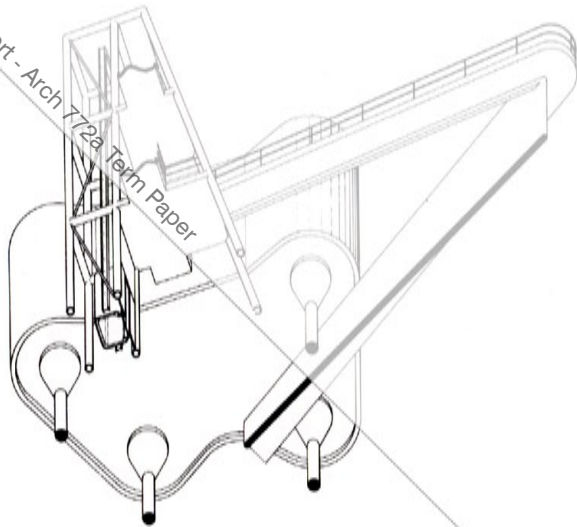


Tom Boschaert - Arch 772a Term Paper



James Stirling
Client Relationships

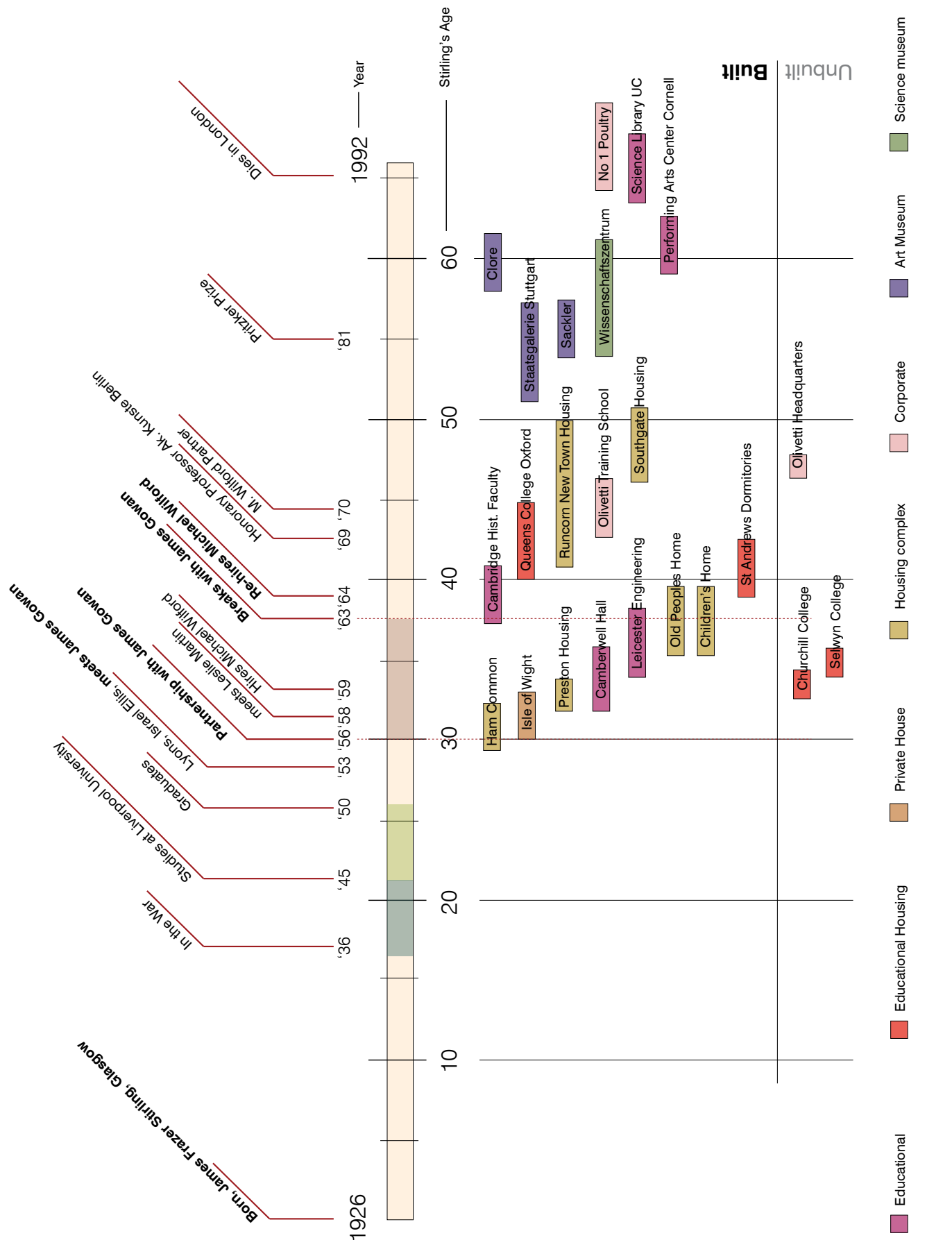


Fig. 1 - Stirling timeline

In the field of architecture it can often be heard said that the client is as important as the architect in materializing a work of great architecture. However, attention to the client-architect relationship is only very seldom investigated, and the difficulties and pleasures of the cooperation soon forgotten in the face of the achievement of the architect. A thin spread of books such as *Visionary Clients for New Architects* by Peter Noever allow a rare glimpse into the world of meetings, debates, friendship and warfare, but mostly with a thick political sauce and not inconsiderable spin. In the case of James Stirling it is widely known that his relations with his clients often went beyond the professional, be it either in a positive or negative sense. A few large projects are still under the spell of tense relationships and are subsequently treated this way, by being neglected or played down in the face of the public. An architect cannot build his work without the clients that make it possible, so how exactly was Stirling able to still attract new clients, how did the relationship with clients influence the architecture, and what were the effects of the negative relationships upon Stirling's career?

