

## “LFA2020 Sitting Pretty” Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

**Eliza:** Hello and welcome back to Building Sound, one of the two podcasts brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture. In this episode we'll be talking with the designers of the Sitting Pretty benches, part of a design competition in collaboration with Network Rail, discovering the stories behind each of their designs.

We start south of the River and London Bridge station and travel west towards Victoria station. The conversations can be listened to from the comfort of your own home, however for the best experience we recommend seeing the benches on site as part of a self guided walking tour. As you walk between the benches and station, you'll be able to pause the episode and restart in the next location.

When you're ready, our first designer Armor Gutierrez Rivas will reveal the inspiration behind his bench, reclaim, reinvent, repurpose.

**Amor:** My name is Armor Gutierrez Rivas. I'm an architect based in London, and I'm also, when time allows, I'm a dedicated and passionate maker, so I have been always trying to look into opportunities to create small installations and small pieces of furniture around the city of London, and that's the reason why I decided to enter the competition of the Network Rail.

I thought it was a great opportunity to show how smaller installations can have a wider impact into the way people use infrastructure. The concept of the bench is trying to raise awareness of the importance of reusing and recycle materials on railway infrastructure. And at the same time, trying to express a through a bench, which at the same time becomes almost like a

footprint of, of the railway in located into the station, trying to express, uh, the power of the connections between the stations and the railway. The bench is a manufacturer out of a reused and reclaim a wooden sleepers. These wooden sleepers are made out of oak normally, and you find them in, still in some lines in the UK, but over the years they have been replaced by concrete.

And most of them have been used for burning, or just to create planters, or very basic kind of design wise. So the idea was trying to use that material which is available and which is linked to the history of the railway. And, uh, transform that material into something that can become a piece of furniture.

So we started by locating the, the sleepers, which was not easy because there is not that many of them and most of them are already damaged. And then the first step was to clean them, to polish them. And it was very interesting because

when you see a wooden sleeper at the beginning, the first thing that you see is the outer layer, which is black because it's coated with the product that they use to protect them.

But as soon as you start cutting through that wood it reveals the beautiful material that lies behind, which has a lot of history and a lot of quality in terms of, in terms of the wood that is made of. Once that was done, we made a collaboration with a London based firm called Shadbolt, which is dedicated to working with wood and trying to always look into how, how can wood be reinterpreted in different ways.

We did everything in, in our workshop, uh, trying to bend the wood and calculating how much time does it need to be into the steam to bend into the appropriate way. We realized very early that, uh, the process was almost as important as the, as the end result because it was this process of through craftsmanship mixed with the, with digital techniques and reusing materials that were already there, trying to create something that was a bit more unique.

Normally in architecture everything takes like months or years to be realized and you need to go through a very long process here. You take all the decisions, you make it with your hands, and it's like a short exercise that allows you to, to create and to, and to bring inspiration in a totally different way.

What I try to communicate with the, with the project and with the design and what I would like people that they are walking on the station and see the bench is not only to see the bench as a functional element that you use just for sitting, but also to see the intervention as something that is telling a, telling a history and that is able to communicate something else beyond the design.

And even if when you see it is not like a straightforward to understand what it is. I think that once you realize what is the material that is made of, and when you realize what is the inspiration that is behind the shape of the bench, or in this case, it's three benches that are creating a composition altogether.

Then, then you kind of see, uh, and, and, and get a bit more curious of how is it make, and it also. I want to raise awareness as well that people that see the bench and that's that understand how the bench was fabricated perhaps can get inspired and start using materials in a different way and start reclaiming materials that normally wouldn't necessarily be of any use and start to change a bit the mind that not everything needs to come from something new but it can also be reuse and recycle.

**Lisa:** My name is Lisa Chan. Local Collective is a small studio that I've set up to explore sustainable ways of design and living. Sitting on London's clay is my design. I entered the competition because I was very drawn to the design value behind it. To improve the openness and connectivity of London's civic space.

I wanted to be part of a celebration that sees the station as a social hub where different interactions happen and different users enjoy spending time in. Surprisingly, I was very clear about what I wanted to achieve with my bench right from the beginning. The first is sustainability, a green design that is sourced from local, reusable materials.

Secondly, I wanted a social furniture that enhances our well being in public spaces. These two thoughts led me naturally to explore using clay as my construction material. The natural topography lying beneath us that is decomposable, breathable, and improves indoor air quality. Another thought I wanted to convey through my choice of clay is repurpose.

