

CONVERSATIONS

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Niall McLaughlin

Niall McLaughlin of London is the Spring 2015 Norman R. Foster Visiting Professor. He delivered the lecture, "Origins and Translations," on January 22. Nina Rappaport conducted the following interview with him in his London studio.

Nina Rappaport How did you start your practice in London, and what brought you there from Ireland?

Niall McLaughlin I was passing through London for a couple of months on my way to live in the U.S. My mother is from New York. I got a flat on Portobello Road, where I met an amazing group of neighbors, so I stayed. They all became friends for life. I started my own practice designing little loft conversions for them. They were poets, writers, and photographers. I felt at home.

NR In your recent buildings, in both sensitive landscapes and urban contexts, you have created environments that integrate new materiality and tectonics in conversation with the past. How has your interest in materiality guided your work and experimentation?

NM I tend to see things as being complex and equivocal. The biggest influence on me as a student at the University College of Dublin was Robin Walker, who had worked for Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe and for whom Mies was a prophet. He gave extraordinary lectures about the corner steel I-beam section detail in 880 Lake Shore Drive, which was a massive problem for him. Robin firmly believed in the version of Mies that comes through the Anglo-American tradition, that insists upon the truth of architecture. But he couldn't square it with what he actually saw in Mies. So, after I left university, I was interested in where Mies came from, as in the tradition of Gottfried Semper and Karl Bötticher and the relationship between the *Kernform* (conceptual form) and the *Kunstform* (representative form). I'm not so interested in the idea of architecture having a truth-telling capacity, but rather how it communicates a semblance of truth. ...

NR But what does it represent if the material is not concealing? You're revealing the qualities of the material in your work, for example, in your design for the Bishop Edward King Chapel, in Oxford.

NM One of my favorite words is *semblance*, or appearing to reveal. It seems that notions of truth—to materials, to structure, to program—ignore the fact that we are figurative creatures. The idea that you can get beyond representation, to something more fundamental than that, I can't accept. I love Semper's observation that the white marble of the Parthenon, so dear to Winkelmann, is nothing more than a ground for the epithelial layer of paint, which is the architecture. The material is destroyed in favor of the idea.

NR Unless you go back to Marc-Antoine Laugier's ideas and the primitive hut? How does the material become shelter as a pure form, as in weaving branches to make a hut?

NM One of my interests at the moment is the idea of the primitive. It is fascinating that Laugier's primitive hut presupposes a stable external thing outside human culture; perhaps he was saying that in previous times it would have been God, but now it's nature. So, he drew Nature, giving architecture to man. I would call either God or nature an external correlative with which architecture was supposed to have a mimetic relationship. What is amazing about Semper is that he says the mimesis does not occur in relation to something outside human culture but that architecture is mimetic of human culture itself. And, so, the most fundamental impulses of human culture, which are really dance and drama, are reified or given concrete identity in certain physical representations. The underlying harmony of the world is enacted in rhythmic activity, which, in turn, is fixed into things through repetitive knotting, weaving, and binding; these basic forms of human manufacture, which are mimetic of human ritual and activity, are the origin of architecture. The primitive hut has four elements: the earthwork, the hearth, the tectonic frame, and the woven screen; each one is characterized by ways of making

Semper says, "Weaving is always associated with the separation of the inner world from the outer world, and that's the origin of architecture."

NR How, then, did you conceive of the chapel design and its representation?

NM The chapel is a kind of embodiment of Semper's primitive hut; it has the earthwork, the woven screen, the tectonic frame, and the hearth. The floor and seating make a monolithic concrete earthwork; it supports an independent timber frame, which is enclosed in a woven stone screen, and, inside, the tabernacle is lined with metal. These elements are isolated and given identity in relation to one another. It was a very direct, quite literal homage to Semper. We wanted to make a timber-woven outer wall, but then we were asked to make the building in stone, and we thought, "How do you weave in stone?" So, the stone bond on the outside, which we invented, is intended to be a tapestry motif.

NR How does it relate to a spiritual quality that's beyond the material, in terms of what Rudolf Schwarz called "the ineffable," so influential to Le Corbusier? How does the sacred space achieve relevance today as the ineffable in terms of tectonics and spiritual qualities?

