JOSEPH MASHECK

Steven Holl

STEVEN HOLL likes to wake up early in the morning and begin his projects with pencil, paper and watercolors. This freehand working up of an architectural space perhaps serves as a clue to the sometimes idiosyncratic results. It is Holl's freedom from established clichés of Modernism and Postmodernism that allows him to create such spaces as Kiasma, his Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, or the Stretto House in Dallas. Holl grew up in Bremerton, Washington, home of the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, and sweeping naval forms are surely evident in some of his work. There is a painterly attitude to composition and playful use of materials anchored within Holl's metaphors: a wooden beach house that evokes the form of an imagined skeleton of Moby Dick stranded on a sand dune, for instance. There is no gratuitous expressionism here, no neofuturist Postmodernism the likes of Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim. Holl's writings point to a desire to express, through architecture, an understanding of some of science's phenomena. At the same time his most successful work transcends its own metaphors.

joseph masheck Thinking of your new pavilions for the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, I'm wondering about your intervening in a context dominated by a classical building. With the Cranbrook Institute of Science, your project with Chris McVoy in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan (1999), it was perhaps easier to deal, as I recall, with the diluted kind of German-art-colony semi-classicism of Eliel Saarinen's art academy out there. So did the Nelson-Atkins have any architectural interest?

steven holl I think so, as an example of that attitude toward classicism in America which has long been seen as a way of making the museum a public building of calm, reserve and importance. But I think our approach in Kansas City is one of complementary contrast: "the stone and the feather." Out of all the competitors we not only took the most radical architectonic approach but also the most careful approach toward the existing building, which is definitely bilaterally symmetrical, with not perfect, but decent, proportions. So we built alongside it, with a new entrance connecting by "umbilical cord" underground.

jm As an art historian, I'm interested in your idea of the half dozen small, modern pavilions sidling down the hill beside the old classical building: at Kansas City you might almost have had in mind the interface of the classical and Modern—apropos of Otto Wagner's plan for the am Steinhof sanitarium church (1905–07) outside Vienna, with its dozen little rectangular pavilions spaced down the hillside below his gleaming white, modernized Roman-imperial hospital. In which case, your disposition might be, so to speak, half asymmetry.

sh It's a different problem, but that's a very interesting example. I just don't believe it's the same problem, especially because we had difficult constraints in the program. Wagner had, if you will, the emperor's ear—

(left) Steven Holl, Lobby, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland, 1998. All images courtesy of Steven Holl Architects.
(above) Steven Holl, Skylight, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland, 1998.

There are two main bodies of the building, and you wall; but if you look at the form straight-on in the

Steven Holl, House of Vapor, Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1999.

something altogether different from the American situation, with committees and special problems to take into account. The real challenge, the exciting thing about a project like this, is to be able to get all those pragmatics, even wheelchair accessibility, into some form that has an ideal of a kind.

jm Well, even Wagner had to allow for incontinence in the mental patients. But, you know, if in working out your idea you come up with something that's like half of an Otto Wagner symmetry, that's kind of nice! Otherwise, you have spoken of "crystallizing an idea"—is that for you anything like what the academic tradition called the "parti"?—which if I ever got it right was a way of designing into basic schemata.

sh No, no! My work doesn't follow that kind of trajectory from the Cornell school. I'm interested in a concept, an idea that is more meaningful than a formal strategy, though formally distinguished, as I would hope that my work over the years shows. For example, the Martha's Vineyard house (1988) which derived conceptually from a whale's skeleton, had to relate to a very narrow site, only 25 feet wide, and that engendered a kind of exoskeletal feeling in the all-wooden building. That's what I strive for in my work, a conceptual stratagem in response to the special conditions of every project. I try to come up with a concept that has a deeper meaning than just a form, and to use that to tie everything together.

jm Your concept, then, is in some measure allowing for an induction from thinking about a whale skeleton to thinking of the dwelling-to-be as long, narrow and exoskeletal. If so, this sounds more conceptual than what not so long ago used to pass for semiotics in architecture, which was all too often just architectural puns.

sh I hope so, because the aspiration isn't to anchor architecture backwards in history. I believe that we are operating in new territory after the collapse of Postmodernism and its reintroduction of motifs of architectural language from the past. I think some of the work that was built under that auspice is perhaps the worst building that we will ever

enter through a single entrance in a common end elevation, you see that it's a shifted golden section.

see perpetrated on American soil. Even so-called failed Modern buildings of the late sixties have more inspirational integrity than some of these Postmodern piles (*laughter*).

