



## Circling the Square: Mies van der Rohe and James Stirling

*Exhibited at the RIBA Architecture Gallery, 66 Portland Place – March to August 2017. Curated by Marie Bak Mortensen (Head of Exhibitions) and Victoria Wilson (Assistant Curator)*

Victoria Wilson\*

\*Until recently, was Assistant Curator of the Royal Institute of British Architects Drawings and Archives Collection and co-curator of *Circling the Square: Mies van der Rohe and James Stirling* with her colleague Marie Bak Mortensen (Head of Exhibitions). Also co-curated RIBA's 2015-2016 exhibition *Palladian Design: the good, the bad and the unexpected*. Currently, works at Ramsbury Manor in Wiltshire as Collections Manager.

### Abstract

This article discusses the RIBA's recent exhibition: *Circling the Square: Mies van der Rohe and James Stirling* which offers a renewed examination of two iconic architectural schemes proposed for the same site in the City of London. Mies van der Rohe's unrealised Mansion House Square and its built successor, Number One Poultry by James Stirling, were both commissioned by architectural patron and developer Lord Peter Palumbo and represent a unique opportunity to draw comparisons between the design methods and solutions of two of the most highly regarded architects of the 20th century. The planning history of the two schemes spans over five decades from the 1960s to the 1990s, providing a fascinating insight into a complex and transitional period in the history of British architecture which saw the successive rise and fall of modernism and postmodernism, and the growth of an influential conservation movement. Intended to replace an eclectic block of Victorian listed buildings, both schemes were opposed by heritage groups and subjected to high-profile public inquiries to decide their fate. Debate over the value of Britain's late twentieth century architectural heritage continues to the present day, with the recent controversial listing of Number One Poultry.

## Introduction

“**C**ircling the Square’ is the story of one remarkable site in the heart of the historic City of London, one that has been at the forefront of architectural debate in Britain for over fifty years. In the early 1960s, Peter (later Lord) Palumbo approached Mies van der Rohe to design a new icon for London’s then premier financial district, close to the Bank of England and opposite the Lord Mayor’s residence at Mansion House. What followed was a thirty-year planning battle, initially to secure permission for Mies’s classic modernist tower and plaza proposal, and later, after that scheme was finally refused in 1985, for its replacement Number One Poultry, designed by that exuberant architect of the postmodern generation, James Stirling. Ranged against both schemes were fiercely fought and highly organised campaigns by a consortium of heritage groups attempting to save from demolition the block of Victorian office buildings that stood on the site - not to mention the shifting climate of architectural taste in Britain during the later twentieth century.

The exhibition (Figures 1 and 2) came about thanks to the generosity of Lord Palumbo, who opened up his personal archive on Mansion House Square to the RIBA’s curators back in 2015. Lord Palumbo had already donated material relating to the Mansion House Square public inquiry to the RIBA in the 1980s, as had architectural historians Robert Thorne and Gavin Stamp, representing the opposition. Initially, therefore, our intention was to curate an exhibition focused upon Mies’s unrealised proposal, inviting comparison with present-day controversy over the impact of tall buildings on London’s streets and skyline. However, in the summer of 2016 there came the thrilling discovery that the original drawings for Number One Poultry had not ended up at the Canadian Centre of Architecture with the rest of Stirling’s archive, as we had supposed, but were still in London in the care of the building’s Project Architect, Laurence Bain. With the benefit of Mr Bain’s unrivalled knowledge of the project and archive, we could include



Figure 1. Circling the Square exhibition. Source: Francis Ware, RIBA Collections.



Figure 2. Circling the Square exhibition. Source: Francis Ware, RIBA Collections.

a fascinating sample of the Stirling office's design and development material, revealing how Number One Poultry was shaped from the beginning by a keen awareness of why Mies's scheme had failed with the planners.

We had been presented with a rare and irresistible opportunity to compare side by side the design solutions of two highly renowned architects presented with the same site, client and budget - architects who, if judged by the appearance of their buildings alone, could not be more different. But we did not want to use the exhibition to pose any trite challenge as to which is the 'better' or 'more appropriate' choice of building for such a prestigious location, surrounded as it is by icons of past ages on all sides - Sir Christopher Wren's Church of St. Stephen Walbrook (completed 1679), George Dance's Mansion House (completed 1752) and Sir Edwin Lutyens's Midland Bank (designed 1924). Instead, we wanted to trace the continuity in purpose and approach that unites two such dissimilar creations, both seeking to respond to, and find their own place in, the continuum of the City's architectural heritage.

This expansion of focus for the exhibition has proven uncannily timely, with the recent listing of Number One Poultry indicative of an apparent shift in the perception of postmodern architecture from a defunct fad to threatened heritage deserving of protection. Earlier in the twentieth century, both Victorian and modernist architecture underwent

similar transformations in perception, from status quo to reviled eye-sores and finally as buildings that inspire renewed appreciation and affection.

Taken as a whole, the story of the site at Mansion House can be seen as a fascinating microcosm of Britain's changing attitudes to both contemporary and historic architecture over the last fifty years.

### **Mansion House Square: 1962 to 1985**

The 1950s and 60s saw the zenith of modernist office building in London. Skyscraper architecture had been led by America since the late nineteenth century and by the mid-twentieth, buildings such as the Secretariat at the UN Complex by Oscar Niemeyer and Le Corbusier (completed 1952), Lever House by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, (also 1952), and the Seagram Tower by Mies van der Rohe (1958), all in New York, provided models that were imitated and copied all over the world (Wright, 2006).

Peter Palumbo discovered the work of Mies van der Rohe as a teenager in the early 1950s, shortly after the completion of the Farnsworth House (which Palumbo was to buy in 1972). By the end of the decade, Palumbo and his father, the property developer Rudolph Palumbo, had begun to purchase the first of thirteen freeholds and 348 leaseholds that made up what was to become known as the Mansion House Square site (Mansion House Square Scheme 1981). In 1962 Palumbo found himself in a position to of-

fer Mies van der Rohe his first British commission (Palumbo, 1984).

At this time, Mies was at the peak of his international career. He had begun work in his native Germany at the turn of the century, designing competent if conventional houses in the classical tradition for the upper-middle classes. By the 1920s, however, Mies had drastically changed direction in the search for an architecture more representative of its own time. His experiments in futuristic, Expressionist glass skyscrapers were in fact decades ahead of their time, whilst the Brick and Concrete country villas introduced radically free open-plans (Schultz and Windhorst, 2012). This shift in approach culminated in the two buildings widely regarded as his earliest masterpieces; the German Pavilion for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona, Spain and the Tugendhat villa in Brno, Czechoslovakia of 1930.

