

Stirling Example

I've always been a designer with...eclectic tendencies. JAMES STIRLING, 1980

James Stirling, who with his longtime partner Michael Wilford designed the additions to and renovation of the School of Architecture at Rice University, died unexpectedly last summer in London at the age of 66. The School of Architecture is perhaps the most unassuming project of their joint practice and, by now, also the best-known building (or part thereof) on campus. The nonspecific gravity and extreme, figure-in-the-carpet modesty with which it accommodates Rice's "1920s... sort of Venetian, Florentine, Art Deco" ambience (Stirling's categorization) left Philip Johnson peering from the window of his limousine in mock bewilderment: "I came to see Jim's building but couldn't find it." Just so, the partners' Zelig-like performance was commended by Colin Rowe (acknowledged by Stirling in 1980 to be "my teacher *then as now*"), who took godfatherly pride in his pupil's "great discretion" in assimilating the Beaux-Arts strategies of the campus's original architects, Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson.

While exceptionally modest for architects of Stirling and Wilford's standing, the Rice project (1979–81) was their first to be built in the United States. Its conception was no doubt facilitated by Wilford's familiarity with the school and its building, the expansion of which he had assigned as a semester-long studio project while a visiting critic in spring 1979. To Stirling, the notion that "it may be difficult to distinguish the façades of the new building from the [pre]-existing ones" or that the design might be "uncharacteristically quiet or conventional" merely served to define one pole of an "eclectic" practice that reserved the right to "oscillate," in his words, "between the most 'abstract' modern (even high-tech)...and the obviously 'representational,' even traditional." If this capacity revealed itself more directly in the partnership's later work, it did so, he suggested in his dedicatory remarks at Rice, not only in response to society's "return to the more ancient desire for buildings whose primary objective is to appear appropriate in their context," but also because "for many of us working with the abstract language of modern architecture, Bauhaus, International Style, call it what you will, this language has become repetitive, simplistic, and too narrowly confining."

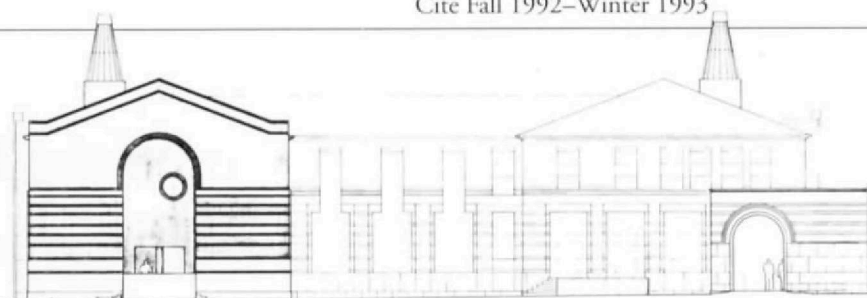
Stirling went on to say, "I, for one, welcome the passing of the revolutionary phase of the modern movement and look forward to a more liberal future producing work perhaps richer in memory and association." This willingness to move beyond fixed positions in anticipation of a less clearly defined but more liberal synthesis is also evident in the premodernist speculations of Bertram Goodhue (Ralph Adams Cram's prodigiously eclectic though silent partner at Rice), who ventured in 1905 that "it is probable that we shall never again have a distinctive style, but what I hope and believe we shall someday possess is

something...so flexible that it can be made to meet every practical and constructive need, so beautiful and complete as to harmonize the heretofore discordant notes of Art and Science, and to challenge comparison with the wonders of past ages."

Stirling and Wilford's L-shaped addition of the Brochstein Wing to M. D. Anderson Hall, Staub & Rather's architecture and general classroom building of 1946–47, conforms to the footprint specified in Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson's General Plan of 1910. But its severe, round-arched principal (north) elevation, which terminates in a *risalit* borrowed from Staub & Rather's otherwise underscaled and little-distinguished original, looks beyond the first architecture of the campus to the more abstracted work of Goodhue's post-Rice career. The most striking of these correspondences is to the U.S. Marine Corps Base at San Diego (1918), a rendering of which suggests a hipped-roof, stripped Beaux-Arts accommodation of the round-arched modernity of Irving Gill at La Jolla and Oceanside. With similar if inadvertent congruence, the double-height gallery windows proposed by Stirling and Wilford for the renovation of the west elevation of Staub and Rather's building (but deleted at the last moment as a cost-saving measure) recall the telescoped apertures of one of Frank Lloyd Wright's elevations for the Albert M. Johnson House in Death Valley, California, 1921 – a project that went unbuilt but also aligns with "the limited period of Frank Lloyd Wright's production...of the concrete block houses around Los Angeles" that Stirling had found particularly impressive on one of his excursions outside New Haven while a visiting professor at Yale.

