**“Voices: A Conversation on LFA2025’s Theme with Rosa Rogina and Dhruv Gulabchande”** Podcast Transcript – LFA Building Sounds

**Rosa:** Hello and welcome to Building Sounds, the podcast exploring the stories, people and projects that shape London's built environment. I'm your host for this conversation, Rosa Rogina, director of the London Festival of Architecture, one of the key projects run by NLA, London's built environment community.

In this episode, we will be discussing the LFA's 2025 theme of voices. 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, taking place every June across London, seeking to bring together anyone interested in shaping a more equitable and sustainable city.

We are really lucky to work with some brilliant people in order to do this, one of which is our wonderful curation panel. Working closely with the LFA team to shape the events, exhibitions, and public round installations that make up the festival every year. Today, we are joined by one of our 2025 curation panel members, Dhruv Gulabchande.

Welcome, Dhruv. Um, to kick off the conversation, would you mind giving us a quick introduction to yourself and the selection of wonderful projects you have created in the last few years?

**Dhruv:** Absolutely. So, um, I'm a British Indian architect. I currently work as an associate director at HFM Architects. Um, I've spent over a decade there.

I think it's coming up to 11 and a half years now, and it spans retail, commercial, public realm, um, and lots of community engagement within there as well. Um, I also run a mentoring practice called Narrative Practice, um, that's a non-profit architectural mentoring and research platform. So the mentoring side of things, we founded in March 2020, and it was a direct response to what was going on over COVID.

And, um, since then it's grown into something quite big. Uh, and now we are collaborating with lots of large practices and institutions. And then the third thing that I do is, um, I'm teaching at university as well. So currently at Central Saint Martins, um, previously at. University of Sheffield and Brighton, typically teaching undergraduates.

But, um, but yeah, that's, that's my background.

**Rosa:** That's amazing. Lots of fascinating hats to balance in between. We are going to get into the theme conversation in a second, but I just wanted to ask a couple of wider questions to you as a starting point, if that's okay. One is around, um, a favourite place or building.

in London, and then I'll just say the second one. Maybe it kind of links up. And the second one was Around, let's say, a word or concept that you think everybody should kind of understand in the context of built environment and that maybe doesn't come through so clearly at the moment.

**Dhruv:** Yeah, one of my favourite, I think, spaces is in New Cross, very specifically.

Um, I've, um, I've been in South London since I moved to London, uh, which was about 14 years ago. And one of the things that I found was Living with friends in an area that's, you know, really busy and lively is one thing, which, which I did during my first couple of years in Waterloo and in Lambeth North, but coming towards somewhere, somewhere a little bit quieter, such as New Cross, but still where you've got really lively things going on with illustration and graphics and artwork at Goldsmiths University.

And I thought the area was quite, uh, um, one of these unique spaces in London where all of these things come together. At the time I was actually, um, studying my Master's at Greenwich University. And it was an easy, um, journey, a cycle through across, uh, Deptford into Greenwich. And I think that's definitely one of my favourite places, at least it has one of my favourite memories.

Because it reminds me that, you know, all these spaces can come together, and it doesn't need to be loud and it doesn't need to be so erratic all the time. And if you do want, like, you just go and pop into town. Um, and the second thing you asked was about my favourite word?

**Rosa:** Or a concept, or something you think we should be pushing more for.

**Dhruv:** My favourite concept and my favourite word. Um, okay, so maybe This is a little bias, and this is very in line with what I do, but mentorship. Now, mentorship for me isn't just about teaching someone, or telling people about how they should be going about things, or when someone asks a question, you answering it, and that's it, done.

It's sort of one of these back and forth things that I found quite interesting. Um, it happened in our dialogues when we were talking about selecting the theme um earlier this month or a couple of weeks ago now and One of the queries and questions was well engagement and how you how you go about that, right?

So we'll come on to that side of it later But the idea of mentorship then was quite interesting because it's helping people to try to find their own space and their own idea of what they'd like to do in their careers, right? So in that whether it be professional careers or personal lives and mentorship really brings that in together because there is no such thing as a one way street with that kind of thing.

Um, it's very two sided mentee becoming mentor, mentor becoming mentee. I think there's there's um, yeah, I quite quite enjoy that word, especially over the past few years. I mean, I feel like I’ve been using it quite a bit.

**Rosa:** How much you learned from the process? I guess it's mentioning kind of back and forth.

Um,

**Dhruv:** Um, really interesting because I, it's interesting because you think that it's always the other person learning that you're giving the advice to, but it's, it's usually the other way around. Um, I could give you multiple examples. So, uh, say we are in a one to one mentoring situation and me having to program and curate this workshop that I'm going to have with this person is me learning, is me adapting, is me getting to, grips with how to speak with this very particular person because their language or their means of communication might be entirely different to how I am usually speaking.

