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Edge of a City. Steven Holl

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**EDGE  
OF A CITY**

Steven Holl

Steven Holl Architects was established in New York in 1977. The firm has won numerous awards and honors including the 1990 Arnold W. Brunner Prize in Architecture. In 1989 Holl's work was exhibited in a two-man retrospective (with Emilio Ambasz) at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. He is a graduate of the University of Washington and has done postgraduate work in Rome and at the Architectural Association in London. He is also a professor at the Graduate School of Architecture and Planning, Columbia University.

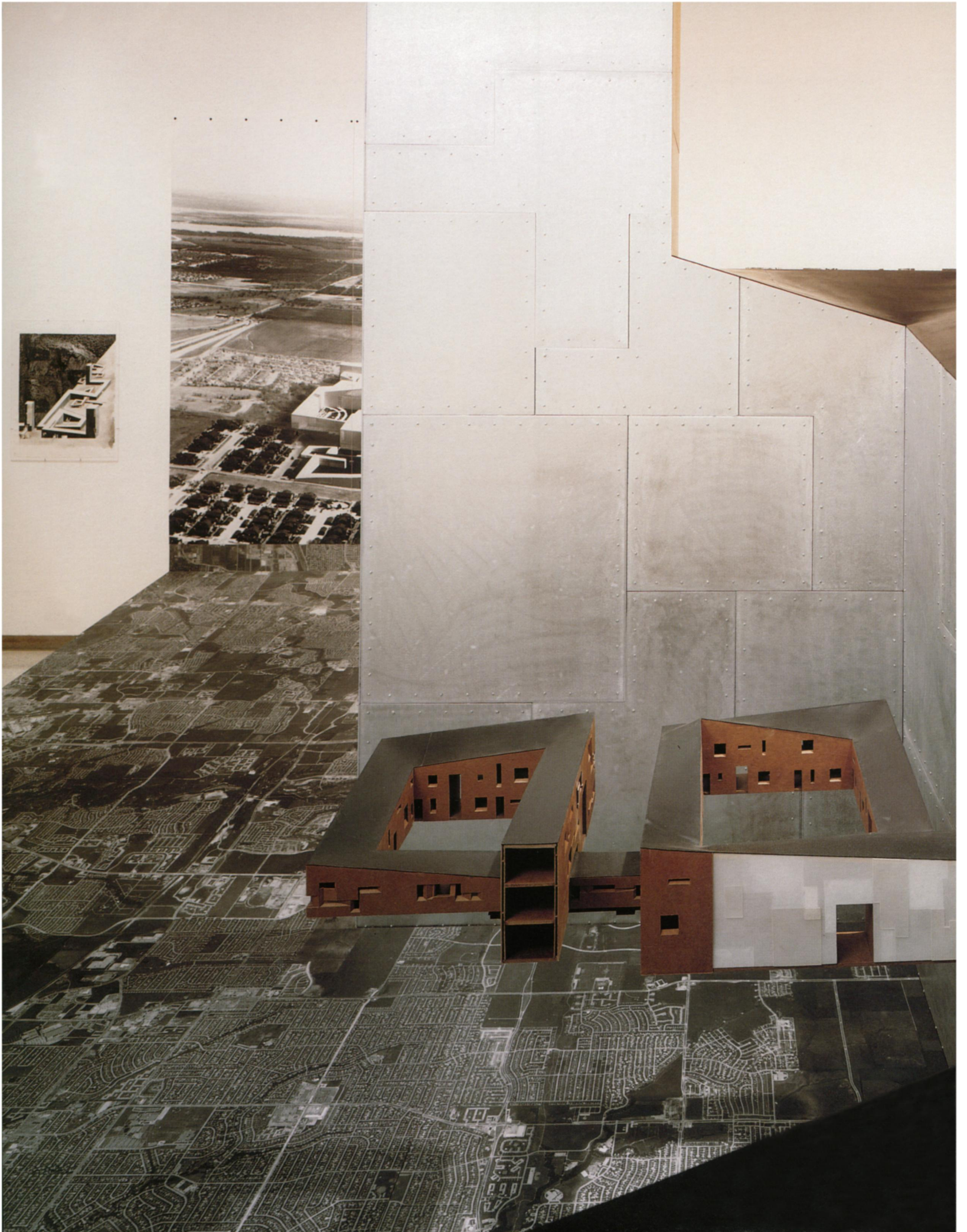
Recent projects include an invited competition for the Palazzo del Cinema, Venice, Italy, to be adjudicated in September 1991; the Strett House, Dallas, Texas, which will be completed in September 1991; an International Housing Exhibition Building, Fukuoka, Japan, completed in March 1991; and the renovation of the Experimental Glass Workshop, Brooklyn, New York, to be completed in March 1992 for the Public Development Corporation of New York City.

