

David Murphy

One Medlock Street, Manchester
Facade Artwork Design Development

June 2025





15 m

33 m

Outline Approach

- *An artwork reflective of its context*
- *An artwork that is essential, democratic and that brings an everyday pleasure to the space.*
- *An artwork that helps to mediate between the old and the new, the natural and the architectural.*
- *An artwork that celebrates real sculptural and architectural considerations: light and shadow, gravity and grace, perception and perspective.*
- *An artwork that aspires to the highest levels of craft and accomplishment with the materials at hand: an alignment with timelessness.*



'The city changes but the river endures'

The River Medlock ("Meadow Stream") runs for approximately ten miles from the hills of Oldham into and through the city centre. It was at the strategic confluence of the Rivers Medlock and Irk that Roman soldiers, led by General Agricola established a fort at Mamucium (79AD), and from which the city as we know has developed. The river stands as a kind of origin story for Manchester.

Its meandering path has, over the course of more than a thousand years, been straightened, culverted, deepened and canalised. At the height of Industrialisation the waters of the Medlock helped provide power, sanitation and transportation methods for the Sugar Refineries, Timber Yards, Cotton Mills and Chemical Works that lined its congested banks and helped make Manchester a global powerhouse.

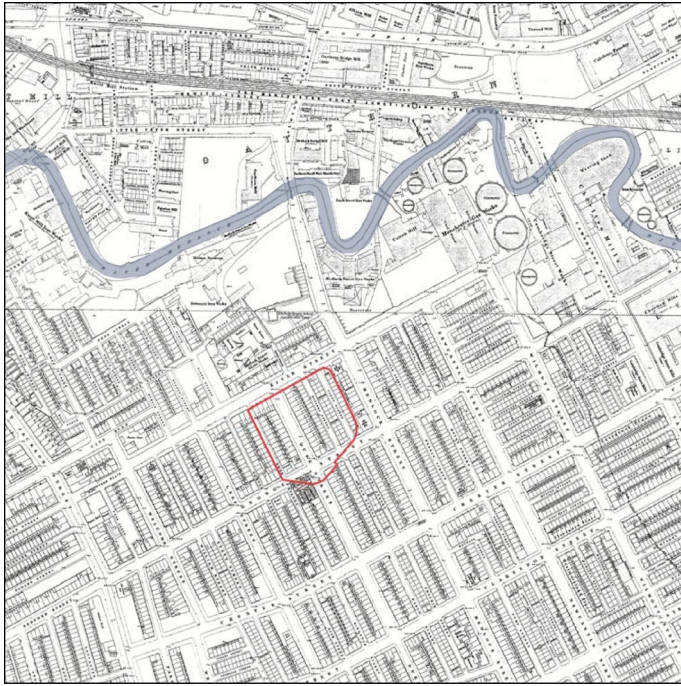
An extraordinary early 20th Century plan to protect against flooding saw a long section of the Medlock lined with more than 8 million red Accrington bricks, and the river has been known colloquially as the "red river" for more than a hundred years. Most of the brick lining has now been removed to allow a more natural hydrology to return to the river course.

Following the modern route of the red river through the city is an act of divination. From the east it ducks below Great Ancoats Street and writhes its way westwards, culverted below the old UMIST campus before reappearing briefly below Princess Street, where it winds under Oxford Road on its way towards its meeting with the Irwell near the Hulme Locks. Its sinous waveform path across this section of the city has provided the inspiration for the patterning in this proposal.

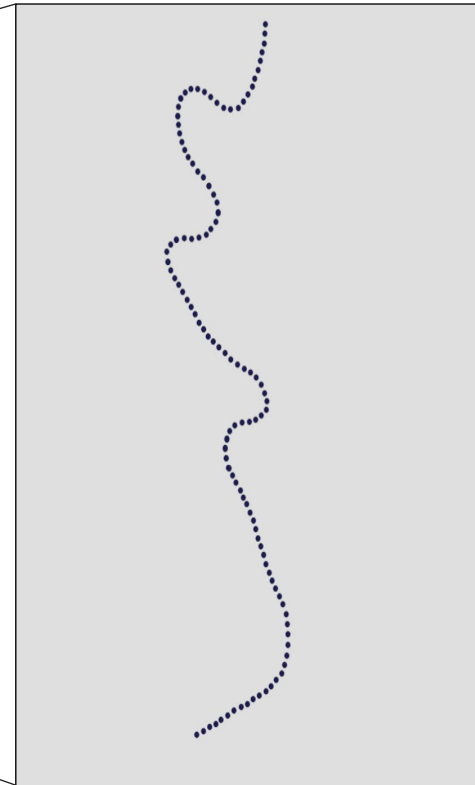
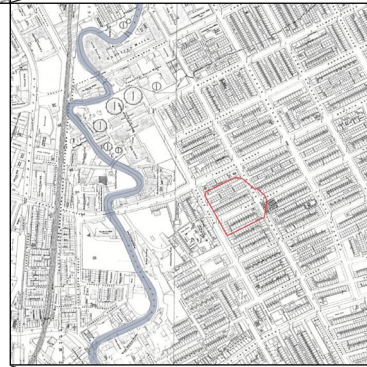
The crossroads that bound the site of the new development also tell their own watery tale, being situated at the corner of 'River Street' and 'Medlock Street' - the historic significance of this unassuming river couldn't be more clearly stated.



