

00;00;04;11 - 00;00;24;09

HOST

Welcome to the people Property Place podcast with me your host, Matthew Watts, founder and managing director of Rockbourne. This is a podcast where I share the stories, views, opinions and career journeys of the movers, shakers, innovators and leaders in the real estate industry.

00;00;24;11 - 00;01;06;13

HOST

Welcome to the People Property Place podcast. Today we are joined by Oliver Lowrie, co-founder and director of Ackroyd Lowrie, an award winning architect building the cities of the future. Well, he started his career at archetype as a project architect, where he spent nine years honing his skills in project management, design and project delivery. He left in 2014, set up Ackroyd Lowrie with business partner John Ackroyd to build an innovative architectural practice with a reputation for putting people at the heart of the design process, they're able to deliver characterful, sustainable, high quality schemes to anchor new neighborhoods.

00;01;06;16 - 00;01;29;26

HOST

As well as his day job, Oli hosts the popular Urban Forecast podcast, where he speaks to a broad cross-section of guests who are defining the future of our cities. He also manages to find time to run the breakfast Club Briefings, a series of events focused on bringing together planners, policymakers, developers and consultants. And it gives me great pleasure that he joins me on the podcast today.

00;01;29;26 - 00;01;31;09

HOST

So, Oli, welcome to the podcast.

00;01;31;16 - 00;01;33;08

GUEST

Thanks very much. Very excited to be here.

00;01;33;10 - 00;02;01;27

HOST

Not at all. Well, look, we've had we've had a number of guests who've come on this podcast whose route into real estate is through architecture, and they kind of go through that process and they realize that actually it's more of the investment asset management, development fund management side that they end up on. But you as someone who has stuck in this architectural route before, we kind of get on to all the amazing things you're doing at Ackroyd Lowry, can you just tell me a little bit about how and why you got into property?

00;02;01;29 - 00;02;24;05

GUEST

Yeah. With pleasure. And I do think that that's really how John and myself sort of see ourselves is, you know, we're sort of entrepreneurs first who happen to be architects. And I think that that sort of comes across in the story. So, yeah, I, I don't know, I went when I was at school, I was into kind of art and design and, couldn't really work out what to do at university.

00;02;24;05 - 00;02;48;02

GUEST

So I actually studied fine art, did a foundation year. So it was a bit of a waste of time. And so kind of gave me the idea that maybe architecture was a bit more of a kind of practical outlay to the use of kind of creative, mindset. And you know, all these years later, I think that it kind of is, although my definition of what I use my creativity for now is kind of different.

00;02;48;02 - 00;03;08;23

GUEST

I, you know, I have to say now, I'm not that hands on. I'm not drawing stuff particularly often, but I still think that that use of kind of creative mindset is important when you're running a business or when you're kind of tackling problems around, how to make projects happen. So I have only had one job as an architect.

00;03;08;23 - 00;03;33;26

GUEST

I did less university. I actually wasn't very good at uni at my undergrad. And so the last thing that I ever designed at uni was with a school, and it's kind of like theoretical school. Obviously you don't get to really design stuff, but I really got into the idea of of designing a school. And so I sort of graduated and found archetypes who are practice, who focus on sustainability.

00;03;33;26 - 00;03;52;04

GUEST

And a lot of their clients are schools. And it combine the two things that I was really passionate about. So sustainability and then kind of designing educational spaces. So arguments. One interview, I actually went there, I sat in their offices and I, I sort of I have my CV in my hand. This is an it's like 2003 or something.

00;03;52;06 - 00;03;56;07

GUEST

And I was like, I want to speak to the boss here. And they were like.

00;03;56;10 - 00;03;57;12

HOST

So you turn up unannounced?

00;03;57;14 - 00;04;17;08

GUEST

Yeah, yeah. Wait until I could hand my CV to the boss. Who's this guy called Bob Hayes, who, is an absolute hero of mine. Just so that I knew that he'd got it. And then I kept ringing, kept ringing. And eventually I managed to get an interview, and the interview was with somebody else. And so I did that interview, and they were like, thanks, we'll call you back if we want a second interview.

00;04;17;08 - 00;04;19;28

GUEST

And I was like, no, no, don't worry, I'll wait. So again, just waited there.

00;04;20;00 - 00;04;21;03

HOST

Just waited in the front. Yeah.

00;04;21;03 - 00;04;37;27

GUEST

Yeah. So and so when I was like, come on, let's do the interview now. So I sort of forced my way into a job there and then. Yeah, I was there for nine, ten years. Loved it. Got my part two, got my part three, which really hurdles which I feel actually there needs to be some reform, if they go on for too long.

00;04;37;27 - 00;05;03;22

GUEST

But, you know, mostly what you learn is, is in practice. So I was very lucky that I got a really good grounding in environmental design. That's archetypes, you know, bread and butter. So, you know, my sort of DNA of, of how I design is from a sustainability mindset, from trying to use environmental factors and natural materials where possible and always kind of, you know, kind of problem solve around

environmental design.

00:05:03;25 - 00:05:21;24

GUEST

After ten years of doing that, I met or after about five years of doing that, I'm John Ackroyd, my now business partner, joined archetype, and we sort of aware of each other, but it wasn't a massive office, but I think we were kind of both the same age and both quite ambitious, and we were never, ever put on projects together.

00:05:21;27 - 00:05:41;27

GUEST

So we never really worked together. But we gradually start talking and we, you know, realized we had quite a lot in common in the way that we thought. And one day we had this opportunity where, a sort of family friend had bought a site in Bermondsey and they got in contact and said, yeah, do you want to kind of do some work in your spare time?

00:05:41;27 - 00:05:59;06

GUEST

And we said yes, and managed eventually to get them planning permission for five units. And then we, then we then told them to sell the site because they weren't developers. And that was some of the best advice I've ever given because, we then did go on to deliver that project for somebody else, and it was an absolute nightmare.

00:05:59;06 - 00:06:16;25

GUEST

I was about 12 party ward agreements and a sewer that no one knew about, and they were very lucky to get out. But what we what happened after that was they sold it. And then there was this gaff. Never thought about it ever again. And I was on holiday and somebody rang me up and he said, hi, I've bought this site in Florence Lane.

00:06:16;27 - 00:06:33;01

GUEST

Oh, shit. What's wrong? He said, no, nothing's wrong. Do you want to do the technical design? And I was like, I haven't got a company. And he said, well, look, I'll, you know, you know, the site, you did the planning, you might as well do the technical design. Just why don't you set up a company? So rang up, John, I said, trying to set up a company.

00:06:33;01 - 00:06:55;23

GUEST

We've got client number one. And that was it. He quit his job. I was still working on the project site, so I think I was doing one day a week, at Craig Lowry. He was doing four days a week, and one day back at archetype, and we gradually migrated over. So, you know, the first invoice got paid and we bought first laptop, second invoice got paid, we bought a printer, got a little office in Shoreditch.

00:06:55;23 - 00:07:14;01

GUEST

In fact, we started in a pub that was our first office. Our friend had just bought a pub, so we were in there and it was very organic and you know, then we got a second time and that turned out to be quite a big project. And then within a year or so we we had a team we've kind of, you know, 5 or 6 people, 4 or 5 people, and we've been very lucky.

00:07:14;01 - 00:07:37;25

GUEST

But I think we've also we've really grasped any opportunity that we get. I think you know, luck is you can't really control some of the things that happen to you. They just they just happen and opportunities fall into

your lap. But it's what you do with them. I think that that makes a difference. So, you know, that second time that we we had was for film studio, and ten years later that that chap is still a client of us.

