



For Níall McLaughlin,  
every job is a fresh challenge.

# London Maverick

Text  
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Some architects defy categorization. What thread links a geometric house of black stone, an oval chapel that evokes the hull of a ship, a digitized antique relief on the façade of a housing block, and a seaside pier of concrete and rough wood? All are recent works by Níall McLaughlin, who grew up in Dublin, practises in London, and finds inspiration in every place and era. 'My way of working is a short cut to obscurity, because no project gets a fair wind from the one before,' he admits. 'Clients can't count on having a dependable set of strategies applied to their projects. So it's – what the hell will McLaughlin do here? People want to know what box to put you in.' Luckily, he has found quite a few clients to join him on his voyages of discovery.

As a student, McLaughlin sprang the first of many surprises. 'There was a new library building at Trinity College Dublin that had a mysterious quality and drew me in,' he recalls. 'I had planned to study English literature, but at the last minute I decided to take a chance on architecture.' One of his teachers was Robin Walker, who had worked with Mies and created buildings of extraordinary finesse. It was a seductive vision, but modernist orthodoxy was being challenged in the early 1980s. 'My career as a designer began when I realized that Mies wasn't the father I needed,' says McLaughlin. 'He created a world in which everything was ordered according to a system of untouchable, universal truths. It reminded me of my Catholic childhood – you can't be half a Catholic.'

Something remains from the rigour of his faith and education, but McLaughlin's work is characterized more by poetry and invention. He loves to read and travel, and these activities feed passions that range from the iconography of the Parthenon to the layered narrative of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. That intellectual curiosity finds expression in his latest and possibly best work to date: the Bishop Edward King Chapel near Oxford. The competition-winning design is located in a circle of trees beside the Victorian buildings of Ripon Theological College. Inspiration came from many sources: a medieval illustration of a floating ship, the boat-builders' roof vault of Santo Stefano in Venice, the oval plan of Rudolf Schwarz's St Michael's church in Frankfurt, and several other chapels from the Palatine in Aachen to Peter Zumthor's St Benedict in the Swiss mountains. 'Sometimes you have so many ideas stuffed within you that they cascade down,' says McLaughlin. 'The design didn't come that easily, but when it did everything fell into place. The danger in a commission like this is that it will be overlaid with ideas jostling for attention.'

Happily, the chapel appears not as a composite of borrowed imagery but as a singular, lyrical space that restores one's faith in the capacity of architects to reinvent traditional forms. Stones arranged in a dogtooth pattern echo the expressive modelling of the old buildings. Within, larch glulam columns soar into the light of a clerestory and weave a canopy high overhead. 'Making a church today connects you to a rich

tapestry of meanings, which used to be true of other building types but no longer is,' McLaughlin observes. 'What's unusual about a religious building is that you are constructing a framework for the stability of meaning.'

Materiality is a key feature of McLaughlin's work. A prototype houseboat, first conceived for Malmö and later moored on a London canal, has a flat deck supported on inflated tubes and walled in translucent carbon-fibre panels for privacy and clear glass for views. A low-budget housing project in South London is clad in aluminium panels faced with strips of radiant film that catch the light and turn the façade into an animated canvas of vibrant, constantly shifting colours. In contrast, the rehabilitation of Deal Pier, a frugal project for an English seaside resort, is as basic as the name would suggest: concrete piles supporting a ribcage of raw timber and a glass-walled café. And the as-yet-unrealized design for a church in a poor London neighbourhood is a sharply angled, plywood-waffle structure, which soars at either end and encloses a diversity of luminous spaces for meetings and worship.

The form of that church may derive from the abstract geometry of a print by Josef Albers that also helped McLaughlin shape a house on the west coast of Ireland. The site is hidden away between rocks in a narrow valley. The client asked for a sober, unpretentious house but offered the architect a free hand and a generous budget. Looking around for local points of reference, McLaughlin found a tiny stone chapel that had survived from the 6<sup>th</sup> century and saw how the blue limestone of Limerick Cathedral turned a glossy black in the frequent rains. The Goleen House comprises a cluster of linear pavilions stepping down a slope, with monopitch roofs and glazed ends that frame views. Thick walls define courtyards and defy Atlantic gales. A path and a stream meander through. An existing white-rendered cottage (now used as a guesthouse) complements stone walls that will weather over time to merge with the surrounding cliffs. The simplicity of the forms is enhanced by crisp finishes and impeccably crafted details, much as Katsura raises the traditional Japanese house to a peak of perfection.

