

Hors Echelle: Remembering James Stirling

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Source: *Perspecta*, Vol. 40, Monster (2008), pp. 70-73

Published by: [MIT Press](#) on behalf of *Perspecta*.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40482279>

Accessed: 08-01-2016 22:24 UTC

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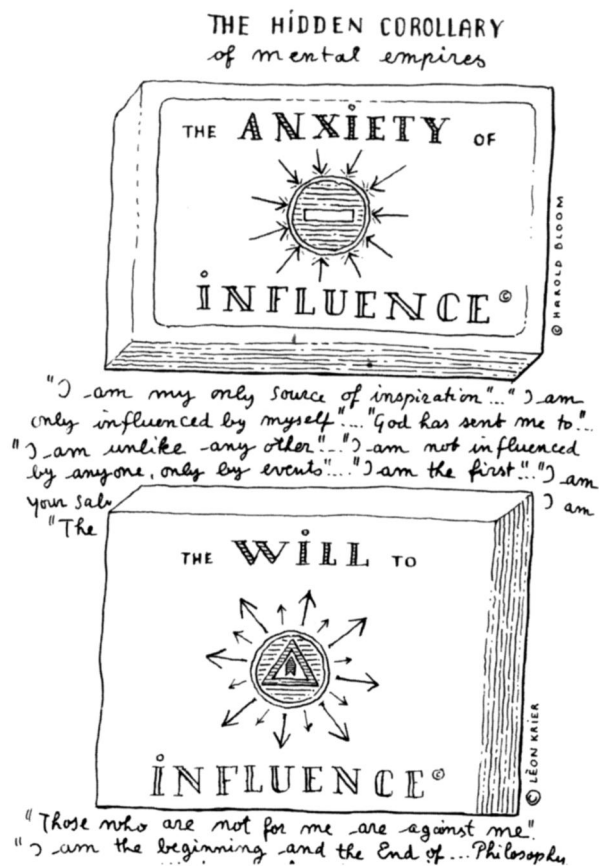
James

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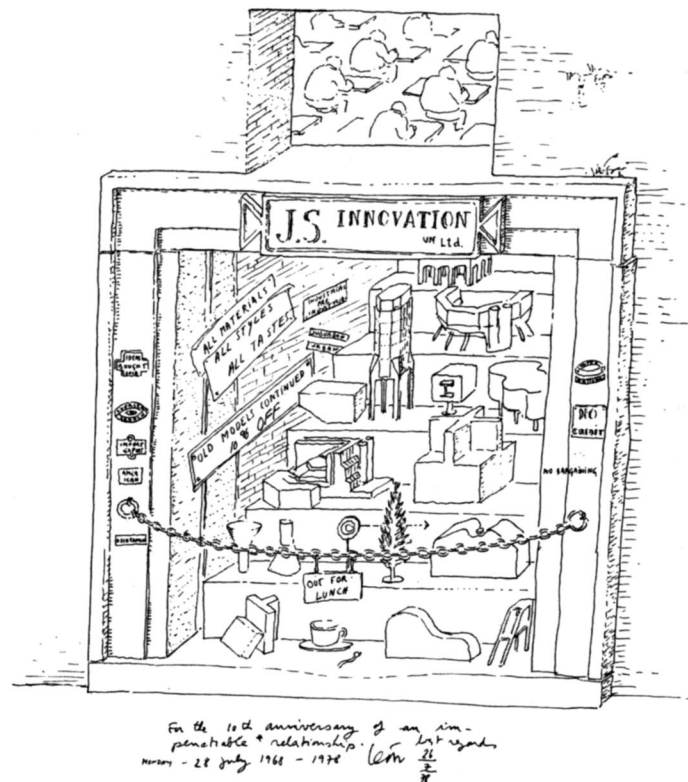
Dreamt 21/10/76: Jim. Laden with plans, exotic fruit and with
half-a-dozen new projects in the style of arts and crafts.
From Leon Krier's Sketchbook, 1976.



Anxiety of Influence, From Leon Krier's Sketchbook, 1976.

