

## 2016 Conference Transcription

Date	Friday 1 April, 2016
Session Title	Community
Session Time	14:00 - 16:00
Moderator	Dan Vernon
Speakers	Assemble (Mathew Leung)
Notes	n/a

Intro	<p>Hello and welcome to Future Everything's 2016 festival podcast series. Over two days, in Manchester's iconic Town Hall, we tasked designers, artists, scientists, and many more, to re-think our resources. From life, earth and intelligence, to community and uncertainty, our speakers ask what we might need less, and more of, in our new future. In a globalised society, how do people re-evaluate the resources we have in new ways together, and what will our future communities look like? In this session about community, we heard from Mathew Leung from architecture collective Assemble 2015's controversial Turner Prize winners. He spoke about their socially engaged work that speaks to address a typical disconnection between the public and the process by which places are made.</p>
Speaker	<p>So thanks for inviting me today. I think my talk's going to be slightly different to Sarah's and Madeline's, partly because, as Dan said, I'm part of a collective, one of many, and that's a collective that works across art, architecture, and design, so we very much deal in the everyday, and then now, in lots of circumstances. We primarily work from our home, which is in Stratford, which is a building that occupies a kind of minimal space between all the transactions that happen around [inaudible 01:42] big changes in the city there, and it's been awaiting demolition for some time now. The luxury that it affords is a great amount of space for cheap, which we share with other practitioners, and it's a home for experimentation and for work, and also for play and for socialising, for building a kind of community, a creative community around. But enough of that for now.</p> <p>Let's talk about the kind of near future, which is what we're here to discuss. And we all get a bit hysterical in architecture and design, I think, as Sarah pointed out, that when we're talking about the near future, people in design have a kind of meltdown, and on the same slide, actually if you type in 'future of architecture', this is what you get. So obviously this is a very different vision to probably what most of us think cities should be like, and we think 'why isn't it like</p>

this? Why isn't it like [inaudible 02:54]? Why isn't it like this hall that we're in now?' But we all know that we don't live or work like this now.

The economy of the way that buildings are made, that architecture and design is made, is completely different. So the conversation that we have centres around sustainability, around adjusting existing building stock, around solar panels, UPVC glazing etc. and obviously this is a very important topic, because energy as a resource is limited, but it's a very narrow way to discuss what we really mean, which is the value of the future life of the project.

So I guess the question is, what happens when we locate this discussion, and orbit around something that's a kind of more agile, more responsive, even more prosaic, and even maybe a temporary form of design and architecture? And I'm going to talk about this primarily in the scope of our own [budget? 03:53], because that's the subject I know best. And I think that it's difficult to talk about sustainability and future, especially in the context a young practice, where actually sometimes the only opportunities that you get are time-limited, or very space-limited, and sometimes this space limitation, or time limitation, is a mechanism. It allows you to test and take risks that you couldn't do in the kind of permanent scenario. Sometimes it's the only way really to get your hands on any kind of space.

So this is the case in a lot of our projects at the beginning. So this is a project space for a Café OTO, it's a kind of music venue, and a space that was guaranteed only a three year lease. So it needed to be dismantled essentially after that period, and it had an extremely limited materials project, but luckily, a huge kind of community of interested people to draw upon. So if this building was going to be returned to the earth, it made sense that it was made from the earth. So in a very low-tech way, stacks were [inaudible 05:00] excavated, put into old rice sacks, stacked on top of one another to create the walls of the building. It's a very kind of simple story actually, which is very, in a material sense perhaps, is quite [done? 05:13], but in a narrative sense, is actually super romantic and super helpful. And so another project that we did in the early days, it was called [inaudible 05:25], a self-initiated project that was a screening events space for a series of events and films over the course of ten weeks. And the key thing really was to change the expectations of space [savers? 05:40 you see, it's probably not somewhere that you really want to be spending your time. But the things that make it appear threatening, the fact that it's out of the way, undercover, and slightly to one side, are actually the great attributes.