NM We almost have an excess of references—but that is how we work. I had two systems, one of which related to the "ineffable" aspects, which are the sense of spatial experiences and ideas of the divine. I went from Mies to Schwarz's extraordinary book *The Church Incarnate* and his methodology for creating the presence of the divine or the threshold of infinity. His diagrams show in theological terms how a human being experiences the world. He talks about the eye, the ear, and the hand generating a symbolic system, which we used directly in the chapel. In tectonic terms, we refer to Semper, but the spatial model comes very strongly from Schwarz. He talks about the altar and the light of the star being brought into the eye and the darkness of the body coming up to the eye and an image being formed where the darkness meets the light. And his drawing looks like a plan of people gathering around an altar. Schwarz has a fabulous description of the altar as the threshold of eternity, as though worlds were dissolving. He uses the metaphor of the body as something that understands the world, and his model is an understanding of God. He equates the relationship between light and structure as the threshold of the divine. We have formed a structural frame within which the community sits, and beyond the structural frame the white wall goes all the way around the edge, and there's a breach in the frame. Schwarz writes that there should be a breach in the structure, and, beyond that, you must put something that stands for the loneliness of God: endlessness and isolation. He considers a window, or an image, but decides that a white wall would do best. We made an outer rim that represents the infinity of God, and, within it, the structure represents the space made for human community, assembling as though they are the darkness of the body and looking toward the altar, where they meet the light of the star. It was quite systematic with regard to Schwarz, Semper, and the theme of the primitive hut.

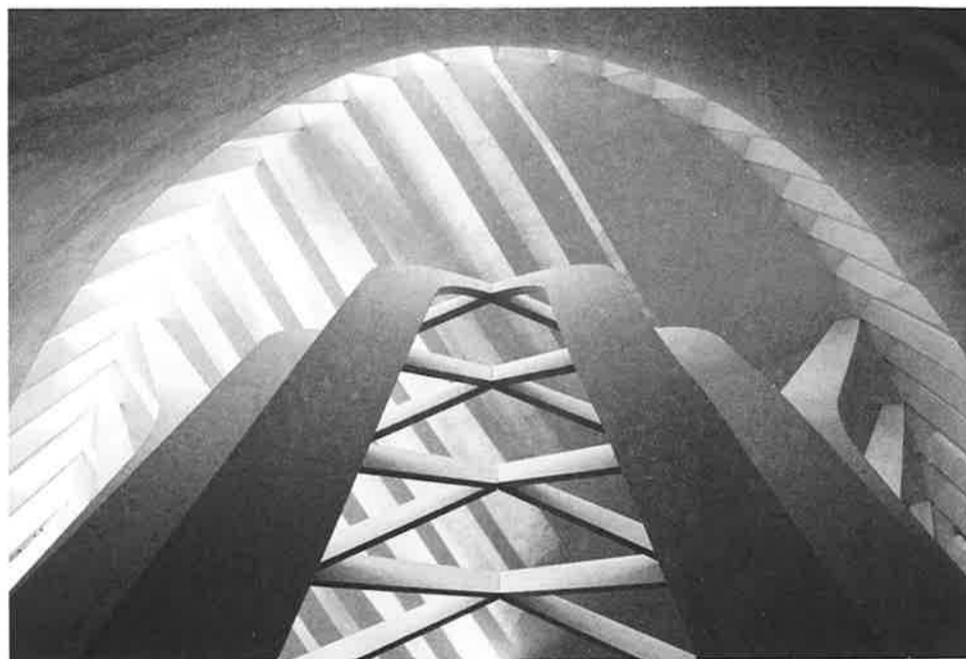
NR When someone designs a chapel, one always wonders whether they have to believe in the ideology represented by the structure they are designing or might they take a more holistic and humanistic approach. Does the religious aspect matter to you in terms of the design?

NM What we do is create versions of the world for other people, and so our job is to absorb their world and make a building that embodies it. The basic plan form came from the chaplain. He held up his hands parallel to each other to explain the antiphonal form of a traditional collegiate chapel, but they kept bending into an ellipse when he mentioned community. So, we made an ellipse with the altar at one node and the lectern at the other.

NR How did the tectonics, the latticework as its own structure, and the construction evolve in terms of the reference to Semper? Are you following a particular trajectory of church design?



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NM Its impulse is in Semper's tectonic frame, which we wanted to be independent. We were having a clear conversation with a suite of buildings, from Schwarz's Frankfurt church to Peter Zumthor's St. Benedict Chapel, which is obviously in conversation with Schwarz's. So, twenty-five years later, we are developing that conversation a bit further: each architect gives the structure some separate identity. Schwarz places it just outside the wall; Zumthor places it just inside. We move it farther in, creating this ambulatory between the wall and the structure and clarifying this idea of an inner world and an infinite world beyond. I liked the idea of the elliptical ambulatory expressing endless Christian wandering. You can walk around the perimeter, looking in toward stillness and light—the idea of "placelessness" in the heart, which in Christian thinking is that you leave your things behind until you find God. So, the delivery is a continuation of a conversation.