In the schematic of Stirling's clients (fig.1), a number of Stirling's most important projects are graphed against a time line, coded by client type. This way we get a quick overview of his career. We can see that his clientèle consisted of varied company, and that not one certain type of client dominates, although educational and housing schemes make for a large part of the commissions. Museums and galleries only enter the picture later in Stirling's career, and corporate clients are not abundant.

In investigating this matter two representative buildings have been chosen. First, the History Faculty building at the University of Cambridge (1963-1968) represents one side of the spectrum, with a decidedly divided client which resulted in a building which had to undergo considerable alterations before it could be deemed satisfactory. The other project is the Olivetti Training center (1969), where a largely positive client relationship resulted in a building which, despite some faults, has been elevated to modern art by its commissioners. Both buildings have a research and teaching function, and are close in chronology. The first, however, completely at odds with the prevailing architectural and design idioms that

surrounded the building, and the second completely in agreement and in extension of it.

General background

After working for Lyons, Israel, Ellis from 1953 to 1959, Stirling set up his practice together with James Gowan, by virtue of two projects, a housing scheme at Ham Common, and a house on the Isle of Wight, brought in by Gowan. Ham Common was commissioned from Stirling by the father of a fellow student. Stirling had established a reputation for himself at the university. Although the client of Ham Common, Mr. Manouso, and James Stirling parted as friends, he found him a difficult person to work with, and he had this to say about him:

*"[Stirling]'s a terrible prima donna. You know, it's very irritating, because he's terribly touchy and won't make the little changes that I want, as a developer. He has a very feminine side to him. He's rather a dressmaker producing a dress, and there are terrible scenes if I want the windows to be two inches lower or higher, because I don't think the people buying them would like it."*¹

However James Gowan, decidedly less finicky and more pragmatic in meetings and cor-

respondence, would be of importance in the conservation of client relationships.

The flats at Ham Common established Stirling and Gowan's reputation due to international press coverage, but perhaps also due to Banham's article defining it as being 'New Brutalism', quite popular at the time, despite Stirling's dislike of the term².

A few small projects were developed after this, among which a sizeable housing development in Preston, passed onto Stirling & Gowan by their previous employers, Lyons, Israel Ellis³.

By this time Stirling & Gowan had been noticed by Sir Leslie Martin, Deputy Architect of the London City Council, head of the Cambridge Architecture School, and a very influential person in the architectural and academic circles of England. It's logical to assume that the distant but valuable relationship Stirling had with Martin resulted from the group of friends and acquaintances he moved in when establishing himself in London after his studies, among which Sandy Wilson, Alan Colquhoun, Colin Rowe and Kenneth Frampton. Throughout the sixties Martin would attempt to deliver Stirling sizeable commissions, resulting in three

1 Girouard, M, *Big Jim*, p90

2 *ibid*, p91

3 *ibid*, p102



Fig. 2 - Leicester Engineering Building, *Photo: Andrew Norman, September 2003*

of the most important buildings of Stirling's early career. His influence cannot be underestimated. Without his active role in promoting Stirling and Gowan, Leicester would probably not have been commissioned from them, nor the Cambridge history faculty, nor the Florey building. After these three projects, successful in terms of the architectural discourse, but disastrous in terms of satisfying the needs of the client, it is not unreasonable to assume that Martin's promotional role vanished, as he had a certain reputation to uphold.

Leicester Engineering Building

The Leicester University had just created a new engineering faculty, and through Martin commissioned Stirling & Gowan to design them a new home. They figured a young and talented architecture office would suit a young and talented engineering faculty. Professor Edward Parkes of the engineering faculty would become the acting client, and in this Stirling and Gowan had a patient and understanding patron who did not insist on an influence on aesthetic decisions, which has been quite important for the purity of the eventual design. The cooperation went reasonable,

but after the building was completed, the relationship was tested⁴. The building had several severe problems associated with it, it leaked and there was no soundproofing to speak of, because of the gap between floor and facade. Parkes: "You couldn't hear anyone in the room next door, but you could have a conversation with someone four floors above"⁵. Stirling's unwillingness to adjust the building to operational faults did not help this situation.

There was an issue with a slippery tiled floor on top of the tower, and there was a chance that someone could slip and fall five stories down, through the glass. Parkes told them he wanted a horizontal bar to prevent such mishaps from occurring, to which a shocked Stirling replied "but the whole concept of the tower is verticality, and you will be able to see those bars from the outside through the glazing, which will spoil this. Try it for a year or two, and see how you get on." To which Parkes' idea was that Stirling suggested that if they don't lose more than a couple of undergraduates a year, it's all right.⁶

Cambridge History Faculty Building

4 *ibid*, p106

5 *ibid*, p151

6 *ibid*, p112



Fig. 3 - Cambridge History Faculty Building, *Photos: Mary Ann Sullivan, 2003*

Despite a mostly friendly relationship, Parkes became critical of the building's faults as well, and the Engineering Faculty members advised Cambridge against the use of Stirling and Gowan as architects for their History faculty building⁷. This commission came out of a competition, also arranged by Leslie Martin, but had the faculty decidedly more divided.

