

## **Building Sounds Podcast Transcript – November - Accessible to who? Exploring built environment equity with Re-Fabricate and the DisOrdinary Architecture Project**

### **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're back for another conversation around the LFA2024 theme of Reimagine. Last episode, we started to explore Reimagine with Jess Neil, one of our 2024 Curation Panel members and CEO of the Stephen Lawrence Day Foundation, where we talked about the power of reimagining equity in city-making, social justice and who needs to be involved in shaping the conversation around the future of our city. The LFA2024 theme of Reimagine is one that looks to create opportunities to reimagine the spaces and buildings in our city, the systems and ways of working, whether that be in the industry or with the communities across the city, as well as rethinking solutions for some of the biggest challenges we're still facing across the world. One of the areas that's still very much in need of reimagining is access in and to the city. So, to explore this conversation, I'm joined today by three wonderful people who've been involved in one of the key projects from the 2023 edition of the festival, Seats at the Table.

To give a bit of context, Seats at the Table was a winning design of an LFA competition which looked to develop a deeper understanding of the public's experience of streets and public spaces. The final output consisted of a freestanding table and six chairs and created a space for conversations around the importance of accessibility, equity for all and how this can and should be considered in any public space or built environment. Before we get into the conversation, though, I would like to give a quick shout out to the Royal Society for Blind Children, who are very kindly letting us record in the wonderful space today. We were here last year with the charities Head of Philanthropy Shalni Sood and Jo Weir from EPR Architects to explore the transformation of the building into the charity's new home and explore what it means to design genuinely inclusive buildings. If you're keen to hear more of that conversation, we'll put a link into the show notes.

But back to today. As I mentioned, I'm here with some of the members of the Seats at the Table project. Could you each introduce yourself?

### **Jos**

Hi, I'm Joss Boys. I'm co-founder and co-director of the DisOrdinary Architecture Project with a disabled artist called Zoe Partington, which has been going for about 15 years, and we bring disabled artists, and increasingly disabled architects and designers, in to buildtenvironment, education and practice with the aim of really thinking much more creatively about access and inclusion. My background is in architecture. I would consider myself a non-disabled person and somebody who's trying to think about what it is to be an ally, but also, as I get older, the kind of boundaries of what counts as a disability gets more and more complicated.

**Rosie**

Hey, I'm Roseanne Scott, so my pronouns are she/her, my disability pronouns are I have achondroplasia dwarfism. I also have hard of hearing. I'm also very severely dyslexic and I also have an underactive thyroid. So that kind of deals with like energy issues and stuff and then my day to day. So I'm director at Re-Fabricate, which is a sustainable waste reuse collective that focus on teaching children from young to like university students about circular economy within the construction industry. And then I also have the day job that we always have to do to pay the bills at MACE, where I am an architect in the Net-Zero ,Carbon, Decarbonisation and Retrofitting Team.

**Poppy**

Hi, I'm Poppy Levison. I also use she/her pronouns. I'm blind and I also have chronic pain and migraines, which also, like Rosie's mentioned, affects my energy levels. I'm part of the DisOrdinary Architecture Project with Jos and my day job is as an Architectural Assistant at DSDHA. I'm also a part of the Curation Panel for next year's London Festival of Architecture.

**Eliza**

So, before we get into the project, I got a couple of quick questions. What's one word that you think of when you think of the built environment?

**Rosie**

My first word is 'adversity', just because I deal with it on a day-to-day and constantly having to find ways to make myself adapt to the environment, rather than the environment adapt to me.

**Jos**

Mine would be 'nuanced' in that I think that there are very differential experiences of any city or any place, and that what we bring to it with our own bodies and minds and what the place gives back to us or doesn't give back, it's very different and it's about power, so it's always very complicated.

**Poppy**

I think I would go for 'hard', both because, like Rosie's mentioned, it can be hard to navigate and hard to exist in at times and you can feel like the city's a bit against you, but also hard in that I've often not got places for rest and softness and slowness and care and those things that I think we really need to be seeing more of.

**Eliza**

Maybe with that in mind, what does Reimagine mean to each of you?

**Rosie**

I guess Reimagine to me in the context of the built environment would mean being an accessible place, having like people, being able to expose the different types of ways of living and adaptation. So it's also considering different types of disabilities and hidden disabilities and accessibility. It's not really something that's a perfect place, but it's something that's adaptable.

**Poppy**

Yeah, I think mine would be similar. I think a reimagined city is also about who is reimagining the city. We have a city that has overwhelmingly been designed by cis, white, older men. We're in the City of London right now and you'd think 99.9% of these buildings have been designed by one kind of person from all the many years that it's been slowly developed over, and so I think what's really exciting with Reimagine is if we take where we are now and we're in a room of all women with various different disabilities, like how would we reimagine the city?

**Jos**

Reimagining for me is about, again, rather like Rosie said, it's about adapting. But I feel like within the built environment professions, sustainability has become like very central and kind of adaptive care and repair notion of sustainability, but the social dimensions of that around disability, for example, as well as other kinds of intersectional needs, just tends to get left out all the time. So for me, I think I want to reimagine a world where we are really thinking about sustainability. It's completely integrated with social sustainability and with inequality, people's inequality and treat it as just a kind of thing around materials.

**Eliza**

I think a lot of people will be familiar with the Seats at the Table project from last year, but could you give a bit of an overview to the project and perhaps walk us through the process that got to the final output?

