**Jim thinks**

“It seemed to me a must to begin with James Stirling. His figure invited an effort to connect the linguistic legacy of the avant-gardes - still alive at the start of the Sixties - to the penchant for complexity that came afterword. Though he is less discussed nowadays, it is obligatory to begin any study of the evolution of contemporary architecture with Stirling”.

When writing his book on *Theoretical Anxiety and Design Strategies*, coming out of a series of lectures held at Harvard University and published by MIT Press in 2004, practitioner and theorist Rafael Moneo felt compelled to position James Stirling as the most important character of the contemporary architectural field that included, among others, Venturi, Eisenman, Herzog & De Meuron and Rem Koolhaas.

To discuss James Stirling is certainly a difficult task, and to write about his architectural inspirations and process is even more challenging. On the one hand Jim, as colleagues and friends used to call him[[1]](#footnote-1), was an extremely reserved person preferring to express himself through drawing, and yet his awareness and control of his public *persona* as an architect cannot be understated. Self-consciously manipulating his output, he played his career as a gambler, a ‘Vitruvius Ludens’ as he was dubbed in a famous article by John Summerson in *The Architectural Review*, March 1983. Not only did he establish some of the canons of modern architecture, he ‘used’ the debates in architecture to generate interest, wherever appropriate, in the production of his own atelier. He always refused particular labels, though he certainly contributed greatly to shape the historiography of twentieth century architecture.

The first characteristic that stands out in any overview of Stirling’s entire works is a clear evolution of his language, which he established during his professional life. One must also, at the very beginning, give justice to the contribution of partners, as it would be intellectually dishonest to speak about Stirling alone. The partnerships can be divided, after an initial and extremely important formative period, into two branches: with James Gowan in the preliminary stages from 1956 to 1963 - after meeting him during a short apprenticeship at Lyons, Israel & Ellis - and subsequently with Michael Wilford, a practice that lasted until Stirling’s premature death in 1992, when he was only 68 years old.

Wilford was also a privileged witness to the early stages of the collaboration between Stirling and Gowan when, in 1960, whilst still an architectural student, he was employed at the youthful age of twenty-one as a studio assistant. He became a partner in 1971. Recalling that period only recently, he spoke about some of the tension he experienced:

“When I joined them, Stirling and Gowan’s office was established in Jim’s flat, a ground floor room in one of the Nash Terraces overlooking Regent’s Park. There were three full height windows in this room, looking out onto the Park. When I arrived in 1960, Stirling was in the right-hand window, Gowan was in the left-hand window and they placed me in the middle. Soon I realised that I was actually squeezed from both sides. I would sit there, trying to concentrate on what I was drawing, and then there would be verbal salvos that would go across the room from side to side, from Gowan and from Stirling: quite passionate criticisms on what the other was suggesting, which initially became incredibly intimidating and I was not sure why I agreed to work for this duo. Then, later, I realised that I was listening to two very strong architectural characters, expanding their ideas and their theories, through their remarks and criticisms of the other person.

Stirling was never interested in detail, was interested in concepts, development of ideas and materials, the way materials are put together; so he felt he needed some help to realise the Ham Common project and invited Gowan to join in a partnership. And that partnership was based, in very simplistic and general terms, on the basis of a designer and of a producer, in terms of realising a project. But Gowan had very strong ideas of his own, which generated this ‘dialogue’: it became clearer and clearer that these were irreconcilable, which is why the partnership split. To be in the middle of that, for that reason was a fantastic learning experience”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the credits of his complete works published in 1975 by Thames and Hudson in the United Kingdom and Gerd Hatje in Germany, Stirling fully acknowledges his collaborators. This first complete retrospective of the practice’s work, the famous ‘Black Book’ is precisely modelled on Corbu’s *Oeuvre Complète*: in the archival files at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) a photocopy of one of the *Complete Works* covers is interestingly juxtaposed with Stirling’s *Building and Projects 1950-1974* draft.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The introduction of the ‘Black Book’ was written by John Jacobus and, unsurprisingly, checked with extreme care by Stirling - and not only by him, there were also suggestions from others, such as Kenneth Frampton. In the colophon Jim states: “I would especially wish to credit James Gowan and Michael Wilford and the other architects who have made important contributions - they are referred to in the catalogue section.”[[4]](#footnote-4) He also recalls Léon Krier who re-drew many of the early projects for publication. However, behind this polite and public façade, lies more ‘undercover’ archival material that tells a deeper story.

