

On the Work of Steven Holl **Under, In, On and Over the Earth**

Steven Holl's architecture is sober but immensely rich. Although his exteriors betray a unique hand, they never speculate in the shock of the new. The interiors often show an ingenious use of space à la Rietveld, albeit for the Affluent Society. In spite of Holl's sensitive use of colour, the impression that persists in the memory is one of black-and-white. That is to say, not the simple black-and-white of the monochrome snapshot but a true pre-war black-and-white, charged with historical meanings, intimating nostalgia and melancholy but also suggesting longing and purity. This black-and-white is a conscious choice, part of an aesthetic programme. The sobriety of the overall impression is deliberate. In fact, this kind of black-and-white is not really uncoloured: an earthy tint, an underlying alchemical hue that practically resists conscious perception, seeps through to the surface. And this coloration takes on a disproportionate significance precisely because of its false modesty, especially when the context is overwhelmed by a gleaming, sparkling extravaganza of colour, technically reproduced to its maximum extent. Holl's colours bring to mind the self-imposed restraint of the films of Jim Jarmusch: the world is dirty, the circumstances cruel, life is hard and the only true friend is a partner in adversity. In spite of his isolation and the wretched tricks of fate, the individual – in Holl's case the architecture – retains a towering dignity. It is the visual self-restraint that is responsible for a sense of elegance and grandeur.

The veiled opulence of Holl's architecture seems to be gaining wider and wider appreciation. There is no need to lay it on as thickly as before: the market for Post-Modernist glitter has passed its peak and architecture is gasping for a *Sinnpause*. At a time like this, Holl's kind of reticence may be the answer. It is not a real impoverishment (for the pampered eye is not willingly chastened), but a restrained form of luxury that strikes just the right note. Holl's architecture is delightfully designed and beautifully executed, and bears witness to a high degree of precision. At the same time, by appropriating tactilist techniques, he avoids becoming ensnared in the temptations of Total Design. Some questions are left unanswered. There are places in his buildings where we encounter a kind of vacuum, often due to a sudden jump in scale, a vacuum waiting to be filled by emotion or by a subjective experience. The experiences proffered by Holl's architecture compensate for a longing that is never mentioned but is felt by more and more people. If we regard his buildings as therapies, then Holl is not a surgeon but a psychoanalyst who proffers his patients the key to greater self-understanding. One question remains, however: does the cure also have a public significance, one that does justice to the programme of his buildings?

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From Typology to Phenomenology

Steven Holl's speciality is character analysis. What is the nature of the elements from which architecture is composed, how can they be manipulated and into what entities can they be combined? He is an architect who seeks out experiment. Not only do his projects form a kind of laboratory, but his studies, publications and teaching work all bear witness to his passion for enquiry. A vital ingredient of his research is the phe-

Phenomenological intensity and a preoccupation with tactile experiences have both been salient characteristics of Holl's work over the past decade, and in this connection, one may claim that he is the only American architect of his generation to be directly influenced by the main lines in modern philosophy and music, that is to say, by the line leading from Husserl through to Heidegger and by the separate achievements of Bartók and Schönberg.

Kenneth Frampton

General theories of architecture are constrained by a central problem; that is to say if a particular theory is true, then all other theories are false. Pluralism on the other hand leads to an empirical architecture. A third direction, as potentially resilient as it is definite, is the adoption of a limited concept. Time, culture, programmatic circumstance, and site are specific factors from which an organising idea can be formed. A specific concept may be developed as a precise order, irrespective of the universal claims of any particular ideology. A theory of architecture

that leads to a system for thinking about and making buildings has, at its base, a series of fixed ideas constituting an ideology. The ideology is evident in each project that is consistent with the general theory. By contrast, an architecture based on a limited concept begins with dissimilarity and variation. It illuminates the singularity of a specific situation.

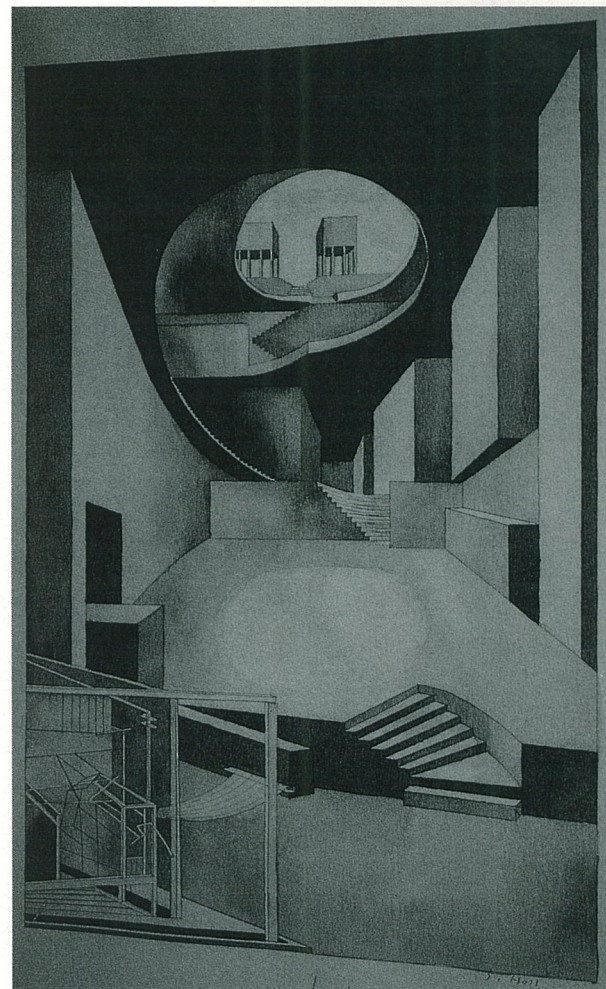
Steven Holl

Architecture is bound to situation. Unlike music, painting, sculpture, film, and literature, a construction (non-mobile) is intertwined with the experience of a place. The site of a building is more than a mere ingredient in its conception. It is its physical and metaphysical foundation.