00;07;37;25 - 00;08;02;27

GUEST

We're working on our fifth studio with him now. And, you know, that's we actually got the retrofit, Highly Commended award a couple of years ago for one of Arthur Alva King's Cross, which is, this amazing Outram shed that we've converted into a film studio for him. So that's been a really, really great relationship. But it's, you know, it's built on really grasping those opportunities and then trying to really, like, do anything.

00;08;02;27 - 00;08;28;26

GUEST

We can't preempt what that client will need. Yeah. And I think that's really are all mentality is you know, it's about outcomes for our clients. It's sort of not necessarily you know, as designers it's not about what we necessarily want. It's all about outcomes for our client trying to anticipate them, trying to deliver good outcomes for our clients is really the kind of, I suppose, the ethos of the business.

00;08;29;01 - 00;08;48;22

HOST

So before we kind of take that that journey on and find out a little bit more about how you manage to scale that business, did you have any family or connections within the real estate space, or did you have any kind of like mentors, you know, or was it literally just the culmination of fine art designing schools and a bit of serendipity that ended up in your kind of route to real estate?

00;08;48;25 - 00;09;10;24

GUEST

Woman. Conveyancing solicitor. Oh yeah. It was maybe useful a little bit at the start. So we had this big vision. Yeah, we wanted to set up this company, to design the cities of the future. But as with lots of practices, the thing that you end up doing is kind of people's house extension. So at the start, having somebody that had done conveyancing in my family was was reasonably useful, but not massively.

00;09;10;24 - 00;09;27;15

GUEST

And I think, you know, one of the things that you realize once you jump is you look back, you're kind of, you know, through your phone, through your black book, everybody that, you know, in a slightly different light. And I'm sure you've done this, you've set up a business. Suddenly everyone, you know, it could be a connection to something.

00;09;27;18 - 00;09;50;17

GUEST

But no, we we didn't take any clients with us. We didn't really know many people in this sort of property world. And so we spent a lot of our, you know, a lot of our kind of, a lot of our marketing budget every year we spent on putting on events, bringing people together, trying to meet more and more people from the property sector, trying to, again, like, anticipate things that they will want and need to bring them into our orbit.

00;09;50;17 - 00;10;07;26

GUEST

Because we didn't we didn't, you know, we didn't take clients with us and we didn't naturally have these people in the space. So instead, we quickly worked out there is a way of making people come into your orbit. You know, you have to spend a bit of money to spend a bit of time, but you can can you can if you can give people things that they want.

00;10;07;29 - 00;10;14;17

GUEST

So knowledge or connections to other people, you can bring people sort of into your orbit. And that's what we still try and do.

00;10;14;19 - 00;10;33;01

HOST

So someone listening to this who's maybe a little bit more free in terms of the investment management development, asset management, portfolio management type space, can you just break down the different parts of an architect's day job and the different areas where they kind of maybe get involved with a wider development process?

00;10;33;03 - 00;10;54;16

GUEST

So, yeah. So, you know, some of the clients that we work for our fund. So, somebody like you said, I, we work for them and we will they've got obviously a portfolio that their funds will own. And every so often some of the leases will expire. So as an example of that, they have an asset on Beach Street where we've been working.

00;10;54;16 - 00;11;27;11

GUEST

We've been working on that for for years now. As leases expire and companies move out, we will go in and we will do a kind of interior design fit out or we might need to get planning permission for office extensions and or change of uses and or refitting the whole building. And so that's one way that we can work is kind of gradually with the fund kind of assisting them to regain assets and get new tenants, get higher per square foot, rental on it or will work for property developers.

00;11;27;11 - 00;11;46;17

GUEST

So somebody like an event on who by a site and we were game planning permission for them and then they will then, you know, take investment to build that out. We'll work on the technical design. And then when they're building it out, we will usually have a site role so that it's kind of 3 or 4 different skill sets that you need.

00;11;46;20 - 00;12;06;19

GUEST

Planning design is slightly different to, kind of technical design. An interior design is then kind of different again, but all the way through we have to have a bit of a project management sort of mindset as well. Like, you know, we do work with lots of project managers, but there's always a little bit of project management that needs to kind of fall back on to, to architects.

00;12;06;19 - 00;12;24;09

GUEST

And yeah, that's, you know, so, our other clients, we, we tend to work a little bit with kind of end user clients as well. So educational facilities or film studios. But most of our, most of our clients are within the property sector. So they're either property developers housing associations or funds.

00;12;24;12 - 00;12;34;19

HOST

And they're coming. They want you to re reimagine re invigorate and deliver a best in class type scheme that's going to be fit for purpose moving forward.

00;12;34;22 - 00;13;05;07

GUEST

Exactly. Yes. So I think funds and developers have slightly different, you know, mindsets. So with the fund, you're trying to kind of reimagine an asset with a developer. You're often, you know, starting from

scratch. Although increasingly I think there's a focus on retrofit rather than knock down and rebuild. So there you're kind of reimagining again. But, you know, a lot of our work now is sort of regeneration projects, kind of 100 plus units of ready plus commercial, and there's often existing buildings.

00;13;05;07 - 00;13;25;22

GUEST

We work a lot in London. So it's, it's a, it's rare that you get, you know, a totally empty site. So we enjoy those projects where you get to do a bit of work with a historical asset or, you know, with, with something with an existing building, but then also, reimagining the spaces around it, and, you know, this kind of buzz, word of placemaking.

00;13;25;22 - 00;13;50;16

GUEST

What, what what does successful places mean? How can you kind of what are those magic ingredients and and how can we, use our design skills and. Yeah, kind of team work with people who have got, you know, more of a commercial mindset to try and bring in the right people into sort of commercial spaces to really ground a place that's, you know, those are the those are the best projects where you get a good team all working together with the same vision.

00;13;50;19 - 00;13;57;11

HOST

To create a destination. Yeah. Excite will kind of thrive by itself and have all different components.

00;13;57;11 - 00;14;18;20

GUEST

Yeah. And then often our part of our role is to then sell that vision to a local authority. So to the planners, you know, so if you're starting at an early stage, you need to get change views or need to get planning permission for, a development. It's, it's often, you know, down to us and the planning consultant to sell that vision to get planning consent.

00;14;18;20 - 00;14;50;18

GUEST

And, you know, we we realized kind of early on, I think, again, to go back to this thing of trying to put outcomes first is the planners can be the gatekeeper of, of a great deal value to developers. So we we realized that actually we should be spending a lot of our time and our money, you know, marketing spend actually on trying to build good relationships with planners and kids, you know, to to be able to better understand what plan is one, because we kind of, you know, to some extent, we know our clients one.

00;14;50;19 - 00;15;21;05

GUEST

Right? They want a good return on investment. That's why they're in the, in the, in development. But it's harder to know what plan is one. And so that's, you know, slightly jumping ahead. But that's why we ended up setting up the Breakfast Club briefings, which is a place where we can bring planners and politicians together with developers to discuss what they think are good outcomes, you know, which are different to the good outcomes that the developers want because they're not motivated by financial rewards, but they are motivated by things like good placemaking, environmental performance.

00;15;21;07 - 00;15;33;06

GUEST

And you can, you know, if you can understand what you know, how these how you can generate win wins, then it's very that's a sort of outcome driven way of thinking about your your clients.

00;15;33;09 - 00;16;00;15

HOST

So taking the story back from, you and John met it's archetype. Was it trying to take yourself out of that

business. Was that a was that a challenge or were they, you know, set up a competing business effectively, or was that a relatively easy thing to do, given the fact you had a kind of a client client on the side, bit of cash flow come in, and then it kind of became increasingly obvious that there was a future pipeline of work, and your kind of risk is minimized.