In one of the several drafts of the ‘Black Book’ amended by Stirling, one page is almost entirely rejected with a large cross. The reason is more ambiguous than such a definite mark suggests: one is led to assume Stirling sees Gowan not only as a partner, but also as a challenger. In the text, Jacobus’s approach to the subject is respectably balanced, as an introduction to their collaborative efforts on the Leicester project rather than a judgement of authorship. After the ‘correction’ of this intermediate draft, Jim relegated the argument to the fact that Gowan was “his partner for seven years”. It is worth recording the majority of the deleted text on that occasion, since the creative input of the partnership has always raised controversy:

“Questions will of course always be asked concerning the respective role of the two in their work from Ham Common to Leicester, and in many respects it is likely that even the two principals themselves could not answer all the questions, even if they were prepared to talk. However, certain recurring concepts in their joint work, of which we can find an indication in Stirling’s independent schemes antedating the partnership, suggests that he rather than Gowan provided the major design incentive. (…) During much of the time, however, the most persuasive evidence for Stirling’s pre-eminence in the partnership has been the fact that his independent designs since 1964 are clear-cut evolutions of the joint work 1956-63, while Gowan since that date has tended to build a new identity for himself (…). Gowan’s independent work seems to stay closer to its sources, and seems more tentative and even nostalgic in comparison with Stirling whose continued ingenuity and imagination seems unflagging”. [[5]](#footnote-5)

To understand Stirling’s collaboration with Gowan, it is fundamental to clarify the evolution of the design ideas, with the two, at the beginning, developing an equal creative partnership in search of a working process. The joint effort was trialled through a series of academic exercises, in which their common interest in Le Corbusier and, just as strongly, in the Dutch legacy, is clearly identifiable.[[6]](#footnote-6) The ‘style’ that derived from such influences can also be glimpsed in their first built project, the flats at Ham Common, which are reminiscent of Le Corbusier’s Maisons Jaoul - but not only. Of these houses, in some notes of the late Fifties, Jim writes:[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Influences*

*Corb: material finishes and exploiting of textures, brick and concrete*

*De Stijl: articulation of plan organisation, certain elements*

*19th century: Functional architecture as warehouses - scale and texture of contrasts*

*And I hope some contributions of our own*

Gowan formalised the departure from the atelier in November 1963. The creative tension generated during the partnership with Stirling began to fade with the separation and Gowan’s architectural output was not as imaginative as it was when produced in collaboration. But we must acknowledge that, during the partnership, there is also an identifiable design strategy underpinned by a precise ‘visual code’ - for example in the projects for the house in the Chilterns (1956) or in the Dodd House (1957). This strategy is not evident before the collaboration between the two, when Jim designed alone: although two very interesting projects, the designs for Woolton House (1954) and the Mill House in North London (1955) are, in comparison, less sophisticated. Woolton House, indeed, is a reinterpretation of vernacular architecture and the Mill House has a less articulate façade than the House in the Chilterns. Gowan must be credited for this shift in the second half of the Fifties.

When asked whether they considered architecture to be an art or science, whether both or neither, Stirling and Gowan gave differently weighted answers in respect of the importance of ‘art’, which clarifies their difference of approach:Stirling’s ismore rounded and adaptable to each case than Gowan’s, who describes a strict sequential process:[[8]](#footnote-8)

Stirling: *As applied art, similar to furniture making or product designing (not styling) and therefore different from the ‘fine arts’ which have a greater freedom, arbitrariness and uselessness.*

*Architecture is essentially a method of organising (as long as your drawings communicate, if you have to do drawings, then you can be a lousy draughtsman and a good architect) and ability will result from knowledge, common sense and experience in addition to intuition*.

Gowan: *I regard architecture as, initially, a science and, finally, an art. The development of any design is through the programmatic and functional requirements to a point of technical comprehension where the problem is fully understood. Then one is free to respond with ideas.*

Stirling’s later partnership with Michael Wilford was certainly less confrontational. One might say the two architects, particularly at the beginning of the collaboration, had a combination of characters that complemented one another more effectively, each providing different qualities. They could be metaphorically allocated to the right and left parts of the brain, respectively predominantly rational and creative, combined to constitute a whole and convincing output.

