**“EPR x The OWOW”** 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 for this conversation, Eliza Grosvenor, Head of Programme for the London Festival of Architecture, one of the key projects run by NLA, London's Built Environment Community.

Last month we spoke with one of our curation panel members about this year's theme of ‘Voices’, why the theme was chosen and what we're hoping to see in next year's programme. I definitely recommend giving that a listen if you haven't done so far. Today we're joined by one of LFA's key partners, EPR Architects, to explore one of their latest projects, the OWO, an eight-year-old long project which brought together historic and contemporary voices to create a really sensitively restored, extended and reimagined London landmark.

With me, I have Charlotte and David. Welcome to you both. Right, to kick off, just to kind of set the scene, could you both introduce yourself and your connection to the project?

**David**: Um, yeah, hi, I'm David Scowcroft, I'm a project director at EPR Architects, and I worked on this project for eight years.

**Charlotte**: And I'm Charlotte Partridge, an associate director at EPR, and also from the beginning for eight years.

**Eliza**: Amazing, and we're going to get into the project conversation in just a second, but before we do that, we've got a couple of quickfire questions. So, as quick as you can think of, what is your favourite place or building in London and why?

**Charlotte**: I think for me, it’s really hard to pin something down, but a recent project, building is the power station, Battersea Power Station.

I live really close to there, and as soon as the whole regeneration of that space had finished, it was just such a nice place to just take a wander to, and the way that they've opened everything up along the river, and they've got loads of food outlets, and just being able to see inside the power station, another really cool refurbishment, I've just really enjoyed that space, so that one comes to mind for me.

**David**: Yeah, I think, I think mine's south of the river as well actually, it's the National Theatre, um, so it's a place where my wife and I, when we first moved to London, used to go to the theatre quite a lot, take advantage of the cheap tickets at the time, and um, especially with the refurbishment, the renovation that went on a few years ago, um, it's just, it opens up the South Bank and it just feels like connected to the city.

I, I really love that.

**Eliza**: It's amazing, yeah, and I think I'm a big fan of theatre so I'm, I have to go with, go with the theatre as well. Um, The other question is around this year's theme of voices, so, the theme for the festival this year is voices, and thinking about, there's often a lot of voices who are left out of that conversation of architecture, what is one term or concept that you wished, kind of, or a bit of jargon that when we talk about architecture in a city, you wish we could break down or people could understand actually what that word or concept means?

**David**: I think my word is probably, um, heritage. We use it a lot in the work that we do at EPR Architects. It deals with a, a lot of complicated, um, complicated design decisions that we make on a day-to-day basis. Um, but we use it a lot and to a certain extent it loses a little bit of its meaning.

Um, the, 'cause it's a bit of a catchall term and I think you need to, um, to really explore a building, you need to get into the detail of these, um, significant, um, spaces that we work with. Um, so I think that's really, yeah, using language a bit more specific to the place is, is and the history of a, of a, of a building a project is, is something that I'd probably like to explore more.

**Charlotte**: And for me, kind of linked to the theme of heritage would be retrofit. Again, something we use a lot and more and more now in the projects that we look at. Um, and it kind of isn't that clear with what it means. Um, but for us, it's essentially bringing a new life into a building. It's putting in potentially some modern interventions, potentially altering some of an existing piece of fabric, be that heritage or not.

Um, and creating a new meaning, a new use for that building. Um, but yeah, it's a bit of a buzzword that probably doesn't have a huge amount of meaning outside of what we do sometimes.

**Eliza**: Amazing. I think that's two really key words to understand and particularly relevant to this project, which we're actually sitting in now, which is amazing.

Um, it's really nice to be able to record in the space that we're talking about. And so this is one of your most recently completed projects. And actually I think it's. What might be a really nice place to start is actually a bit of an overview of the project. So for people who aren't familiar with the project, could you give us a bit of background to what the project is, kind of the context of the space we're in at the moment?