As McLaughlin's team brought the Goleen House to completion, they addressed a radically different challenge from the committee planning the London Olympics. The athletes needed to be housed for a month, but the apartments would then form the core of a new community, regenerating a brownfield site. To build these blocks quickly and economically, the developer standardized plans and construction, while inviting 19 architecture firms to contribute diverse façades. Many architects would have dismissed such a job as window-dressing, but McLaughlin was intrigued by the opportunity to break away from the conventional exteriors of most public housing. Searching for an image that would symbolize athleticism and have a timeless resonance, he turned to the →

**'My career as a designer began when I realized that Mies wasn't the father I needed'**



## Bandstand Bexhill-on-Sea | UK | 2001

In Bexhill-on-Sea, Níall McLaughlin complemented Erich Mendelsohn's De La Warr Pavilion, a rare British example of International Style modern, with a movable fibreglass concert shell. It moves about on the terrace to accommodate different performances. The shape of the canopy was based on computer analysis of sound projection. The design was developed through a series of workshops with local school children.





← The existing house is roofed in natural slate with rendered white walls. The new structures are clad in Irish blue limestone, which will weather over time to match the surrounding cliffs.  
Photo Nick Kane

↙ The house comprises a cluster of linear pavilions, with glazed ends that frame views.  
Photos Nick Guttridge

## Plan



## House

Goleen | Ireland | 2009

This house is set in a landscape of exceptional natural beauty. The linear pavilions step down the 1.6-m fall of the site, creating a meandering path through the house from the entrance on the west to the living space and sea views to the east. A series of pitched roofs staggered across the site provide the residence with semi-enclosed courtyards. At the end of the journey, a larger terrace reveals spectacular views of the cliffs, the sea and the islands of West Cork.



## Cross Section

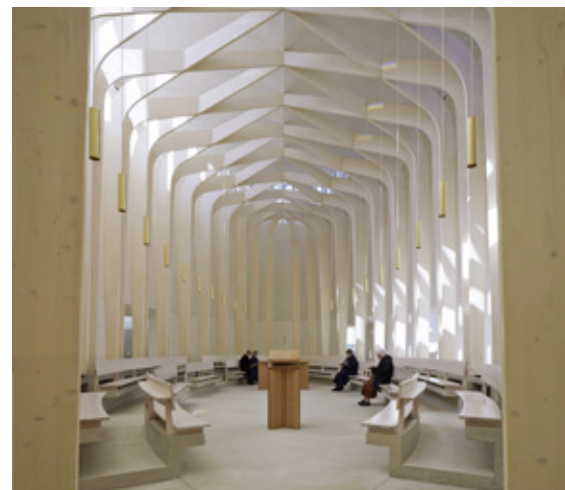




## Bishop Edward King Chapel

Oxfordshire | UK | 2013

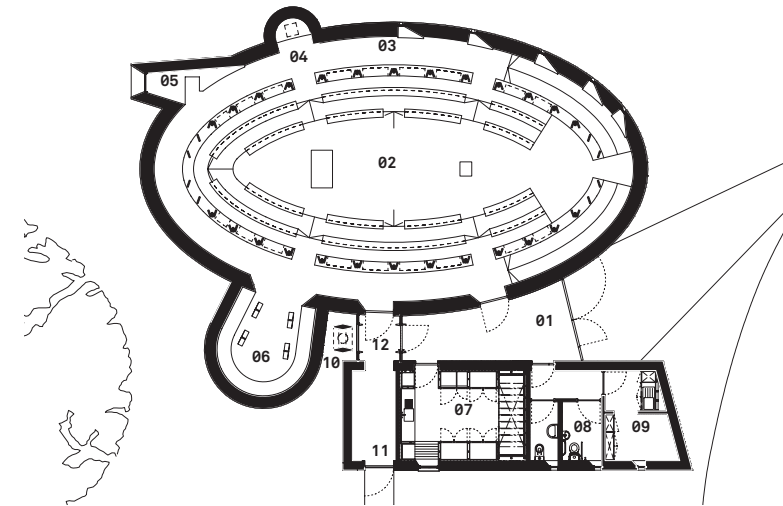
In 2009 Niall McLaughlin won the RIBA competition to design the new Bishop Edward King Chapel for Ripon College. Two main architectural ideas inform the design. The first is a gentle hollow in the ground as a meeting place for the community. The second is a delicate ship-like timber structure that rises into the treetops to gather the light from the leaves. The first idea speaks of ground, of meeting in the still centre. The second idea suggests an uplifting buoyancy, rising towards the light. The way in which these two opposite forces work off each other is what gives the building its particular character.



↑ The site is dominated by a ring of mature trees on high ground overlooking a valley.