Nevertheless, attributing the problems with Leicester to inexperience on the part of the young office, they did not believe these problems would reemerge a second time. Still, the faculty was divided, and only after strong support of two of the members of the commission, and in fact faculty members for whom the building was destined, in combination with the support of Leslie Martin, the commission was handed over to Stirling & Gowan. The design for the building, to be executed in a brick and glass style similar to Leicester, drew on Sir Leslie Martin's research on library planning, and was ahead of its time in terms of planning⁸.

John Mills of the Cambridge History faculty commission says that the commission was

very impressed by the functionality of the buildings in the plans, and the professional and knowledgeable attitude of both partners. They would have a sensible straightforward answer to everything, much to the pleasure of the committee, much more so than the two competing parties⁹.

But Stirling and Gowan split up before the building was to be completely designed, and a good deal of knowledge about detailing and effective problem solving solutions thereby left the office.

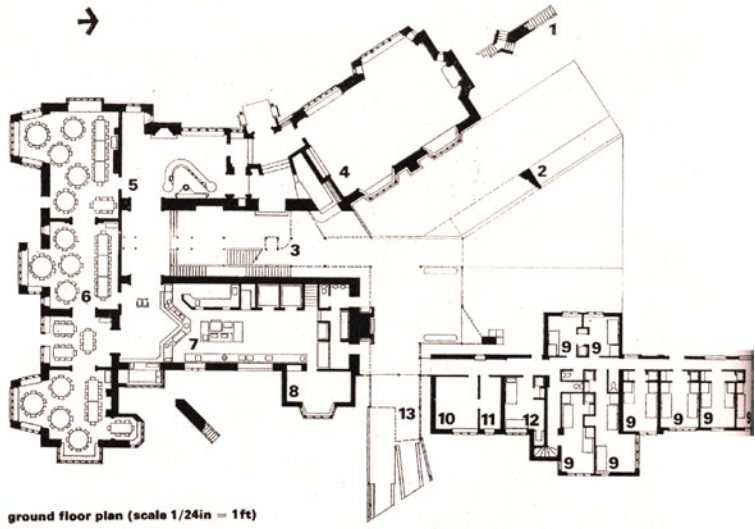
By choosing Stirling and Gowan, the University Grants commission refused to provide additional funding for the building, and this was the reason for going with the cheaper tiles, and an untreated aluminum window frame system, proving to be partially responsible for the leaks and environmental problems. Also, due to an unforeseen hindrance of an old building on the site, the building had to be adjusted at the last moment to fit onto the site¹⁰. The treasurer of the University Grants Commission thereby proposed to rotate the building, often stated as the reason for the major problems with heat gain in summer and energy loss in winter. Blaming all the environmental problems

7 *ibid*, p152

8 Nicholas Ray, *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 2003, no 3-4, p203

9 M.Girouard, *Big Jim*, p151

10 <http://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/faculty/building/>, 2006



ground floor plan (scale 1/24in = 1ft)

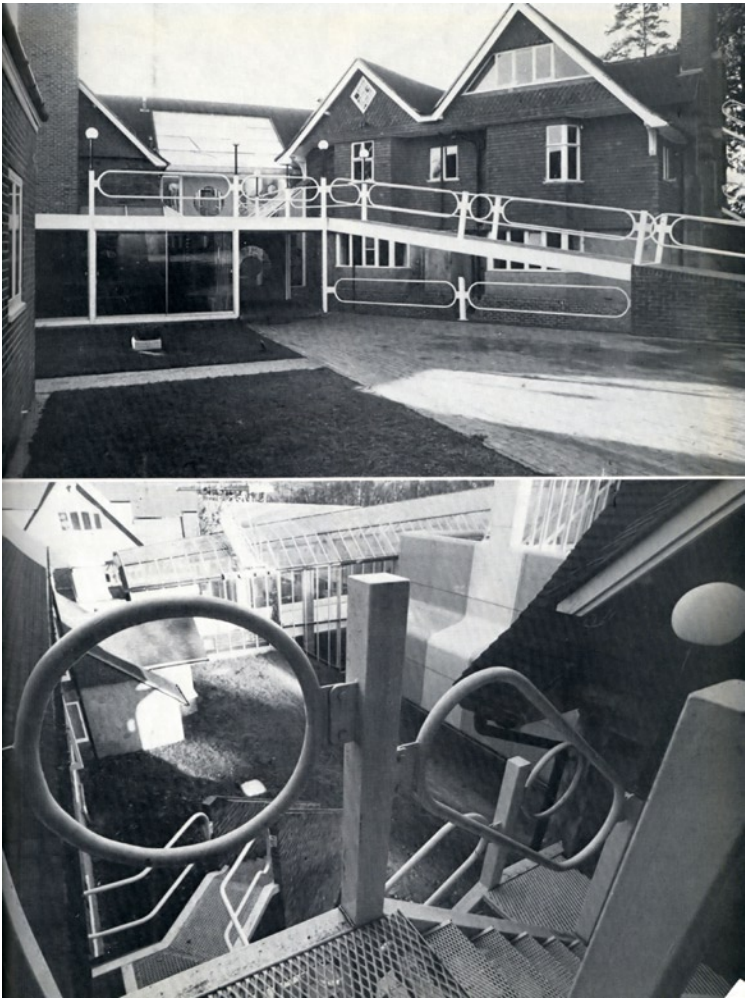


Fig 4-8 - Olivetti Training School Reconstruction, 1969, Edward Cullinan

on this one move is, however, somewhat short sighted, since the orientation of the critical glass elements were now south-west instead of south-east, and would therefore only have trivial impact.

