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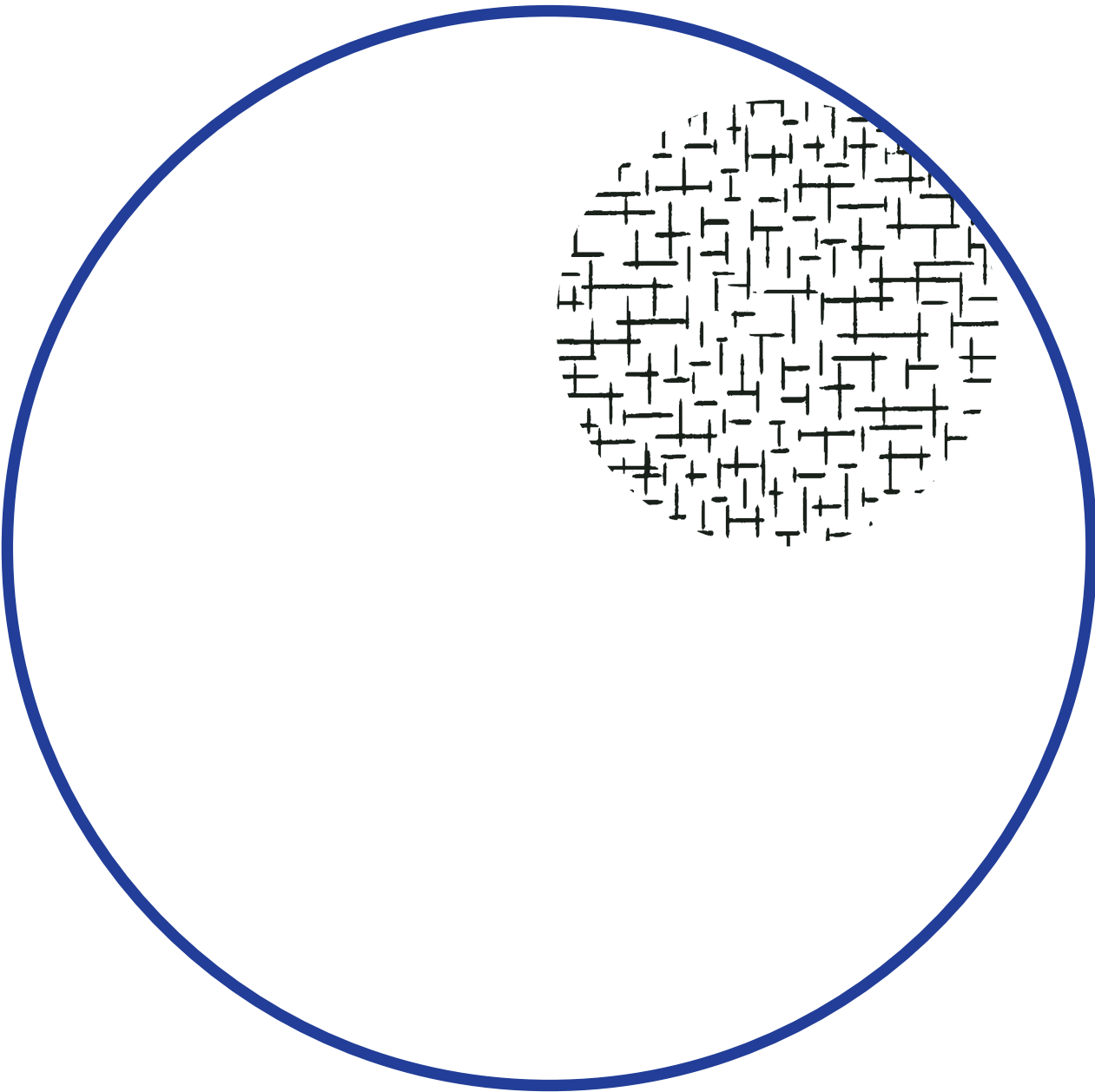
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OUTSIDERS

PAST + FUTURE

# AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF FRAGMENTS

ANDREW MELVILLE HALL
JAMES STIRLING
1968

TEXT BY CAMERON MCEWAN

Standing in the shadow of Modern masters such as Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier, the generation that graduated from architecture schools in the extended decade after World War II – Robert Venturi, Oswald Mathias Ungers, Aldo Rossi, James Stirling to name a few – were critical of the social and urban effects of Modern architecture. Yet they were reluctant to abandon Modernism altogether. Instead, they put forward a critique of Modern architecture and in doing so searched for the core principles of the discipline. Architects and theorists inquired into architectural and cultural questions such as the following: how can tradition and technology be reconciled? How do the arts and architecture relate to everyday life? What is the role of the architect in the social struggle of the city?

