

Leicester Engineering Building the quality of a masterpiece are likely to be his, not Stirling's. The comparative weakness of the Florey Building and Cambridge Library, which Stirling designed in a similar manner after the partnership broke up, reinforces this view. The discussion then has to move to the works that are truly in Stirling's own voice. But notwithstanding the ebullience of the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, the apparent coarseness of later work such as the Clore Gallery at the Tate Britain and the building at 1 Poultry in London coupled with the current disdain for architectural postmodernism, with which Stirling seemed to be associated but which he disavowed, makes it hard to view this part of his work positively or receive its lessons.

If we look for theory, or perhaps if conditioned by OMA and MVRDV to expect form and rhetoric hand in hand, we see little. Robert Maxwell, Stirling's friend and his illuminating interpreter has observed that, although what Stirling wrote was often very trenchant, he did not generate theory in support of his work as Venturi did. In Maxwell's view Stirling's theoretical basis lay in Colin Rowe's idea that there were relationships between buildings by Corbusier and Palladio, and Stirling's recognition of the possibilities opened up by the eclectic forms of Le Corbusier's later work in the Maison Jaoul and Chandigarh. According to these impulses Stirling was able to combine modernist and classical approaches with brash forms and colours in an appeal to popular taste.

If we look at the buildings, it can seem as if Stirling made architecture from a set of personal fascinations, like Lutyens or Plečnik, transgressing their logic at whim and producing an oeuvre that is opaque while demanding to be understood as art. In this sense Stirling can sometimes come dangerously close to the behavioural traits and misconceptions about artistry that thread their way through the English bohème from Augustus John to Peter Cook. But he was an infinitely better artist than either of these. He was perhaps more like Hawksmoor, who also left little theory and whose forms defy explanation. As Kerry Downes has suggested, Hawksmoor's work only 'found recognition in the 20th century's study of the subconscious', and a fuller appreciation of Stirling's work may have to wait for changes in social and architectural thinking of a similar order.

But if the lens of postmodernism is removed, Stirling's work can be seen as he saw it, as part of the continuing evolution of modernism. By incorporating building forms and stylistic patterns from the past, including modernism's own past, he sought to access meaning that develops through time and acculturation and make it part of the modernism of the present.

While outright functionalists such as Hannes Meyer would deny it, relationships with the past are intrinsic to modernism and have existed in many different forms. Alan Colquhoun has pointed out Le Corbusier's manipulation of motifs from Beaux Arts Classicism to provide the founding principles of his early work, while Aldo van Eyk appealed directly to human cultural history to support his form making. Herzog & de Meuron, through the typological outlook of Aldo Rossi, their teacher at ETH, saw the 'anonymous' mid-twentieth-century modernist buildings of Switzerland as a vernacular, which they combined in the Schwitters apartment building of 1985, for example, with the forms of conceptual art. Alvaro Siza, working in an architectural situation shaped by the previous generation's study and cataloging of Portuguese popular architecture, adopted the generalized white modernist vernacular of southern Europe as an underlying vocabulary in projects such as the Carlos Ramos Pavilion of 1985 and teacher training college at Setubal of 1986.

In the work of the architects I have mentioned, the source material is highly absorbed and subsumed into a contemporary stylistic statement. What makes Stirling different and currently hard to accept is that the precedents in his work are highly visible and stylistically overt.

But perhaps the biggest issue in relation to the present time is Stirling's approach to meaning. His use of precedent seems to entail a belief in the dignity of past architecture, which because it is unexamined does not possess the illuminating qualities that can be expected of great art. In comparison, Siza's architecture in the swimming pool at Leça da Palmeira creates new meanings from the familiar industrial surroundings and the sea, and delivers them as knowledge through the experience of those who inhabit the building. But Stirling is not alone in missing the potential of his art. Conceptualism with which Herzog & de Meuron played and

discarded offers a discourse in which political and social systems can be discerned within objects and buildings. In this field the writing of conceptual artist Dan Graham reveals a history of popular culture formed by collective action and individual creativity that is a valid alternative to the saturated individualism of the present time, and which can permit architecture again to become a social art.

