

LFA Building Sounds: The Architectural Association (AA) with Jordan Whitewood-Neal (Dis) (Transcript)

Eliza:

Hello and welcome back to Building Sounds, the podcast exploring the stories behind the people, places, and projects in our city. Brought to you by the London Festival of Architecture, I'm your host, Eliza Grosvenor.

Last episode we explored the RSBC Life Without Limits Centre, and the process of designing genuinely inclusive spaces. We were joined by Joe Wheeler from EPR Architects and Shalni Sood from the RSBC, that's Royal Society for Blind Children.

In this episode, we're continuing conversations around the inclusivity of our public space and in particular looking at the Architectural Association in Bedford Square. For those who ask the media with the Architectural Association, it's the oldest school of architecture in the UK. It was founded in 1847, with the aspiration of promoting and affording facility for the study of architecture for the public benefit. And the space is still there in Bedford Square so you can see it, many of you I think will be familiar with it.

So I'm joined by Jordan Whitewood-Neal who is one of our Curation Panel Members for the 2023 festival. Welcome Jordan!

To begin with could you give us an introduction to yourself.

Jordan:

Yes of course! So my name's Jordan Whitewood-Neal. I'm now an independent researcher into architecture disability. I just completed my master's in research at University of Brighton where is researching the history disability at the Architectural Association and its relativity to domesticity and pedagogy. I now work in practice as well as teaching at the London School of Architecture and also in Nottingham Trent university, and also supervising a few bachelors dissertations at a couple of places. And I'm also Co-founder of research disability collective Dis which launched a few days ago. Which is about trying to enliven Disabled stories within architecture and built environment in order to help us understand and critique spaces better.

Eliza:

Amazing! So quite a few things that you are doing already. and I think this new venture of Dis is really exciting, I think there's a lot of excitement around that.

The other thing that you are is a Curation Panel Member for the festival this year, which is really exciting. And I think from the start, when we first gathered the Curation Panel, there's been some really interesting thoughts that you brought up, in that first conversation when we were talking about the theme deciding that 'In Common' would be the theme or LFA2023. And there was one particular idea that came up and actually we had it when we announced the theme - we had a quote, which I'm just going to read out. See if you can remember.

You said: "Drawing more from the social contemplation of what we as individuals and communities have in common, this year's theme reminds us that not only are people at the heart of architecture but that our similarities and differences are vital interrelations to acknowledge. But as well as the question of what, I think another important question is

where do we have in common? What places can and do we commonly go, and where can we not? The idea of the commons, common space, and commonality are all up for grabs, to either idealise or critique. Access to, in and around the city is dependent to an extent on the accessibility of public spaces, so when we ask where do we have in common, we are also asking, where are we truly able to go freely and spontaneously, and where is only common for some?

And I think that final sentence in particular is super powerful and basically we thought we couldn't leave it there, and we wanted to dive in okay further and really unpacked what that means for you and how you're thinking, or hoping, that will be sort of seen in the programme for the festival. So I don't if you've got any initial reflection on hearing that again, I know you wrote it a few months ago!

Jordan:

Yeah, it was very nice to hear back and sort of reflect upon that. I think that the crux of that quote was that question of where do we have in common - sort of really bringing the spatial element to the theme and the city. And I think why it's so important, is that one of the things I'm really interested in terms of how everyone, but especially Disabled people, experience cities it's this sort of idea of spontaneity, that idea that you can spontaneously through your own agency go anywhere. Which as we know isn't always possible, due to either sort of civic public space barriers or barriers of buildings themselves. So idea spontaneity is not just about being able to go anywhere, it's about what that represents about the city but you inhabit and you use and you live in.

This is particularly important in terms of the theme of 'In Common' because to spontaneously goes somewhere, for someone, is at the end of day something we value and a lot of people maybe take for granted, the fact that you can just go into this building or this space without having to question how you get through it, how you get there.