After fleeing Nazi Germany for America in 1938, Mies reinvented himself again as the proponent of a new architectural language of glass, brick, concrete and steel, reflecting the achievements and materiality of the modern, technological age. From the 1940s onwards, Mies was to apply this new language to endless variations on two main archetypes – the single-storey, clear-span structure, seen in small, domestic form at the Farnsworth House (1951), but also employed for university buildings like Crown Hall (1956) and the monumental, unbuilt Chicago Convention Hall

(1953), and the multi-storey tower, perfected at Seagram (Frampton, 2007).

The enduring influence on Mies of an older generation of classicists (in particular the nineteenth century architect and planner Karl Friedrich Schinkel) is evidenced by this rational, systematic approach to design where buildings are considered as problems to be solved. Once the formulae had been perfected Mies saw no need to further develop or reinvent it; the template could be adapted and reused again and again (Schultz and Windhorst, 2012).

It was just such a variation of the classic Miesian tower type that was proposed for London – an office building clad in a skin of solid bronze mullions and bronze-tinted glass, its eighteen storeys of office accommodation elevated upon a colonnade of thin bronze stilts surrounding a double-height glazed lobby with a marble-lined interior. But the tower formed just one component of a scheme composed of three inter-related elements – an underground shopping concourse, adapted from Mies's contemporary scheme at the Toronto Dominion Centre (1969) (Carter, 1984a), was to provide traffic-free access to the tower and local tube stations, whilst above ground seventy-eight percent of the site was given over to a clean, uncluttered public plaza stretching from Mies's tower to the side of the Mansion House (*Mansion House Square Scheme*, 1981).



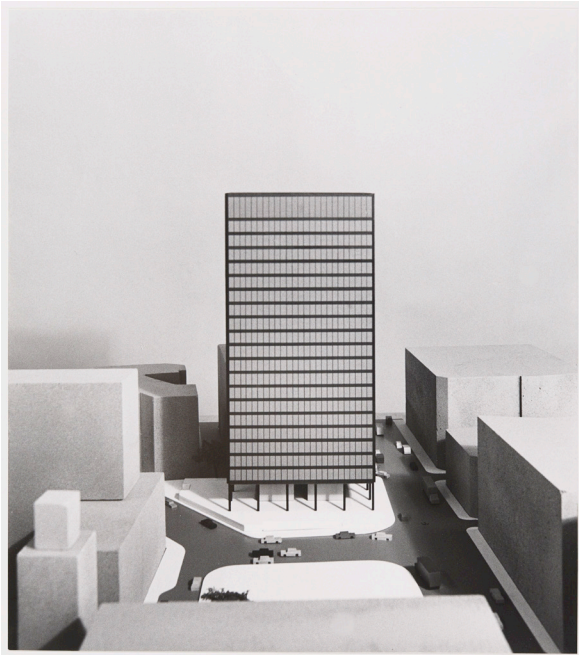


Figure 3. First known study model from ca. May 1967. Source: Francis Ware, RIBA Collections.

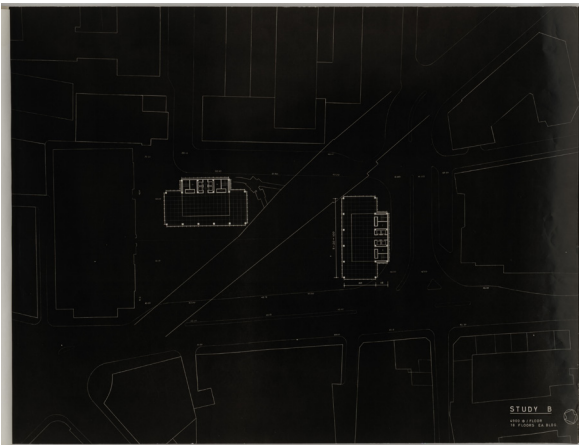


Figure 4. Feasibility Study B from set of eight studies, ca. 1963-4. Source: Francis Ware, RIBA Collections.

The scheme was developed from 1962 right up until Mies's death in 1969. As Mies was based in the United States, a London office was established under the supervision of Project Architect Peter Carter, whilst Mies's grandson, Dirk Lohan, acted as Project Architect for the Chicago office. In addition, the British planner and architect Lord William Holford was brought on board to advise on the complexities of London planning and traffic regulations.

Very little original design material survives for Mansion House Square and no drawings in Mies's own hand are known (although several private archives are yet to be fully explored and published). This provided ammunition for later critics who accused Mies of turning the project over to his staff and taking little personal involvement. At this late stage in his life, however, Mies was suffering from arthritis and failing eyesight, so that study models, always important, now became the primary design tool (Schultz and Windhorst, 2012). Only when a project had been satisfactorily developed in three dimensions, progressing from smaller-scale massing models to detailed full-size mock-ups of individual components, would a set of drawings be prepared (Carter, 1984a).

The earliest known study model for Mansion House Square is recorded only in photographs (Figure 3), the original having been either discarded or mislaid. Dating to around May 1967, only the basic components of the scheme are in place

and the details and finish yet to be finalised. It is unclear when this configuration of square and office block first arose, placing Mies's modernist tower in a formal relationship with its stately, classical neighbours. Lord Holford wrote to Mies on 1st February 1963 that he expected the project to essentially consist of "a large office block facing an open space" (Holford Papers, folder D147/C39/1(ii)), but a later memo by Holford suggests it was not until 1967 that the tower's location was fixed at the far west of the site, allowing enough space for the generously proportioned square (Holford Papers, folder D147/C39/6). Indeed, an earlier set of feasibility studies from ca. 1963-4 (Figure 4) show that a series of very different configurations for the site were initially considered by the Mies office, many of which would have entirely precluded anything like the balanced arrangement achieved in the final design. Practical considerations were as important as the architectural effect to be gained from opening up the square; the presence of underground railway and pedestrian tunnels at Bank Junction necessitated the positioning of the building as far away from such complications as possible (Carter, 1984b).