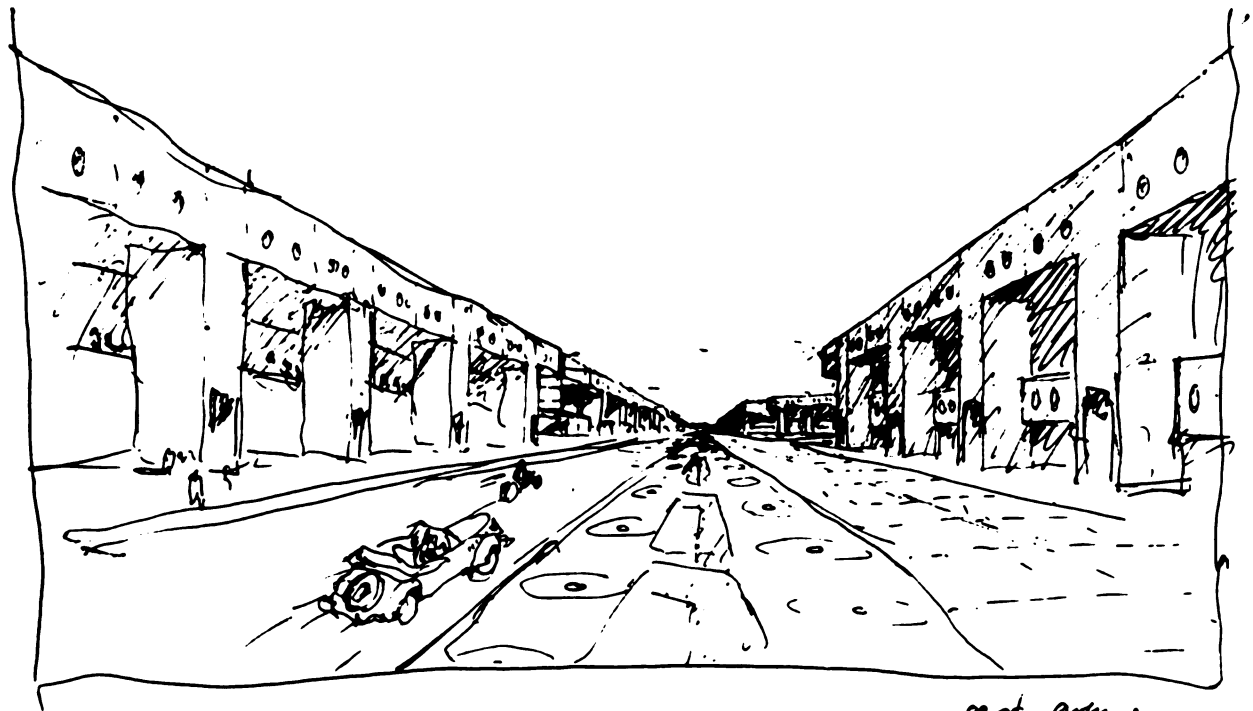
James Stirling is the most impenetrable person I have come across in my life. I worked for him, traveled with him, saw him privately and didn't get to know him in something like 25 years. I sat with him for hours and days in rooms, cars and planes and unless addressed, he would not speak. He would talk, when he wanted something specific. One day, while driving with him for three hours on the M1, I put him to the test: not one word was uttered, not even a "see you," when I closed the door of the DS 21, my stomach in knots. And yet he did not appear to be a cold person, nor was he a sulking type. The U.K. Jim had an air of joviality about him, an impression slowly but surely eroded by experience, and yet the U.S. or German Jim seems to have been an easy-going, cordial chap. The scarcity of our exchanges outside work would extend to all subjects: politics, women, architecture, his own life and circle. And yet it was great to work for him, to be with him. He was clearly somebody, and he was good to me, professionally and privately.

When I arrived at Gloucester Place, I hardly spoke the language or knew anything about England. I immediately had a very comfortable relationship with him because, quite simply, I didn't read the invisible barriers and codes which regulated the office hierarchy. I had applied for a job, because Leicester and Sheffield were for me creations of genius. The rest of his work left me cold. My awe was partial, but I didn't know where else to go ... Le Corbusier was dead, Kahn's *maniera* was too shallow and Ungers' built work, just too awful.



J.S. Innovation Unlimited, From Leon Krier's Sketchbook, 1976.

Over the years, I queried Jim about the contradictions and incompleteness of his work, but he would not be engaged. I proposed, "Clearly Leicester was just a beginning." He did not see it that way, nor would he be drawn. "You rediscovered the alphabet, but why do you stop at the beginning?" "No, no, no," he would laugh. "You just got it all wrong." "And what about grammar or syntax?" I would reply. When expressing my dislike of Blackheath he would snarl, "You are wrong." When the 1,500 dwellings of his Runcorn Town Center housing were demolished I ventured, "Any regret?" "They are wrong," he grumbled. Or again, "Water will get into those rooms." "You don't get it," he would reply. The ceiling falling off the concrete for the third time? "They are wrong," shrugging his shoulders. For a man who was involved with building for over 30 years he was astonishingly aloof from the technical and social consequences of his buildings and ideas.