Steven Holl project team:

Hideaki Ariizumi	Scott Enge
Laura Briggs	Tod Fouser
Steven Cassell	Hal Goldstein
Janet Cross	Jennifer Murray
Sarah Dunn	Chris Otterbien
	Adam Yarinsky

Cast glass by Christopher Cosma

*Edge of a City* was shown at Walker Art Center from 21 April to 23 June 1991. It will travel to the Henry Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, in the fall of 1991.





overleaf:

Proposal for spiroid housing and recreation in new town sectors between the two sprawling cities of Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas, 1991.

Model of hybrid buildings as parallax skyscrapers, a concept for the Hudson River, New York, 1990.

*The exploration of strategies to counter sprawl at the periphery of cities — the formation of spaces rather than the formation of objects — are primary aims of the Edge of a City projects.*

*In each proposal, living, working, recreational, and cultural facilities are juxtaposed in new pedestrian sectors that might act as social condensers for new communities. From “spatial retaining bars” that protect the desert at the edge of Phoenix, Arizona to void courts that internalize the landscape in Fukuoka, Japan, the six plans attempt an unanticipated entwining with existing circumstances. Though they differ in form, these proposals share a “pre-theoretical ground” of psychological space, program, movement, light quality, and tactility.*

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On the fringe of the modern city, displaced fragments sprout without intrinsic relationships to existing organization, other than that of the camber and loops of the curvilinear freeway. Here the “thrown away” spreads itself outward like the nodal lines of a stone tossed into a pond. The edge of a 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. Traditional planning methods are no longer adequate. Looking back at the city from the point of view of the landscape, these projects consider untested programs and new kinds of urban spaces.

The exponential changes brought about by air travel over this century exemplify how experiences of space and time change from city to city. Within hours we are transported from one climate and time zone into another. Formerly, entering a city occurred along the earth via a bridge or a portal. Today we circle over, then jet down to an airstrip on a city’s periphery. Consequently, in making plans and projections for new city edges it is necessary to discard old methods and working habits and begin with basic research.

### Psychological Space

Psychological space is at the core of spatial experience. It is intertwined with the subjective impression of actual spatial geometry and born in the imagination. The absolute side of rational planning is in a contrapuntal relationship to the pathological nature of the human soul. It is in this mix, at its architectonic conception, that the spatial spirit of a work of architecture is determined.

Sitting in a fishing boat, drifting a few miles away from the ocean shore, one is surrounded by horizon. Reflections of clouds in the water double the space of



the sky; the ocean provokes a silent inward focusing mood, psychological as well as spatial. Likewise, the experience of flight, with its views of space between cloud formations, has a vastness of dimension that invigorates and excites the imagination. Towers of white clouds bunch independently like cotton skyscrapers. Looking down, the desert floor below seems to be a base for these strange forms, then suddenly, jet wings cut the towers in half and the mobile architecture of the clouds is sliced by immense aluminum knives. The spatial exhilaration of air travel has transformed humanity, and the vaporous architecture of clouds has become a phenomenal spatial experience.

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.

If we consider the interior as the harbor of the soul, light, colors, textures, and spatial relationships take on an absolute and urgent importance. The interior, a "psychic vessel of containment," can possess both the clarity and vagueness required for reflection, fantasy, and passion. The architecture of the interior can alter our experience of time of day or season; it can alter our perception of colors, affecting our mood and body temperature. At the direct encounter with interior space, architecture changes the way we live.

Model of Dallas-Fort Worth proposed housing.

Just as the “dimension of the soul is depth” (not breadth) so the dimensions of an interior may well exist below or above the physical limits of its geometry. Spatial extensions beyond a room’s interior, those in a room flanking an open court, for example, may engage and extend the spirit of that interior. Thus spatial projection can be a way of invigorating minimal spaces in housing or in places of confinement, such as hospital rooms. Concepts of “void space” and “hinged space” extend the spatial sense of the living areas in twenty-eight apartments in a housing scheme for Fukuoka, Japan. Four open courts bracket natural ponds on the south, and four open gravel courts face enclosed park space on the north, extending the interiors and offering a variety of perspectival experiences. On the interiors, “hinged space” formed by pivoting “participating” walls transforms a four-bedroom plan into a free plan, allowing spatial adjustments according to cycles of growth and decline in family size or changing activities of daily life.

