ATHLETES VILLAGE
BLOCK N15
LOCATION
STRATFORD, LONDON
ARCHITECT
NIALL MCLAUGHLIN
ARCHITECTS
WRITER
ROB GREGORY
KEY WORDS
ELGIN MARBLES,
PRECAST CONCRETE,
DIGITAL IMAGE
SAMPLING
Facadism. Skinning up. Call it what you will. There has been much debate about the processes involved in the design and construction of the London 2012 Athletes Village. While the Olympic Delivery Authority and Lend Lease’s intention was legitimate in their ambition to involve practices with varying levels of experience, the notion of pairing up established and up-and-coming practices, banded as either small, medium or large firms, to work on the design of single buildings put some architects off.

Beyond the prestige of working on the Olympic site, what fulfilment could there be in designing the skin for an otherwise anonymous residential block by someone else? And how would an architect with any design ambition generate meaning from being asked to work in this way? Some architects, however, did accept the challenge and are soon to see the fruits of their collaborations. Niall McLaughlin, for instance, through constraints imposed on him while working as a sub-consultant to Glenn Howells, saw the opportunity to do something unlike anything his practice, was given responsibility for two plots that comprised 498 residential units. He invited Niall McLaughlin Architects and Piercy Conner Architects to work with him on the facades and at their first design team meeting gave them the simplest of briefs. As McLaughlin recalls, Howells stated that neither team should dare to produce a syncopated facade, effectively vetoing the sort of slippy-sly window layouts that have become the ubiquitous answer to cladding nondescript commercial and residential interiors.

Although tongue-in-cheek, this instruction encapsulated concerns held by many critics that the whole process could see the village becoming little more than a parade of over-stylised, thinly veiled attempts to dress up, disguise or ameliorate these buildings’ potentially monotonous frames, or chassis. Built to strict functional briefs for both the athletes and their future mixed-tenure residents, the design of the residential chassis across the site has a degree of consistency that some designers would inevitably want to break down through expressions of their own creativity. McLaughlin, however, did the opposite, using what he refers to as the abstract and normative characteristics of both the design and procurement processes, and the resulting structure of the building as the starting point for the generation of his facade in an approach that if anything exaggerates and plays on abstraction and repetition.

For him, this project was a rare opportunity to focus on the themes of architectural representation and decoration, which he relished, having spent time researching the history and significance of the screen in architecture through the writings of Gottfried Semper and Karl Bötticher. Recalling Semper’s assertion that the origins of monumental architecture lay in the bedecking of the festival scaffold with emblems of the festival tradition, the challenge for McLaughlin was how to provide a facade that not only expressed the structure of the building and its interior spaces, but that would also perform a representative function for a wider public.

‘We had the image of Sol LeWitt’s 122 Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes in our minds from the beginning,’ he says. ‘With its endless variations, set within a grid, every single one of them is different, and you feel as though it is trying to communicate something to you.’

In describing the trance-like state that this image induced, McLaughlin sought to replicate this sense in a facade that would appear to be communicating order. In reality, however, as with Sol LeWitt’s piece, when you try to seek out where the order lies, all you find is more variation, and the oscillation between order and variation becomes part of the building’s communicative function. But what mode of decoration would he take? Having eliminated the idea of working with artists on a series of specifically commissioned pieces, why did he eventually decide to sample the Elgin Marbles?

‘Well,’ he says, in anticipation of what will no doubt become the most obvious reading of the building, ‘the last thing I want is for people to think it is to do with representing the origins of the Olympics. At one stage, I thought we might go and look at Olympia, but I didn’t like that idea, because there is too simple an equivalence between the origins of the Olympics and this site. For me, it is all about the origins of architectural representation and my own fascination with these particular stones and their deracinated state.’

Tracing the Parthenon sculptures’ eventful history over two millennia, he goes on: ‘There is a sense to me of the Elgin Marbles being fragmented and lost. They were made under the eaves of a particular building at a particular time by particular people, with a particular set of meanings at that time,’ he says. Yet as history tells us, that was just the start and through their eventful life, they have come to mean so much more today. ‘Damaged by volcanic ash, burnt in a fire, defaced by Christians, robbed of their metal by Turks, blown up by Venetians in a bombardment, the Marbles were taken down by Lord Elgin, sunk in the ship on the way back to England, recovered by sponge divers, brought back to one of the most polluted cities ever on earth and covered in sulphur dioxide,’ muses McLaughlin.

He was fascinated by the way in which the marbles have constantly changed state and have constantly been re-idealised, right up until Lord Duveen’s attempt in the 1930s to make them white again (when of course they were never white in the first place) in some sort of...
THIS PROJECT WAS A RARE OPPORTUNITY TO FOCUS ON THE THEMES OF ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATION AND DECORATION

Previous page, main picture: Under construction, the precast concrete relief panels sit amid columns and beams of the principal long facades.

Top right: The north elevation shows the random disposition of variant panels.

Above right: McLaughlin and his team were given one night to capture the digital information in the British Museum.

Centre right: Metropolitan Works created the medium density fibreboard reproduction using a 5 axis router.

Bottom right: A latex mould was made for each of five subject stones, from which five variant panels were produced by masking the mould into 950mm, 1200mm, 1650mm, 1800mm and 2200mm widths.

Middle: Final insulated cast panels and beams are craned into place.

Far right: As a result of the re-sampling, some panels create irregular exposed edges that cast delightful shadows.
ideological drive that in fact damaged them further in the process.

Beyond their physical meaning, the subject matter of the stones held significance for McLaughlin, which led him to choose five carvings that were more theoretically related to the notion of representation, including the presentation of the sacred peplos to the goddess Athena. In the end, however, it was a clandestine conversation with senior curator Ian Jenkins late one night in the British Museum that finally helped him to decide.

While McLaughlin’s colleagues Chris Cornish of Inition and Tom Lomax of University College London were busy capturing the vital digital imaging data on the other side of the room, Jenkins turned to McLaughlin and said, ‘I know you have all these theoretical ideas which are very interesting, but really it’s all about the horses. The people of London will love the horses, look at their rhythm, look at the repetition.’

With that the decision was made. McLaughlin redirected his colleagues to five different stones that would be the basis for the 25 variant panels required to clad the building. From the digital files, the next stage was to produce the 2200 x 2200mm medium density fibreboard reproductions, using Metropolitan Works’ 5 axis router, which in turn were used to make the latex moulds from which Techrete would cast the final panels.

With five different-sized panels cast from each mould, in 950mm, 1200mm, 1650mm, 1800mm and 2200mm widths, the panels were backed with rigid insulation before being craned onto Howell’s chassis. Once installed, the delightful effect of light falling across the panels was revealed as the relief cast its shadow on the flat concrete frame. The image was timeless, but strangely familiar. Yet re-sampled, unordered and placed at random, using an algorithm based on the velocity of particles entering the atmosphere, there is much more to McLaughlin’s Marbles than meets the eye.