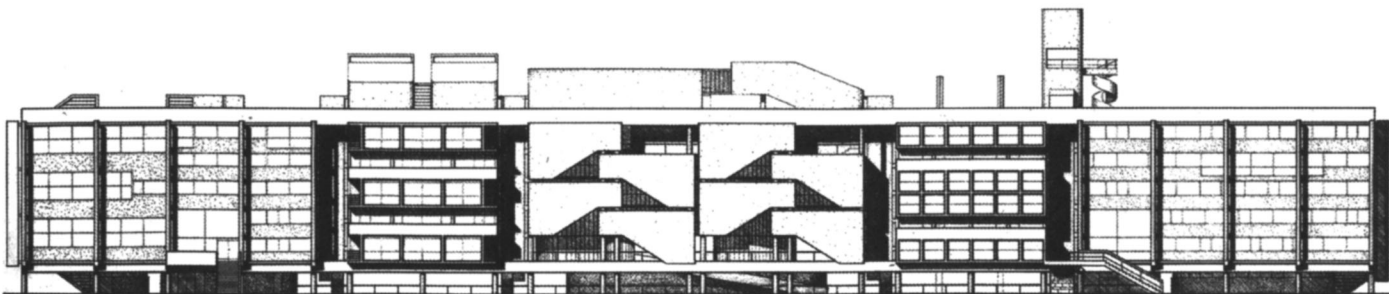


DEAR JIM I FOUND THIS SKETCH IN MY PAPERS. I MADE IT WHEN DOING THE
OTHER PERSPECTIVES FOR RUNCORN, AND DIDN'T SHOW IT TO YOU BECAUSE
I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT ASK ME TO DO MANY ANOTHER DRAWINGS, I THINK
IT WOULD BE A NICE ONE VIEW, AS IT IS SO LONG TO WAIT FOR IT
GETTING LUTS. I HAVE DECIDED NOT TO HEAR FROM YOU SINCE
BUT WISHES LETS TALK

Runcorn New Town, Liverpool, England, 1967-76
Sketch by Leon Krier.

When I worked on the Siemens Headquarters project, the size of a town of 10,000 people, Stirling would come to the competition office in Montague Street, asking, "So what's the image?" I didn't quite understand his use of the term, nor did I ever quite grasp the idea. Begging him for clarification, he would mutter "A boat? A bridge? A radio set? You know what I mean." I didn't. I suggested it could perhaps be a town??? "We are already doing Bath in Runcorn." He was drawn to the sections of ship turbines and rocket engines I had glued on the site "hors echelle" (out of scale). J. Stirling had become endeared with his reputation as "enfant terrible" of the architecture scene.

I kept wondering what had happened to the author of the Engineering Faculty, its elegance, its intelligence, its classicism. While he loved to cause scandal he had an unshakeable belief in certain (modernist) conventions. For Runcorn Town Center, housing engineers and quantity surveyors kept demonstrating to him that no savings, in time or cost, would be made by repetition of large-scale elements, i.e., by prefabrication or off-site production. Yet he decided to dress, at great cost, 1,500 "in situ" built dwellings with pre-cast concrete panels, not for reason of speed or economy, but for the sheer metaphysics—namely, to make them look "prefabricated."



Sheffield University Project, 1953.

He evidently didn't care a lot about the users' opinions and yet was extraordinarily sensitive about his reputation with peers and the professional press. He regularly handed me foreign language articles with a "Just let me know, is it for me, or against me?" meaning that the latter were not to be translated or archived.

Having spent a year at Stuttgart University, I was disgusted by the gray sterility of the teachers, the school buildings and above all, the teaching. I sent my "book" to Stirling because I was desperately looking for a master and mind who could readily answer all my questions and expectations. Instead, I found somebody remarkably vague about matters of theory or practice, unsure where to go after Leicester, Cambridge and the failed Oxford. Unprepared to debate fundamentals, certainly not with a freshman.

It was the very immaturity of this very big, very illustrious, very intelligent and inspiring man, which finally rang all my alarm bells. I kept wondering: If he doesn't have a clue about a greater picture and what his work and ideas are supposed to add up to, who possibly can? Like so many of his peers, James Stirling was more interested in conducting experiments than with building good buildings or cities. He chose to forget that his prototypes were not to be flown by test pilots, but experienced by chance passengers.

Stirling was truly a man of his age, and his work is, consequently, extremely perishable. Nevertheless, the ideas behind the Leicester Engineering Faculty and Sheffield University projects transcend their frail envelopes and may hopefully one day be resurrected in more robust bodies.



University Faculty of Engineering, Leicester University, 1959–63.