So what we're trying to do is tell another story about that space, and so that one was imagining a stubborn household owner who decided not to move their house when the A12 came. And so these wooden bricks gave the space a house-like appearance, and this is a scaffold frame that was clad in timber bricks from reclaimed peers, reclaimed railway sleepers etc, to create the structure, and eventually these were repurposed after the lifetime of the project, as [inaudible 06:32] kind of very over-engineered [planters? 06:35] from a local primary school, and there's been capital investment in sight, and it means that the fence has been removed, so there's now a through route and there's a service plot waiting for inhabitation.

This is the case for the very first project that we did together as well, which was undertaken by a very loose group of individuals right at the very beginning of when we were starting off together as a group, which we had no expectation at all for the future, you know, not even a kind of practice which was for fun. And it did have a rationale; eventually the backstory is that it's about the reuse of automobile infrastructure, and a return of the picture palace and other typology that's vacating our city centre at the moment. There's a sense about thrift and of repurposing materials that we've touched on in other projects, such as reclaimed scaffolding for chairs, or timber [inaudible 07:32] to create the signs on the roof that were stripped out of the building behind, and we begged, stole, and borrowed our way to the rest of it basically, a project that was completely one-off. It was programmed and run by quite a naïve young group. And lots of these materials were taken wholesale to our home in Stratford where we ran a cinema and a café and a pizzeria for a few years. Unfortunately, we no longer have this. The lunches were great, but we have a much healthier diet now, I think now that we're not consuming all of that. But all of these are very direct examples when we're talking about architecture and sustainability, and the long-term we're talking here about materials and recycling in the short-term.

But really, that's not the function, or it's not the purpose of these projects. These are telling stories about reuse really, and they are very much a product of liberally grabbing opportunities that are out there as young, hungry practitioners, and they have a very different economy to private house extensions etc. So that material awareness is an absolute necessity, not only something to aim for.

So we're also engaged in large scale, more conventional building projects, which is the extension and refurbishment of Goldsmith's College to provide spaces for the display of art, and smaller exhibition designs and so forth, and this is a traveling exhibition that's going to Miami next, which is great.

But I'd like to talk a little bit more about two projects in a bit more detail, which talk more about the questions of future, or at least where the question of future is more prominent, and both of these end up in workshops, and although they're very different in their scope, and they grow from different places, they embrace a lot of the same ideals that you've seen of direct action of thrift, and an interest in materials, and the kind of whole economy of the project. And the first of these is a workshop called Blackhorse Workshop in Walthamstow, down in London, and the reason I wanted to talk to you about this is because the idea of direct action, which as I was talking about is very much a necessity because of a lack of capital funding primarily, became a kind of obsession of ours in the coming year.

So whilst we did have a pizzeria and a café etc. and they were getting nice and rotund, the interest, or the preoccupation, with making, eventually took precedence. And so in our own studio, we gradually assembled a range of tools. We've forged alliances with others to pool and support equipment, and I guess what we're doing is acting on this feeling that making is not something that's done by someone else. This change is not something that's done or made by someone else, but it's something that can be immediate, however small, and

actually the fact that you can put something together yourself, perhaps on a very small scale like this, you know, this is kind of furniture scale, actually means that you can understand that everything around you is put together in the same way. It's conceived of by someone, you know, the city around you has made the decisions, they were made somewhere, and so there's got to be somewhere where this urgency, this ability to change, is possible.

So in Blackhorse Workshop, the question is really, how is this feeling made manifest? How is it made public? And there's examples of this urgency across the world, so there's Men's Sheds on the left, which is a movement that started in Australia which looks to engage socially isolated older men in the social act of making... originally doing their backyards, but actually, to bring those people together in order to start a conversation about the things that they're making. And then [inaudible 11:50] Space, which is again a very different focus, which is very much focused around electronics and tech etc. And they're all very valid ways to approach it, but we're thinking of how this idea of being able to change the world around you; how can you manifest this more in a more public institution? And how can you make it feel as though it's something you can just drop in?