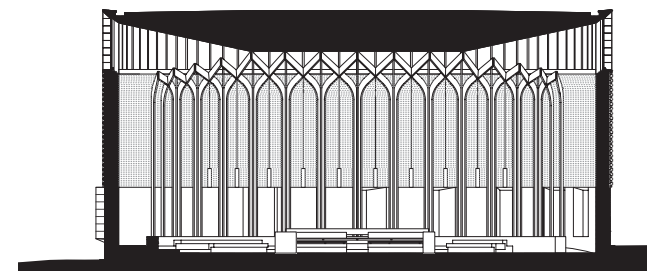
↓ View of the main chapel looking towards the lectern.  
Photo Dennis Gilbert | View Pictures

### Plan

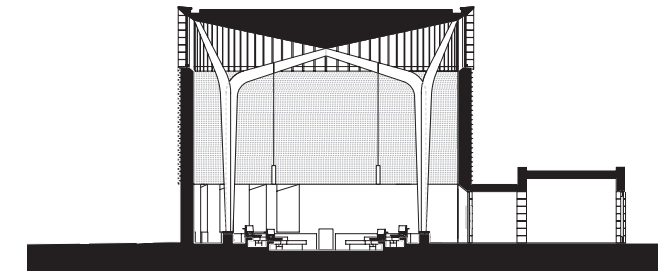


- 01 Entrance lobby
- 02 Main chapel
- 03 Ambulatory
- 04 Blessed Sacrament niche
- 05 Private prayer space
- 06 Sisters of Begbroke prayer room
- 07 Sacristy
- 08 Toilets
- 09 Storage
- 10 Bell tower
- 11 Second entrance
- 12 Prayer board

### Long Section



### Cross Section



← marble friezes that Lord Elgin snatched from the Parthenon two centuries ago and sold to the nascent British Museum. The Elgin Marbles are among the greatest achievements of figurative sculpture, especially in the overlapping ranks of men and horses that seem to be moving forward in procession to the shrine of Athena.

To capture the beauty and energy of this frieze on a different scale was an awesome task. McLaughlin was allowed to stay overnight in the gallery where the sculptures are displayed. An SLR camera shared a tripod with a projector that cast a grid image over the figures as the camera took repeated exposures. Software created a 3D digital file from the processed images, which directed a router to carve MDF boards. A latex mould was made from these shallow reliefs, and five concrete panels were cast and cut in different ways to create 25 variations. These were interspersed with jutting balconies to animate the entire façade. The audacity of this intervention provoked intense controversy. Purists joined with the Greek authorities (who have lobbied repeatedly for the return of the Marbles) in deploring an act of desecration, and some critics scorned this revival of surface ornament. Once the commotion died down, the block took its place in the wonderfully varied anthology of styles that relieves the enormity of London.

The house and the reliefs share a sense of mass, but many of McLaughlin's projects are light and playful. In Bexhill-

on-Sea, he complemented Erich Mendelsohn's De La Warr Pavilion, a rare British example of International Style modern, with a movable fibreglass concert shell that resembles the wings of a bird. In Hull, a much-battered port city on the east coast of Britain, he created a movable community centre to serve as a showcase for excellence in the built environment. Mobile homes are tipped on end to support a tilted canopy, and a kit of devices provides renewable energy. For the expansive redevelopment of the rail yards behind King's Cross and St Pancras stations in London, the architects made two radically different contributions. The first was a pavilion that resembles an airy gazebo; the second was a mixed-use block that was by far the largest building they had ever tackled. It was to contain mechanical plant for the whole development, a sports centre and market, housing and car parking. The goal was to dissolve this vast mass by cladding the façade in fluted glass that would appear to ripple as trains passed by.

That project, named Argent, was put on hold after the crash, but a revised design should resume construction later this year. If realized, it may remain an anomaly in McLaughlin's oeuvre. 'I haven't done nearly enough public buildings, but I don't want to work on a huge scale,' he says. 'A building isn't like a car or an iPhone – it belongs to the part of us that yearns for a degree of permanence.' ←

