

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Mies & Stirling in The City

A Review of *Mies van der Rohe + James Stirling: Circling the Square*, The Architecture Gallery, RIBA, 8 March to 25 June 2017

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A recent exhibition at the Royal Institute of British Architects staged a comparison between two historic projects, one by Mies van der Rohe the other by James Stirling, for a historic site in London's financial district known as The City. The exhibition looked back in time to events of the mid 1980s, revealing how Mies' unbuilt modernist design for an office tower and open plaza had actually paved the way toward realising a building by James Stirling, the one that sits on the site today, known as No1 Poultry and that has recently been listed by Historic England as an exemplary postmodern monument. The exhibition is interesting for its curatorial bias because, although it appears to be about a historical subject, it resists setting that subject in a meaningful narrative, its stated intention being solely to compare the design methods of the subject architects.

As an accompaniment to the exhibition a small debate was staged bringing together a panel of 'experts' to discuss the merits of Mies' Mansion House Square-design versus those of Stirling's No1 Poultry. The discussion was framed as a simple 'pro' or 'contra' argument, where those in favour of Mies tended to dislike the very same features and qualities that those favouring Stirling enjoyed, and vice-versa. In Mies' favour was the futuristic, reductive, unadorned quality of his design and the idea of a large open square, combining a solution to problems of congestion with a potential place of festival and assembly. In Stirling's favour was the bumptious, quasi-historicist, jokey quality of his design and the idea of an open interiorised rotunda at the heart of a dense urban block as a place of transition for people crossing the site. A further point of comparison was Mies' use of rectangular geometries and the organising principle of the grid, as opposed to Stirling's more baroque geometries and his use of collage as a strategy of composition.

At the end of the debate the audience were asked to vote, the outcome was inconclusive, which begs

the question: given it is impossible to decide in strictly formal terms, then what was it about the circumstances of the past that led to the preference for Stirling's design over Mies'? Anyone expecting the exhibition to supply an answer would have been disappointed. Aside from a few selected letters and press cuttings, the material on show was explicitly for the purpose of formal comparison, including architectural drawings, models, sketches and material samples.

Looking for an answer elsewhere, one reads in Detlef Mertin's recent monograph, *Mies* (2014), how the formal lineage of Mies' unrealised design for the Mansion House Square can be traced back to the Seagram Building in New York (1954-8). Mertins argues that Mies' design of the Seagram Building set the precedent for the architectural type of the combined office tower and open plaza development, which after its construction 'triggered a change in the zoning bylaw' of New York City and indirectly 'encouraged the construction of more public plazas.' Mertins reads Mies' London design as having failed because the urban typology of the office tower and open plaza was 'too controversial in its modernity to be realised in that city.' (Mertins 2014: 423). Mertins' assessment is correct in that the modernity of Mies' design was a contributing factor to its eventual rejection, but that was not the main reason the project failed, the main reason was the quite considerable delay in the procurement process.

It was in the 1960s that Mies, then in the last phase of his career, had been commissioned to propose a Seagram-type development for the site next to the Mansion House, by property developer and art collector Peter Palumbo. At the time the design was granted outline planning permission. In those days it was not necessary to actually own the property rights in order to apply for planning permission for some particular site, and it was understood that full permission could be granted at a later date on the basis of the same outline design. But it took Palumbo about twenty years and it cost him £10 million to acquire the twelve freeholds and 245 leaseholds necessary to acquire the full property rights to develop Mies' design. So it was not until 1982, by which time Mies was dead (he passed away in 1969) that Palumbo was in a position to apply for full planning permission. When he did apply permission was refused. Palumbo appealed against the refusal on the basis he already had outline permission and had acquired the necessary property holdings in good faith. The appeal led to a public inquiry, launched by the British Government in 1984, the proceedings were long and protracted but the outcome was no different and again permission was refused.

Permission was refused because, although the two decades of delay had been necessary for Palumbo to acquire full property rights, the delay also meant that the typology of the office tower and open

plaza was by then perceived to be old-fashioned and out-of-date. The type seemed especially out-of-date to contemporary conservationists who valued the tight streets, medium rise building blocks and eclectic historicism of the predominantly Victorian and Edwardian building stock. In other words, Mies' design no longer carried the same cultural values as it had done back in the 1960s, when it was greeted with enthusiasm and had no difficulties obtaining the necessary approvals. Furthermore, and perhaps of greater detriment to the success of the project, was the fact of Mies' death. One important factor in the criteria for valuing works of architecture assumes the building is the architect's unique product, the architect is thought to relate to the building rather in the way an [artist relates to an artwork, as the original author of the work](#). In fact we can see this assumption at work in the recent listing of No1 Poultry, where one of the criteria states the building is of architectural and historic importance because it is by James Stirling.