00;16;00;18 - 00;16;25;23

GUEST

Well, I think it was. We did it was easy because we I'm still friends with Bob, you know, who's just one of the most inspiring people that I've ever met. And I never wanted to sell that relationship by. I don't really think they are competitors of ours. You know, we're in very different spaces. We really we wanted to take a lot of that design, thinking about sustainable principles and apply them to a slightly different context.

00;16;25;24 - 00;16;45;01

GUEST

You know, their focus is really sort of education, not only but mostly, and ours is really much more region. We kind of wanted to take their thinking and apply it to like a city scale almost of like, you know, how can you make kind of passive house master plans? And, you know, we're still on that route of of trying to explore what that really means.

00;16;45;01 - 00;17;12;26

GUEST

But I don't think that it it meant that we were never really directly competing. We're still in contact with them. And so it wasn't particularly difficult. And we left on good terms. You know, the challenges came I think we've been doing this ten years now and we had the Brexit vote, then the implementation of Brexit, then we've had, you know, the Ukraine war, which affected us more than both of these actually, I think probably Covid, Covid cost of living crisis.

00;17;12;26 - 00;17;20;12

GUEST

So you know, it was those challenges rather than, than the living archetype that were the hard things.

00;17;20;14 - 00;17;28;05

HOST

And can you just talk to me about your skillset and then John skillset and what do you kind of focus on. And then what does John focus on?

00;17;28;07 - 00;17;42;13

GUEST

Yeah, it's a good question because we get asked a lot. And I think over the years it's probably changed. I think at the start, honestly, just John can add much better than me. He has much better grasp of numbers than I do. So that meant that he was going to be looking at the finance stuff more than me.

00;17;42;16 - 00;18;03;28

GUEST

I do slightly more of this type of things. I live with more outward facing, but we we both like to mix it up. And, you know, John also does marketing and sales, but there's probably slightly more lean of me towards outward facing stuff and slightly more lean for him into finance. But as the team is growing, you know, we've got people that do more of that.

00;18;03;28 - 00;18;21;18

GUEST

So it has allowed us to retain the thing that we both kind of enjoy, which is to still have a bit of a coaching role on projects. You know, we want to try and avoid it, that we're ever running a project. It's not exact, you know, we're not set up that the directors would be the the ones that you talk to every day.

00;18;21;20 - 00;18;47;05

GUEST

But we want to keep on, you know, we kind of we like to keep particular clients relationships and I really enjoy now kind of coaching younger members of staff and sort of going, well, yes, I kind of see where I see what you're thinking there. But actually, if we tried thinking about it this way and I think the thing that we both have to spend quite a lot of our time doing is, is, you know, that unlocking of projects that kind of creativity around problem solving.

00;18;47;09 - 00;19;17;02

GUEST

And I think, you know, I did a podcast recently, with Ben Cross from General Project, who was trained as an architect. Now obviously works in development. And, you know, that was one of the things that I really resonated that he was saying, it's that he still uses all of his, like, architectural mindset to kind of unlock these problems, that these roadblocks that you get in projects where it's just like, if you can step back sometimes I kind of think around it, you can come up with a solution that is, you know, slightly outside the box.

00;19;17;02 - 00;19;24;27

GUEST

And that's, I think, probably what John and I both spend quite a lot of our time doing is sort of doing that across multiple projects, trying to unlock them, get them to the next stage.

00;19;24;29 - 00;19;30;27

HOST

As well as working on the business, scaling it and, making sure the next project is, is coming.

00;19;30;27 - 00;19;47;05

GUEST

For the team. Exactly. And sales and Legion and yeah, all the rest of it that you have to do, and you do end up with spread quite thin. But I think, you know that the bit that I don't do now is sit on cad and draw stuff, really ever so. But I kind of miss it sometimes, but not, not that much.

00;19;47;07 - 00;19;59;06

HOST

So, the two of you kind of left set the business up, worked on that first project. The second project came, can you talk to me about the early stages in terms of building a team and how you kind of navigated those early challenges, too?

00;19;59;09 - 00;20;20;09

GUEST

Yeah. Well, I think when you set up and I'm probably quoting somebody else here, but that you, you basically end up standing freshly, you kind of just end up hiring anyone because it's fun. And the people that you can hire in a startup are a quite an odd bunch of people. So it's very unlikely that the people that you hire in the first year will be there in year ten.

00;20;20;11 - 00;20;41;12

GUEST

And that is true of us. There's nobody that's there except for me and John, because who is going to go and work for a company of like three people? It's the people that are a bit wild themselves and they're like, oh, I might do this for a bit. You don't. It's a very hard to build a team of loyal people when you are a startup, because you're getting the sort of the pirates, the outliers, the people that kind of want to set up their company.

00;20;41;15 - 00;21;00;12

GUEST

Whereas now the people that we can hire now that we've been guy for ten years, we've got, you know, decent office and we've got a reputation, we can get really, really great people. And we do tend to be slightly countercyclical in terms of we are because we're small and we have quite a lot of revenue split across quite a lot of projects.

00;21;00;14 - 00;21;28;26

GUEST

We tend to feel sooner the bite of the negativity in the economy and also positivity. So, you know, as an example, like 18 months ago when the Ukraine first invasion happened, that hit us quite quickly, just because certain funding streams were turned off and it sort of like hit us quicker than say, Hawkins Brown, you know, or any big Arctic where the, the revenue is a bit more lumpy, you know, get sort of projects have the momentum and they'll just keep going.

00;21;28;26 - 00;21;57;01

GUEST

Owen's sort of switched off quicker, and then we'll tend to then feel like a moment, you know, we're starting to notice the kind of the green shoots and maybe lots of others are as well, but it means that we tend to hire at the opposite time to other people, which is good because we get to, you know, in a, in a when it's when it's tough on those companies is when we start to pick off and we can then hire, you know, really good senior people from other other practices when they're maybe not so in-demand in the rest of the market.

00;21;57;03 - 00;22;11;01

HOST

And in terms of your in terms of like the the business model, as it were, are you retained on project, like how did the kind of the financials work in terms of the different parts of architecture and how you deliver or forecast cost?

00;22;11;04 - 00;22;25;26

GUEST

Okay. This is exactly yeah, it's a fixed fee for each project. Yeah. Stage. So there are seven stages in the project. But the numbers are sort of slightly weird. Stage stages basically.

00;22;25;26 - 00;22;32;18

HOST

So it matches the seven different Riva stages, and then you price according to the project. And so it's kind of like a retainer on, so.

00;22;32;19 - 00;22;50;24

GUEST

It's a fixed fee, but say, say that you appointed me and you've got a site and we're going to get, you know, 100 unit scheme is what we're targeting. We'll go right. Planning application. Let's do you know, it's going to be three free apps and a planning application, and mostly we'll fix the fee to there because that's reasonably easy to predict.

00;22;50;27 - 00;23;06;01

GUEST

You don't tend to provide your fees necessarily all the way through the project because you sometimes don't quite know, like sometimes we are asked to do that and you're like, we haven't had one free app, how do I know what it's going to cost to build it? It's like very hard to predict. So usually we do fees up to planning.

00;23;06;04 - 00;23;21;24

GUEST

So for a certain number of free apps and then planning, then you know, then we'll be asked ideally we

would then be asked to, to provide more fees to do stage three and four, which kind of technical design and then then stage five and six, which is site. And then we'll try and draw it down monthly.