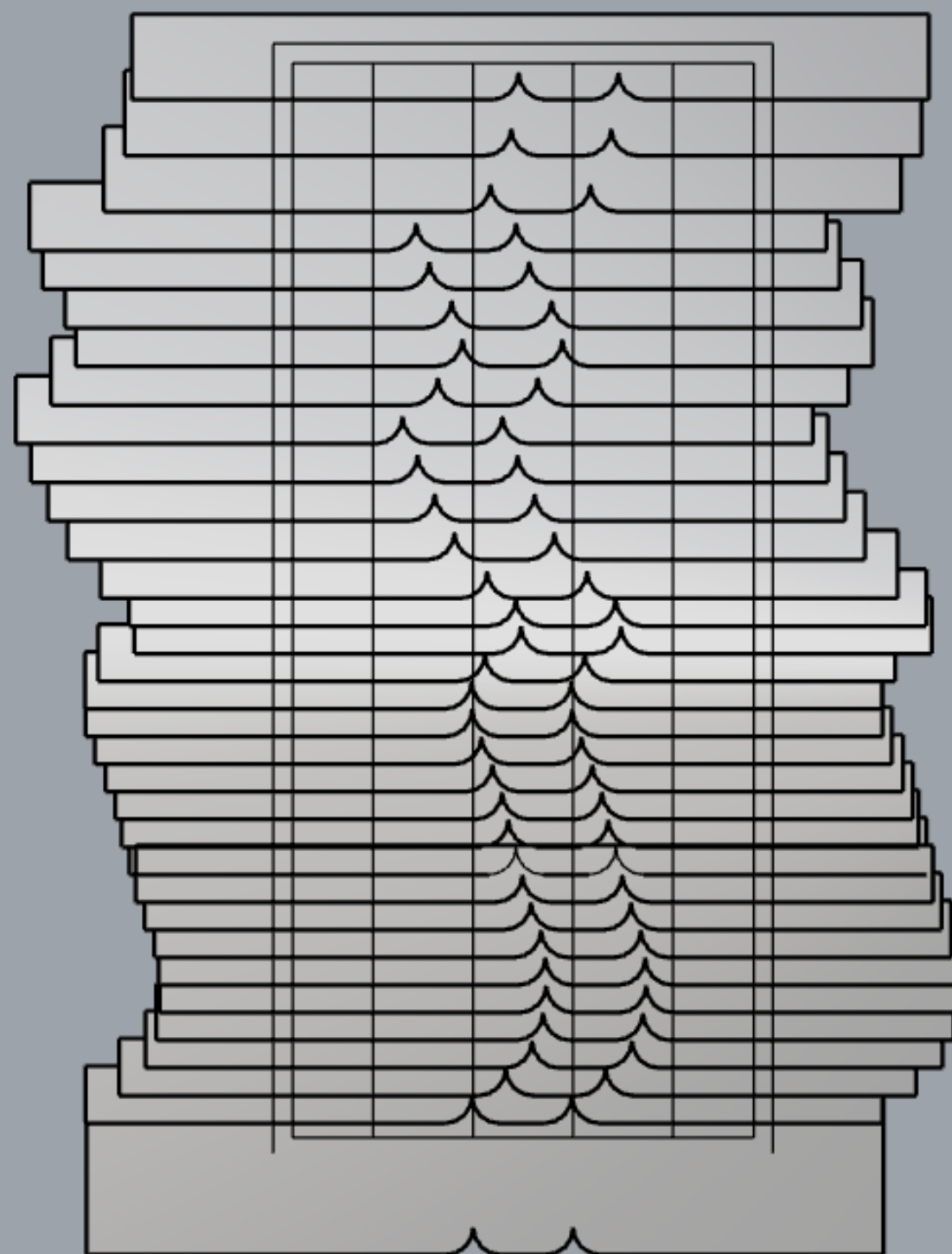
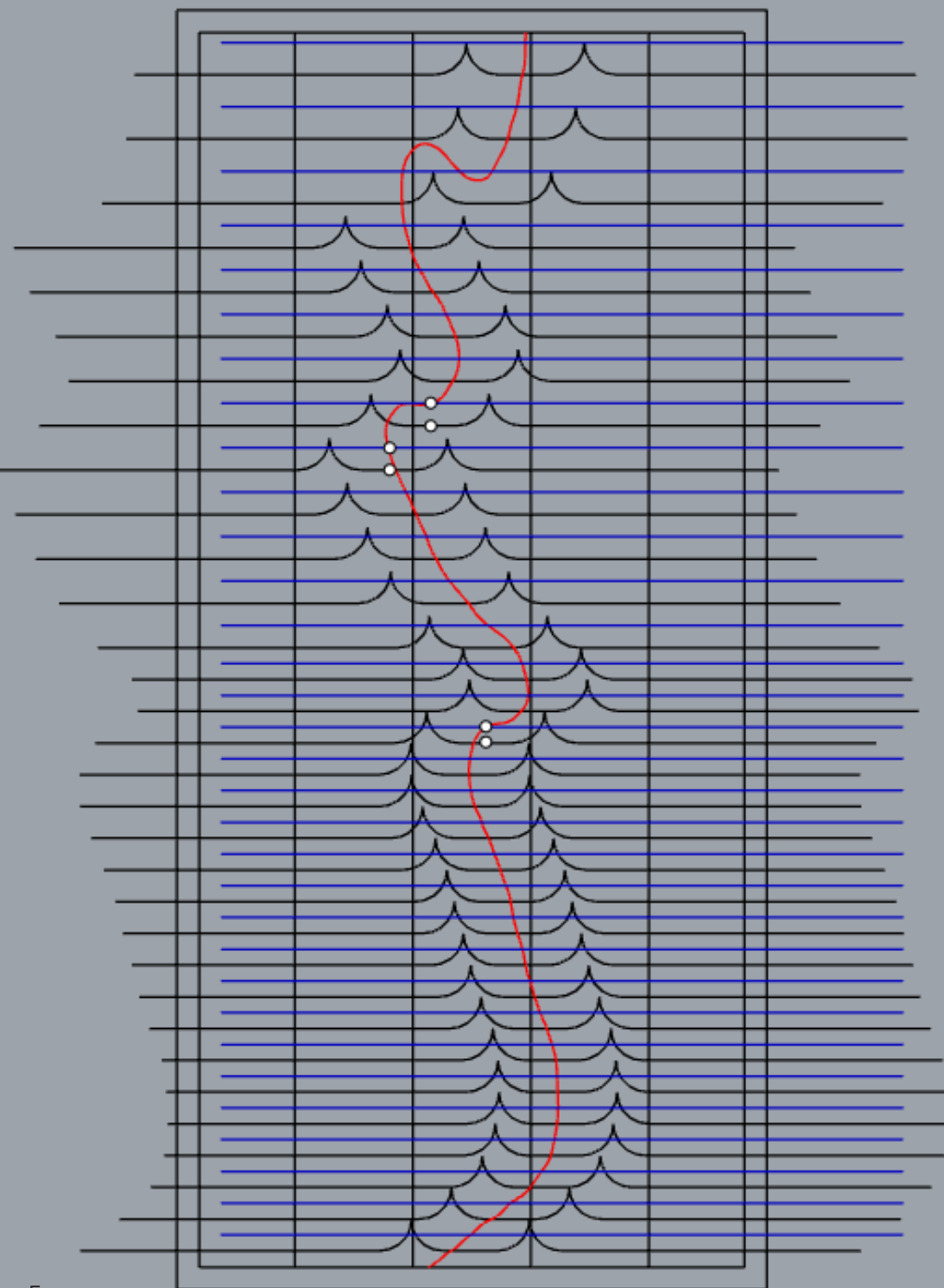
Meandering Medlock



