

BUILDINGS: ATHLETES' VILLAGE

From the north-west, the Athletes' Village presents a cliff face of beige concrete cladding systems.



PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY DIXON

Olympians' village politics

London 2012's Athletes' Village far outstrips the makeshift facilities of the last century, but the need to beat the clock has taken its toll, writes **Oliver Wainwright**

Provided the prisoner of war camps are a good standard and the barbed wire removed, I see no objection to their use for housing the athletes," wrote one civil servant to the organising committee of the London Olympic Games — in 1948.

Not called the "austerity Olympics" for nothing, the last time London hosted the games saw athletes housed in a motley collection of makeshift dwellings, 4,000 competitors scattered over 30 sites across the city in a strategy of make-do-and-mend writ large. Lodgings ranged from RAF camps to nurses' hostels, school halls to college dormitories, as well as a sprawling field of rickety wooden huts in Richmond Park — originally built to accommodate army recruits and refurnished at a cost of £35,000.

Two generations later, the sporting circus has returned, this time accompanied by a swollen cortege of 17,000 athletes and officials. In the intervening years, the two-week festival of amateur sport has mutated into a professionalised tool of urban regeneration. Host cities compete not for the glory of the games, but for the chance to leverage exceptional amounts of public and private funding to build an entirely new urban quarter.

So it should come as no surprise that, while 1948 saw the hasty removal of barbed wire and the creaking of cabins, the London 2012 should boast a £1.1 billion purpose-built "village" — hemmed in by miles of electrified fence.

Village is a rather misleading term for what is in fact a 27ha grid of concrete blocks, between eight and 12 storeys tall, that stand huddled together in the north-eastern corner of the Olympic site. Bor-

This outcrop of housing reads as an alien chunk airlifted in from a Spanish suburb

dered to the east by the gully of the overground rail line, and to the south by the deep, open-cut box of Stratford International station, the development sits like a gleaming citadel, securely severed from its surroundings. Viewed from every angle — from the streets of Leyton to the east, from the decks of the Westfield shopping centre to the south, from the undulating mounds of the Olympic Park to the west — the village presents an abrupt cliff face, a forbidding wall of beige.

But, as with every building in and around the Olympic site, appearances are deceptive: this outcrop of high-density housing, which reads like an alien chunk airlifted in from a Spanish suburb, is the first fragment of a much bigger plan. It is a plan that stretches almost 300ha across the Lower Lea Valley, and will take the next 30 years to materialise, on the biggest tabula rasa development site in Europe. So how to judge a new piece of city whose context has yet to appear, and will not do so for some time?

The present reality is best explained by a brief reprisal of its origins. These date back to the mid-1990s and an ambitious plan by Chelsfield and Stanhope to transform this vast swathe of abandoned rail lands into Stratford City, a "new metropolitan ►

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ATHLETES' VILLAGE SITE PLAN



1. Denton Corker Marshall
Building N1
Residential units 288
Retail space 450sq m facing public realm

2. Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands
Building N2
Residential units 298
Retail space 250sq m

3. Patel Taylor
Building N3
Residential units 297
Retail space 585sq m

4. Patel Taylor
Building N4
Residential units 290
Retail space 585sq m

5. Glenn Howells (west block), Panter Hudspith (east block)
Building N7
Residential units 318

6. DSDHA
Building N9
Residential units 120
Retail space 478sq m

7. Eric Parry Architects
Building N10
Residential units 281
Retail space 450sq m
Office space 440sq m

8. Penoyre & Prasad
Building N11 — Polyclinic multi-purpose health facility
Community facilities 1500sq m
Health facility 3200sq m

9. AHMM
Building N12 — Chobham Academy. Scheduled to open

in September 2013, the 1,800-student academy will specialise in sports, performing arts, literacy and languages.

