



ATHLETES VILLAGE BLOCK N15

LOCATION

STRATFORD, LONDON

ARCHITECT

**NIALL MCLAUGHLIN
ARCHITECTS**

WRITER

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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 had done before.

Howells, a contemporary of McLaughlin's, with a much larger 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-slidy 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 structuring 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. 