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# STANDING ON PRECEDENT: AN ARGUMENT FOR INSTRUMENTALIZING ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

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This paper considers the question of influence in architecture. What does it mean for an architect to reference, copy, incorporate, or acknowledge precedent? What are the strategies for doing so? These longstanding questions lie at the very heart of our discipline, but remain largely unexplored within both architectural history and design. My focus is on analyzing specific strategies by which architects reuse the past. My emphasis, in other words, is on understanding the operation performed, the way in which the past is brought forward, rather than on identifying or legitimizing the “source” itself. Importantly, these translational operations aren’t necessarily tied to any one time period; we can locate them throughout architectural history.

Ultimately, this paper aims to provoke discussion as to how we might develop a more sophisticated approach for engaging the past within architectural schools and to offer a richer and more productive language through which to talk about influence, both in the design studio and the history class. As architects tentatively dip their feet into the ideologically charged waters of the past, we must ask what it means to “stand” on precedent, once again.

For over a generation, architects have been afraid or perhaps unwilling or even unable to talk about influence. Still wary from the facile postmodernist appropriations of historical pastiche, theorists and practitioners alike shy away from open acknowledgement of their status vis a vis the past.

Increasingly, however, we are seeing a world embracing and even celebrating influence-- witness the recent phenomenon of the “mashup” and longer-standing notion of sampling in music, or the best selling writings of Jonathan Lethem, which are constructed collages of previously written ideas and phrases.<sup>1</sup>

Architecture is no exception. Perhaps the most telling symptom is the resurgent interest in postmodernism, with its clear reuse of the styles of the classical past. Excellent books by scholars such as Reinhold Martin and Jorge Otero-Pailos are mapping architectural postmodernism as a more subtle and complex phenomenon than the largely stylistic one put forth by Charles Jencks and others in its original codification.<sup>2</sup> Sessions at the most important conferences for architectural historians are now turning to various aspects of postmodernism, and a recent issue of the ACSA journal JAE ex-

plored the role of precedent in architecture.<sup>3</sup> This isn’t simply an academic curiosity: architectural firms such as FAT are unabashedly looking to the past, performing second-level derivations of postmodernism as the ultimate pas de deux with history.

And yet, in this shifting cultural context in which an acknowledgment of the past and of our relationship to it now occupies center stage, or is at least inching its way there, there remains a dearth of vocabulary with which to talk about influence, and more importantly a lack of conceptual frameworks through which to analyze and understand the use of the past. Most often any overt use of the past is greeted with suspicion, seen as regressive or nostalgic.

Even if we were able to state unequivocally that all architecture suffers some form of influence, this truism offers little in the way of an interpretive or evaluative framework. How do we talk productively about strategies for working with the past?

The writings of the preeminent literary critic and scholar Harold Bloom remain one of the more provocative and relevant for a discussion of influence. In his seminal texts *Anxiety and Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1975), Bloom offers a series of strategies or what he terms “revisionary rations” for understanding how “strong poets” misread or, in his term, “misprision” their predecessors.<sup>4</sup> Although Bloom’s theory is articulated in relation to poets, its precepts can serve any creative discipline, including architecture, and particularly ones in which there are not only seminal “masters” but also seminal works that constitute a disciplinary history. Bloom’s theory brings to the forefront an acceptance of the fact that poets, “strong poets” even, are profoundly indebted to their “predecessors.”

By acknowledging an engagement with the past as a legitimate part of the creative act, Bloom’s framework does two important things: first, it locates possible sources of architecture’s “newness” within the past, and second, it removes from the notion of influence the impossibility of originality—“poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original.”

Particularly relevant for a consideration of influence in architecture is the importance that Bloom places on the individual artifact—the poem in his case, the architectural project in ours—as a source of



Figure 1. Stirling and Gowan, Ham Common Flats, London, 1958.

influence, rather than a more abstract idea of the precursor. In other words, Shakespeare is less important than Hamlet. When thinking about an architect's engagement with his predecessors, we might say, then, that Le Corbusier is less important than the Villa Savoye.

Bloom's terminology is critical here, and in particular I want to focus on the notion of revisioning. To revision something is, as Bloom notes, to literally "see" it "again." This is a distinct idea from referencing, a more neutral act in which the element brought forward from the past is acknowledged as complete and left more or less intact. Copying similarly implies that the original element is unmodified; the later version simply a repetition of the earlier incarnation. Revisioning, on the other hand, acts more violently and more decisively on the precedent, violating its initial terms. The act of revision necessitates some kind of change. Here we are reminded of T. S. Eliot's famous quote, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal" which, like Bloom's theory of influence, acknowledges



Figure 2. Le Corbusier, Maisons Jaoul, Neuilly-sur Seine, France, 1956. Photograph by James Stirling.

that all poets are indebted to their predecessors—the distinction, in other words, is not between those who are and those who are not influenced by the past, but between those who simply repeat the past, and those who make it into something new, whose "theft" of the original idea makes it their own.