These questions were underpinned by a search for an architectural language that might extend, overcome or break free of Modernism. On one hand there was a tendency to extend the technological and functionalist approach of Modernism as is evident in projects such as Kenzo Tange's Tokyo Bay proposal (1959) or the buildings of Paul Rudolph in America. On the other hand there was an approach that rejected Modernism and put forward a stylistic mimesis of historical architectural form exemplified in BBPRs Torre Velasca tower in Milan (1956-58) or the "Townscape" aesthetic in Britain. James Stirling questioned both of these tendencies.

James Frazer Stirling (1924-92) was one of the preeminent architects of the post World War II generation – in Europe and Internationally – and recipient of prestigious architectural awards including the RIBA Royal Gold Medal (1980), the Pritzker Architecture Prize (1981), and Japan's Praemium Imperiale (1990). Stirling's work – which has been recently reassessed by Anthony Vidler, Mark Crinson, Emmanuel Petit, and Amanda Reeser Lawrence – was subject to critique by many of the leading architectural thinkers of the time including Manfredo Tafuri, Peter Eisenman, John Summerson, Kenneth Frampton, Joseph Rykwert and Alvin Boyarsky. These critics put forward various descriptions of Stirling's work, from "violent" and "apocalyptic" as Boyarsky said, to "playful" as Summerson commented. Eisenman read Stirling's work as a dual critique of Modernist abstraction and post-Modern material presence. For Tafuri, the architecture of Stirling was an "archaeology of fragments."

The notion of an "archaeology of fragments" frames the following discussion. On one hand an archaeology of fragments refers to a conceptual framework for the selection and extraction of a fragment – an abstract or representational form – from the history of architecture and the city, but more broadly the history of forms in general. On the other hand the notion refers to a formal principle for the composition, manipulation and transformation of buildings as distinct parts through operations such as duplication, repetition, rotation, oppositions of scale, form, space, interior and exterior. It is important to recognise in both cases an archaeology of fragments is linked with the historical evolution of formal knowledge in architecture. Furthermore it is worth pointing out that the category of fragment discussed here does not refer to a romantic vision of architecture as a ruin, nor of material phenomena. Rather the fragment is understood from a

conceptual and formal point of view.

In the text that follows I will first rehearse Stirling's formative influences and put forward a close reading of his Andrew Melville Hall as a transitional work in Stirling's oeuvre that points toward the spatial complexity of his museum and gallery projects of later years. My discussion will be situated by recalling a selection of significant moments in architectural debate during the 1950s and 1960s from Banham to Eisenman and Ungers then to Rossi and Tafuri. The aim of this essay is to first theorise an archaeology of fragments in relation to a selection of Stirling's works; and second, provide a brief account of how stimulating and productive a period this was for architecture with the view that doing so brings the present state of architectural production into sharp relief.

Stirling was born in Glasgow. His mother was a school teacher and his father, a ship's engineer. The family moved to Liverpool where James Stirling spent his childhood and youth, before enlisting in the army in 1942, aged eighteen. He was recruited into the Black Watch and trained in Perth, Scotland. In the same barrack-room, Stirling became friends with his future architectural mentor Colin Rowe, then moved to the Maryhill Barracks in Glasgow in June 1943. We can say that Stirling's internal visual-formal criticality developed from his exposure to the industrial forms that were revealed during train journeys from Glasgow to Liverpool and from his experience abroad in the army. Stirling was injured in combat as a paratrooper in 1944 and released from service in April 1946. In the following September he started his architectural training at Liverpool.

A formative influence at Liverpool was Rowe who was Stirling's thesis tutor. In 1947 Rowe published "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa," which compared Andrea Palladio and Le Corbusier. It combined formal analysis with a Wittkowerian interest in Palladio's proportional system to compare Palladio's Villa Malcontenta (c1550) and Le Corbusier's Villa Stein (1927). Rowe's polemic was for Le Corbusier to value the Classical tradition above his Cubist disposition. With this proposition, Rowe – like Emil Kaufmann's "from Ledoux to Le Corbusier" – contributed to the historicising of Modern architecture. In another early essay, "Mannerism and Modern Architecture," Rowe discussed the relations between Mannerist and Modernist conceptions of space. The key example was Le Corbusier's Villa Schwob (1916), in which Rowe comments that the blank square panel on the entrance façade disrupts the surrounding elements – oval windows, columns, canopy, the curved volumes of the house beyond – paralleling the Mannerist effects of complexity and ambiguity. We can say that the thinking inherent to these essays manifests in Rowe's teaching.