In this early version of the scheme, the tower comprises five structural bays by three, with each bay made up of five modules of five feet each. This was later amended to a more generous six feet, six inch module, with three bays of six modules each on the long sides and three bays of four modules on the short. Mies apparently felt this adjustment



Figure 5. Ashtray in travertine marble. Source: RIBA Collections.

of the building's proportions brought it more into accordance with the monumental scale of the surrounding buildings (Carter, 1984a). As the scheme developed and after Mies had the opportunity to visit London in 1964 and see the site for himself, he incorporated many other similarly subtle concessions to the site's historic context. While Mansion House Square certainly adheres to Mies's typical design vocabulary (with the tower even reappearing in the exactly contemporary, and also unrealised, King Broadcasting Studios in Washington State, 1967-69) (Carter, 1984c), Mies was not averse to modifying his template in order to contextualise the scheme to its London setting. Most obvious is the height of the tower itself, which is significantly lower at eighty-eight and a half metres than any of those Mies built in America. Elsewhere, the height of the ground floor lobby canopy perfectly aligns with the corresponding string courses of its neighbours, establishing a direct dialogue between the new and the existing structures. Internally too, Mies broke with his own conventions in his treatment of the two service cores, relocating them from their usual position in the centre of a plan to rest here against the west wall. This modification allowed office workers an unobstructed view over the newly created square in one direction, and an equally impressive glimpse of St Paul's Cathedral from the other, to be enjoyed at leisure while waiting for the lift. As ever with Mies's architecture, the building's external features act as expressions of its internal structure and planning grid; thus, on the rear elevation, two vertical bands of louvre panels represent

the unusual presence of these service cores on the other side of the wall (Carter, 1984a).

Mansion House Square provided Mies with his biggest budget since Seagram (Schultz and Windhorst, 2012) and he indulged lavishly in his favourite materials – along with their bronze skin components and shop fronts, the square, the roof of the tower, and the shopping concourse were all to be paved in Cornish granite. Key interior walls were to be faced in travertine marble and even the beautifully designed ashtrays (Figure 5) were to be fashioned out of this same expensive material.

And there are other indicators that Mansion House Square represented a special commission for Mies, one in which he took a deep interest. An early letter by Mies to Lord Holford, dated 15th February 1963, sets out his expectations of their working relationship: "...As in all of my work, I insist on the architectural control during the entire job ... I am most interested in this project since Mr Palumbo wants an extremely fine building, and to build such a building in London would be indeed an honour" (Holford Papers, folder D147/C39/1(ii)).

Interestingly, Holford later expressed to Palumbo his unwillingness to act merely as a "liaison architect" (Holford Papers, letter dated 14th February 1963, folder D147/C39/1(ii)) with the necessary authorities, and clearly hoped for a more equal design collaboration. The archive at Liverpool University also includes some fascinating

alternative schemes designed by Holford himself that post-date Mies's appointment as architect (Holford Papers, folder D147/C39/3). The square formed a particularly contentious issue, with Holford left disappointed that traffic requirements meant severing the square from the base of the tower by redirecting Queen Victoria Street in front of it. Throughout the autumn of 1967 he fought for a compromise solution that involved picking up Mies's tower, turning it ninety degrees and running the road underneath it!

The first official set of drawings was not produced until September 1967, and a copy of this is now in the RIBA's collection. Mies typically designed blank, flexible office spaces to suit the needs of multiple, often unknown, occupants; these drawings therefore represent a unique concession by Mies as they indicate detailed layouts for every single floor, reflecting the specific requirements of the prospective single tenant at the time, Lloyd's International (Carter, 1984b). According to Peter Carter in his testimony at the 1984 public inquiry, by the time of his death in August 1969, Mies had overseen the preparation of two more sets of drawings, including a full set of preliminary working drawings and material specifications. Carter also recalled his final conversation with Mies, who relayed detailed instructions as to the exact positioning and profile of the bronze flagpole in the square. Carter's point was that Mansion House Square was indeed a genuine, and complete, Mies van der Rohe design - neither an off-the-

shelf product of the Mies office nor a case of the team "interpreting a collection of rough sketches" left behind after his death.

Nonetheless, the scheme was not to have an easy ride through the planning process, even in the relatively modernism and high-rise-friendly 1960s. The thirty-metre height limit set by the 1894 London Building Act had been lifted in 1954 and developers had wasted no time in exploiting the economic advantages of building high. Bucklersbury House (built 1954-58, Owen Campbell Jones & Sons), which would have formed the least distinguished side to Mansion House Square, was one of the first modernist tall buildings at fifty-one metres. By the end of the 1950s, several buildings were in construction that would reach 100 metres (Wright, 2006).

In the 1960s, however, more and more obstacles were being put in the way of schemes like Mansion House Square and attitudes to tall modernist office blocks were already beginning to shift. Harold Wilson's government introduced Office Development Permits in 1965 in a bid to gain more control over the activities of profiteering developers (Wright, 2006). Palumbo's team was not able to acquire an ODP until April 1968 (Carter, 1984a) and this was still no guarantee of planning permission for the project. The building's proposed height of just under ninety metres proved to be a major obstacle to securing the approval of both the Greater London Council (which had replaced the London County



Figure 6. Public exhibition at the Royal Exchange, October 1968. Source: John Donat, RIBA Collections.

Council in 1964) and the Royal Fine Arts Commission, a government advisory body that held significant influence over planning decisions. At the very time that Mansion House Square was under discussion by these bodies, the GLC was developing its new High Buildings Policy that defined a tall building generally as anything over 150 feet (47.5 metres) and for buildings in the City as any structure “in excess of the general height of surrounding development” (Haskell, 1966). Grave concerns were expressed over the tower’s potential impact on views of St Paul’s Cathedral and on the wider skyline of the City. The Palumbo team had to go to great lengths to persuade the GLC to make an immediate exception to their new policy on the grounds of the scheme’s “outstanding architectural merit” (Palumbo, 1968) including bringing PR’s founding father Tim Traverse-Healy on board and staging a lavish public exhibition in the Great Hall of the Royal Exchange in October 1968 (Figure 6). Having stood firm on the height issue, the team eventually secured a promise of planning permission in May 1969, just three months before Mies passed away.

But there were conditions to this promise that were eventually to prove the downfall of Mansion House Square. To get around the lengthy lease remaining on the Bank of New Zealand, (the triangular building which stood right in the middle of the area proposed for the new square) the project team had proposed constructing the scheme in two phases, illustrated through a specially designed model with two interchangeable sections

(Figure 7). Phase one would involve demolishing the Victorian buildings on the wedge-shaped site where Queen Victoria Street meets Poultry, and building the tower and shopping concourse immediately. Phase two would be delayed until the Bank of New Zealand could be acquired and this too demolished to make way for the square.

