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## James Stirling: Victorian Architect

A short talk given to introduce the RIBA's Less is More evening, held at the Institute on Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> March 2017

<https://www.architecture.com/WhatsOn/Assets/Files/LessismoreProgramme2.pdf>

It may seem surprising for someone from the Twentieth Century Society to be talking about James Stirling as a Victorian, and even more so given that the Society fought hard to protect this building on exactly that principle. So why is No 1 Poultry a 'Victorian building'? Are there ways in which we can identify in it messages from the nineteenth century which are important for us to recognise and preserve today?

When Stirling came here to accept his RIBA Gold Medal in 1980, he provided a long stream of historic buildings of different sorts that he liked, and mentioned that as a student he liked what he called the 'stiff' art nouveau of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Josef Hoffman. He said he was intrigued by the English baroque of Archer, Hawksmoor and Vanbrugh, and then he spoke about French chateaux and English castles. It's worth mentioning this, because it is an aspect of the architectural design process is often forgotten. Victorian architects, who had for the first time an encyclopaedic knowledge of their historical forebears, often laid out in front of them historic buildings they admired as they started to approach a design problem. Even Philip Webb and Edwin Lutyens, evidently extremely original designers, lined up historical models in front of themselves before they started work so as to draw from them a sense of the mood they wanted to develop. That in itself an important point that is weirdly lost in modern architectural education. Twentieth-century architecture need not be seen as an isolated fashion 'event' – it is very often about much older and consistent messages which have somehow got lost.

Then after this list Stirling mentioned 'striped brick' Victorian architects including William Butterfield. I'm very struck by the fact that people who like Butterfield's work also like Stirling's. There's now a lot of interest in the work of the more distinct Victorian architects and I don't think that's a coincidence.

What Butterfield was up to was defining the outline of his buildings very sharply and clearly so that you could almost – *almost* – understand it, so that you could start to hear what it was saying to you. The building is talking back to you, whoever you are, so long as you are listening – it's not just a 'thing' that you can take or leave. It's not, in other words, a shell – as most of the new buildings near No 1 Poultry are shells. This approach originates in Victorian realism – that is, you design a building that is very expressive about what it was doing, what it was for and how it was built; you can dig holes out of it to express depth.

The colour is built in and you can't change it without destroying the whole thing. Some of Stirling's motifs are comprehensible, but you some simply makes you wonder, and look for more. There's an obvious connection between this Victorian idea and British postmodernism that seems to have got lost. Most of the really striking British postmodernist

buildings were drawing out elements of the surrounding area and putting them together in a way that made you appreciate them, even if you cannot quite identify them. Architects in the 1980s were using historical elements as a way of making the purpose of your building more obvious: not just what's going on inside it, but what it intends to do to the street. That's clearly what Terry Farrell was doing at Clifton Nurseries, the first great iconic building of British postmodernism, when he drew from the porticos of, for example, the Royal Opera House around the corner. But for a more Victorian attitude, look at what Richard Reid was doing at Epping Forest Civic Centre when he was echoing the Victorian and Edwardian water and church towers nearby.

Stirling did that in his Berlin Wissenschaftszentrum in the most blatant way possible. There we had a church, a castle, a Greek theatre and a kind of hexagonal-plan campanile. It's a building that makes the point that British postmodernism, whilst it was international in its references, was not a form of classical revival: it was referring to a range of familiar building histories in different ways. The big mistake of the people who write about postmodernism was to think that the British were merely echoing what the Americans were doing, which was, I think, a kind of a high art movement that played about with neo-classical scenery. All the recent evidence from first-hand evidence from the architects themselves shows that British architects were drawing their buildings from a very close observation of the architecture around a site.

Stirling's architecture was about scenery, all right, but like all good gothic revival architecture it was about coloured, three-dimensional scenery. The only useful thing that Pugin ever said about his work was when he referred to the value of his experience as a stage carpenter at the Covent Garden theatre. Gothic revival architecture was also about standing out and making a point about the values of architecture before anyone got near, in the way that a cathedral does. It has a kind of bell tower which signifies it from a distance, with an arrangement like a flagpole. Stirling couldn't draw his eastern tower upwards, because the height of the building had been such a central issue in the campaign against the Mies project for the site, so he highlighted it instead by cutting it away from the elevation behind it. His building also has a whole parade of motifs instead of a grid of them; like a church, they are arranged sequentially and longitudinally, rather than in a formal grid. Compare it with, for example, Butterfield's chapel for Balliol College, Oxford. Some of these motifs, like the arcades, are recognisable as elements from the buildings round about, but some – triangles, circles – are not.

The late Victorian architect and writer W.R. Lethaby thought that if you drew on ancient forms, a building that was very complex iconographically would be understandable to anyone who knew the myths of the culture they grew up in. In the case of No 1 Poultry, the ancient iconography is if anything Egyptian, Babylonian. Some Victorian architects, including Butterfield, seem to have seen church architecture, at least, as a place to fight a kind of battle in which the architect's own ideas were supposed to tower over lesser ones. Height is enormously important to the Victorian architect, and so is a kind of painful truth: that the facts that a building reveals are not supposed to be easy and that you need to work out what they mean, to go back into history and iconography and to work out what they mean. I'm very struck by the fact that Victorian architects in general, and Butterfield in particular,

took very strong positions about things which don't sound rational at all and which they were not always very anxious to explain.

It's been said that No 1 Poultry is an unedited building, in the sense that Stirling wasn't alive to edit it down to a final and calmer scheme. But that has revealed its rawness to us. If you want to hear about Victorian architecture, you should listen to what his friend Mark Girouard had to say about him. When Stirling came to collect his medal, Girouard told us that he saw in Stirling's buildings shapeliness, delicacy and gaiety – characteristics which are, as he said, as far away from brutalism as possible, and precisely the same ones that he saw in the best Victorian work. So the first way to look at Stirling is as a Victorian architect who became more and more Victorian as time went by. Even after death. And a building that celebrates death is an extremely Victorian thing.