

## “LFA2020: The Tooley Street Triangle” 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, Charles Holland of Charles Hollad Architect will be talking us through the design behind the newly unveiled Tooley Street Triangle and how it fits into the wider concept of wayfinding.

The Tooley Street Triangle is a wayfinding beacon designed by Charles Holland Architect outside the London Bridge Station. The latest in the LFA's ongoing series of public realm improvements across London. The piece is a symbol of celebration and welcome and London's streets come to life again with visitors, commuters and Londoners.

We started by asking Charles what the starting point was for the Tooley Street Triangle.

**Charles:** The initial idea was really something to do with maps and how we used to work with maps, you know, traditional ones, but Google Maps and things like that, and trying to make a sort of real life version of a map, almost as if like a bit of London A to Z or the little map on your phone had sort of sprung to life and become an actual three dimensional thing.

The design has two main components, and each of those components is a completely different sort of material. So, one component is the ground plane, the floor, which is a map, and it's like a scale map. So it's a map that you can walk on. So it's, it's sort of halfway between a map size, which is something you could hold in your hands and real signs.

So it's a little bit like the scale of a model village. So on the grounds of Tudor Street Triangle, uh, there's a map of the area that you're, you're in, and that's printed onto the grounds using paver marking. So we thought that was quite nice about using the material that's normally about very familiar forms of signage and direction, yellow lines and arrows on the floor.

All the parking signs and things and using that floor material, but to do something much more, uh, figurative and illustrative and, uh, enjoyable visually. So we created a map on the floor, which is literally a series of streets with the street names on, but it's also got North Sign and it has the conventions of how maps work.

So London Bridge is shown as a thick line that goes over the road that's below it. So it, it sort of talks about levels, but in a very reduced graphic way. And then on to the map is the second object, which is like the beacon. And that's a bit like a series of Ordnance Survey symbols that have been sort of combined and made into a real object.

So we're really familiar with those signs where you have symbols for a church, or symbols for a picnic area, um, or symbols for an ancient monument. And they're little kind of graphic notations, triangles and circles and crosses and, uh, things like that. So we made it, the beacon is a three dimensional object, which is essentially a little pyramid.

Which has a number of elements to it, and it's triangular in plan that fits some sort of miniature onto the map in Tooley Street triangle. So the site is a triangle itself, and the monolith is a pyramidal triangle. It has a bench running around it on each side. It has a bit of signage, which is more descriptive of the place.

So there were three sides. And each focuses on a particular road, which is adjacent to you. And it tells you something about that road. So it tells you where it is, but there's also a bit of historical information. Then it has a series of flags at the top, which are actually metal, but they look like flags that are fluttering in the wind, and they're just purely directional.

They give you three points one way, three points the other way, and three points another way. So there are different destinations that are flagged up by the object. And then the third element is it has this sort of sphere on the top, which is a mirror ball, and that reflects the map and the area around, so that's quite a sort of oblique way of locating yourself.

And when we did the original competition idea, we called it You Are Here, so it's a bit like it locates you in the space you're in, in every sense, and it tells you things about where you are. It shows you where you are in a quite unusual way as a reflection, and then it tells you some things that you can go and see.

The fabrication of it is quite collaborative and involves a number of different people. In a way, each of those people are sort of specialists in a particular bit of either signage or wayfinding techniques. So the ground map is done by pavement marking specialists, so it uses the usual materials that they use and the usual techniques, but in a slightly different way.

The beacon itself, the largest part of it, is a metal frame, but it's clad in vitreous enamel panels, and that has been made by, um, Links Signs, and they are one of a small number of people who make vitreous enamel, and vitreous enamel we chose because it's a material that is most of the London underground signs are made of.

You know, it's a long established material for signage in the public realm, particularly associated a lot with travel and transport and movement in various ways. And it's a really lovely material because essentially it's a fired material, like a, like ceramic. It is heated onto the surface of the metal.

So it has a, uh, has a bit of depth and it has a sort of glazed effect, almost like very, very tiny imperfections that you get with glazed surfaces, but kind of add to the material quality. And of course you can use any color and you can combine it with graphics. So it's a really lovely material and it has lots of connotations with traditional London street signage and underground signage.

Um, so we're working with, Uh, Links who are making that and they make a lot of signage and they do a lot of TFL stuff and things like that. And then we're working with a fabrication company called Raskl and we worked with them before and they made the sphere, which is like a sort of particular thing.

It's actually mirror polished stainless steel, but it makes a perfect mirrored surface. And then we have a contractor who's installing it all. We always tend to work with slightly different materials for each project. The project sort of developed. Around kind of central ideas and then we find, uh, to some extent we find a material that works with that.