Although the square was pitched as a unique civic asset, after a meeting with the RFAC on 14th February 1968, Holford noted that several members had expressed an aversion to the idea of a large open space in the middle of the City, and favoured phase one over phase two (Holford Papers, folder D147/C39/1(i)). It was, therefore, rather surprising that when planning permission was at last promised, it was with the stipulation that construction could only begin once Palumbo had completed all the free and leasehold purchases and so had sufficient control over the entire site to ensure both tower and square could be completed within a single phase of development (Corporation of London, 1969). As a result, it was not until January of 1982 that the team, minus both Mies and Holford (the latter having died in 1975), was ready to resubmit its plans for a scheme now almost twenty years old.

In the intervening eleven years, attitudes to modern, high-rise developments had undergone a steady decline following the widespread ideological (and with the collapse of Ronan Point in 1968, literal) failure of residential tower blocks to provide safe and desirable social housing. This alongside





Figure 7. Model showing phase one of two phase development, 1968. Source: RIBA Collections.

the growing perception that contemporary commercial architecture offered little more than a series of repetitive glass boxes. For many, the New Brutalist concrete architecture of the 1970s was as grey and depressing as the economic situation after the oil crisis of 1973. Recession meant that restoration and re-use was increasingly seen as a more viable option than complete redevelopment, bolstered by the rise of a conservation movement which was campaigning for protection and restoration over demolition of historic buildings and townscapes (Wright, 2006).

The Victorian Society had formed in 1958, indicative of a turnaround in academic and popular interest in mid to late nineteenth century architecture, so much maligned since the end of the Victorian era. And it was not only threats to grand, stately or religious architecture that provoked campaigners, but also those to commercial and industrial heritage of just the type represented by the eclectic block of Victorian shops and offices at Mansion House (Glendinning, 2013). The most highly regarded of these was the neo-Gothic Mappin & Webb building of 1870 by John Belcher, with its distinctive cupola-topped tower at the apex of Poultry and Queen Victoria Street (Figure 8). The high-profile demolitions in the early 1960s of the Euston Arch and the London Coal exchange only succeeded in drawing increased support for the movement and as a result, many of the buildings on the Mansion House Square site received individual listed status during the 1970s and early 1980s. The surrounding area of

Bank junction was also designated a conservation area under the 1967 Civic Amenities Act. Perhaps most fatal of all to Mansion House Square was the formation in 1975 of the conservation group SAVE Britain's Heritage, who were to lead the consortium of heritage organisations that opposed the scheme when it came to public inquiry in 1984.



Figure 8. Mappin and Webb building, illustrated in the *Builder*, 1871. Source: RIBA Collections.



Figure 9. The Guildhall courtroom during the 1984 public inquiry into Mansion House Square. Source: John Donat, RIBA Collections.

All of this activity meant that by 1982 Palumbo and his team faced a formidable task to get Mansion House Square off the drawing board and into construction. The resubmitted plans had changed little from the time of Mies's involvement in the project; ever aware that the scheme would outlive him, Mies had ensured his design allowed enough flexibility that it could accommodate any new building services, technologies and regulations that might arise in the future. The hope was that the City Corporation would honour its promise of 1969; in fact, it took just 17 minutes of discussion for the Planning Sub-Committee to turn the scheme down in July 1982, citing numerous reasons, chief among them being that it would involve demolishing newly listed buildings (Carter, 1984a).

After Palumbo appealed this decision the battle lines were drawn, with the Greater London Council and SAVE both announcing their intention to fight the appeal. A public inquiry date was set for May 1984 and one of the biggest dramas in British architecture commenced (Figure 9). Building Design magazine covered the events in a weekly column like an unfolding soap-opera, with Jan Burney describing the opening as "rather like a royal wedding or, more accurately, a state funeral" (Burney, 1984) with anyone who was anyone in the architectural establishment putting in an appearance. The list of witnesses willing to attest to the merits of the scheme was indeed formidable, including Sir John Summerson, Richard Rogers, Berthold Lubetkin, RIBA President Michael Manser and even James

Stirling, blissfully unaware that he would be fighting for his own scheme in just a few years' time. The scheme's opponents were also able to boast high profile supporters. Philip Johnson, a pioneer of the postmodern movement but formerly a devoted Mies disciple who had worked with him as Associate Architect on Seagram, wrote to the historian Gavin Stamp that he considered it "a bad idea for one of the greatest architects in the 20th century to be represented .... by a posthumous and unimportant piece of architecture. The continent of America is over-represented by these later "sons of Seagram" ... Both Mies and London deserve better monuments" (Johnson, 1984). Johnson's comments were echoed by many opponents of the scheme who saw in its strict adherence to the Miesian canon of tower architecture a complete lack of originality or sensitivity to the City's unique historic fabric.

The most high-profile opponent of all was, of course, the Prince of Wales. 1984 was a momentous, almost dystopian, year for modern architecture in Britain. Not only was Mansion House Square and Miesian modernism on trial, but while the inquiry was still taking place the Prince delivered his now famous speech at Hampton Court Palace on 30th May. It was the RIBA's 150th anniversary gala evening and also the occasion of Indian architect Royal Gold Medalreceiving the Royal Gold Medal. However, the evening was dominated by the Prince's unprecedented attack on modern architecture and the rough-shod development

that had blighted so many historic towns and cities since the end of the Second World War. The Prince singled out several buildings for particular censure, including most famously ABK's National Gallery extension which was later scrapped, while Mansion House Square was pointedly criticized as a "giant glass stump better suited to downtown Chicago than the City of London".

This idea of the open plaza as a product of the American grid system and, as such, alien to the historic, irregular street pattern of the old City had persisted since the RFAC's criticisms of the scheme back in the 1960s. It was addressed in an alternative proposal, commissioned by SAVE and prepared by Terry Farrell. This unofficial report made the case for refurbishment of all eight of the listed buildings to provide a combination of office, shopping and dining facilities while small, enclosed public courtyards offered a direct contrast to Mies's vast, draughty square which "blasts open the tight hub of buildings and streets at the Bank intersection" (Terry Farrell Partnership, 1984, p.41).