The resolution of the functional aspects of site and building, the vistas, sun angles, circulation, and access, are the 'physics' that demand the 'metaphysics' of architecture. Through a link, an extended motive, a building is more than something merely fashioned for the site.

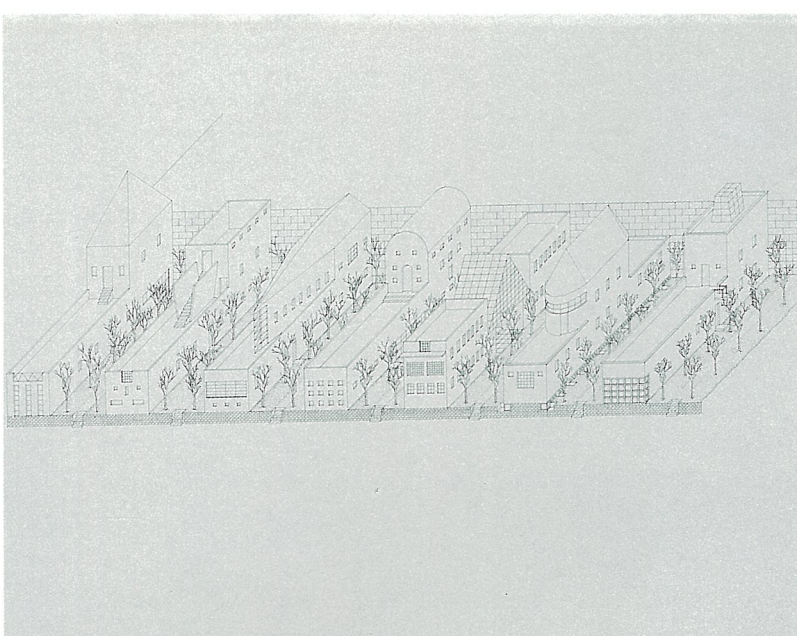
Steven Holl

View at elliptical passage, project for Porta Vittoria, Milan, 1986



nomenological value of architecture at various scales, from the interior to the city. But his phenomenology is anthropological rather than philosophical in nature. In other words, it is not so much the power of things *as things* that preoccupies Holl, but the general human experience of that power as it affects each of us separately. Holl's work exploits the power of things to communicate with people and with the functional programme at a somatic level. He takes a stand against the soulless mass production that has the building industry in its grip and argues for '... a kind of reasoning that joins concept and sensation. The objective is unified with the subjective. Outer perception (of the intellect) and inner perception (of the senses) are synthesised in an ordering of space, light and material'. ★ At first sight this resembles an appeal for a more profound kind of architecture, but the stress Holl places on the *architectural* embodiment of the marriage between intellect and experience gives him a special position among the many who have summoned phenomenology to their side: their interest either fails to go beyond a theoretical appeal, or develops into a glorification of the experience of every detail as an end in itself. Holl is concerned not to dismiss the programmatic significance of the marriage, and this expresses itself in his capacity for both small and large scale thinking. His competition entry for the Palazzo del Cinema in Venice (1990) is an example

★ Steven Holl, 'Selected Projects', in *Quaderns* 181-182 (April 1989), no. 166.



Autonomous Artisans' Housing, project, Staten Island, New York, 1984

that reveals the importance he attaches to the programme of his architecture. It is apparent in his remarkable treatment of the surface and in the great subtlety with which he manipulates incident light; in the way he stage-manages the architectural experience by means of an almost labyrinthine access to the space via the water, sloping ramps and promenades; and, finally, in his treatment of the auditorium.

Initially, his broad concern with form and programme was concentrated on typology, the American vernacular and existing building methodologies, as in the Hybrid Building, Seaside, Florida 1988. It becomes especially clear in his project for Autonomous Artisans' Housing, Staten Island, New York 1980-1984. Here Holl invented a specific type of form to reflect the specific activities of each hypothetical occupant – the paper maker, the wood worker, the glass etcher et cetera. The hitch was that the possible associations the public might have with the chosen typology would be largely prescribed, owing to the conventionality of the forms. Hence these associations would fail to elicit subjective experiences in the individual spectator. During the eighties, Holl therefore developed a more refined idiom in which the typology of forms was replaced by spatial scenarios and a more abstract image that was virtually no longer open to rational pros and cons. It appealed to the user at an almost unconscious level. The 'style' that Holl uses in his recent work, with its almost alchemical surface treatment, makes 'a permutable series of abstract correlations that can be brought to accommodate a very wide range of empirical programmes'. ★ On the one hand, Holl has hereby ventured into a much freer area of design, in which he can cater for many different kinds of programme within the scope of his vocabulary, without bowing to the irresistible demands of specific formal conventions. On the other hand, the craftsmanlike quality of his work has made him practically invulnerable to conventional, external criticism. Now a critique will have to be found which does justice to the purely architectural perfectionism of his work, without thereby losing sight of the work's public meaning.