00;23;22;01 - 00;23;45;04

GUEST

You know, there's this way there's different different. And one of the things that is annoying is there is coin, lack of of consistency across the industry in terms of, of like how fees negotiated are paid. And it's something that I'm always banging on about that Riva should give slightly more guidance on that. You know, in the 80s, in the bad old days when I wasn't an architect, so I didn't care and I never knew about it, but they were like fee scales.

00;23;45;07 - 00;24;04;07

GUEST

And then that was seen as, anti-competitive. And then lots of architects kind of went on about the good old days of when there was set fees. But I do think it would be quite simple forever to, to not say, here's, here's a, you know, mandatory fee scales, but just to provide a bit of guidance to clients because I think often clients don't know.

00;24;04;09 - 00;24;22;22

GUEST

And there are lots of architects who will do lots of bits of work for free, you know, hoping that on the back end they'll get something. And so it does mean you'll get, you know, often project managers saying to clients, well, look, you don't really need to pay for this. You can I'm sure there's an architect do this bit for free or you can check these guys against each other.

00;24;22;22 - 00;24;38;02

GUEST

So for me, I feel like there is an opportunity for Revit to come out and say, look, this is this is just the best, best practice for what you should expect to pay for it. Architect for X right. So yeah, let's keep saying it until somebody listens to me.

00;24;38;07 - 00;24;55;21

HOST

But I guess for you then, you know, the ideal situation is, is acquire a project, take it through planning and then take it, you know, ongoing. So you've got that continuation and you've got that fee stream that you can kind of plan. But I also assume you, you know, other people might get planning and then they might put it on pause and then maybe bring in a slightly different architect to deliver the other part.

00;24;55;21 - 00;24;57;19

HOST

Yeah. That is that happens a lot of what happens as well.

00;24;57;19 - 00;25;09;04

GUEST

Yeah, it happens quite frequently. And so we'll sometimes deliver stuff that other people got planning for. And then, then the project itself, you know, so often we'll have, we'll have ongoing relationships with clients that will buy something that has already got planning.

00;25;09;10 - 00;25;09;17

HOST

Yeah.

00;25;09;23 - 00;25;28;25

GUEST

And then at that point, you know, we'll be appointed to go back to planning to maybe improve it via an

NMR or a section 73, try and optimize it slightly, tweak it to their design preferences and then deliver it out. So that's something that happens quite a lot, is that, you know, the site will be sold with planning, and then a different team will deliver it.

00;25;28;27 - 00;25;48;07

HOST

So in terms of the building of the business, you've touched on the kind of the countercyclical nature of and the ability or the early indicators you get when maybe there's some challenges or there's some good times. You've talked about kind of hiring some kind of generalists. How did you kind of go through that transition from hiring generalist to kind of specialist?

00;25;48;13 - 00;26;01;10

HOST

Is that when you got kind of headcount of ten, or is it when you kind of, you know, really started working on the business in terms of building like the systems and processes and really defining what different roles were and then you could be very particular with the types of individuals that came in.

00;26;01;12 - 00;26;16;17

GUEST

So I think there's a very important moment to us about three years in when I joined this thing that's called the Supper Club, which I think is now called Helm, which is like an entrepreneur's network. And at the first meeting, so you're sitting around with all these other business owners that aren't in the architecture space. None of them work.

00;26;16;20 - 00;26;31;22

GUEST

And they were all talking about they're not exact. And what they're not exactly saying I'm really sorry was a non exact. And they were like, you haven't got a non exact. I was like, no I think you know what one is. And they were like don't worry we'll make you a shortlist. So the supper club then kind of went away and they were like all right this guy's just exited a business.

00;26;31;22 - 00;26;50;13

GUEST

He'd be great for you. Here's another one. And so we hired a non-executive. At that point, and that was really game changing for us because suddenly you've got like you said, you know, did you have mentors? Well, we didn't until then, and we purposely chose a mentor that was not from the architecture space, but he had a really good knowledge of it.

00;26;50;16 - 00;27;06;03

GUEST

So he had built and sold a business called Sephora, which was, it's piece of software. So he was actually selling it into the architect. So, you know, he was he built software that was, that was sold to architects. So he really knew architects but wasn't one go to.

00;27;06;03 - 00;27;07;23

HOST

So you need be straight. You need a story.

00;27;07;23 - 00;27;26;26

GUEST

But he was from a software background, which we really wanted. We wanted like somebody with like, startup mentality with business. You know, he'd been to like I think yeah. One of the prestigious business schools. And we wanted somebody that was like that, like architects get a bit of a reputation for being a business. We wanted somebody that was like really the opposite end.

00;27;26;26 - 00;27;52;01

GUEST

You know, there's not people in the tech startup space that are often, you know, being called bad business people. They're often very shrewd. And his background sales of. So we were like, this is a guy for us. And he really helped shape our business, sculpt it, asked us difficult questions. I think in the first meeting we had with him, we said, you know, so these are all projections and we think that we're going to grow by 25 to 30% this year.

00;27;52;04 - 00;28;09;28

GUEST

And he sort of looked at it and he was like, so what if I were to, just ask you if you could grow 100% in the next 12 months? We were like, well, I mean, that sounds easy to say. And he was like, well, just think about what you would need to do. What would you need to put in place for that to happen?

00;28;10;01 - 00;28;25;04

GUEST

So we went away. Next board meeting, we came back and we were like, we'd actually we'd have to do this and this and this. We'd have to hire these people and put them in place, and we'd have to have like a different structure and we'd have to step back and stop running projects. He was like. And then learn how we did that.

00;28;25;04 - 00;28;44;25

GUEST

And we literally doubled our revenue from one year to the next, put in place a senior management team, put in place more specialists around finance, tried to put in place more of a process around BD and. Yeah. And it worked. And you know, we kind of we doubled our revenue that year. So that was when it start to get serious I think.

00;28;44;25 - 00;29;04;07

GUEST

And then then what we tend to find is our growth happens quite erratically or irregularly. So we'll have a year where it doubles, and then we have a year where it flattens and then we have a year it doubles and then we have a year flattens because you kind of you can't constantly grow. So we tend to find that we follow an upward trend and then consolidate.

00;29;04;09 - 00;29;04;17

HOST

Yeah.

00;29;04;21 - 00;29;13;14

GUEST

But we do sort of plan for that. So we don't always plan to double. But you know we would plans have years of pushing for growth and then years where we're just consolidating.

00;29;13;17 - 00;29;22;17

HOST

And so that not exact was the one that really held you to account, challenge you to think better, you know, shared some wisdom around sales process, execution.

00;29;22;17 - 00;29;23;05

GUEST

Hiring.

00;29;23;07 - 00;29;24;10

HOST

Decision hiring.

00;29;24;11 - 00;29;38;16

GUEST

I mean, hiring is such a skill, you know, and at the start, we would kind of make up for these different processes that you and obviously you don't. You're a creator. But, you know, at the end of it what we've we had certain people advising us, which is hire fast fire for us, you know, bring them in, get a man.

00;29;38;16 - 00;29;54;22

GUEST

It's a crap. Get rid. But you know, now that we've been doing it for longer, I think we can attract really good talent at a junior level. But for those senior hires, I think you hire slow. You know? And I think you you've you've got to kiss lots of frogs, and you've got to make sure you've got the right person.

00;29;54;22 - 00;30;12;08

GUEST

And we have like a much more rigorous, slow process of bringing people in. Now. Well, at any level, particularly at senior level. And there's such a skill to hiring, you know, that cultural match, but then not making sure you're not just copying yourself with little mini mes and it's it's a real balancing act. You need to get somebody that fits in.