The entirety of Stirling and Wilford’s archive is kept at the CCA in Montréal. Within this prestigious collection a number of Stirling’s personal photographs and documents are also housed, dating back to when he was a student at the Liverpool School of Architecture. He graduated from the University in 1950, where he had been supervised and mentored on his thesis by Colin Rowe, an important intellectual influence - and the beginning of a subsequent close friendship that was to be key to Stirling’s development, as will be apparent.

Jim’s acute observational skills were developed in his early years: he went bird watching in Wales in the Forties with his friend Gerald Kirby Robinson and kept a diary with detailed notes on the birds’ eggs and on the landscape. The diary is in the collection of Lady Mary Stirling who adds that “Jim was bad at everything at School, but good at Art. He had a fantastic sense of space and how to arrange things, such as in the ability tests”.[[9]](#footnote-9)

With this premise in mind, it is of value to step back in order to understand Jim’s influences and inspirations prior to the partnerships, which can be distilled from two principal sources: his biography, *Big Jim. The Life and Work of James Stirling*, published by Mark Girouard, and his own dark navy-blue notebook, in the collection of Lady Mary Stirling, recently transcribed by Mark Crinson.

The first is a traditional British biography, which interlaces Stirling’s architectural career and personal life, highlighting the many influential individuals he encountered. Since, ‘Jim was a very private person’ as Michael Wilford recalls in conversation, the personal memories that Girouard records play a significant role in understanding Stirling more thoroughly, as from in-depth exchanges with those who gravitated to him, and who formed his intimate circle.

The notebook is the second insightful source, which should not be confused with the cited ‘Black Book’, the publication of his complete works. It is a H.J. Ryman account notebook dedicated by Jim to his thoughts and inspirations in architecture written in the Fifties, most probably between 1953 and 1956; this first hand diary contains reviews and reflections on modern architectures, examination of texts, lecture notes (also on loose sheets), poignantly intertwined with Stirling’s own interpretations via sketches, imagery and thorough notes. As Mark Crinson summarises in his commentary to the transcription, the notebook reveals four main areas of interest: 1) The state of architecture in Britain, Europe and America; 2) Reflections on Modernism; 3) Analysis of his favourite buildings in Liverpool and their architects; 4) Le Corbusier’s Architectures.

The purpose for Stirling of rigorously recording such information was not only in order to reinforce his acute architectural understanding, but also to provide crucial reflections and instigate the definition of his ambitions. It seems Jim particularly looked to dissect the genesis of early twentieth century architecture in order to understand and effectively position himself in the trajectory of Modernism. In one page of his notebook he summarises his perception of Modernism, with a precise tag, that he calls programmatic: “obviously programmatic architecture is the greatest category (i.e. Renaissance), thus are almost entirely the production of FLW, Corb and Mies”. Accompanying the statement is a systematic list of buildings by the three Masters: 13 for Wright (10 built), 10 for Mies (5 built) and 20 for Le Corbusier (8 built). “From the above buildings”, he concludes, “almost the entire vocabulary of modern architecture has descended”.[[10]](#footnote-10)

However, Jim’s list of second generation Modern Architects (Terragni, Asplund, Moretti, Aalto and Duiker) did not contribute to the list of programmatic buildings. In his view: “it will probably be left to the third generation to continue (we hope) programmatic development”.

Emphasis should also be placed on the fact that Jim positioned Renaissance and Modern Architecture on the same level. Another statement that clarifies how, from the very beginning and not only later in his career, he was interested in architecture as a whole.

The evolution of Modernism is also represented in a very thought-provoking synoptic chart. According to this ‘map’, following a crisis in the Twenties, the separation between architecture and technology materialised after the Second World War, in 1948. The paradigmatic buildings that, for him, represent this distinction are the Unité d’Habitation in Marseille, identified as the *Academic Architecure ‘Art’*, and Skidmore, Owen and Merrill’s Lever House in New York which, according to his reasoning, is *Technological Architecture ‘Non Art’*.

