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ON JAMES STIRLING

A PREMATURE CRITIQUE

Kenneth Frampton

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album).
Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.
Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In the end is my beginning.

T. S. Eliot, from 'East Coker', 1940 (*Four Quartets*)

Making an assessment of the work of so protean a figure as James Stirling so soon after his death is a daunting task, not least because this entails looking back over forty years of work, beginning with his competition entry of 1953 for the University of Sheffield. In this interval the world has changed beyond all recognition. The artistic personality is particularly susceptible in this regard. Thus around 1925 the work of Francis Picabia was transformed overnight, as though he had become a different person. Such radical shifts are often caused by cataclysmic events, as in the case of E. Maxwell Fry, whose post-war buildings display little of the radiance and optimism of those he built during the 1930s. A disrupted career of this order contrasts strongly with that of an architect like H. P. Berlage, whose work evolved, seemingly without a break, from the beginning of his career in 1894 to his death in 1934. Such continuity may perhaps have been due to the fact that things moved more slowly in Berlage's time, or to the solidarity of the Dutch burgher world, which remained more or less undisturbed throughout this forty-year period, owing perhaps to the neutrality of the Netherlands in the First World War.

Looking back over the first years of Stirling's work, one is struck by its freshness and energy and by the volumetric order and precision of its monopitched forms, from his Woolton house project of

1954 to the brilliant Village Infill Housing exhibited at CIAM X in Aix-en-Provence in the following year, together with its subsequent adaptation to middle-class flats at Ham Common, in 1955. No one could then equal Stirling's capacity for combining cellular forms into striking contrapuntal assemblies. These vital beginnings were followed by more mannered undertakings, as in Stirling's Chiltern Hills project, or Stirling and Gowan's rather formalist neo-Liberty stone-faced houses, projected for an upper-middle-class close in Kensington, not to mention the more vigorous terraced housing they realized in Preston, all of which date from around 1957.

Stirling's exceptionally lucid entry for Churchill College, Cambridge, of 1958 (the Blenheim of the Welfare State, as Colin Rowe called it) may be seen in retrospect as the momentary reconciliation of two countervailing impulses: neo-classicism, on the one hand, assumed in this instance for its monumentality, and cellular clustering, on the other, that still derived its energy from vernacular prototypes. Stirling's essay 'Regionalism and Modern Architecture', published in *The Architects Year Book* of 1957, indicates that he was fully aware of these two tendencies in his work:

In post-war Britain, two styles or minor movements have emerged from the Schools of Architecture in addition to the eclecticism that is normal to them. The first style, which probably reached its peak about 1950–54, has been termed 'neo-Palladian' in deference to Professor Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, published in 1949. The usual asymmetry of Modern Architecture was reconsidered and axially conceived schemes became more common. . . . The more recent trend in many ways is a reaction from the former and could be considered approximately a re-assessment of indigenous and usually anonymous building and a revaluation of the experience embodied in the use of traditional methods and materials. Le Corbusier's assimilation of Mediterranean domestic and native Indian architecture into his most recent buildings is symptomatic of this new manner. The most visually stimulating chapters of Kidder Smith's recent book *Italy Builds* were not those on Italian Modern and Italian Renaissance but that on the anonymous architecture of Italy. Today, Stonehenge is more significant than the architecture of Sir Christopher Wren.

Stirling's Churchill College, surrounded by a berm, was surely as brutal and as theatrically fortified as anything from the hand of Vanburgh or Hawksmoor, and a similar conjunction can be found in the school assembly hall that he built at Camberwell at the same time. This earthwork-castellated approach with its double reference to the English baroque and Celtic tumuli was neither classical nor vernacular, but rather a subtle synthesis of the two.