But it's always nice to be led by the material, too. So things start to sort of develop because that's the material you've chosen to work with. And I think we're, we're, we are interested in a kind of relationship between a certain sort of graphic communicative language. I didn't realize that in material, you know, the vitreous enamel is lovely because you can be very direct with it.

It's highly graphic. You can get very precise patterns and lines and letters and things, but it has a very different character to say, powder coating something, which is a much flatter, more mechanical appearance. So there are nice correlations between other projects, particularly House for Essex, which had a ceramic clad tile exterior, tiles developed by Grayson Perry.

And again, on that project, we were really, interested in how you get that sort of crackly surface finish. In the development of that we looked at those kind of classic sort of Victorian pubs which are clad in quite often green glazed tiles on the outside and they're really lovely. If you get up close to them you can see all the tiny cracks in the glaze, which give them part of their sort of depth of the character of that material.

We hope that the impact of it on people is kind of multiple in a way. In one sense, it's meant to be very direct and helpful. So, you know, it, it tells you the direction to say, um, the GLA building or to borough market. Uh, and it's a very simple, practical bit of wayfinding, but it's also quite a playful object.

And it does that literal way finding in a number of different ways, some of which are less direct, um, like the sphere, which gives you a kind of slightly surreal fisheye lens view of you in the location you are. And it also provides a bench and a bit of seating. So there's a sort of small moment of kind of repose and quite a busy, hectic area.

And then the map on the floor, again, has a sort of gently surreal. quality. We were really interested in doing something which is signage and useful, but does something else as well, which is maybe a kind of more experiential thing. And it makes hopefully connections in people's minds between the way that they navigate, um, the city and the sort of enjoyable aspects of that.

And the funny sort of way that you use signs and symbols and figurative things and abstract things to sort of guide you. So you, we're really super familiar with that language. Nowadays, I suppose, looking at your phone, but also looking up, um, hopefully looking up occasionally, looking at direct signage, like arrows saying things, but also then noticing the shape of something on the horizon, which is, that's where we're going to, like the top of the shard is a thing that helps us navigate as much as a very direct sign saying the shard this way.

So, uh, I hope that it engages in all the, in the way that we navigate in quite a playful and gently surreal way, I think. This project is one of the first projects I've done, I think, which is directly about signage and wayfinding. But I think we've brought, I guess, a sort of architectural sensibility in some ways to that.

And it's not absolutely literal signage, and maybe that's something that is different to getting a graphic designer, perhaps, to do the same job, or a specialist to look at it. So it's interesting, there is legible London signage, which is in the same space to us and we see our thing as complementing that because it's not quite providing the same thing.

It's a little bit more spatial and it's a bit more experiential and it's, it has a slight element of sort of commentary on the way that we use signage and that might come from, you know, being an architect doing some signage. I think what's interesting about the city is the multiplicity of things and the layering.

So I think it's difficult to find any one thing that does all the things you want it to do. So with this we see it as like another layer of signage. But I, I'm always really interested in, in things that do more than one task. I always like things that are hybrid and I've always, you know, various public realm projects we've involved in and one others that we're involved in now looking at doing things that kind of speak to different audiences.

So, you know, a bench that's also a skateboard ramp. It's always a kind of interesting hybrid to me that it might, it might allow two different things to happen. And so a piece of signage that's also a kind of has a sort of sculptural

quality, I think it's really interesting. So yeah, I, I think there's a lot of scope for non professional and non traditional signage designers to make a real positive contribution to the city.

I also think that, you know, we're surrounded by a lot of signage, which probably you get really used to, but also don't. maybe question why it looks the way it does. It's interesting, I think, we probably make distinctions in our minds when we look at things between things we think are technically necessary and things that we think have been added for slightly more esoteric reasons.

So when we see a sign saying, you know, slow down or 30 miles an hour, we don't necessarily go, why does it look like that? Because we know that it's a piece of. Practical instruction, but everything comes from somewhere. Everything's designed in a certain way. So, perhaps one of the things that we can bring to issues like signage and wayfinding the city is to relate it to more traditional and historic.

ways architects and designers make objects in the public realm. So with the, with the beacon at Tooley Street, as well as looking like bits of map signage, it also looks a bit like a, a needle or a monument or other sort of more traditional bits of public art. And that hybridizations I think were important for me.

The brief was really a collaboration between the London Festival of Architecture. And then Team London Bridge, which is a kind of group or consortium of local businesses, an organisation that represents local businesses in the area and how to improve the public realm and qualities of the area. So they've been incredibly supportive.

It's been a really enjoyable project to work on with them.

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