William J. R. Curtis

VIRTUOSITY AROUND A VOID

William Curtis is an historian and critic of architecture. He wrote a large part of AR August on Users and Abuses of History. His book ‘Modern Architecture since 1999’ has won the Alice Davis Hitchcock Medal of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain. He also received the Founder’s Award of the American Society of Architectural Historians.

When the model and drawings of James Stirling, Michael Wilford & Associates’ design for the Neue Staatsgalerie and Kammertheater in Stuttgart were first made public a few years ago it was obvious that the building would eventually stimulate discussion on the general state and aims of contemporary architecture.

The dominant image of a cylindrical drum sunk with wings and curved slabs ascending over terraces seemed to be a monumentality, rhetoric, civic space, context, ornament, precedent and the very basis of architectural vocabulary in an age of stagnation and gluttony.

Now that the building is complete it is time to assess the lilac of these broad concerns as well as for its workability as a museum. Its sheer sculptural inventiveness and control over sequence place it apart from the mere fadism of Post-Modern Classicism, though there are some cosmetic and indecisive details. The finished building even suggests that Stirling has been able to play a sort of pantomime with recent views in a way that outwits their more reverent and earnest adherents. The substructure of the design – its real formal and intellectual foundations – have roots in Stirling’s earlier work and within the Modern Movement, especially in the work of Le Corbusier. Type solutions have been abstracted, then consciously mannerised in a college’s private strataconum which emphasizes display of architectural virtuosity.

The problems posed by programme, site and city virtually required a solution based on polarities and contrasts. The site sloped down to a motorway that cut the old cultural areas of the city in two. The new gallery had to complement the old, a Neo-Classical building with symmetrical wings. This terrain, the demands for ground-level parking and for the ‘democratic’ path through the scheme recommended a stack of terraces traversed by a meandering sequence of ramps. Distinctions in the programme between galleries, office, a theatre and a music school prompted a variety of formal treatments that might in turn respond to different pressures in the setting. Oddly fragmented wings could stabilize these fragments while recalling the Neo-Classical form of the neighbour and palatial ancestors from the grand Classical part of this last of Stuttgart. The theatre wing echoed the two wings of the old gallery.

Stirling found a suitable icon for the institution ‘museum’in the circular drum, a public space at

* The brief called for a breakthrough across the block – a central demand in German architectural competitions.