10. CF Møller Architects
Building N13
Residential units 185

11. Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands (north block), Haworth Tompkins (east block)
Building N14
Residential units 201

12. Glenn Howells (west block), Niall McLaughlin (north block), Piercy Conner (east block)
Building N15
Residential units 298
Retail space 6 ground-floor units

13. DRMM
Building N26
Residential units 242
Retail space 400sq m

centre" of homes, offices, retail and leisure, clustered around the international station. Designed by Fletcher Priest, Arup and West 8, it was the biggest planning application London had ever seen, of a scale and ambition that would surely never be realised. The Olympic bid — which came along in 2005, once this masterplan had already gained outline permission — proved a catalyst. Weaving a landscape of leisure around a new urban hub, the Olympics and Stratford City made a marriage of convenience, each used to justify the viability of the other. But this hurried public-private pairing had the fatal effect of dramatically compressing the programme: from a 30-year phased strategy to a frenzied gold rush for 2012.

To complicate matters, ownership of the Stratford project also changed hands, split between two Australian giants. Westfield took on the retail and leisure component — choosing to deliver the "towncentre" as an inward-facing covered shopping mall — while Lend Lease acted as development manager for the housing, happily leaving financial responsibility with the publicly funded Olympic Delivery Authority as the credit crunch hit. With the two parts critically separated by the gaping slice of the international rail cut, and each in the hands of a different private interest, the idea of an integrated "city" was abandoned before it had even begun.

A question of scale

This compromised, convoluted history is very much in evidence on the streets of the Athletes' Village



9. Chobham Academy by AHMM

today. There is something peculiarly diagrammatic about the place, a sense that comes not only from the repetitive grain of perimeter blocks — each around 100 x 80m extruded to 10 storeys — but from the gestural boulevards that sweep between them. You can almost read the big red arrows on the design and access statement, indicating the visual axis to the Velodrome, the north-south corridor to the shopping mall, the east-west route from Leyton — axes that terminate in Canary Wharf and the Shard respectively, tying this rootless place into the macro network of grands projets.

All very well on the planners' tick-box analysis, but there was clearly little attention paid to what kind of spaces these grand moves would create. The route from Leyton means going from a fine grain of terraced houses, through an industrial backland, across a

railway gully and into this Hausmann world of avenues framed by marching white facades. The journey south to the town centre, meanwhile, ends in a mountain of steps, topped by the gates of a shopping mall.

"We would have liked to

In comparison to the plastic-clad towers along Stratford High Street, the village blocks are of exceptional quality, built with durability and generosity

improve these connections, but our boundaries had been set in stone," says Greg Deas, chief architect at Lend Lease, who describes the design process from 2007 as one of tweaking and adjusting within the "straitjacket" of the existing plan. The original vision for the village had apparently taken Maida Vale and Notting Hill as its inspiration, a reassuring image for the bid, but one that bears little semblance to the reality. Instead, Deas says that the modern developments of Hammarby in Stockholm and Bercy in Paris provided the model — perimeter blocks, variously sliced up along their southern edges to allow sunlight in and views out.

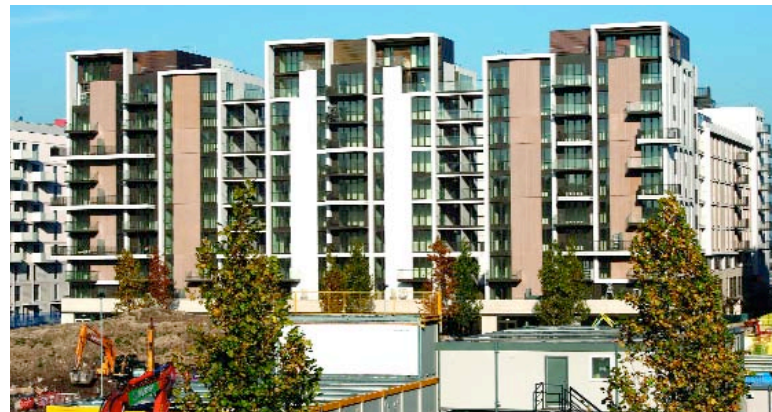
Now built, each plot in the village follows this sensible logic, organised with a slab to the north, a wing either side, and a series of three "pavilions" to the south, connected by glazed winter gardens. The lower three floors are devoted to "townhouse" maisonettes, whose first floors open on to private back gardens and a shared courtyard to the rear, while apartments are stacked above, each enjoying an unusually large balcony. This arrangement allows for front doors on to the pavement, with parking concealed beneath the podium courtyards, and goes some way towards making proper residential streets. Spaces for corner shops and other essential facilities are also provided, strategically placed facing main routes and squares, where they will probably work and not remain boarded up, as they have in the new developments along nearby Stratford High Street. In comparison to ►



