

Situating Stirling – Robert Maxwell

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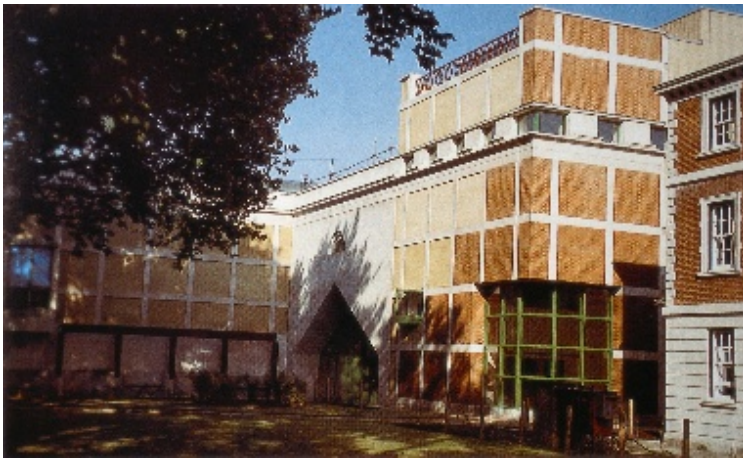
As Tate Britain's James Stirling exhibition opens,

selected critics evaluate his legacy. Robert Maxwell interprets Stirling as the master of Mannerism

Did James Stirling have a theory of architecture? Not in the sense that Robert Venturi has a theory of architecture, a story that can be made into a book, setting up a reasoned framework others can use. If Stirling knew what to do, in any instance, he was following some sort of instinct - an inner voice. And yet there is a surprising consistency in his work.

I believe that the crucial influence on Stirling was that of his tutor, Colin Rowe. Rowe went on to gain an MA in History at the Warburg Institute, but first completed his Diploma in Architecture, so he was a trained architect, and he combined in his own judgment the appetite of an architect and the knowledge of a historian. He sent his students to the library to crib ideas for their designs.

Under Rowe's influence, Stirling developed eclectic tastes, and was able to admire many periods of architecture, particularly the early years of the 19th century, when inherited forms began to be subject to pressure from technology, and Neo-classicism was evolving into Romanticism. Schinkel was particularly enjoyed.



The entrance from the street to the Clore Gallery at Tate Britain in London, the first major commission awarded to Stirling after a period of material problems at the University of Cambridge

In his speech 'Architectural Aims and Influences', his response to the award of the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 1980, Stirling acknowledged his interest while still a student in the 'just arrived' Modern movement, the foreign version as taught by Colin Rowe. Rowe encouraged his students to cultivate visual acumen, endlessly looking at buildings. With Rowe, Stirling learned how to look.

Rowe taught the history of architecture, not as an academic discipline, but because certain architects had made architecture enjoyable. He enjoyed Palladio, and also Serlio, Scamozzi, Giulio Romano, Hawksmoor, Ledoux, Cockerell and Lutyens, all architects with an enlarged self-consciousness about their art. Self-consciousness does not exactly kill spontaneity, but it creates a doubt, and the necessity to overcome doubt by a sort of considered impulse.

The common factor in all these preferences was the tendency towards Mannerist doubt, and my theory about Stirling's theory is that some principle of contradiction that he absorbed from Rowe joined up with his own origins as a Glaswegian Scot who enjoyed teasing the English, and gave him a *modus vivendi* for his entire career.

If this is true, we ought to be able to trace in Stirling's work a tendency to order linked to a tendency to break the rules, a simultaneous enjoyment of contradictory aspects. The idea of balancing opposing tendencies suggests something like a game. It appears that Stirling has taken to heart certain effects in Mannerist architecture, where rules are followed in one part only to be broken in another.



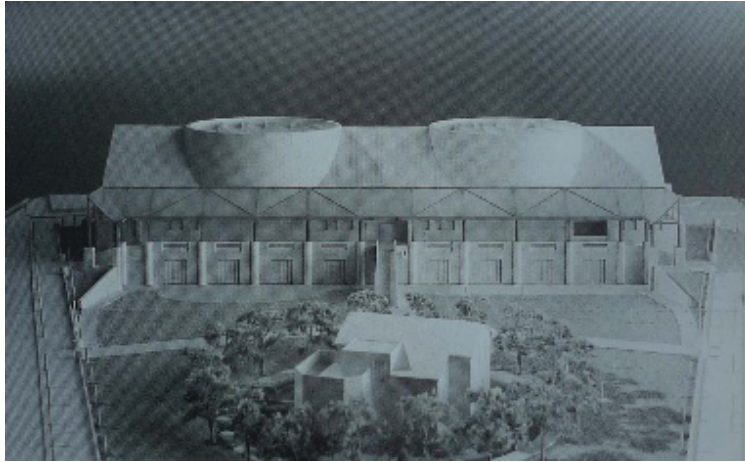
The University of Leicester Engineering Building is built in red brick, in a bold move away from the prevailing white walls of the International style