jm I suspect that for you, too, Modernism still holds artistic conviction, which is not to deny the critical aspect of Postmodernism from Venturi onward.

sh I have always worked in a way that's at war with the conservative aspect of Postmodernism, and I continue to do so. Happily, over the last ten years, there has been a fresh look at things that are of our time, and even an optimism on the part of committees toward more forward looking architecture. Het Oosten Social Housing Company Offices, on De Singel, in Amsterdam, my project with Justin Korhammer (2000), had to go through one of the most conservative committees in Europe, the Amsterdam Beauty Committee [*officially called the Municipal Department for the Preservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites*].

jm They really call it that?

sh Yes! It regulates every building built inside the canal area of the city. We had to tear down a coal-fired boiler plant and its smokestack; but we preserved the main building, a 19th-century brick structure which is now the main part of the headquarters.

jm What is it the headquarters of?

sh A social housing company, a kind of hybrid between preservation of low-cost housing and for-profit housing. There are a number of them, but this one is particularly interesting because they have always attempted excellence in architecture, and it was nice that I was hired for the project; they felt there were no Dutch architects who could give the level of detail and craft that I strive for. I did something experimental there that I wasn't sure would work, which is why I purposely didn't publish it for a while. Two things are put together: the concept of a Menger sponge—a notion of infinite porosity, so the plan, section and elevation are of relatively the same geometric consistency—and chance determination in accord with a piece of music by Morton Feldman (*Patterns in a Chromatic Field*, 1981). Color areas and the windows and orifices that weren't of the basic pattern of porosity were located by a random operation. The actual program of the building was so complicated (besides offices, it needed to have a meeting hall, a place for parties and seasonal events, a cafeteria, a place for weddings, so many things) that no one program could have driven the design. I needed a concept other than the program to drive the design: the concept of porosity, which operates on the interior as well. Perforated plywood walls soak up the acoustics, and you can also project digital images on them. When the building was three-quarters finished, I was still not sure it was going to work. I was completely surprised when *Architectural Record* and *Domus* chose it for their covers, and it got listed among the top ten designs of 2000 by *Time* magazine.

jm You must have had a sympathetic contractor for such a tour de force, right?

sh No, we had to go to war. It was a long, long struggle. We had to reject things, and go back; but it was worth it, and they're proud of it now.

jm Because, frankly, I have something between curiosity and skepticism about artists' generative ideas; it strikes me that the Menger sponge, as you explain it, would seem to produce ever wilder asymmetry as it goes inward, but you seem to have kept that under control, as if you're somehow playing against a Menger tendency to make things ever less regular.

sh But it's only an analogy. In fact, we wanted to use *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* first, before the Menger idea, especially in effecting some practically indiscernible transition from the remaining old brick building to the new structure.

jm In the case of the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art (1992-1998) in Helsinki, I'd like to ask you about a different sort of issue, the problem of what could be considered styling, meaning something gratuitously shaped versus what is expressively formed, even voluptuously formed, but not *merely* shaped. I am thinking of the Helsinki museum, especially the "muscle car" bulge to one side of the building (suggestive now of the wildly popular I-Mac computer) versus its flat back wall with such beautiful asymmetry in its window pattern.

sh Well, the flat side is the city side, and all the offices are there. One of the reasons it's like that is that I wanted every office to have an operable window, and the offices don't lay out in a symmetrical way; so the sort of lyricism of that wall has to do with what's behind it.

jm In other words, it's not an arbitrary pattern, and neither is it determined by some mathematical or even musical formula.

sh Right.

jm Then might I say it's functionally determined?

sh Not really (*laughter*), because I was in charge of where those functions would go. I mean, in my architecture I really adhere to the functions, except that I manipulate them freely. What you see in the end isn't so much because of my having had to include those various things as that I have arranged them. That had to do with the basic concept of the building, which is a chiasmatic intertwining, a folding in on itself. The first sketches show a knotlike shape; but that shape doesn't have an urban edge. So what we did was shear off the wall—we sawed it right off in the model! And there we had this flat, urban wall which we could deal with in terms of the disposition of windows, which is related to the flat face of a post office across the street. If you stand between the two buildings you do feel like you are in an urban street. The other side is like a garden, so where the building bulges away from the perpendicular, that's really a garden facade. Besides, while the one side goes out, in a way, the other goes in, and when you enter you feel the curve moving up the ramp, while what's happening geometrically in the 25 galleries that make up the interior of the building is also exposed to you on the outside.

jm I want to ask about what might be called the optics of this, since I know by more than the title of your recent book,

Steven Holl, Y-Retreat, the Catskills, New York, 1999. Photo by Solange Fabiao.