**Rosie**

So Seats at the Table was born from the competition that you guys put together with Foundation for Future London and the City of London for a competition called Co-designing Equity in the Public Realm.

It was interesting how that kind of came to be. So I remember getting an email from Jos going 'hey, do you want to partner up in this? We're going to do it with DisOrdinary Architecture project,' because we've done a few things, we've done roundtables together, and then we kind of realised oh, there wasn't enough time. So I took it back to Re-Fabricate and we said why don't we do this as a collaborative venture? And then that kind of began the fruits of the whole thing, talking about the intersection between sustainability and accessible and inclusive design.

So Seats at the Table, in terms of as a programme, ran for around six months, between February 2023 to around July, where it came in several parts. So you had the Seats at the Table work stream, which kind of did school workshops with schools across East London to design chairs for different types of people. And then you had the site intervention workstream where we worked with collaborations with disabled artists and built environment professionals. And then we had the events workshop, which was run through the month of June to celebrate the London Festival Architecture month, and then we had this stream of accessibility throughout the whole thing.

How our position worked was that we wanted to try and not be perfect but inclusive and as accessible as possible in terms of designing and working with disabled people, who are in our team, as well as working with disabled people that we were collaborating with on the workshops and then also with mainstream and SEND schools. So we were working on all age groups with different types of disabilities, trying to create a space for disabled people in this park in the City of London, Postman's Park, near Farringdon. So it was a great experience. So if I hand to Jos so I can have a drink before I talk about schools.

### **Jos**

So I think we were hugely overambitious.

First of all, we were really interested in really thinking about the process as a process of co-design, so it wasn't just like an installation that somehow reflected co-design and equality and that meant that initially, the kind of site that it was assumed that we'd take, we said that it just wasn't accessible enough and we did a series of site explorations, bringing together a lot of disabled and non-disabled creatives to just discuss what it was that made it accessible.

We did a couple of workshops over two weekends where we really looked at those places and used that as a way of choosing a different site, which was Postman's Park. So we were already adding in a kind of something that was process related and disability-led around and participatory around that aspect of just literally what the site was. And then, as well as the fantastic work around working with schools and working with the Bartlett build team and the people who build the table – the Remakery – we also then what we found was that we needed extra money, that the funding that we got didn't really make it possible to do proper access, either in terms of the people who created the work or in terms of the events. So we got some money from the Arts Council England and that then made it possible to also introduce some additional site interventions, which were very much around what kind of adaptations you might make to make the site itself more accessible. Poppy, you led on one of those.

### **Poppy**

Yeah. So these had a real range from wayfinding and signage to then the one that I was involved in, which was an audio described piece of a memorial that was already in the park. So I think what was really nice was we'd taken a space and we've not only gone 'here's the installation we think

should be in the park', but we also looked at the park more generally and said how can we make the space that we're in broader than just our bit? How can we add some accessibility to that? And that became a really lovely creative piece and its own right, which I think we'll go on to talk about but hopefully might have a longer lifetime than just the one month of the festival.

## **Rosie**

So basically, back to the first workstream, which was Seats at the Table. So Seats at the Table came about where we connected with five different schools. So two of them were SEND, so one was a community centre called We Are Spotlight. So it kind of creates respite and after school club for older students with different disabilities. We did a community workshop with them and then we had an SEND school in Stratford, I think, and then we had four other schools that were mainstream, but they varied from like year three or four right up until like year 10.

And the idea being is that we went to each of these schools and we asked them to design a chair. But it was designing a chair either for themselves, and there were different accessibility requirements, but then also designing for other people. So thinking outside the box in terms of how other people are affected or what different people have different types of access needs in terms of disability. We gave them kind of fact sheets to then have a discussion point around, so it was kind of opening the conversation to be able to allow discussion and questions to be asked about different types of disabilities, and then each of the students then came up with a design option for some of the disabilities. Sometimes they were very adventurous and they chose more than one disability, sometimes they just chose one and then we were then able to work. We were able to work with UCL B-made workshops. Some of them were harder than others because sometimes we had like 10 students, other time we had like 30 students collate the different design ideas, taking different parts that we thought were really successful, especially from the conversations that we had with some of the students. But then kind of designing a chair, that kind of represented it. It was very different and it kind of opens the conversation about how there's no such thing as one perfect chair that can suit all types of disabilities and accessibility needs. But we had things that were incredible where we had a child who was kind of wanting to explore designing a chair for his grandpa and loved TfL fabric, and then Poppy went hunting for TfL fabric – which is a thing apparently which is amazing – and people were thinking about 'how do I make sure that he has a coffee?'. There was a lot of kind of cappuccino cup holders in all these chairs, which was really interesting, there was a rocking chair. So it's great if you can have a look at the photos because you can have an idea of the kind of imagination that different age groups have. And it's great because children have that innocence, they don't think about barriers in the way that we do as adults. They have a very different interpretation of what access is. So it's also about creativity and exploration rather than function.

And then also throughout these work streams that Jos pointed out, we also had the built section. So as part of Re-Fabricate, we tried to make sure that as much of these materials as possible could be brought from recyclable or reusable sources. So we worked with, like Peckham Reclamation Yard and Re-makery found this amazing worktop surface that we were able to build a table out of that was made out of yogurt pots and then we used recycled timber and recycled scaffolding. So

they did an amazing job on this beautiful table. So these are all housed and we're basically the discussion point around events that we had during the month of June.