So very much like your library or a gym that you might go there, not to read or to work out, but in order to make a change in the physical environment around you, and that this place would be something that supports this act as a social act, and also as an act of leisure as well as just something that's completely about manufacture.

And so this is based in an area that's undergoing a lot of rapid change, and you can see there's always been a huge tension, and it's not a recent thing. This is a photo from the seventies of the kind of tension between the industrial and residential spaces in the outer boroughs of London. And so it's super important that all the things that we're doing address these tensions, address the complex situations in which we're placing them in or we're growing them out of. And so pretty boring stuff like this; a survey of existing provision is absolutely as important as going out there with a silly wagon and talking to people.

So you understand actually what kind of things you're competing with, how you're going to change the balance, and the economy of a particular place. And so this is a stupid little wagon, but it is really fun, and that's partly trying to redress the focus or the idea of what a workshop could be in that space. Obviously [inaudible 13:54] you completely change your target audience, and you get them to participate in more mundane things like this, which eventually end up in the story about the project, which is partly a necessity, because it needs a business case, but it's also partly about making the case for the project as a whole, which is not something that you always have to do with architecture and design projects. So this element is creeping in and ever-present in a lot of the earlier projects, is about how it operates in economy, how it operates holistically.

So as part of this whole programme, it wasn't just finding the building, but it's employing three staff, and it's now gone up to five, and so we had to develop the

physical design with them, and the programme of course, so that alongside [keen? 14:45] makers such as Hannah here, a licensed designer, you might also go to the workshop to undertake a more structured learning course, or equally, you might hang out in the café, because that's the kind of place you should be where actually it doesn't matter whether you're a pro, semi-pro, or a complete amateur, actually that creative act is something that stands for hope and optimism and the ability to change the world around you.

So although it was originally intended to be a pilot project, I think I touched upon this idea before, that actually this temporary opportunity is a way to show what's possible, and so actually, it's not two years old, it celebrated its second birthday quite recently, and the lease on this particular building has been extended to 2019, because I think that actually what we've done is been able to tell the story about why this is an important part of our city and why actually it should be at least there until 2019. And so there's been funding secured for an extension of this workshop, and this kind of short-term opportunity has been backed up by a longer-term plan, and a bigger story is something that's enabled us to actually look much further into the future in terms of planning.

So it will take a little while to explain, but this housing project also ends up in the workshop, and you can probably see where the obsession, or the direction that we're going in here. So this started off as one of the more conventional projects that we were talking about, the architecture, there's houses involved, it's definitely bricks and mortar. And it's a very complex concept that we're talking about. This is Toxteth, so you might recognise it was in the BBC, all over the news recently. Probably about a year ago there were all these houses being sold for one pound, and it's an area in Liverpool in which its recent economic and social history are indicative of Liverpool at large. So it's the once thriving port city is in relatively severe economic decline and shrinking population, high unemployment, and the Toxteth riots, decades ago now, were really a last straw.

So there's a system of managed decline where actually lots of these houses, which were once the best in the area, now look like this. And so this government pathfinder scheme essentially is looking... you can see that actually loads of them don't have roofs on them, and the reason is to stop them being squatted, and also because they ran out of money to demolish them. So these houses have stood empty for a long time, they've been boarded up. It's a condition you see across a lot of Liverpool, and you know, also there's areas in Manchester, across the North West, that look like this.

But what we had here was a group of residents who eventually would form a community land Trust who took responsibility for their neighbourhood and understood that the smaller things that they did actually represented a much bigger change, or an idea of what the area could become. So very small, domestic actions, such as cleaning, painting, and planting, were actually very powerful things, that in this void that was created in the absence of authority, they were actually given space to exercise an enormous amount of self-control. And so the intention of refurbishing these houses came next as a... we didn't know the obvious next step is to actually ensure that these houses would remain

in an ownership model which was not entirely private or public, but somewhere in between and would be affordable. So the ambition was not to enforce a single ambition, a single kind of top-down uncompromising thing, but a series of smaller projects that would allow for this slow building-up of this community again.