00;30;12;11 - 00;30;16;25

GUEST

There isn't just you have five of them because they remind you of you. It's a.

00;30;16;25 - 00;30;36;29

HOST

Tough one. It's, it is a it is a big challenge. You know, we bang on. In fact, you know, identifying people has never been easier. But actually all the other parts of engagement assessment role defining what does success look like there? The other kind of the challenges that often people overlook. But it sounds like as a journey and as a business, you've kind of been there and done it quick.

00;30;36;29 - 00;31;11;05

HOST

One from me, if you haven't already subscribed or followed this show on the podcast or app where you listen or watch, please do. It takes 10s and helps tremendously. I've got really big plans for people Property Plays podcast, and that one small action really, really helps grow the show and the present and enables us to keep doing what we're doing.

00;31;11;05 - 00;31;26;28

HOST

So if you haven't already, please follow or like on the platform you watch or listen to. Thanks so much. What's been the hardest thing in terms of kind of scaling scaling the business?

00;31;27;01 - 00;31;53;07

GUEST

What's the hardest thing? I think it's all hard. I think what's difficult in our industry that's probably particular is like there's just a real blancmange of legislation that's come out of the government in response to Grenfell. And I totally support the thinking behind a lot of it. But the implementation of some of that has left a lot of architects quite confused about our responsibility.

00;31;53;09 - 00;32;17;23

GUEST

Like nobody wants, you know, like bad outcomes, like Grenfell to happen again. What everybody want, I was hoping, was that there would be a greater level of clarity through the legislation that came out

subsequently, and I have to say, I think the some of the legislation that's come out after it has not created more certainty for architects over exactly what their responsibilities are.

00;32;17;26 - 00;32;36;17

GUEST

We all want to make sure we're doing exactly the right thing that we want that we should be doing at the time. But some of this legislation is tended to make things more opaque rather than less. And, you know, that's I think it is time. I think we're getting past the worst of it now. The Building Safety Act has come out and there's more guidance around that.

00;32;36;17 - 00;32;59;21

GUEST

And I think that is going to give architects a level of responsibility and therefore control that they haven't had for a generation. You know, and this is one of the things that architects sort of, you know, have have whined on about historically is, well, you know, we've sort of been put a bit in the corner, but, you know, project management is kind of taking the lead role for x, y, z.

00;32;59;24 - 00;33;18;11

GUEST

Boom. It's very clear now that there is a lot of responsibility that the architect, as principal design, will have to have. So this is like our opportunity to embrace this legislation now and go, okay, come on guys, let the legislation is saying we need to be responsible and we need to make sure that we're competent and we need to demonstrate that competency.

00;33;18;18 - 00;33;36;14

GUEST

And if we do that, then that means we basically get a like a very essential role in making sure that the rest of the team is also competent and the rest of the team are the right people. Well, that's great. That's putting responsibility in control. Back to the architect. That's what you know. That's what we've been talking about for years, is protection of role rather than protection of title.

00;33;36;16 - 00;33;57;19

GUEST

It's now in front of us. So rather than running from this new legislation, scared we should be using this opportunity and saying, look, we're we're very happy this is here. And, seeking maybe a little bit more clarity around some of it. But other than that, it's reasonably clear that it's architects that need to be taking control of projects up to a point.

00;33;57;22 - 00;34;22;03

HOST

And I guess, you know, what you touched on earlier is just that relationship with planners and council. And if you can understand what they want and you can design best in class, sustainable buildings, it is a win win win for developer, resident and council. Then surely that. Yeah, it feeds back to your point of view, taking a central role in terms of really trying to drive that agenda and develop great outcomes.

00;34;22;06 - 00;34;46;15

GUEST

Absolutely. So, yeah, exactly. I think planning is another area where perhaps the the rise of the planning consultant has maybe slightly pushed aside architects, but again, it's another opportunity or we've see it as an opportunity. So we you know, we spend a lot of our time trying to, you know, trying to make sure that planners think that what we are designing is, is best in class.

00;34;46;15 - 00;35;19;14

GUEST

And this is, you know, good placemaking. And so that drives all of the events that we do. It drives part the,

you know, the podcast that we run. So having forecasts podcast, we've had lots of planners and politicians on that talking about what made what is good placemaking because we want we want everybody when they hear Larry to think, okay, you know, those are the guys that are talking about the type of places that we want people to live in and, you know, for, for that to happen, we have to go out there and sort of, you know, put these events on, keep talking about it so that you start to get that

00;35;19;14 - 00;35;35;12

GUEST

kind of association, which means that hopefully then clients will come to us because we are seen as a safe pair of hands with planners to be able to say, oh, wait, no, it's an equity scheme. So that means it's going to be it's going to be, you know, these things that we support, which, you know, well, we'll have to see.

00;35;35;12 - 00;35;39;19

GUEST

But it seems to, you know, it's a, it's hopefully is is working.

00;35;39;22 - 00;35;51;23

HOST

Yeah. Well like you touched on, you do a lot in terms of the podcast, the breakfast briefing, the other events. You also do a lot of spec work as well as in terms of demonstrating capability, which is quite rare. And in, in this industry. Right.

00;35;51;25 - 00;36;22;08

GUEST

Well, I think I don't know if it's fair. I think people do. What we have to do is, is set out a very defined funnel of how a client will come to us. So they, you know, my first hear of us through a podcast or through our network of consultants that we work with, we also work with a political consultant that we have are on a retainer to, you know, to make sure that we are messaging correctly to the local authorities and that they are aware of us, and, you know, has that kind of reputation managed with with local authority.

00;36;22;08 - 00;36;44;14

GUEST

So through this nets, you know, will will be cast people. And then the first thing that we try and do is get them to one of our PCP events. So breakfast club briefing events where we're then associated with the speakers. So we tend to get a like an MP senior politician to be the speaker. And then in the room there will hopefully be, officers from several London boroughs.

00;36;44;14 - 00;36;46;15

GUEST

Mostly, I mean, mostly it is London.

00;36;46;17 - 00;36;48;27

HOST

In terms of the work that you do and the types of. Yeah.

00;36;49;00 - 00;37;20;11

GUEST

And then there's usually the guests that we yeah, the attendees of that event. So we'll get a few developers and then senior officers from local authorities and that just you know, the point of that is it's all Chatham House and it's behind closed doors. But you get to hear what people really think, developers, planners, architects, consultants and, you know, more often than not, people actually tend to agree if you take away, you know, planners and, and, and developers don't always have the best relationship because they're mostly meeting across the table, a free education meeting.

00:37:20;17 - 00:37:40;16

GUEST

And they're disagreeing about quite small things, actually, in general, there is, you know, developers and planners, if you put them in the same room, with a nice breakfast away from a particular project, everybody kind of does agree around the outcomes. But, you know, it's it's also part of our lead generation funnel that that would be the first time a, you know, potential new client will come.

00:37:40;22 - 00:37:57;06

GUEST

We're invited to one of those events and we will see they will get to see this dialog happening out the back of that. You know, they might go, okay, well, look, I've got a site and we have like a, you know, a particular product which they will get, which is a free product, which is a, you know, it's a capacity study.

00:37:57;08 - 00:38:26;08

GUEST

We know how long it takes us to do. It's part of our marketing budget that we will do that for clients. It's, you know, it's not infinite. It's driving people towards our core product, which is, you know, a planning application, technical design package, whatever it is. That's our core product, which is you pay for that. But before that, there is a, you know, a free product, which is it's a sort of, you know, freemium, if you like, where you get to test out what it's like working with us and what we, what we're trying to prove varies knowledge of the context.