**David**: Charlotte?

**Charlotte**: Yeah, so um, Built in 1906, I think is when it was completed. So over a century ago now, um, the building was created to essentially be the the pinpoint, the pinnacle of where all the decision makings would happen in the World War. So the likes of Winston Churchill, Lord Kitchener and various other secretaries of state have walked these corridors.

**David**: The Old War Office is a building which was the headquarters of the British Army from when it was initially completed in 1906 through to the 1960s when they moved out and joined with the M. O. D. over the road and various other government departments moved in. It's got a bit of a dual, um, personality in a way.

Um, this building always has been, um, there is one side of it which is very, um, very much about the status of, um, what the British Army and the military history, um, was. So it houses, housed a lot of the, um, offices, um, for the secretaries of state and the generals who worked in the army at the time. Um, but it also was the administration for the British Army.

Um, so there's over 2000 people who worked in, in the building, um, during its, uh, when it was actively occupied.

**Eliza**: Amazing. And just thinking about a project like this, what is it about a project that makes you as a practice interested in tackling something? So kind of quite monumental, um, it's not an easy, small task.

What makes a practice interested in tackling like this?

**Charlotte**: Yeah, I mean, you kind of hit the nail on the head there with saying it's such a monumental building. It really is a national monument. It's so historically significant, nationally and internationally. Um, and so when we first had the opportunity to work on it, it's, it's a huge challenge and it's a huge honour, really, to be able to even enter the space.

The building was built as this impenetrable fortress and designed literally to keep people out. Um, so to be even able to come through into the spaces and then explore the ways of unlocking the building and being able to allow members of the public to come into the building for the first time in its century long history. It's just magical.

**David**: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. The fortress nature of the building is, is, is fascinating as well. The building itself sits, sits on its own as an island, um, in, in Whitehall. It's 425 metres in circumference around the outside and the main facade is 25 metres high, um, so, and it's, it's a, um, neoclassical Portland stone, um, facade around the outside of the building.

There was only three entrances. Um, that were ever used, um, in, into the building when we first, um, uh, started working with it. We introduced 13 new openings into the building of various sizes and, um, for various uses. Um, and the project really, really is about how we, how we bring people through and, and they can experience the grandeur of, uh, you know, of, of, of some of their heritage spaces.

Um, and also, um, and use it to, to, to, to secure its future, um, for, for the future. Um, going forwards, um, find a new use for the building.

**Charlotte**: Yeah, typically everything that we start from is from the guest journey. So it's how the guests enter the building, how you approach the building, what the building can be used for, how the existing spaces could be broken up, utilized as they are, transformed into a new use.

And then from there, internally, it's all those touch points and creating a new journey and space through the building. And that's what we really enjoy doing and how we would kind of approach an existing building, no matter whether it's of this sort of nature or not.

**Eliza**: So you mentioned that approach is really about kind of that kind of welcome into a space and kind of the journey through.

So you know you're working on the project. What's your first thing that you're starting on?

**Charlotte**: So we would always for, particularly for a heritage listed existing building, um, start looking through the archive drawings. Um, so be that through the National Archives, um, being able to acquire information from the previous owners, the MOD themselves.

Um, and digging through all these incredible black and white photographs, looking at how the spaces were used, seeing all the people that used to work in the buildings. There are incredible photos dotted around, um, of all the workers sitting at desks in the spaces. Um, and so we'll look through those archive drawings and photographs and see how we can then break that building down into how it should then be transformed.

**David**: Yeah, and I think, as I mentioned before, it's always had a bit of a dual element to it. By understanding the building and being able to really understand the most important spaces, you can enhance those, start telling that story, and then we, then when we work through the rest rest of the spaces which, um, which help support the overall journey.

**Eliza**: I think that journey is a really interesting aspect, and I'm thinking it's been quite a long journey. It's been a few years since you kind of took on the project, and there's been a lot of people that have been involved in that. How have you kind of, you mentioned kind of the archive before, and a few of these different, um, kind of voices and approaches to, to the space.

How have you worked with other people in, um, kind of aspects that you've had to deal with, and kind of those ideas of collaboration throughout the project?

