

CULTURE

Building across the airwaves

Can architecture be presented successfully on the radio? Of course, says duo Amenity Space, whose radio show has now spawned its own practice. **Pamela Buxton** tunes in to find out how it all took shape

Strange, plinky-plonky sounds and odd whirrings are coming out of the radio. It's the noise of toilets, plant rooms and other "utilitarian spaces in iconic places," the theme of this week's Amenity Space radio show, and typical of the programme's quirky take on the built environment.

Tony Broomhead and Nicky Kirk, the architect duo behind the show, broadcast on Resonance FM, have just started their fifth series and, as Kirk says, feel they can now give themselves a pat on the back for producing some 32 hours of live programming on one of the trickiest subjects to convey on radio – even more impressively, neither had any broadcasting experience, and they have done the whole thing for nothing while continuing to work as architects.

It's been a fast learning curve. Although still by no means slick, nowadays they're so used to sound editing that they can recognise speech patterns from audio graphs. "We've got really geeky about watching wave patterns," admits Broomhead.

Pioneering sound

It was a different story when they set out a couple of years ago to create a new way of presenting architecture on radio. Now in their early 30s, Broomhead and Kirk met more than a decade ago while studying architecture at Sheffield University, and did their first jobs together in London. But once they had begun work as architects, they both felt frustrated at the lack of scope for creative experimentation



Radio on: Nicky Kirk (left) and Tony Broomhead wanted an outlet for creative experimentation outside of conventional architectural practice.

compared with the freedom of their student days. "You leave university and all that fun research stuff, you end up just doing a job,"

says Broomhead. The only outlet seemed to be architectural competitions, but the stuff we liked was the research side – finding out

what was going on."

As listeners of arts-oriented Resonance, they noticed the London-based station didn't have an

architectural programme, so decided to put together a pilot show with a different take on the subject. "There were no architectural pro-

grammes," says Broomhead. "We thought that was a shame. We set ourselves a target to devise a radio show by the end of the year."

By summer 2006, they had their own hour-long slot, taking the quirky name Amenity Space – the leftover space intended to be used to benefit the public. The show aims to be informative and entertaining. The two present the show live using a mix of pre-recorded snippets, audio art pieces, songs, studio interviews, and amiable banter instead of dry, academic descriptions of buildings.

Sense of place

The emphasis is on conveying the atmosphere of a building or place: "It's very difficult to talk about architectural space. If you're going to describe it, you can't do it justice – you need to experience the space," says Broomhead.

They've variously tackled broad topics like architectural education, London's drains, and being sued, as well as doing a whole show devoted to an appreciation of Cedric Price, plus interviews with architects such as Will Alsop and CJ Lim, and filmmaker Patrick Keiller. Then there are the side projects such as the Sonic Shed installation featuring sheds at Ladbroke Grove, west London, and in the Yorkshire Sculpture Park near Wakefield, which broadcast sounds to each other.

It's important to Amenity Space to be accessible and to avoid condescension. "We're sharing information about what we're learning," says Broomhead. "It's a more honest way to do it."

They don't know their exact listening figures but Resonance FM, which broadcasts over the capital and up to 10 miles out, generally attracts around 200,000 listeners. And through the internet, the show has gained listeners from as far away as Asia. For some reason, too, it is particularly popular in Swed-

den. The email feedback they get is gratifying: "When you're in the studio, you don't know if anyone's out there – or not – apart from our girlfriends and families."

And in what must surely be one of the most unusual routes to set up an architectural office, in addition to Amenity Space the radio show, there's now Amenity Space the practice, established in the autumn. It felt like a natural progression to move on to built projects, says the duo. They have already been short-listed for the Arts Council's arts space of the future competition, and came second in the RIBA's Green Dragon's Den contest to turn 12,000 unused maps into a shelter. They'd like to get into public sector projects, but through the radio show exposure have ended up ten-

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dering for more arts-based work, alongside domestic projects.

Meanwhile, they're planning to keep going with the radio show in tandem with the new practice, with both informing the other. "Radio is another form of architectural space," says Kirk. "There's a transmission of data into another space – it's constructing space down the airwaves."

AMENITY SPACE IS BROADCAST ON Resonance 104.4 FM in London, and online at www.resonancecfm.com Thursdays, 1-2pm. Hear two recent editions at bdonline.co.uk/whats-on

BBC Radio 3's controller of speech talks about putting architecture on the radio at bdonline.co.uk/whats-on