In his essay 'Ronchamp: Le Corbusier's Chapel and the Crisis of Rationalism' (AR March 1956), he writes: 'The desire to deride the schematic basis of Modern architecture and the ability to turn a design upside down and make it architecture are symptomatic of a state where the vocabulary is not being extended, and a parallel can be drawn with the Mannerist period of the Renaissance. Certainly, the forms which have developed from the rationale and the initial ideology of the Modern movement are being mannerised and changed into a conscious imperfectionism. For Stirling then, Mannerism was a conscious imperfectionism. It also seems to imply 'turning a design upside down'.

In his seminal essay entitled 'Mannerism and Modern Architecture' (AR May 1950), Rowe argues that architecture has at least twice become a theatre for the expression of conflict: once in the Seicento, when Michelangelo showed the way into a post-Renaissance condition of anxiety, and again in the early 20th century.

The main characteristic of Mannerist art was to express the conflict between the current system and the promptings of disbelief and scepticism. The art conforms to the prevailing system yet at the same time subverts it. At the Palazzo Tè the voussoirs are correct, but appear to be slipping out. The emotion conveyed is one of discomfort,

in which the beauty of the ideal is asserted and questioned.



The Library at Latina designed by James Stirling and Michael Wilford shows the refined sense of Mannerism with which the pair forged their name

Rowe makes a good case for finding analogous qualities in the architecture of the 1920s, when there was a conflict between the abstract system of Cubist composition, where the personal vision of the artist is privileged, and the inherited, somewhat classical canon of composition still evident in works of Behrens, early Gropius, Adolf Loos and later in Art Deco cinemas.

Where he had to search very carefully to find a source of contradiction between Modernism as technicity and Modernism as Cubist fragmentation, for us in the post 9/11 world, with global warming no longer in doubt, after Darwin has shown the true age of the universe, after cosmologists have had to invent new concepts like dark energy and dark matter to explain what they cannot observe, the conditions in which we live supply all too readily the ontological grounds for doubt. Mannerism, instead of being confined to a system for the periodisation of art history, now becomes a condition in the production of art. We have finally reached what WH Auden called 'the age of anxiety'.

Rowe became visible with his articles for the AR: 'The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa' (AR March 1947) and 'Mannerism and Modern Architecture' (AR May 1950). Stirling became visible worldwide

after the construction, with James Gowan, of the University of Leicester Engineering Building. One of the first things about Big Jim was his tendency to be cheeky, which, when he came to build on the hallowed turf of ancient universities was expressed initially by the use of red brick, as found in the Victoria Building, the nucleus of the University of Liverpool. It was partly at least a case of the 'lucky Jim' syndrome of Kingsley Amis: the redbrick style was offered in place of Portland stone. Stirling and Gowan were two northerners bringing forthrightness to architecture.



The imposing conical caps of the Braun Factory, situated at Melsungen

The enjoyment of breaking the rules is evident in the Engineering Building. Leicester shocked because it was far from being the orthodox style of its time. It already had historicist overtones. It referred to Russian Constructivism, as opposed to Le Corbusier; it was in red brick, as opposed to the white walls of the International Style; and it had improvised greenhouse glazing, as opposed to 'high design'.

Peter Eisenman makes a case for interpreting the building, not as an example of straight engineering design, but as an elaborate formal game of simultaneously affirming and denying the traditional associations of structure and materials. Without abandoning modernity, it extends the meaning of Modern architecture far beyond the literal reading of material forms. Eisenman's analysis establishes

Stirling's interest in Mannerism, although Eisenman does not use that word.

The Clore Gallery at Tate was the first major commission awarded to Stirling after a period when the material problems of the History Faculty at the University of Cambridge and social problems with his housing at Runcorn were evidently held against him. Its entrance looks back at the Tate portico and is lined with stone, and in addition is marked by a large pedimental opening ('as if a classical temple had been removed,' said Summerson), with a half round opening above that reminds us of Dance or Ledoux. So we now have more evident historical references, expressed as a combination of the playful and the scholarly.