**David**: I think at EPR we, we do pride ourselves on that approach, you know, it's, um, it's a team effort. The, at EPR, um, ourselves, there was over 20 architects working on the project, um, through the main body of the, body of the period, period of the project.

And, um, but that's just one part of a much bigger design team, um, but it all starts with the clients. So our client was in, we feel was incredibly brave, um, in terms of their ambition for taking on this. They see themselves as a custodian of this building and wanted to give a little bit back to the city that they call home.

With that, they then empowered the design team to really push the boundaries of what's possible. Um, and we've, over the, over the course of the project, we've, we've had some incredible collaborations with, um, those consultants. Um, starting with collaborations we have, particularly the structure engineers and the building services. So Elliot Woods and, uh, Acorn were huge parts of this, um, project enabling the transformation, um, into, into the, into the new uses that we have today.

**Charlotte**: I think the, just pinging back onto the client element of it, they really trusted in us in terms of what we would be able to do.

Um, and I mean, we're fortunate to have a really great portfolio and have worked on other similar listed heritage buildings, uh, possibly not quite as incredible as this, but the way that they trusted us and allowed us to take their vision and then bring it to fruition was a really lovely experience for us.

Um, And yeah, the collaboration with the consultants was incredible. Um, I think for me, one of the most amazing collaborations was with Historic England, um, the Prince's Regeneration Trust and with Westminster City Council. Um, but with Historic England in particular, it was really a narrative back and forth with them and us throughout the entire duration of the project.

When we first introduced them to the proposals, there is quite rightly some hesitation of what we wanted to do. You know, it's such a historically significant building and project with such an incredible past. And so we just needed to bring them along our thought processes and allow them to really see that we love the building and wanted to do something incredible to it.

And Bring a completely new future to the building. Um, so yeah, for me, I think the collaboration with them was, was amazing. And really where we got to from what we first presented back in 2015, 16, to then what we've ended up with now is hugely different to those initial proposals, because they themselves also wanted to see us push it.

**David**: It was a conversation. It was a conversation that we had. It's all, it's the picking up on the different people's opinions and taking those into account. I think that layers up the stories of the, you know, the, the opportunities as well that we've managed to take advantage of.

**Charlotte**: Um, So also with the consultants, interior design has obviously played a huge part in this building.

You walk through and every single space has been completely reimagined. And we ended up collaborating with 11 interior designers over the course of the project, which is pretty crazy. Um, And, you know, a few of them for, for a lot of the spaces, the spa, the residential and the hotel, were, were by, um, 1508 did the Resi, um, Goddard Little Fair were in the spa, and then the office of Thierry Despont did the interiors for the hotel guest rooms and public areas.

And that was such a lovely relationship that we forged over the years. Um, it really was collaborative and it, it kind of was challenging at times because we were very much the, um, the owners of retaining the history. And we knew what we could and couldn't do. We knew what we could adapt. We knew what we could cut out and carve.

And we knew the elements that had to be completely retained as existing. And so by the very nature of bringing in new interventions there was a bit of a clash between the tradition and the heritage and sometimes that is really lovely and there are some spaces that you go through the building and it works so well and there are times where we had to pare things back and have some counter suggestions but it was a really great collaborative process it's kind of like going back to uni and being able to sit around a table and all sketch together and it was really enjoyable.

**David**: I think a lot of that comes from the um, the nature of the building itself we, I think we've all felt um, a sort of pride in working on the project and an honour to be able to be part of its journey. Um, so we do feel that, um, the, everyone who works on the project really did, you know, contribute to the, uh, to the final, final work.

The design team that were part of this journey, the contractors and subcontractors, the specialist trades were also um, key to, um, delivering, uh, uh, uh, A building of this quality, um, and, um, yeah, the building process itself is, uh, the original building took six years to build and the refurbishment project took another six years.

It's quite a nice bookend in terms of how the, um, how we see it and, and yeah, the collaboration with the, with the, with the builders of the project as well is something that we're really proud of.

**Charlotte**: The craftsman, the artisanal craftsmanship that was woven in to, um, the fit-out elements of the building.

