

Steven Holl: architecture and experience

Steven Holl was born in Bremerton, Washington in 1947 and received his architectural degree from the University of Washington in Seattle in 1970. After a short time studying in Rome, he returned to the United States for an east coast tour of graduate programs. Holl visited Penn, Columbia, Harvard, and Princeton, after which he decided that graduate studies were not of interest to him and he sought work in the office of his master, Louis Kahn. He studied Kahn a great deal and appreciated his experiential architecture. He believed that Kahn's works 'could not be gleaned from magazines but required the consciousness of a body in space' to fully understand them. In a conversation with Alejandro Zaera Polo, Holl said, 'I have always believed that each project should have an idea which is driving the design. Kahn's projects were paradigmatic in this respect. It was not his style I was looking for, but the intellectual clarity, simplicity, and forthrightness which the other figures, the leading figures of that moment, Venturi and the Five, were rejecting. When I was given *Complexity and Contradiction* in 1967 by my professor in the university, I thought: I am going to do exactly the opposite.'¹ Unfortunately, Kahn died in Penn station days before Holl's interview with him. With this news, Holl went to San Francisco to begin an internship with the landscape architect, Lawrence Halprin. After working with Halprin, Holl commented that, 'Halprin cared about ideas and would allow strong concepts to take precedence over any kind of stylistic determination.'² In 1974, Holl left Halprin's office and pursued a graduate degree from the Architecture Association in London where his fellow colleagues were Peter Cook, Charles Jenks, and Rem Koolhaas. According to Holl, 'the AA at that time was the place of a fantastic hyperactive intellectual debate - a very energetic moment of formation.'³ Shortly after graduation, he returned to San Francisco to work in a local bookstore. In 1976, Holl went to New York City to visit his brother, an artist. He never used the return portion of his ticket. That same year, having few contacts or experience in New York, he opened up his own practice. After three years, he was well connected in the design community, teaching for Parsons School of Design, and working on his first projects. Since 1981, Holl has taught at Columbia University and he is currently a tenured faculty member in addition to his full time practice.

Holl's diverse experiences have undoubtedly shaped his design process and architectural philosophy. In his current practice, he relies on initial analog sketches and watercolor paintings to harness the intended concept for each unique project. He uses watercolor because he is interested in the qualities of light in space and believes that watercolor shows more possible values than other medias. Holl says that this initial process of hand sketching 'fuses intuition with concept' and 'connects mind, hand, and eye.' By using analog processes initially, Holl feels that more 'circuits of decision' are opened than when using a digital media. Only when the concept is defined does his office move to advanced digital media to explore the project further. His early drawings and sketches are somewhat ambiguous and therefore can be experimented with in different ways that generate possibility. For Holl, architecture is an art form which is less a pragmatic, problem-solving exercise and more of a built poem or three-dimensional storyboard. Therefore, this early conceptual foundation is critical for further design development. He uses metaphors and 'ideas' as heuristic devices, or rules intended to help guide

¹ El Croquis, Volume 78, "Steven Holl 1986-1998", p. 7

² El Croquis, Volume 78, "Steven Holl 1986-1998", p. 9

³ El Croquis, Volume 78, "Steven Holl 1986-1998", p. 7

an investigation. Kenneth Frampton says these are 'XYZ organizing tools' which organize parts but allow freedom of design. Holl feels that the design of buildings is a complex process which needs 'extra-architectural ideas' in addition to the program when designing which help to organize the concept and general design solutions. For this, he looks to poetic/scientific metaphors like 'bottles of light' for the Chapel of St. Ignatius, the 'stone and feather' for the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art expansion, or 'porosity' for the MIT dormitories. He claims that these ideas 'are not abstractions' and that they are 'fused with architectural programs.'⁴ For Holl, this act of 'juxtaposing two incongruous things together (a literary metaphor and an architectural program or structure) yields a dynamic tension' which helps to drive the design process. He defends that these metaphors are not merely poetic notions and that they are 'liberators connecting to broader thinking in other disciplines.'⁵ For Holl, the mission of connecting art and architecture through poetry is one that imbues his projects with meaning. This general method is used for each of his projects; however the metaphor and outcome are almost always unique. When asked why he is always solving specific problems instead of creating an operative system, he said, 'Architecture isn't about efficiently making a recognizable project. What is the meaning of an international practice that produces the same set of spaces and rules in a city regardless of its site or situation of the specific program?' Holl believes this is a meaningless gesture and he personally strives for intensity and individuation in each of his project designs. He attributes his distinctive metaphors to his responsive contextual design process and defends that each unique site and circumstance requires a specific design solution made for the spirit of that site alone.