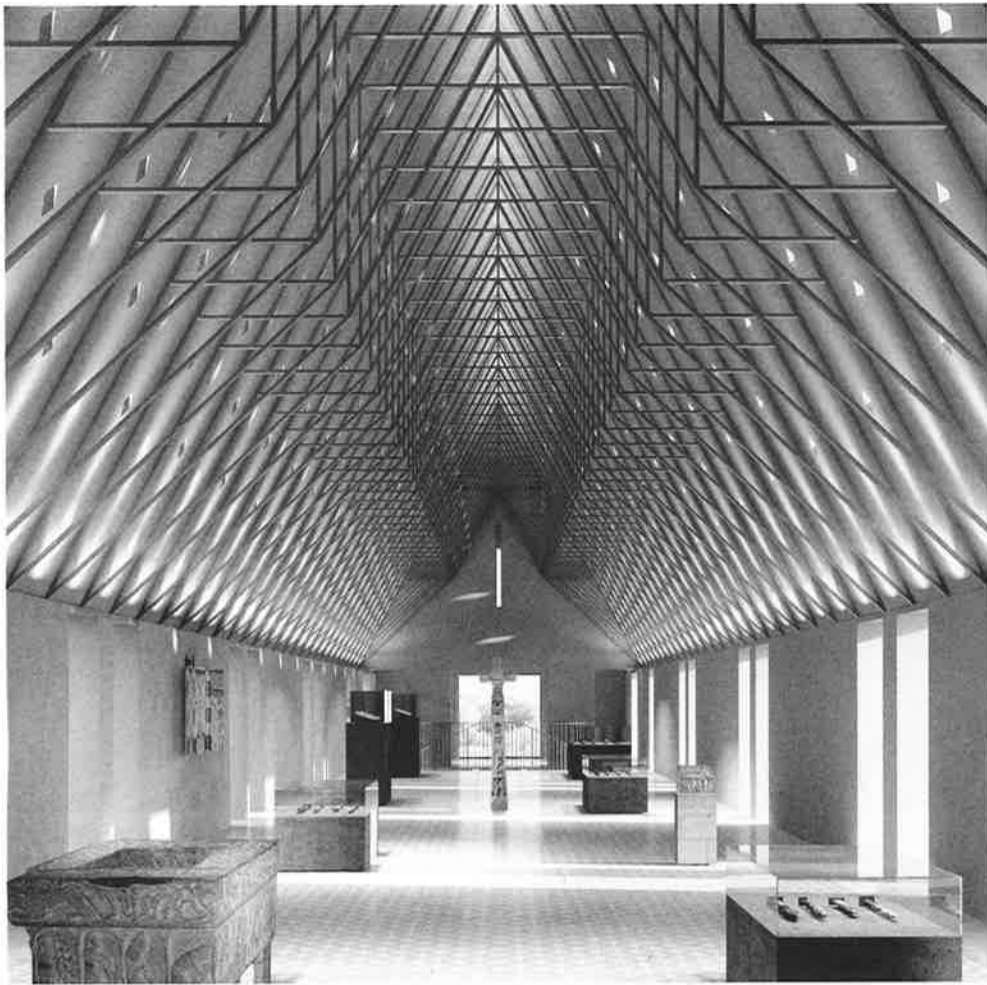
NR When you design for that which is not ineffable, does this quality enter the project in other ways, as in the athlete's village, in Stratford, whose surface is more Ruskinian in contrast to Semper? How do you reconcile what you have written about as an abstract building with applied design, as in the façade, in terms of the authenticity of the chapel?

NM The 2012 London Olympic Park was managed ruthlessly. The buildings were going to be used by athletes for six weeks, and then they were to become part of the housing stock of the city. It's counterintuitive to design it for athletes and then use it for another purpose; you're better off designing it for others and then reengineering it for athletes. But then it had to comply with all the standards of the International Olympic Committee and those of registered social-housing landlords. They hired architects to design what they called a chassis as the generic form of the building, and then, with the Architecture Foundation, they asked architects to design facades.

