

# Good intentions

In the second of three architectural reports on London 2012, Edwin Heathcote explores the Olympic Village

The last time London hosted the Olympics, in 1948, the athletes were housed in former military hospitals and prisoner-of-war camps, student halls and a bunch of tents in Richmond Park. This year, the 17,000 athletes will find themselves in a fortified city. London's huge Olympic Village is grossly misnamed. This is a chunk of serious city poking its head and shoulders above the low-lying brick terraces of east London and it will be the most significant element in the Games' legacy.

This is housing on the scale and density that architects and planners have been demanding for decades: a single developer ensuring a coherent, intelligent and compact urbanity. It is the kind of unified development that has proved impossible since the end of the big postwar municipal building programmes – programmes whose widespread social failure has tainted the reputation of large-scale urban intervention ever since.

The original masterplan by Fletcher Priest, Arup and landscape designers West 5 for developer Land Lease attempts to imbue the place with the scale and feel of expensive London districts – very dense but very classy. In this it has failed completely. Instead the result resembles a tranche transplanted from a Spanish or Swedish suburb, a piece of impeccably modern townscape with solid blocks, quality public space and facilities, and generous landscaping. It has a very fine school, designed (by architects AHMM) around a central drum in a cheery retro-modernist style. It has shops, streets, green spaces and a town centre. Unfortunately, though, that centre is isolated in the big ugly box of Westfield, Europe's largest urban shopping centre.

That removal of commercial street life might cause this to become an Alphasville, with the appearance but not the vitality of genuine urbanity. It's difficult to judge while it's still under construction, and

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while it's still in Olympics rather than "legacy" mode. But the tall, beige buildings seem to be creating deep beige canyons, and even with the balconies, courtyards and a smattering of shops and planting, it is difficult to see this as an integrated and buzzing city quarter.

Despite these reservations there are many things to cheer. One of the few good arguments for hosting the Olympics at all was that a development of this scale achieved at this speed – and with coherence – is impossible without the impetus of the big deadline. The design guidelines applied to things like the ratios of windows to wall, balconies to give all apartments access to outside space, a material palette of cast concrete panels that eschews whacky colours or nasty cladding. This, with the commissioning of a range of relatively young (although also relatively safe) architects, has created an ensemble of carefully articulated buildings. Some inhabit the dull end of the commercial spectrum, others look serious and interesting.

The most striking building is by one of London's under-praised talents, Niall McLaughlin. He sheathes his block in coats of the Elgin marbles, made by electronically scanning the real marbles at the British Museum. The panels run around the whole height of the building, their shallow relief passing in and out of sharp shadow and creating a feeling of movement and depth. Simple balconies, with bands of concrete indicating floor and ceiling levels, create a particular muscular nest of space – a bit reminiscent of Rome c1835, a comparison that will always raise the problematic associations of Fascist architecture.

Regardless of these echoes, this is a powerful and beautiful building that poetically evokes the ancient Greek origins of the Games, as well as the controversial London location of the Elgin marbles; it is a building intelligently located in time, event and place.



Origins Niall McLaughlin's blocks at the Olympic village, with casts of the Elgin marbles

Steve Bates

There are 2,618 flats built so far, with another 2,000 to come. Eric Farry's central European-inflected block is solid and urbane. Its bright abstract balcony fronts introduce a rare flash of colour – they were painted by Farry himself after a budget cut precluded any commissioned art. The building's cutaway corner and chunky mass recalls the solid urban blocks of Barcelona. Other notable buildings in the village include DSDHA's sharp 14-storey block with its strikingly angular balconies, CF Møller's solidly Scandinavian composition and dRMM's elegant terrace of three-storey houses.

The model imposed on the architects is the perimeter block: apartments and houses wrapped around a central green courtyard. That the blocks are arranged in a grid sliced through by diagonals reinforces their European quality. Their scale negotiates the chasm between the hideous burgeoning commercial towers of east London, which rise out of the raggedly redeveloped post-industrial landscape, and the dense rows of Victorian terraces that give the surrounding areas their neighbourhood character.

If the legacy of the Olympic Village is to be compared to that of other big events, however, there is good and bad news. The public infrastructures left over from the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Albertopolis, the area containing South Kensington's

museums, the Albert Hall and Imperial College) and, a century later, the Festival of Britain (the Festival Hall and, ultimately, the architecturally adventurous South Bank complex) make the civic legacy look weak. A more accurate comparison might be with White City, built for the 1908 Olympics, an area that remains a hopeless mess (not helped by the city's other massive Westfield shopping centre).

The Olympic Village was bought last year by Qatari Diar, the Qatari sovereign-wealth fund's property arm with developer Delancey, for £557m. This has left the taxpayer with a bill for £270m, a huge public subsidy for a private estate. This is a place of good intentions but it is one that encapsulates the contemporary trend for the privatising of profit and the socialising of loss.

In that, it is as perfect a snapshot of a moment as was the self-improving South Kensington. Perhaps the Olympic Village will retain its current feel of a high-security gated enclave, perhaps it will grow into a piece of real London, or perhaps its blocky grid will prove successful and begin to inform the streets around it. The cliché has it that London is a collection of villages. This is entirely wrong: London is a city of districts, big, sprawling quarters with poorly differentiated edges and centres that are nevertheless each radically distinct. Perhaps, then, this new bulky non-village fits right in.

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