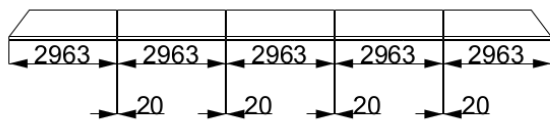
- This is a proposal about a line and about a colour, both of which define the River Medlock.
- Following an extrapolation of the river's meandering path helps to locate and contextualise the artwork.
- It describes a real-world hydrography and reaffirms the significance of this 'quiet little river' both to this neighbourhood, and to the wider city.
- Recognises the immediate locale as a site of flows and transitions: a site where open spaces are getting busier with pedestrians, and this new gateway to the city will soon make this site a major point of confluence.
- The artwork reflects this, and though essentially abstract, the work remains readable and allusive.
- Parallel 'ripples' carved into its surface flow vertically up the panel, a fluid and calmly meandering line that leads the eye towards the sky and creates a gently compelling artwork that is confidently in and of its place.



Above: Defining the beautifully meandering line of the River Medlock as it flows East to West at the foot of the One Medlock site (bounded in red). Right: The same path rotated and isolated forms the basis of this proposal



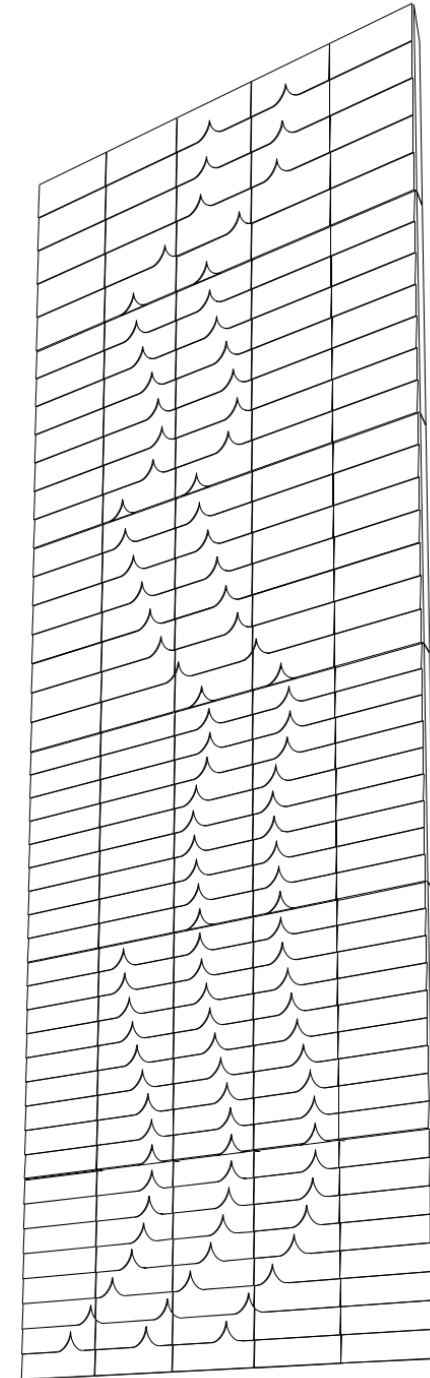
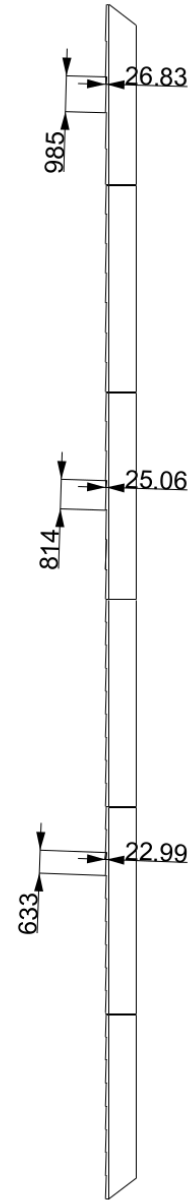
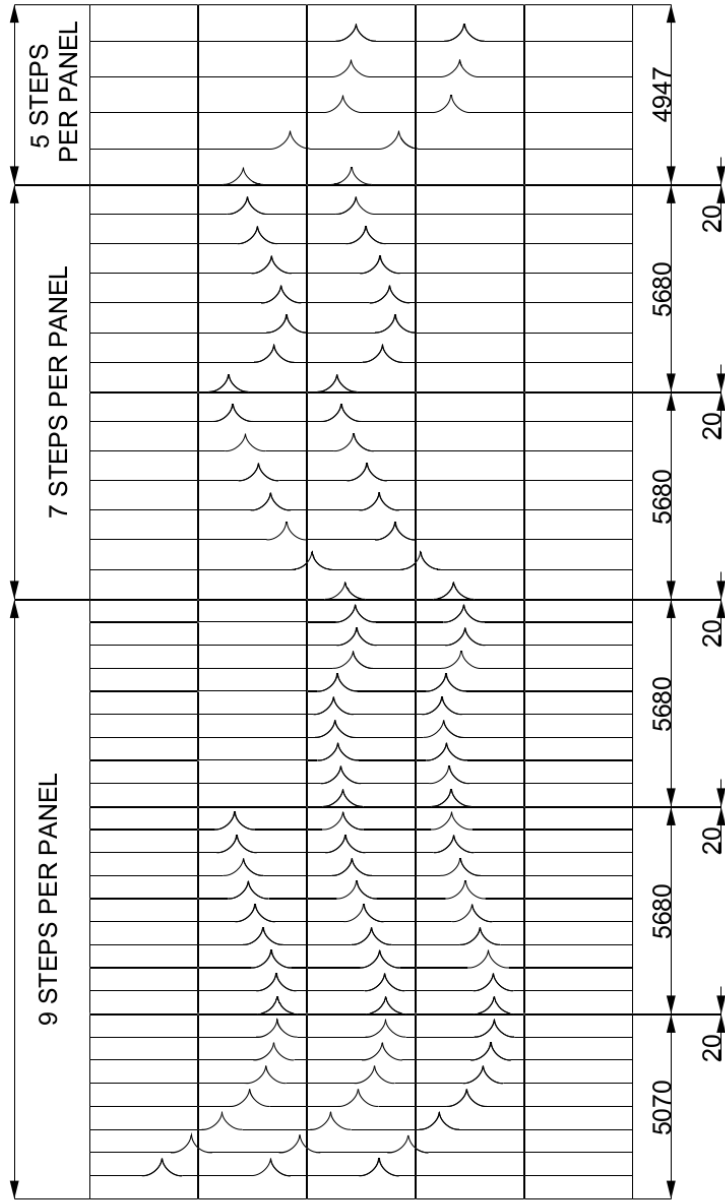
Translating the datum of the river path (in red) and mapping to the facade allowed us to modulate patterning & determine scale. A number of options were tested before developing our preferred version.