And then, as part of Re-Fabricate, we always try to make sure that all the stuff like such as a site interventions (we had bean bags with places of rest, and then we also had the table and the chairs) We wanted to make sure that they had a home or that the materials were kind of reused in some way, they weren't just kind of chucked. We were then able to kind of use our network and contacts where we were able to take the chairs back to some of the schools. So some of the schools are so excited to have them back. They've all got homes. And then the bean bags went to a library which was part of a workshop and event experience that we did with Re-Fabricate and Beyond the Box with Neil Onions, who does an amazing programme called People's Pavillion.

### **Eliza**

So not a small project. I think there's so many elements and thought and care that's gone into this and I think you mentioned ambitious, but I think you've also been able to take the ideas and really distil it down into every detail. Actually, within that, because there's so many different components, has there been anything that's been particularly challenging and I think that's surprised you positively or negatively, throughout this whole process?

### **Poppy**

One of the things that's come out of the project that was maybe an unexpected outcome was the formation of various networks and friendships and all sorts of things coming out of the project.

I mean, I never met Rosie before doing this. I was aware of her but as it is with disabled people in architecture, we're often spread quite distant, we're in our little niches and different architecture practices, and so I think having the project where we had 20 disabled artists, architects, creatives coming together for the co-exploration workshops, the events and then also the Arts Council interventions, we've built some really strong connections from people I know. Rosie even mentioned once, 'how long have you guys known each other?' For me and Jordan Whitewood Neal, and it was like, we met a year ago for the first time and we've only seen each other a couple of times, but through this project we'd seen each other more times than anything else. And so there are all of these friendships that have kind of formed and I think it will be really interesting to see how one seemingly kind of isolated one-time thing of the project could end up having a really long impact.

### **Rosie**

It also meant that it opened your eyes more in terms of what other disabilities have different accessibility needs or that aren't necessarily what you find on Google.

So, like part of the accessibility stream was that we made sure there was a pre-access information to try and create more of a piece on pre-access for the events. So we spent like a day here or there where we were just kind of exploring the site more and really analysing like what could be

a trip hazard, what would be easier for someone who's blind, like how could it work in terms of hearing? How does it work best to navigate or locate the location of the chairs for someone who's deaf, so you ensure there's sight lines, then also just pathways in terms of how does it work from getting from the nearest bus stop or where's the nearest toilet. We then were able to produce a document and then have that access information online and it kind of developed more of a conversation about this fluidity of not being perfect and accepting your mistakes and things that you assumed and then just actually moving forward.

### **Jos**

It was a very accepting group and I just wanted to add something about that. You know that these sorts of projects, because they're temporary, they tend to be these isolated things, and so I think the networking has been really powerful and I can see that. But I also, I think for me it was very interesting trying to do something that was process-led, that was disability-led, within the context of the city, where there are rules and regulations – of course there are – and there are different patterns of ownership and there are people and bureaucratic processes you have to go through. And that was quite hard for us because it was always an emergent project. It came out of the complexity of those different voices and coming to a view. It was exactly what we were asked to do. It was a co-design process, but then that became something where getting the right permissions became much more complicated. We didn't have a design scheme to give.

We had some ideas and a kind of clarity about where we were going, but in terms of the assumptions that were being made, and some of that is, I think, around disability, and I find it's very clear that bringing in more than one or two disabled people is only seen as a health and safety issue. Like this is too high-risk. We can't have more than one person in a wheelchair in the space, and so that's horrifying to me, and I think that there were elements of that too.

So for me there's an interesting thing there, both about how one makes those of course, meets the requirements but also has a way of doing it that's also more open. And the other, I think, is about legacy. It's about the fact that some of these things could have stayed, could have been there longer, could have become permanent, but it's a temporary thing, so making them become permanent becomes really complicated. So the kind of really positive interventions that I think we made at a very small scale as a kind of indication of how you could do adaptation for accessibility in a very creative and low key way. You know that doesn't exist anymore and that seems a real pity.

### **Eliza**

I think that's the importance of a project like this. It takes more time than we would want it to, but hopefully a project like this can build confidence for the more longer term projects. So for these temporary interventions sometimes they might not always work. Where they do work, they can transition into that long term. But I still think there's been a lot of learning from this year. I think it's been a great opportunity to challenge us and challenge everyone that's in the network of the Festival. But also I know you've been very busy since June as well, so that was only a few

months ago. There's been a lot of thinking you've been doing about those learnings and how you can take those forward. I don't know if you want to share anything more about some of the work you've been doing.

### **Rosie**

So we did a grant application recently basically to try and get additional funding from the City of London to hopefully I mean the ability to make part of one of the interventions that Poppy worked on permanent. So we did an application where it kind of basically talked about the previous process of what we've just discussed today but then also apply for funding to actually make this intervention like physical and permanent and I think I would give Poppy the mic to be able to talk about what these interventions are.

### **Poppy**

Yeah, so the intervention was looking at the Memorial to Heroic Self-Sacrifice which is in Postman's Park, and it was a memorial that was put together in the late 1800s, I believe, to commemorate people who have died trying to save other people, and it's a lovely memorial. It's got several cultural references. People have referred to it in, I think, as a play about it and things, but currently it's loads of flat tiles on a wall, and so what we did as a response to this was we did an audio described piece, so we had people reading out all of the different tiles, but we wanted to go for what is described as enhanced audio description, so there was a composed sound piece behind it that was composed by a visually impaired composer, was edited by a visually impaired editor. So we really wanted to ensure that we were employing and creating opportunities for people within our community as well, and we wanted them all to be read by different voices, and actually the outcome of that was when it was playing, people who were sighted and who were blind found that they interacted with the piece in a much more evocative way.