00:38:26;09 - 00:38:43;09

GUEST

You know, a team that we can bring together quickly, like a planning consultant or, you know, structure engineer or whatever you happen to need speed of response. And, you know, most importantly for us, high quality design, you know, we want we want quickly clients to be able to say, oh, these guys not only safe their hands, they know the local authority.

00:38:43;16 - 00:39:01;18

GUEST

They kind of know some of the people at the local authority. And the design proposal they for sent it to us is really good. And that's, you know, that's why we do it and that's why it's part of it is part of a funnel. And, you know, I wrote an article recently for about this and got lots of the comments back saying, you know, I can't believe you work for free.

00:39:01;21 - 00:39:19;19

GUEST

Don't people just take the piss? If people take a piece of that and they do it repeatedly, you know who they are. You like, you don't. Going to do it again and again and again. It's it's, you know, it needs to lead to paid work at a certain point because that's, you know, that's how we fund doing it again, the next time round.

00:39:19;21 - 00:39:28;05

GUEST

But yeah, you know, thus far it's a, it's a, it's a reasonably but I don't think it's uncommon in other industries for you to have freemium.

00:39:28;05 - 00:39:48;12

HOST

So I was going to say it's not an uncommon, thing that you're talking about, but it's always taking those principles from maybe a tech, the tech world. Exactly. And going, how can we apply that to a, a bit more of an antiquated industry so that we can kind of bring people into, as you touched on using your orbit and then through a funnel and using kind of lead gen, which is,

00;39;48;16 - 00;40;09;18

GUEST

Towards core services. And so, yeah, I think that we've always invested a lot in like advisors because we sort of maybe didn't have these mentors or didn't necessarily want mentors in the architecture space. So as well as in on ExAC, I've done the Daniel Priestly, KPI and, you know, that talks a lot about trying to build this ecosystem of products and it takes you well to do it.

00;40;09;18 - 00;40;17;07

GUEST

But I, you know, and it sort of permeates your thinking. But now I think, you know, you can see it. There's like a spider web and then the funnel and, you know, the kind of.

00;40;17;09 - 00;40;17;25

HOST

Different types of.

00;40;17;25 - 00;40;37;09

GUEST

Tracks. Yeah. Your chat people. And I imagine, you know, it would be interesting to know how many touch points it's taking for a client before they sign on the dotted line. But it's usually a lot. And, you know, I think seven is the thing that's quoted. I don't know if it's that for us, but it would, you know, that you've got to put out a lot of touch points into the world if you want people to follow the breadcrumbs.

00;40;37;12 - 00;41;05;24

HOST

Well, what are some of the kind of the challenges that you see developers facing right now as we kind of sit here approaching middle of the year of the election has just been called, kind of a six week run up is, naturally, frustratingly, probably inevitably going to be a bit of a slow down over the summer just to kind of accommodate, a the election and then the kind of the implementation that what what are some of the challenges that you're seeing the developers, kind of running into right now?

00;41;05;26 - 00;41;28;10

GUEST

Number one problem is viability, and that's because of build costs having gone up. Number two problem that planners are sort of saying is that the planning system is very slow and often doesn't create the best outcomes for them. But it's, you know, it's the viability more than anything. It's those build costs that have really made everybody suffer. And so how do you overcome that.

00;41;28;12 - 00;41;33;20

HOST

And is and what's been driving that. See Ukraine is, you know, partly to blame.

00;41;33;22 - 00;41;56;00

GUEST

And yeah, I think, I think that Covid was really to blame. And, you know, that printing money for an extended period of time cause inflation. It was then Ukraine and the that particular cost shock construction prices. Some people have been saying the construction values are coming back down again. I don't think that that's that likely. And they went up by, you know, 20 to 30%.

00;41;56;03 - 00;42;23;23

GUEST

So that's put a lot of projects underwater. How do you get them back above water. Do you go back to planning? Well, yes, you can. But you know, our plan is that sympathetic to a pure viability argument. Some are salmon. So, you know, and I think across the industry what what people are starting to see is that there's lots of developers we're doing, you know, you're kind of reworking old projects, trying to

squeeze them a little bit.

00;42;23;26 - 00;42;50;20

GUEST

What does that mean for placemaking? What does that mean? You know, when the when all the good bits are the bits that you can't afford. It could be that you sort of the whole of the built environment that you're creating becomes a little bit worse. You know, that would be a really bad outcome, as if everything we were building now, at this period of stress, just to get stuff built, is not going to stand the test of time because it was, you know, all of the the good stuff was taken away.

00;42;50;22 - 00;43;13;03

GUEST

I would I would say that our design sort of ethos is the design doesn't have to cost more necessarily, you know, good design shouldn't cost more. If you put if you're doing the principles right, then you don't need to pay more to have a high quality place. And so I think that is, you know, that's that's hopefully why a lot of the applications that are being reworked aren't necessarily getting worse.

00;43;13;03 - 00;43;37;15

GUEST

They're just becoming, you know, slightly tighter, slightly more efficient. But the quality in place of creating doesn't necessarily need to fall. I did, we did a live kind of a UK riff about potential reform to the planning system, said Nicholas Boy Smith, and who talks about planning reform. And it was interesting. There were two to developers on kind of regal and capital and centric, and both said, you know what?

00;43;37;18 - 00;43;59;05

GUEST

Planning isn't actually that bad. You know, it's not. Maybe it could be fine tuned. But like, we don't find that getting planning is the hardest thing. So that was quite an interesting reflection because I think probably for the bigger developers, planning isn't their biggest obstacle. I think it's maybe the smaller, smaller developers where funding a big planning application they are.

00;43;59;07 - 00;44;20;17

GUEST

The cost of planning applications is sort of getting higher and higher. And I do think it's probably favors larger developers rather than smaller, because that barrier to entry is so high. But those are the two. You know, those are the two major things that I think is stifling housebuilding. The problem is for any incoming government. What levers do you have?

00;44;20;19 - 00;44;46;18

GUEST

You know, there's not a huge amount of spare cash lying around. Does labor come in and start trying to build its own housing? I don't really think it's got the money, and I hope it doesn't have the appetite, because I don't really think that that would be a good way to deliver lots of housing. I think maybe a little bit of, I think more funding for planning system would probably pay for itself.

00;44;46;20 - 00;45;01;24

GUEST

I think even actually putting up planning fees might help, but it needs to then be ringfenced. So making sure that any, you know, any increase in funding for planning is kept within those planning departments, that they can process applications quicker. I think that would be a positive.

00;45;01;26 - 00;45;18;26

HOST

It's taking so long, right. That's one of the challenges. Is the time it takes to go through planning. And I was at UK brief and I, I was there at your event which was fantastic and, and and attended a few other

talks and there were no, I had heard someone say I might be a little quoted here, but 25% of planners have.

00;45;19;02 - 00;45;28;11

HOST

It's kind of left as well. And so there's lots of red tape and challenges around actually getting in front of these people, but also the time it takes stifling.

00;45;28;13 - 00;45;46;20

GUEST

Planners are being asked to assess more and more stuff and so, you know, now they and I I've got I have a lot of sympathy for planners. They do a great job in that. I don't think the financial rewards are amazing. So they really got believe in what they do. But they're being asked to check fire strategies and, you know, check environmental performances.

00;45;46;20 - 00;46;07;14

GUEST

And this is stuff that didn't used to be really within China's remit. So you're getting it's no surprise that it's taking longer and they're struggling to resource it. Each application takes a lot of manpower their side to person power. So so yeah, you need more planners and more specialized planners and you need to invest more in that and get things through quicker.