The History faculty can be seen as the most troublesome of Stirling's designs, with plans for its destruction within 16 years of its opening only prevented by a very small margin. Many respected European architects regarded it as a masterpiece of its period and the proposals to demolish it triggered international protests¹¹.

An official investigation yielded the following comment:

*The performance of the building is unsatisfactory in many ways, apart from the failure of the external cladding. In particular, the building suffers from extensive leakage of rainwater through the external glazing and terrace roofs, and also from the inherent problem of high solar gain during the summer and subsequent heat loss during the winter.*¹²

Nicholas Ray, in a speech at a RIBA conference in Cambridge in 2004, mentioned the five type of values an architect should adhere to, as defined by Thomas Nagel in The Fragmen-

11 N. Ray, ARQ, No 3-4, p203

12 The Cambridge University Reporter, 16 May 1984, p 545

tation of Value (1977). He notes that Stirling is in complete failure to adhere to specific obligations to the client and the direct users, as well as the architecture community at large for negligence in the area of environmental design, specifically since the building was targeted as a supposedly environmental breakthrough.¹³

The relationship not only with the client, but of the entire History Faculty staff itself quickly grew hostile after completion. The students hated the building, frying or freezing while they saw tourists and architects taking pictures of the building outside. The librarian hated it. It was berated in the press. In the mid 1980's, after the tiles had begun to fall off, a lawsuit was prevented due to the guarantee of the building having expired.

Hostility started early, and shortly after the opening a member of the site committee would turn up the library's extractor fans at full speed when there was a recording for a television documentary, making filming impossible due to the noise. The staff member would refuse to turn them off, saying the building should be filmed under 'working conditions', while in actuality, the fans were always off. In the end,

13 N. Ray, ARQ, No 3-4, p205

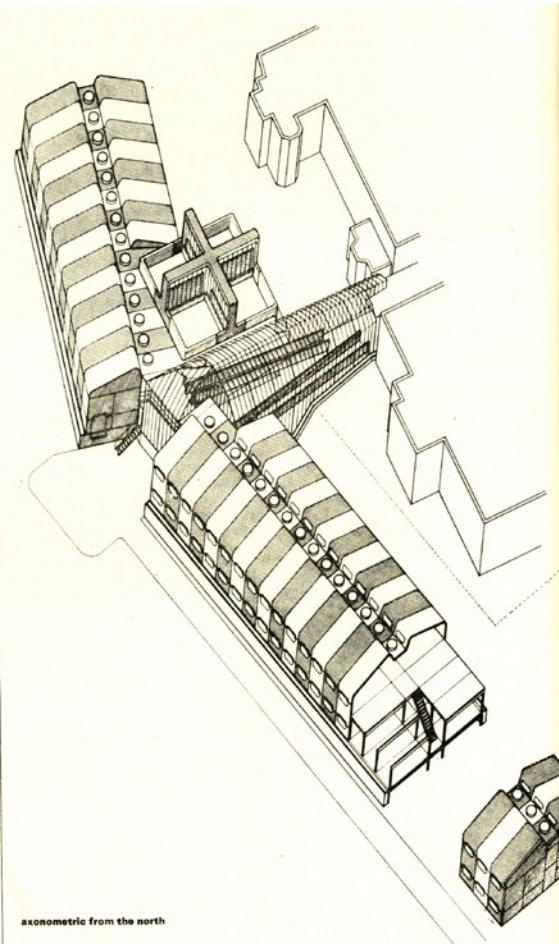
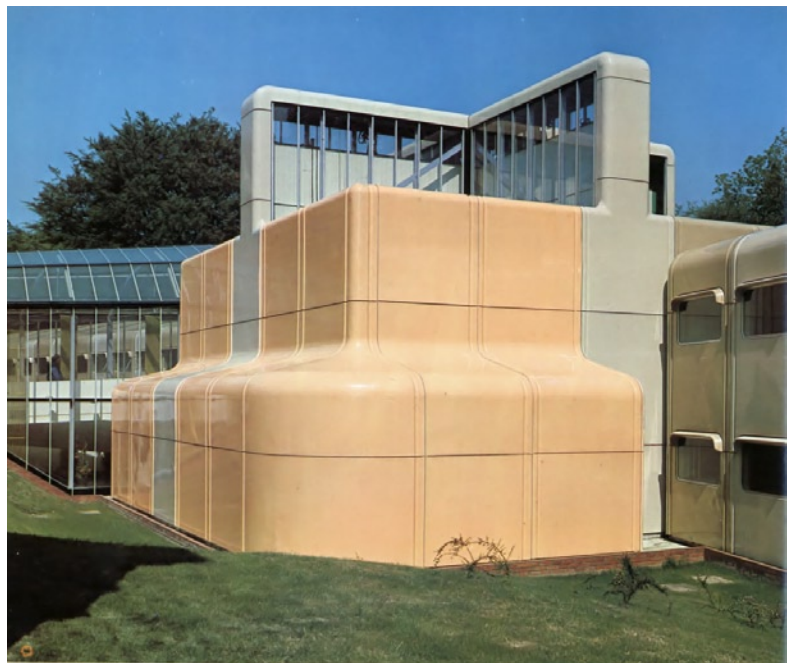


Fig 9-14 - Olivetti Training School Wing, 1969, James Stirling

Michael Wilford had to climb onto the roof to pull out the fuses of the fans¹⁴.