★ Frampton, Kenneth, 'On the Architecture of Steven Holl', in Holl, Steven, *Anchoring*, Princeton 1991, p.7.

The transition from typology to phenomenology is a transition from static observation of a subject with a name and a function, to dynamic interpretation of subjects without names but nonetheless with an irreducible existence. It is a change from iconography to anthropology. In later work, such as the Palazzo del Cinema, the building no longer offers a made-to-measure solution to the visual and programmatic problems, but leaves room for an interplay of associations. From this, we can make the crucial observation that Holl is not actually all that interested in coding the use, but in the irreducible, subjective moment of experience that is *possible*. The question of who will take advantage of that possibility falls outside the architect's competence. The spatiality of the recent work is no longer bound to the presumed identity of the occupant or user, but solely to the wishes and the spiritual and tactile needs of *specific* persons.

An abstraction has been made that offers more space for the concrete human experience. 'It is no longer possible to make a building for the mass of society', says Holl, 'without understanding who that anonymous mass is. Architecture must be done with a person in mind.' Holl is seeking a temporary assignment of meaning; not to the thing as phenomenon, nor to man as philosophical category, but to a *person* and his activities, which are reflected in the architectonic material. This architecture stands or falls by the instance.

Sweet Daydreams

A number of recurrent themes can be detected in Steven Holl's oeuvre. Firstly, he works from what he calls a *limited concept*. That means that no single aspect of his design method is universally applicable. Only meticulous analysis of the constraints imposed by the specific combination of location, time and programme can lead to a solution that 'joins concept and sensation'. Neither truth nor an established meaning prevails, but a *combination* of experience and meaning.

Secondly, he uses a technique he refers to as *anchoring*, in which the building is rooted into the existing context by simultaneously respecting and challenging it. Holl is concerned to elicit a certain idea of the location and to establish associations between his design and its urban environment. These are nebulous images and concepts that give him the leeway to develop a line of thought (and action) in give and take with the location. The intention is not to achieve a design that is at one with the existing environment, but an 'anchoring' that exploits the conflict inherent in the linking of a particular building to a particular location. This implies that anchoring always takes place from a certain distance, and we encounter this in a literal form in the conception of the aerial roots as 'legs' on which the project stands. ★ The *Parallax Skyscrapers* project springs to mind here.

A third notable aspect of his work is his *alchemical approach* to form and material. Form is de-institutionalised and thrown open to discussion by means of a sort of elegant crudeness. Materials are not used for their own sake, nor do they betray a unequivocal reference to a conventional meaning. Their purpose always seems to be

★ Indebtedness to an article written by Arthur Wortmann, 'Het scheppend vermogen van de schaalversnelling. De architectuur van Steven Holl' (The creative potential of the acceleration of scale. The architecture of Steven Holl), *Archis*, 4 (1992), pp. 27-35.

The edge of the city is a philosophical region, where city and natural landscape overlap, existing without choice or expectation. This zone calls for visions and projections to delineate the boundary between the urban and the rural. Visions of a city's future can be plotted on this partially spoiled land, liberating the remaining natural landscape, protecting the habitat of hundreds of species of animals and plants that are threatened with extinction. What remains of the wilderness can be preserved - defoliated territory can be restored. In the middle zone between landscape and city, there is hope for a new synthesis of urban life and urban form.

Steven Holl

In the yet-to-be-built city, notions of passage must be addressed. Consider the city as it might appear in a series of cinematic images: zoom shots in front of a person walking, tracking shots along the side, the view changing as the head turns. At the same time, the city is a place to be felt. Notions of space, shifting ground plane, plan, section, and expansion are bound up in passage through the city. Consider movement through the city framed by vertical buildings. Each change of positions reframes a new spatial field. This parallax of overlapping fields changes with the angles of the sun and the glow of the sky. Premonitions of unknown means of communication and passage suggest a variety of new urban spaces.

Steven Holl

Materials interlocking with the perceiver's senses provide the detail that moves us beyond acute sight to tactility. From linearity, concavity, and transparency to hardness, elasticity, and dampness, the haptic realm opens. An architecture of matter and tactility aims for a 'poetics of revealing' (Martin Heidegger), which requires an inspiration of joinery. Detail, this poetics of revealing, interplays intimate scaled dissonance with large scale consonance. The vertical patience of a massive wall is interrupted by a solitary and miniature cage of clarity, at once giving scale and revealing material and matter.

Steven Holl



Texas Stretto House, Dallas, 1992

to bring about a chemical reaction with the mind of a further unspecified person who literally *comes into contact* with Steven Holl's architecture through some (ostensibly) random quirk of circumstances. This treatment of material turns even the most tranquil moment into an *event*; it is a process of sublimation or condensation that is meant to lead to a real experience. The architect must rigorously avoid revealing any of his intentions in advance since that would channel the reading along a fixed route.