On the *Art* side are Le Corbusier, Moretti, Breuer and Frank Lloyd Wright; on the *‘Non Art’* side are American and Italian factories and Buckminster Fuller.

Beyond this strong and clear statement, another important architectural basis for Stirling’s designs is revealed in his criticism of Le Corbusier’s Modulor: in his view, the eye cannot perceive the over-complexity of the Modulor*.* This position adds a dimension to his opinion not only of the Swiss-French architect’s theoretical speculations, but also to Jim’s view on architecture:

*The Modulor is concerned with a series of dimensions. Dimension alone is meaningless in architecture. Only visual and comprehensible proportion is valid. A proportion is composed of at least two dimensions (height to breadth).*

This aspect is, again, sign of Stirling’s personal way of interpreting architecture from the historical past to more recent Modernism, which clearly differentiates him from most of his contemporaries: he had the ability to dissect what he felt relevant, without duplication or direct imitation, but through a process of reinvention, interpretation and extension of his references.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Another central element to consider in the development of the young architect is the very early engagement with the world of art and artists, in an exchange that seems to have been mutual. Jim enjoyed a long standing friendship with Eduardo Paolozzi and he was also a member of the Independent Group who met at the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London from 1952 to 1955. The group consisted of all spectrums of the arts - musicians, architects and writers as well as artists: the Smithsons, Nigel Henderson and Reyner Banham were regular attendees. The Banham household infact, was often a base for many of the regular meetings held on Sundays that led to exhibitions such as the *Parallel of* *Life and Art* (1952) and *This is Tomorrow* (1956); Jim participated in the latter with a group of three - with Michael Pine and Richard Matthews - presenting a paper mache sculpture in the exhibition. In the archival collection at the CCA it is possible to trace elements of these contacts during the period of experiment that follows Jim’s university years and his enrolment in the School of Town Planning and Research in 1950-52 in London.

In the mid Fifties Jim produced a distinctive collage, which was a combination of black and white stripes and colourful rectangles glued to a spread of the *Evening Standard* of Monday 21st March 1955. As is clearly visible in such works, interdisciplinary interest in the artistic realm always played an important role for Jim. In the notebook he clarifies the impact and the relationship between painting and architectural thinking:[[12]](#footnote-12)

*There are two types of painting - that which hangs on walls, to be looked at and perennially enjoyed by sensitive observers, (most likely not fellow artists) and that which presents images and symbols for the use of constructors (i.e. architects, typographers, designers, etc.) and other visual artists. These two styles have emerged since Cubism and in the first category are all De Stijl, Mondrian, Doesburg, Constructivists (Malevitch, Pevsner), Paolozzi (?), Action Painters (purist?). In the latter category are the later Picasso and Braque, all Klee, Surrealism, Bacon, Marini etc.*

The Fifties were key years for young Jim’s evolution, particularly stimulated by his intellectual curiosity. It is also clear that Jim still remained extremely close to his roots. In the notes for a lecture on the back of a postcard, circa 1958, he plans to begin with an introduction on Liverpool, as he frequently did on other public occasions, including the ceremony when he received the RIBA Royal Gold Medal for Architecture in 1980[[13]](#footnote-13), thereby showing a continuing respect for his personal history and acknowledging its influence.[[14]](#footnote-14)

*Liverpool*

*- Father – ships Eng.*

*- Play around docks*

*- School of Architecture*

*New York 80s - Joyce’s Dublin*

*Major Port to New World*

*Most American city in England*

*Warehouses – development*

*- style à la Liberté*

*Glass Buildings - Oriel*

*Ellis/Paxton Inventor*

*Sullivan visit 1864 on way to Beaux Arts*

This synthesis, better than any other, demonstrates the importance of the Northern city during his formative period and suggests that Liverpool provided a continuing creative inspiration with its characteristic naval imagery, as Charles Jencks later noted. In an interview with him, Jim says:[[15]](#footnote-15)

*I’ve told you the story of where I was conceived? My mother, who was Scots/Irish and a very reserved lady, in a most uncharacteristic moment, said that I was conceived in New York on my father’s ship. So I’ve always thought I could start an autobiography – ‘I was conceived in a bunk on board a ship lying in New York harbour in the roaring Twenties’ - but then I couldn’t keep that pace going, so I’ll never write it. I saw a lot of ships when I was young. We moved to Liverpool and I was always in contact with the docks which were very busy. My visual background is one of the Mersey and docklands.*

