criticism
John Jacobus

Architects: James Stirling and James Gowan

Engineering Building, Leicester University

The spate of college and university construction on both sides of the Atlantic during the past few years has already produced a just dividend of worthy buildings. The late Whitney Griswold's success with diverse architectural personalities at Yale, where in the last decade a heterogeneous batch of provocative new university buildings has sprung up, is too well known to require comment here. The new works at Cambridge, to mention only one ensemble of collegiate buildings in the UK, are presently of more local than of long-term international significance, though this condition will almost certainly be changed when Stirling and Gowan's history faculty is completed some two years hence. For now, however, the Stirling and Gowan achievement can be thoroughly measured in their just-finished Engineering Building at Leicester University. Its design goes back to 1968, although it was occupied by students and faculty for the first time only in the fall of 1969, and its interior arrangements were still incomplete in certain details at the time of writing.

Like so many of the best university buildings since IIIT, it seems its points as an individual, and not as part of an ensemble. This and other new college buildings must cause acute embarrassment to the proponents of coherence through master planning, since there is nothing irresponsible in the distinct, unassisted appearance of Leicester Engineering. Indeed, its uniqueness only reinforces the impression that a kind of Darwinian, laissez-faire attitude is mandatory in the haphazard out-of-vital new buildings, especially at a time when so much contemporary design is compromised by exaggerated respect for locals, or for some hypothetical future. Like Kahn at Philadelphia or Rudolph in New Haven, Stirling and Gowan at Leicester have given future architects and building committees a qualitative solution that can form a challenge for future efforts. They were not themselves, or at least not alone, forced into the strait-jacket of a local monument cliché that was already established on the far side of the campus, and they refused from setting up a rival one on their own quarter of the site—one which would have only required undoing at some future time. Instead, the architect addressed themselves to the immediate demands of the programme with devotion and respect. Leicester Engineering is a product of its immediate circumstances rather than of its environment, present or future. It is a timely solution as well as a timely design. It realistically deals with the here and now and, without obstruction or interference, leaves the future to find its own way. (In five years' time, the building will likely be doubled in size.) Yet the contemporary reality of Stirling and Gowan's building is anything but expedient.

Like so many of the most skillful buildings of the past half century, Leicester Engineering is cursed with a left-over site, an unwanted corner, and this was a blessing, in that it provided the architects with...