Holl has developed his personal architectural philosophy over the years and his many writings have attempted to articulate these ideas throughout his career. *Dualities*. When asked about his intentions in perception, Holl explained that he breaks them into two categories: empirical satisfaction (physical only) and intellectual/spiritual satisfaction. These can also be stated as objective/subjective or thought/feeling. In an interview for *El Croquis*, Juhani Pallasmaa asked Holl about his juxtaposition of scientific phenomena and poetic imagery. Holl responded by saying that, 'the challenges of bridging science and art, thought and feeling, are especially critical in realizing architecture. The science of construction, of materials and stresses, of energy balance doesn't sit separately from an artistic idea or the inspired feelings provoked by light and space. An idea holds these manifold aspects together in a work of architecture.'⁶ *Phenomenology*. According to Kenneth Frampton, 'phenomenological intensity and a preoccupation with tactile experiences have been a perennial theme of Holl's architecture, and it is [because of] this connection, one may claim, that he is the only American architect of this generation to be so consciously influenced by this philosophical line.'⁷ Holl believes that the challenge for architecture is to stimulate both inner and outer perception and to 'heighten phenomenological experience while simultaneously expressing meaning; and to develop this duality in response to the particularities of site and circumstance.' Because architecture engages all of our five senses simultaneously, he argues that 'buildings speak through the silence of perceptual phenomena' more than any other mode of artistic communication.⁸ His architecture focuses on how people move through space and perceive its physical and metaphysical qualities. Holl says that regardless of whether users

⁴ Holl, Steven & Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology in Architecture*, p.119

⁵ *El Croquis*, Volume 108, *Steven Holl 1998-2002*, p. 16

⁶ *El Croquis*, Volume 108, *Steven Holl 1998-2002*, p. 13

⁷ *El Croquis*, Volume 78, *Steven Holl 1986-1998*, p. 35

⁸ Holl, Steven & Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology in Architecture*, p.41