Applying Bloom's thinking to specific architectural examples yields one model for how we might analyze architecture's use of the past. In particular, I consider the work of British Architect James Stirling—one of the most provocative "revisioners" of the post-war era, whose work challenges the very definitions and boundaries of modern and postmodern. Of course, in so doing, I am necessarily revisioning Bloom's framework by translating it to architecture—this misreading or misprision is certainly deliberate and in the spirit of Bloom's original analytical intent.

### SWERVE

James Stirling's Maisons Jaoul, his first commissioned work completed in 1958 with his partner James Gowan, offers a clear example of Bloom's notion of a "swerve." The suggestion is that the precursor was on the right track but didn't go quite far enough and "should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves."<sup>5</sup>

Ham Common is a clear revisioning, in Bloom's terminology, of Le Corbusier's Maisons Jaoul. (Figs. 1 and 2). With its horizontal banding of exposed concrete infilled with load-bearing brick walls, in its arrangement of low-rise, detached cubic buildings on a long, narrow

## STANDING ON PRECEDENT

site, and even in specific details such as the u-shaped pre-cast concrete gargoyles, it seems to make a deliberate nod to Le Corbusier's building, completed only the year before Stirling. Reyner Banham described Ham Common as a "tidying" up of the "casual and untidy" Jaoul.<sup>6</sup>

But, Ham Common was not a copy of Jaoul. While undeniably indebted to Le Corbusier's earlier project, it nevertheless enacts a fundamental critique of Jaoul—a project which, at least on the surface, seemed to abandon modernism's core values and certainly its white-washed aesthetic in favor of a more expressive "brutal" language and primitive construction techniques. Rather than simply imitating or reproducing the earlier precedent, Stirling overlays the principles associated with the modern movement—principles that Stirling had found lacking at Jaoul—onto the "crude" post-war architectural language being developed concurrently by Le Corbusier

A few examples of the ways in which Stirling makes a more "rational" Jaoul: He introduces reveals between the brick wall and the reinforced concrete horizontal floor slabs to separate the materials more cleanly; As a reaction to the undifferentiated brick surface at Jaoul, the bricks at Ham Common are arrayed in a deliberate and regular gridded pattern, with horizontal banding defined by the running bond, and are calculated to maximize efficiency and minimize material use; The patterning in the *beton brut* is organized and systematic unlike its messy counterpoint at Jaoul; The pointing in the bricks is recessed, creating an "oblique shadow" that calls into relief the outlines of each individual brick. The intent wasn't simply to "tidy up" Jaoul—to use Banham's terminology—but instead to use materials more precisely—to give Ham Common the "mechanistic" qualities Stirling found lacking at Jaoul.

In their "rationalizing" of Jaoul, Stirling and Gowan were effectively "correcting" Le Corbusier by making him more "Corbusian"; they understood Le Corbusier as embodying modernism more broadly—as rational, precise, systematic, orderly, objective, machinelike—and were attempting to reintroduce those terms into his postwar work, as a kind of "swerve." The revisions at Ham Common attempted to make "more mechanistic" what Stirling termed the "primitive" aspects of Jaoul as a means to rationalize, or modernize, Jaoul.

### GENERALIZE

Another of Bloom's strategies and another of Stirling's projects offer a further exploration of this way of interpreting historical material. In Bloom's revisionary ratio that he termed "Daemonization," the "later poet" looks back to the work of the "parent poet" for meaning that extends beyond the specifics of the original work of art. In other words, the later poet attempts to "generalize away the uniqueness of the earlier work."<sup>7</sup>

Stirling and Gowan's Churchill College Competition offers an example of this "generalizing away of uniqueness" of the past. The un-built project, designed in 1959, was for a large, unoccupied site at

Cambridge University (Fig. 3). The program was for a new college, housing approximately 500 students, focusing on the sciences.