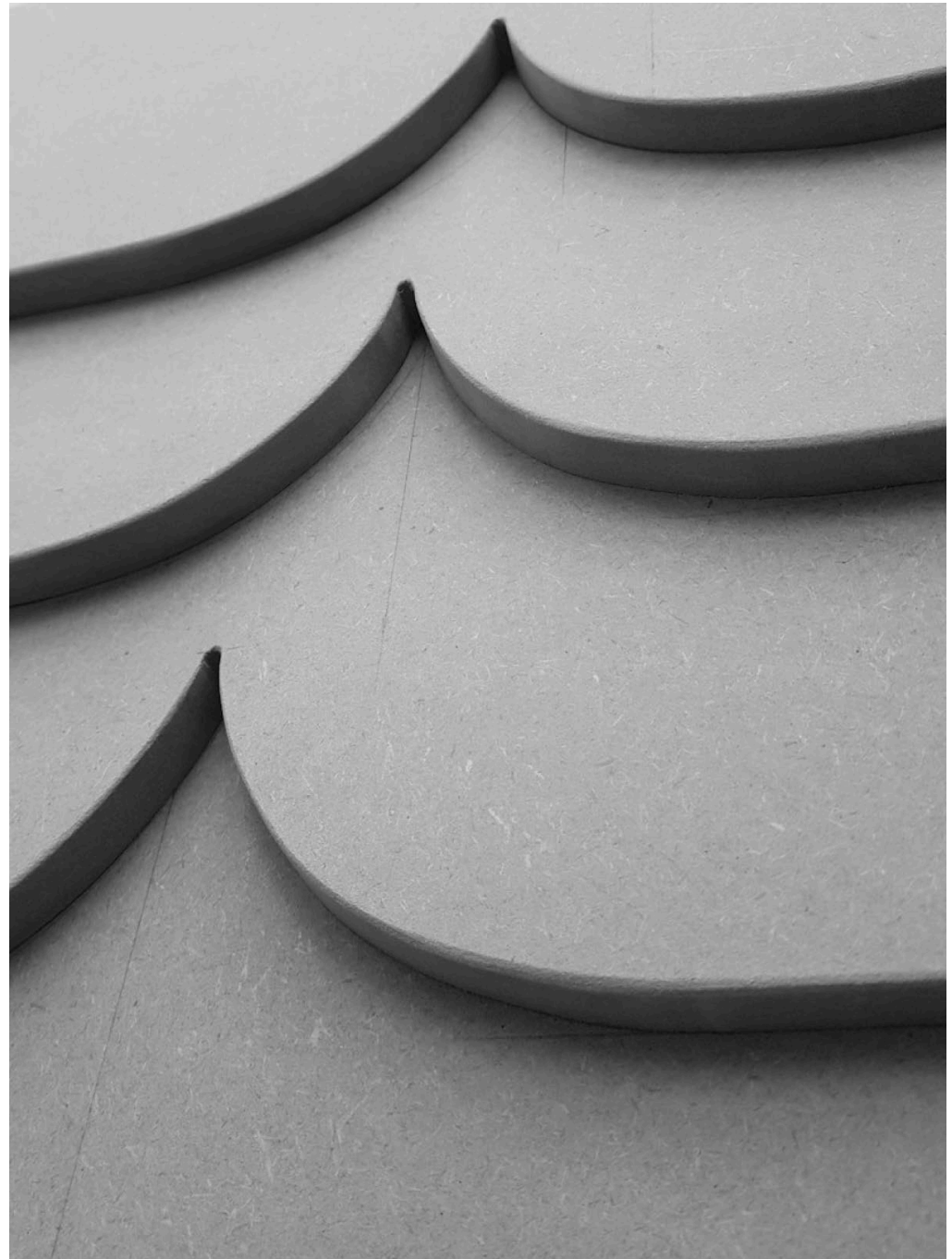
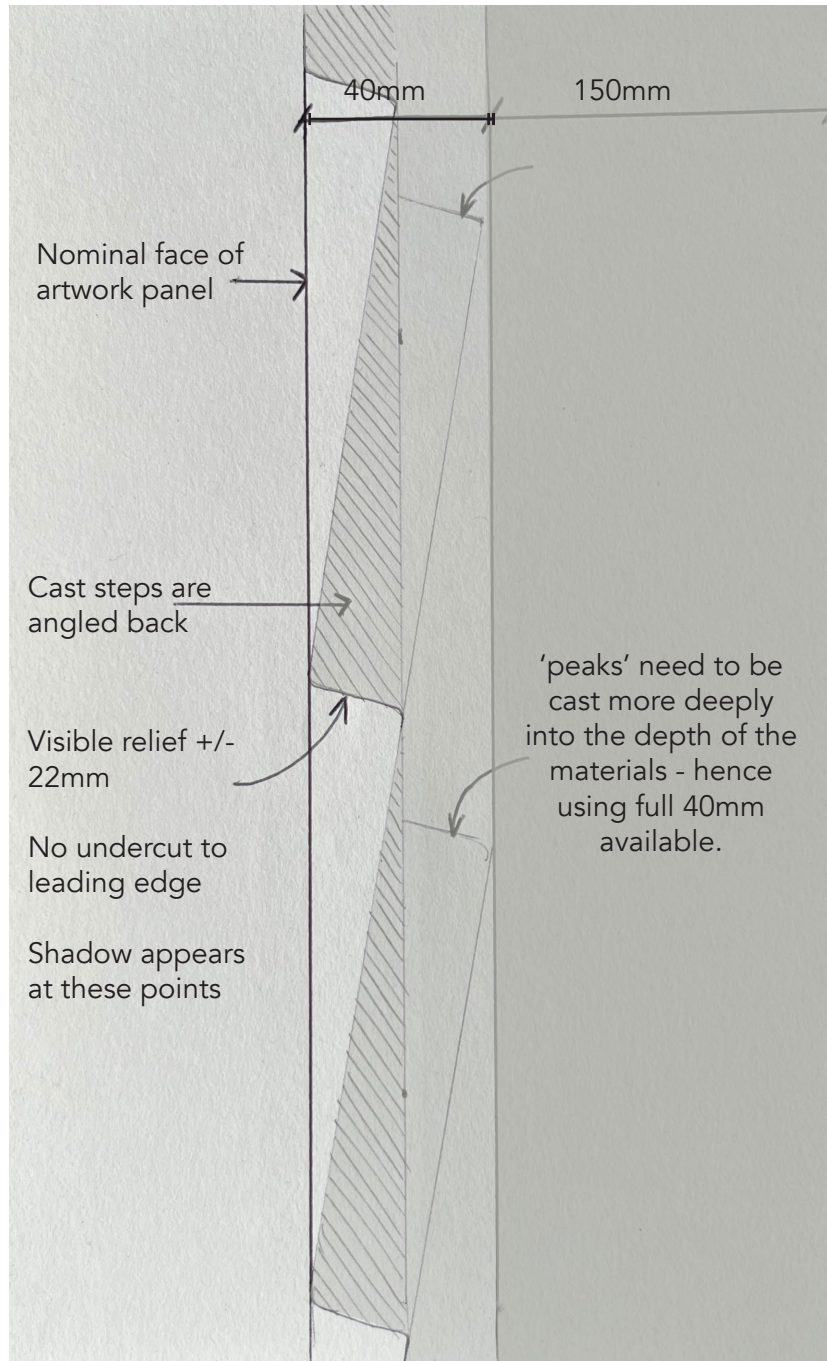


