

## CULTURE

# Big Jim'll fix it

James Stirling put the world of architecture to rights in his often hilarious pad, says **Patrick Lynch**

## BOOK

## JAMES STIRLING: EARLY AND UNPUBLISHED WRITINGS ON ARCHITECTURE

Edited by Mark Crinson  
Routledge, 160pp, PB, £24.99

★★★★☆

When James Stirling died in 1992 Vittorio Gregotti declared that "from now on everything will be more difficult." Indeed, during the past 18 years we've seen the re-emergence of the sort of autistic formlessness that post-modernism thought it had killed off.

Between 1953 until he was 30 in 1956, Stirling carried around and wrote in "a dark blue Ryman account book" referred to in Mark Girouard's biography Big Jim as "The Black Notebook". I found Girouard's book impossible to finish, the scope of Stirling's ambition almost demonic and the scale

of the problems facing him made me anxious about my own future well-being as an architect.

Most young architects carry sketch books but how many of us would dare write: "Frequently I awake in the morning and wonder how is it that I can be an architect and an Englishman at the same time, particularly a modern architect." And who but Big Jim would then proceed to declare that "the number of great architects which this country has produced since the gothic can be counted on one hand — Mackintosh, Archer, Hawksmoor, Vanbrugh, Inigo Jones and perhaps Soane?"

This collection of juvenilia was perhaps never intended for publication, although some of it was printed and forgotten in student magazines, but the hilariously argumentative tone works brilliantly as architectural stand-up, and you sense that Stirling had an eye on posterity. In spirit, at least, he was in dialogue with his heroes.



James Stirling working in his overcoat in his unheated office, 1962.

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Stirling's writing is like his design work, ruthlessly logical and yet eclectic and seemingly open to influence from both high and low culture. The Black Notebook is particularly engaging and full of riffs that seem to be situated in an imaginary salon — the bar of the ICA? — where Corb and his favourite baroque architects and some contemporaries are called to account for themselves and berated, celebrated and cajoled.

Stirling takes as his project "two trends in contemporary architecture which must be disproved": firstly "dropping a curtain down the facade and disguising the interior... American back to Bauhaus origin"; and secondly the "one idea" approach — or "I have an idea". A thesis of sorts is scratched out in the bar counter, and you see a whole life's work being set up in these short tracts.

For Stirling, continuity was established between differing historical periods because "there is nothing fundamentally new about modern architecture... Architecture will always be the same for western civilisation".

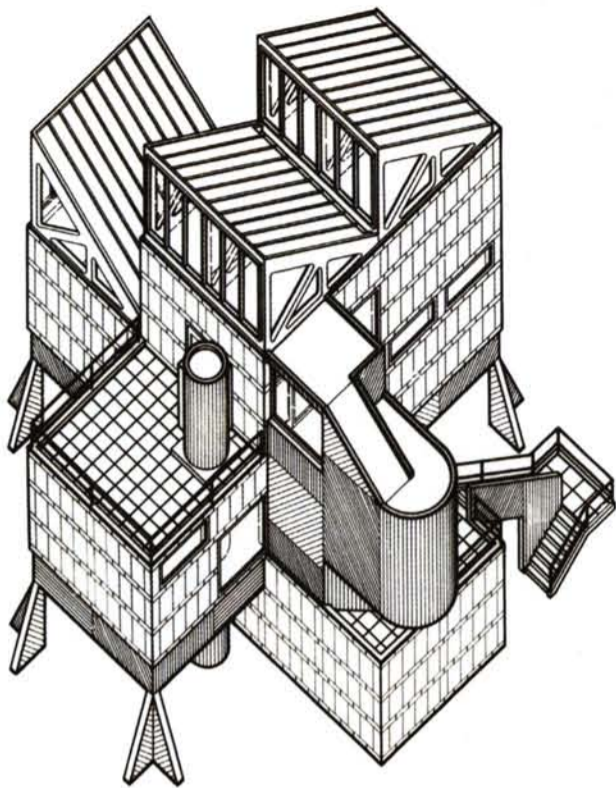
Stirling's designs were driven by questions of the articulation of the programme and the problems and opportunities of the site. The essential architectural "act of programming the hierarchies"

enabled him to think about problems of type and character as well as functional problems without losing sight of the "plastic potentialities inherent in the accommodation (and circulation)".

"Having arrived at the germ or bones or mechanics of an architecture," he claims, "the progress from this point can be quite automatic; such questions of proportion, construction and materials can now be considered. But great discipline must be exercised so as not to disguise or obliterate the initial conception, in short every move should be a further revealing and analysis of the conception."