Liverpool, home of the cobbled docks and brick warehouses, was also the city of pioneering buildings by Peter Ellis. Ellis’s 1864 design for Oriel Chambers is one of the first independent curtain wall façades. Jim not only noted this, but carefully photographed the building, first in the Fifties and again later. He was fascinated and intrigued to discover more from his surroundings, also recording the ‘machinery’ and red granite and sandstone piers on the shores of the river Mersey. But his fascination was not confined to the still shots of the photographs he captured: he later translated and embedded many of these elements as details in the designs of the practice.

Jim’s father, a marine engineer who worked for the Blue Funnel Company, had an understated yet extremely important influence on him, especially at a young age. Indeed, Jim was surrounded by naval spare parts catalogues, with their exploded axonometrics and technical manuals, such as Ritchie Leask’s 1922 *Marine Engines.*[[16]](#footnote-16) The striking visuals of bolts, mechanical sections and their hatched representation as well as his father’s own drawings, must have had an eye-opening impression on a creative young boy. In Girouard’s biography, Jim himself recalls his impression of his father’s work “being fascinated at the age of four or five by the beautiful drawings he did of engine and turbine parts, and so on, coloured blue and pink”.[[17]](#footnote-17) And, even if not directly recalled by Jim, Meccano, the engineering toy with perforated metal parts which could be joined together with small nuts and bolts, could have been another great source of inspiration: its factory, created by Frank Hornby, was established in Liverpool since 1908 and was at its height of popularity in the Thirties.

At a later stage the Liverpool School of Architecture played the most crucial role in his intellectual development. During the war it hosted the Polish School of Architecture, which contributed to an early dissemination of modernism in Liverpool, as recorded in *The Polish School of Architecture 1942-45*, published by the University of Liverpool in 1945, of which Jim owned a copy. He enrolled after the Poles had left the School, in 1946, when Liverpool was not dissimilar from the institution that Charles Reilly had established as the leading architectural school in the British Empire. In the years when he led the School, from 1904 to 1933, Reilly had modelled its curriculum and also initiated strong ties with American practices,[[18]](#footnote-18) opening the door for students to gain experience in the USA, as Jim himself did in the summer of 1948.

As mentioned earlier, at Liverpool Stirling met his mentor Colin Rowe. It was a relationship with a shared understanding from the beginning, since both had participated in the war, an experience which certainly moulded the two characters. Jim fought in the Normandy landings and Lady Mary Stirling summarises the subsequent emotional shock unequivocally: “the impact of war on Jim’s personality was tremendous”.

This shock is recorded in some correspondance held in the CCA archive, in response to some letters sent by Jim. The first is a letter dated 16th June 1944 and sent from Peter Hargreaves, officer of the Senior Training Corps of the Liverpool University Contingent, who praises Jim’s letter: “I must congratulate you on your letter which I think is the best I have received from any Cadet, and I have received a good number, as you put your story together so well that it reads exactly like a War Diary. You certainly seem to have been in a hot spot and I sometimes wonder whether the pictures in the newspaper are being painted too rosily”.

The second, some years later, was by professor Lionel Budden on 1st February 1951: “Dear Stirling (…) thank you for your letter of 31st January and for the statement enclosed with it, declaring that you ‘have no intention of taking part in any future war, nor service related to war’. (…) I am retaining the statement in accordance with your wish”.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The friendship between Rowe and Stirling was one of a lifetime. Colin Rowe also wrote the very informative and rich introduction to *James Stirling: Buildings and Projects*, edited by Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford, published in 1984. Not only did they engage at an architectural level, but they also travelled together. Even if we do not have any detailed record of these architectural tours, his experience must have been as vivid as the one recorded by Peter Eisenman on his trips with Rowe.[[20]](#footnote-20) In terms of Jim’s career Rowe’s influence cannot be underestimated and can be seen, perhaps, as the real intellectual partnership in the decisive years of Stirling’s formation. His impact on Stirling’s thinking must have been dramatic, as already suggested by Antony Vidler. Jim’s schoolmate Robert ‘Bob’ Maxwell, in particular, tells us that “with Rowe, Stirling learned how to look”.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Rowe had completed his MA with Rudolf Wittkower in London at the Warburg Institute, in 1947,[[22]](#footnote-22) which is relevant when we seek to discover the nature of Rowe’s influence on Stirling. We can discern a conjunction of interests, for example, stemming from Rowe, who would have informed his aspiring student of the exhibition *British Art and the Mediterranean*, which travelled in Britain between 1942 and 1944. The visual anthology of that exhibition, published in 1948 by Fritz Saxl and Rowe’s MA supervisor Rudolf Wittkower, was an *in-folio* limited edition book and remains on the shelves of the Liverpool University Library to this day.