The *annus mirabilis* in Stirling's career is 1959, the year of the glazed and faceted Selwyn College project, and also of the Leicester University Engineering Building, which established him as an architect of national stature. What is exceptional about Leicester is the reinterpretation and synthesis it makes of rather different elements drawn from widely dispersed sources. One first senses the breadth of this hybridization in the Aaltoesque auditorium, as filtered through Stirling's experience in the office of Lyons, Israel and Ellis. At the same time its outer cantilevered shell obviously owes much to Konstantin Melnikov's Rusakov Club of 1926. Similarly, the faceted laboratory block with its diagrid floor surely originates with Louis Kahn, while the clipped octagonal curtain-wall of the tower may have been an unconscious allusion to Saint'Elia, just as the factory roof owed much to the ferro-vitreous building technology of the nineteenth century. Behind all this lay the presence of Wright, particularly as this had manifested itself in the S. C. Johnson building, completed some twenty years earlier. While Leicester represents the apogee of Stirling's first career, its heterogeneous assembly of diverse parts, part crystalline, part stereotomic, will prove difficult to repeat, as is suggested by the equally synthetic but somehow less convincing History Faculty at Cambridge of 1964 and the Foley Building at Oxford of 1966.

The eclipse of Stirling's career as a brick architect remains for me a poignant episode in the history of British modern architecture, for it seems to have been the last occasion when it might have been possible to evolve a normative, contemporary brick tradition suited to the British climate. This effort, initiated by Sir Leslie Martin, who gave Stirling his chance at Leicester, was continued in various ways by Colin St John Wilson, Patrick Hodgkinson, John Miller, Alan Colquhoun and Ivor Richards, all of whom were involved with Martin at Cambridge at the end of the 1950s and remained in touch with him throughout the 1960s. In all of this Stirling played a seminal role. Moreover, despite its limitations the Cambridge School represented a clear and transmissible line, which, subject to Aalto's influence, might have led to the emergence of a popular, accessible, modern, British brick-faced manner. It was, however, soon to lose its impetus, although from exactly what causes it is hard to say.

Symptomatic perhaps of the pending change was Stirling's own shift from fair-faced brickwork to precast concrete cladding, struck from steel formwork, as is evident in the technological *tour de force* of the student dormitories that he realized at St Andrews in Scotland in 1964. Aalto is obviously still an influence in the organic structure of the site plan (see Aalto's linked dormitory blocks built for Otaniemi in 1954) but the Aaltoesque brick and tile syntax has been renounced and, save for the aforementioned Oxford college, Stirling will never return to it. He seems to have been aware of what was at stake in this departure, namely the compulsion to respond to the neo-Palladian challenge of the Pax Americana. All of this is hinted at in his 1957 essay on regionalism, and he will return to this theme again in his essay on the 'Functional Tradition' of the nineteenth century (*Perspecta* 6, 1960), wherein he alludes to the ambiguous nature of this transatlantic shift towards neo-classicism.

On both sides of the Atlantic the current dilemma of modern architecture seems to be that top architects are absorbed in becoming either stylists or structural exhibitionists and as the 'Functional Tradition' indicates, there

is an alternative architectural expression to that of style or structure. This is by the direct expression of the actual accommodation volumes in relation to each element determining the plastic composition of the building. . . . The architectural quality of a solution will of course depend upon the particular organization of the accommodation, circulation, services, etc., and vernacular buildings usually have an unsophisticated but successful integration of large and small elements achieved with a degree of inevitability. In modern architecture, an over-formal solution may avoid the realities of the accommodation, and this is the case with Louis Kahn's project for the Trenton Community Center where the silhouette of the gymnasium, which is the biggest single volume, is determined by a roof-bay system which is mainly appropriate to the corridors and small rooms.

While Stirling would rationalize his use of precast concrete at St Andrews on the grounds that neither craftsmen nor suitable material were locally available, he none the less still demonstrated that a powerful *parti* could be arrived at through the organic siting of cluster blocks on a heavily contoured site. At the same time he became concerned with a retrenchment to tradition in a totally different sense, as we may judge from the following passage:

In the Georgian squares, each house has an elaborated entrance and the location of the principal room, usually on the first floor, was indicated by wrought-iron work, canopies, etc.; thus the extent of the dwelling and the location of its main accommodation was indicated on the terraces of the eighteenth-century city. This identification of the house in its environment is repeated by Le Corbusier in the Unité, with the expression of the dwelling cell, several of which comprise the total building, whereas in the Lake Shore Apartments the location of the dwelling is of little consequence. 'Styling' encourages ambiguity and in most of our Victorian terraces the identity of the individual house has also disappeared. The styled uniformity of these street façades was achieved with rendered walls, repeating windows, and horizontal cornice, but the true organization remains visible on the backs, where it can be seen that the building is made of bricks; it has a pitched roof, rooms are at different levels and of unequal size, and outhouses define the property walls.

