

Italian Jobs

Working and travelling with James Stirling was an old-fashioned masterclass, says Barbara Weiss

Most educationalists today agree with the importance of tailoring teaching methods to suit individual learning. Furthermore, the evidence of the benefits of active 'doing', compared with passively 'receiving' wisdom, is compelling. In agreement with this view, I can confidently say that the most formative periods of my architectural training occurred not during my five years at college, but in my two stints at James Stirling, Michael Wilford & Associates.

When I first joined the practice in 1976, as a very green third-year student, to work on a competition for the proposed Tuscan Regional Centre, I had my Italian background to thank; when I later returned, in 1983, it was to work for two more years as project architect also on an interesting array of Italian projects.

The office, consisting then of 11 staff, plus Jim and Michael, was run in a totally idiosyncratic way that allowed both highly creative thinking and a great degree of rigid perfectionism. This counterpoint of easygoing and exacting, subversive and authoritarian, humorous and scholarly was reflected in the work as well as in interpersonal relationships in the practice.

At JSMWA every member knew his place, played a specific role in the overall team, and was respected for his/her unique skills, rather than being pigeonholed according to more standard office hierarchies relating to age or experience. Our common thread was that we all worshipped Jim, and hung on his every word and every sketch, while simultaneously indulging frequently in playful – and somewhat liberating – school-boyish camaraderie with him.

The practice was a republic that encouraged total dedication, while constantly and deliberately stretching our intellectual and professional abilities; it was also an enlightened dictatorship that made sense of disparate personalities, ways of designing and thinking – always bringing out the very best from communal effort.

Out of the office, I accompanied Jim on numerous visits to Italy. The privilege of travelling with him, of discussing what we saw, of witnessing him, with his inimitable magpie instincts, observe, dissect and set aside for future use anything that took his fancy, from small details to whole city plans, altered forever the way I look at things.

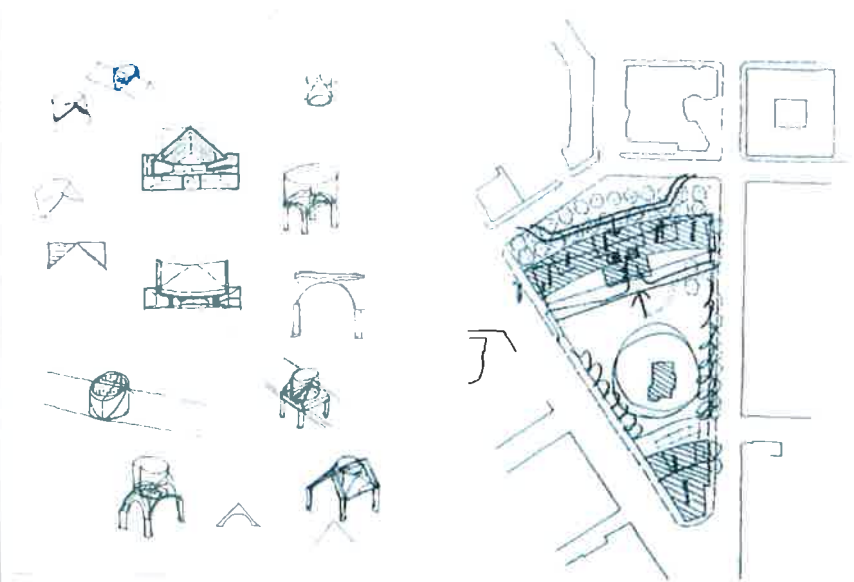
The intensity of this full immersion into a world totally concentrated on the discipline, as well as the making, of architecture, has also left me with the conviction of the immeasurable value of old-fashioned masterclasses, and a compulsion to always aim for the highest standards – while at the same time allowing the personal and incidental to affect the abstract. It has had a profound effect not only on how I design, and what I design, but also on how I work with my own team, and with clients (watching Jim 'perform', while explaining his extraordinary designs, never failed to thrill).

Most crucially, I owe to Jim the essential realisation that in life, as in architecture, the constant play between opposites is the secret to discovering extraordinary layers of added richness. /

“Witnessing Jim – with his inimitable magpie instincts – observe, dissect and set aside for future use anything that caught his fancy, from small details to whole city plans, altered forever the way I look at things.”

Right
Sketches of Latina Public Library, for which Barbara Weiss was project architect while working in the office of James Stirling, Michael Wilford & Associates. She later went on to found Barbara Weiss Architects.

James Stirling (1926-92) worked in partnership with James Gowan between 1956 and 1963, and with Michael Wilford from 1971 until his untimely death.



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Lewis Blackwell

Executive director for strategy and development at the Building Centre in London.



Rory Gardiner

Australian-born, London-based architectural photographer.

David Morley

Established David Morley Architects in 1987, having previously been a director at Foster Associates. Recent work by the practice includes the London 2012 water polo arena and the Dickson Poon University of Oxford China Centre; a residential building is on site at London's King's Cross.



Steve Parnell

Architect, lecturer at the University of Nottingham and regular contributor to the architectural press. He won the 2012 RIBA President's Award for Outstanding PhD Thesis for his study of the magazine AD, 'Architectural Design, 1954-72'.



Stephen Proctor

Founding director with Andrew Matthews in 1988 of Proctor & Matthews Architects, whose recent projects include Abode at Great Kneighton, Cambridge, the 'supreme winner' at the 2014 Housing Design Awards (AT2-48). He is a member of the RIBA Housing Group and the Essex Design Initiative.



Timothy Soar

An architectural photographer who initially studied engineering, whose photography of Marks Barfield's Greenwich pavilions appear in this issue.

Carolyn Steel

Author of 'Hungry City: How Food Shapes Our Lives' – and a director of Kilburn Nightingale Architects. She is currently working on a book titled 'The Idea of Food' which explores her idea of 'sitopia' (food place) to be published by Chatto & Windus.

Barbara Weiss

Trained at Geneva's Ecole d'Architecture and at the AA in London before working at Johnson-Burgee and Richard Meier & Partners in New York, Valle Broggi Burckhardt in Milan, and at James Stirling Michael Wilford & Associates in London. She founded Barbara Weiss Architects in 1987; recent work includes Wokingham Medical Centre and a new Ark for the Westminster Synagogue.



M.J. Wells

Trained as an architect in Liverpool and London before undertaking postgraduate studies in architectural history at the Courtauld Institute of Art. He works in practice in London.