Despite their extraordinary efforts to defend the scheme, including the production of some of the most detailed architectural presentation models ever made (painstakingly restored and reunited to form the showstopper centrepieces of the exhibition) the Palumbo team were defeated. The verdict came back in May of 1985; Secretary of State for the Environment, Patrick Jenkin, praised the scheme as a "bold and imaginative endeavour to

achieve a development of real distinction". However, both square and tower were unacceptable in their scale and character and as such would fail to achieve any harmony with their surroundings. Jenkin did not, however, believe that the Victorian buildings were of such importance that any future proposal to replace them would also be refused, stating that "it would be wrong to attempt to freeze the character of the City of London for all time" (Jenkin, 1985). The door had been left open for another attempt.

After the investment of so much time, energy and money, no one would have been surprised had Peter Palumbo decided in May 1985 to sell the site at Mansion House and move on. But for Palumbo, the project had always been more about providing patronage for great architecture than it was about profit. Just a few months later, he had taken Jenkin at his word and commissioned another great architect of international fame, James Stirling, to start work on a new, and hopefully more "acceptable" proposal.

### **Number One Poultry: 1985 - 1998**

As Mansion House Square was in its death throes, Stirling was scoring his first major success in many years with the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, completed in 1984. He was to follow it up with a string of cultural buildings in a distinctive style often identified (much to Stirling's annoyance) with the growing postmodern movement. In complete



contrast to the trajectory of Mies's output, Stirling had been most subject to modernist influences early on in his career, making his name with the stylistically daring Leicester Engineering Building (1963), in partnership with James Gowan. Stirling's influences and interests were, however, diverse, ranging from the Beaux-Arts curriculum of the Liverpool School of Architecture, where he studied in the immediate postwar period, through British vernacular buildings and an early worship of Le Corbusier. His architectural output drew on these eclectic stimuli to varying degrees throughout his career, but his later buildings brought to the fore a growing concern for a more contextually driven approach, often utilising lively historical references (Baker, 2011). Surely Stirling was the ideal architect to address the concerns of those who had condemned Mansion House Square as acontextual?

This time around the site was much more restricted than the one Mies's team had to work with. The issue of the New Zealand Bank remained unresolved and as such the Stirling team were required to come up with a more integrated solution to fit the same programmatic elements of office and retail accommodation and public space onto what was now an awkward wedge-shaped plot. Building tall, however, was no longer a viable option. The day of the City skyscraper was, for now at least, over and in its place was a new breed of medium-rise offices, designed to maximise trading floor capacity by stacking fewer storeys over a wider area (Wright, 2006). In its final form Number

One Poultry rises to just five storeys above ground and three below. A public garden and restaurant are cleverly squeezed onto the roof, and an external atrium plunges all the way down through the centre of the building to light the office floors, a ground floor courtyard and a below-ground shopping concourse. Further shopping facilities are provided on the ground floor, along with a public passageway linking Poultry to Queen Victoria Street. Most striking is the building's use of colour, such a signature of Stirling's work, with the softer, natural tones of stone and brick contrasted with bright primary colours used to express manufactured materials. The façade of Number One Poultry is finished with alternating bands of soft-pink and sand-coloured sandstone, a distinctive effect but a comparatively muted one, in deference its historic surroundings. On its less visible areas, however, the building lets loose with eye-popping turquoise on the roof, glazed purple tiles in the inner walls of the atrium, punctuated by window frames of yellow, pink and blue, and on the rear elevation, a single, squat, bright yellow column interrupts the plate glass wall of the Green Man pub. In plan, the building is one complex series of interlocking geometrical forms arranged, like its classical neighbours, symmetrically about an east-west axis. Overlapping triangular openings cut into the vast drum of the central atrium, which itself sits snugly within the encompassing triangular floor plan. This formal geometry is continued on the roof with a parterre garden designed by Arabella Lennox-Boyd (Figure 10).





Figure 10. Number One Poultry. Source: Richard Bryant 1997.

While Mies had spent a lifetime fine-tuning a systematic, objective approach to design, ensuring his office's output conformed to a homogenous architectural language, Stirling's methods were more intuitive and the product of creative team interaction. Nonetheless, there is a definite Stirling office methodology of sorts and one that is illustrated clearly through the design material for Number One Poultry. When it came to selecting material for the exhibition we, as curators, were spoilt for choice as the project archive is so unusually complete. Stirling's consciousness that his design was likely to face the same scrutiny as Mies's perhaps overrode the usual tendency to throw material away when it was no longer needed.

Stirling began by sending his team to thoroughly research the site, documenting in photographs the large-scale details of the surrounding architecture. The influence of its rusticated, monumental stone work, the undulating façades of curves and arches and the classical rhythms of repeating horizontal and vertical bays can all be detected in the two proposals that followed.

The design process itself commenced with the team experimenting simply with how to fit the required elements onto the site; the archive contains hundreds of these early drawings, each idea given an intriguingly descriptive name such as the "Dart" scheme, "Temple" scheme or "House within a house" scheme. Stirling then stepped in to act as a sort of magpie, selecting and editing

those solutions he liked, having them redrawn to incorporate his own ideas or combined to form new hybrid schemes (Girouard, 1998).

Again unlike Mies, Stirling continued to design through drawing until the end of his life, although by this stage he usually only contributed sketches at the beginning of a project, leaving the draughtsmanship of the distinctive 'worm's eye' axonometrics to his staff who were rigorously trained to duplicate this painstakingly precise office style (Girouard, 1998). Models featured, but only as tools for explaining the evolving concepts to the planners. The exhibition included a number of Stirling's exquisite pencil and ink sketches for Number One Poultry (Figure 11) where one can see him playing around with ideas introduced in the earlier office-produced programmatic schemes, working them up into what would become two alternative proposals, known as Schemes A and B.

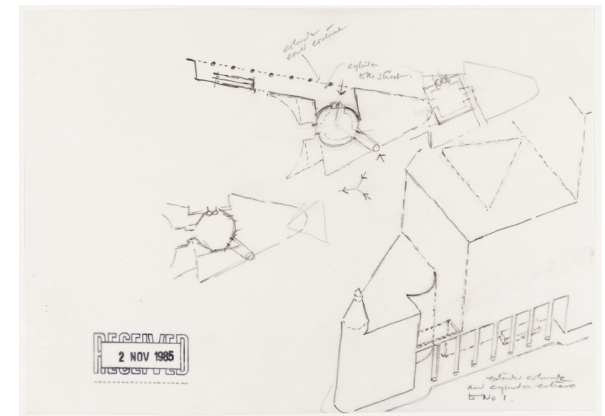


Figure 11. Stirling sketch for Scheme A incorporating colonnade, November 1985. Courtesy of Laurence Bain.