niallmclaughlin.com

**'I haven't done nearly enough public buildings, but I don't want to work on a huge scale'**



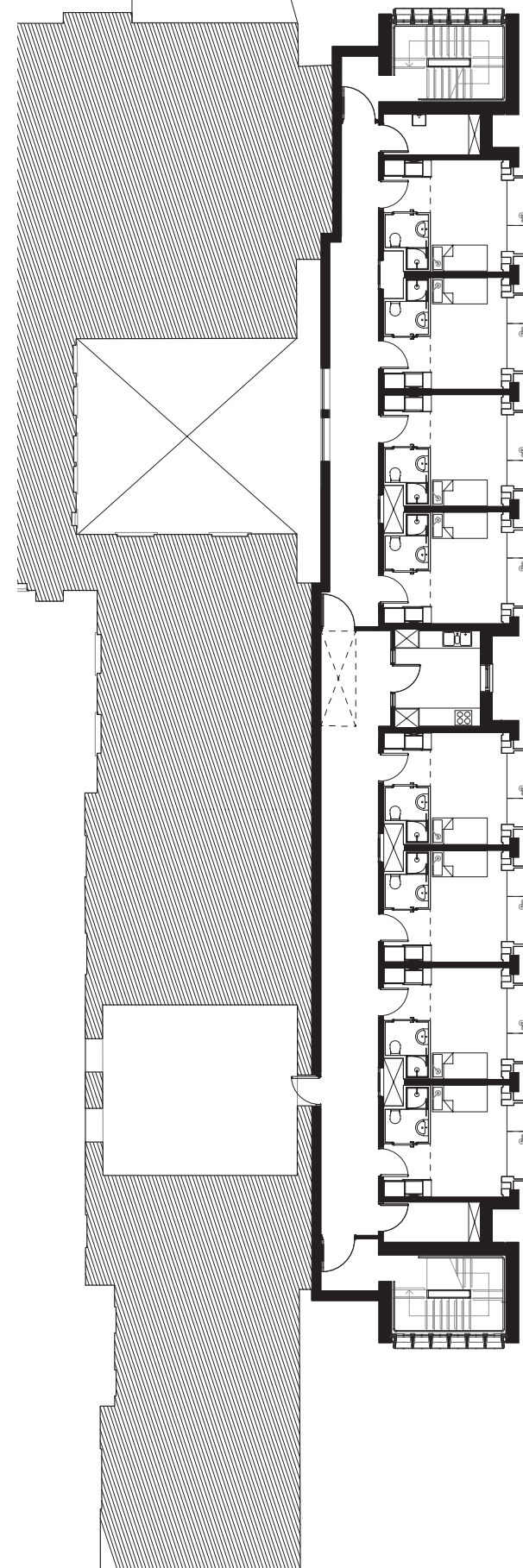
## Student Housing Oxford | UK | 2011

The two buildings are located along the existing boundary wall of Somerville College and face north by necessity. The window units, each containing a desk and a window seat, project from the façade like bay windows, allowing oblique views up and down the street through side windows and filling the interior with a maximum of natural light. The building utilizes renewable technologies: a ground source heat pump provides heating, a solar thermal array produces hot water, and photovoltaics generate electricity.

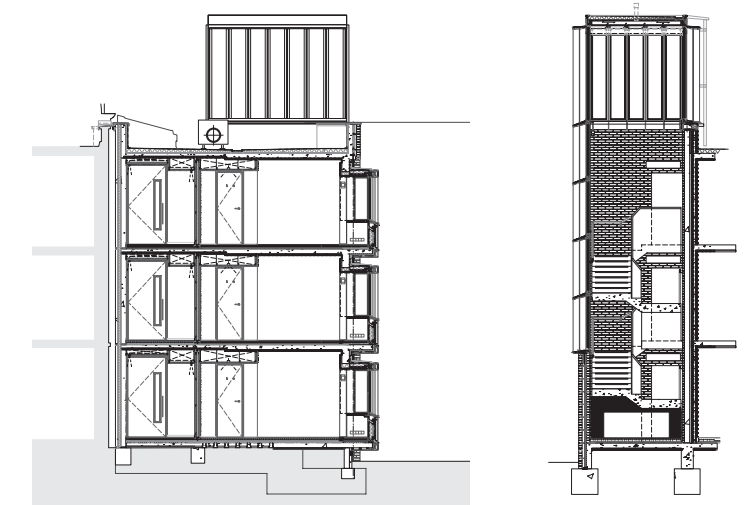


↑ The buildings use durable high-quality materials, such as local bricks, European oak and concrete containing GGBS.

### Typical Floor



### Cross Sections





↑ The façade features relief castings that are based on an ancient frieze at the British Museum. Made from reconstituted stone, they display parades of athletes assembled for a festival.

↓ 3D scanning of the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum.  
Photo Crispin Hughes

## Housing

London | UK | 2011

The regeneration of Stratford for the London Olympics has created a whole new piece of city. It was designed in such a way that it made a festive statement for the big event, but its longer life is as housing for a mix of tenure types. The design is based on a site-wide strategy that incorporates sequencing, procurement, design guides and buildability. The architects needed to integrate with a much wider team on all aspects of design and construction.