Our current climate urges us to rethink little construction methods and materials. Before we search for new materials and new forms, maybe we should first look around and see what is locally available. What is waiting for repurpose? and how we can be creative about these low embodied carbon designs. And I think it was quite fitting, um, another thought about using clay was in the construction of Crosswell, which is quite an exciting new introduction of a Elizabeth line.

I think six million tons of clay was dug out for the construction. So I thought this was a very nice connection to, to, it's sort of like we're thinking about how we can reuse these excavated materials. The layout of the seating is a modular system. It is recombinant from four modules. This allows flexibility and adjustability to different locations and social needs.

Its circular plan creates a central social circle that is open and interactive, whilst its outer ring is for more private and quiet users. The curvature of the wall guides the flow of people. Above the wall, I am hoping that people will have fun with it and find that this is a likeable furniture accommodating to their different social activities.

If I may be a bit more greedy, I hope people can fall in love with the materiality of clay too. That this social furniture can provide a rare moment in the inner city for passengers to feel the tactility and rawness of Earth. I am curious to see how these seatings will be used by everyone this summer.

**Marcin:** I'm Marcin, I'm the president of the United Suburbs of America, and I've designed Convo Station. I was really inspired by the location. Recently there was this transition in train stations. There's a new type of visitor in train stations. There's no longer just the passenger. Right now, train stations, they're hosting kind of visitors, people that are going to the train station to use the facilities or the restaurants.

not just to travel. So you have these two groups of people and I was really interested in finding a way to get these two groups to join together and kind of

form a dialogue between the two types of groups. We want to take the idea of a seat and make it more of a platform for people to have a conversation.

So I hope when you sit down on this bench, you'll see that it's a bit awkward to sit next to a stranger, because when you sit next to them, they'll be in your peripherals. And so you'll be a bit more inclined to engage in a conversation. Or when you're sitting on this bench, you might feel someone joining in on the bench or joining in on the rocking, because maybe the tempo has changed.

And so a new type of dialogue through motion has sort of evolved. I think the United Suburbs really wants to be playful, a bit silly, and perhaps try and be witty in some way. I don't think we want to take ourselves too seriously, so we want this to be a toy in a train station. We really want to kind of stick out from what a train station is, there's this transport infrastructure, very serious thing, and we want to play as a sort of interlude in someone's commute.

I know that commutes could be very monotonous, and I know they could be very difficult sometimes. So I hope amongst, you know, the bleak, grey days of London, you might see something colourful and playful in the corner of your eye, and maybe be drawn to engaging with it. Because a bench is in motion. It's a rocking bench.

We had to look at materials that would accommodate that sort of movement or take on those sort of loads. So we did have to rely on ply and a lot of wood materials. That also led to the ability to kind of CNC these types of woods. But at times we wanted to paint over it so we could hide the material behind it.

We wanted the bench to look more like a toy than it was a piece of furniture. It was myself in the design, but I am working with Universal Spray. And we did find a way to hide the groove in the natural material of wood and give it a certain sheen that you find in plastic toys. I think there's a lot of room right now for architects and designers to communicate their ideas.

I'm really happy if designers are being a bit more adventurous in the way they kind of show their ideas. Usually an architectural drawing is more than the drawing itself. It usually refers to the thing that's behind the drawing, the thing that you're about to design. But I think if we look at an architectural drawing as its own final product, uh, there's some value in that.

You could identify something that you might not get in the bench. You might identify how you imagine a person engaging with it, or you might identify what value something has over, you know, you might be able to recall or refer to an idea that you have that you might not see in the final product. Uh, so I think architects or designers should really focus and care about the initial drawings.

I mean, there's a lot of room to communicate more ideas than just the final thing. How it's maybe fabricated or what it's meant to look like.

**Nick:** My name is Nick Tyrer. I'm the designer of the Lacuna Bench, and I designed the bench in collaboration with Victoria Philpott, who is an award winning garden designer. The key concept was about creating some personal space, trying to create some separation from the crowd. This is obviously a subject that's become a bit more pertinent recently, social distancing, although that isn't there.

Isn't the driver of the bench itself. When I use train stations, and I think 80 percent of people that use stations in London, I'm on my own. It's about commuting to work and I kind of much more wanted to have a comfortable experience for everybody else that was in my shoes. It sounds a little bit antisocial, but it was much more about creating a personal space that you can relax and kind of enjoy your wait in a busy station.

A bench. It's obviously for the user. It's for the person sat on it. And, you know, you've got to be comfortable. It's got to be ergonomic and going to give that person an experience. But we approached the design with the idea that it needs to add something to the station around it. 99 percent of people are going to walk past the bench.

