what his legacy would have been had he kind of fulfilled his aspirations and become an architect. And so our why for doing the work can't be to undo the harm that was done to Stephen or to Baroness Lawrence and the wider family. And so it has to be about other young people like Stephen who are here today in 2023 and into 2024 when the festival happens. So I guess my challenge to people listening would be what tangible action can you take within your own sphere of influence to get us closer to equity for young people from marginalised communities?

How can you mobilise with the resources and the privilege and the access that you have to create space for young people are not currently represented in the spaces that you have access to? And that can be everything from making a donation to an organisation that you know is doing great work that can be about engaging in the festival, that can be about having conversations in your working environment about how inclusive your recruitment practices are. There's a whole plethora of things that people can do. But yeah, that would definitely be my kind of provocation is think about a tangible step that you can commit to taking in the spaces where you have influence to make things a little bit easier.

Eliza: I absolutely love that and I really hope people are listening to that because I think that is so crucial. And when it comes to your work with the foundation as well, where can people find out about that? What are the best websites, social medias, anything like that?

Jess: Thank you. Yeah, people can find us at stephenlawrenceday.org where you can subscribe to our newsletter, make a donation, find out about some of the programmes, scholarships, bursaries, apprenticeship opportunities that we've got at the moment, and you can follow us across all the major social platforms at SL Day FDN.

Eliza: I think that's all the time we have. But a massive thanks Jess, for exploring what 'Reimagine' means to you and for our city more widely. Listeners, we'd love to hear your thoughts on the 2024 theme too. If you have any ideas, inspirations questions, please send us an email to info@londonfestivalofarchitecture.org. We'll pop that in the show notes and we'll choose one lucky thought or question in our next episode.

We'll be back next month teasing out the theme of Reimagine with another of our collaborators. Until then, if you like this conversation, you can follow Building Sounds on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or whatever you find your favourite podcasts. Listened to all the conversations? Why not check out the LFA Instagram, TikTok or Twitter or head to our website keep up to date with all the latest news updates and ways to get involved in next year's festival. Until next time.