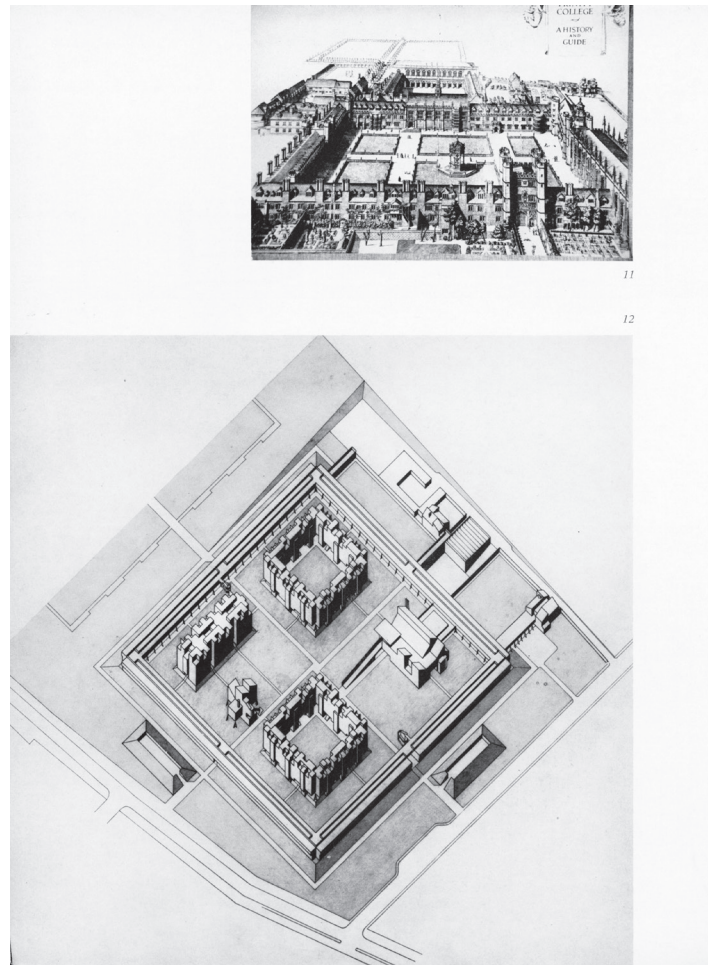


Figure 3. Stirling and Gowan, Churchill Collage, 1959, (below), juxtaposed with Trinity College (above), from James Stirling, "'The Functional Tradition' and Expression," *Perspecta* 6, 1960

The focus of the project is a giant courtyard, what Stirling and Gowan term the "Great Court," four times the size of the courtyard at Trinity College. Dormitory rooms encircle the perimeter. Public functions—library, eating hall, multipurpose room—are placed at the center, along with two other dormitory buildings, which are essentially miniatures of the overall courtyard form.

Stirling mentions many sources in his various writings and lectures about the project—Le Corbusier's La Tourette, and Louis Kahn's Richards Medical Building among them. But it's his revisioning of the traditional college courtyard that makes the project not simply a riff or copy or an earlier precedent but an interrogation and update of the core tenets of the courtyard type.

The key here is to understand what's retained and what is changed. The most noticeable similarity between the historical model and Stirling and Gowan's late iteration is the overall figure of the enclosed courtyard. Although it remains dominant in Stirling and Gowan's scheme, the increase in scale from the traditional model is equally pronounced and lends a greater air of monumentality to their project. Stirling and Gowan also insert smaller courtyard buildings inside, bringing back the scale of the traditional courtyards, as well as multiplying the number of courtyards. These two smaller courtyard buildings offer a novel alternative to the traditional courtyard circulation pattern; rather than moving from one adjacent court to another, movement is from a larger court to a smaller court-within-a-court.

Other changes to the typological precedent: the idiosyncratic outer walls of a typical Cambridge college that must respond to existing structures or site constraints are here, in the absence of any context, made rectilinear; the "quadrangle," more often than not a five- or six-sided shape, with randomly angled sides of uneven lengths, is taken to its logical endpoint of a perfect square; the usually erratic paths across the courtyard are now straightened and evenly spaced. Stirling and Gowan also remove public functions and place them as separate buildings in the center, clarifying programmatic distinctions in a way that the traditional courtyard typology does not. The shared public spaces, which are typically located in the "ring" of buildings around the courtyard, are now ejected into the middle of the courtyard. This programmatic separation is a foundational aspect of the scheme and offers a more "functional" answer to the programmatic differentiation of spaces within a traditional college.

Stirling and Gowan's project becomes an idealized courtyard plan, what a Cambridge college *would* look like were it not for the burdens of site and accumulated history. Rather than operating as any kind of idealizing or historicizing impulse, Churchill distills the core attributes of the courtyard type into a pure form, effectively reducing the college courtyard to its essence.