#### Passage/ Parallax

In the yet-to-be-built city, notions of passage through the city 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 position 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.

In the modern city the voids between buildings, not the buildings themselves, hold spatial inspiration. Urban space is formed by vertical groupings, terrestrial shifts, elongated slots of light, bridges, and vertical penetrations of a fixed horizontal. Urban space has a vertical “Z” dimension equal to or more important than the horizontal “X-Y” plane. This perpendicular spatial order is amplified by a range of viewpoints from various levels. From a roof terrace, a subway platform, the upper floors of a tower or an underpass, urban perspective in the “Z” dimension is experienced on a shifting ground plane.

The experience of parallax, the change in the arrangement of surfaces defining space due to the changing position of the viewer, is transformed into oblique planes of movement. Spatial definition is ordered by angles of perception.

In the 1990 proposal for parallax skyscrapers to be built on the Hudson River in Manhattan, ultra-thin towers bracket views and form a new kind of framed urban space over water. The existing train yard would be transformed into a new city edge park, in the spirit of Frederick Law Olmsted. Hybrid buildings with diverse functions, the towers are linked by horizontal underwater transit that connects to high speed elevators serving upper transfer lobbies.

## Program/Activity

The incredible energy in such cities as New York, Milan, and Paris is related to programmatic diversity and juxtaposition. Modern metropolitan life is characterized by fluctuating activities, turbulent shifts in demographics, and changing desires of restless populations.

We do not call for a new disordered architecture to match the disorder of culture; such duplication simply affirms the chaotic, achieving no other dimension. Rather, we propose experiments in search of new orders, the projection of new relationships. This is not to transpose our study into a system or method, and yet the energy inherent in the development of new relationships presents us with a continuity of ordering that inspires reflection.

Consider the experience of reading a comprehensive morning newspaper, an ordering of life in society. The following untenable juxtapositions might be paralleled in urban terms: an article describing a billion-ton glacier that is drifting around the North Pole lies next to an article about the construction of a 24 foot diameter water tunnel and a piece on the austerity program of a religious cult. Alongside a column on insomnia and the sleep movement of plants is a huge diagram of the "Pacific Rim" trade network. An article on Japanese factories in Mexico is adjacent to a photograph of a hole in the ozone layer over the South Pole.

To precisely translate thoughts and feelings sparked by incredulous relationships is as problematic as translating an English word into all of the world's other 2,796 languages. Precision of the rational gives way to intuition; subjective dimensions establish physical dimensions.

A spatial arrangement, an aroma, a musical phrase, may be imagined simultaneously. Depending on the awareness and imagination of the perceiver, an initial visual field can provoke subject matter and imply programs. We can speak of the sounds implied by an array of brittle linear forms, or the way a view smells. An individual's cultural associations, recognition of materials and imagination of their properties, and the physiological effects of space and enclosure all present individual limitations. The perceiver's angle of vision and preconception is potentially open to the adhesion of unforeseen associations. Rather than allowing prejudice to be a primary subjective determinant, one can induce associations by increasing the possible number of programs to occupy an urban setting.

Isolated buildings of a single function, the suburban norm, typical at the modern city's periphery, give way in these projects to hybrid buildings with diverse programs. An effort toward programmatic richness — an open association of spaces to program suggestions (action images) — is fertilized by gathering and juxtaposing a variety of activities.

In a 1986 project for the re-use of the Porta Vittoria rail yard in Milan, free association, "semi-automatic" programming is a strategy for increasing diversity