Olivetti Training Center

Only one year after the commission of the History Faculty building, and its design faults not yet known to the general public, Olivetti Britain commissioned a renovation of its Hasslemere training complex, and an additional teaching wing. The commission came to Stirling on the recommendation of Kenzo Tange, a Japanese architect, who had been employed by Olivetti, reflecting Stirling's growing popularity in various parts of the world¹⁵. Stirling however, preferred not to handle the renovation of the existing building himself, but offered the job to Edward Cullinan¹⁶. Cullinan's subsequent design, which can in many ways be seen as completely awkward, seems to serve a purpose of bridging the stylistic difference between Stirling's addition and the old Edwardian complex (fig 4-8). Stirling, by handing off the assignment, gave himself the more unrestricted assignment, and was able to produce an architecture that was unhindered by the old

complex and its difficulties of dialogue. In history Cullinan's achievement seems to be largely forgotten, but his performance paved the way for Stirling's wing and without it, it is without doubt that there would be a great many more problems associated with Stirling's wing.

14 M. Girouard, Big Jim, p154

15 ibid, p 144

16 Banham, R, Architectural review April 1974, p 198

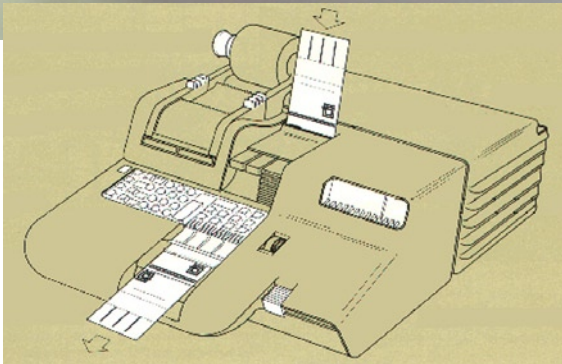
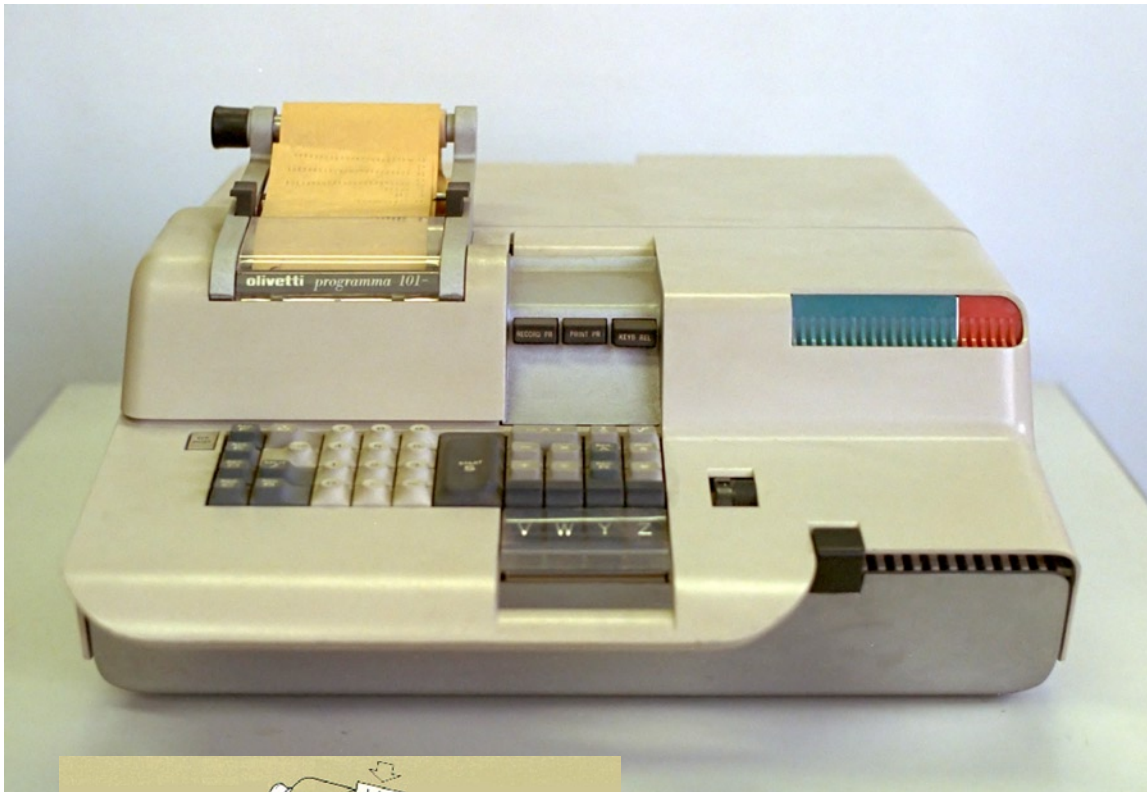