While this 'inside-out, back-to-front' approach certainly accounted for the format that Stirling and Gowan had employed in the Preston housing in 1957 and even for the crenellated form of St Andrews in 1964, it was not so evident in the orthogonal terraced housing that he designed for Runcorn New Town in 1967. Despite the precast concrete cladding, there is a discernible break here in Stirling's development which, as it happened, would coincide with Leon Krier joining the office and with the ad hoc assembly of a German-speaking staff who were destined to play a role in Stirling's subsequent development, as we may sense from the Krier sketch which was included in the Runcorn coverage that appeared in the Stirling *oeuvre complète* of 1975. Under an axial view of Runcorn, rendered as Hausmannian *allée*, Krier wrote:

Dear Jim,

I found this sketch in my papers. I made it when doing the other perspectives for Runcorn, and didn't show it to you because I thought you might ask me to do again another drawing. I think it would make a nice view, as it is so long to wait for it getting built. I hope to hear from you soon.

Best wishes,
Leo

To introduce this ironic, human touch in a documentation of this work was typical of Stirling's ambivalent, self-mocking manner.

We encounter just such a play in the figure of the Queen Mother who is shown opening the Foley Building at Oxford against a photo-montage of the tropics. I became the focus of such a riposte through Stirling's publication of a postcard that I sent him from Cambridge, Massachusetts, in May 1981 conveying my reservations about the irregular fenestration of his proposal for the Fogg extension; see *James Stirling, Buildings and Projects* of 1984. Needless to say, my advice was scrupulously ignored.

Runcorn is in so many respects a transitional work, above all because here the free morphological clarity of the earlier housing is seemingly abandoned in favour of a gridded urban form, in which the living units are, for the first time, unduly constrained by the formalism of the block layout. Most of this arises from the decision to provide a monumental arcade on the entry side and a stepped section towards the garden in the rear. This was ostensibly a manifestation of a truly organic organization, as Stirling once called it. The result, however, was an unresolved hybrid composed, in part, of Le Corbusier's Durand block of 1933 and, in part, of a certain neo-classical civic decorum, harking back to the eighteenth century — to Bath, Edinburgh or the Georgian squares of London. And yet this was not the only contradiction manifested in Runcorn, for as Stirling entered the 1970s he found himself increasingly caught between the Platonic attractions of the neo-classical and the unprecedented syntax proffered by the application of innovative, lightweight, 'high-tech' building materials and methods, particularly as these appeared in the GRP clip-on, multi-coloured pre-fabricated metal panels lining the pedestrian decks of Runcorn. Similar panelled units would embody the entire building in the Olivetti Training School completed in 1972, and to an even greater degree the two-storey Southgate Housing added on to the original Runcorn development in 1977. These orthogonal two-storey terraces with their clip-on, full-height panels, their neoprene-gasketed 'television' windows, and festooned with services on light lattice-work trusses, were hardly recognizable as a work by Stirling. Perhaps this momentary 'high-tech' phase was too close to the *Produktform* of Foster Associates to be pursued any further.

From 1969 Stirling was increasingly susceptible to the influence of the young neo-rationalist architects of German or Swiss origin who had been drawn to his office and who, in one way or another, would help him realize his new monumental manner that surely displayed an affinity for the Italian *Tendenza*, not to mention the work of Mario Botta and the Ticinese School. Save for the occasional reference to his earlier Aaltoesque morphology, as we see it, say, in his unbuilt Olivetti Headquarters for Milton Keynes (1971), Stirling veered towards the classical, beginning with his highly axial proposal of 1969 for Siemens AG, designed with Leon Krier, and went on to design, in quick succession, a series of museums for Germany: the North Rhine Westphalia and Wallraf-Richartz Museums, projected respectively for Dusseldorf and Cologne in 1975; and the Stuttgart Neue Staatsgalerie, won in competition in 1977 and finally realized in 1983. With these three designs and his honorary membership of the Berlin Akademie der Kunst, Stirling was well on his way to becoming an expatriate architect laureate, paradoxically celebrated and honoured in the service of a country that was not his own.