And so there's a big learning process for me. So I take that learning from that. It could be our collaborations with large practices. When we sit down, each practice is individually very different. Their ethos is might align very, very well, might align on certain viewpoints. And then it's the learning to try to bring.

ourselves into that scenario and say, okay, how, how am I going to learn who, uh, who I'm speaking with? It's, I think it goes back to, uh, people, right. And about, and again, back to about that space as well, because once you have that space and once you have those ideas flowing around, um, it's all, yeah, it's all a lot of back and forth about learning and the process is, you know, you sit down and you have genuine conversation.

And I think that's really, really important.

**Rosa:** Fascinating. I mean, it reminds me on, uh, kind of Ranciere's concept of the fact that you don't have to master something in order to teach it. So that kind of open relationship, um, as an ongoing learning process, which I think fantastically brings us to the theme of next year.

So, which we mentioned at the start of this conversation, but just as a reminder to anyone who have missed it, the theme for 2025 is voices. I would love to hear from you your thoughts. And how you found the process of deciding the theme with the wider group?

**Dhruv:** Yeah, so I think it was brilliant to have so many experts in the, in the team.

I, I found that everyone had their own voice. Everyone had their own conversation that they wanted to bring. And somewhere along the line, things started clicking between people and how we were all really wanting to end up in the same place, but we just didn't know that the word was going to be voices.

Um, I think it's, I think it amplifies like this diverse range of perspectives, um, not just within architecture, but the, and the sort of built environment as a whole. Um, all of the stories that we were hearing, even around that table, whether it be health and wellbeing, wellness care, Um, my conversations were bringing in diversity, inclusion, young people, as were Satu's, and I think there are, there were so many collective voices in even shaping that conversation.

Why not expand that out to our wider London community and help it to shape our urban landscape as well? Like it could reflect. this notion of belonging, bringing everyone together. I, I think there's so much encouragement in the word there.

**Rosa:** Brilliant. And do you think, um, you're already kind of seeing or, or, uh, or having an idea of what you would be hoping to see, uh, in the festival as, as a kind of response to the theme we have set out?

**Dhruv:** I think so. I think so. I think generally my hope would be to create this platform where people come together like the other word, maybe that I would have picked earlier instead of mentorship would have been narrative. And I think it's quite again on brand with my practice. But I think the idea about bringing architecture and urbanism together, ensuring that it reflects all those rich cultural values, I guess, Without sounding too too broad, um, but it does give like that spotlight and I think The hope would be that it would encourage that conversation, connect people on this sort of social, environmental issues based conversation.

Um, I did have this, we sort of collectively had this conversation along the way in, in writing the, The essay as well or the documentation that goes alongside this and one of the things was well it is about the voices, but it is also about the unheard voices and, and I guess, from my perspective, what I would hope from the festival that it.

It really gets really deep down into that understanding that there are people that Have not had their voices heard or that Live in silence, which is another element and I think inclusion really comes into play when you're holding such a large festival. Just the intention from the festival itself to bridge that gap between whether it be professional or whether it be community or whether it be the singular voice that's not been heard before, I think could be really fascinating and I'm really hopeful that We do end up engaging with even more communities this year.

Um, Yeah, a bit of rethinking of that role with urban space. We are inevitably again talking about architecture or we're talking about the built environment, but without people that also doesn't exist. So I think that would be my absolute goal and aim. Um, if we did manage to get anything out of this, that would be the small thing, more conversation.

**Rosa:** Definitely. And I think it's quite interesting that, you know, maybe people's first reaction might be, well, actually voices is not spatial in its kind of maybe first kind of encounter, but actually when you start to unpack those kind of relationships and important kind of processes that the idea of kind of listening and amplifying in an interweaving, um, uh, might, might bring, uh, to the table, then it suddenly kind of becomes very quickly quite spatial in its own uh, right.

**Dhruv:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Rosa:** One of the other things we, we, we talked about, um, in the session as it was around, um, kind of different ways of working. We are hoping maybe the participants would, would feel inspired to do so. We talked quite a lot about kind of collaboration, professional kind of, uh, uh, bodies and practices, maybe working with, with, uh, communities or kind of specific groups in their area.

How do you think that could. play out around this particular theme?