When you have people reading these incredible stories, every single one becomes a tragedy, whereas when you read them as a flat plaque on the wall, it's easy to kind of like just brush through them, like you're reading an article in the newspaper or whatever, and so during the festival we had this on a QR code and we had a speaker, and so I think the hope is that we can have this as a permanent thing and we can have something in the park that would enable this to be a permanent. You could scan a QR code and hear the piece. And as well as that, we also had a BSL translation, because for a lot of deaf people, BSL is their first language, and so reading a lot of English can be quite difficult, especially as a lot of the language is kind of outdated, it's from the 1800s. Things are worded quite strangely, so it was really helpful to then also have a translated piece to go alongside that.

### **Rosie**

The grant's covering those two things which hopefully will then create a permanent platform online and also produce like a plaque that can go alongside the existing plaque, that could be transcribed in Braille and then also have a QR code. Unfortunately, with the memorial, there was a small step, so we're talking like 200mm – not much, but it obviously makes it inaccessible to a

lot of people. So during the festival we put some temporary ramps in, but unfortunately at the time the park owners, let's say, didn't want to keep them. So we're hoping part of this grant money will also be able to ensure permanent ramp will be able to be installed either end so it can allow accessibility throughout the whole experience as well.

## **Jos**

And the other thing that we've been able to do, which is really exciting, I think, is that in applying for the Arts Council England money, some of it was quite practical in a way it was about obtaining extra funds for access, both for the creators involved and for audiences, because that wasn't really possible to fund within the commission as we got it. But at the same time to say there's so much that's been learnt from Seats at the Table in all its different variations that that could be a jumping off point for putting together a kind of prototype publication, a different kind of design information around access and inclusion, which was kind of going beyond compliance but was very much around this notion of creativity.

And so that's written, we're just sourcing permissions for all the images. The aim is that it's not design guidance and it doesn't use standard terms for different forms of impairment, like it's not under categories of being deaf or blind or wheelchair user and it doesn't use terms like wayfinding, even though these things can be very useful, but it doesn't use any of those typical terms that have kind of become mainstream within architectural practices, the way you deal with accessibility. It uses terms and concepts that come from disabled artists, activists, scholars across the world. So expressions like Crip Time and Spoon Theory and really useful access ecologies you know, we can discuss whether they're the right terms, but really useful ways of thinking about the world differently and under those different headings there's some kind of brief introductions to what those ideas are and how they relate to architecture. There's lots of disabled voices and there's various creative examples of things that you might do, ways you might and as much as anything it's about attitudes. Really it's a kind of compendium. It's called 'Many More Parts Than M: Reimagining Disability, Access and Inclusion Beyond Compliance', and it's kind of quite like a fanzine, I guess, and the idea is that you have it on you if you're in practice.

It's aimed very much at non-disabled architects and other built environment professionals and students and tutors. You can just have it on your desk and when you're bored or you run out of ideas or you haven't really got a clue about access at that moment in the design that you're doing, you can kind of just flick through it. So it's a test of that and we'll be launching it in Manchester and London in the new year, in 2024, in January and February, and we'll give away free copies. So the idea is that we'll just test run how effective this is, what people think about it, and we'll also have a much more accessible online version.

And we've got other resources, we've been doing interviews with some of the people involved. There'll be other links to things that people might want to know about and then hopefully that might lead on to something else, and there are lots of examples from the Seats at the Table as a jumping off point. So that feels exciting and a bit worrying in case it turns out not really to be

something that people find useful and then we have to rethink it. But it felt like it was worth trying different ways of discussing access and inclusion within our disciplines.

### **Rosie**

Jumping from that, we've also been in discussion with the City of London about having some workshops, basically a lessons learned piece from Seats at the Table and then also from the voices from the compendium, bringing to the table some of the artists and creatives from the project to also have a discussion about the Smithfield Public Realm project, so ensuring that this public realm is going to be developed in 2025, 2026. It's also going to have a lessons learned and a discussion piece around some of these things that we've been talking about and actually listening to disabled voices rather than coming from the clinical perspective of building regulations and approved document part M.

### **Eliza**

I'm personally very excited for this publication, keeping these conversations going and alive. We need to keep the industry holding them accountable, making sure they're not forgetting these conversations. They're still very, very present, but they need to be very present to people that are thinking about these at every level. I think it will be so useful to have these conversations. It will be a different thing, I think, for different people, but I'm really excited for what that might be.

### **Jos**

When Zoe and I started it was very much Zoe's idea, she was part of a huge network of disabled artists. Disability arts is quite vibrant in the UK and it was very much like what else can we do? You know, when I was involved before that in feminism, there were at least women in architecture. Not many, but there were women in architecture but when you were thinking about disability you knew that there were disabled people as students, as tutors, as practitioners, but they weren't going to tell anybody because it would really affect your opportunities to continue studying, to get a job. So it was like hidden, a really hidden thing, and we certainly weren't going to go out and say tell us you're disabled, so we can work with you.

