The New Criterion

Architecture June 1989

A Stirling performance at Cornell

by Roger Kimball

On James Stirling's performing arts center at Cornell University.

While one can come up with the names of a few architects who are better known to the general public, it is difficult indeed to think of one who has enjoyed the blessings of critical opinion more uninterruptedly than the sixty-three-year-old British architect James Stirling. "The very best architect of his generation," the critic Charles Jencks wrote in 1973, well before Stirling had embarked on what have come to be regarded as his signature buildings. Ada Louise Huxtable, the former architecture critic for The New York Times, went even further, describing Stirling as "one of the great architectural talents of the 20th century." And while there have been scattered dissenting voices—especially in England—they have only added to Stirling's reputation, much as attracting the right enemies often adds more luster to one's name than all the well-meaning exertions of one's friends. The predictable harvest of such continuous attention has been not only numerous commissions but also honors aplenty, including the Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, which Stirling was awarded in 1980, and the much-coveted Pritzker Prize, which he won in 1981. In the last few years, at least since his Neue Stattsgalerie in Stuttgart was completed in 1983, Stirling has basked in a reputation so impeccable that it seems almost posthumous. The opening of his new performing arts center at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, reminds us that James Stirling is still very much with us, however, and provides an apt occasion to pause for another look at his work. he son of a marine engineer, Stirling was born in Glasgow and raised in Liverpool, where he went to architecture school after serving briefly in the Second World War. Though for several years his commissions were few and far between, by the late Fifties he had emerged as an articulate and energetic crusader for a species of imported hi-tech modernism. Projects like his Ham Common Flats in Surrey (completed in 1958) and his Engineering Building at the University of Leicester (1963), undertaken with his then-partner James Cowan, effectively established Stirling's critical reputation; his notorious History Building at Cambridge University (1968) and Queen's College at Oxford (1971), both of which he designed after splitting from Cowan, helped to consolidate it.

Stirling's early buildings possess a brash, often aggressive quality that one critic—searching, one gathers, for an adjective to express both admiration and alarm-described as "bloody-minded." (The massive maintenance problems that plague many of Stirling's buildings from the Sixties have perhaps led some of his English clients to settle simply for "bloody.") Bristling with severe angles, piling up volumes in unexpected fashion, making ingenious use of industrial materials and finishes, they are highly self-conscious progeny of Corbusier's *beton brut* architecture, as, for example, in his Maisons Jaoul and Unité d'Habitation. Accordingly, the influential critic Colin Rowe, Stirling's longtime friend and early champion, has dubbed Stirling's 1960s Brutalist style architecture "Anglo-Corbu."

Stirling's early buildings possess a brash, often aggressive quality.

Since 1971, Stirling has worked in partnership with Michael Wilford, and it is with Wilford, twelve years his junior, that he has negotiated the transformation from talented practitioner to international superstar. Though the idiosyncrasies of Stirling's architecture have always made conventional labels difficult, it may also be said that it is with Michael Wilford that he has managed the transformation from eccentric modernist to confirmed postmodernist. The buildings that have been most commented on and celebrated in the United States—notably the Sackler Museum addition to the Fogg Museum at Harvard University (1984), the Clore Gallery at the Tate Museum in London (1984), and the Neue Stattsgaierie in Stuttgart—are prime examples of the new, more fanciful Stirling: highly inventive, but also, at least for this observer, highly problematic.

There are, first of all, the garish colors: the abundant use of Pepto-Bismol pink and bright, acid greens—what, after its use in many of his recent buildings, might now be baptized "Stirling green." Then there are the coy historical references, so prominent a part of the postmodernist's building kit, that Stirling and his associates sprinkle gratuitously and cleverly throughout their buildings: a quotation from Corbusier here, an mock Italianate feature there, all neatly juxtaposed within—or on top of—a slickly engineered modernist frame. Above all there is Stirling's play with a building's volumes, his highly original but often arbitrary arrangement of shapes, facades, entrances, windows, and so on.

In some ways this knowing free play is the greatest source of Stirling's appeal. It is perhaps what Ada Louise Huxtable pointed to when, in her panegyric to the Sackler Museum, she concluded that "this is not easy architecture. And it is not innocent architecture. It is knowledgeable, worldly, elitist, difficult, and even quirky architecture. The emphasis is on myth and monumentality rather than the old partnership of form and function." But by shifting his attention away from that "old partnership" of form and function—if that is in fact what he is doing in his recent buildings—Stirling also threatens to render his architecture rootless and merely idiosyncratic. The "quirky" quality that Mrs. Huxtable admires can quickly pall when it is pursued for its own sake, as it often is in Stirling's buildings. It tends to result in an architecture that, for all its originality, seems insubstantial and, finally, somewhat frivolous. One suspects that this is part of what Colin

Rowe meant when, in the midst of sly praise, he made the "not entirely minor qualification" that Stirling's widely admired Stuttgart museum was "a building with no face."[1]

It cannot be said that Stirling and his colleagues (including architects from the New York firm of Wank, Adams, Slavin Associates, with whom they worked on the project), have departed in any significant way from this commitment to cleverness in their new building for Cornell. Although Stirling's office began working on designs for the project in 1982, the building did not open officially until this April, when the finishing touches were completed and Cornell inaugurated the center with a celebration for the many alumni and other donors who paid for it all.