Robert Maxwell has pointed out that Rowe's teaching method encouraged an "eclectic" interest in architectural history so that students could "crib" ideas. Rowe, as Maxwell writes, "taught his students to cultivate visual acumen, endlessly looking – not only at photographs of buildings, but also at the buildings themselves – as evidence always accessible, always under our eyes, to be scrutinized for the secrets it contained." Hence, Rowe stimulated Stirling's interest in architecture's historical-formal condition and taught him to be continuously visually aware. Stirling engaged in the search for precedents, finding the conceptual

principles – the "secrets" – that underline them by being able to see – as Rowe did with Le Corbusier – not what is literally present, but the conceptual presence. In doing so Stirling absorbed architectural history – canonical and anonymous buildings, those that were built and unbuilt – as the fragments for combination and re-combination in his projects.

Reflecting on his early formation in his Gold Medal speech, Stirling cites numerous influences. He mentions books including Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* and Saxl and Wittkower's *British Art and the Mediterranean* to architectural tendencies such as Art Nouveaux, Italian Rationalism and Russian Constructivism. Stirling cites English castles, French chateaux, Italian palazzi as well as farmhouses, barns, warehouses, industrial buildings, engineering structures and railway sheds. We can read these references as Stirling's world of forms from which fragments are extracted to undergoe an abstract process of reduction and transformation before being put forward as distinct parts in architectural and urban assemblages.

An example of Stirling's first urban assemblage is his thesis project of 1949. The project, for a town centre in England, is arranged on a two by five square grid with singular buildings – shopping square, market, hotel, health centre, government offices, police station, law court, post office, bank, cinema, dance hall, concert hall, church, community centre, civic square and town hall – configured along shifting axes and defining an open public space. Stirling preferred an orthogonal layout with buildings square or rectangular in plan, with the exception of the cinema which fans outward, the dance hall which is a twelve-sided polygon and the town hall which is cruciform in plan. The range of plan-types and shifting axes, as well the creation of formal and spatial relationships by contrasts of scale and form anticipates Stirling's future work.

On completing his studies Stirling arrived in London in 1951 where he enrolled on a town planning course but departed after six months citing lack of design aspiration. For four weeks Stirling worked at London City Council. Then between 1953 and 1956 he worked for Lyons, Israel and Ellis while undertaking competition work in his free-time.

While at Lyons, Israel and Ellis, Stirling met Alan Colquhoun and James Gowan then became involved with the Independent Group. The Independent Group was a forum for discussing important architectural issues and cultural tendencies. It included the following members: Colquhoun, Alison and Peter Smithson, Reyner Banham (who convened the group until 1955), Richard Hamilton, Edward Paolozzi, Sandy Wilson, and John McHale amongst others. These protagonists would undoubtedly generate stimulating discussion. The Independent Group formed shortly after the Festival of Britain in 1951 with the intention of re-directing British arts criticism and practice away from the nostalgic notion of "Eternal Britain" and the tendency toward "townscape" that prevailed at the time. Instead, the Independent Group wanted to investigate the formal aspects of technology and consumer culture.

One of numerous exhibitions that the group held was entitled "This is Tomorrow" at London's Whitechapel Gallery in which Richard Hamilton displayed his collage *Just What is it that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing*? The collage provides a snapshot of the consumerist ethos of the time. The image depicts a semi-naked body builder and reclining "housewife" occupying a London townhouse. The figures are surrounded by household objects typical of the day including a tape-recorder, TV, vacuum cleaner, telephone and can of spam. The figures and objects are framed by an image of Earth from space which is substituted for the townhouse ceiling. For the exhibition, Stirling (with the sculptor Michael Pine and graphic artist Richard Matthews) contributed a sculpture based on the spatiality of soap bubbles constructed from plaster. It is interesting that in his statement Stirling writes that architecture received its formal vocabulary from the artists of the 1920s. We can think of De Stijl, Constructivism, and Cubism and note how painting and sculpture inform Stirling's formal vocabulary.

In essence those involved in the Independent Group searched for alternatives to Modernist abstraction. They proclaimed an interest in an "as-found" aesthetic, a reverence for materials and an affinity with domestic and industrial "vernacular" forms. Banham described this as "New Brutalism" and hoped for a "new spirit" in architecture after Le Corbusier's *l'Esprit Nouveau* that advocated transforming society. New Brutalism was largely a reaction to the "comfortable" British lifestyle that prevailed after the Festival of Britain as well as the developing "pop" culture and the informal picturesqueness of Townscape. However, both tendencies were quickly viewed as superficial styles that fell short of Banham's transformative aspirations.