Without doubt the Staatsgalerie is the master work of Stirling's second period, just as Leicester was the apogee of the first. Each building synthesized the themes of the phases to which it belonged, the first being fundamentally regional, if not national in tone, the second international and in some respects as universal in its aspirations as the original neo-classical mode. Not quite, however, for Stuttgart, despite its generally symmetrical *parti* (echoing the classical form of the 1837 gallery to which it was attached), was relieved throughout its fabric by three articulating strategies which not only imparted an organic, high-tech inflection to the podium entry, but also categorically denied the deportment of its mass, clad in banded and bonded masonry. I have in mind the dilated and canted curtain walls that announce and accommodate the entry foyer and the cerise-coloured pipe-railing that serves and denotes access to the podium and recalls in its festive air the quintessentially Pop Art affinities of Stirling's background. We can hardly overlook this evocation of Archigram and Eduardo Paolozzi, not to mention the populism of the Independent Group, which had been so seminal in Stirling's youth. To this we must add the ubiquitous, mannered play with cacophonic fragments; the perverse, non-load-bearing flat arches with oversized voussoirs; the prominence of a portico supported by squat Tuscan columns sinking into the ground; a number of flat arcuated episodes, this time without voussoirs; and last but not least the revetment itself which, by its knowing simulation of masonry, conveys its non-load-bearing character, in part through its proportions and in part through a number of 'loose' stones that with Piranesian delectation seem to have fallen out of the wall enclosing the garage. All of this is perhaps too familiar to require reiterating but I do so in order to remind the reader of the way in which the oblique allusion to Asplund's Stockholm Public Library (turned inside out), and even to Nordic Doricism in general, is strongly mediated, as a *parti pris*, by many a deft empirical episode that both stimulates and distracts the visitor, evoking a kind of Playmobil architecture writ large.

Stuttgart's revisionism is surely evident in the architect's decision to exhibit the art in a series of discreet rooms along the length of an enfilade, just as Leicester declared its Brutalist ideology through the symbolic assertion of a British culture grounded in the industrial heartland of the Midlands. Thus, where Stuttgart would assume the decorum of a belated Schinkesque palace, Leicester saw itself as a benighted Titanic, set upon the open sea as the flagship of the British Welfare State. Be this as it may, Stuttgart's common-sense assumption of the classical at both a curatorial and an urbanistic level is accompanied by other effects, most notably by the adoption of an architectural language that, however Doricist its affinities, borders on historical pastiche.

While Charles Jencks's *Language of Post-Modern Architecture* of 1977 can hardly be held accountable for Stirling's Nordic reinterpretation of neo-classical form, it is surely significant that its appearance coincided with the premiation of Stirling's initial design for the Staatsgalerie. At all events, what happened thereafter certainly had something to do with Jencks, as one may judge from the diffuse character of Stirling's architectural manner over the next decade, as is surely manifest in the extension to the Tate Gallery (1985) and in the curiously conflicted character of the Wissenschaftszentrum realized in Berlin in 1988. This latter epitomizes the

strength and weakness of Stirling's approach at this time. Thus on the face of it an ingenious accommodation of the requirements on a very restricted site, including the skilful reuse of an existing building, together with a precise tectonic expression, evident in the brilliant detailing of the loggia and the fenestration. And yet despite this professionalism a mannered play with Schinkesque features, as read through Albert Speer, plus the use of two-tone masonry, leaves much to be desired. The historical quotation is a grotesque parody and the multicoloured stonework borders on the gratuitously exotic. Nor can one regard the planning of the octagonal library as felicitous, for an escape stair consumes the best part of the available floor space. Similar reservations may be expressed about the extension to the Tate, destined to house the works of J. M. W. Turner. One assumes that an exhibition gallery is meant to enhance the quality of the work exhibited rather than to overwhelm it with furnishings of an inexplicably lugubrious character. Surely the brilliantly evocative light of Turner's paintings tends to be absorbed by the sombre, yellow-ochre tone of the interior with its subdued light.