## IN DE BETOVERDE CIRKEL Paul Vermeulen

Manfredo Tafuri noemde James Stirling wreed. Zijn architectuur, meende Tafuri, was een systeem van uitsluiting, een betoverde cirkel waaruit ontsnappen niet mogelijk was, even hermetisch en monomaan als het boudoir van de Markies de Sade. Ofschoon Stirling zich mat met de traditie van de moderne architectuur, hanteerde hij fragmenten zonder utopisch residu. De tekens van de taal verwezen betekenisloos naar zichzelf, hun eigen axioma's herhalend, zonder toegang tot de dagelijkse ervaring, zonder plaats voor het toeval. 'In de absolute aanwezigheid van vorm is het bestaan van het informele een 'schandaal', zelfs in dat informele gedrag *par excellence*, de menselijke aanwezigheid', zo toeogde Tafuri.<sup>1</sup> 'Het 'schandaal' van Stirlings architectuur is de mens, onbeslist drijvend tussen de architectuur als louter object en een overdaad aan hermetische mededelingen.'<sup>2</sup>

Toen ik destijds dit retorisch gezonde oordeel las, dat in zijn onverbiddelijkheid iets vleids leek te hebben, kwamen mij inderdaad de uren dat ik Stirlings *Black Book*<sup>3</sup> had gespeld voor de geest als een initiatie. Ik had mij toegang verschaft tot een kabinet waartoe niet-ingewijden niet toegelaten werden. De breedsprakige redevoeringen waarmee Le Corbusier de aandacht van zijn tijdgenoten probeerde te trekken, weerklonken hier niet. Nieuwsgierig, 'aangetrokken noch afgestoten door de autonome articulatie van Stirlings formele

1 (...) the absolute presence of form makes 'scandalous' the existence of the casual, even in that casual behavior *par excellence*, human presence.'

2 'The "scandal" of Stirling's architecture is man, held as he is in an ambiguous suspension between architecture as a pure object and a redundancy of hermetic communications.' Manfredo Tafuri, 'L'Architecture dans le Boudoir. The language of criticism and the criticism of language', in: K. Michael Hays (red.), *Oppositions Reader. Selected Essays 1973-1984* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), p. 291-316.

3 *James Stirling, Buildings & Projects, 1950-1974* (Londen: Thames and Hudson, 1975).

machines<sup>4</sup> begroette ik de veeleisende klim, de ijle en de gevaarlijk dunne lucht die daar hing als een tot overmoed prikkelende weldaad.

Volkshuisvesting was voor de moderne architectuur bij uitstek het vehikel van de utopie. Daarom is in Runcorn, het uit glimmende panelen gemonteerde huisvestingsproject van Stirling, de afwezigheid van utopische residuen zo opvallend. De typologische en technologische keuzes stonden vast nog voor Stirling de opdracht kreeg; hij benaderde de opdracht, zo stelt Mark Girouard, 'als een interessant ontwerp probleem – hoe een coherent en treffend geheel produceren met geprefabriceerde eenheden, voortdurend herhaald over een groot gebied'.<sup>5</sup> Stirlings marine-associaties – de ronde ramen – evoceren anders dan bij Le Corbusier geen sociale utopie: die waren louter 'linguïstische elementen, of beter voorwendsels voor het gebruik van taal'.<sup>6</sup> De wraak van de ideologie op deze gladde formele machine werd koud geserveerd. Na nog geen twintig jaar werd ze gesloopt om plaats te maken voor suburbane twee onder een kap.

Niets hiervan begreep of voorzag ik toen ik mijn initiatie met het *Black Book* doorliep. Maar ik voelde wel dat de waperende sjaals en ouderwetse cabrio's die Léon Krier in de straten van Runcorn had getekend een schennis waren, even schrill als de plichtmatige gezelligheid van een berghut in de ijle. Stirling zal deze inbreuk hebben gedoogd als een vroege blijk van de baldadige nostalgie die hem overviel, net nu zijn architectuur een perfecte pasvorm had gevonden voor de consumptie maatschappij die nu rap haar vervel tegemoet snelde. Krier zal een voortijdige poging hebben ondernomen om de soevereine machine in te lijven in een argument tegen CIAM, voor de traditionele rooilijnenstad. De autobiografie (voor Stirling) en de politiek (voor Krier) waren kiemen van realiteit die het hermetische kabinet binnendrongen en besmetten. De bewoners ten slotte, onbeheersbaar en schandelijk, in niets gelijkend op Kriers flanerende dandy's, deden de rest.