1. N1 by Denton Corker Marshall



6. N9 by DSDHA



3. N3 by Patel Taylor



4. N4 by Taylor Patel



5. N7 by Panter Hudspith



10. N13 by CF Møller



12. N15 by Niall McLaughlin



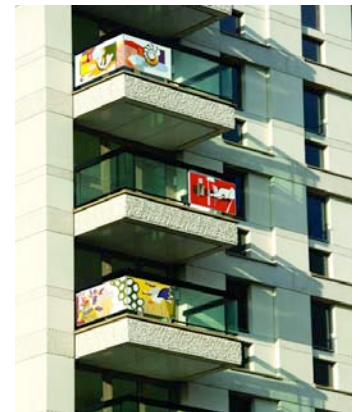
11. N14 by Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands



2. N2 by Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands



13. N26 by DRMM



7. N10 by Eric Parry

BUILDINGS: ATHLETES' VILLAGE

the films, plastic-clad towers there, the buildings in the village are of exceptional quality, built with a durability and generosity absent from most equivalent speculative and affordable housing in this country.

The streets themselves are conceived as tree-lined avenues, with a planted central reservation and some integrated parking, but the blocks' height dictates they must be broader than feels comfortable. Ranging between 20-30m, with large stretches of planting in between, there is little sense of enclosure, of buildings edging streets and squares. It is more like space, punctuated by buildings. A finer grain could have achieved equal densities — along the lines of Venice, for example — and it is regrettable that the colossal scale of the site intimidated the designers into reaching for the broad brush, especially as the coarse resolution of the outline plan quickly became that of the detailed plan.

"There was no time to go back to outline planning," says Tim Uquhart, development director for the village at Lend Lease, explaining the pressure to begin piling before designs had been fixed. "The 2005 permission was incredibly restrictive, so we had to find a formula you could apply across the site, without constraining the design outcome."

This formula consisted of a standard type — or "chassis" — to which a group of 17 architects, chosen by an Architecture Foundation competition, would be invited to apply a dressing. An internal design review board was set up, driven by the vocal Ricky Bunnett, which, fearing a lack of consistency, established a series of design guidelines.

"We were looking for a continuity of palette, a sort of melding between buildings," says Paul Hartmann, project lead at the ODA and chair of the panel, describing regular meetings where composite elevations of neighbouring blocks were discussed. "We didn't want it to turn into a zoo." Developed by Fletcher Priest and Patel Taylor, these principles set out the idea of articulating the bottom, middle and top of the blocks, as well as dictating the ratio of glass to wall (part of achieving Code for Sustainable Homes Level 4) and the use of pre-cast concrete cladding in shades of stucco and stone.

"It was quite an open process of seeing what the architects thought the rules should be and assimilating them into a common language," says Glenn Howells, one of the first architects appointed. "The objective was to create a landmark place, rather than a series of landmark buildings."

A threat or a challenge?

Walking around the village, it is fascinating to see how the different practices have responded to this curious situation, some managing to bend the rules more than others. The more successful buildings have embraced the blunt realities, turning what could be a reluctant compromise into something that celebrates the peculiar circumstances.

"If it's going to be a cliff face, we thought, it should be the most beautiful cliff face in London," says Deborah Saunt of DSDHA, whose striking, white, flat-iron building in the centre of the village delights in its brute, blank aspect. Inspired by the chalk seams that run beneath the site, it has a heavy,

COMPOSITE ELEVATION



DRMM's plot N26 features extruded, ceramic-clad blocks facing on to low-rise mews housing to the east of the site.

mineral quality. Layers of tapering balconies form fissured crags across its facade, positioned in response to the planned 30-storey tower by Ian Simpson across the way — one of the more ambitious proposals, along with Make's twin towers, which have not materialised.