At the time of the 1984 public inquiry, Mies' followers and fans tried to rebuff the authorship-based criticism by arguing it was the design and not its execution that constituted Mies' original contribution, pointing out how, by the time of his death, the design had been fully explored and represented in models and drawings and that Mies had left behind sufficient information for the building team to go ahead with the construction in conformity with his intentions (the team included Mies' office in Chicago, the UK based architects Holford Associates and Peter Carter, author of the popular book *Mies van der Rohe at Work* ([Carter 1999](#)). Carter had been the project architect for Mansion House Square under Mies, he eventually moved back to the UK and continued his involvement in the project through his own practice). But this way of arguing only exacerbated matters, making it seem as if the act of posthumous construction would constitute [yet another resurrection of Mies, a kind of twin to the one that was currently taking place in Barcelona, where Mies' temporary pavilion of 1929 was undergoing reconstruction](#). Especially, if not exclusively, those who were not fond of modernist architecture, found the idea of resurrecting Mies at Mansion House unbearable.

One item on display at *Circling the Square* strongly evidenced anti-Miesian sentiment, it was a letter from the 'young fogey' architectural historian, journalist, campaigner and conservationist Gavin Stamp to the then Prime-minister, Margaret Thatcher. In his letter Stamp rudely refers to Mies as a '99-year-old German from another age who is dead' and to his Mansion House Square design as an example of the 'inhuman megalomania of architects,' he concludes by suggesting the site be

developed ‘by younger, talented and British architects’ (his underlining). There is no reason to suppose that Stamp’s letter had any effect on Mrs Thatcher, but she would have been against the idea of the plaza simply because it raised the spectre of mass political protest and rallying at the heart of the capital; and against the tower because she wanted to encourage commercial high-rise development out at the newly designated enterprise zone on the Isle of Dogs in London’s Docklands, better known today as Canary Wharf.

Circling the Square demonstrated how Palumbo’s site was developed according to James Stirling’s low-level urban block design in striped shades of pink and buff stonework, with its embedded circular atrium in place of Mies’ open plaza, but it did not make it clear that Stirling’s design came after the public inquiry of 1984, it was never contemporary with Mies’. The exhibition showed how, effectively and knowingly, Stirling’s design reversed the urban figure ground pattern of Mies’ prismatic form set in open space. And it mentioned how, at the time of the public inquiry, Stirling’s career was on an upward trajectory. In 1984 he had just completed the widely acclaimed Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, thought to be exemplary of the new postmodern attitudes to form and space in architecture and urbanism that had been emerging in the international architecture culture of the 1970s (Girouard 1998). This building too consists of an interiorised yet open rotunda, with an architectural promenade cutting through a substantial building mass. Like No1 Poultry, the Stuttgart building displays amusing architectural motifs, including fake Cyclopean walls in stripy stonework with garishly coloured handrails. And, stooping to the jingoistic level of Gavin Stamp’s letter to Thatcher, it might even be argued the formal resemblances between No1 Poultry and Stuttgart expressed a preference for German rather than British values in architecture. Be that as it may, in the mid 1980s Stirling could rely on the success of his Stuttgart project to persuade the City authorities and arbiters of taste that his design for No1 Poultry was sufficiently fashionable and up-to-date to merit construction.

Today it seems incredible that London almost had a building by Mies at its centre! It was *only* because of the historical contingencies, unfolding across time, in which both architects and their projects were immersed, including the economics of property development and the human desire for novelty that The City ended up with a Stirling and not a Mies, a circular hole to pass-on-through rather than an open plaza. *Circling the Square* is to be commended for having staged the two projects so nicely for contemporary public viewing, the weakness was in the way it understated the projects’ temporal relations. The fact that reality momentarily manifests some condition X and not Y is a crucial aspect

of architectural history and urbanism. Neglecting past realities, even with the best of intentions, can only be detrimental to the understanding of our own contemporary condition.

References

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Letter from Gavin Stamp to The Rt Hon. Margaret Thatcher, dated 21 April 1985, exhibit 14, Mies van der Rohe + James Stirling: Circling the Square, The Architecture Gallery, RIBA, 8 March to 25 June 2017

Carter, P (1999) Mies van der Rohe at Work, [London & New York](#), Phaidon Press.

Girouard, M (1998) Big Jim: The life and work of James Stirling, [Chatto & Windus](#), London (especially see the chapter 'After Stuttgart')

Figure

Mies van der Rohe + James Stirling: Circling the Square: Models on view at the exhibition, left, Mies' stridently modern Mansion House Square and right, Stirling's playfully postmodern Number 1 Poultry