Preferred Design Option

Panel step sequence:
9,9,9,7,7,5

No. unique moulds:
15





Above: Simplified section showing artwork panel relief and 'incline' on patterning
 Right: Simplified model showing 'stepped' panel relief and patterning revealed in shallow relief



Scale tests of the preferred design in card @1:50. We tested the viability of adding a 'frame' to the artwork (pictured here). This was revised out in our final version, in preference of a 'cleaner' design running the patterning full width.

The 'Red River'

- Developing the narrative of the Red River has been an essential element of this proposal, whereby an extraordinary early 20th Century plan to protect against flooding saw a long section of the Medlock lined with more than 8 million red Accrington or 'Nori' bricks.
- We propose using a red/terracotta tinted precast concrete for the Artwork.
- This colour is both synonymous with the river and with the city's vernacular architecture, creating a fitting narrative and rationale for our colour and material choices, further rooting the proposal in place.
- The varied tones that emerge naturally from the brickmaking process have further inspired this proposal, and it is our intention to pick up on this non-uniformity by varying the levels of acid-etch applied to the concrete panels, as well as embracing the natural variations present in the casting process



Right: 2013 photographs showing the 'Red River's' brick lining at Bank Bridge Road above) and (below) at Alan Turing Bridge.

Above: Accrington or 'Nori' brick, famed for their 'iron-hard' strength and used extensively in building and engineering works across Manchester and all over the world. Nori is 'Iron' Backwards.