And you know, public transport in London is a good example of that. You know you maybe have the most accessible building in the world but if the infrastructure around it does not support it the spontaneity sort of disintegrate. So that question of where becomes pivotal to understanding the equities or inequities exist within in London, or elsewhere. And it also, I think, enables us to bring awareness to the spaces aren't accessible or don't enable spontaneity.

I prefer the idea of enabling spontaneity or the benefit of spontaneity rather than the idea of access. Because I think it speaks to a much more fundamental aspect of moving and being in the city.

Eliza:

Absolutely love the idea of enabling spontaneity, I think that interesting term and I think it's not often the language used, so it's really interesting context. And you've mentioned the infrastructure around spaces and in between spaces I think is really key. Having said that there's one building that you've been looking at in particular with some of your research around these ideas and I wondered if you share a little bit about what that research is in context of this conversation.

Jordan:

Yeah, so for the last three years of my degree, which finished a couple of months ago, it was predominantly focused on the Architectural Association's building in Bedford square. And the fundamental so apart that research was about a man called Andrew Walker who

was a tutor at the AA from the 1980s to early 2000s. And he was Disabled, he sort of became Disabled in the early 1980s and returned to the school a few years after that. And he started something called the 'Environmental Access Course' which was a sort of disability centred course, that he ran from 1992 to 1999.

And that was sort of the focus the research but what the research also looked at was the building itself and how both the building and its management and its place in the school played a role and relationship to disability. And actually spontaneity plays a really interesting part in theorising that. Because well I also got time in that research was this idea of reliability. Now reliability progressively became a very complex term in the research, as something that may consider as a quite simple idea actually started to unravel. So it was not just how do you rely on something or someone but how does a space and architectural institution make you as a person reliable. You know to reliably know where you are, it's reliably knowing where you can go, to reliably know how you're going to get into the building.

So the AA was interesting because we know - I think a lot people know the AA front door as it's kind of primary entrance, it's kind of that sort of signifier of the school and it's also interesting that the AA is in many ways a public institution, you can just go off in from the street into the building without having to, kind of, have key cards etc, like in the other places. So the institution sort of presents itself as a public extension of public space. But for Andrew, it was a different situation and Andrew as a signifier for disability in a wider sense. Because when he was there when he became Disabled and returned to the school, his sense of spontaneity around the building completely transformed. And this is a Georgian building, with multiple complex levels, narrow corridors, steps up to the entrance, no lifts - no usable lifts anyway at the time! So what was before his accident free roam completely changed. And the two bits I focused on to sort of illustrate these ideas were the front door to Bedford Square and the back doors to Morwell Street.

And the front door, for a period of time in 1990s, had a metal ramp that was put in place - temporarily... permanently! - to enable access to that main entrance. Which consequently enabled a spontaneity of movement for Andrew and his students, who were also Disabled or had mobility issues, which was amazing thing. But then that was actually removed not long after that because a local conservation group complained that it wasn't fitting with the amazing Georgian terraces in Bedford Square.

So that removed one set of spontaneity because then if you wanted to access that door you had to ask someone to get the ramp out for you, which took about 45 minutes, you know. So that freedom that you have to be able to move in that building, easily, was removed. So the Morwell Street St entrance on the back became his primary entrance and that was often locked and even requires key cards, which is what you have now, or required security to come and unlock it, and then when Andrews inside it was unlocked again. So these doors actually become really kind of like contentious spaces and contentious objects because they affected spontaneity. So it really, when we started talking about the theme of 'In Common', it became really interesting to reflect upon that research and reflect on how that kind of lack of spontaneity created a reliable person in Andrew. Because they knew where he was because he could only go certain places, essentially with permission or with help. And I think there's an important lesson to learn from that story.

Eliza:

Amazing. And it's still, am I right in thinking, the ramp is not there today? Which means

that physical access, that spontaneity, just doesn't exist. What does that mean for - obviously you mentioned what it meant to Andrew, but what does it mean today, in a world that you think we might have progressed a bit further and particularly maybe an independent school like the AA, which is often seen as different from some of the bigger institutions, what does that mean? What are they missing out on with that?