According to university officials, the entire cost of constructing and furnishing the building—approximately twenty-five million dollars—was contributed by "friends" of the project. This generosity is doubly memorialized at the performing arts center. First, the donors are prominently listed in orange and white raised lettering high on a wall of the entrance corridor. The architects apparently took considerable pains to get the design of this honor roll just right, which is no doubt why they choose to call it a "frieze" instead of, well, instead of merely a list. Then there are the scores upon scores of tags affixed to walls, railings, seats, etc., declaring, for instance, that one is standing in the Herbert Gussman and Roseline Nadel Gussman Lobby or has just stepped out onto the Benton M. Kaneb Loggia. This concession to vanity has been commonplace in certain museums for quite a while now; it seems a bit excessive to find it so much in evidence in what is, after all, a college building.

In some ways this knowing free play is the greatest source of Stirling's appeal.

The performing arts center is situated just outside the main campus of Cornell in Collegetown, a quickly gentrifying community that services the university and provides housing for thousands of Cornell students. (Most undergraduates live off-campus after their freshman year.) Occupying a narrow strip of land along College Avenue, the center stands in front of the university's oldest building, Cascadilia Hall, and directly adjacent to Cascadilia Gorge, the breathtaking one-hundred-forty-foot-deep fissure that marks this edge of the Cornell campus. Though the building runs along the main drag of College Avenue, its primary entrance faces the gorge. Consequently, the only clear approach to the center runs effectively toward the building's side, which the architects have done their best to dress up. While less prominent parts of the building are clad in stucco, the College Avenue face is bedecked with rough-cut Vermont marble. These thin, grey-white marble panes are affixed to their concrete supports with stainless-steel clips instead of grout and mortar, using the same open-joint system the architects used in cladding the Neue Stattsgalerie. Also enlivening this side of the building is a small, free-standing, marble-clad octagonal pavilion with porthole windows perched atop rounded arches. The pavilion is intended to be used primarily as an information center and bus stop, though it also houses a small suite of offices for travelling

theater groups on its second story.

In Ithaca, the initial reaction to the Stirling design was mixed, ranging from jubilant to hostile. By the time the building opened, critical voices seemed to have quieted down to a murmur, though it is difficult to say whether this was the result of resignation or a change of heart. In any event, it is difficult to describe the style of the performing arts center, primarily because, like so many of Stirling's buildings, it does not *possess* a style so much as it parodies several. Still, it is clear enough that the architecture of Renaissance Siena and Florence were much on Stirling's mind when he set about designing this building. Though structurally it is a perfectly ordinary steel-frame building with concrete decks, the architects have been careful to imbue the building with all manner of Italianate hints and reminiscences. Thus we have a partly enclosed "loggia" running along the side of the building facing the gorge, a simple "pergola" of redwood resting on marble-clad concrete columns rising fifteen feet or so above a "plaza" (which a more pedestrian taste might describe as a simple open space). There is also the neatly designed pitched roof jutting out toward College Avenue, which is surmounted by a slender tower—or "campanile," if you prefer—replete with rounded open arches. Together they are presumably meant to remind us, stationed here, far above Cayuga's waters, of life in an Italian village.

Indeed, in a presentation to the donors on opening night, Stirling noted that he had been sitting in a cafe across the street from the center one day and chanced to witness a prospective student regard the building for a moment and then tell his family that it was apparently "some sort of Florentine ripoff"—"which I took to be some sort of compliment," Stirling modestly told us. Not that all the building's details are pseudo-Italianate. Some are out-and-out postmodernist pastiche. Set into the marble face of its College Avenue side, for example, is a half-moon of stucco that caps a triangular "bow" window that juts out from the center's main dance studio over the plaza. And one can hardly fail to mention the debut of a new green in this building—new to Stirling's palette, anyway—which is applied generously to metal supports: somewhat darker (though perhaps not any more appetizing) than the green used in the Clore Gallery, the Sackler Museum, or the Neue Stattsgalerie, it has been dubbed "Cayuga green" by the architects, in honor of Ithaca's famous Finger Lake.

The interior of the center is bisected by a large multi-story foyer that opens out onto the loggia. Off either side of the foyer are classrooms, studios, theaters, rehearsal spaces, offices, and workshops. Altogether the center contains ten auditoriums and studios for dance and theater. Unfortunately, as soon as one goes beyond the loggia into the guts of the building, the impression of unencumbered order dissolves and one is confronted with a labyrinthine warren of doors and hallways. The internal confusion of the building is lamentable but was probably unavoidable given Cornell's specifications and the modest size of the site: the footprint of the building is only about one hundred thousand square feet. Several studios are literally piled on top of one another; at the same time, the need for sound and light insulation meant that all the entrances to studios, theaters, and rehearsal spaces required double doors.