A Manchester Vernacular

- Using a red-tinted concrete continues to develop the language of red brick and glazed terracotta synonymous with the city and particularly across this former industrial quarter of Castlefield.
- We have drawn specific inspiration from the beauty and natural variation in brick tone and colour due to varying levels of iron oxides in production.
- It is an approach that connects and aligns with a much older set of building traditions, both civic and industrial, including those that line the path of the Medlock.
- Characterised by warm-toned expanses and subtle detailing in relief.

Left: Natural variation in brick tones on the Refuge Assurance Building, Manchester (now Kimpton Clocktower Hotel), by Waterhouse (completed 1895); Shallow terracotta relief adds finesse to the Manchester Midland Hotel by Trubshaw (completed 1903).

Below: Red brick warehousing and wild buddleia lines the bank of the Medlock at Circle Square.



Material Selection and Rationale

- Following the appointment of Evans Concrete as Precasters we have selected tint reference LMAR in an acid-etch finish. As one of their standard colours this product has had all the relevant safety and strength testing as opposed to a custom mix.
- LMAR is characterised by a red brick cement base colour with lively flecks of coloured aggregate, lending the facade a bright and characterful appearance while relating strongly to the vernacular red brick present across the City Centre
- The aggregate is more pronounced at deeper levels of etch, giving a slightly paler tone. A lighter acid etch reveals less aggregate and consequently presents a richer red tone.
- We intend to use three levels of acid etching across our panels to create a gradient of colour in the Art wall, richer tones towards the base, and lighter tones towards the top.
- After extensive testing and mock-up sampling we have selected SIKKA 825 in Brick Red as our preferred Mastic.
- This product reads well as a shadow gap between the panels, and strikes a good balance between unifying the facade while acknowledging its panelised nature.
- Tonally it works in both wet and dry conditions.



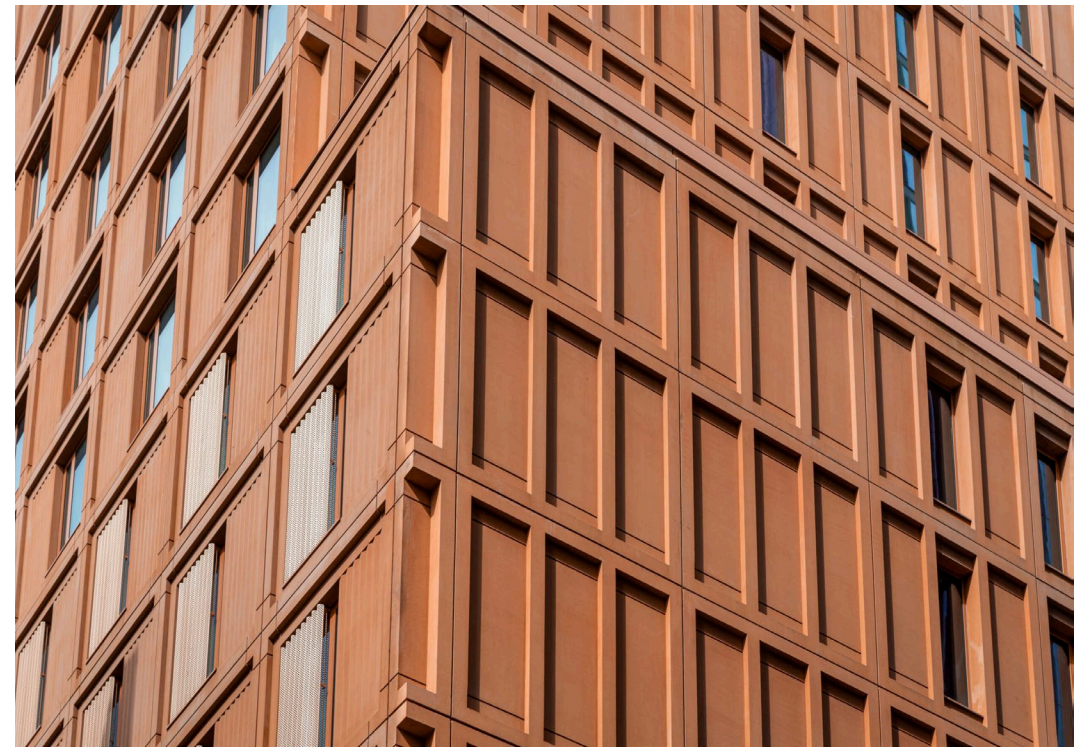
Top Right: Sample LMAR tinted concrete panels in three levels of acid-etch, and with a Mastic Joint in Sika 825 (Brick Red).

Right: As above, sprayed with water to illustrate appearance when wet.