Jordan:

It's interesting because I mean the ramp itself reflects one type of disability in terms of mobility or the use the wheelchair. But I think it's the attitude towards it as an object and what it represents in terms of providing spontaneity that has enabled it represented it from wider idea of disability as a whole and how the institutions or society's attitudes towards it need changing.

So today what it means, is that an institution that is very progressive, or has been very progressive in some sense, is sort of lacking in what would you consider fundamental aspects of what is essentially kind of a public institution right?

I mean certainly personally; I was at the AA a couple weeks ago for an event and we had to use a very very steep metal ramp to get up those steps. This is 20 years after Andrew was there and the situation if anything it's got worse. But what value of this research has been, and if I bring it into the present, is that it's highlighted that an issue. Yes it should have been highlighted when Andrew was there because was 20 years ago but it's sort of bringing it to the forefront again and making it very clear the fact that this is an issue still and now it needs addressing the much more meaningful sense. And there are great people at the school who are kind of pushing that now and sort of we're working together to kind of understand how the ramp is maybe just a signifier of wider change.

But I think the AA's interesting because if we can do it there, in what is a very difficult space, it kind of acts as a very important case study in a wider sense in terms of how we start to address London, which is you know city of old buildings, which in many senses are reluctant to change and the access is a very, kind of, uncritical idea sometimes - it's kind of more about, kind of, pragmatic functionalist idea, in many senses in terms of how institutions view it.

I mean David Gissen, who's a researcher in the US has a book coming out in the new year, which is called 'The Architecture of Disability' and it's thinking beyond access. And I implore you all, I've just been reading it and I implore you all, to read it in the new year because I think it really brings attentional how access is the starting point, it's the very fundamental thing you can do and now it's viewing disability as a way to actually move beyond that and think more critically about spaces. So yeah, the AA is a stepping stone, I think, hopefully towards wider thoughts about it.

Eliza:

Yeah I think it could be really interesting to see how the AA move forward. And I think you've mention event series that the public programme team at the AA did a few weeks ago which was around new standards and are questioning access and comfort but also different groups of people who use space and feelings that exist presently and the requirements that just aren't fulfilled. Which is a really interesting process I think for a lot of people. I think there were a lot of people who were very familiar with some of the conversation but also some people who were very new to them, so I'm hoping it was a real chance to move forward - which as you mentioned should have been there with Andrew but wasn't quite in the same way. But I think it's been really great that you've been able to

bring his work and his teaching the forefront again and sort of reopen these conversations, which I think is really lovely.

And actually reminds me, I think, of the those that you've written for Dis, which was around - I think it's something like 'Dis is gentle. Dis is disruptive' I think was one of the bits that was there, which I thought was really interesting. And it is not sort of throwing in people's faces and saying this is what you should do but it's also an element of challenging, which I think comes in this conversation. And I know a lot of the collective is about stories and gathering all that sort of live experience and knowledge and using it to make an impact on industry and the city and how they work. I don't know if you've got any thoughts on that and what you're hoping that space that you're carving out will look like and provide for the industry.

Jordan:

Yes, so I mean, this was actually kind of born out of an event we did at the LFA, called Invisible Tales. Which was a kind of short event which brought together a group of different practitioners from both art and architecture, to basically tell stories of themselves in the built environment. And it could've been, you know, a walk home or a train ride or visiting a club, so many different things that came up in that, a trip with family. It was kind of things that you don't think about too much when you're living in that and then when you reflect on that you start to see how they kind of open up opportunities' to think about the spaces we use every day on the issue and tensions that come up with that.

And that kind of inspired this idea of a collective that tackles this word atomization of Disabled voices, predominantly in sort of art and architecture, because I feel like in previous years and before that, Disabled voices have been quite separate, working sort of you know individually, apart from sort of strictly amazing movement in terms of activism that happened in the past. But then in terms of architecture specifically, there are so few Disabled people actively working in architecture in terms of research and practice and engaging with disability and architecture as a topic, as an intersection. But now we have so many great people who are coming out of uni, going into practise, going to research, talking events who are bringing attention to this.