It was during the period between 1953 and 1956 that Stirling kept his "Black Notebook." The content of this notebook included observations on current architectural debates and specific buildings, reflections on films, art and exhibitions as well as diagrams on the history of Modernism. Stirling quoted passages from books such as Le Corbusier's *Le Modulor* and lists buildings by Mies, Wright and Le Corbusier, writing that from these buildings – which included Wright's Larkin offices and his Guggenheim, Mies' Barcelona pavilion and his skyscrapers, Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino, the Ville Radieuse and Ronchamp – "almost the entire vocabulary of modern architecture has descended."

At one point in his Black Notebook, Stirling reflects on his design process. He puts forward the following sequence: a valuation of the functional and social importance of various elements of the brief; an "intuitive" response to the "plastic potential" of accommodation and circulation; the selection of elements into a hierarchy; the disposition of units "suggesting" functions; then to matters of proportion, construction and material; before a "process of simplification." On one hand this displays Stirling's rational approach that extends from a Modernist sensibility for analysis and abstraction. On the other, Stirling emphasises intuition and a "plastic" process. We can read this as an understanding of the creative element in architecture as a decisional moment that cannot altogether be rationalised so that rational analysis and subjective decision are always in tension. Stirling recognised this relationship when he described his work as "oscillating" between the "abstract" – a language derived from the geometric type-forms of Cubism, Constructivism, and de Stijl with their balanced asymmetrical compositions – and the "representational" – a language related to historically determined urban type-forms such as Italian palazzi or monumental industrial buildings.

Stirling's sensibility for rational analysis and subjective decision combined with his "process of simplification" is similar to the thinking of Oswald Mathias Ungers who was the same age as Stirling, and both of whom had known one another from the early Team Ten meetings. In *Architecture as Theme* Ungers put forward the following themes to theorise his work: morphological transformation, assemblage, coincidence of opposites, assimilation and adaption. These themes – which are productive for theorising Stirling's work as well – are revealed, for instance, in the 1964 project for a student hostel in Enschede. Here, Ungers uses three basic geometric forms – the circle, square and triangle – which are extruded into volumes and composed along shifting axes and by antithetical relations so that circular voids are cut into solid square blocks, and square volumes are arranged in a triangular composition.

Both Stirling and Ungers' work share principles such as axial arrangement of forms and spaces ruptured by singular elements connected obliquely, the juxtaposition of solid and void, contrasts of scale, and the superimposition of antithetical forms and spaces. Notable examples in which these principles are realised and which evoke the notion of an archaeology of fragments include Stirling's Derby Civic Centre (1970), Wallraf-Richartz Museum (1975) and his Düsseldorf Museum (1975); and Ungers' Berlin Museum (1965), Hotel Berlin (1977) and his German Library in Frankfurt (1982).

This was the backdrop to one of Stirling's
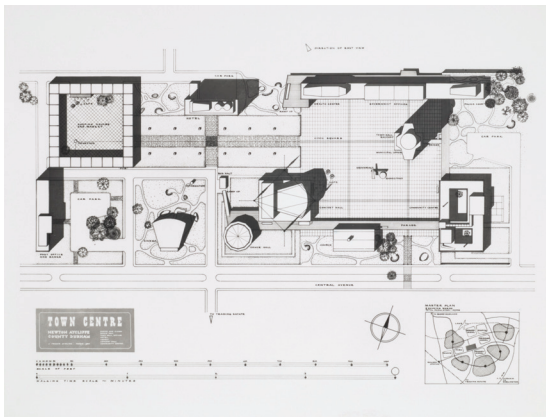

James Stirling, Site plan of thesis project, 1949.
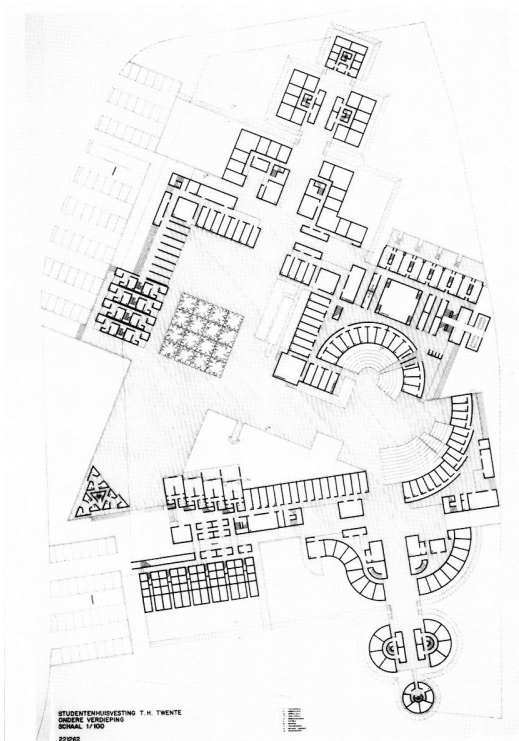