And people did. We made a safe space and people did start telling us, but we certainly didn't start from that. So that's why we were bringing disabled artists in, because it literally felt the only way that one could bring in that creativity. And now it's just increasing numbers. I mean, it's still very small, but there is an avant-garde, there is a forefront of very diverse disabled people coming into the built environment and having pride about that and that's really exciting, I think.

### **Poppy**

Yeah, I think it's like you're mentioning. I think so often disability is kind of it can seem like quite an isolated sort of area and there can appear to be gatekeeping, which I don't think is ever intentional, but it's the nature of it. It can be quite hard to sort of get into that space of people

doing it, and so a lot of the questions I'll get asked when I talk to people is like what can I go away and read? What can I go away and look at? How can I learn more about these subjects? And that's going to be really difficult.

So I hope it'll kind of act as a primer. But it's also this strange one where I feel like I live a bit of a double life, where I'm in like the sort of disabled space and I can refer to Crip Time and say I'm low on spoons that day, and now everyone will know what I mean. And then I go into work and I have no way of explaining to people, like if I went into work and said I'm really low on spoons today, you'd just get stared at, like they just wouldn't understand what you were saying. So I think it's also really good to sort of broaden some of these terms out so that disabled people can feel more comfortable in a workspace or within architecture. We can broaden our sort of small niche out and like spread it out, because there's so much that everyone can learn from it.

### **Eliza**

I'm going to come on to 2024 at the moment, but you mentioned Spoon Theory a couple of times. I know it will be in the compendium, but could you, for anyone who's not familiar with that, give an overview? I mean I say give an overview, that might be quite difficult.

### **Poppy**

Yes, so spoon theory is a way of measuring energy. So it was literally invented by someone who was at a dining table and got some spoons out and went if I wake up I have six spoons and that is the amount of energy, and one of those spoons might get taken from just getting out of bed and one might be taken from having a shower, and so one day you might have five spoons when you wake up, one day you might have 10 spoons when you wake up. I mean, people use it in different ways, so there's kind of fluctuations. It's quite informal, I would say. People can kind of interpret it to make it how it works for them. But yeah, it's a way of kind of talking about your energy levels, particularly in the sort of chronic pain and fatigue sort of space.

### **Rosie**

It's also like a very good level to use for like over stimulation or just general health as well. I've explained it a lot to my friends and they know when I'm having a really bad day because I say, yeah, I'm at minus 10 spoons today. So they know I'm already depleted two days ago and I'm run down and I'm on a very thin level. So it is a great analogy to use and it's funny because it also becomes a joke where you start comparing spoons with your friends.

### **Jos**

But I also think it's really. I mean, I think all of these things help us get beyond where we're stuck in architecture and the built environment, which is around a very functionalist understanding of access, which is it's literally about getting these disabled bodies and minds from A to B. How do you get them in the door, how do they get to the toilet? And nothing is to do with the quality of

that experience. There's nothing about whether that's a beautiful experience. There's nothing about whether that's a meaningful experience, which, of course, for non-disabled people, those are the key things. When you're designing, you're not just trying to get people in the door, you're trying to make them enjoy and be welcomed into that process. So we're stuck in this incredibly functional understanding of access, like disabled people are just kind of molecules that have to be moved around.

And within all this work that's been going on for years and years, with all sorts of disabled people pointing out the barriers, complaining about the lack of equality of experience, inventing new terms, thinking about new ways of how this might be done collectively rather than just through individuals. That's been going on for years and years and it just feels like it's about time that non-disabled architects and people across the built environment started listening to that stuff and it's great. It's not even just like politically correct. You know that you have to do it. It's actually really beautiful. It's really wonderful. You know if it's Spoon Theory or Crip Time, which is about just how you work at a different pace. You may work at a different pace and lots of people work at a different pace. It gives you a way of talking about that and it gives you a way of talking about the quality of experience and not just the functionality of it.

### **Eliza**

I think that's a really important point. I think one of the things about Seats at the Table is, obviously there was so much thought and care that went into what the seats and table would be like, but also they were beautiful objects as themselves as well, like regardless of everything else that went into it. Anyone walking by couldn't have said they weren't beautiful. Then they also created space for different types of people.

I know you had different people who were drawn to particular chairs because there was something that they hadn't experienced before, just drawn to different parts of it. So I think this, as you mentioned, it's often one or the other, but examples like this show that it doesn't need to be and sometimes, yes, it looks different on if it's a building, if it's a chair, it looks very different situations, but I think some people just can't get beyond the fact that they can go hand in hand. It shouldn't take projects like this to make people realise that it's possible. But I'm also thankful for projects like this, where you have tried to introduce all of these elements to show people again that it is possible to do such things like this.

### **Rosie**

Just to draw on the point on the intersection between the two, they do come in hand. We're living in a society where we're an ageing population, we're going to end up with an increased number of disabled people. And this gets quite sad and depressing, but there is a higher rate of suicide within disabled people because of isolation. The people who are around today that are going to be in their 90s, let's say, or they survived to their 100s, are going to have a form of disability at some point, unfortunately, whether it's access or mobility, or dementia or Parkinson's. We really

need to start thinking about, like, not just for the people who need access, but thinking about your future self.

### **Jos**

I also think there is a bigger picture where these things connect, which is that the climate emergency does disable people, whether that's around pollution or whether it's around very poor living conditions, that we're in a situation where more and more people disabled people themselves are often put in very difficult situations. But like how many people? The very high proportion of people who died in Grenfell were disabled. So there's a whole thing about who's valued and who isn't, but also that the very act of the climate emergency will be disabling. It's part of our future and that's not to look at that. That's to say so when we're thinking about sustainability, we need to be thinking about, you know, the effect on humanity as well and on individuals, and that it's not just about getting old, although it's important. It's about fact that that's something we're also resisting.