So as much as this was about kind of collective that will do projects and do pieces of work and work with people, it was also just an opportunity to highlight the fact that there are amazing people doing work, who are Disabled and who are valuable and whose stories can actually impact things. So that I do have been disruptive you know that the use of Dis not only came from the kind of disability studies world, where you have the Dis and the / and you have the ability afterwards but also came from Dis as a kind of like a prefix of opposition right? How do you start to oppose fundamental ideas of space? So that's where that came from and we're really looking forward to the new year and what we're going to do there.

I know me and James have got, James Zatka-Hass, who founded Dis with me, have got a lot of ideas that we want to implement, so it should be exciting. But we're also excited about how it can relate to the 2023 theme in terms of 'In Common' I think there's a lot to question, as my quote sort of highlighted.

Eliza:

Amazing. And I think you've just mentioned the coming together of people within the collective but also connected and I think there's some amazing voices that have come out and I go back this event and those conversations as well. I think it was just a really

beautiful space it was carved out for these conversations to happen and I felt really privileged to be hearing from such amazing people, sometimes challenging conversations and things that were necessary the easiest to hear but also super important and created this really beautiful space, so I think it is we need trying to see, as you mentioned, what comes out of that in the new year.

And I guess you sort of touch on it already, but what is the importance of having these conversations and questioning the standards and not just sort of going in the same way that we have done, what does that mean to you?

Jordan:

Yeah, so Manijeh and Harriet did an amazing job with that series and then we had like several conversations about it in the run up and sort of the question like what it can be and how it can have an impact beyond the conversation itself -which is always very difficult with architecture! I feel that we always have these conversations with events and then it kind of disappears afterwards, so we're very kind of aware of that fact.

So firstly the benefit of having the six in the series, which sort of covered the really broad range of standards and brought in some brilliant people, the fact that those conversations happens in the AA itself, there was sort of a constant awareness of the tension between what was being spoken about what the AA offers that does it does not offer.

And like you said like you said, there were people that brought up difficult questions and brought up difficult experiences they had there, and I think that was why it was so important to have it in that space, because you weren't just speaking to the people in the room, you were speaking to the space itself.

And now, the plan is to have a next event which happens in the new year, which is actually about starting to think and reflect and address some of the issues that came up in that series. Not just in terms of access or the building itself but in terms of how many different communities and groups can start to carve out space there, But again use it as a site of investigation, a very challenging site really, to think about these issues and I'm hoping, you know, that provides not only a platform to think about interventions in the space but really to start to inform the AA's own thoughts about how it wants to move forward, you know.

We have a new director there now, who is going to have to take these ideas forward, you know, we have a brilliant council there. So yeah, the AA's always been a very democratic institution, the students have always had an equal vote in terms of who leads the school but you've also got to have a varied demographic for it to be truly democratic right?

So as much as it's important to make sure the space is suitable and useful for everyone, to allow for that idea of spontaneity again, you've also got start think about who's actually at the school, who's studying there, who's teaching, who's accessing it regularly, you know. Because unless that's diverse, the conversations there aren't going to be as productive, So I think that's another reason why the New Standards series was so brilliant because it brought those voices into the school, into the space, and gave them that opportunity to kind of engage with it critically. And I think now it's kind of raised a lot of questions, which I think is what's needed. So I think time will tell about how well those thing will materialise into actual change but we're very determined to make sure that something does! And I think that's the important think.

Eliza:

That's really great to and I'm really intrigued to see what's going to come out of the new year. And I'm just thinking slightly separately from those events are going on, how can people with the Festival in June next year, interrogate some of those conversations as well, and also to challenge their buildings, maybe it's an architect getting involved - how can

they think about the spaces that they created - if it's community groups or individuals or artist, how can they respond to the spaces around them and taking some of these ideas and apply it to their specific contexts as well?