Local Precedents

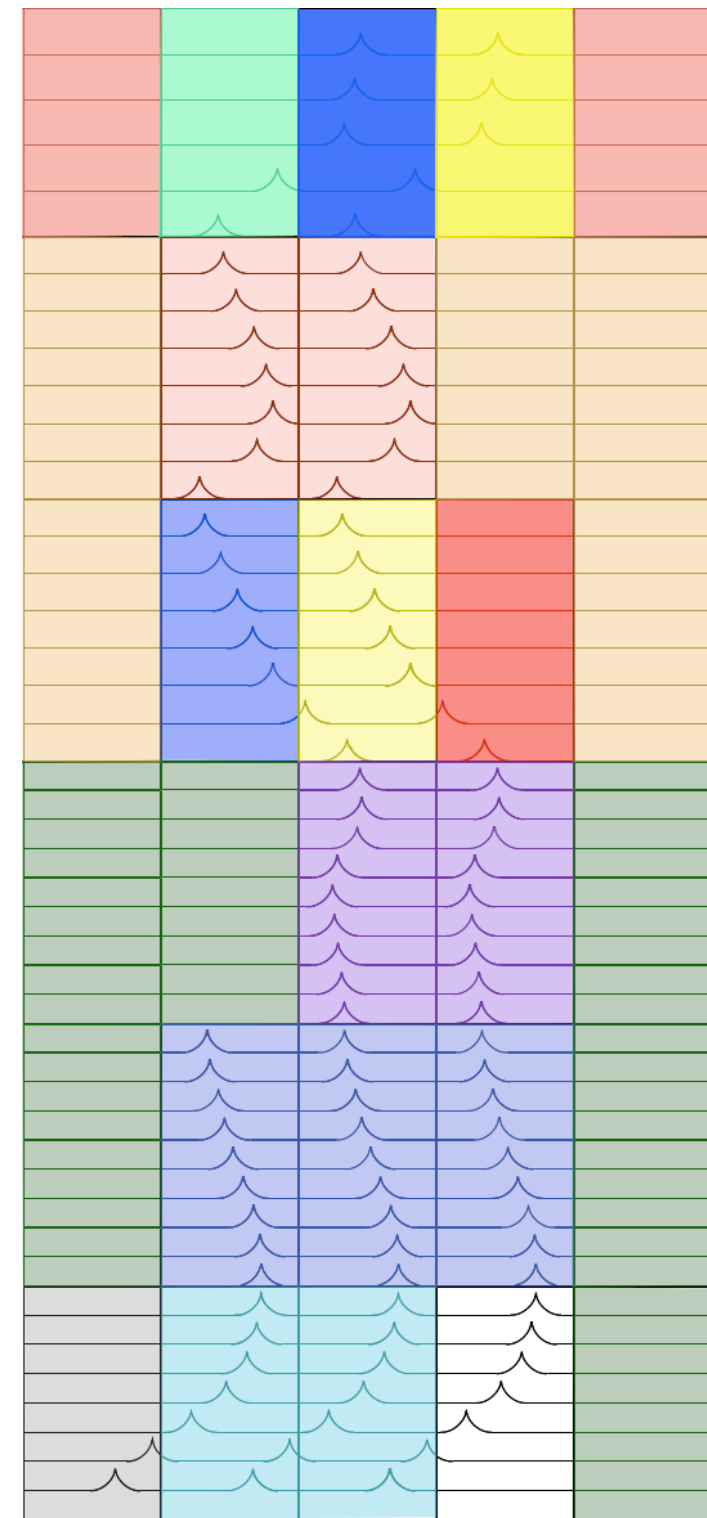
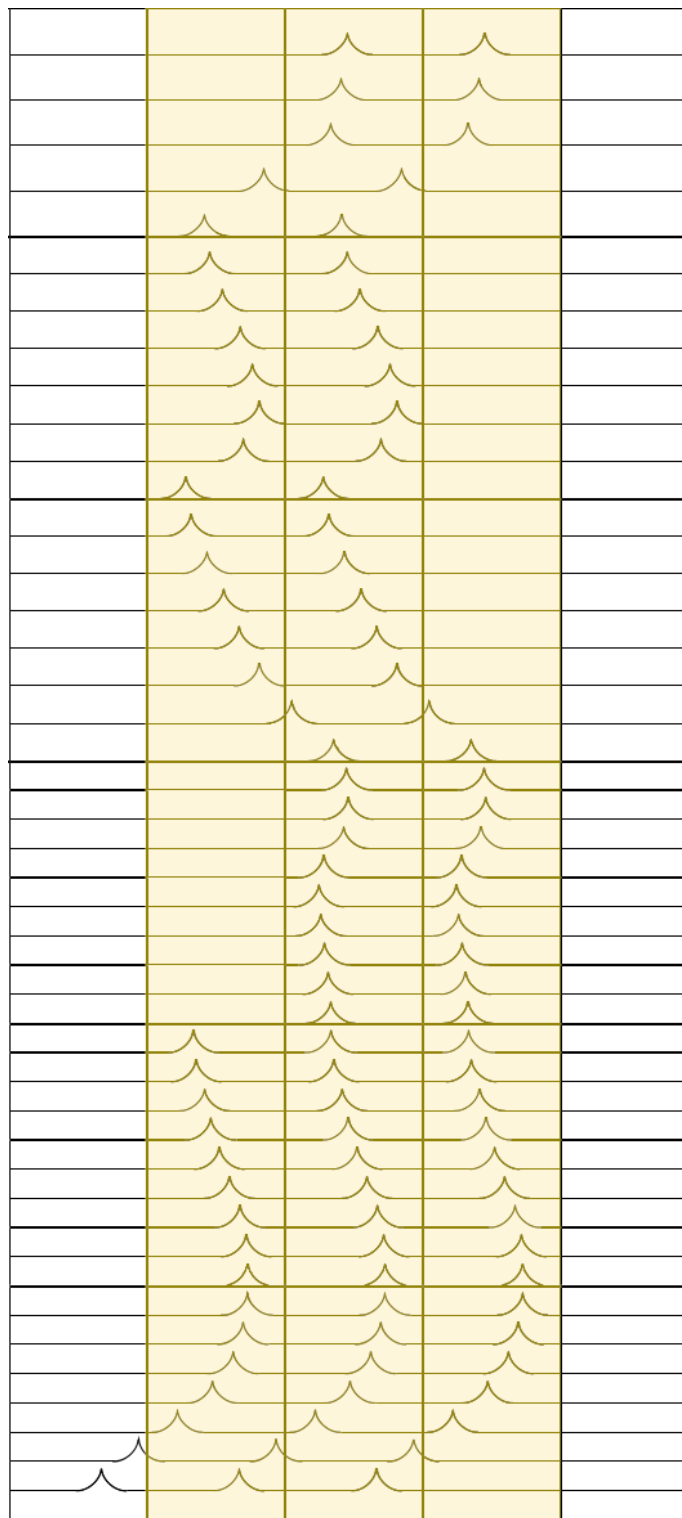
- The Maldron Hotel (2022) presents a contemporary example of terracotta tones in this city context, and a test-case for large panel fabrication in red-hued precast - Note the visual alignment with the neighbouring Clocktower Hotel.
- We see the relatively uncommon contemporary use of this colour in Manchester as an opportunity to explore.
- Highly sympathetic to wider architectural material palette and those of the surrounding buildings.
- We understand using a reduced carbon concrete mix is possible, which is aligned with industry best practice and is in the interest of all stakeholders.
- Colour choice supports the aim of a robust and low maintenance Artwork which is resistant to staining.