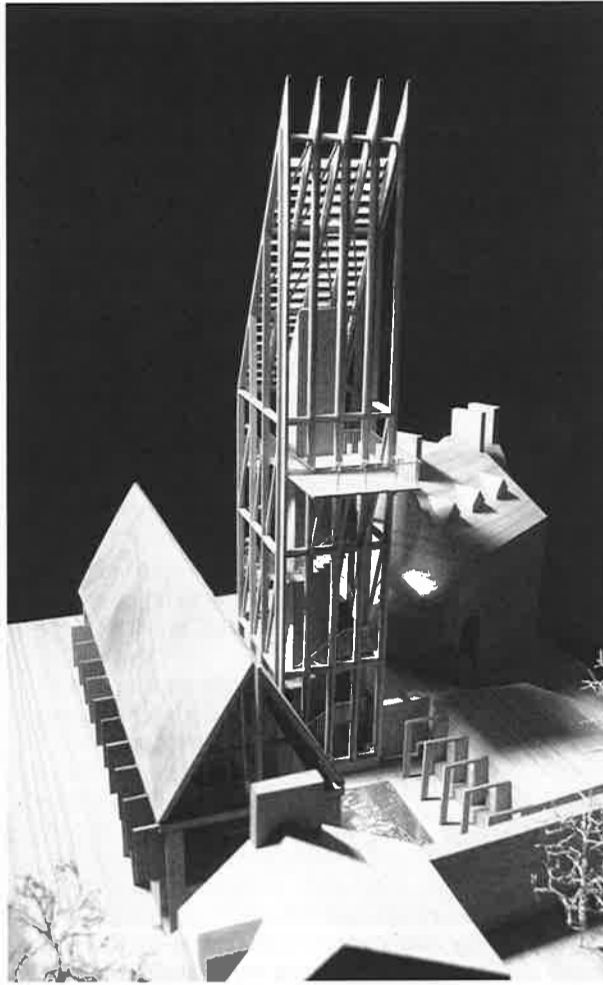
NR Did you find you were designing enough of the building, or was it too superficial?

NM I became quite interested in this separation of inner and the outer forms, and it ties back into Semper's ideas of represented form. We said, "Here's our project: it's a façade." Semper took from Bötticher the principle that the visible form is a representation of the invisible structural idea. He also thought the building should be bedecked with emblems that embody parables and ideas from the society that created it.

NR In using a concrete casting of the Elgin Marbles, how did the relationship of



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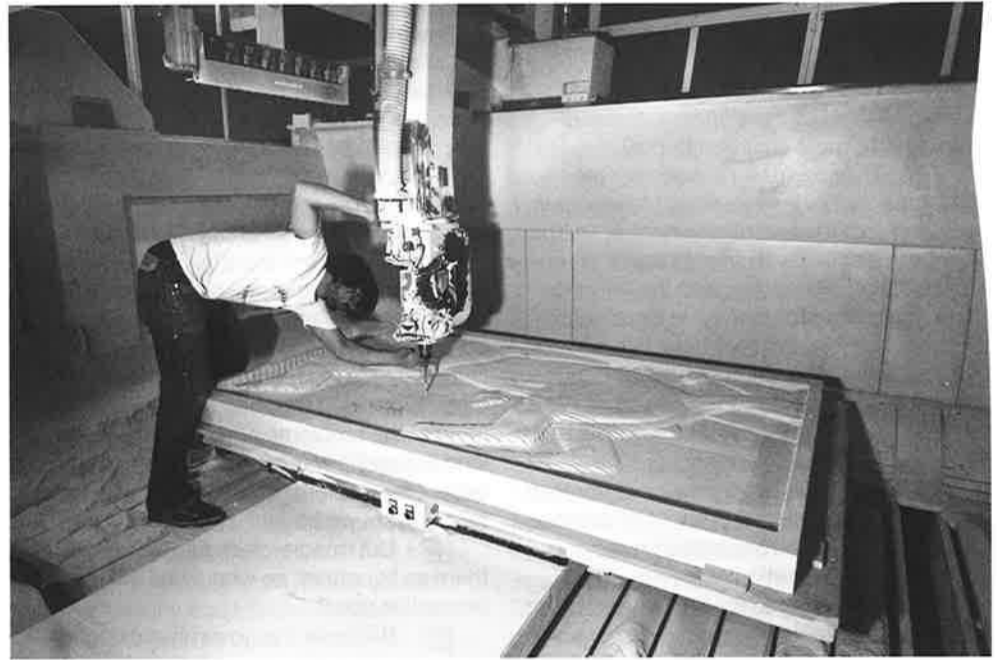