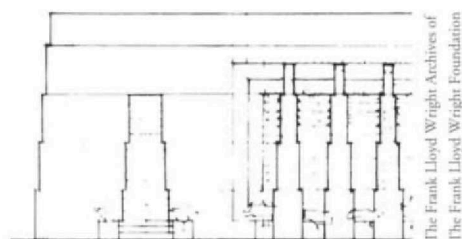
The low-key, uncanny *déjà vu* of Stirling and Wilford's retrospective interpolation for Rice's "eccentric but elegant campus...[of] arcades...and fancy spires" was relieved of its anonymity only by discreet flourishes here and there. A pair of conical glass-and-aluminum lanterns rose above the roof line to mark either end of the concourse connecting the old and new parts of the building (a device that was subsequently proposed, but discarded, as a means of emphasizing the rounded corner of the design for the expansion of the Fogg Museum). An offset bull's-eye window was introduced as a sectional clef floating within a two-story, essentially liminal "arch" that activated the otherwise blank, narrow west end elevation of the new wing. (A canopy of neoconstructivist inclination was also proposed as a signal embellishment for the new streetside entrance to the concourse, but it, like the telescoped, double-height windows intended for the gallery, was said to have fallen victim to budgetary imperatives.)

The firmness and commodity of the building were also constrained by budgetary considerations. Stirling confided at an all-school lecture that the fiscally induced use of Sheetrocked air pockets for *poché* at



Rice, in contrast to the ruin-conscious enthusiasm for pourable rubble he had encountered in the building of the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart (1977–83), made him hesitant to lean against most upright surfaces. A cost-saving experiment with decentralized air conditioning for the studios, bureaucratically mandated at the height of the energy crisis, imposed units that proved noisy and difficult to manage. But at a more fundamental level, where good sense could be demonstrated to cost no more, the architects' seamless, atelierlike organization of the building yielded a scale and particularity that succeeded in promoting the unfrilled but clublike domesticity that Stirling remarked at the dedication as vital to the special demands and spirit of architectural education. Overall, the result was, as Paul Goldberger discerned in the *New York Times*, a work of "visual pleasure...quirky and warm and affectionate, taking the older building's themes and giving them a kind of life that they never before had."

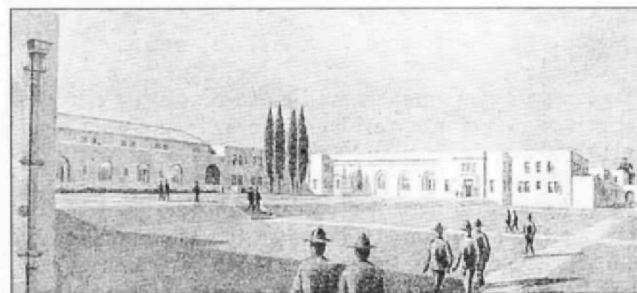
It is regrettable that, having attended so famously (and frugally) to the needs of the School of Architecture, Stirling and Wilford were not rewarded with a more substantial commission at Rice. Ampler American projects did however follow at Harvard (the Sackler addition to the Fogg Museum, 1979–85), Cornell (Performing Arts Center, 1982–88), and the University of California at Irvine (Science Library, 1988–93). But even now it should be possible for Rice to show a less stinting regard for the architects' intentions for the building itself, beginning with the double-height fenestration prescribed for the west



Top: James Stirling, Michael Wilford & Associates, additions and renovations to M. D. Anderson Hall, Rice University, 1979–81. West elevation. Above: Frank Lloyd Wright, Albert M. Johnson House, Death Valley, California (project), 1921. Partial elevation.

elevation of the Farish Gallery. The "shocking" colors that initially brightened the walls of the studio corridors could easily be reintroduced (as a surreptitious student initiative briefly succeeded in effecting several years ago) and the janitorially correct brown flooring that muddies the concourse and gallery be replaced with something more congenial from the architects' customary palette. The Smith Court, which Stirling envisioned as "a sheltered garden in an otherwise very open campus," still awaits a suitable complement of chairs and plantings. It might even be possible to fabricate and install the steel-and-glass canopy the architects had initially proposed to mark the building's ceremonial streetside entrance. James Stirling was not one to stand on ceremony, but it seems only proper that Rice should at last accord its own small fragment of his outsized genius a fuller measure of respect.

Drexel Turner



Left: Bertram G. Goodhue, U.S. Marine Corps Base, San Diego, California, 1918. Perspective rendering. Below: Stirling, Wilford & Associates, Brochstein Wing, M. D. Anderson Hall. North elevation.