Fig 15 - Olivetti Programma 101, Bellini, 1965



Fig 06 - Olivetti Divisumma 24, Bellini, 1973



Fig 17 - Olivetti Divisumma 18, Bellini, 1971

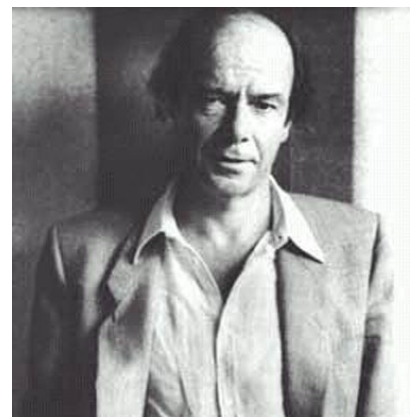


Fig 18 - Mario Bellini



Fig 19 - Olivetti TVC-250, Bellini, 1966

The resulting training center is often regarded as an odd one out in Stirling's career. The materials and their application on the building in the form of glass reinforced plastic modular panels. In this case, an influence of Olivetti itself cannot be underestimated. Whereas in many cases Stirling was designing buildings for institutions that did not have an aesthetic of their own, Olivetti at this point in time was world famous for its industrial designs, far more and widespread than Stirling himself. Touting design masters such as Mario Bellini (fig. 18) and Ettore Sottsass (fig. 22), Olivetti themselves undoubtedly left a big imprint on the work of Stirling for this building. When we investigate some of the products being designed around this era, it is hard to miss the clear analogies between the building, the Divisumma calculator series of Bellini, and the use of form, color and material in the work of the decidedly post modern Sottsass, who was to start the Memphis design group, which was one of the major industrial design impetus around the world, hardly a decade later. These designers, but also Richard Sapper, Marco Zanuso and others who worked for Olivetti at the time, were themselves trained as archi-



Fig 19 - Olivetti Valentine, Sottsass, 1969



Fig 20 - Olivetti Synthesis 45, Sottsass, 1969



Fig 21 - Alessi Spicerack, Sottsass, '62



Fig 22 - Ettore Sottsass

tecs and lectured across the world about their ideas & buildings.

Olivetti, which was started in 1908 as a typewriter production company, produced the first personal computer, the P101 (fig 15), in 1965. This was not only a revolutionary step for the office machine world, but also for its designer, Mario Bellini, who, at age 30 produced with the P101 his Leicester. The subsequent TVC-250 solidified his reputation, and was at the top of the profession, only to march onwards in times to come. His architecture has also been regarded as consistently high quality. With the Divisumma 14 (fig. 17), a new line of desktop calculators was introduced, very much in line with the previous products of Olivetti.

Stirling's use of almost perfectly scaled up injection moulding filleted edges on the panels, partially required for the GRP panels can be witnessed in the Divisumma 14, and other Olivetti designs of the time. Also, the distinct color separations between parts, which were supposed to be lime green and mauve (like Sottsass's Divisumma 24) if the city council had allowed it, would strike direct parallels with the products hanging around on Olivetti's

drawing desks at the time. The use of several dynamic devices which could alter the shape and configuration of rooms all seem to be directly related to Olivetti products as well.

Although the round windows and indented edges of most of the facade seem to be borrowed directly from the Divisumma 14, they were also a typical sign of the emerging plastic post-modern product design era, in which Olivetti would play a major role, in conjunction with Brion Vega, Braun and Telefunken. Taking into account the design cycle of industrial design products in this era, the drawings for the Divisumma 14 must have been on the table around the time Stirling was invited to design the new training center.

In some ways we can regard the Olivetti training center as the first building which was commissioned for its image rather than its function. Although the client seemingly got exactly what they wanted, critics were not always that easy going on the design, not even the usually Stirling sided Banham. Banham also criticized Olivetti itself for being uncritical and placing more value in their own corporate image than the quality of design of their products.