Oswald Mathias Ungers, Plan of competition entry for student residence at TH Twente, Enschede, 1964.

most radical works, his competition proposal for Churchill College for the University of Cambridge (1959). Undertaken with James Gowan, the brief included accommodation for 500 students as well as a dining hall, chapel, library and administration facilities. Stirling and Gowan proposed a 180m square perimeter block of student accommodation, which was raised on an earth platform recalling the ramparts of Medieval city walls. Within this "great court" the other elements of the brief were arranged as singular buildings including two further square plan courtyard buildings containing further student dormitories which were essentially miniature duplications of the overall scheme. Paths led to the midpoint of each of the perimeter sides resulting in the division of the court into quadrants, thus performing another duplication of the square form.

Churchill was one of a number of university buildings designed by Stirling. Others include the "canonical" Engineering Building for Leicester University (1959-63), the History Faculty at Cambridge University (1964-67), the Florey Building at Queen's College, Oxford (1966-71) and Andrew Melville Hall for St Andrews University (1964-68). While the Engineering Building, the History Faculty and the Florey Building are broadly similar in their formal and material language – using faceted glass walls, brick and tile units in horizontal bands, building mass articulated as distinct volumes composed centripetally implying spatial force is directed from edge to centre – Andrew Melville Hall departs from this language.

Andrew Melville Hall is a student residences in St Andrews on the East Coast of Scotland around 80 km north of Edinburgh. St Andrews itself is a small town with a ruined Medieval cathedral and castle. It has numerous university annexes scattered throughout the town, which was planned along a market street with thin plots of land extending to either side. St Andrews University expanded in the 1960s and required new residences for the rise in student numbers. A site off-campus at the entrance to the town was selected for Andrew Melville Hall. Stirling intended two pairs of identical buildings, however only one single building was completed.

The building itself is composed of two slab-wings of unequal length – one rotated off the primary axis – extending from a central block, which creates a large outside court. An enclosed stair is adjacent to the central block. These distinct parts are connected by a glazed promenade gallery.

The central block contains most of the communal facilities including kitchen, dining hall, common rooms, two small external terraces and the main entrance. It is clad in smooth finished rectangular concrete panels on its back and side. Vertically orientated glazed units clad the front court side and return for several modules before connecting to the concrete walls. One half of the front elevation is planar while the other is set back two times resulting in an highly articulated volume. The roof of the central block has sixteen glazed rooflights which are square with chamfered corners. This conceptually reads as a void inserted into the solid block.

The enclosed stair element extends from one side of the central block outward and up two levels. It provides access to the different accommodation in the central block and leads to the upper storey entrance from the promenade gallery.

The slab-wings contain student rooms as well as accommodation for live-in staff. The longer wing extends parallel to the central block while the shorter one is rotated off the main axis. The rooms are arranged obliquely from the central axis of each slab providing each room with two views and analogically recalling the historic street plan of St Andrews itself. Stair cores punctuate the block with two in the shorter wing and three in the longer wing. These are expressed on the roof as greenhouse lanterns. The rooms themselves are constructed from prefabricated concrete floor and wall units which are externally finished in ribbed concrete, framed by placing metal strips within the moulds. The ribbing is diagonally positioned on each wall unit and runs in opposite directions to adjacent walls in contrast the smoothness of the central block.