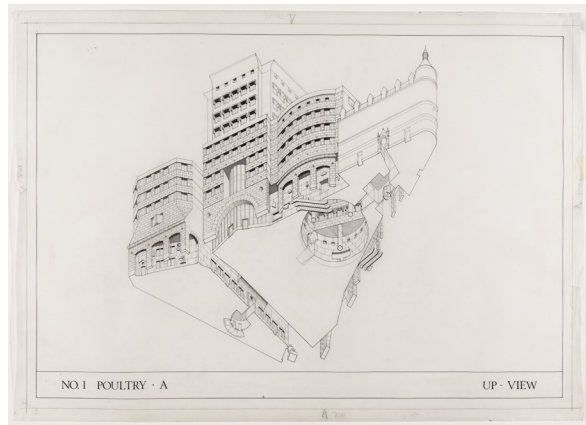


Figure 12. Scheme A up-view. Courtesy of Laurence Bain.

Interestingly, Scheme A retained the Mappin & Webb building at the apex of the site, a conciliatory gesture to those who wished to preserve what Stirling himself agreed was the best of the existing structures. Old and new are woven together in a tapestry of referential touches. Not only does the height of each, distinct, portion of Stirling's building accord with that of one of the surrounding buildings, but a ground floor loggia provides the setting for a sort of gallery of archaeological finds, displaying fragments of gothic window arches, columns and capitals copied directly from Mappin & Webb's own façade (Figure 12). An element of this archaeological approach was retained in the final design, with the inclusion over the Poultry entrance of the 1875 terracotta frieze formerly decorating the façade of the now demolished Number 12-13 Poultry.

However, retaining Mappin & Webb came at the cost of optimising space; in order to accommodate the square footage required, the building had to include a tower on its central portion 150' (45.7m) high. With height such a historically sensitive issue, the team prepared an alternative, lower scheme of just thirty metres in height which did away with Mappin & Webb but ultimately met with greater approval from the planning office (Stirling, 1988). Scheme B is, as a result, a more restrained, compact and evenly balanced building, with a greater degree of symmetry in the individual elevations. Though still displaying the Stirling tendency to compartmentalise its façade

into discrete units, the fragments are unified into a cohesive whole by the consistent use of pattern and a limited palette of materials.

This breaking down of a building into separate, clearly expressed components was another feature of the office's design methodology, each one subjected to methodical analysis and experimentation before arriving at its final form (Wilford, 1994). Accordingly, we decided to group the design material on display into several sub-categories, revealing this process at work in the development of the tower, the façade and the public spaces. Of the latter, one of the most interesting sets of drawings relates to the roof which was originally intended to be left flat and undeveloped. It was not until December 1987 that ideas began to be drawn out, following a comment by the then City Architect and Planning Officer, Peter Rees, that the building's roofline should provide more visual interest to the pedestrian on the street, effectively becoming the 'fifth elevation' (Stirling, 1988). Numerous schemes were tried out on paper, loosely following two main themes; the first utilised the curve of the glazed bays above the arched side entrances, extending them upwards to form a large drum reminiscent of that at the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, encircling the existing triangular light-well. One iteration of this design playfully experiments with a rooftop river, ending in a waterfall cascading over the tip of the building (Figure 13). The alternative scheme was equally imaginative, featuring a ziggurat-type

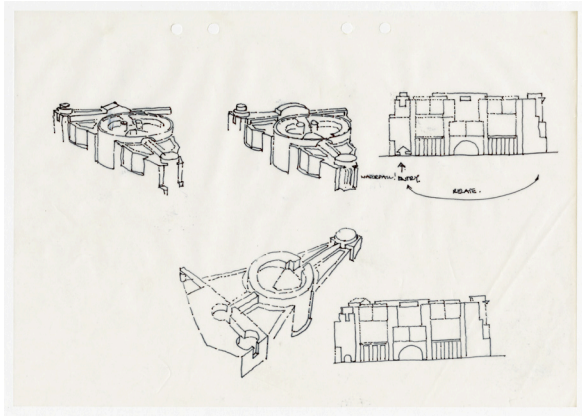


Figure 13. Designs for roof, post December 1987. Courtesy of Laurence Bain.

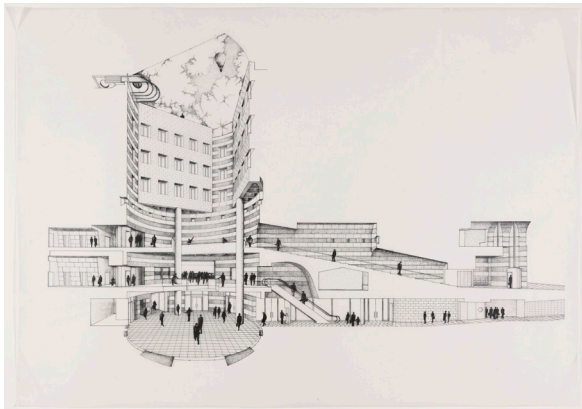


Figure 14. Sectional perspective. Courtesy of Laurence Bain.

structure of three levels sited to the west and a small cone near the apex of the building which would have combined to form a dramatic silhouette when viewed head on from Bank.

Stirling's later work was often concerned with the civic role of architecture (Maxwell, 1994), and the public elements of the scheme were as important to Stirling as the square had been to Mies's vision for the site. However, while Mansion House Square's insertion of a large new open space was heavily criticised for its perceived disregard for context, with Number One Poultry Stirling sought to make connections with the existing identity of the area. Cutting through the centre of the building, Bucklersbury passageway allows pedestrians to cut the corner between Queen Victoria Street and Poultry, entering and exiting the building through one of the forbidding arched doorways on either side and encountering on route the generous internal courtyard with an impressive view up through the atrium. This arrangement is a conscious echo of the street pattern of the old City, where narrow alleyways lead into small enclosed courts that provide sudden, startling views of the sky (Stirling, 1988).