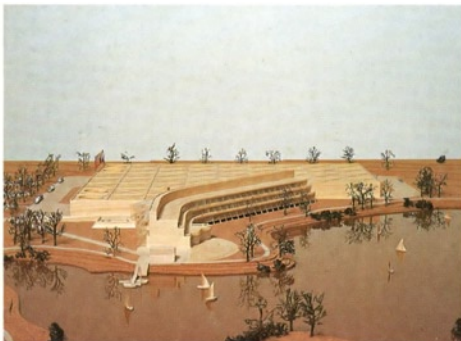
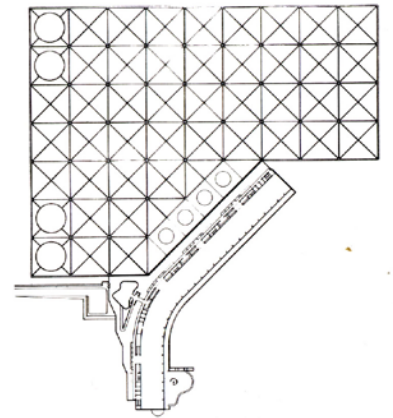
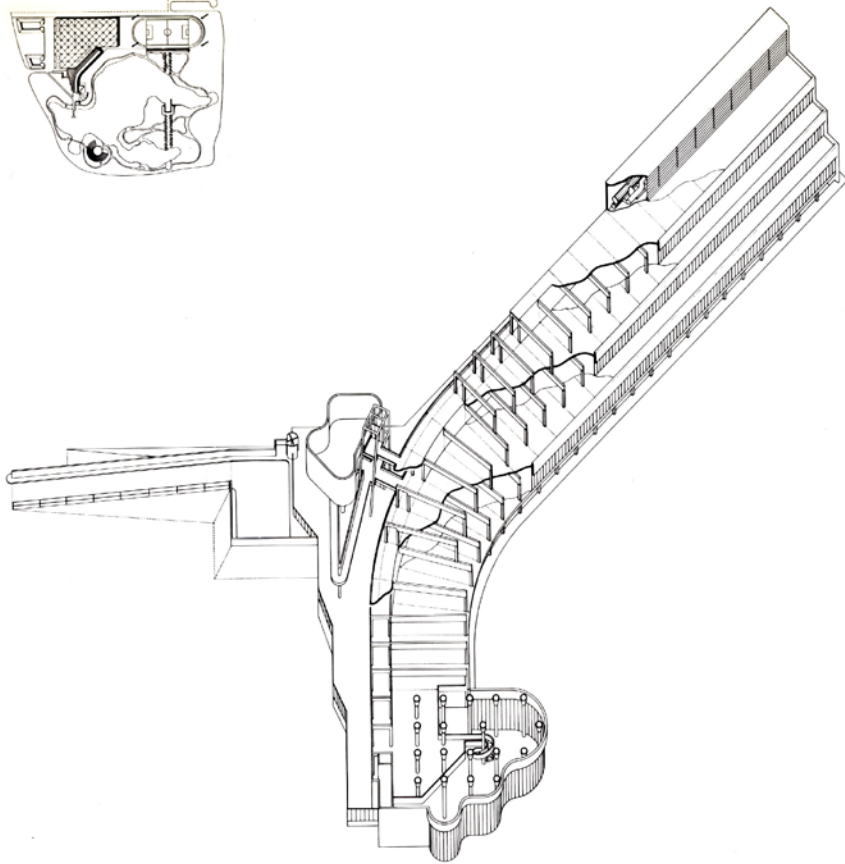
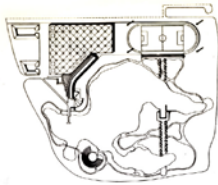
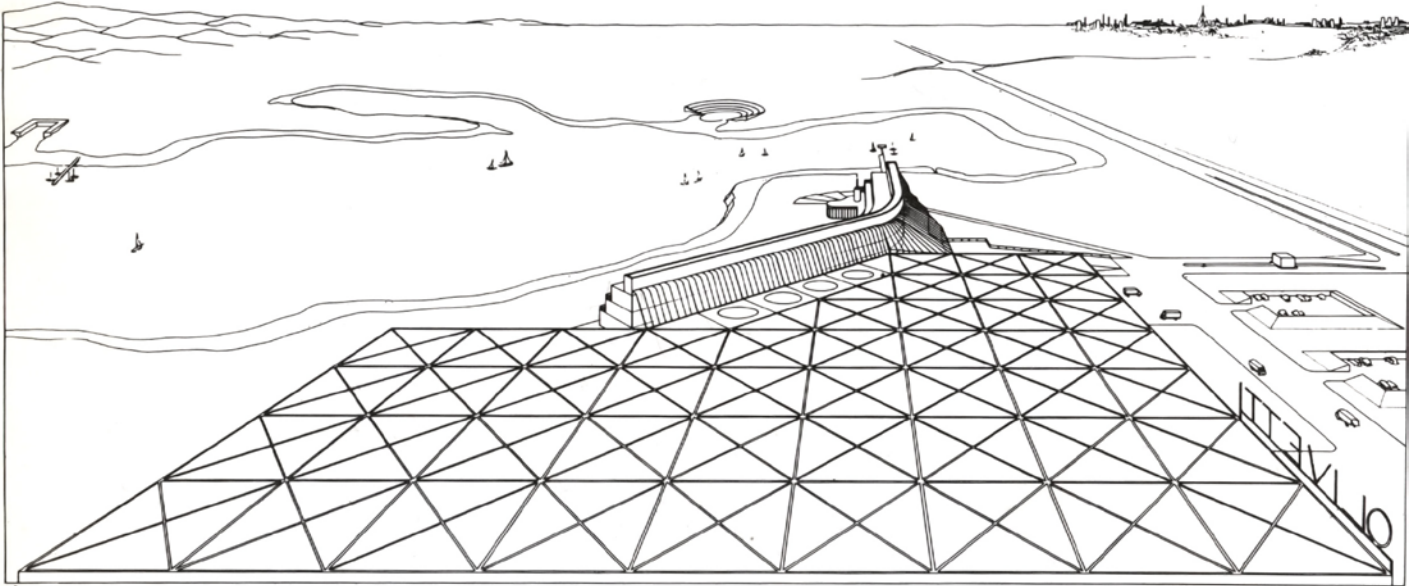


Fig 23 ~ 30 - Olivetti Headquarters at Milton Keynes, 1971

A second design for Olivetti was made by Stirling and Wilford, this time for their headquarters at Milton Keynes. Olivetti's market position had already been steadily weakening in this gateway to the computer age, and the headquarters would never be executed. What is interesting is that Stirling completely turns about face on the Olivetti references, and instead continues in his trend of using a great multitude of historical and contemporary references to other architects and his own buildings. According to Kenneth Frampton evidence can be found of the roof of Leicester, but flattened, the tented greenhouse roof of the History Faculty, the stepped terraces of the Florey building, and the urban galleria and circus hall of Derby City Hall. Outside influences include Aalto's staircase wall of his Jyvaskyla University of 1950, Niemeyer's organic dance pavilion at Pamphlua in 1948, to Le Corbusier's Olivetti Computer center, projected for 1965.¹⁷ Instead of the singular industrial design references, Stirling is thus back in his home court. Additional considerations to be taken into account is that the headquarters were to be built on a remote stretch of land without any distinguishing topographical characteristics or immediate

cultural anchor points. The sprawled out design has a dialogue with the lake, but tension as such can be found in Leicester, with its play between the flat plane of the workshops versus the shifting directionality of the vertical towers is absent. For what reason Stirling decided that Olivetti's own design culture might not be as relevant here as in Hasslemere is unknown. It might be that once was enough, and Stirling might have felt distracted from his pursuit of personal interests by Hasslemere, which certainly was the last building to be quite unlike the other pictures in the big Stirling book.