### **Poppy**

I think there's also something to be said about how disabled people are more likely to be affected by the impacts of climate change, but then also disabled people are often the sort of unintentional victims of positive climate moves.

So this can be shown in quite a simple way with something like plastic straws, where there's been a huge effort to ban plastic straws, but actually plastic straws are and were originally designed as a medical device for disabled people and people in hospitals, and so you now have a situation where there are disabled people who need straws to be able to drink safely and in a sanitary way and they can't access plastic straws anymore, and glass and stainless steel and those sorts of things can't be easily cleaned by disabled people or have risks of breaking or aren't bendable.

So all of these alternatives don't really work for them and these plastic straw blanket bans have massively affected people. But I have also then heard this in an architectural concept where people are trying to dissuade people from using lifts by putting lifts in difficult to reach places in the building, because lifts produce a certain amount of carbon. Lift use in a building is seen as a really carbon intensive thing. So if we minimise the amount of people in the lift, then we'll reduce the carbon, and this is often dressed up in a nice way with like oh, let's have a 'social stair', which is a lovely concept but is really rooted in the notion of an able body being the most valuable. But also, having lifts that are hard to find is really difficult generally, because if you can't find the lift, you've all been down the dark alley of TFL trying to find the lift down the longest corridor ever known to man.

But then these also have intersectional risks where, like, if you're a single woman going off down some long dark corridor to try and find a lift, and then there's just sort of a man that's going to try and sexually harass you or whatever. It puts you in an incredibly vulnerable position. So there

are so many knock-on impacts of if we shove disability into the corner, and so I think this is why we need to be having these properly like intersectional discussions about things.

### **Eliza**

All of this is something that we really want to expand in the programme. I think there's a really beautiful series of events that happened connected to this project. It was part of the festival and something that we're really keen to make sure continues to be part of what we're talking about, particularly, obviously, with the theme this year. We're imagining there's a lot of opportunities to think about that, both in terms of physically reimagining the city, ways of working, ways of designing. I think this really comes into it and hopefully people will have been able to read the compendium by the time the festival comes.

Is there anything that you're hoping that people can use the festival to make a change, to have a certain conversation, anything you want to kind of challenge people to use the festival for?

### **Rosie**

Lift disabled voices. Have conversations with disabled voices, include disabled voices, whether disabled artists, they don't even have to be architects, just include disabled voices. So make sure that the workshop that you do, like you're able to reach out to people who are deaf and see if they need a sign language interpreter. But also have the conversation, like Chris Laing makes a good potent point, make sure that you find out if people who are deaf want to come to your event so that you're able to then provide for a BSL interpreter, but then also that you're not taking away a interpreter from someone who actually needs it. So don't provide it unless it's actually needed.

It's like making sure that the intervention or the pavilion that you provide is accessible. Like the great thing that we've had and I pointed out with Neil when we've been working together for a second year now with Beyond the Box's People's Pavillion. Like we gave them the brief that the pavilion that these students have to design has to be accessible in the first place. Like there's no conversation if or but – it has to be. Like it can be done at such a small scale. Because if you bring these small-scale conversations at such an event like LFA, where so many people come, especially with the amazing new job this year, where it's all over London, you're then starting to ignite these conversations happening all over the city and then people who have never had that kind of exposure before thinking, oh, why is this not everywhere?

It's amplifying disabled voices but then also providing the funding to be able to support them. Like, how do I change the system for them so they're constantly not having to like shout for themselves? I'm dealing with this all the time and it would be great if you could have someone who is able-bodied to just carry the conversation and break those glass ceilings for the people that are trying to punch through.

### **Jos**

I wanted to just to add, I think, my ask, and I know that it's always difficult, but that there ought to be an access fund or there ought to be a part, very deliberately, within each commission or each project which is given towards access funds for BSL interpreters, for audio description, for different ways of recording and capturing the event, that and ways of reaching out to a wider disabled audience.

### **Poppy**

Yeah, I think it's difficult because so many of these issues stem from broader societal issues around disability and, like we really are the last of the minority groups where I think it is still incredibly socially acceptable to completely segregate us. I think if you were to say that people from other protected characteristics groups were barred from an event because of, specifically because of that protected characteristic, there would be massive uproar. And yet I often think if I ever went to the architecture press about an instance of discrimination I faced, they'd probably go, 'and what?'. Like I can't at this moment in time, envision the headlines that you get about other things, and rightly so. Like I always want to say, like this isn't about playing a game of like minority Top Trumps, like this isn't straight comparison. There are still huge issues for all kinds of groups, but I think there's a level of social acceptability with disability discrimination that we don't see in other groups and which isn't even acknowledged. And there's also just a huge awkwardness, like the number of times that I'll reach out to someone at an event and be like 'I'm coming and I'm disabled,' and they're just like often people won't get back to you or you'll reach out to something and they'll just say no on health and safety grounds, like even from my own experience at work. I went to do a site visit with my colleagues and I arrived, got my PPE on, walked down to the site from site office and the health and safety manager just said you're not allowed on. And then we tried to follow up and they never got back to us. And so I've still never been to that site and whilst I was lucky that I'm at an early stage where that wasn't the end of the world, it wasn't key to the project that I went on site. But like there probably will be a time in my career where if I turn up to a site and if I can't do that, that's properly barring me from being able to fulfil contracts and those sorts of things. And so I think, yeah, there needs to be a broader acceptance within the broader society, but also particularly within architecture, that we just don't accept the sort of discrimination.

