

>>BOOK

**MODERNITY AND
REINVENTION:
THE ARCHITECTURE OF
JAMES GOWAN**

By Ellis Woodman

Black Dog Publishing, £29.95

Review by David Kohn

According to ancient Greek poet Archilochus, quoted in Isaiah Berlin's *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' In Ellis Woodman's book, he seeks to establish the fox-like credentials of one of Britain's unsung architectural heroes.

The book is divided into three sections. Woodman's brief but satisfyingly incisive introductory essay

is followed by photographs and drawings of projects dating from 1955 to 2006, concluding with three recent interviews. Woodman's essay explores the intellectual background to the extraordinary range of expression in Gowan's work. In particular, the idea that architectural style, rather than being a surface applied image, is related to building types and therefore fundamental to the ongoing reinvention of the discipline. Gowan's exquisite drawings are central to this proposition, and provide a direct way into his work.

Gowan drew his schemes in unforgiving pen and ink. The boldness of the lines suggests little hesitation, and few razor blades needed. Space, extent and construction are all rendered with clarity. The overall sense is one of incredible hand to mind fluency and a deep knowledge of the subject. Several lesser-known houses are delightful and ripe for inspiration – the Isle of Wight House 1995-6, and (my favourite) the house at St Davids, 1964. A shiny two-storey drum with W20 steel windows, it is both so utterly of its place and alien at the same time as to make you laugh out loud. However, the later projects after 1987 seem to have lost this sparkle and the photos and drawings fail to convince.

Woodman's interviews give Gowan



JAMES GOWAN/TECHNIST SPA

the opportunity to present his side of several stories with dry and sometimes cutting wit, not least his partnership with James Stirling. To Woodman's tantalising question, 'Do you think your contribution [to the Leicester Engineering Building] and Stirling's are readily distinguishable?' Gowan replies, 'Stirling is a Classicist and I am a Goth.' Further probing confirms that Leicester, like most of his output, is Gothic, assembled out of volumes and not multiplied from elements through symmetry or other operations.

Woodman invites speculation as to how architectural history might have

written itself if Gowan's quest for 'the style for the job' had prevailed over Stirling's apparent desire for a signature. Not long after the Leicester block was completed and Gowan and Stirling had split, Stirling's students Richard Rogers and Norman Foster set up in practice and, alongside subsequent waves of neo-modernism, ushered in an ongoing period of hedgehog hegemony. Woodman presents a call to all foxes to maintain the intrinsic tensions in architecture and resist the temptation to rely on singular systems that govern what they understand, think and feel.



Top right: University of Leicester Engineering Department Building