The Olivetti training center might be unique in Stirling's career, where the building seems to be so much influenced, or inspired, by the client he worked for. In the years after this, news about the persistent problems in the Leicester engineering building, Runcorn, St. Andrews and the History Faculty did not do Stirling a lot of good. Although internationally acclaimed as a great architect, the clients weren't coming, and a good deal of the '70s were problematic times for the office. If assignments did come in, they were mostly on the basis of Stirling's fame, and the client would most likely not be involved in the design process, but be more

17 K. Frampton, A+U, Feb. 1975, p88

interested in being handed a genuine, unmitigated Stirling. Stirling was looked upon by the world with idolatry eyes from now on, and his clients would follow suit, 7 years later. M.J. Long says that in this period, Stirling probably not only received a limited number of clients, he almost certainly also lost a number of them. His stubborn attitude and his limited financial security of his teaching position at Yale presumably weeded out most of the clients that were not willing to go along with Stirling's architectural game. But Long also emphasizes that it was never Stirling's intention to breach with the brief. The brief, as handed over by the client, assuming it did not have any architectural restrictions, would be analysed and integrated quite thoroughly. Change orders and the discussion about the design, however, was another matter. Stirling would, despite his aversion to presentations, deliver the speeches to the clients himself, and they would invariably inspire both client and the office itself, but if reality dawned upon the client, who would wish to discuss certain matters, one could expect a cold reception. It should be said that the staircase up to the Stirling offices were lined with letters of complaint and dismay from clients and users of buildings as if they were trophies,

thus it cannot be said that one was not warned in advance.

It is important to realize that the clients that had the most trouble with Stirling, that is, publicly detectable problems, were mostly those whose building commission came forth out of a design competition. The history faculty was such a commission, and Stirling and Gowan were selected on the basis of their preliminary design, without many personal encounters, and not because of the reputation of Stirling and Gowan. This is a major difference between Cambridge and Olivetti as a client, which should not be forgotten. Olivetti's building might have performed as dismally as the History Faculty, but that would have been of little importance. It goes to show that Stirling was much better suited to create a business card for an institution or company than he was at providing a functionally sound building. Girouard says in Big Jim that if Stirling talked about architecture with friends it was always concepts, theories and ideas, never materials or construction. He seemed disinterested.

From the moment Stirling started work in Germany, which coincided with the arrival of Leon Krier in the office, his career picked up once more. A number of unbuilt projects precede the first built work of Stirling in Germany, mostly in the period that typifies itself with a lack of work, 1970-1977. Starting with the canonical, but unbuilt Siemens AG building in Munich, which has some strong references to Archigram and Superstudio, to the even more influential, but also unbuilt Museum for modern art in Westfalen, to the Wallraf-Richards Museum and the study for the Dresdner Bank, the Staatsgalerie had a formidable basis in quite theoretical and investigative work. The cooperation with the Germans proceeded quite unlike the relationships with the British clients. Stirling couldn't speak a word of German and the actual design meetings were therefore held by others, probably not an unwelcome side effect. German builders, technologically more advanced than their British counterparts, and used to solving technical details in a professional and autonomous manner, had much less difficulty working with Stirling than anywhere else, and this improved the working relationship a great deal. Subsequent projects in Germany, such as the Wissenschaftszentrum in Berlin, were

completed with much less problems than the Cambridge, Oxford and Leicester designs. After the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart of 1977-83, Stirling is also invited to the United States, resulting in an addition at Rice University and the Fog Gallery in Cambridge, Boston.

James Stirling died at the age of 68 in 1992 in London. With his premature death, a character who was at the top of his profession left a gap that has never been adequately filled. Stirling's self-proclaimed megalomania might have caused him to have difficult periods where clients would steer clear, it is likely that without it he would never have been able to build the examples of architecture we can look at, and learn from today. His unique personal attitude towards the profession cannot be disconnected from his architecture, and by studying the work of James Stirling, we are studying the man himself, with all his idiosyncrasies, quirks and caveats. One is hard pressed to find an architect with more controversial anecdotes to his name, be it in a personal setting or a professional one. I dare say that Stirling's pissing against the windows of the architecture profession far exceeds the distant arrogance and self proclaimed genius attitude of Frank Lloyd Wright, and it is obvious from looking at the buildings that Stirling wanted this controversy. Stirling was always ready to throw a wrench into the mountain of turning cogs that is the architectural machine, and in doing so, he was occasionally hit by the splinters.

Any client who commissioned Stirling after the History Faculty building debacle knew what he was getting himself into, and if not, should have his homework better. Luckily for most clients, their wishes were not tread upon as much.

In an era where the architectural profession is struggling to save itself from a relegation to the corner of 'design consultant', we could use more Jim Stirlings, whose impatient and condescending attitude to clients, in combination with world acclaimed architectural genius would help reclaim the field. We don't need to go as far as Stirling, for example by hitting the client of the redevelopment study of New York on his hands with a ruler upon touching a drawing, but by taking the business approach we make ourselves vulnerable to business arguments, exactly those which cannot be won, since our current economical model places little value on artistic merit or ethical approaches.

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