

# Leon Krier's Drawing for the Olivetti Headquarters

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### collection

The perspective drawing that Leon Krier made in 1971 for James Stirling's Olivetti Headquarters at Milton Keynes, England, mentioned by Colin Rowe in the quote above, served as a presentation drawing illustrating the proposed interior for this unexecuted project. But the drawing was also an homage by the young draftsman to his master, one that contains evidence of the architect's wide-ranging sources of inspiration and his engagement with history.

Krier animates his drawing by establishing a dramatic narrative episode in the foreground. Stirling sits just outside the picture frame gesturing in an authoritative manner to his assistant Brian Riches while Krier himself appears in profile only, a disembodied head in the form of a classical term. The chairs and table are actually copied from early nineteenth-century pieces by Thomas Hope that Stirling collected and displayed in his home. (Upon Stirling's death the entire collection was placed on loan with the National Trust for Scotland, where it may now be viewed.) Open on the table is a book that must surely be a volume of Le Corbusier's *Oeuvre complète*, the model for Stirling's own volume of collected works that was published four years later in 1975 and on which Krier worked extensively.

Krier's drawing style – spare black lines on a white sheet – recalls the drawings of Le Corbusier but also those of nineteenth-century neoclassical architects that Stirling admired. In his 1980 RIBA Royal Gold Medal award speech, Stirling traced the origins of his fascination with neoclassical architects: "I'd known the Soane Museum from the early fifties and later I became interested in neoclassical architects like Soane, Gandy, Playfair and Goodridge [and in] their German counterparts – Gilly, Weinbrenner, Von Klenze, and Schinkel."<sup>1</sup> What especially attracted Stirling to this work was "the move from sparse abstraction to the breakup of classicism with the incoming language of realism and naturalism,"<sup>2</sup> a situation he felt shared parallels with the architectural scene of his own day.

James Stirling's collection of nineteenth-century furniture marks his engagement with history and the prominent placement of some of these pieces in Leon Krier's 1971 presentation drawing for the Olivetti Headquarters at Milton Keynes served as official notice of this encounter. For Stirling history was not a sourcebook to be mimicked but a learned text to be studied from and argued with. In his own home, an existing turn-of-the-century house on a quiet tree-lined street, these examples of nineteenth-century design were placed side-by-side twentieth-century pieces by Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, Marcel Breuer, and his wife Mary Stirling.

Reviewing a 1974 exhibition devoted to Stirling's drawings mounted at the RIBA Heinz Gallery, Mark Girouard observed that "outline drawings take objects out of space and time into a Platonic world of pure form, undisturbed by accidents of texture or light and shade."<sup>3</sup> In the drawings that Girouard saw in 1974, most probably executed by Leon Krier, the impeccable quality of the lines unify the disparate elements represented, helping the viewer to apprehend the underlying qualities that unite a chair by Thomas Hope with Stirling's design for the Olivetti Headquarters at Milton Keynes.

The James Stirling/Michael Wilford Fonds at the CCA comprises over 40,000 drawings, fifty-two models, more than 100 linear metres of textual documents, and nearly 20 linear metres of photographic materials documenting Stirling's activities as architect, author, lecturer and photographer and those of Stirling's long-time partner Michael Wilford.



Leon Krier, Interior Perspective for the Olivetti Headquarters, Milton Keynes, England, 1971. Fonds James Stirling/Michael Wilford.

"So exactly when did Stirling buy his first piece by Thomas Hope, that chair, so satisfying, so grand, so heavy, which quickly became so celebrated by the Leon Krier perspective for the Olivetti interior at Milton Keynes? Was it '69? Was it '70? In any case, though the taste pre-existed the purchase, this was surely a watershed..."  
– Colin Rowe, Introduction in James Stirling: Buildings and Projects, p. 15



Thomas Hope, Drawing Room, Etching, Plate 6 from Household Furniture and Interior Decoration (London: T. Bensley for Longham, Hunt, Rees and Orme, 1807).

<sup>1</sup> James Stirling, *Writings on Architecture*, ed. Robert Maxwell (Skira: Milan, 1998), p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Girouard *A Modern Neo-Classicalist? The Architectural Drawings of James Stirling*, *Country Life*, May 9, 1974 (v. 155), p. 1129.