DSDHA was perhaps lucky with its site, drawing formal novelty from the triangular plot. Elsewhere, the orthogonal type has been executed with varying success, but perhaps most compellingly by Niall McLaughlin.

"I was very interested in the principle of the facade being delaminated from the building's core form," says McLaughlin. "Usually it's something one tries to

3D scans of the Elgin Marbles are hung in a grid with horses galloping across the elevation

swim against, to retain a sense of 'authenticity', but here we decided to embrace it."

His facade, which clads the northern wing of block N15, relies in its repetitive, factory-produced nature, refusing to stagger, offset or modulate the panelised system — tricks resorted to by

others in a vain attempt to relieve the monotony. Instead, McLaughlin has focused his attention on the panels themselves: 3D scans of the Elgin Marbles, cast in computer-milled moulds, and hung in a regular grid with horses galloping across the elevation.

"I like the idea of setting Ruskin's conception of the craftsman against the absolute Taylorism of the construction process," he says. "Through digital reproduction, these deracinated stones are now doubly lost."

While Saunt and McLaughlin's buildings are driven by conceptual positions that turn the realities of the project to their advantage, the less successful blocks try desperately to evade the situation.

The buildings that face on to the village's central grassy mound, now christened Victory Park, appear to have buckled in awe of this prospect. In an attempt to dissemble their bulk, the two 80m frontages by Patel Taylor are articulated as a lumpy collection of bits. The three bays of block N3 are apologetically carved up into a series of six volumes of different height, each held in a white frame and broken down with a dancing concoction of vertical coffee-coloured bands, traversed by a syncretised litter of balconies.

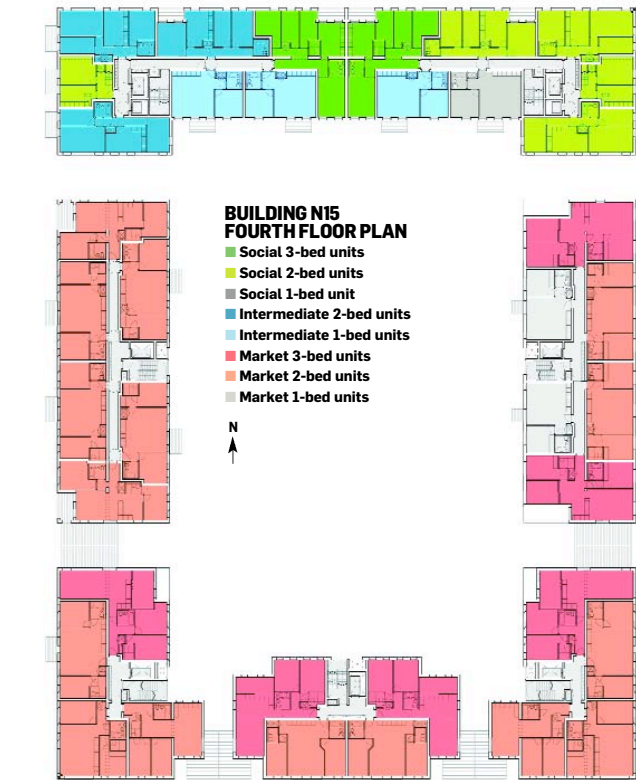
Sobriety versus display

To the west, meanwhile, Panter Hudson has followed suit — no doubt egged on by the design

review board — with stacked barcodes of brick slips, offset in pre-cast concrete casing. Its fussiness brought into focus by Glenn Howells' sober white wing to the west, which opts for a simple reinterpretation of Georgian proportions in a single material.

"Throughout the development of the village, the debate was always about sobriety versus display," says Frank Duffy, who has chaired the Stratford City Design Review Panel since its inception. "I think, on the whole, sobriety won out."

He sees this as a good thing, relieved by the lack of applied colour — Eric Parry's bizarre enamelled panels, which hang from the balconies of N10 like beach towels, apparently slipped



through the net — although he does admit to a nervousness about the similarity of the buildings. "Maybe there should have been a few more Niall McLaughlins," he adds wistfully.