Een anekdote van Girouard geeft een prangende illustratie van Tafuri's punt. Robert Dutch, gehuwd en vader van twee kinderen, zorgde voor opschudding door zich bij herhaling naakt te vertonen in het verdiepingshoge ronde raam van zijn woning in Runcorn. Hij nam daarbij theaterale houdingen aan. 'Hij leek God wel', zei de politieagent die hem arresteerde, maar Stirling wist beter: met zijn armen gestrekt, naakt in de grote cirkel leek de man op een renaissancegravure die de verhoudingen

van de architectuur met het menselijk lichaam verbond. De soevereine compositie zegevierde! De zielenpoot, gekooid achter glas, gevangen in de cirkel, veranderde zichzelf in een logo van pure architectuur. Zijn deviant verlangen viel samen met het schandaal van de autonome vorm. 'Dit', aldus Girouard, 'was het soort verhaal dat Jim aan het lachen bracht'.<sup>7</sup> Voortaan zou hij naast de autonome vorm de pervertering ervan te kijk zetten, en zijn formele machines vergezellen van een vulgair commentaar.

In de inleiding tot zijn biografie van Stirling breekt Girouard een lans voor de relevantie van een boek over een architectenleven. Een architectenleven haalt zelden de media, terwijl het nochtans een opwindende zaak dient die op vele levens ingrijpt. Omdat ikzelf behoor tot de kaste van architecten las ik zijn boek met een ietwat ander soort ontroering. Als student werd ik door het *Black Book* geïntitueerd in de wondere esoterie van de productie van vormen. Als praktizerend architect echter vond ik troost in dit picareske heiligenleven, waarin de hoofdpersoon als een kolossale uitvergoting exemplarisch werd onderworpen aan de beproevingen van ons vak. De erediens voor helden die niemand kent. De verleiding van het technisch risico, dat zich als schoonheid vermomt. De paniek voor de aangetekende brief. Het ontzag voor en de argwaan jegens de culturele intelligentsia. De steken van jaloezie bij het succes van een mindere confrater. De krenterigheid en bedilzucht van opdrachtgevers. Architectuur als glijmiddel en als zondebok. Het meningsverschil met een dierbare medestander. Een reputatie die achter je aan stommelt, vaag en groot als een schaduw. Het wonder van de ruimte dat zich openbaart in een gebouw in aanbouw. Boven dit alles: een galmende lach.

De vraag die zich dan opdringt is of Stirling, tussen canon en vulgariteit, ook exemplarisch is in zijn onvermogen om het alledaagse te onthalen. Is de architectuur in staat tot het gewone? Verdraagt de autoritaire vorm een andere tegenstem dan spot en pervertering? Net zoals voor Stirling blijft vandaag voor ons de grote poort

4 'Neither attracted nor repulsed by the independent articulation of Stirling's formal machines (...) Tafuri, op. cit. (noot 2).

5 '(...) a design problem which interested him – how to produce a coherent and striking whole out of precast units constantly repeated over a large area – (...) Mark Girouard, *Big Jim. The Life and Work of James Stirling* (Londen: Pimlico, 2000).

6 '(...) a linguistic element, or better, (...) a pretext for the use of language'. Manfredo Tafuri, op. cit. (noot 2).

7 'It was the kind of story that made Jim laugh.' Girouard, op. cit. (noot 5).

van de ideologie gesloten. Het sociale dient zich niet aan als een utopie, maar als een micropolitieke keuze: bescheidener, concreter, pertinenter. Menselijke betekenis glinstert overal. Zelfs als we verkiezen haar niet te zien, zal ze haar gram halen en onze onaangedaanheid overstemmen met een bulderende lach.

## INSIDE THE MAGIC CIRCLE Paul Vermeulen

**Manfredo Tafuri called James Stirling cruel. His architecture, in Tafuri's opinion, was a system of exclusion, a magic circle that offered no escape, as hermetic and monomaniac as the Marquis de Sade's boudoir. Although Stirling saw himself within the tradition of modern architecture, he used fragments without utopian residues. The linguistic signs were self-referential and meaningless, repeating their own axioms, without access to everyday experience, without room for chance. 'The absolute presence of form makes "scandalous" the existence of the casual, even in that casual behavior par excellence, human presence,' according to Tafuri. 'The "scandal" of Stirling's architecture is man, held as he is in an ambiguous suspension between architecture as a pure object and a redundancy of hermetic communications.'**<sup>1</sup>

**When I first read this rhetorically rich judgement, which seemed almost flattering in its implacability, I was reminded of the many hours I had spent perusing Stirling's *Black Book*; it had been a kind of initiation.<sup>2</sup> I had gained access to a cabinet from which the uninitiated were barred. No echoes here of the verbose speeches with which Le Corbusier had tried to catch his contemporaries' attention. Curious, 'neither attracted nor repulsed by the independent articulation of Stirling's formal machines',<sup>3</sup> I welcomed the demanding ascent, the emptiness and the dangerously rarefied air as a salutary incentive to recklessness.**

**For modern architecture, public housing was, above all else, a utopian vehicle. That makes the absence of any**

1 Manfredo Tafuri, 'L'Architecture dans le Boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language', in: K. Michael Hays (ed.), *Oppositions Reader: Selected Essays 1973-1984* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 291-316.