This use of the past *dehistoricizes* historical precedent. The symmetrical, enclosed, elevated form of Churchill College is immediately recognizable yet historically indeterminate. At Churchill, Stirling and Gowan generalize away uniqueness of past examples, to come back to Bloom's terminology, stripping the historical model of its exigencies, exaggerating its characteristics to generate a generic condition, an "ideogram" representing all courtyard buildings.

## REDEEM

Of all of Stirling and Gowan's projects, Leicester Engineering building seems to invite source hunting. Nearly every architectural critic commenting on the building, couldn't escape speculating on various antecedents and alleged influences, from Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax Building, to Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, to Antonio Sant'Elia's Città Nuova. But the most consistently mentioned and indeed most visually noticeable "quotation" is the Rusakov Worker's

Club by Antonin Melnikov, in particular the lecture halls that protrude dramatically from Melnikov's structure (Figs. 4 and 5).



Figure 4. Stirling and Gowan, Leicester Engineering Building, 1963.



Figure 5. Konstantin Melnikov, Rusakov Workers' Club, Moscow, 1928

The most significant difference between Stirling and Gowan's lecture halls at Leicester and their predecessors by Melnikov is the degree of visual and structural independence they have within the overall scheme. At Rusakov only the upper portions of the theaters emerge from the building envelope; the rest of the theater volumes are buried within the overall building profile. At Leicester, by contrast, the

volume of the theater is revealed in its entirety. The lecture halls become more or less autonomous objects, harnessed within the overall building cage. Their independence is reinforced by their dramatic cantilevers, which make them appear to literally escape from the rest of the building, and by the fact that around every edge they are confronted by a contrasting material or a gap and seem to “float” above the brick base. Structurally, the theaters are tied to the stair and elevator cores, but this connection is concealed behind their cantilevered masses so they effectively read as separate.

In comparison to Stirling and Gowan’s later version, Melnikov’s theaters begin to seem a weaker, milder iteration; the full volume of the lecture halls, which, thanks to Leicester, are now perceived as three-dimensional objects, seem to be buried within the Melnikov building, almost as if they desired to break free. The later project makes it feel as if Melnikov didn’t go far enough with his original form, that it could have been taken to a greater and more profound extreme.

These revisionings represents a what Bloom terms “tessera.” In this scenario, the later poet “provides what his imagination tells him would complete the otherwise ‘truncated’ precursor poem.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most provocative aspect of tessera is the suggestion that the later work isn’t simply a copy or even a correction but a “redemption” of the earlier work. Bloom’s framework, allows us to see the referential gestures at Leicester as progressive rather than regressive. Revisioning, in this case, fundamentally alters the way we understand the “original” and introduces the possibility that the later version could, in fact, supersede it. To say that another way: we begin to read Leicester as the originary moment—as the “stronger” version of the idea.

Each of these examples from the work of Stirling and Gowan “steals” from and “revisions” the past to make something new. The key is that all of them are “modern” and yet all rely on the past. By looking specifically at how they are misreading or misprisoning the past—correcting, swerving, generalizing, redeeming—we can begin to get at more general strategies for how to misread the past. We can also, I would suggest, begin to develop strategies for designing such misreadings in the work that architects do today.

In my brief analyses of Stirling’s projects, I have attempted to articulate an approach to analyzing architecture in which the role of influence is openly acknowledged and forms the basis of a new type of theoretical inquiry. This type of analysis could happen in the history class or in the studio.

History in this way becomes a kind of “guide,” but it does so by suggesting ways of revisioning the past, rather than by favoring any one architect or style over another. It becomes operative not by advocating for any one type of school or style, but by illuminating possible approaches to working with historical material and understanding its relationship to past examples.

## ENDNOTES

1. Jonathan Lethem, “The Anxiety of Influence: A Plagiarism,” *Harpers* (February 2007). See also Jonathan Lethem, *The Anxiety of Influence: Nonfictions, Etc.* (Doubleday, 2011).
2. Reinhold Martin, *Utopia’s Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis, Minn.; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Jorge Otero-Pailos. *Architecture’s Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). See also Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977)
3. Among many examples see the session “Post-Modernism Revisited: The Presence of the Recent Past,” at the 2013 Society of Architectural Historians Annual Meeting. See also *Journal of Architectural Education*, “Beyond Precedent,” Issue 64:2, Blackwell Publishing, March 2011.
4. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
5. Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 14.
6. Reyner Banham, *New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (New York: Reinhold, 1966), 88.
7. Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 15.
8. *Ibid.*, 66.