

LONDON FESTIVAL OF ARCHITECTURE 2008: A Q&A WITH PETER MURRAY, CHAIRMAN OF THE EVENT

By Léa-Catherine Szacka

This year, the biennial London Festival of Architecture (LFA) lasted a whole month. Indeed, from 20 June to 20 July 2008, the LFA put forward more than 600 activities across the capital, which together comprised the month-long celebration that tried to make architecture engaging and exciting for both a new and a familiar audience.

LFA 2008 was a celebration, a festival, a happening. It constituted an event, an architectural event. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an 'event' is 'the (actual or contemplated) fact of anything happening,' or 'anything that happens, or is contemplated as happening; an incident, occurrence.' Yet there seems to be another meaning to the word 'event'. Indeed, an 'event' is also something that has certain duration and occupies a geographical space.

Therefore, taking into account this latter meaning, an 'architectural event' would be a happening focused on architecture, while having certain duration and occupying a fixed geographical space. In other words, an 'architectural event' is something very similar to an exhibition about architecture whose main goal is to engage the public with architecture. But does an event like the London Festival of Architecture really manage to engage the public with architecture?

A post-festival report produced by LFA 2008 stated that some 250 000 people attended the festival events, while thousands more saw the street gallery exhibitions and installations located around the city. Nevertheless, these numbers do not tell us much about the possible success of the event. Did this year's festival propose the innovation and transformation of the status quo? Was it a sign of changes occurring or yet to come?

The festival was highly publicized. Brochures were distributed across the city, and the website and official icon trail guide were handy and easy to consult. Moreover, to ensure a good participation, the organisers of this year's edition of the biennial festival decided to extend the territory covered by the event. In 2006, the festival centred on the Smithfield area, but also extended its reach to include a route connecting King's Cross and Bankside. The 2008 edition divided London's territory into five hubs, with one weekend focus and one emblematic figure per hub:

Hub1, Kensington + Chelsea + Knightsbridge, 21-22 June, with Richard Rogers, architect.

Hub2, Canary Wharf + Stratford + Greenwich Peninsula, 28-29 June, with Richard Burdett, urbanist.

Hub3, King's Cross + Bloomsbury + Fitzrovia + Covent Garden, 5-6 July, with the Architecture Association's students.

Hub4, Southwark + South Bank, 11-13 July, with Mark Wallinger, artist.

Hub 5, Clerkenwell + City of London, 19-20 July, with Farshid Moussavi, architect.

In order to learn more about the past, present and future of the LFA, I addressed a few questions to Peter Murray, chairman of the London Festival of Architecture.

L.-C.S.: Can you explain briefly the historical origins of the London Festival of Architecture? How and when was this event first organised in London? Is the LFA now a permanent organisation linked to the New London Architecture centre (NLA)? Is the Festival due to take place regularly every two years?

P.M.: The Festival was started in 2004 under the title of London Architecture Biennale (LAB04 and LAB06); I developed the idea as a reaction to the Venice Biennale which is a wonderful event but has very little relationship with the city or its people. I wanted to organise something that would be embedded in the local environment and be able to make a difference to London and its citizens. In the first year it was aimed at architects, but we soon found out that it was also of great interest to the general public. So for 2008 we changed 'biennale' to 'festival' because more people know what a festival is and the word better describes the celebratory nature of our event. The LFA will take place every other year – the next one is in 2010 and then in 2012 – Olympic year!

L.-C.S.: According to you (and to the LFA 2008 team) was this year's festival a success? If so, why? Apparently the LFA 2008 was supposed to work with a private firm specialised in assessment and statistics related to public events. Was this project realised? If so, what were the results of such a study? How do you measure the real impact of an event such as the LFA?

P.M.: It was a success because we had over a quarter of a million people attending events; it was a success because everyone we speak to tells us it was; it was a success because Government ministers have complained that we didn't ask them to open events, and our research shows that 94 per cent of people attending thought it was 'excellent' or 'good'.

L.-C.S.: One of the critiques made to the LFA 2008 was that, although the enterprise was really positive, the number of different events might have been too high, with not enough attention given to some of the events you proposed. Do you have some comments on that? Do you think that the LFA might reduce the number of events in subsequent editions?

P.M.: This may be a complaint among journalists and people who are regularly attending architectural events, but not a problem with the general visitor. The event was big because a lot of people wanted to get involved. I do not see this as a problem – this is the nature of London, there are so many things to go to you can't see them all. It does, however, create a major problem in communications, but I think our website managed to address that problem very successfully.

L.-C.S.: An interesting type of activity you put forward this year was the Blueprint Big Breakfast, with some important figures of the London architectural scene talking about their own work. Nevertheless, the tickets for these particular talks were quite expensive (£25.00), which made the events essentially dedicated to professionals who were able to find some time to attend. Could you tell me a little bit more about the reaction to these breakfasts?

P.M.: Some events were more expensive; but then, there were hundreds of events that were absolutely free.

L.-C.S.: What were the most popular activities of the festival and why? Which one had, according to you, the most important impact on familiar and unfamiliar audiences?

P.M.: Most of the events were popular so it is difficult to compare them in that way. The ones that had the most impact were the street interventions like Exhibition Road, Montague Place and Cheapside. These showed how streets can be changed to make them enjoyable parts of the city; they were integrated with real strategies. Also very memorable was the EXYZT Lido project which showed what can be done with empty sites and provided a great temporary facility for the local community. The Embassies Project was a fantastic success and we will build on that in the future.

L.-C.S.: Can you compare the LFA to other similar events around the world (such as Venice architecture Biennale, Rotterdam Biennale, London Design Festival, etc.)? How do you think the LFA is better or different than these other events?

P.M.: We are not aimed at just architects – our aim is to bring together the public and the professionals. The making of cities today is a democratic pact between these two parties, and events like the festival provide a great way for them to come together in a celebratory way instead of the confrontational manner that is so often the case.

L.-C.S.: Finally, could you expose briefly the plans for the future of LFA? Do you have some special aim or projects regarding the next festival due to be held in 2010? Are you already planning something special for the 2012 edition that will coincide with the summer Olympics in London?

P.M.: Our aim is to create a festival fit for an Olympic city; as we build up to 2012, our next festival will take on the issues both of the games themselves but also the legacy that they will leave. 2010 will be a rehearsal for 2012 when the eyes of the world will be on London. We will want to show that, although the attention of the television viewers will be focused on the stadiums, the Olympic experience must permeate the whole city. We will therefore be organising the festival so that it will have a number of central hubs, as it did this year, but it will also have ‘hot spots’ all over the capital where local activities can take place and where the people of London can have a real impact on the quality of their environment.

After the end of the festival, the firm Locum Consulting produced a survey analysis. Around 7000 visitor questionnaires were printed and distributed this year, and 1674 responses were recorded. The conclusions of this survey were that, overall, the event was well-rated, but there was no big change when compared with the previous edition. The study also revealed that the visitors of the LFA 2008 were mainly in the 26-35 and 36-45 age range categories. It seems that although the format of this biennial architectural event has changed a lot (from a 10 day Biennale in a specific area of London, to a month-long festival almost all over the metropolis), the type of visitor and their appreciation of the events remained more or less similar. Unfortunately, Locum Consulting's survey could not tell us how much impact the LFA 2008 really had on people's engagement with and excitement about the architecture of their city.

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