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This brings us to a fourth aspect of Holl's work: straying through a labyrinth. By taking us along a *promenade architecturale*, along stairways and ramps, Holl aims to bring us face to face with the Other. Advantage is taken of that unpremeditated encounter – no contrived meetings, please. Thus the aim is certainly not to create a tourist attraction, but the *amazement* of that sudden contact with the Other. Only amazement proves the authenticity of the encounter, a view that places Holl within the paradigm of existentialists such as Jean Paul Sartre and Martin Buber. The meeting is the criterion of a successfully designed space, in both the social and the architectural sense. This irreducible and authentic meeting is the only *raison d'être* of this architecture. In this respect, spoken language can even be an obstacle. In the attempt to create maximum *nearness*, Holl shows himself pupil of Heidegger. It is not a matter of the space as a neutral container, but of space as existentially experienced potential:

'The psychic core of a room is like a *reverie*. The room, an individual's place of periodic repose, either inspires or inhibits creative thought. Insight, fantasies, and imagination are fueled by the psychological space of the private interior. (...) At the direct encounter with interior space, architecture changes the way we live.' ★

refraction intertwine to define or redefine space. Light subjects space to uncertainty, forming a kind of tentative bridge through fields of experience. What a pool of yellow light does to a simple bare volume or what a paraboloid of shadow does to a bone white wall presents us with a psychological and transcendent realm of the phenomena of architecture.

Steven Holl

The experience of space from a point of view that is in perspective presents a coupling of the external space of the horizon and the optic point from the body. Eye sockets become a kind of architectural position grounded in a phenomena of spatial experience that must be reconciled with the concept and its absence of experiential spatiality.

An infinite number of perspectives projected from an infinite number of viewpoints could be said to make up the spatial field of the phenomena of a work of architecture. Space remains in oblivion without light. Light's shadow and shade, its different sources, its opacity, transparency, translucency, and conditions of reflection and



Museum of Modern Art Tower, New York, 1986

But this change does not take place according to a rational communication pattern. The architecture is meant, rather, to invoke an atmosphere which is unaccented, hardly perceptible to consciousness, and which clears one's head of all over-evident messages, leaving it open to Experience in the broadest sense of the word.

With this thought in mind, and not forgetting Heidegger, we arrive at a fifth main theme in Holl's oeuvre, the idea of *Geworfenheit*. Man does not choose the conditions under which he lives, but the conditions choose him. Holl's work is never an objectivising platform for convincing arguments. On the contrary, it is the modality of those arguments that will itself assume the characteristics of Holl's space and material. The literal basis for this architecture is the earth, which can be subject to four main relations: 'Under the earth, in the earth, on the earth and over the earth'. ★ Holl goes into more detail about these relations as follows: '... a series of primary syntactic proximal correlations such as rear, over, atop, under, within, against, between, through, across, beside and from'. ★ The very essence of existentialism, thus – an orientation in life by means of the most fundamental thing mankind has at his disposal, namely space, particularised as prepositions in masonry! His tectonics are not traceable by the usual methods, for rational construction does not play a major role. They involve, rather, a compositional ordering of volumes and lines that makes a conclusive statement not about the edges, but about the (psychological) space itself. The spirit finds its place and there is room for the daydream.

★ Holl, Steven, 'Edge of a city', in *Pamphlet Architecture 13*, New York, 1991, p. 12.

★ Steven Holl, quoted in Frampton, Kenneth, 'On the Architecture of Steven Holl', in Holl, Steven, *Anchoring*, Princeton 1991, p. 7.