understand the architect's concept or philosophy, they must still be able to sense the phenomenal qualities of the space. He adds, 'in this sense, architecture is a great universal language; like music, it can be philosophically and idealistically produced but its true test is in the public experience.'⁹ *Phenomenal Zones*. In his text, *Questions of Perception*, Holl outlined what he calls 'phenomenal zones' or general aims in design which produce phenomenal qualities in architecture. The eleven phenomenal zones are: enmeshed experience (a merging of object and field, blurring perception of individual elements), perspectival space (identifies that with movement, our perspectives are always partially unfolding and should be carefully studied), color (indeterminate because of translucency, opacity, reflection, available natural light), light and shadow (shaped by solids, voids, opacities, transparencies, and translucencies), spatiality of night (gives dimension to urban experience since the 20th century), time duration and perception (architecture compiles all elements within a duration of experience), water (a phenomenal lens where psychological power of reflection overcomes scientific refraction), sound (surrounds us and is therefore like architecture - reveals materiality, proximity, density, vastness), detail (the haptic realm defined by touch where authenticity is critical and where joints in materials show that one idea ends and another begins), proportion/scale/perception (the golden section as a fine-tuner which gives disparate elements cohesiveness), and site circumstance/idea (acknowledging the genius loci of a place and responding accordingly, drawing from then for inspiration). *Materials and Hapticity*. Holl believes that materials should be closely related to the design concept since users are in direct contact with them. He explains that materials allow for haptic identification, 'an unconscious reading of a space's qualities' including surface textures, temperature, weight, vastness, sound, etc. *What vs. How*. Holl believes that architecture today suffers from 'euphoria of technique' and argues that designers are 'obsessed with the 'how' instead of the 'what.'¹⁰ *Whole vs. Sum of Many Parts*. Holl's philosophy values the whole over the individual parts and argues that deconstructivism (and its fragmented strategy) is over. He states that a unified 'idea' must tie the entire project together and give it order. *Globalization*. Holl's projects worldwide have given him the opportunity to explore new places and see them through unbiased eyes. He believes that this 'fresh perspective' in foreign lands opens up possibilities for design solutions which might have otherwise been overlooked to designers of that particular culture. In his housing project in Japan, he generated a concept based on his personal interpretation of 'ancient qualities of Japanese domestic space' using void space and hinged space. He was able to translate tradition using a new spatial strategy. *Our Contemporary Dilemma*. Holl states that, 'today we are a modern media society – an overbearing source for lack of consciousness and obsession with the mundane and the commercial.'¹¹ He argues that if architecture is fully predictable, then it is not experiential. With the growing commercialization of architecture, he goes on to say that 'safe work is culturally worthless.' Holl optimistically offers that, 'architecture offers the hope of returning to us all those experiential qualities; light, material, smell, texture that we have been deprived of by the increasingly synthetic environment of images on video screens.' He goes on to say, 'I believe that the potential for phenomenology as a departure point for an architectural practice becomes more poignant in the face of the prevalence of the synthetic in our lives. Those technologies can potentially create new forms of experience.'¹² While he is critical of contemporary society's acceptance of the banal and meaningless, he is hopeful that new digital medias will help architects to innovate using sensory and

⁹ El Croquis, Volume 108, *Steven Holl 1998-2002*, p. 12

¹⁰ El Croquis, Volume 108, *Steven Holl 1998-2002*, p. 27

¹¹ Holl, Steven & Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology in Architecture*, p.40

¹² El Croquis, Volume 78, *Steven Holl 1986-1998*, p. 29

phenomenological philosophies. *Resistance*. Holl resists two things in his practice: rushing the design process and producing a stylized architecture. He says the reason he runs a small office with a reasonable workload is to allow his designers to adequately research and develop their designs. Holl says, ‘you know when you have a concept and you know when you don’t, and you can’t start if you don’t have an idea... if I don’t have the idea, I won’t make the presentation. Architecture takes time and you can’t just expect to have a scheme in ten days. I can try, but if I don’t find the solution, I cannot pretend I do.’ He adds, ‘we must raise the practice of architecture to the level of thought.’¹³ Juhani Pallasmaa asked Holl why he seemed to reject the ‘accepted aesthetic codes’ of architecture to which Holl replied that he aims for new ideas for each of his projects and that he has ‘deliberately avoided developing a fashionable language.’ He argues that, ‘Postmodernism has come and gone. Deconstruction has likewise had its fashionable moment; now it’s light skins; I’m in favor of the original – if sometimes awkward – it always has a better chance to convey deeper meanings.’¹⁴ It seems as though by rejecting traditionally accepted norms, Holl manages to intensify the expressive and emotional impacts of his built forms.