Some of those trades were absolutely incredible. And, you know, some of the people we worked with, the people that do the hand carving of all the ornate timber millwork. It's just one guy called Roy who is sourced because he's just incredible at that trade. And he managed to perfectly match some of the existing detailing, um, that's now sitting in some of the most incredible building parts that we've created through the reception and the memorial room.

And it really was just these hugely talented, skillful artisans that have been brought in and it was really joyful to work with them and learn a bit more about what they do day to day.

**David**: Yeah, it really was.

**Eliza**: So a big shout out to Roy and the rest of the team involved in that side as well. I think that's really, um, beautiful and I think you can really kind of notice that when you're walking around the space.

You can really feel all the care that's really gone into the work at all different levels. And I'm thinking you mentioned a little bit of challenging, challenges having quite a few, quite a lot of people on some of the elements. What's been the biggest challenge, kind of, in the eight years of working on the project?

**David**: I mean, one of the, one of the very obvious ones is that we went through COVID, um, during the construction process. Um, it feels like a long time ago now, but, um, it was incredibly disruptive, um, at the time. One of the, The benefits of the building being the size and scale that it is was actually the work could continue once the appropriate, um, safety measures were put in place.

Um, so it generally did carry on, but, um, you know, some of these things, events that happen around, historical events that are happening around us at the time of the project going forwards is, um, yeah, it can be, can be, um, can be a challenge.

**Charlotte**: Yeah, another challenge I think is just the nature of it being an existing building is so inherent with unknowns.

Um, so you can have a plan and it can all be going swimmingly. And then all of a sudden you find a big beam or a steel that's holding up the building. And it's those parts that I really enjoy because you have to do some on the spot problem solving. And you have to go back and speak to the designers and the design team and the engineers and the services engineers, um, and try and come up with a solution that's still at the end of the day creates what we want to create but is Working within the constraints that we found. I think that is kind of It's quite a broad challenge, but it is probably one of the biggest challenges that we come across.

**David**: Yeah, I think so.

**Charlotte**: Across all the projects that we've worked on at EPR.

It's always the same with existing buildings.

**David**: And it's one of the most rewarding. You feel like you know the building so much better after the project, which is, uh, which is a real, yeah, it's a real honour.

**Eliza**: It's really beautiful that you talk about it being an honour to kind of take on the building and kind of work through that.

I know it's been quite a personal journey for you both, particularly Charlotte, and I wonder if you want to talk about that kind of personal side of the project for you at all.

**Charlotte**: Yeah, of course. Um, so I've been at EPR since, uh, I graduated from my degree, um, back in 2012. Um, and I came back after then doing my masters, um, in 2014.

And that's when we first had the opportunity to look at this building. At that point, it was working with the agents when the MOD was selling it. So it was a very different approach than it then became when we first, uh, properly got involved. Um, but then in 2015, we were lucky enough, uh, to bid and then eventually win, um, the opportunity to work on the project.

And so I was at that point, a part two architectural assistant, um, very scared and out of my depth of what was to come. Um, and then over the years, the kind of people that surrounded me and mentored me through that time just continuously gave me opportunities to take on more and more responsibility. Um, something which I'm really, really grateful for.

Um, and I then qualified and it was still going on. I then got promoted to an associate and it was still going on. Um, and then, I mean, we opened, a year, just over a year ago. And then at the start of this year, I was promoted to associate director. So for me, over the course of 10 years, um, since we first looked at this building, it's been quite the journey, um, but it's been incredible.

And I feel really proud of what we've all done. And for me, just as a personal journey, it's been amazing and I've really enjoyed it.

**Eliza**: So that idea of collaboration, I think we really experienced, we had a conversation kind of a couple of years ago around the RSBC Life Without Limits Centre, um, with a couple of the team and thinking about how the architect and kind of charity come together to kind of really create these spaces, and I can feel this through the conversation that you're having now.

And I think it really ties into the, this year's theme of voices and kind of really playing into the kind of historic, the contemporary voice in this case, but also all the kind of individuals that have really played a role in every part of this project. Why is that important to you and why does that really drive so much of your work at a practice?