So the very first of these was the refurbishing of ten houses on Cairns Street, a very modest start really. You can see that it's not that straightforward a job. Some of these houses aren't in great nick, but equally, if they aren't, then there's an opportunity there. So if floors are have fallen through, then maybe that's an opportunity to create more generous double height spaces, and equally, if the ceiling needs replacing, actually doing it in a kind of [inaudible 20:02] geometry is just basically the same price, so why not take advantage of the fact that you've got to re-do all of this again? And equally, if a roof or a floor has completely fallen through and is probably going to take a lot of money, a lot of effort to turn it back into a house, why not leave it as a communal facility, which is a winter garden? I mean, you're not doing anything else with it for now. So the budget's [inaudible 20:30] equivalent cost of rebuilding houses as new is actually comparable, partly because of a tax break, there's no VAT on new builds. So actually, there's this perverse incentive to tear down a lot of these houses, which have all this memory imbued in them, and to replace them with newer building stock.

So lots of these interventions were actually just fairly standard building materials and finish just taking care of parts of the house, and this obviously isn't enough for a housing scheme. For something that grows from such a great place, we needed to find a way to create a sense of pride or a new vernacular for these houses in a way which is much cheaper.

So each of these houses are kind of packed with a small element of highly bespoke handmade elements; so the mantelpiece is the heart of the home, ceramic door knobs etc. tiles that use the standard 150/150 white towel that you'll see everywhere, but embellished in a way that creates a kind of sense of care. And so, from the start, we're interested in how this process of rebuilding could support the rebuilding, the infrastructure of the area as a whole. So Granby Workshop, which eventually sprung out of that, was the social enterprise which we set up in one of the local empty shops. And obviously, there's no coincidence that just as this process was starting up, we we're nominated for the Turner Prize for 2015, and so this seemed like a perfect opportunity actually to use all of those conversations that are really boring about what art is and what the future of art is and where it's all going, into something that's a lot more product... something which you can feel is actually contributing in a positive way to community.

So the workshop trains and employs a team of local people to make products for the houses, but these are also available for sale. So, in a way, the great opportunity that we've got is also that these houses, there's so much space, the same way that we have our space in Stratford, and so we're able to use them as productive spaces, and we're able to use the opportunity in Tramway in Glasgow in the Turner Prize show to provide essentially a massive showroom

	<p>for this idea. And so basically, also if you're stuck, if there's any upcoming birthdays etc. you know where to go; <a href="http://www.granbyworkshop.co.uk">www.granbyworkshop.co.uk</a> there it is. I'll click quickly through these products, because there's a lot of them which obviously embody or have on them the mark of the maker, and that's not something which is like fetishising this idea of the handmade, but it's understanding that actually, all of these products come from somewhere, and so rather than trying to disguise that, rather than trying to make these all uniform, this embraces the elements chance, and so whether that's in the, not off-cuts, but I guess the end of the mix for the bigger concrete fireplaces. They also use these to make smaller products. So in the long-term I guess the ambition is the workshop grows, it develops skills through training and creating employment opportunities, but really it's part of a slightly taking a step back and a slightly bigger picture of the area, of the very near future, which isn't the one that both Sarah and I have shown, but there's one that is about being able to promote a confidence in an area and tell a story about the area which is very different to the one to date.</p> <p>So it's a very low-tech vision, in a sense, and it's a messy one, one that Sarah's also touched upon, and this is based around an interest in other disciplines as well as architecture, and design outside of those things which you are strictly responsible for. We believe that partly the fact that this idea of workshop making has cropped up [25:05] believe that this is a future in which the sharing of resources is just basically the most important thing, and it's one that's particularly personal, as we are about to be evicted from our own premises. And so our own future is very precarious. But as is the case with our past, I think it is one that is DIY. Thanks.</p>
<p>Outro</p>	<p>We hope you enjoyed Mathew's talk, and thanks for listening. You can hear the rest of the talks from 2016 at <a href="http://futureeverything.org/2016podcasts">futureeverything.org/2016podcasts</a>.</p>

[Transcription ends]