Jordan:

So I mean, to start of, you know, the discussion that we had as a Curation Panel about this theme somewhat centred around the fact that it's maybe slightly more open than previous years, in terms of how you could respond to it, right? Because the idea being in common and speak to many social and spatial opportunities. So that was the first thing we had in mind. But what, I think, the benefit of that for people who are applying to do events at the Festival is that they can really start to, in the same way that I sort of wrote that quote about questioning what the theme was, you can start to carve out your own idea of what 'In Common' means, and develop a very nuanced idea of what that is, and what it means to you. Because what 'In Common' means to me will be very different to what means to somebody else.

And I think that's the value in it and that's the first thing anyone that's developing proposal should be asking. And then you know, I focused on where, but you could use any of the other W's here, you know: Why do we have stuff in common? What about spaces enables or does not enable us to have stuff in common? You know, what role the spaces we create or use play in that? So I think that's where you can be very critical in things that are either designed or used or live in.

But I think it's also, you know, as the theme suggests, a very socially focused theme this year. Which I think after last two years is something we need and it's nice, you know. I mean I hadn't been up to London from Brighton for the two and a half years before I went to the AA for the New Standards series a couple weeks ago and there was something really lovely about being in that room with fifty people. People who'd I known for the last two years but I haven't met, with a similar idea of what you wanted want to achieve there, asking questions, asking similar questions. And we all actually had something in common there, in terms of what we are trying to achieve at the school and beyond that. So I think, yeah, I think that's why I said in the quote that people are so important in whatever we achieve through this. And I'd love people to engage with communities that are often left out these conversations. And I know that if we try to bring some Disabled voices into the conversation again. Invisible Tales was kind of like a sort of test bed, a sort of micro version of something you could do, hopefully there's grander things we can try to achieve this year.

Eliza:

Very exciting to see what that might look like. And I think it's really interesting. I think sometimes a lot of people think London Festival of Architecture... Architecture with a capital A, it might just be all these sorts of big star building but also, it's a very human side of how we are within our cities, those everyday spaces. We're in buildings 90% of the time, particularly more with the pandemic, so it's really lovely to hear you tease out that side of architecture and the theme, which might not initially come into people's mind when they hear the theme in relation to the festival. So I think we're coming to the end of the conversation now. I think I could talk for a long while about this and with you. But is there one particular thing that you'd like our listeners to take away from this conversation.

Jordan:

One thing to take from this ... I think on the personal level, we spoke about my research and stuff. I think the reason I was so passionate about that work it was because I could

actually see myself reflected in it. Andrew I had, apart from amputation, very identical disabilities, in terms of spinal injury and a wheelchair user, so reading his experiences there and letters had written and the issues he faced were very a personal in terms, of how I could see myself having that issue or I have had the issue in the past in different spaces.

So there's something powerful about being able to see yourself in relation to something, which is why I say when you are addressing the theme of 'In Common', you've got to understand that in relationship to yourself or your group or your community, however you are addressing it. And I think that would enable a rich response to it, yeah. I think it's something people do but I think there's something that we can do even more actively. And I think you can get you can something powerful for it, from yourself but also in terms of output you produce from it. And that's going to enable a really lovely festival, if we start to enable ourselves to exist within the theme rather than being an external event that we kind of just ran. I don't know if that makes sense but I think, I just want to enable people to understand their place in it, in relation to not just the theme but in relation to other people.

Eliza:

It definitely made sense I think, and what a lovely place to end this conversation on. Thank you very much Jordan for this conversation.

Jordan:

My pleasure.

Eliza:

We'll be back with a new episode next month. Until then if you've liked this conversation, make sure to subscribe to the channel and if you really liked it why not share it with a friend, a colleague or family member. And if this conversation got you inspired to explore the theme of 'In Common' for yourself, head to the LFA website to find out how you can get involved. Until next time!