**Charlotte**: I think a building of this nature deserves the celebration and one of the reasons why we love working on these types of buildings is being able to give them a completely new life and allow people who would never have been able to come into this kind of building to then explore it and enjoy it, not only for us, also for the people that worked here all those years ago, you know, They host veteran days now and, uh, the, the, the suites are named after the old spies and it's really celebrating those voices.

And it's stories like that, that makes EPR really love that kind of building.

**David**: It does. And, and the idea of collaboration, I think it's, I'm pleased you picked up on it. What we do is, uh, It, it relies on the team around us to do. We don't, we don't do anything on our own. Um, and, uh, and it just creates a better outcome for the clients and the, and the work that we do is, uh, is richer for it.

**Eliza**: Yeah, I think that, that kind of collaborative nature is really key. And I think Just one point perhaps we haven't picked up on yet is the kind of the current people who are kind of using the space on a day-to-day basis. You've got quite a mix of people, um, kind of using the space for various reasons.

How have you kind of navigated that kind of, um, set up, I guess?

**David**: So we talked a lot about the hotel. Um, it's obviously as much, it's the most accessible part of the, accessible part of the building. Um, but there's also the other part of, uh, other half of the, um, space that we have, which is, uh, dedicated to residences as well.

So there's 85 apartments, um, within the building. Um, they're branded residences, so they're part of the hotel, um, as well. Um, and as I mentioned at the beginning, the building's always had a dual identity. Um, and I think, you know, The two uses have really helped. They fit very nicely together. Um, the, the residence is, uh, uh, in a much more private part of the building, and then the hotel is facing Whitehall.

And I think those, um, just some of those moves that we made as well, it's really helped. The, the, the use of the building, um, reflects, um, the past as well as, you know, how we're moving into the future.

**Eliza**: And I guess the final aspect of that is, remember the public can come and, visibly come and have a little walk around today.

How do people actually go about doing that?

**Charlotte**: So you can walk down Whitehall from, you know, from House of Parliament, Trafalgar Square, and just walk in. So we've created these new openings for exactly that reason, to create a far more permeable access into the building, from whichever direction people are coming through.

They host daily tours. Um, for the guests that are using it and people that are using the spaces, the restaurants, um, and that's something that we think has been such a huge joy to be a part of as part of those conversations with Historic England and Westminster.

**Eliza**: Hopefully people are really excited about the project already and want, have learned quite a lot through this conversation.

But if they want to kind of find out more, where can they learn more about the project?

**Charlotte**: To learn more about our journey on the project, I guess the best place would be, uh, on our website, epr. co. uk, uh, where we have, uh, an extensive case study and a video that takes us all the way through the construction and ultimately the completion of the project.

**Eliza**: Great. Thank you so much for chatting. I already knew about the project for a little bit, but it'd be really nice to kind of even hear more stories, um, as we've kind of gone through this conversation. Is there one last thing you'd like to leave listeners with about the project, the process, this conversation?

**Charlotte**: I think, for me, it really has been an incredible process and journey that we've all been on.

And to now be able to take a bit of a step back, firstly come and do this recording in the building, but allow and watch other people coming and enjoying it. I think that's been the most pivotal part. Um, and I hope that anyone listening and anyone else that wants to come and visit the hotel gets as much enjoyment out of it now as we did doing the refurbishment and the conversion in the first place.

**David**: Yeah, absolutely. Um, just before the recording I was, I was standing outside in Whitehall and, um, you could see the, uh, number of people walking past. And before this project everyone would have just walked past it without noticing. Now people stop, take a photo, enjoy the Christmas decorations that are up at the moment.

Um, it's, uh, it's really special.

**Eliza**: I did do that as well. I walked past, I took a photo before entering. Um, a massive thank you to you both for this conversation. I've really enjoyed it. Uh, listeners will be back with another conversation, um, shortly with one of our LFA collaborators. Until then, if you like this conversation, make sure to give us a like and hit the subscribe on any of the platforms you're listening to.

Until next time.