A stunning sectional perspective (Figure 14) exposes this dynamic arrangement at the heart of the building, as well as illustrating the role of pedestrian circulation as a motivating force in Stirling's approach to planning (Wilford, 1994). As in other projects, the visitor's route through and between spaces at Number One Poultry is treated

as a carefully orchestrated sequence of events, exposing them to a succession of special effects frequently punctuated by the use of ramps, staircases and lifts (Sudjic, 1986). A sense of drama and performance accompanies the long, shallow, barrel-vaulted tunnel that ascends from the Bank entrance, undergoing several changes of ceiling height before depositing the traveller onto the first-floor terrace overlooking the courtyard.

Stirling fought against the postmodern label so frequently bestowed upon him, but it is hard not to employ a postmodern reading of Stirling's repeated use of historical influences from outside, as well as from within, the site's immediate context. Early ideas for a classically inspired treatment of the façade were directly informed by buildings in Glasgow by the neoclassical architect Alexander 'Greek' Thomson (1817-75) while those for the tower seem to return to Stirling's youthful interest in English castle architecture (Girouard, 1998). Italian architectural tradition makes an appearance in the final building where a small belvedere marks the tower summit. In another dramatic flourish, from either side of this sheltered seating area, the brave visitor can step out onto two open viewing platforms which provide a spectacular view across the rooftops of the City, rooting Number One Poultry within its rich tradition of architectural evolution.

Schemes A and B were developed concurrently for several years and another public exhibition show-



casing both proposals was held at the Guildhall in June 1986. In the following year, concerns over Scheme A's height and bulk led to the decision to proceed with Scheme B alone. However, despite support from both the RFAC and the Planning Office, in July 1987 it was rejected by a narrow majority of the Planning Committee. The demolition of historic buildings and the impact of the new structure on the local character and views of nearby St Paul's Cathedral were once again cited as reasons for refusal. Work by the Stirling office continued, however, refining the scheme into what became Scheme B Revised. It was this version which was resubmitted for planning and so became the subject of the second public inquiry, held between May and June of 1988 (Stirling, 1988). Stirling was at least able to speak for his own project, and delivered as carefully argued and detailed a testimony as Peter Carter had given on behalf of Mies's scheme in 1984. On the other side, the SAVE team launched a similarly emotive stand against this renewed threat to Poultry's existing heritage. But this time, it was Palumbo who found favour with the new Secretary of State for the Environment, Nicholas Ridley.

While the outcome of the inquiry was still being considered, the building was publicly criticised by the Prince of Wales, who memorably described it as "an old 1930s wireless" in his Vision of Britain programme broadcast in October 1988. An unsent letter featured in the exhibition reveals Stirling's frustration at this royal disapproval, accusing the Prince of seeking to interfere in the result of an-

other public inquiry, and threatening to resign his royally bestowed RIBA Gold medal in disgust.

Ridley's favourable verdict was not the end of the battle either, with SAVE's successful appeal to the High Court in 1990 swiftly followed by reinstatement of planning permission by the House of Lords in 1991. In an eerie parallel of the events of twenty years earlier, Number One Poultry was also to be a posthumous building for its architect. Sadly, at the time of Stirling's death in 1992, the project was in jeopardy again from the opposition's new tactic of blocking consent for the necessary road closures. It was not until early in 1994 that Mappin & Webb was finally demolished, having been first exhaustively photographed by the Stirling office in a series of poignant black and white images that depict unflinchingly its state of decay after so many years in limbo. Nearly ten years after its initial conception and over thirty years since Palumbo had first decided to commission a new architectural icon for the City of London, Number One Poultry finally began construction. It was completed four years later in 1998 under a large and dedicated project team headed by Laurence Bain.

### **Another changing of the tide**

The long-drawn-out process of bringing Number One Poultry to completion meant that it was, inevitably, doomed to suffer the same judgement as its predecessor – that of a building outdated before it was even finished. Just as modernism



had experienced a rapid rise and fall from the 1950s to the 1980s, postmodernism's time in the sun was shorter still; by the mid-1990s, as Britain once again emerged from a recession, it was all but obsolete (Sutcliffe, 2006).

At same time, however, modernist architecture was experiencing a resurgence of interest and investment. From the late 1980s, tired and unloved tower blocks began to be re-clad and restyled to enjoy a new lease of life. The founding of DOCOMOMO (International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement) in 1988 signalled modernism's entry into the canon of architectural heritage while its clean, sleek lines also became emblematic of a new cool. Trellick Tower (completed 1972) by Erno Goldfinger was a typical example of this turnaround; once a reviled symbol of the failed British social housing experiment, a programme of refurbishment and rebranding by a pro-active Tenants' Association made it a highly desirable residence for middle-class professionals (Wright, 2006). It was listed in 1998. One need only look at how the Seagram-inspired Aviva Tower in London by GMW (completed in 1969) is now revered for its timeless elegance to get an indication of how Mansion House Square might have been viewed today, had it been approved in 1985.

While many at the time believed that the negative

verdict passed on Mansion House Square meant the end of tall buildings in London (Darley, 1985), high-rise offices soon began to make a comeback, beginning with the development of Canary Wharf from the late 1980s but really taking off towards the end of the millennium and gathering pace ever since thanks to the policies of successive London mayors Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson, the latter granting permission for well over 400 tall buildings during his tenure (Ijeh, 2016). Many skyscrapers of the 21st century not only make a mockery of Mies's modest ninety-metre tower with heights of 300m and over, but they often fail to display any consideration for public amenity or ground level integration (Woodman, 2014), such a central concern of Mansion House Square.

Had Mansion House Square been built of course, then there could have been no Number One Poultry. Credit must be given to the prescience of then RIBA President Rod Hackney who, after hearing the positive verdict for Number One Poultry in 1989, commented that he was sure in a hundred years' time conservationists would be fighting to preserve the building with as much passion as their present-day counterparts had fought to prevent it (*High court bid to veto Poultry*, 1989). In the end, it only took twenty years, ten less than the statutory thirty required for listing to be considered, for Hackney to be proved correct.

Increasing threats to postmodern buildings in the form of demolition or extreme redevelopment pro-

posals have sparked major efforts by the Twentieth Century Society in recent years to save and preserve the best examples intact. Successes include John Outram's Pumping Station on the Isle of Dogs (completed 1988) and Terry Farrell's Comyn Ching redevelopment (also completed 1988) in Covent Garden. Number One Poultry finally secured its protection, after yet another series of rejections and appeals, in early 2017. The application for listing was driven by proposals commissioned by the new owners from Buckley Gray Yeoman, primarily with the aim of allowing more light into the building. The most significant intervention involved enclosing the east and west colonnades with glazing and extending the ground floor shops and first floor offices (whose windows do not align with the columns) forward to meet it. Historic England's advice report considered these changes to be detrimental "to the character and structure of the original building", recommending it be listed Grade II\* and concluding that it is "an outstanding commercial building, among the best architecture of its type in the City, which if permitted to remain in its original guise will take its place among key buildings of the later C20" (Historic England, 2015).