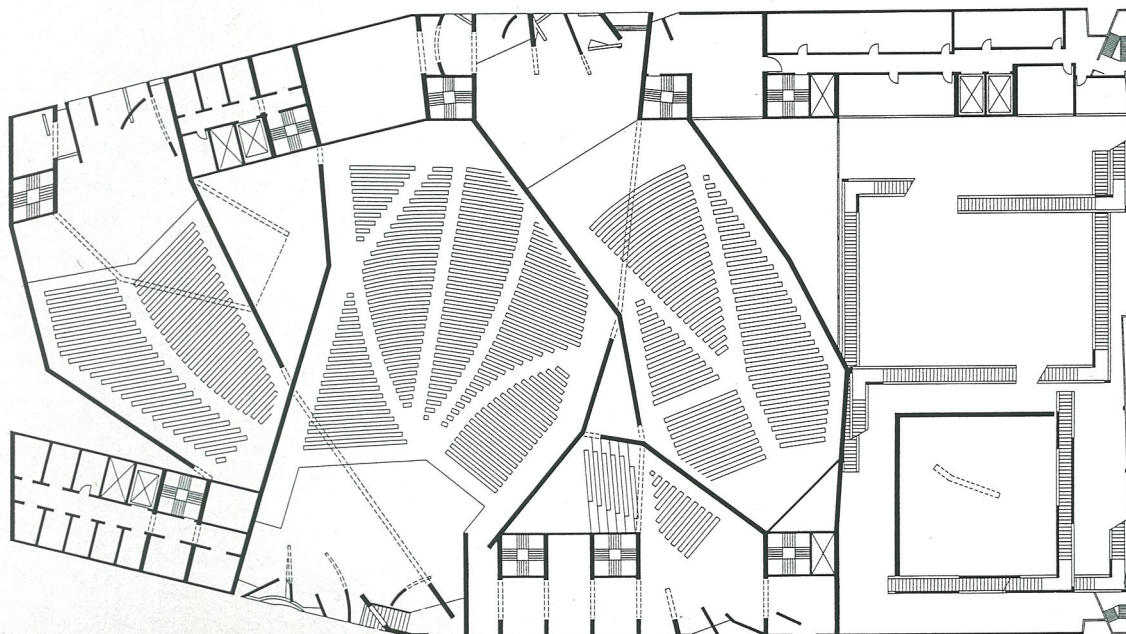
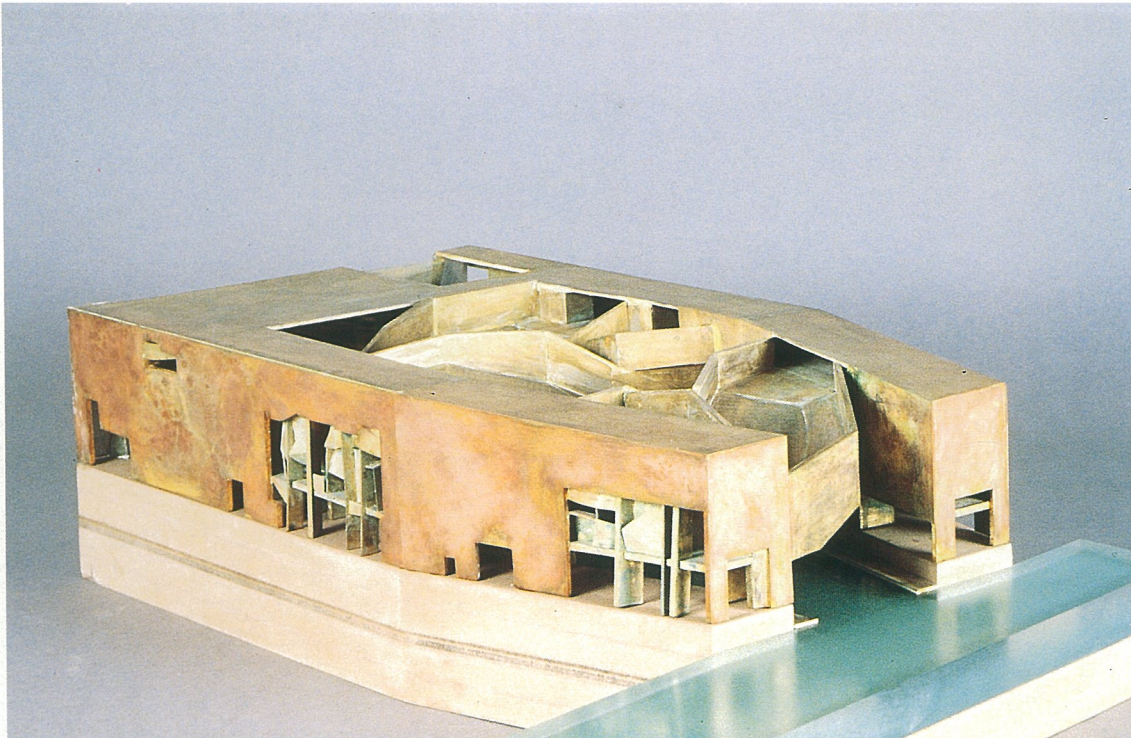
★ Kenneth Frampton, op. cit. p. 7.

We do not call for a new disordered architecture to match the disorder of culture; such duplication simply affirms the chaotic, and achieves no other dimension. Rather, we propose experiments in search of new orders, the projections of new relationships.