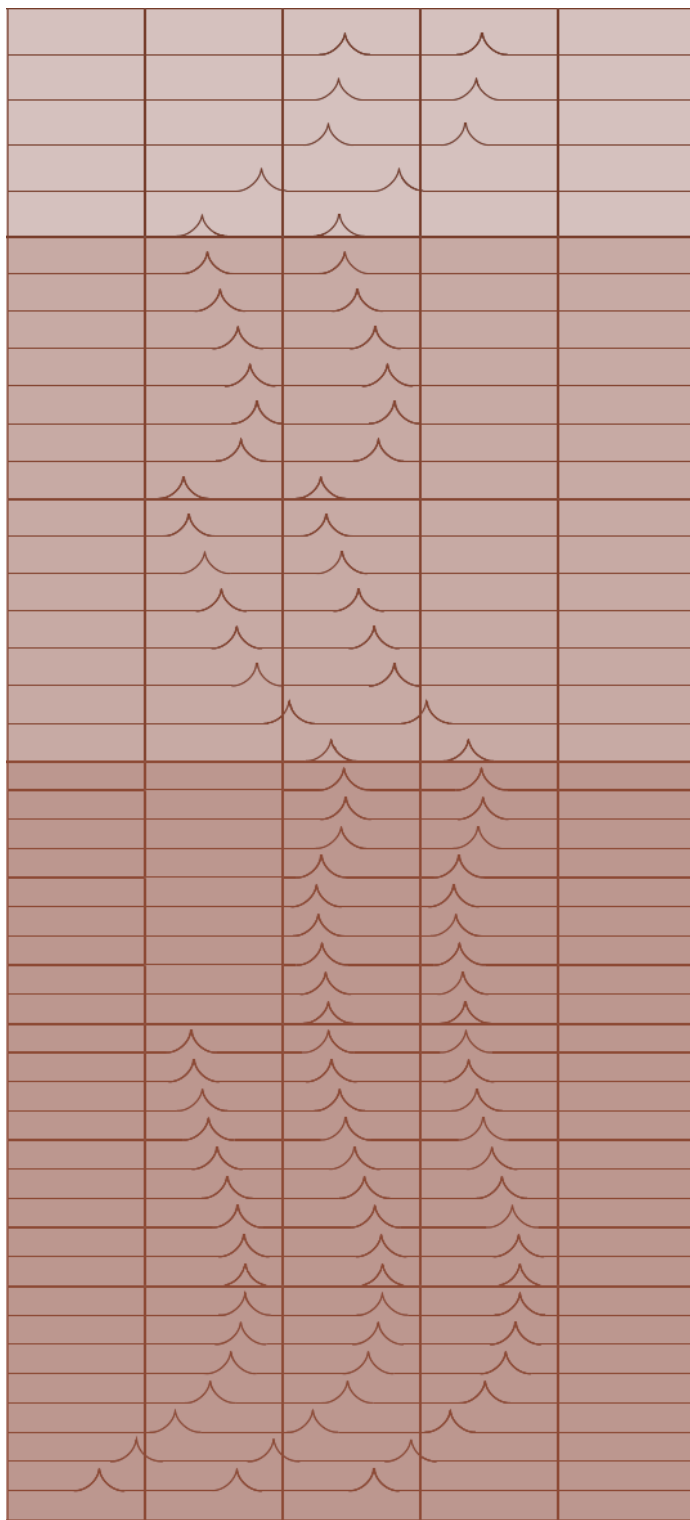
Right and Below: Maldron Hotel, Charles Street, Manchester by Simpson Haugh (completed 2022) utilises precast facades in Red Tinted acid etched and retarded finishes.



Design Considerations

- For efficiency the meandering 'ripple' detail is almost fully retained widthways within the central 3 panels.
- We have struck a balance between fidelity to the research material, visual and sculptural interest and efficiencies for production.
- Illustration on far right highlights how we have used careful repetition to minimise unique panels and reduce mould-making requirements.
- We are keen to play with the perceived scale of the work by decreasing the regularity of the steps at higher elevations - a kind of optical refinement - following some of the principles of *entasis* (from the greek 'to stretch'). This helps with reducing the artwork's monumentality and more clearly defines the patterning from the perspective of pedestrians.
- The spacing of the steps themselves are defined by the panel sizes - meaning mastic lines can be largely concealed in the shadow gap.
- Vertical mastic joints will be more evident, but will diminish in relation to the scale of the panels, particularly with the selected complementary colour.





← HEAVY ETCH

← MEDIUM ETCH

← LIGHT ETCH



- In support of the perspectival 'correction' detailed on the previous page, we are also intending to vary the intensity of colour across the Artwork through utilising three levels of acid etch.
- A richer red tone (a lighter etch) is used at the base of the wall, helping to visually anchor the work in place, and the artwork colour will fade subtly in a gradient as it reaches higher elevations.
- These measures lend a subtle yet dignified sculptural quality and further helps address the facade's extreme scale and verticality, particularly when viewed at close quarters.

Left: Illustration showing gradation of colour, reducing in intensity with height





davidmurphystudio.co.uk
@_davidmurphystudio