And also, if people are awkward, like most disabled people I know, I mean I'm not saying go up to a disabled person and say I don't know anything about this, educate me, because that's not right. There are resources out there. But if you say to a disabled person look, we've got a really small budget. We really want to be able to support you. Could you let us know how we can support you best? Then you start opening a conversation and actually if people come up to me in a sort of relaxed way and they're just like, I really want to be able to help make this accessible or whatever, yes, okay, at times it requires free emotional labour from disabled people which – in an ideal world – we wouldn't have to do. I mean, if you have the money, pay the person. But if you are just like one person running an event for LFA and someone's reached out, just go back to them and say, okay, let's have a chat, maybe we have a phone call, maybe we do something, have an email, maybe I take pictures of the entrance so that you can see it like there are a lot of things that are quite easy to do and quite cheap. And I mean I think that LFA is also already doing quite

a lot with the access rider and things, so there is some knowledge within their organization. So if you were running an event like, maybe reach out to Eliza!

### **Eliza**

Yeah, and I think we're not expecting the same thing from everyone, because we know we have individuals doing events, but then we also have massive corporations.

We're not expecting the same thing from everyone, but everyone can do something that is making events more accessible, but also disability-led events as well. I think it's something that we've had a couple in the programme, but it's an area that I personally really want to expand, because I think it will include a whole group of people who haven't been able to engage in the festival in one way, but also for anyone who wants to, it's a different way of, I think, interacting with the city, with the architecture, which will create even more conversations as well. It's something that is very big in my heart to make happen. But with everything you've just been saying and this list, I know, is probably going to be incredibly long I'm going to ask you to pick one thing that you could reimagine in this built environment of the city, in policy, in ways of working. What's one thing you could, if you could change right now, that you would reimagine?

### **Jos**

I can think of something, but I'm not sure it's quite what you're after. I get told very often by architects in practice that they would love to employ a disabled person but their office isn't accessible, and they say it in a kind of you know, like apologetic way, like I'm really sorry, but you know, like I don't have to do anything about it. That's just, unfortunately, that's the way it is. And for me there's two things about that. One is what type of accessibility?

And there are still many, many people like the invisible, of the disabilities that you might employ. You might still have this as a commitment, because we are getting more and more disabled people coming into architecture and it's really exciting. But those people are coming into practice and practice has to change what it does to support them. So for me, the big thing would be that people don't just say that in an apologetic way. They actually think next time they move offices we make sure that it's accessible. I mean, there's many practices that aren't like this. There's some really brilliant practices out there, but generally I have this said to me a lot and I feel like that's something that everybody who's in the profession, who's listening to this podcast, should like think a bit harder about – about how they actually support the next generation of much more diverse disabled, creative people into our world, because that's, to me, the thing that's really going to make change.

### **Rosie**

Do you think I can talk about my idea that we talked about?

### **Jos**

Yes!

### **Rosie**

Okay, so basically, off the back of the compendium, we're going to slip in a little leaflet of an idea that we have in mind that we're trying to find funding for at the minute. So it's something I've had in the background for myself like a very long time, and now we've got the platform to do it. I think it's an amazing opportunity. So, having grown up with third-generation dwarfism in my family, throughout the generations we've come up with different ideas of like how to adapt the home, but also to make sure that we adapt the home in a way that doesn't devalue the home if we were to sell it. So it's kind of bringing the conversation around more holistically and going beyond, like you say, part M. So I want to kind of create a piece where I could reach out to my community for those with dwarfism, because that's obviously my disability, where I ask you what are successful adaptations you've done to your home and then draw them up with scenarios. So, in my reimagined world for 2024, I want to try and reach out to the communities that I have access to and for them to send me ideas like this that they've thought of, whether it's something they found like a gadget that helps them or whatever and then create a collection of these specifications and products or drawings and rate it on sustainability, economy, finance, materials.

I've got a friend in Egypt who has dwarfism. They don't have the infrastructure. So the simple stool that you have that everyone can buy from the supermarket for five pound, that folds up. By the way, it used to be called a Turtle Stool and my dad got the original one 30 years ago. Probably might be something that he could sell on eBay for a grand, if he's listening! But anyway, like for my friend to buy in Egypt, it was about 120 quid because of export costs and inaccessibility of the infrastructure and exchange rates and everything and this is someone who I know, who is a 3D designer. This person could design or build their own version, but they've never seen one in their life and I literally showed them last year on camera this stool that we've all taken for granted that you can buy in Dun Elm for two pound, but to create a platform that could have this in a location that could then be used globally, and the aim is that there's a lobby on an A4 piece of paper that anyone can print and then funding will go to support stable people to do the drawings for these things.

This will be a platform where it be public and the idea anyone can print it from all over the world and then the idea being like practices, like with the compendium, can buy a printed copy.