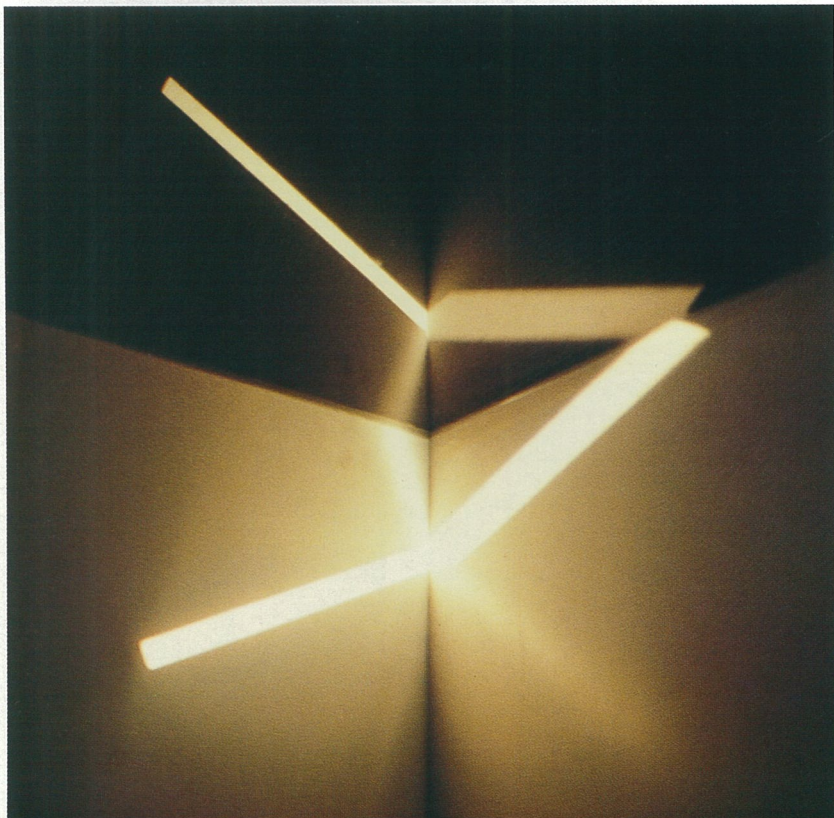
Steven Holl

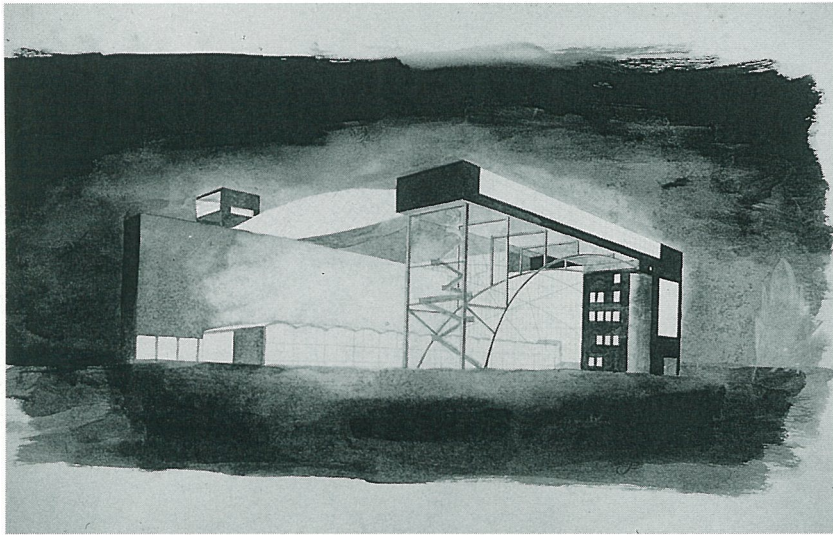
If we consider the order (the idea) to be the outer perception and the phenomena (the experience) to be the inner perception, then in a physical construction, outer perception and inner perception are intertwined. From this position experiential phenomena are the material for a kind of reasoning that joins concept and sensation. The objective is unified with the subjective. Outer perception (of the intellect) and inner perception (of the senses) are synthesised in an ordering of space, light, and material. Architectural thought is the working through of phenomena initiated by idea. Whether reflecting on the unity of concept and sensation or the intertwining of idea and phenomena, the hope is to unite intellect and feeling, precision with soul.

Steven Holl

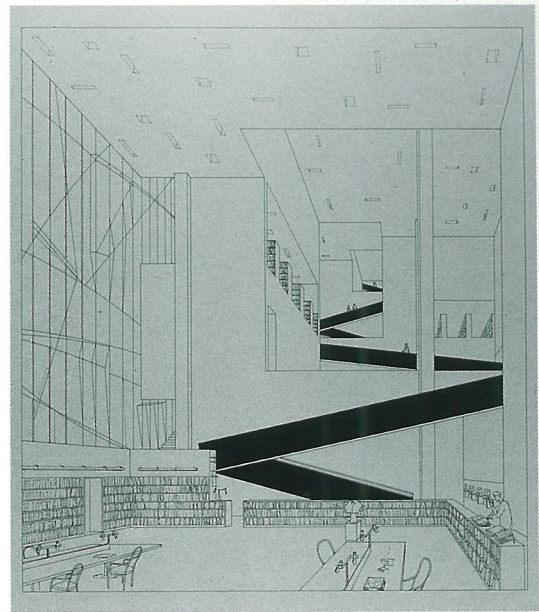


Palazzo del Cinema, competition entry, Venice, 1990





Berlin Library, competition entry, 1988



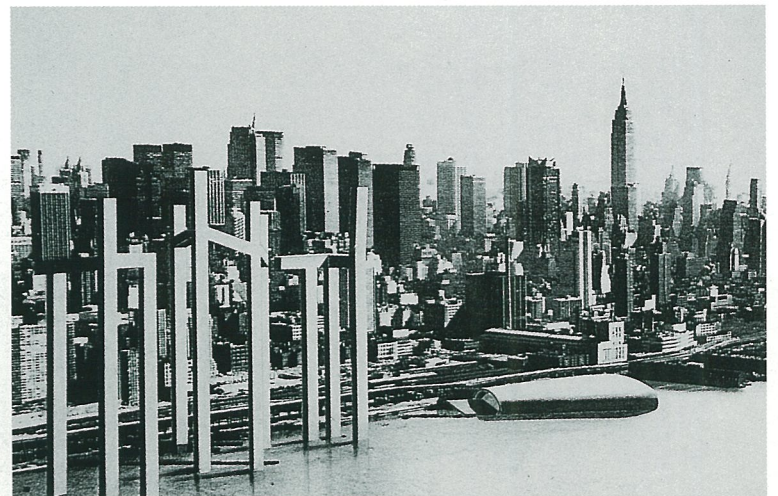
The important thing is thus the associative potential, and this ultimately plays a role in generating new context. The context – the social, the physical and eventually also the tectonic conditions – is a precondition for experience. Experience, in turn, is a precondition for continuity of the context.