**Dhruv:** Yeah, completely. Uh, cross disciplinary really at the heart of everything that we do was maybe 50 percent of our conversation, you know, bringing in artists, sociologists, ecologists, community organizers, architects, designers, generally speaking Londoners, um, in to have conversations, um, and have their perspectives was something that we were really interested in, in having.

Um, uh, it sort of builds that layered discussion that we, we haven't maybe seen before, or at a time where conversations can be quite polarized, um, to give the space for conversations that are on a level without the fear of, um, you feeling outcasted. Like, giving that space was everything we wanted. And you're right, maybe voices isn't, um, something that you immediately link to spatial, um, uh, or space even.

But actually, when you start thinking about it a little bit more, um, you're, exploring these narratives and exploring these urban narratives and histories and you're bringing about conversation of building, conversation of space, conversation of maybe the other side, which is forgotten histories too, which I always find fascinating.

Um, maybe understanding the development of what we're going to be doing in the future. I mean, we're never standing still as London and that's really. Really quite exciting. Um, I hope that people see this as maybe a performative space as well. In the past, we've had very provocative, um, events happen as well, so there's an opportunity here for something a little bit, um, outgoing, uh, outward thinking.

Um, maybe it's, uh, art space, maybe it's creative expression, and that doesn't have to be through the physical sound of voice. understanding that voice can be in multiple different, um, or can be expressed in different ways. Um, maybe it is through traditional architecture and exhibition and movements, and there is not nothing to say that you can't.

Um, and again, if I was to relate that back to one of our events from last year, I think sessions, which is our mentoring evening, we held two of those last year at Fletcher Priest Architects and the HFM Architects. and ability to express voices in a space that usually is not open for young people to be able to inhabit is fantastic.

And the late lets you do that. Um, it could be environmental action and activation and social activation. There is nothing to say that we cannot have an activist event. Um, that is, you know, more accessible for everyone. I think there are lots of exciting tangents that this could go down. But I hope that Voices really, really expresses how we are all different and we all have our own individual way of communicating.

And I think communication is quite key here.

**Rosa:** You could, nobody I think could have put this better than you just have. It really got me excited to think about, uh, you know, what, what might come through an open call and start shaping, uh, the, the program. I think just to kind of echo some of your points around particularly experimentation and the, the festival as a vehicle.

Mm-hmm. To be kind of trialling, testing, thinking, kind of coming together and, um, that, that moment of of kind of temporary exploration that hopefully then in, in different forms translate into more, uh, kind of permanent legacy, um, long term. I think we are coming to the end of the conversation, but I have one final question, if that's okay.

And that's around one thought or challenge you would like to leave our listeners with around the theme or anything we've covered in these conversations. What it could be, perhaps a call for action.

**Dhruv:** I think, yes, okay. I think the call to action should inevitably be related to what I've been saying so far.

Um, my work has generally speaking been about amplifying or connecting and Making sure that the voices, and again, this is very, very key, are heard. So connecting voices, amplifying voices, and making sure they're heard. So, um, alongside the hopes for LFA that we end up being interactive, Um, in person and perhaps not in person, but interactive is the key thing here.

Um, one of the words I said earlier was polarized. We end up in conversations where we may not necessarily see eye to eye, and there is a learning here that that is okay. But understanding and respect for one another come from listening to each other's voices or modes of communication. And I think the really, I think a really, really interesting way.

And if there was going to be a call to action, it would be engagement. So the idea that you are in a space where you may not have previously worked in, you may not have previously entered, and you are collaborating with someone else, which we're really promoting here, go in and do that bit of public engagement, have that participatory event, learn of their stories, their ideas.

Even if it is temporary as an installation or interaction, really share their voice, really amplify their voice. You're going in and making sure that you are being hands on and creating active dialogue. That would be my absolute call to action. We are not doing enough of public engagement. There are fantastic people who are, credit absolutely where that is due.

But we as individuals could absolutely do more. So that would be my absolute call to action. Um, go and listen to, go and listen to other people's voices. See how all can, their communication.

**Rosa:** Thank you so much for being part of the discussion, Dhruv. Uh, where can our listeners find out more about your work?

**Dhruv:** Um, so the primary way is through Narrative Practice. And that's narrative and practice. And it's that handle across, uh, LinkedIn, Instagram, the website is narpr.co and all of our events. And hopefully lots of our LFA engagement will also be posted on there as well. And, um, yeah, that's, that's where you can find us or come and talk to me wherever I am.

I'm always at events.

**Rosa:** Brilliant. Amazing. Thank you listeners. If you like the conversation, make sure you give us a like and hit subscribe of any on our platforms that you're listening to until next time. Thank you.