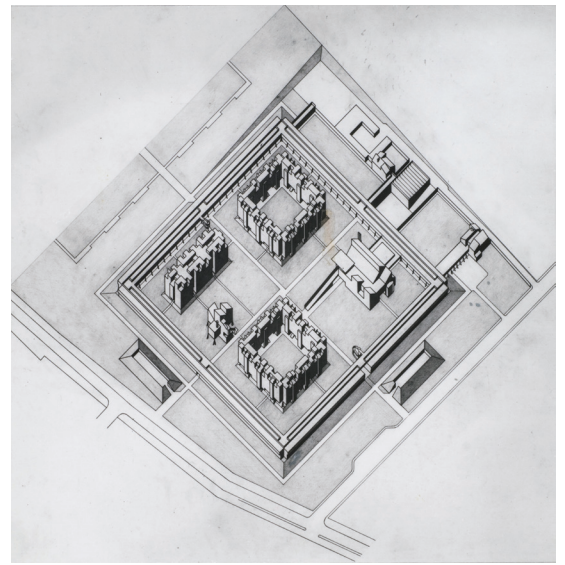Connecting the central block and slab-wings is the promenade gallery which extends from entrance level and runs continuously along the length of both wings on the court side until it returns on the short elevation for a single bay. It is the main circulation and socialising element which connects the small private student rooms with the larger communal areas. The promenade gallery is expressed externally with vertically articulated glazed units projecting outward from the wall datum and reads as an horizontal incision into the slab-wing with the effect of implied spatial force extending along the slab-wing and outward.

As we have said, Stirling's buildings for Leicester, Cambridge and Oxford Universities are broadly similar in their formal language and conceptually read as composed centripetally as a single unified mass. By contrast, Andrew Melville Hall reads as composed centrifugally with implied spatial force stretching outward. We see this in the slab-wings which extend out in one direction, in the enclosed stair which extends in the opposite direction, and in the glazed promenade gallery which cuts through the building. Furthermore, Andrew Melville Hall is not a unified mass but an assemblage of distinct volumes – slab-wings, central block, enclosed stair and promenade gallery – in formal and spatial dialogue with each other through shifting axes, rotations in plan and interpenetrations of opposing elements. The building departs from the language of Stirling's prior University buildings and should be viewed as a transitional work that points obliquely toward the spatial complexity of his museum and gallery projects of the coming years in particular for its centrifugal composition.

Andrew Melville Hall was completed in 1968 at the end of a pivotal decade in which the following three seminal texts were published: Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), Aldo Rossi's *L'architettura della città* (1966), and Manfredo Tafuri's *Teorie e storia dell' architettura* (1968). Architecture's formal-historical language was crucial to each of these texts as it was for Stirling's work. Venturi invoked history as a way to enrich Modern form. For Rossi, history was a crucial reminder for understanding architecture as a body of knowledge that developed over time and contained the formal and conceptual material for architectural production as urban types. Tafuri put forward a polemical straightening out of history as an unedited display of architectural and intellectual crises that could only be overcome after deep critique. Stirling investigated the potential of architectural form and space to be manipulated in different ways and in doing so expanded and transformed architecture's formal-historical body of knowledge.

The purpose of briefly mentioning these works is to be reminded that the period in which James Stirling was active – in particular the 1950s to 1970s – was a greatly productive period for architecture when architects engaged with the history of the discipline and viewed their role as a crucial intellectual contribution to the social and cultural struggle of the city. It was for sure the last major period in architectural culture when architecture was recognised as a significant intellectual pursuit. Studying the era has a dual effect. It brings into sharp relief the present condition of architectural production, which often seems weak, diffuse and committed merely to general consensus; yet simultaneously it provides an edge from which we might project beyond the current architectural impasse.



James Stirling, Churchill College, University of Cambridge, 1959.



James Stirling, Andrew Melville Hall, 1968.