It should be noted, however, that not everyone agrees postmodern buildings deserve such consideration. John Jervis argued recently against the knee-jerk listing of such buildings simply because their retro aesthetic is again fashionable: "Undue artistic import should not be forced upon pomo because it reminds us of our youth or because a

generation of young academics needs new PhD topics or retired architects are still around to lobby for preservation" (Jervis, 2016, 107).

Ultimately, there is no hard and fast lesson to take away from the extraordinary history of this endlessly contested plot of land. However objectively councils, heritage groups, journalists and planners have sought to determine what to build and what to destroy, which buildings should be allowed to survive into the next generation and which ones must be left behind in the past, the story of Mansion House Square and Number One Poultry ultimately only highlights our inability to judge on behalf of future generations, or to anticipate what will be most valued by those who inhabit our cities in the future.

However, interesting ideas in architecture, as in many other things, have a way of coming back around. Mies was not the first to consider opening up this particularly crowded area of the City – from Sir Christopher Wren's post-Fire of London plans in 1666 to Lord Holford's post-Second World War redevelopments, over the centuries many attempts have been made to regularise the messy convergence of streets at what is now Bank Junction. Today, as of May 2017, the area is undergoing a trial period of closure to all vehicles except buses and bicycles as part of attempts to make the area safer, but also pleasanter, for pedestrians and cyclists, a place to enjoy and linger as well as to pass through on one's way to work (City of

London, 2017). With the disappearance of traffic, what emerges is a wide, open space contained by a more impressive roll-call of distinguished buildings than even Mansion House Square could boast: The Royal Exchange, the Bank of England, the Natwest building (formerly the National Westminster Bank by Sir Edwin Cooper, 1932), St. Stephen Walbrook, the Mansion House, the Bank of New Zealand (now the Magistrates' Court) and of course, Number One Poultry. If the scheme is given permanent approval, the long-lived vision of a square in the heart of the historic City of London may yet be realised, and with it the space and opportunity to step back and appreciate this ever-evolving architectural back-drop as never before.

## References

Baker, Geoffrey H. 2011. **The architecture of James Stirling and his partners James Gowan and Michael Wilford: a study of architectural creativity in the twentieth century.** Farnham: Ashgate.

Burney, Jan. 1984. "Mansion House Diary." **Building Design** 688, (May 4): 3.

Carter, Peter. 1984a. Proof of evidence of Peter Carter. Mansion House Square Archive. RIBA Collections, MHS/1a.

Carter, Peter. 1984b. "The Project Architect." **UIA International Architect Special issue. Mies van der Rohe: Mansion House Square and the**

**tower type**, no. 3: 26-38.

Carter, Peter. 1984c. "An Annotated Inventory of the Tower Buildings of Mies van der Rohe". **UIA International Architect Special issue. Mies van der Rohe: Mansion House Square and the tower type**, no. 3: 8-18.

City of London. 2017. "All change at Bank". <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/services/transport-and-streets/traffic-management/Pages/Bank.aspx>.

Corporation of London. 1969. Letter to Holford and Partners dated 22 May. Adrian Gale papers. RIBA Collections, MHS/7/2.

Darley, Gillian. 1985. "What's gone up must come down". **Town and country planning** 54, no. 7/8 (Jul/Aug): 230-231.

Frampton, Kenneth. 2007. **Modern Architecture: a critical history.** 4th ed. London: Thames & Hudson.

Girouard, Mark. 1998. **Big Jim: the life and work of James Stirling.** London: Chatto & Windus.

Glendinning, Miles. 2013. **The Conservation Movement.** London: Routledge.

Haskell, John. 1966. Notes of meeting held at Guildhall Offices dated 18 October 1966. Holford Papers, University of Liverpool Library, Special Collections and Archives, folder D147/C39/6.

- “High court bid to veto Poultry”. 1989. **Architects’ Journal** 189, no. 24 (June 14): 9-10.
- Historic England. 2015. **Advice Report**: No. 1 Poultry 15 October.
- Holford Papers. University of Liverpool Library, Special Collections and Archives.
- Ijeh, Ike. 2016. “Boris Johnson: assessing his legacy”. **BD online** 13 April 2016.
- Jenkin, Patrick. 1985. Letter to Victor Mishcon and Company dated 22 May 1985. Mansion House Square Archive. RIBA Collections, MHS/1b.
- Jervis, John. 2016. “Pomo phobia”. **Icon**, no. 156 (June): 98-107.
- Johnson, Philip. 1984. Letter to Gavin Stamp dated 16 May. Gavin Stamp Papers. RIBA Collections, StG/1.
- The Mansion House Square Scheme**. 1981. [London?]: Peter Palumbo.
- Maxwell, Robert. 1984. “The Work of James Stirling”. In **James Stirling Michael Wilford and Associates: buildings & projects 1975-1992**, 7-11. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Palumbo, Peter. 1968. Memo dated 6 May. Adrian Gale papers. RIBA Collections, MHS/7/1.
- Palumbo, Peter. 1984. “The Client.” **UIA International Architect Special issue. Mies van der Rohe: Mansion House Square and the tower type**, no. 3: 23-25.
- Schultze, Franz and Windhorst, Edward. 2012. **Mies van der Rohe: a critical biography**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stirling, James. 1988. “No 1 Poultry: Public Enquiry Proof of Evidence” dated 17 May. Gavin Stamp Papers. RIBA Collections.
- Sudjic, Deyan. 1986. **Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, James Stirling: new directions in British Architecture**. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Sutcliffe, Anthony. 2006. **London: an architectural history**. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Terry Farrell Partnership. 1984. “Mies is great, London is greater”. **Building** 246, no. 7334 (11): 35-42.
- Wilford, Michael. 1994. “Introduction” In **James Stirling Michael Wilford and Associates: buildings & projects 1975-1992**, 5-6. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Woodman, Ellis. 2014. “Ground control”. **Architects’ Journal** 239, no. 15 (April 18): 40-47.
- Wright, Herbert. 2006. **London High**. London: Frances Lincoln.