00;46;07;14 - 00;46;23;12

GUEST

If you want planners to check everything or you, you know, you say that they don't need to check as much stuff and then you don't need bigger planning departments. Again, there's not that many levers, so maybe you do the latter rather than the former if you haven't got money to pay for it, maybe you just be like, okay, well, slightly more free rate.

00;46;23;12 - 00;46;44;05

GUEST

You know, planners don't check x, y, z. We put that on to build a control to check. That's sort of one option. But you know, the only so government's targets mostly have been to build 300,000 units pay per year of housing. That's only ever been done when the private sector. So the private sector does about 180 to 200,000 per year.

00;46;44;08 - 00;47;09;04

GUEST

This year will be lower. And then and then the balance is made up with the public sector. So there would probably be a temptation from labor to say, well, look, let's, let's, let's go, let's do this ourselves. I think development has become so complicated and so specialist that we're not in 1948. You can't just go out and build yourself lots of houses.

00;47;09;06 - 00;47;31;17

GUEST

What I would say the best way of delivering more housing would be is to provide more grants. So I think that using, you know, there's lots of housing associations already, there's lots of developers that would be happy to provide affordable housing if grants were paid to an adequate level to make it worth their while doing it, rather than trying to reduce the amount of affordable housing on every development, which is sort of the incentive.

00;47;31;24 - 00;47;57;03

GUEST

You know, the incentive at the moment is to do that. It would be to increase the grant, and let the private sector develop more of it. And, and, you know, local authorities can have a crack at it via arm's length

hose if they want. But thus far in London, that doesn't seem to have had brilliant outcomes for everyone, because that's just, you know, it's it's a risky business and it's easy to go wrong.

00;47;57;06 - 00;48;08;00

GUEST

So I think, you know, let the private sector in the House deliver more of it, put the grants up. And that would be my preference of how to deliver more housing.

00;48;08;02 - 00;48;23;10

HOST

You you'll see very experience in terms of the realities of saying what your developer, developer, investor clients are going through, but you also have got your own development project as well. Can you just talk to me a little bit about that? Because I guess so. It's the other side of the fence and you can have your your developer hat on too.

00;48;23;12 - 00;48;40;23

GUEST

Yeah. So and I you know, I think it's, it's a, it's, this is sort of a risk talking about that because I think, you know, there have been some people that have said to us, well, you know, don't we don't want to be competing with this architect now that you're developing. But, you know, that's it's not our main bread and butter.

00;48;40;23 - 00;49;06;19

GUEST

But we did take the decision a few years ago that we wanted to do some development, really, because we we kind of wanted to learn from that experience, you know, what's it like being on the other side of the fence? So we joined and we set up an SPV with the planning consultant that we work with, and we acquired a site in an area where we knew the planning context reasonably well, and we were able to secure planning.

00;49;06;22 - 00;49;29;00

GUEST

It still took us two years, but we were able to scale planning this year for residential led scheme. And it's it's you know, we've learned a lot. We've learned lots of stuff that I didn't expect to learn. You know, the planning again, the planning wasn't the hard bit of that necessarily. It took its time. But in the end we we, you know, got a scheme that both us and the council were very happy with.

00;49;29;03 - 00;49;50;15

GUEST

But it's that, you know, that viability that is the challenge in this period that we found that site construction prices have gone up. They've you know, they've driven out some of the margin for that. So now that we've got our consent, we've got to work out, you know, what's next can kind of be sold and pay back the costs that it's taken to achieve the planning.

00;49;50;22 - 00;50;07;20

GUEST

Or is it something that we need to, you know, JV with the contractor on to actually get back that value? No. These are the decisions that we're making at the moment. And probably the the economic impact of the election might make a difference. So for the moment, we're sitting tight and seeing what happens.

00;50;07;20 - 00;50;08;20

HOST

Pens down.

00;50;08;22 - 00;50;09;14

GUEST

Yeah, exactly.

00;50;09;14 - 00;50;11;04

HOST

For the next six weeks through the summer.

00;50;11;10 - 00;50;36;14

GUEST

And that's you know, if that's happening to us, it's happening to a lot of other people. That is the problem with uncertainty, political uncertainty. And we've had so much political uncertainty, even within one party, you know, the ruling party that we've had for 13 years, there's been so much political uncertainty. But I do think a lot of developers, just the ones that can afford to it's it's cheaper to sit there and do nothing and make sure that you don't start embarking on something which ends up being the wrong decision.

00;50;36;16 - 00;50;56;29

GUEST

And you've had that from, you know, the moment of that Brexit vote, you had people sitting on their hands waiting to see what would happen. Then you had it again with the actual, you know, leaving of the EU. Then you had it with Covid, then you had it with Ukraine, now you have it now with another election. What we need is a period of political certainty given by a strong government and, you know, hopefully that's what we get.

00;50;57;00 - 00;51;01;05

GUEST

But I'm not you know, I'm not that certain that that's going to happen either.

00;51;01;08 - 00;51;12;29

HOST

Can you just tell me about the size of that crowd, Larry, as a business right now and then I'm also keen to kind of touch on you do an academy as well. I'd be really interested to find out a little bit more about that. But yeah. So tell me about the size and scale. Yeah.

00;51;12;29 - 00;51;31;06

GUEST

So about 20 people and you know, we our highest we had about 30. And then this has been a, you know, a couple of year period of we haven't had to let anyone go, but it's just, you know, you get natural shrinkage. So, but as I said, we're we're filling it. Tick back up now, which is good.

00;51;31;08 - 00;51;49;01

GUEST

The academy, something that we're very proud of. So it sort of came out of our top line ethos as a business is we want to build the company that designs the cities of the future and what we found is that a lot of people that enter our potential, like myself, not from not from cities, you know, I'm from like the suburbs.

00;51;49;03 - 00;52;13;08

GUEST

And that's quite a lot of the demographic demographic of people that go into architecture didn't grow up in, in, in inner London areas. So we wanted to build some sort of academy system that would bring, you know, kind of young people. It's not even seen as like something, you know, it doesn't get taught in school. So it's not something that you necessarily think of as an obvious career path.

00;52;13;10 - 00;52;49;24

GUEST

So we wanted to kind of correct that, and we wanted to bring in this next generation of, of architects. I actually grew up in, in the London, in the boroughs that we work in, and we have our office in. So Tower Hamlets, Hackney, Newham. So it takes a long time. And at the same time as we had that thought about wanting to, you know, create these, get this like diversity of thoughts around the future cities, which is what's the, the, Sir Alex Ferguson documentary where he scribbles on paper and creates this academy that then you get Gary Neville, Phil Neville, David Beckham, Ryan Giggs all come through the academy.

00:52:49;27 - 00:53:08;07

GUEST

And so we were like, oh, wow, this could actually work out very well just from a recruitment basis. You know, we could be recruiting our own. Tell them. And the reality was it took us about five years to get this thing off the ground. It's I've knocked on so many doors, banging my head against so many walls, trying to find people at councils that we were like, okay, we want to set up an apprenticeship scheme.

00:53:08;07 - 00:53:30;18

GUEST

Just give us the kids. And they're like, it doesn't really. It's like it doesn't sound like a thing that we do. Eventually, we set up a partnership with New City College, who are an academy where we take the BTec students, who are on the environment and construction course, and we do six candidate, six pupils per year, and they have to have 40 days in our office per year.

