

Tarnished Stirling

Why did postmodernism's most gifted architect fail so often?

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“Notes from the Archive: James Frazer Stirling, Architect and Teacher”

Exhibition runs until January 2, 2011 at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Connecticut, and will then travel to the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal.

Post-modernism in architecture came to the public eye when, in the late 1970s, *The New York Times* printed on its front page the astonishing image of Philip Johnson's model for the proposed **AT&T (now Sony) building in midtown Manhattan**. What Johnson designed was an ostentatious f-you to postwar corporate modernism's steel-and-glass, rectilinear reserve that simultaneously played right into the hands of corporate conservatism, which was only too happy to pursue legitimation by reference to historical precedent. Here, Johnson offered up a Chippendale cabinet, blown up to a

ridiculous 37 stories, and clad in a paper-thin, pink masonry verneer.

([Click here](#) for a slideshow of some of James Stirling's greatest work.)

Johnson's AT&T Building elicited excitement among some and, among others, disdain, but its deferential stylistic bow to *Town and Country* taste became a harbinger of an era when many architects relinquished their long-held conviction that interventions in the built environment could help advance modernization and improve modern life. In the following decades, American architects increasingly indulged their corporate and wealthy patrons' branding and status-enhancing impulses with interpretations of Johnson's comforting and comfortable aesthetic of looking to the past.

The eye adjusts, in this case to the bad as well as the good. By the 1990s, landscapes across the globe had been despoiled with nostalgic, historicist monstrosities such as **Michael Graves's Portland City Hall** and Aldo Rossi's **Quartier Schützenstrasse in Berlin**. More unsettling still was that the historical precedents from which these architects drew could not be satisfactorily reproduced or even recalled—their materials, their hand-crafted ornaments, their careful details—because the artisanal traditions and material-building practices on which they relied had become rare and prohibitively costly to accomplish. So post-modernism replaced old-fashioned craftsmanship and materials with scenographic illusions: flat, decorative passages meant simultaneously as authentic recollections and ironic riffs on the past.

Post-modern historicism—let's call it the McMansion aesthetic—still holds architects in the developing world, as well as contractors and builders in the United States and Europe, in its sorry clutch, substantiating the truism that many people will opt for the familiar no matter how poorly it may serve them. As the movement spread from high architecture to the vernacular, especially in United States but also in Europe, James Stirling, a British architect who was the movement's

most gifted practitioner, remained little known outside professional circles. Stirling was the third winner of the Pritzker Prize, in 1981, but it did him little good: He won it before nearly anyone had heard of the award, now routinely called architecture's Nobel Prize, so he could not reap the benefits today associated with such an honor. Moreover, Stirling was an uneven practitioner, who produced many more bad buildings than good ones, and he died at a relatively young 68 years old, in 1992.

Among the handful of Stirling's important completed buildings is one indisputable masterpiece: the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, an art museum that was finished in 1983. (Readers also might be familiar with his work from Tate Britain's Clore Gallery, which houses the Turner collection.) The Staatsgalerie employs so many historicist aesthetic tropes that, when its design was first released, it provoked a heated and not always polite debate about the moral rectitude of employing motifs drawn from neoclassicism in a country still haunted by Nazism's aesthetically reactionary tendencies.

Technically an addition to Stuttgart's neoclassical State Museum, Stirling's Staatsgalerie is a sophisticated reinterpretation of its predecessor's traditional aesthetic. Most of the steel-structure building is clad in a creamy yellow masonry; galleries are housed in a symmetrical U-shaped block and arranged *en enfilade*. Outside, where in traditional neoclassical buildings a dome would sit, Stirling carves out a tall cylindrical courtyard, left open to the sky.

Despite all its allusions to historic precedents, Stirling creates in the Staatsgalerie an entirely contemporary experience, pulling neoclassicism apart and reassembling it in the spirit of the complexity of the modern city. To enter the building, one ambulates up a long, low-slung ramp that transverses a good part of the building, a complicated spatial sequence that is anything but traditional. Punctuating the masonry facades are aggressively steel-and-glass moments, such as the tilting entrance hall, arranged in curves that flutter like Marilyn Monroe's skirts. Memorably, the gallery floors, handrails, and exposed steel I-beams are covered with enamel tinted acid green.

The Staatsgalerie turns the notion of post-modern architecture on its head, making a strong case for how the movement could and should be an extension of the modernist project, particularly its aspiration to use architecture to modernize the city and social life. Stirling's combination of historicist and contemporary motifs relates the new building to the original (now called the "Old") Staatsgalerie. His skillful form-making and planning weaves the complex into its site, built into a hill and sited between a large and busy street on one side and a residential neighborhood on the other—and it does this while maintaining a distinctive identity. An outrageously ostentatious ramp, capped by coupled handrails enameled in hot pink and blue, pulls users up into the museum, into the sheared cylinder of a courtyard where neoclassical sculptures play off the arched openings, and then up to the residential neighborhood behind. It is a bravado performance, a singular building that holds its own with the greats of modernism; and yet, it is undeniably post-modern in its allusions to historical precedents and impatience with some of modernism's most closely guarded aesthetic tropes.

"Notes from the Archive" is an exhibition of the Stirling archive currently on display at the Yale Center for British Art. (After the show closes in New Haven, it will open at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal, the permanent home of [the Stirling archive](#).) As it is limited to one collection, it does not aim to be a comprehensive exhibition of the architect's work. Particularly regarding his later, highly uneven projects, the exhibition is more mounted than curated, showing some of his painfully bad misfires (the Wissenschaftszentrum in Berlin) alongside some of his best (the Staatsgalerie), with little indication of the meaning of the projects or their substantive differences. Still, the exhibition is fascinating for both specialists and general viewers. It contains not just the usual and sometimes tiresome fare of architecture exhibitions—drawings, sketches, models—but also Stirling's notebooks and sketchbooks, photographs, student projects, slides from his own collection, as well as articles, artwork, and projects by some of Stirling's contemporaries.

All this material offers decades of glimpses into the inner workings of the mind of one of the most thoughtful, innovative, and creative architects of the latter half of the twentieth century. Stirling began grappling with the failures of then-prevalent strains of modernism even in his student projects. In his senior thesis, he had already identified the challenge of his generation: to reinterpret and reshape the goals of modernism to address the demands of the postwar city. Even in this youthful work, Stirling identified the solution that would become his major aesthetic contribution: Instead of a clean, integrated aesthetic, which, for him, was exemplified by the traditional renaissance piazza, architects

should look to the Acropolis in Athens, where a collection of very different buildings make manifest their own distinctive identities and purposes, and are carefully placed in dynamic spatial relationships, animating the voids between them. True, Le Corbusier had also made of the Acropolis an exemplar, but mainly for building design, not modern urbanism. The elder French architect never pulled off this aesthetic in built form in the contemporary city. Stirling did.

Opportunities to dive into the ocean of another's mind are rare. The best parts of "Notes from the Archive" help the viewer do that. Why, in much of his career, did Stirling fail, and fail again to marshal his innate curiosity and creativity to the complex task of making great architecture? "Notes from the Archive" offers no answers; indeed, it doesn't even pose the question. But perhaps unveiling hints of just where modernism, and post-modernism, might have gone should suffice.

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