Elbow-room versus Force Majeure

Holl's work is intriguing for the way it exemplifies both the strength and the impotence of architecture as an autonomous participant in the ongoing cultural debate. From the functional and programmatic point of view, his work is extremely difficult to characterise. On the one hand, Steven Holl writes about the 'the interior as harbour of the soul'. If the architectural interior space were to respond to a spiritual appeal, it might well change our lives. But Holl remains silent on the question of what that new lifestyle should be like. On the other hand, he clearly takes a great interest in the programme of the architecture at various scales. In this connection, he deliberately refrains from polished designs. By using an ontology of architectonic design elements (volumes, access, material, mathematical structures), he ensures that the image transmits its content to us through its tactile qualities, in spite of, and at the same time due to, its highly aesthetic qualities. The transcendental spirituality is thus dimmed and the earthy character of the programme is unmasked. He succeeds in softening the constraints of the programme by strictly architectural means and is hence not forced to seek that elbowroom outside architecture. Perhaps this is the only route open for strategic action if we wish to isolate architecture from its political dimensions. The merit of Holl is that he tries to read reality anew from things themselves, and he strives for an experience that leaves room for continual reinterpretations of things and in relation to things. An ambiguity, a non-metaphorical moment, arises and this can repeatedly inspire life and permanently refresh communication between things, culture and the public sphere.

But when it comes down to it, it remains questionable whether the work is not too

phenomenological. In spite of its disarming openness and modesty, it becomes bogged down (deliberately, so it seems) in a purely architectural language. Hence it side-steps a confrontation in which the programme relates to a broader cultural context – a context that can not be translated into a purely architectural language, but could in principle be captured by tectonic means. Holl accepts the total context of the environment and the programme as it is given. He is vulnerable to the criticism that applies to all phenomenological strategies: the interplay of context and programme is reduced to the level of sensation. There is no explicit narrative which might otherwise restrain the power of the media to confiscate Holl's rough, indistinct and recalcitrant forms and to transform them into ornamentation. Only in an explicit relation to a definite programme, can form and material hold onto their cultural meanings and so evade the decline into representation.



Parallax Skyscrapers, Manhattan, Penn Yard, study project, New York

Making architecture is complex – sometimes tragic, sometimes comic. You can never figure it all out in advance. That's what makes it so exciting to get to the next project - you don't know what you are going to do. I went to visit the site of our project in Japan, on an island two hours south of Tokyo. When I first got there, I thought, Boy, it looks like Seattle. Then I walked down the beach, and this strange bird with a weird head and an enormous beak came by, and I realised how exot

ic the place was. The drift that had washed up on the beach was cork and other strange things. When you bring the lens down and focus it close, there's a peculiarity to things. If you just look from a distance, everything seems the same. But there's an intensification that takes place in the detailing, the working out.

Steven Holl

Holl begins [in his Stretto House] with pure phenomena and putatively local materials, and ends with a house that bears little relationship to Texas, its climate, coloration, fundamental materials, or its vernacular. If this is forgivable, it is because we all dream of Eden, and know that a measure of denial is essential to architecture.