The costs can also go towards funding or giving a grant to a disabled person who wants to go through a profession within the built environment, and this is something that I envision as being something that's going to happen within the next five to ten years and hopefully get passed on, and it could become like a catalogue of what Document Part M should be. It's hard to have that communication where you can talk about it from someone like I'm privileged being someone who's been born in the UK. We have a better infrastructure, especially if you're disabled, but we need to be able to help pass it down to be able to help and benefit someone like that. It will be incredible, like for me, that would be a legacy, that would be - I'm starting to cry now. A legacy I'm incredibly passionate to leave, and I think it's something that if we were able to fund in a way, then it would be amazing, and it could also be the start of what is next.

**Poppy**

I feel like mine's incredibly trivial after that. I think it's one that exposes kind of the normalized segregation, though it would be something as simple as making every tube station step free, every train station step free, because I saw a wonderful joke, I think on Twitter, and it was when the European space agency announced that they were going to send disabled people to space, and someone joked that the ISS will be accessible before the Northern Line, and I think that says a lot about where we're at with disability and how so much of it is just based around attitudes, and if we all just had a bit more of a like, can-do attitude towards making change for disability, then things could change. We could get an accessible northern line before there are disabled people in space, which feels like it should be achievable.

**Eliza**

Well, with that, is there one final thought or challenge you want to leave people with? We've covered a lot in this conversation and I feel like that's made me have even more questions than I thought at the start. But is there one thought or challenge you want to leave people with at the end of this conversation?

**Rosie**

The only thought I can have but it's what I say to everyone is if you have a friend who is a woman from a minority group or is disabled, if you want to help them, just listen, like just listen to what they have to say. Don't talk over them, don't try and interpret it, just listen and validate them.

**Jos**

Yeah, I think I'd say something that is just completely aligned with that, which is again something that's said to me really frequently when I give talks, whether it's in architectural schools or in practice in CPDs is that people say but the thing is, I feel really awkward, I don't know how to talk to disabled people. I feel I might say the wrong thing, and when I'm feeling quite rude about it, I say well, the thing is, what you have to realise is it's not about you, it's not about your feelings and your awkwardness. It's actually exactly what Rosie said. It's about listening, it's about taking notice, of paying attention to the lived narratives of people who are different than you, and absorbing that and being willing to say the wrong thing. Knowing that you will, I say the wrong thing all the time, it's alright. It's just like that's how you get into a situation where you, as a non-disabled person, are just much more comfortable in this world in recognising and enjoying the whole variety and diversity of our ways of being. That that's something to celebrate, not something to try and block out.

**Poppy**

Yeah, I think those are really important. I think, like Rosie's mentioned, it's also this sort of emotional labour that comes with being disabled and those things on the street where someone completely others you or whatever it is that can just kind of ruin your day. It's so important that those are included in conversations like this. But I think another thing that I often get thrown at me when I talk about disability in an architecture space. It's like oh, it's too complicated and if I design for this person then it excludes this other person. And yeah, that's absolutely true.

You can design a space for blind people and half the group want it to be really bright so that they can see better, and the other half of the group are light sensitive and would hate for a really bright environment. It is complex. It's never not going to not be complex, but as designers we always like to talk about how we're so good at problem solving, like if we talk about the perks of architecture education, why is it so important? We always go into these things like problem solving and act creativity and all of these things. And so it's like the challenge that I would give to people is like actually embrace the complexity, embrace the constraints that come up play with these things, because I think one of we're always looking for something new and disability has not properly been explored in architecture. So if you want to create something that hasn't been done before, embracing disability is a really good way of being creative, and there's so much joy that we can also get from disability.

### **Eliza**

If people want to find out more about each of your work. I think you've all been doing some incredible work on this project, but also on this project as well, and even outside of London. I know you've been travelling quite a bit recently with your work. Where can people keep up to date with each of your works, but also the project as well?

### **Rosie**

I'll bring it back to you the company Re-Fabricate. So we have a website at [refabricate.co.uk](http://refabricate.co.uk) and we also have an Instagram which we're more kind of vocal on, and then if you want to send us an email, it's at [hello@refabricate.co.uk](mailto:hello@refabricate.co.uk). And if you want to reach out to us, we do sustainability workshops about the built environment to all age groups and we're also opening into inclusive spaces, especially off the back of the collaboration with the Compendium and DisOrdinary Architecture Project.

### **Jos**

Everything about DisOrdinary Architecture is on our website, which is [disordinaryarchitecture.co.uk](http://disordinaryarchitecture.co.uk). We don't have any staff. We work project by project. We don't have any money, so the website's always out of date. Our Instagram account is always deeply out of date, so if anybody out there would like to do some sponsorship, we'd be very pleased to take your money, but that's where you reach us.

**Poppy**

I, as Jos has mentioned, I do work for the DisOrdinary Architecture project, but on a project-by-project basis, so feel free to reach out to me via DisOrdinary, but I also have a website, it's [poppylevison.com](http://poppylevison.com). Or reach out to me on social media if you want to chat disability.

**Eliza**

Amazing. So I think that's all the time we have, but a massive thank you, Rosie, Jos, Poppy, for talking to us about the project and exploring what Reimagine means to you all, but also for accessibility and the city more widely.

We'd love to hear your thoughts, listeners, on the 2024 theme also. If you have any ideas, inspiration or questions, do send us an email on info at [londonfestivalofarchitecture.org](mailto:info@londonfestivalofarchitecture.org). We'll be back next month. Until then, if you've liked this episode, you can follow Building Sounds on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or wherever you find your favourite conversations.

Listened to all the conversations? Give LFA a follow on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter or head to the website to keep up with all the latest news and updates and ways for you to get involved. Until next time!