2 James Stirling, *Buildings & Projects, 1950-1974* (Londen: Thames and Hudson, 1975).

3 Tafuri, op. cit. (note 1).

utopian traces in Runcorn, Stirling's sleek panel-clad public housing project, all the more striking. The typological and technological decisions had been made before Stirling received the commission; he approached it, Mark Girouard claims, 'as a design problem which interested him – how to produce a coherent and striking whole out of precast units constantly repeated over a large area'.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Le Corbusier, Stirling's marine associations – the round windows – did not evoke a social utopia: they were purely a 'linguistic element, or better . . . a pretext for the use of language'.<sup>5</sup> Ideology's revenge on this slick, formal machine was served cold. Barely 20 years later, it was demolished to make way for suburban semi-detached homes.

I understood or foresaw none of this during my initiation with the *Black Book*. But I did sense that Léon Krier's drawings of fluttering scarves and old-fashioned convertibles in the streets of Runcorn were a violation, as jarring as the obligatory cosiness of a chalet in rarefied mountain air. Stirling must have put up with this violation like an early sign of the wayward nostalgia that hit him, just when his architecture had found the perfect form for a rapidly declining consumer society. Krier must have made a premature attempt at annexing the sovereign machine to an argument against CIAM and in favour of traditional building lines. Autobiography (for Stirling) and politics (for Krier) were germs of reality that crept into and infected the hermetic cabinet. In the end the residents, ungovernable and scandalous, and quite unlike Krier's *flâneurs*, did the rest.

An anecdote by Girouard provides a compelling illustration of Tafuri's point. Robert Dutch, married with two children, caused a stir by repeatedly appearing naked in the floor-to-ceiling round window of his home in Runcorn. Doing so, he would assume theatrical poses. 'He looked just like God,' said the female police officer who arrested him. But Stirling knew better: with his arms outstretched, naked in the large circle, the man resembled a Renaissance engraving, placing the human body into architectural perspective. The sovereign composition triumphed! The poor wretch, imprisoned behind glass, caught in a circle, transformed himself into a logo of pure architecture. His deviant desire coincided with the scandal of the autonomous form. According to Girouard,

'it was the kind of story that made Jim laugh'.<sup>6</sup> From then on he would flaunt the autonomous form as well as its corruption, and accompany his formal machines with a vulgar commentary.

In the introduction to his biography of Stirling, Girouard stands up for the relevance of a book about an architect's life. An architect's life seldom makes the front pages, although it actually serves an exhilarating cause with an impact on many people's lives. Because I belong to the caste of architects, his book moved me in a somewhat different way. As a student I was initiated by the *Black Book* in the wondrous esotericism of the production of forms. As a practising architect, however, I found solace in this picaresque hagiography, in which the protagonist was served up as a larger-than-life exemplar and subjected to the trials and tribulations of our profession. The worship of unknown heroes. The temptation of the technical risk disguised as beauty. The panic of the registered letter. The veneration for and mistrust of the cultural intelligentsia. The pangs of jealousy at the success of a lesser colleague. The stinginess and interference of clients. Architecture as lubricant and scapegoat. The difference of opinion with a well-loved ally. A reputation stumbling behind you, large and blurred like a shadow. The miracle of space revealing itself in a building under construction. And above all: a boisterous laugh.

All this raises the question of whether Stirling, wedged between canon and vulgarity, is also exemplary in his failure to entertain the commonplace. Can architecture do the ordinary? Does the authoritarian form tolerate a manner of dissent other than derision and corruption? As it did for Stirling, the great gateway of ideology remains closed to us today. The social does not emerge as a utopia, but as a micro-political choice: more modest, more concrete, more pertinent. Human meaning is reflected everywhere. Even if we choose not to see it, it will get its own back and drown our indifference with a thunderous laugh.

Translation: Laura Vroomen

4 Mark Girouard, *Big Jim. The Life and Work of James Stirling* (London: Pimlico, 2000).

5 Tafuri, op. cit. (note 1).

6 Girouard, op. cit. (note 4).