If this was not precocious enough, he continues to remind us "how often one sees buildings which are just 'simple' or 'complicated' without having gone through a process of simplification". He continues in this vein to lament "the turnout year after year at the AA of 'intuitive' engineering diagrams in the name of architecture" and even to wonder why, when there are only "four decent schools of architecture in the country", part II students are all paid the same.

Mark Crinson bookends this collection with two essays that brilliantly organise the texts and situate Stirling's work for us today. In the introduction, "The Forma-



The library from Stirling and Gowan's entry to the Churchill College, Cambridge competition (1958).



A young Stirling at Le Corbusier's Pavillon Suisse (1949 or 1954).

tion of a (Post-) Modernist", he points out that "the work's status is in limbo, lodged somewhere between old battles and revisionist accounts that have yet to take off". Colin Rowe's influence upon Stirling as tutor and friend is shown to be crucial to the development of his historically nuanced and collagist approach. Crinson calls this "work that [has] a much more open attitude towards sources, about the possibility of a more complexly eclectic mod-

### Jim of this period was a brilliantly opinionated ex-paratrooper at large in London

ernism... what Stirling and Gowan called a 'multi-aesthetic' or a 'style for the job' that 'could solve the demands of the brief'. Crinson claims that "this was a post-modern architecture, if not yet post-modernist".

Manfredo Tafuri famously called Stirling's architecture "cruel", because it didn't offer the solace of a utopian vision. You can certainly see that his writing was harsh and judgmental, and like JD

Salinger's contemporary creation Holden Caulfield, Stirling's honesty can also be immature and bumptious at times. Rowe recounts the Jim of this period as "moustachioed and militaristic" — a brilliantly opinionated, handsome ex-paratrooper at large in London with the best sort of ambition. He was clearly dedicated and committed to his discipline and charming enough to be on BBC radio discussing the Le Corbusier exhibition at Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery in 1956, alongside John Summerson.

Stirling was writing regularly for the Architectural Review about Corb and he seems to have been the first to visit the Maisons Jaoul. Crinson's concluding essay, "L'Architecture Anglaise", insightfully describes Stirling's love-hate relationship with Corbusier as "sting and solace", something like Harold Bloom's notion of "The Anxiety of Influence" on young poets.

I found this small volume immensely enjoyable and insightful, and it enabled me to see beyond Stirling's huge personality into a semi-private world of integrity and passion. Most of the problems of modern architecture that he addresses so frankly are still current. I recommend it to all architects that are really interested in ideas about architecture.

## BUILDING A LIBRARY: 7

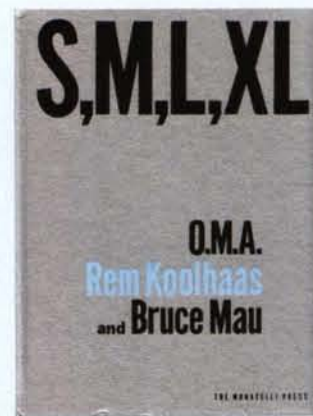
**S, M, L, XL**  
By Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau. Monacelli Press, 1,376pp, HB, £48.

This is the biggest book of my 50. It is the heaviest and has more pages — 1,344 — than any other single volume. By the kind of planned coincidence it is full of, one of its signature pieces is called Bigness, Or the Problem of Large. It is not a book for reading; most of its pages

contain no text. When text occurs, there is usually something funny about it. It is overlaid on images that make it hard to read, or it is printed in huge type with vast margins that make it hard to read, or it is threaded through other material that makes it hard to find.

Koolhaas's next large publication was called Content, but one of the mantras of the present work is "fuck content", a slogan to which it is basically faithful, though perusers of this volume are bound to learn a few things in spite of themselves.

I found out, for instance how many miles Rem Koolhaas travelled in the 13 years before the book was put together, and



how many nights this required him to spend in hotels — 240,000 and 305 respectively. On closer inspection it is all far bigger than I thought: these are the figures for 1993 alone.

The layout of the book is its truly alluring feature, which is why Bruce Mau is credited as joint author. This layout is inspired by various forms of advertising, by slick corporate brochures but equally by cheap flyers handed out in the street, by comic books but equally by surrealist film, by a wide range of incompatible forms of architectural representation which are alternately miniaturised or blown up so large they barely make sense.

Why is this strange product included here? Not because I like it, but because it expresses something about our moment.  
*Robert Harbison*

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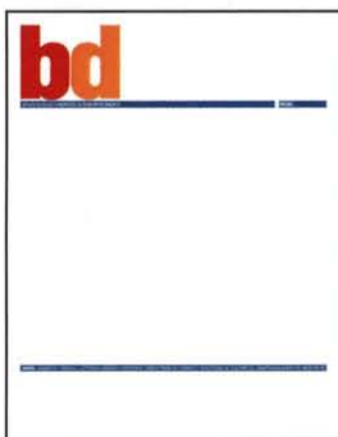


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