> The interior of the center is bisected by a large multi-story foyer that opens out onto the loggia.

The chief attraction—and the main public space of the center—is a 5,500 square-foot horseshoe proscenium theater that seats about four hundred fifty people. The architects clearly lavished considerable care on the design and appointment of the theater, which, despite a certain preciousness—especially in the use of purple, green, and pastel pinks—is undoubtedly the most impressive space in the building. The brass railings and oak veneer paneling are handsome and illustrate how well Stirling can adapt off-the-shelf materials and fixtures; elegant supporting columns, swelling slightly at the top, recall the mushroom columns in the Neue Stattsgalerie and their ultimate precursor, the columns Frank Lloyd Wright designed for the Johnson Wax Building. The theater is comfortable, intimate without being close, its lighting is subtle, its acoustics good. Overall, it shows Stirling at his best and least pretentious.

Cornell has provided an elaborate rationale for almost everything having to do with its new performing arts center. Its siting in Collegetown was an effort to improve town-gown relations and "upgrade" the neighborhood; its decision to accommodate only the film, theater arts, and dance departments in the building, leaving the other arts to fend for themselves elsewhere on campus, was a result of space and budget constraints; its selection of Stirling as the building's architect was . . . actually, that was one thing that was never adequately explained. It that was stressed again and again, however, that the center was meant neither to train aspiring actors or dancers nor to serve as a venue for "trial runs" of performances, but rather to offer undergraduates a taste of the worlds and disciplines of theater and dance. Bruce Levitt, the chairman of the theater arts department, even spoke of an effort to "unite the academic with the aesthetic." Since only about eight hundred students out of an undergraduate population of about 12,500 currently take classes at the center, this effort at unification would seem to have some distance to go.

Yet perhaps the announcement that the center would play host to a "multi-cultural celebration" for ten days next fall gave one a deeper insight into the sort of "teaching activities" Cornell envisions for its new center. Asked about the nature of this forthcoming celebration, Mr. Levitt explained that it was to be a celebration of American "differences" and "diversity" predicated on the charming thought that the image of America as a "melting pot" is all wrong and should be replaced by the image of a "gumbo": a kind of stew, you understand, in which things are not assimilated but maintain their "differences." A schedule of events was not yet available for this sideshow, but one can hazard that it will include much talk of racism, sexism, ethnicity, and other such topics central to the teaching of the dance and theater.

The multi-cultural celebration notwithstanding, though, the real question remains: What, beyond some postmodernist window-dressing and the prestige of having commissioned a building by James Stirling, did Cornell think it was getting with its new performing arts center? Why spend twenty-five million dollars on what is supposed to be a building full of classrooms, rehearsal spaces, and studios for undergraduates? It is all very mysterious—unless, of course, the window-dressing and prestige are not accoutrements but are themselves the main point of the exercise.

Kindness prevents me from lingering over the smorgasbord of performances to which Cornell students and some of their teachers treated the building's donors one night in April. Perhaps the evening's entertainment helped to explain why university officials might have thought their students needed instruction in dance and theater; but it left one bemused about why they believed such obviously expensive instruction was justified. In any case, by far the most engaging performance was given by Stirling himself. Cornell is famous among architects as a difficult client, and it was most amusing to witness Stirling obliquely reminding his audience of that fact. In the course of his speech, he often adverted to the budgetary constraints that he and his colleagues had labored under in designing and constructing the performing arts center. One result of these constraints was that two sides of the building were left in unornamented stucco, a striking and not altogether agreeable contrast to the marble face of the main College Avenue facade and to the loggia. With what one might think brutal honesty, Stirling went on to describe the center as a building with a front side, a side side, and two back sides. It was impossible to disagree.

As a possible remedy to this situation, Stirling suggested that one day Cornell might engage the artist Richard Haas to paint one of his famous *trompe-l'oeil* murals on one of the "back side" sides. But instead of endowing the blank wall with elaborately painted "windows," "rustication," "pediment," and other *trompe-l'oeil* architectural ornamentation as is his wont, Haas should be commissioned to depict the beautiful natural vista that was visible off College Avenue before the performing arts center was erected. Having just sat through a few dreadfully acted theatrical scenes, some really embarrassing vocal pieces, an insipid modern dance, as well as several self-congratulatory speeches by university officials, I had to admit that it seemed like a good idea. Not that Haas's imagined mural would really do anything to repair the damage, of course, but it might well serve as an admonition—the moral being *caveat emptor*.

1. _ *James Stirling: Buildings and Projects*, edited by Peter Arnett and Ted Bickford, with an introduction by Colin Rowe; Rizzoli, 1984, page 23. Go back to the text.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from* The New Criterion *at*

40 (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 7 Number 10 , on page 56

https://newcriterion.com/issues/1989/6/a-stirling-performance-at-cornell