Holl’s most notable written works include his 1987 *Anchoring* (his first manifesto about the connection between architecture, site, phenomena, idea, and history), the 1994 *Questions of perception: phenomenology of architecture* (a collaborative collection of phenomenological essays, written with Alberto Perez-Gomez and Juhani Pallasmaa), his 2000 watercolor publication *Written in Water* (which contains initial concept sketches and paintings for his earlier projects), and his most recent text form 2007, *Architecture Spoken* (where he explains the design and building process of 24 of his projects). Though his built works are many, four projects accurately highlight his design philosophy, process, and execution. *Void Space/Hinged Space Housing – Fukuoka, Japan (1989-91)*. This 14,000 sf, 28 apartment housing project is characterized by flexible interior spaces and non-repetitive, individualized apartment plans. The exterior facades are all unique and have what Holl calls different ‘faces’ to the city: the north facades are ‘active’ while the south facades are ‘quiet.’ The east and west facades, separated by water courts, are characterized by punctuated curtain walls and heavy concrete walls, respectively. The section reveals the individual nature of the apartments while the plans show the flexible spaces created from large hinged partitions and doors. *Stretto House – Dallas, Texas (1991)*. The design concept for this 7,500 sf house took six months to develop. Holl and an intern in his New York office (with a penchant for music) developed the concept together for this project. A heuristic for this concept was the musical stretto (where one musical phrase overlaps another) which was analogous to the water rolling over the dam. Existing dams on the site were pivotal in influencing the house’s spatial organization. Metaphorical ‘spatial dams’ made of heavy concrete were covered with an ‘aqueous’ lightweight metal roof structure which ‘flowed’ over the dams. This juxtaposition of heavy and light material mimics the heavy percussion and light strings of a musical stretto.¹⁵ *Chapel of St. Ignatius – Seattle, Washington (1994-1997)*. Designed for the campus of Seattle University, this 6,100sf chapel was conceived as ‘a stone box filled with seven bottles of light,’ each of which had different colors and corresponded to a specific part of the Jesuit Catholic ceremony: procession, narthex, reconciliation, main gathering, choir, and blessed sacrament (or mission) chapel for community

¹³ El Croquis, Volume 78, *Steven Holl 1986-1998*, p. 26

¹⁴ El Croquis, Volume 108, *Steven Holl 1998-2002*, p. 21

¹⁵ Holl, Steven. *Architecture Spoken*, p. 36

outreach. At night, this structure glows and acts as a campus beacon, calling students to prayer. Holl's challenge for the project was satisfying both the processional and communal aspects. The bottles helped to organize the specific functions and establish an order for the building's interior spaces. An exterior pond which he calls a 'thinking field' reflects the chapel's bottles and creates a forecourt space within the campus. *Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art expansion – Kansas City, Missouri (1999-2007)*. This 165,000 sf addition to an existing neoclassical museum was integrated into a new earthwork which blends architecture, landscape and art. Holl responds to the existing structure by designing an addition which is fundamentally different and therefore strengthens the relationship between the two. He calls his concept the 'stone and feather' because the existing museum structure is monolithic and opaque while the new addition is lightweight and translucent. The new addition sits along the eastern edge of the museum campus and is composed of five 'lenses.' Holl uses varying levels of translucency in construction to achieve ideal natural light levels at the interior while creating a glowing series of volumes at night.¹⁶

While Holl's completed works appear to be a hodgepodge of ideas, he manages to bridge the gap between architecture and experience. Alberto Perez-Gomez says that Holl's works 'refer to the most authentic tradition of architecture, and also respond genuinely to the demands of our own time at the end of progress and linear history.'¹⁷ Perhaps his 'process' of continually reinventing the design strategy keeps his buildings current and relevant? Finally, Kenneth Frampton says Holl's work 'is undeniably phenomenological in that the vitality of his will-to-form is always amplified by a rich culture of materials, both natural and artificial, without which it could not attain the fullness of being. The overall strength of the work clearly resides in the intensity of the fusion established between culture and nature, while the latent weakness stems from the perennial risk of over-elaboration, an impulse that tends, however inadvertently, towards the gratuitously decorative'...'there is always a precarious balance to be maintained in this regard.'¹⁸ As Frampton points out, Steven Holl's work is often composed of many conceptual elements, all derived from a process which is undoubtedly more poetic than pragmatic. Regardless of all of this, users seem to connect to and benefit from the phenomenological spaces resulting from this Holl's conceptual strategies and attention to sensory details.

¹⁶ Holl, Steven. *Architecture Spoken*, p. 62

¹⁷ Holl, Steven & Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology in Architecture*, p.9

¹⁸ El Croquis, Volume 78, *Steven Holl 1986-1998*, p. 40