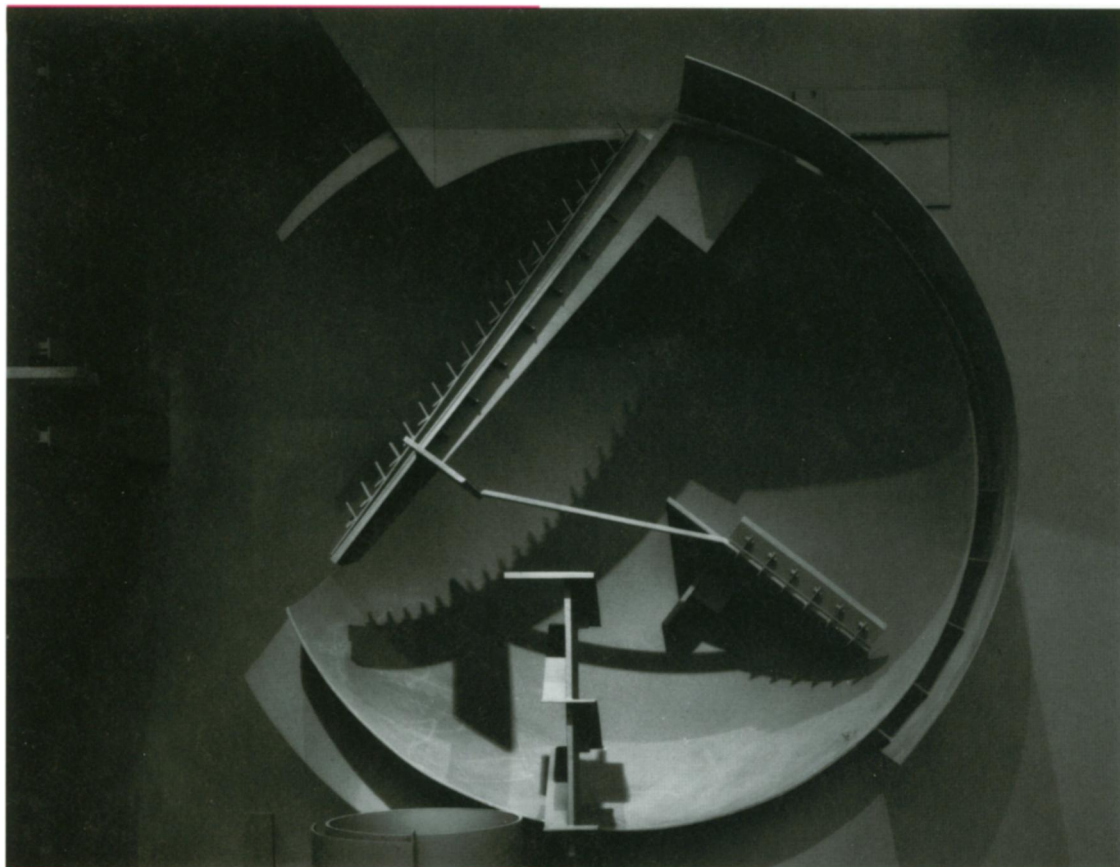
and juxtaposition. From a dense center, Milan unfolds in circles ringed by a patchwork grid that finally sprawls raggedly into the landscape. Against this centrifugal urban sprawl (from dense core to light periphery), a reversal is proposed: light and fine-grained toward the center, heavy and volumetric toward the periphery. This proposal projects a new ring of density and intensity adjoining the rolling green of a reconstituted landscape.

A new strategy for urban morphology is explored; perspectives of overlapping imagined urban spaces are drawn and projected backward into plan fragments. With the help of a sectional “correlational chart” these space fragments are adjusted to form a whole city sector.

A very different strategy is proposed in the “stitch plan” for Cleveland, 1989. Five “Xs” spaced along the inland periphery of Cleveland define precise crossover points from a new urban area to a clarified rural region. These new urban sectors are made up of spaces bounded by buildings with a mixture of functions.

At one “X” the crossover is developed into a dam with hybrid functions. The urban section includes a hotel, a cinema, a gymnasium. The rural section contains programs related to nature: a fish hatchery, an aquarium, botanical gardens. The artificial lake formed

Model of Porta Vittoria, Milan.



by the dam provides a large recreational area and extends the crossover point into a boundary line. Taken together, the “Xs” imply an urban edge.

The *Edge of a City* projects probe phenomenological dimensions in the formation of new urban spaces, in order to transform the tangled waste at the fringes of our modern cities and build new urban sectors with programmatic spatial and architectural richness. Beyond this horizon we are seeking a moving territory between the extremes of idea and physical experience. In the same way that the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggested that the “absolute separation of meaning from factual existence in every region of experience is in fact impossible...,” any constructed space can be defined by its first inhabitant — a psychological space, whether of angst or joy.

Steven Holl

Detail of Cleveland’s “stitch plan.”