Jim considered this catalogue the most important book, alongside those by Le Corbusier, as he states in a 1948 letter, where seven books are listed. He writes that the list contains “books which influenced me most when I was a student at architecture school. All of the following were of equal importance to me - but if I had to give an order of priority they might be as follows”:[[23]](#footnote-23)

*Saxl and Wittkower’s* British Art and the Mediterranean *(1948)*

*Le Corbusier’s* Towards a New Architecture *(1927)*

*A.E. Richardson’s* Monumental Classic Architecture in Britain and Ireland *(1914)*

*Sartoris’s* Architecture Nouvelle

*Volumes 1 and 2 of Corbusier’s* Oeuvre Complète

Gunnar Asplund Arkitekt *(Stockholm, 1943)*

*Roth’s* New Architecture

Even if this is not the place to comment in detail about the selected books, one should acknowledge that, even at a first glance, these volumes have an extremenly varied nature, with subjects divided between traditional, classical and avant-garde architecture. Furthermore, they must be considered the bulk of Jim’s personal architectural library, which will reach nearly 2,000 books at its apex, including twelve of the Prussian (and Neoclassical) architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Rowe will later speak about Stirling as an ‘architectural connoisseur’, subtly and rightly implying that this knowledge was instilled by him as a teacher. Rowe once claimed that Stirling understood every aspect of London’s St. Pauls; and, indeed, one of the chapters of the cited anthology of Saxl and Wittkower is entitled *St. Paul’s Cathedral: the variety of the sources* and devoted to the subject, explaining the provenance of all the ‘parts’.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In 1953 Rowe wrote a review of Talbot Hamlin’s *Forms and Functions of Twentieth Century Architecture*, which provides another insight into the perceptive thoughts he was sharing with the young Jim only three years earlier. It is well-known that usually Rowe’s writing is difficult to grasp due to its sophistication, but on this occasion he is straightforward:

“The idea of composition as it was understood around 1900 was a concentric one, implying generally a grouping of elements about a central space or void and a downward transmission of weights according to a gravitational scheme. Against these principles De Stijl advanced what was called ‘peripheric’ composition, developed not toward a central focus, but toward the extremities of the canvas or wall plane, and involving, in a building, not a gravitational but a levitational scheme. The influence of this formal experiment upon modern architecture has often been denied, but it cannot be overlooked that every historically important architect of the 1920’s was affected by it; and all the major monuments of the time, from Les Terrasses at Garches to the Bauhaus and the Barcelona Pavilion, embody in some degree the results of this discovery”.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Stirling paid as much attention to the representation of buildings as to buildings themselves: “a drawing has to be designed”, he wrote in the catalogue of his own exhibition organised by the Royal Institute of British Architects at the Heinz Gallery in London.[[27]](#footnote-27) There are several kinds of axonometrics that he and the office developed during his career: the precedents are partly to be found in the maritime parts books and partly in the complex war machinery representations to which his generation had been heavily exposed, as recalled by Reyner Banham in the same RIBA catalogue, speaking about “the mathematical elegance of some kind of abstract art”.

The drawing-types could be basically summarised in two kinds. The most common are axonometric projections from above, bird’s eye views, which appear very early, from the Fifties, and continue to be applied on many occasions - for the Churchill College Competition, the Cambridge History Faculty and later projects.