00:53:30;21 - 00:53:52;22

GUEST

And we kind of have them on this rota and it's brilliant. We've just had our first, first one graduate. And then he will be then coming back to us, but in partnership with London South Bank University as a paid apprentice. So for the BTECs they're unpaid for this because they're 16 to 18. Then they graduate with enough Ucas points to go to a university place that we then provide.

00:53:52;22 - 00:54:16;14

GUEST

So they come back four days a week and we, they just stay with us for working as an apprentice and that will then give them their qualification after four years so they never have to pay a penny. It's all provided free, in fact, from the point that they graduate the BTec, they are paid a wage. So rather than getting, you know, a hundred grand in debt or whatever it is, over seven years of architectural training, you can you can be earning money as you go.

00:54:16;17 - 00:54:22;28

GUEST

So we're really pleased that and hopefully it does generate, you know, the David Beckham of the future architecture.

00:54:23;02 - 00:54:31;00

HOST

Yeah. Future talent for you but also bringing other people into the wider sort of real estate ecosystem who otherwise wouldn't necessarily be able to afford it.

00:54:31;00 - 00:54:36;01

GUEST

Or C will find it. Exactly. You'll find it. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:54:36;03 - 00:54:46;10

HOST

Can you just talk to me a little bit about the types of projects you go on, on the go at the moment. And then are there any trends that you're noticing in terms of types of projects that you're coming your way as well?

00:54:46;12 - 00:55:14;16

GUEST

Yeah. Yeah, definitely. I think as I said, we're kind of a good bellwether for what happens in the industry. And what we've seen is, that the larger residential led schemes are tending towards being and ending up in the hands of housing associations. So whether they be, you know, for profit agents or so, not for project, not for profit housing associations, anything that's kind of 100 units plus is tending to be housing association driven.

00:55:14;16 - 00:55:37;03

GUEST

So we got consents, I think about a year ago for 140 unit scheme, in Croydon, which is a project for a private developer. But and that was bought by a housing association and we are sort of optimizing that now through the planning process again. And that will be delivered out doing quite a lot of work for major housing association who are for profit.

00:55:37;10 - 00:55:57;10

GUEST

So we've just got consent for them, for 97 units in, in barking, Dagenham. And we're, we're looking at and we're delivering out another 60 or so in, in, in Redbridge. So that's the sort of trend on the Rosie side on the, on the private developer side, I would say the focus is shifting towards, more co-living student and hotel.

00:55:57;12 - 00:56:21;04

GUEST

So, you know, you aren't finding a lot of property, typical small, you know, medium property developers trying to build out a lot of Rosie just because it doesn't stack for them. And, you know, that's that's a shame because they are still doing stuff. It's just the stuff that they're building. It needs to be, more, you know, alternative because that's where they're getting the returns.

00:56:21;06 - 00:56:42;27

GUEST

And we I think we're seeing as well on the sort of the fun side, in the right location, everybody's diving back in. So, you know, the offices in Soho, in Clerkenwell are high, you know, high value. And they were pre-COVID. So people are now in the right areas building offices again, but not if they're in the wrong areas.

00:56:42;27 - 00:57:02;05

GUEST

If they're in the wrong areas. Everything needs to and a result, I think, is that, you know, certain markets are just dead in that they're not going to come back. And we're also seeing much more of an emphasis on retrofit. So, we've got an application in at the moment, which is for a really big retrofit scheme in Camberwell of the old Magistrates Court.

00:57:02;08 - 00:57:25;19

GUEST

So it's a live application, and that's, really exciting because that site was actually allocated for a knock down and rebuild. But, you know, became kind of economically and also environmentally a better choice to strip that big old concrete frame back and, not knock the frame down, you know, work with the frame, extend it, rejig it a little bit.

00:57:25;19 - 00:57:43;23

GUEST

But most of the bones of that structure remains, and that's going to be ready. Hotel and interesting commercial units at ground floor podcasting studio really community kind of based, ground floor uses.

And we're also providing a new kind of market square. So that's a, that's a scheme that we're really, really excited about.

00:57:43;25 - 00:58:02;28

HOST

Amazing. Well, look, you've had a, a phenomenal career. You know it sounds like one, one interview. Second interview one one job through to kind of setting up, setting up your own business. And you know, I know you pay a hell of a lot for it. You give an awful lot. You, get a lot of, energy.

00:58:02;28 - 00:58:23;01

HOST

I know from like, connecting people as well. And I know you've worked on some unbelievable schemes, so I'm really excited to see what you and, the business go on to achieve through this. Rather kind of volatile. Yeah. As we draw to a close, Ollie, a question that I ask everyone who comes on the podcast is who are the people, what property and which place would you allocate 500 million pounds worth of capital if I gave that to you?

00:58:23;04 - 00:58:43;16

GUEST

So for me, it's all about people. But I, you know, I don't know who these people are. I would put most of that money into an account of, you know, like building the academy. And I would want to take it to other countries, other places, you know, the model, what I just said about architecture favoring, you know, the kind of the whatever middle class people from the suburbs, sorry is true globally.

00:58:43;18 - 00:59:06;25

GUEST

You know, that 500 million if you could do a academy in Lagos, if you could do an academy in Bahrain, like, you know, bring people into the industry that that haven't otherwise got the opportunity, that, you know, that architecture has is global. So that's, you know, I would invest the money in people and places around the world that where those opportunities don't currently exist.

00:59:06;25 - 00:59:08;19

GUEST

So I hope that's not too much of a cop out answer.

00:59:08;22 - 00:59:22;19

HOST

Yeah, a little well, in a sense. So you spend your 500 million and then is there is there a particular, you know, property location or type of asset class that you would hope that these future designers or future architects that come through would, would focus on?

00:59:22;24 - 00:59:54;02

GUEST

For me, it's like my general thinking is that cities are the answer. We've got a rapidly urbanizing global population. So I think people need to think about how we create like cities are the answer, because they are more efficient, they're more sustainable. And I know this is going to be a, again, a bit of a cop out to you, but it's like, I think you need to have really high quality, mixed use urban realms, the well supplied by, you know, kind of farmland around them.

00:59:54;02 - 01:00:16;07

GUEST

Right? Otherwise humanity is going to have some serious problems because we've got a slow growing global population. And we've also got the problem that parts of the world are going to be uninhabitable. So you're going to just get forced migration into places that are like, so you know, where we are now, northern Europe collapse. We're going to have to increase the size of our cities quite significantly and

increase the density of them.

01;00;16;07 - 01;00;35;16

GUEST

And the supply, the infrastructure around them. So these architects need to be tackling that problem, which is like, how do you cope with more people in the world living in fewer places and supply them with food? Like, I think you don't need to say what asset class it needs to be. You just need to. So, you know, you've got to crack that really complicated problem.

01;00;35;16 - 01;00;39;07

GUEST

So that's, you know, that's the problem for our children to solve properly.

01;00;39;11 - 01;00;41;16

HOST

And 500 billion is not going to cut that.

01;00;41;17 - 01;00;58;06

GUEST

It's probably not. But I think you know that it's you know, if you can if you can build the people if you can. It all starts with teaching those people, you know, stuff how to do things, how to problem solve. So that's that's the point with the, you know, spreading that investment into as many people as possible. So I can come up with a solution for Ollie.

01;00;58;06 - 01;01;01;02

HOST

Like I said, thank you so much for joining the podcast. I've really enjoyed the conversation.

01;01;01;03 - 01;01;02;02

GUEST

Thank you so much for inviting me.

01;01;02;02 - 01;01;31;11

HOST

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01;01;31;14 - 01;02;02;06

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01;02;02;08 - 01;02;19;29

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