I am inclined to agree. For although the design code is broken in places, including DRMM's dark grey stripes of extruded ceramic cladding and CF Moller's refreshing use of monolithic brick, the overall effect is of a group of buildings that has been progressively assimilated through collective review, watered down into an inoffensive vanilla soup.

The real test of the village will not come until March 2013 at the earliest, when the 2,818 homes are handed over to Qatari Diar and

Delancey — which bought the development in a joint venture for £557 million, along with the rights to build out the six remaining plots with up to 2,000 more flats — while the 1,379 affordable units will be handed over to Triathlon Homes. The plan is to rent rather than sell the homes, which bodes well for both maintenance and the formation of a viable community.

The forthcoming legacy neighbourhoods, planned to be built in phases from 2014, already appear to have learned valuable lessons from the village. In Chobham Manor, the first phase to the immediate north, there is new emphasis on low-rise family housing, reinterpreting the London vocabulary of terraces, mews and

square in a welcome move away from the swaggering blocks of the urban renaissance. And, when the Mayoral Development Corporation is formed on April 1, there is at least hope that there will finally be a form of joined-up strategic intelligence to unify these plans, from Hackney Wick, through the brave new world of the park's "legacy communities", to the next phases of Stratford City, and the hinterlands of Stratford, Maryland and Leyton. Whatever grows up around it, the Athletes' Village will always stand as the formative kernel, a hasty monument to high-quality housing, but a quality that was accelerated, codified, standardised, reviewed and resold into a strangely empty place.

A legacy rooted in local heritage



Chobham Manor will be the first legacy community to be developed.

The Olympic Legacy Communities Scheme, submitted for planning in September 2011, covers 64ha of the park where five new neighbourhoods are to be built over the next 20 years: Chobham Manor, East Wick, Sweetwater, Marshgate Wharf and Pudding Mill.

In contrast to the high-density perimeter blocks of the Athletes' Village, these forthcoming districts favour a lower-rise grain, drawing inspiration from London's heritage of terraced housing and mews streets, with a strong emphasis on family housing, which makes up 40% of proposed units.

Three new schools — two primary and a secondary — will support the neighbourhoods and the surrounding area along with Chobham Academy, which sits just next to the Olympic Village and will open in September 2013. Other amenities include nine nurseries, three health centres and 12 multi-purpose community spaces, which could be community centres, libraries and gyms.

1 Chobham Manor This will be the first neighbourhood developed after the games. Now in for outline planning, Chobham Manor will contain family homes, with wide, tree-lined avenues intersecting narrower mews streets and green squares. The area continues the grid of the Athletes' Village, preserving viewing corridors to the Velodrome.
2 East Wick Extending the "creative vitality" of Hackney Wick, East Wick will be a new hub of businesses, shops and community facilities. Linear residential terraces are proposed along the park edge to provide an inhabited



LEGACY MASTERPLAN

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 Chobham Manor | 6 Athletes' Village |
| 2 Eastwick | 7 Stratford International |
| 3 Sweetwater | 8 Westfield Stratford City |
| 4 Marshgate Wharf | |
| 5 Pudding Mill | |

frontage, in reference to London's tradition of parks overlooked by houses.
3 Sweetwater Sited to the north-west of the main stadium, Sweetwater — named after the former sweet factory on the site — will be a low- to mid-rise family neighbourhood of terraced housing and apartments. Framed by two waterways, it will also host a primary care centre, nursery, primary school and an Idea Store.
4 Marshgate Wharf Covering beneath the ArcelorMittal Orbit, Marshgate Wharf is the most atypical of the neighbourhoods, continuing the high-density perimeter block typology of

the Athletes' Village to form a "metropolitan gateway" to the park. A large proportion of the ground floors will be given over to waterside shops, restaurants and cafés, catering to the area's role as a visitor destination.
5 Pudding Mill Sited at the confluence of rivers and canals to the south of the park, Pudding Mill has an industrial character and is made up of irregular parcels of land framed by rail lines, viaducts and underpasses. Development will provide a range of unit types, balancing the demands of the residential population with those of its creative and industrial uses.



Chobham Manor will consist of a low-rise grain of terraced streets.