The most charateristic Stirling drawing-type, however, is perhaps the axonometric from below - the worm’s eye view, reminiscent of Choisy’s representations in his famous *Histoire de l’Architecture* (1899), which Stirling probably knew through Le Corbusier’s publications. Here, as in the case of the the Florey building, the image derives much of its power from the sequential elimination of information: “What is left on the image is the minimum required to convey the maximum information with the greatest clarity - related to how we ‘understand’ the building as distinct from the way it might in reality look”, as he described it.

Frequently these two representational systems - from above and from below - are used for the same project, supplemented by other drawings which are crafted for the client’s needs and understanding.

I have mentioned the complexity of Jim’s inspiration, neglecting, at first glance, the process. In reality the process was predominantly linear and the fruit of teamwork, where he acted as a creator and mediator according to the occasion. As Wilford recalls in conversation:

“The process was established very early on, and in a way was followed through all the various stages of the office development. But I think the propositions, the ideas that developed from that process, were in a stage of evolution, there were influences coming in from various sources. The important thing is that we are speaking of an exploration, with no preconceived ideas, it was just allowing by drawing, by tracing on A4 pages, because I believe, and Jim believed, that it was important in that initial stage of developing an idea that the image you make, the image you draw, is as small as possible, that it contains only the essential characteristic of the idea of the building”.

What is important to understand, at the same time, is the formation of the early knowledge and its progression during his career, with the partners and their backgrounds. Jim’s architectural knowledge starts with the natural observations made in company with Gerald Kirby Robinson, takes shape with Rowe, is challenged by Gowan and finds consistency through Wilford.

The best way to appreciate the final refinement of this approach is the use of Aby Warburg’s simplified methodology, applied by Fritz and Saxl in the cited catalogue on *British Art and the Mediterranean*, Jim’s favourite book. Although Warburg’s understanding of the evolution of forms in cultural terms is very complex, it is summarised in his system of photographs mounted on cardboard panels.[[28]](#footnote-28) Stirling made his own interpretation of the historical continuum, by being selective towards sources, visually and/or pragmatically: any architectural event has an impact and then is recorded by memory; it leaves a trace if it is worthy.

In this sense, the selective memory of Jim, from his youngest years, evolved in constant dialogue with that of his work partner. This process will be later exemplified through his own ideal connections of the past with the present - and the future: all of architectural history, distilled by the eye and the mind of the architect, can form the basis for inspiration. This kind of relationship between architectural objects often distant in time and space, indeed, is presented in his paper at the Iranian Congress for Architecture in September 1974 and subsequently published in three different journals in 1975 - *A+U* (no. 2), *Casabella* (no. 399), and *The Architectural Review* (no. 939). Here Jim explains how he sees his contribution to history, as perceptive continuity devoid of any predetermined sequence. And it is precisely this aspect of the selection of images, which make an impression on the retina and are retained in the architect’s memory, the device that we can similarly identify in his axonometrics: timeless images that are fashioned and fixed in the world of ideas as much as they form the material presence of a building.

1. In this text we will often refer to ‘Jim’ to emphasise the significance of his personal history for his formation as architect. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Conversation with Michael Wilford, Liverpool, April 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. CCA, James Stirling/Michael Wilford fonds, AP140.S2.SS4.D1.P2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *James Stirling: Buildings and Projects 1950-74*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1975, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. CCA, James Stirling/Michael Wilford fonds, AP140.S2.SS4.D1.P2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ellis Woodman, *Modernity and Reinvention: The Architecture of James Gowan*, London: Black Dog, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *James Stirling: Early Unpublished Writings on Architecture*, edited by Mark Crinson, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Eight questions to James Stirling and James Gowan’, *Polygon*, vol. 5, 1960, pp. 10-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Conversation with Lady Mary Stirling, London, October 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *James Stirling: Early Unpublished Writings on Architecture*, cit.; for this and following citations see pp. 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Marco Iuliano, ‘Double Stirling’, *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2015, pp. 160-164. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *James Stirling: Early Unpublished Writings on Architecture*, cit., p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Address given at the 1980’s ceremony in *James Stirling: Writings on Architecture*, edited by Robert Maxwell, Milan: Skira, 1998, pp. 133-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lecture notes published by Anthony Vidler, *James Frazer Stirling: Notes from the Archive*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010, p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. CCA, James Stirling/Michael Wilford fonds, AP140.S2.SS10.D2.P15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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