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The architecture of Steven Holl is developed as a catalyst to perceptual experience, precisely to engage a sensitized consciousness in search of the profound in architectural experience. Holl believes that, because we are born into the world of physical objects, in the living of our lives we are naturally able to fully experience the perceptual phenomena of our surroundings and, thus, have joy in the immediacy of our sensory perceptions. Inspired by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Holl designs architectural experience as an interplay between the concrete immediacy in our perception of the physical world and its abstraction as mental construct, thus offering a simultaneity of physical being and mental life as a profound transformation of everyday experience. Holl develops architecture as an intensification of a particular cast of mind, stating that:

The experience of space, light and material as well as the socially condensing forces of architecture are the fruit of a developed idea. When the intellectual realm, the realm of ideas, is in balance with the experiential realm, the realm of phenomena, form is animated with meaning. In this balance, architecture has both intellectual and physical intensity, with the potential to touch mind, eye, and soul (Holl 1994: 40).

For Holl, achieving “physical intensity” is a matter of creating constructions of space, materials and light that transform our day-to-day experience by sensitizing our consciousness to an authentic engagement in the immediacy of sensory experience – becoming as fully conscious as possible of our existence. This heightened state is focused through our “embodiment” – what Merleau-Ponty describes as the experience of our bodiliness in the world, as *lived*, free from any schism of mind from body. While we engage in inner mental phenomena as an inward awareness, we simultaneously engage in outward physical phenomena. As we can think deeply, so too are we capable of great engagement at the level of physical phenomena.

For Holl, “embodied” experience gives significance to acts of making. Workmanship, engagement in the purposeful formation of materials, gives precise properties to the perceptual structure of our physical surroundings. These properties endow the perception of objects with what Merleau-Ponty calls a “form giving” power that inherently relates to our embodiment by affording a way of knowing the world directly through its sensual nature (Merleau-Ponty 1981). This is the language of the world of objects. This language is within our comprehension; it is a fundamental understanding gained from the intimate knowledge we experience as we dwell within our bodies. Building design, then, is the materialization of the artifice of architecture in a *living* connection between mental and sensual content. For Holl, acts of making purposefully configure the world to realize the presence of sensory perception. The experiential immediacy in perception intensifies relations between our body immersed in its experience of the world and the interpretive world of mental concepts. One searches perception for questions – i.e., why has this been made and what are the motives behind it being made this way?

In the Addition to the Cranbrook Institute of Science in Michigan, Holl challenges occupants to engage in concepts of scientific thinking by immersing them in an environment of the senses. Two modes of construction help accomplish this. Daylight is manipulated in the building interior to express both its profound presence and its varying penetration over the course of the day. As the sun moves across the sky, no room is perceived the same way twice.

Skylights allow penetration in locations strategically positioned to alter the sensuality and geometry of architectural spaces. Light refracting skylight glazing distorts the entering sunlight into a living texture that effectively causes it to be perceived as the material substance

**Figure 1**

Photo by Stephen Temple

of the wall surface. This transfiguration of light into substance evokes the character of scientific research, centrally concerned as it is with such changes of state. The experiential connectivity of this realization is from senses to intellect – from phenomena to abstraction.

Wall and ceiling surfaces are constructed of plaster applied by hand in many thin layers, each with a differing color or fine textural character. Because they are applied by hand the depth of each thin layer varies slightly, giving the perception that various surfaces show though one another. Though there is little three-dimensional texture, the layered wall surface offers deep sensual interaction as thinly veiled layers interact with and vary color and light reflectance. The surface appears to change depending on one's proximity, developing a natural scaling coherence (Salingaros 1999). The wall has a hierarchically continuous sensual quality no matter from how far or close you see it. A painted wall, by contrast, ceases to look and feel different after moving only a few feet from it – it is only a colored skin, after all. Because visual perception requires constant motion, this plaster wall offers itself to our perception in living connection with our movements through perception and, thus, reciprocally realizes our embodiment in the *actual body of the building* – its illuminated space and surfaces.

There is an *interrelationship* between the way constructed things in the world are conceived, the way they have been made or produced, and the way they are received through perception. Attention to the nature of human perception can have great effect on the potential

influence of man-made design on human feeling and thinking. In Holl's buildings, architectural experience is formed of an interdependence between the sensual particulars of physical phenomena and the generative concepts of *the maker* to simultaneously heighten perceptual phenomena in connection with developing meaning. For Steven Holl, architecture is as much a project of consciousness as a challenge of conceptualization, program and construction.

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