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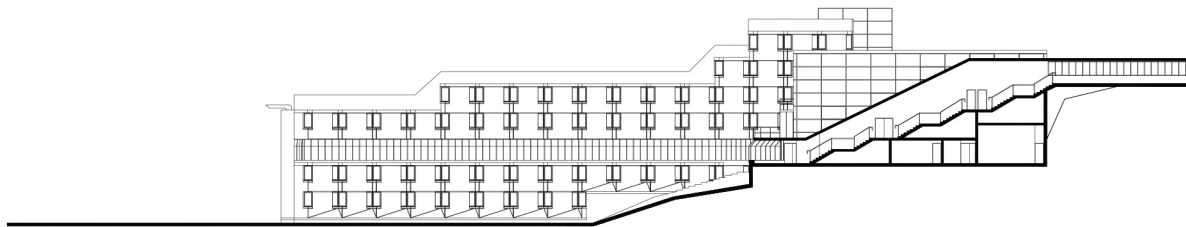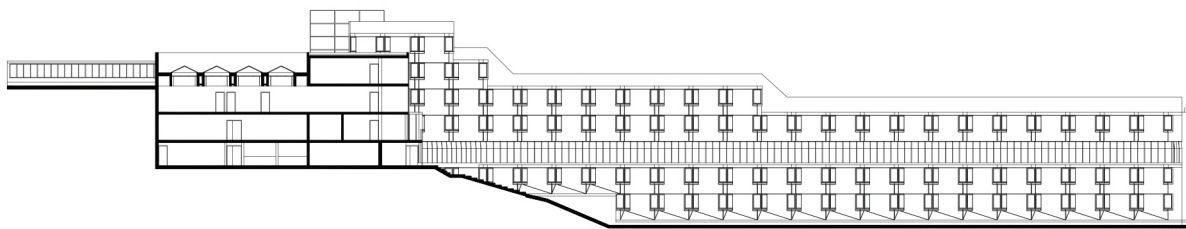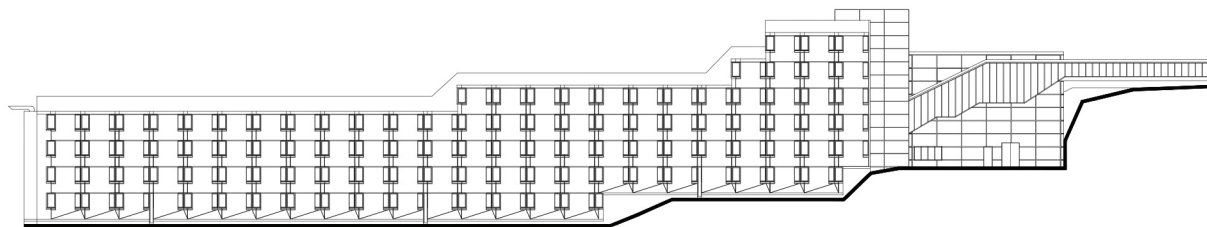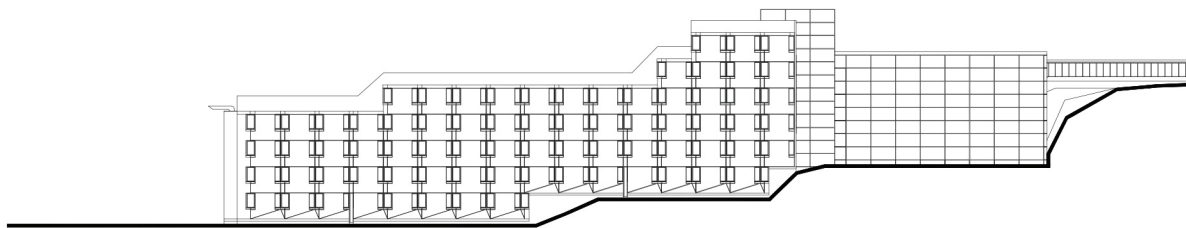