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1. Niall McLaughlin Architects, detail of clerestory and stone fins, Bishop Edward King Chapel, Oxford, England, 2012. Photograph courtesy of Niall McLaughlin Architects.
2. Niall McLaughlin Architects, main chapel ceiling, Bishop Edward King Chapel, Oxford, England, 2012. Photograph courtesy of Niall McLaughlin Architects.
3. Niall McLaughlin Architects, Auckland Castle, County Durham, model, 2014.
4. Niall McLaughlin Architects, Auckland Castle, County Durham, model showing new tower, 2014.
5. Niall McLaughlin Architects, Housing in Stratford, concrete panel details, 2012. Photograph courtesy of Niall McLaughlin Architects.
6. Niall McLaughlin Architects, 5 Axis CNC machining of relief positive for Housing in Stratford, 2011. Photograph courtesy of McLaughlin Architects.



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copy and—many times removed—original become part of your design concept?

NM The marbles are lost pieces that have become something on their own. They were burnt, damaged by a volcano, defaced by Christians, and blown up by the Venetians. When Elgin took them down, he cut the backs off, turning solid stone walling elements into veneers. They were taken to London, the most polluted city on earth at the time, where they acquired a sulphurous coat. There was a dreadful attempt to clean them by chipping the surface until they whitened. So, it's this weird mixture of being copied, translated, and re-idealized—all the time. We were able to scan them one long night in the British Museum, and the Keeper of the Stones suggested that we use the section with the horses. I thought of them as a "lost troop." We were looking at this idea of deracination—something completely removed from its context and offered as an abstraction. The idea of these stones, shaped by hand for the cult site of a god, under the eaves—the Ruskinian ideal—which are then taken away and become lost, become modern.

NR Yet your appropriation takes them to yet another level of commodification, like Warhol.

NM In fact, we quoted Warhol in our competition statement. He said if you

reproduce something often enough you produce a kind of numbness. What we did was funny. We went there and said, "Watch us! We're doing this right in front of you!" It was a very simple idea. It was one of the most enjoyable projects I've worked on.

NR Now, you are working on a complex site for Auckland Castle, in County Durham, which has both historical and religious themes but also has room for new insertions. How do you address these different considerations?

NM The Normans built this castle on a fantastic site overlooking a ruined Roman fort. It became the seat of the Prince Bishops of Durham and the bishop's palace. In the nineteenth century, one bishop bought twelve paintings of Jacob and his Twelve Sons by a Spanish Counter-Reformation painter, Francesco de Zurbarán—a very odd thing for an Anglican bishop to do. No one knows why Zurbarán painted this theme at a time when the Jews were being thrown out of Spain. But then he decided to send the paintings to Brazil, and they disappeared, eventually turning up at an auction house in London. A Durham bishop bought them because he was interested in Jewish naturalization and Catholic emancipation, and he lined his dining room with them. Recently, when the diocese wanted to sell them, Jonathan

Ruffer, a local boy made good, said he would buy the paintings if they would also sell him the castle. So, he bought both and plans to make a museum of religious faith, a visitor attraction, an art gallery, and develop cultural tourism to revive the economy of the town.

NR What are you inserting into this historic site, which is now protected with seven listed buildings?

NM We are doing the master plan, an extension, and a new museum building called "Five Thousand Years of Faith," funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, so it needs to apply to all faiths, from paganism to modern culture. SANAA is designing a café in the gardens. Ruffer also bought the old bank in the town and is turning it into a gallery for his collection of Italian and Spanish Counter-Reformation art and has made a link with the Prado.

We are designing a museum wing with a tall roof referencing the long, narrow tithe barns in medieval England, built in stone and supported up by an extremely lightweight metal roof. The building will contain large exhibits and artifacts. The other part is a new welcome building, in timber. The wooden shutters will open and contain representations of the castle at different stages of development. We are also building a viewing tower so that the building itself will be an exhibit on

the communicative capacity of architecture to speak about itself and its own place. When you look down into the courtyard, you will see a map of the landscape depicted in a mosaic built into the ground, as in cathedrals with labyrinths or symbolic systems inscribed on the floor.

NR What is the focus of your studio at Yale this semester?

NM Andrew Benner, who is teaching with me, and I have developed a brief around public representations of democratic institutions in the context of an almost autonomous world city, like London. We are examining the relationship between conceptual ideas and material practice. Our teaching is very iterative, allowing design ideas to emerge through physical making and trusting the creative potential of making and remaking.