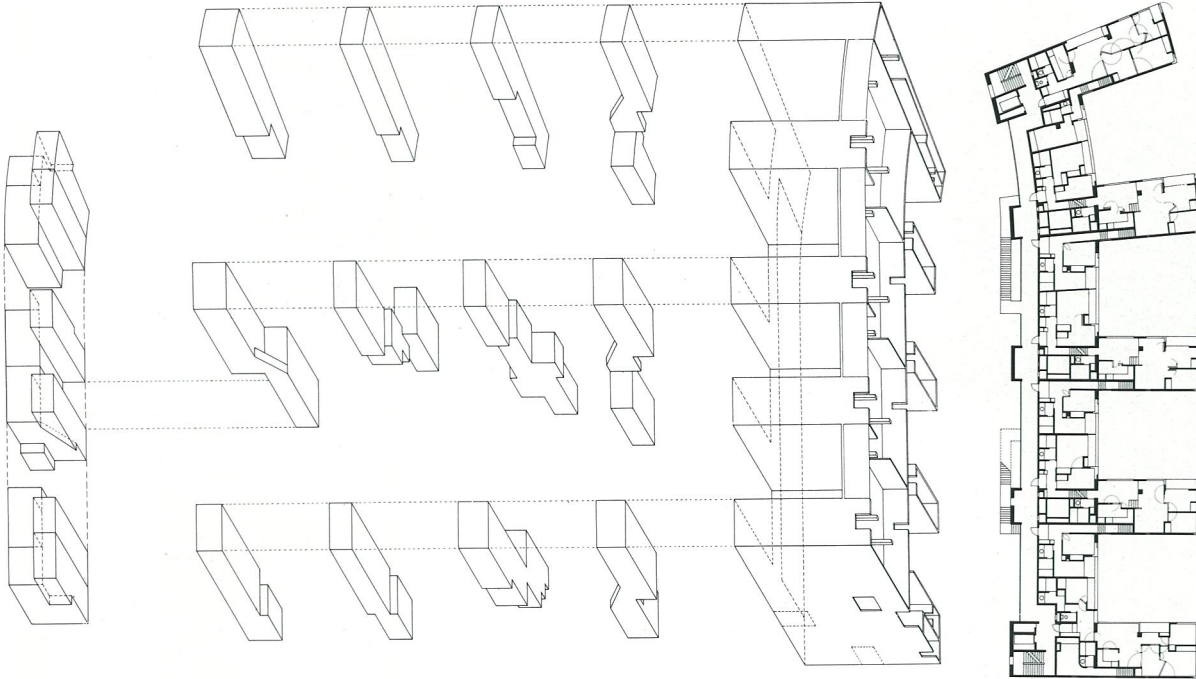
Michael Benedikt

An architecture based on a limited concept begins with dissimilarity and variation. It illuminates the singularity of a specific situation.

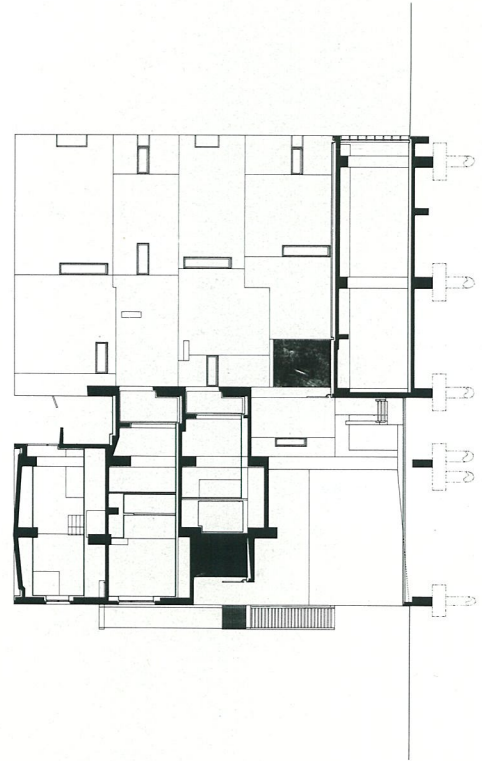
Steven Holl



28 housing units are divided into 18 variants of five types: 'L' (L-shaped plan), 'I' (straight plan), 'D' (double level, 'DI', 'DL'). Units interlock in plan and section, interconnecting the different court spaces



Four active north-facing voids interlock with four quiet south-facing voids to bring a sense of the sacred into direct contact with everyday domestic life. The south voids are meditative spaces held apart from day-to-day activity. To ensure emptiness, these voids are flooded with water; the sun makes flickering reflections across the ceilings of the north courts and apartment interiors. The north voids are set as play areas for children, seating for a ground floor café, etc., and face onto a common garden. Each pair is joined together by a large opening and a flight of steps. Light from the water court spills into the paved court; in return, the sounds of children playing and of conversation percolate into the meditative space. The opposition of phenomena corresponds to the sheared section of the voids. Interiors of the 28 apartments revolve around the concept of 'hinged space', a development of the multi-use concepts of traditional Fusuma taken into an entirely modern dimension. One type of hinging – diurnal – allows an expansion of the living area during the day, reclaimed for bedrooms at night. Another type – episodic – reflects the change in a family over time: rooms can be added or subtracted to accommodate grown children leaving the family or elderly parents moving in. An experiential sense of passage through space is

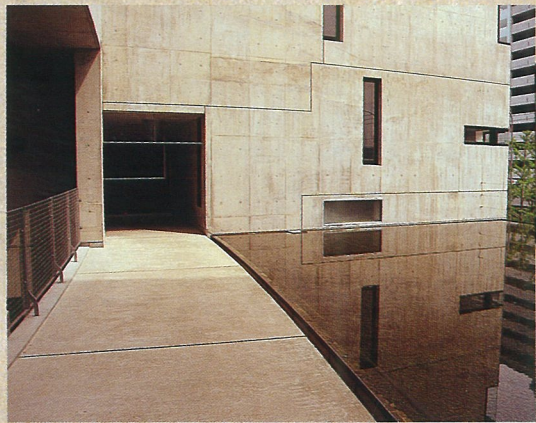


heightened in the three types of access, which allow apartments to have exterior front doors. On the lower passage, views across the water court and through the north voids activate the walk spatially from side to side. Along the north passage one has a sense of suspension with the park in the distance. The top passage has a sky view under direct sunlight. The apartments interlock in section like a complex Chinese box. Individuation from the standpoint of the individual inhabitant has an aim in making all 28 apartments different. Due to the voids and interlocking section, each apartment has many exposures: north, south, east, and west. The structure of exposed bearing concrete is stained in some places. A lightweight aluminium curtain wall allows a reading of the building section while walking from east to west along the street; an entirely different façade of solids is exposed walking from west to east. The building, with its street-aligned shops and intentionally simple façades, is seen as part of a city in its effort to form space rather than become an architecture of object. Space is its medium, from urban to private, hinged space. *Steven Holl*



Per Bareley, Untitled (steel, wood, motoroil), 1987





Twin Dolphin Resort Hotel,
Cabo San Lucas, Baja, Mexico