Inside, beyond the reception desk, the staircase rises in a straight flight, pointing 'away' from the galleries, and the visitor has to pause at the top, reorient, and pass in the opposite direction along the subsidiary side space in order to enter the sequence of top-lit galleries on axis. There is something perverse about this.

However, Summerson was unexpectedly appreciative of Stirling's experiment. Reviewing it in the AR, he approved the result as producing 'the kind of strange space that Soane would have enjoyed', and he capped his article with the title 'Vitruvius Ludens' (AR March 1983), the architect at play. The idea of treating architecture as a game, with rules, was after all close to his own interpretation of the Classical Language of Architecture.

Summerson returned to this theme in a later article 'Vitruvius Ridens or Laughter at the Clore' (AR June 1987), where he comments about a lack of support to a panel above the corner window: a device 'leaving the brick panel in an apparent state of imminent collapse. One thinks of Giulio Romano's slipping voussoirs at Mantua.' The risky game that Stirling plays is clearly Mannerism, although Summerson, like Eisenman, does not use the word. The only critic, to

my knowledge, who does use the M-word is William JR Curtis.



The entrance to the Clore Gallery, Tate, London, is marked by a large pedimental opening reminiscent of a classical temple

Similar Mannerist qualities can be identified in much of Stirling's work, particularly in the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, in the Braun factory at Melsungen, the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, the Cornell University Center for the Performing Arts and the Lowry at Salford. They can also be seen in unbuilt designs for the Bibliothèque de France at Paris, Compton Verney in Warwickshire, the Library at Latina, the Thames-side project for Canary Wharf, and many others.

The desire to make fun of routine Modernism comes back, as we have seen, to Stirling's advent in London as a Northerner. But if he felt able to make fun of routine Modernism, it was not just a matter of architectural allegiance; it was also because of his sense of humour, which meant no claim to certainty should be taken too seriously. His temperament produced a bias that predisposed him to a criticism of Modernism, making him a Postmodern as well as a Modern, making him above all a Mannerist: indeed, a master of Mannerism.

Two aspects of postmodernity, then, were evident in Stirling: mannerist doubt, and the sense of continuity. The sense of continuity is the same, within architecture, as the sense of the city. So we have two things working in him: doubt and the city. He said: 'I am interested in exploring the combination of function and economy with

new strategic permutations of the monumental and the informal, as part of a broader and more profound search for a robust modern architecture which contributes to the evolution of the city and contemporary culture.’



The Thames-side project for Canary Wharf, London proved to be a landmark scheme in James Stirling’s illustrious career

My conclusion is that Stirling is not to be judged by the relatively superficial aspects of an adopted style. It is true that one can differentiate between an earlier and a later manner that may be termed by architects Modern and Postmodern. But there is a wider view of modernity, a view that holds good in all the other arts. In the literature of the 1920s, we find that James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land* are full of references and historical allusions; in Picasso, we have *Les Femmes d’Alger* at one moment and neo-classical *fat ladies* in the next; Eric Satie’s music can be abstract and arcane, or become popular tunes like *Gymnopédi* or *Gnossienes*.

It is only in architecture that functionalism provided a straitjacket that limited the scope of its ideas. In discussing the Sackler Gallery at the Fogg Art Museum with Michael Dennis, Stirling stated: ‘Nowadays one can draw equally, without guilt, from the abstract style of modern

design and the multiple layers of historical precedent.’

Stirling took from Rowe an attitude that provided him with a means of entering architecture into a level where it could contribute to the life of the mind. Both the architect Stirling and the painter Francis Bacon share an attitude towards their art, in which the rule of mimesis, in Bacon, and functionality, in Stirling, are made subject to a higher necessity: that of creating an ontological doubt.

They propose an authenticity that derives not from science or the world of facts, but from an inner vision. No one questions Picasso’s authenticity, and no one denies Picasso’s importance to art. In the same way, we may recognise an authenticity, in both Bacon and Stirling, which goes far beyond the question of style.



The voissiors of Giulio Romano’s Palazzo Te in Mantua break away from the Classical Order

Robert Maxwell studied at Liverpool University, where he met James Stirling and Colin Rowe. Maxwell is Emeritus Professor of Architecture at Princeton and was formerly its Dean