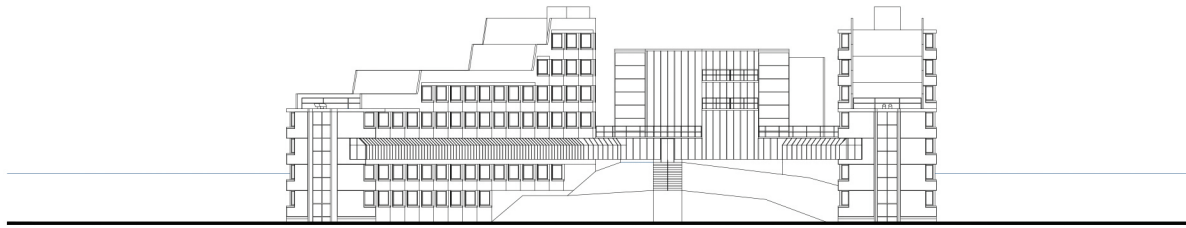
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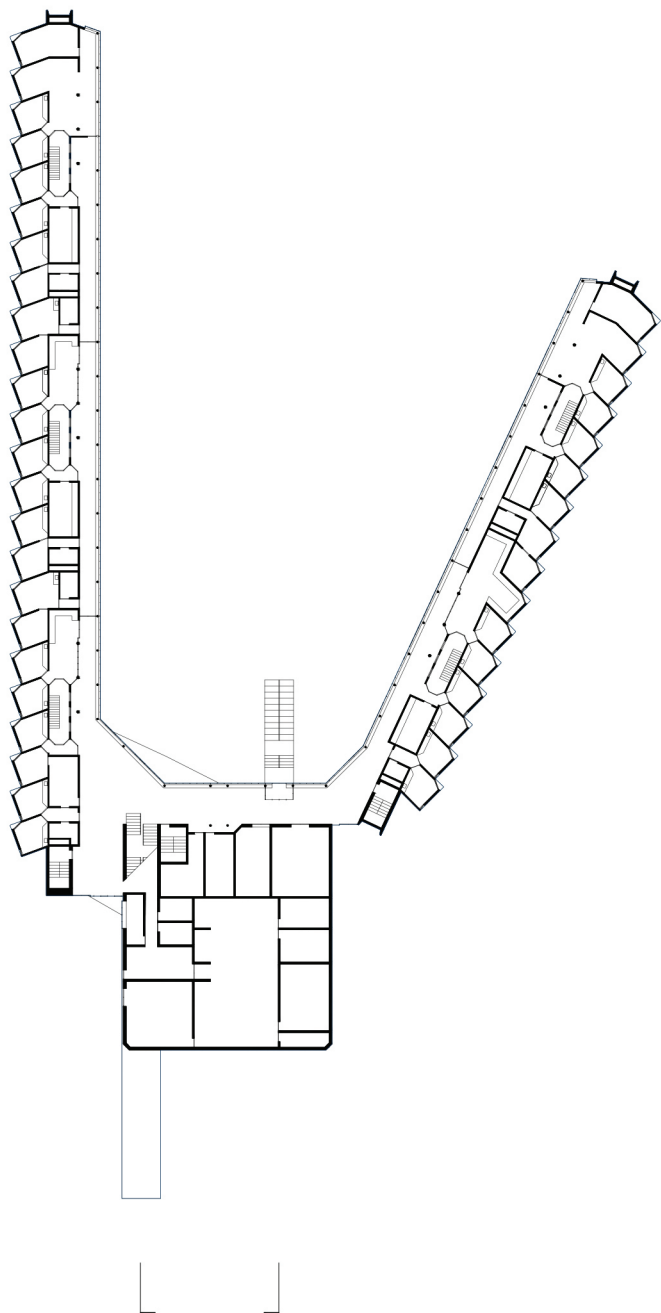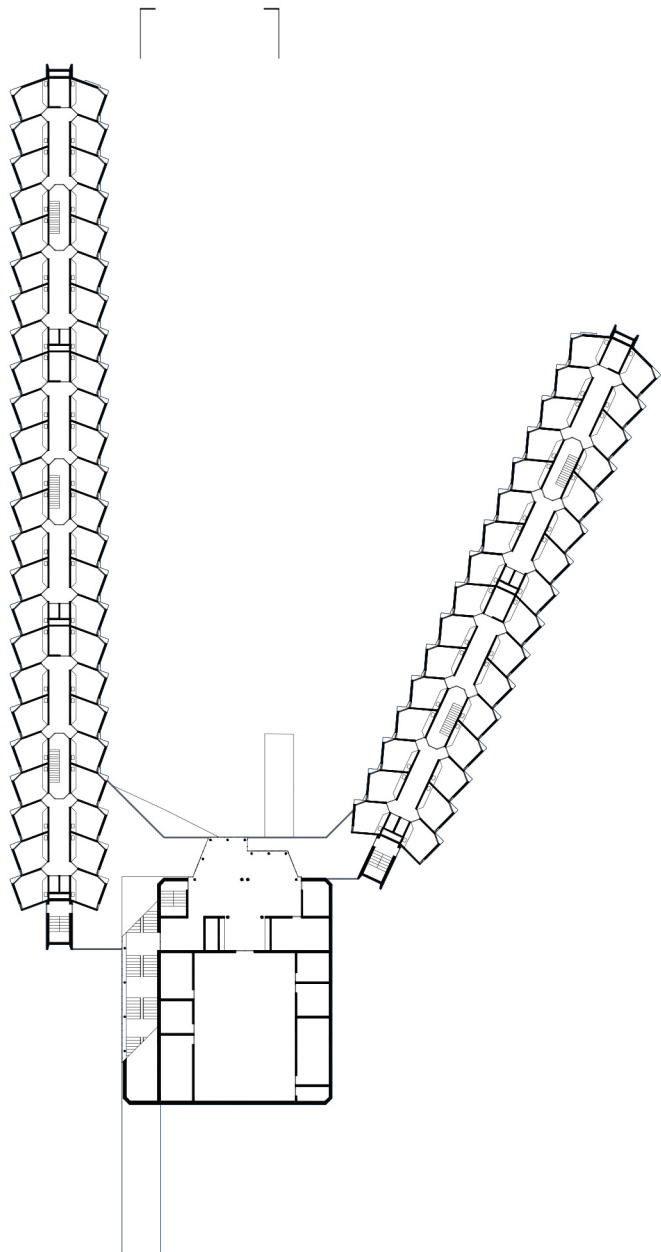
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