When it comes to Stirling's post-Stuttgart period, one feels that Colin St John Wilson might well have had his beloved colleague in mind when, following Wittgenstein, he wrote of the temptations that confront the talented:

can we speak of the ethics of design — of play? This bias is hard to correct because the force of the temptation is in direct proportion to the inventive strength of the talent at play. However, we have already seen that it is of the essence of architectural play that it is the translation of a need. Even the excitement of play (the making and the breaking of the rule) can lead to a bewitchment of the player by the play for itself. This is the bewitchment that we call 'formalism', which is play claiming to be an end in itself.

I mentioned Berlage at the beginning of this essay, first, because Stirling was an architect of comparable stature and, second, because of the marked consistency of Berlage's approach in a career of comparable length. Among the many other comparisons that could be drawn between the two, one notes the different approach that each adopted towards the treatment of traditional gallery space. Thus in comparing the Staatsgalerie to Berlage's Gemeentemuseum one is struck by the fact that the diffused quality of the light in Den Haag derives directly from the delicacy with which the lay-light has been detailed, whereas the typical lay-light in the Staatsgalerie is treated in a very different manner. Above all it has been painted British racing-green, which compromises, so to speak, the potential luminosity and tranquility of the space.

While the critical thrust of Wilson's observation could surely be applied as much to any number of contemporary architects in their active years, it is particularly ironic that self-indulgent formalism was exactly the charge that Stirling would bring against the late Le Corbusier, particularly for what he saw as the *art pour l'art* attitude reflected in the Maison Jaoul and Ronchamp.

Like Otto Wagner, Stirling, despite his contrary character, seems to have been considerably influenced by his collaborators and this was never more true than in his swerve away from the 'semiosis' of post-modernism in the last *magnum opus* of his career. I have in mind of course the large pharmaceutical equipment plant that he built for Braun Melsungen AG at Melsungen, near Frankfurt, in

1992, the year of his untimely death. Designed not only with his partner, Michael Wilford, but also with a Berlin-based team led by Walter Nægeli and Renzo Völlebuna, Braun AG is without doubt one of the most important industrial complexes to have been built in this century and it will surely take many years before the magnitude and significance of this astonishing achievement is fully assimilated. Braun AG is a *tour de force* at many levels, above all perhaps because it totally undermines the present tendency to regard buildings as one-off aesthetic objects. Thus the building's carefully considered integration with the rural landscape in which it is situated is the basic unifying motif throughout. And, while history is still in evidence, it is the history of the immediate past, that is to say, of the heroic modern movement between 1910 and 1940 rather than Stirling's prior evocation of a *passé historique*. We are, in fact, closer to his structurally rationalist proposal for Dorman-Long steel fabricators (1965) than to the overworked decadence of the Wissenschaftszentrum. Moreover, there is little that one could point to here that is truly ironic. There is, instead, a rediscovery of the vital force of modern industry, as first expressed in Peter Behrens's AEG turbine assembly hall of 1910 or in Hans Poelzig's chemical factory built at Luban in 1912. And, while the forms at Melsungen are more dispersed, hermetic and even tragic than in these two canonical cases, they are none the less equally heroic as tectonic propositions. Thus the great arched roof of the production building at Melsungen re-evokes the industrial grandeur of Eric Mendelsohn's unbuilt textile factory projected for Leningrad in 1925, or the more modest but nevertheless structurally expressive hat factory that he realized in Luckenwalde in 1921. Much the same can surely be claimed for the bow-spring roof of the delivery warehouse or for the wooden pedestrian bridge that links the administration building to the canteen. All of this is surely deeply embedded in the Northern European building tradition at its most expressive. One senses here, in the prevalence of overcast light, something of the elegiac tone that emanates from such figures as Ludwig Leo and Anselm Kieffer.

For all the ironic ambivalence that he evidently felt towards his 'patron state', Germany seems to have eventually led Stirling back to his origins, for this surely is what one finds at the very end of his life, in the diminutive but monumental bookshop that he built for Electa at the Venice Biennale in 1992. In this, we are returned to the Brutalist syntax of his beginnings, to the plastic conviction of his CIAM Village Infill Housing and of Leicester. What he would have done with this homecoming, had he lived to Berlage's ripe old age, we shall never know. We can only surmise that it would have been some kind of new beginning, much as Eliot speaks of it at the head of this essay.