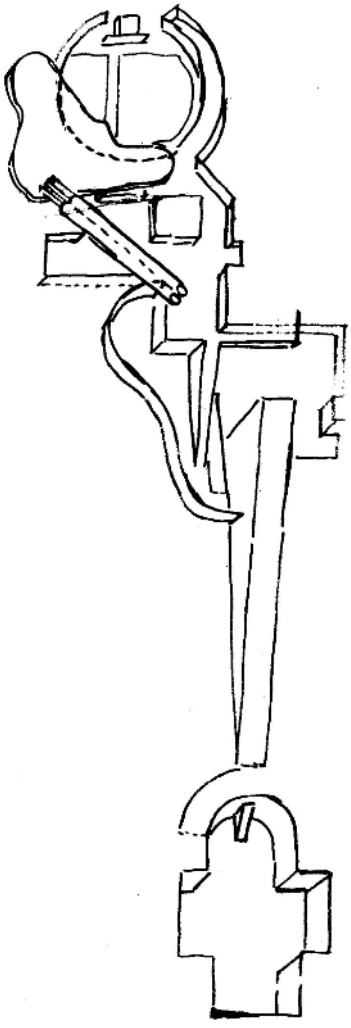

Figure 2.5 Sketch, axonometric drawing for the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne.

In this chapter we look at the particular mixtures of drawings that were selected for printing when Stirling's museum designs were first made public. We treat the series of drawings as pictorial design narratives, each comprised of a carefully composed collage of images. We maintain that these representations had a forceful impact and served as forerunners of innovative modes of architectural representations in later years. At the same time we ask what contemporary cultural trends nurtured the kinds of images that Stirling opted to avail himself of and what made them acceptable to the public. We conclude that a newly found interest in the design process and in the ideas and concepts that guide it, led to the wish to make public not just the resulting artefact, but also the narrative that tells the story of the process and concepts as well. We use the term "reconstructive memory" to describe the unconventional representation that mixed together standard drawings of the buildings with evidence from the preliminary conceptual search, together with abstractions made post factum, in order to tell the design story.

The Context

James Stirling – a profile

James Stirling was born in 1924. After the Second World War, during which he was enlisted, he studied at the Liverpool University School of Architecture where one of the very young professors was Colin Rowe. (We shall return to Rowe's influence on Stirling further on.) He started practising in the early 1950s and, until his death in 1992, had been in private practice by himself and with partners (from 1971 with Michael Wilford), while also teaching in England, Germany, and the USA. Stirling was born into Modernism: Wilson (1992) points out that two of Modernism's "archetypal masterpieces" (Le Corbusier's Pavilion de l'Esprit Nouveau, and Byvoet and Duiker's Zonnestraal Sanatorium in Hilversum) were built shortly after Stirling's birth. As a young architect Stirling was, like most of his contemporaries, an avid Modernist who saw himself as a disciple of Le Corbusier. His first significant large project was the Leicester University Engineering Building, designed in 1959. By the time the Cambridge University History Faculty Building was completed in 1967, Stirling was already a very well-known architect. In the mid-1960s it became obvious that Stirling was no longer an orthodox Modernist. He continued to base his designs on rational analyses of programme and context, but his forms became less constrained and "boxy." Instead of subdividing space within a prismatic volume as in Le Corbusier's "plan libre," he started assembling independent spaces, enclosed in distinct volumes, around flexible circulation spaces – both horizontal and vertical. This was a combinatorial act that yielded elaborate forms that were joined together with great mastery. While still manifesting an interest in the work of some of the pillars of Modernism which included, in addition to Le Corbusier, Kahn, Aalto, and others, Stirling did not refrain from studying pre-Moderns like Asplund and 19th-century neoclassicists like Schinkel, for example. Stirling, who cultivated eclecticism, never shied away from "borrowing" forms he liked: "Like Picasso, Stirling operated a magpie avidity to steal whatever he liked while yet turning it into his own – and that is a freedom which is only possible to someone who belongs to no school" (Wilson 1992, p. 20).

Despite Stirling's strong individuality and the various freedoms he took in designing, nonetheless he did work in a very consistent way, both in terms of the ideas he pursued and the design searches he conducted. He testified about his design principles: "I never think of a design as being conceived from the outside; on the contrary, all our designs are conceived following the sequence of entry and going through primary movement" (Stirling 1992, p. 24). By "primary movement" he meant the main circulation spaces of the building or complex of buildings. Organizing buildings on the basis of circulation was, of course, a fairly common concept. Stirling took it to an extreme and, in particular, he allowed spaces devoted to circulation, like corridors and staircases, to occupy primary forms in his designs, equal in importance and elaboration to spaces devoted to "useful functions." The use of circulation, or movement, as the generator of form is evident in Stirling's work from the beginning of his career (Jacobus 1975). When his buildings began to lose their compact boxiness in favour of assemblages of individually crafted volumes,