And so we almost envisioned it as a stone in a river that had kind of been worn by the flow of everyone coming past it. The shape intentionally, makes it easy for people to walk around it. It's big enough that it doesn't surprise anyone. And then obviously with the planting that Victoria kind of incorporates into the design, it's trying to create a much bigger impact on the station and really add a different kind of experience to the station as a whole.

The idea for the materials was to really reinforce the idea of it being this kind of soft organic shape. The way that we did propose doing this is with plywood, which obviously doesn't naturally kind of create these geometries. So it's actually plywood that's been layered and then cut to be a smooth geometry.

The theme of the planting is kind of a woodland setting. The idea was to evoke the feelings of calm and tranquility. We kind of have two levels of planting. So, um, you have the canopy at high level filling up your kind of peripheral vision, hopefully making the space just feel a little bit more intimate.

The planting is also to your left and right to really kind of. Set you in the bench space. Victoria has chosen the planting to make sure it's suitable for specifically the Waterloo station. And the silver birches were chosen because they have the benefit that they improve the air quality, absorbing pollutants.

The bench definitely departs from, you know, traditional furniture and stations. It seats three people. In that respect, it's, you know, it's not an efficient bench. However, what we have tried to bring to this is the idea that there can be much more of a statement to the station as a whole, the planting, the trees, the smells, the colors, it should be an experience for people on the bench and everybody walking past it.

One of my personal interests is the idea of phenomenology, which is how humans experience the world around us. And one of the key aspects of that is designing for all of the senses. It's not simply about making something look good. It has to feel good. It has to stimulate, you know, your direct vision, your peripheral vision.

your smell, even your sense of touch isn't simply the touch of your fingers, it's a sense of weight, it's a sense of temperature, it's all these different senses that we need to think about. And I think these have all kind of come together in hopefully a bench that does attempt to meet the human body in all these different ways.

I suppose I hope that people have a more genuinely pleasurable time in the station. you know, waiting for a train, waiting to meet someone, you know, that they can briefly be transported. They can read their book and not feel like they're surrounded by thousands of people rushing past them. And, you know, even if this is the only greenery and trees that they walk past on their commute into work, it will, I think, have a positive benefit.

**Josh:** Hi, my name is Josh Hayward and I founded the design practice, Hyelmo.

**Luke:** Hi, my name is Luke Brennan Scott, and I collaborated with Josh on Beluga. We started with looking at what had previously won these London Festival of Architecture bench competitions, and there was a fun, playful, pop art side to them that we really wanted to explore.

As well as looking at how people interact with the world around them when in public spaces. Part of our initial process and our initial thoughts towards the bench were not just to do with the form and the sustainability of it, but how people interact with it and how people interact with each other within London stations.

The opposing seating with enough room for two people per bench. opposing seat was really designed and scaled in order to encourage multiple groups of people to use the bench at once.

**Josh:** We've tried to make a product that doesn't look hostile but actually through its design, um, it's meant to be comfortable but not so comfortable that it would encourage you to dwell on it for a particularly long time.

**Luke:** We're not so naive as to think that our bench will solve problems like people talking to strangers in stations and we don't believe that it will necessarily. Be able to make people have those interactions, but we wanted to create a space and facility that allows for that to happen.

**Josh:** The other key principle we wanted to work with was the sustainability angle.

Um, having looked at the way street furniture is produced and, um, implemented in train stations and in the public domain, they all involve quite intensive manufacturing processes, um, and have a very high embodied energy and a lot of waste material involved. Um, cause they, they particularly utilize, uh, steel components.

Um, and what we really wanted to do was work towards something that could be, um, not just an improvement in terms of the environmental factor, but actually be carbon neutral and completely sustainable and engaged with the circular economy of materials. So that's why we moved towards 3d printing, because it allows us to create an object.

With zero waste and, uh, working with the types of materials like PLA or recycled pet, there is uh, an opportunity to actually, um, at the end of the life cycle of the item of furniture, you can break it down into the raw materials and produce the next generation of furniture from the same material.

**Luke:** There's other benefits as well when it comes to sustainability in that the transport and storage of materials and your ability to respond to demand. are much greater and you can produce your products far more locally just by sending a digital file to your local 3D printing facilities. So we really do see it as the future, uh, in terms of more sustainable, more open source, more accessible design.

This method of printing, uh, has not been broadly used for public seating before and provides a lot of flexibility. It creates a bench that you can produce in any number of colors or arrangements. and can be adapted to any number of spaces, making it suitable not just for Victoria Station where we've chosen to implement it, but any number of other locations.

**Eliza:** To see images of the benches or to find out more information, head to [lfa.london/stations](http://lfa.london/stations)