Parallax (2000), that you are interested in parallax as a phenomenon. In the entrance wall of the same building, the way a truncated rectangle on the near corner lines up with the rectangles behind may or may not comprise an accidental doubling.

sh There are two main bodies of the building, and you enter through a single entrance in a common end wall; but if you look at the form straight-on in the elevation, you see that it's a shifted golden section. Although the logarithmic spiral is organizing all the proportions of this building, I usually fine-tune everything in my work with that classical system, the Golden Ratio (1:1.618). Thus, though the viewpoint of the photograph may be a happy accident, it's of two things that are themselves intrinsically related proportionally.

jm You like corners in a Cubist way anyway, don't you? After all, you designed the Art and Art History Building for the University of Iowa with Chris McVoy, derived from Picasso's 1912 *Guitar* construction.

sh Yes, and one of the most interesting things is to enter a space at the corner. This relates to the chapter in *Parallax* called "Hinged Space," with rotating panels, and how in 1983 I realized that you could even rotate 30-foot sections with corners.

jm Let me ask you about my favorite—excepting perhaps the Storefront for Art and Architecture (1993) on which you and the artist Vito Acconci collaborated—the Y House, in upstate New York. The rear, which is the twinned end of the "Y," is one of the most beautiful facades I've seen in a long time. How did you settle on the split configuration?

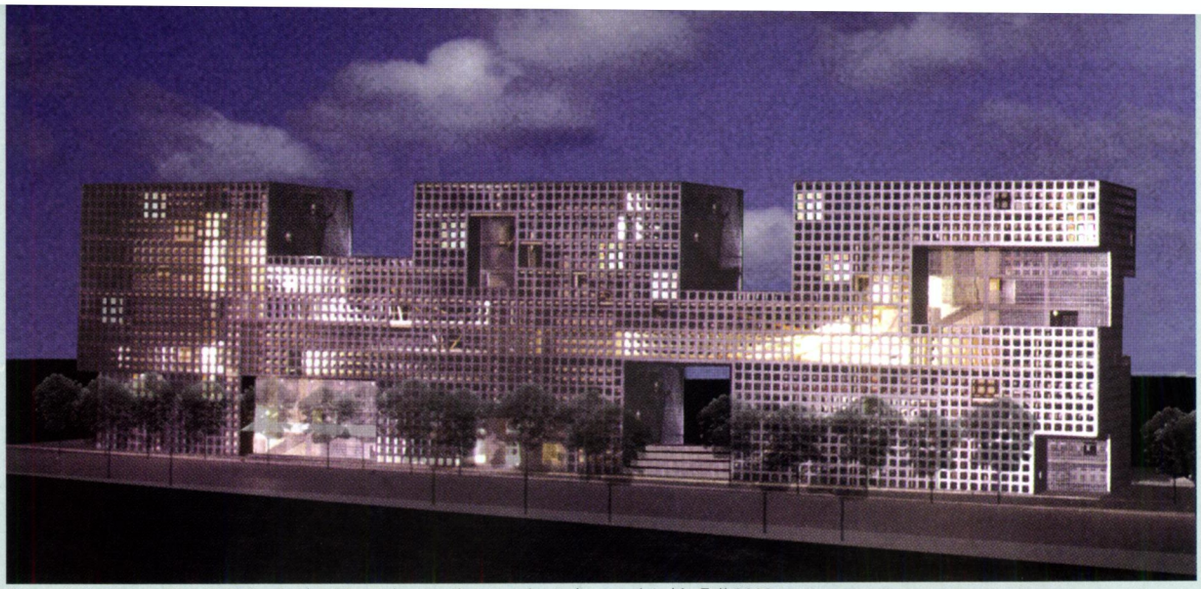
sh That was a particular project where I visited the site and got excited about how one turns up and up to a hilltop, then turns and looks back at the Catskills. I extended the building from the height of a person gradually rising up in that spiral and then split the form off in two. It almost fades off into two ends looking out over the distant view, both facing south. It's actually one of those projects that seldom happens for me: I made the basic sketch the day that I went to the site, November 16, 1997, and didn't deviate from it. In the interior there is a reversal of day and night between the two wings (nighttime upstairs and daytime down, daytime upstairs and nighttime down). Normally a small weekend house would pack all sleeping into one area.

jm It strikes me that there is something sort of neighborly about the closeness of the two interior walls, even—I know this a loaded word—*vernacular*, like two little frame houses in Jersey City that are only 15 feet apart, something sort of neighborly in the middle of nowhere.

sh Yes, exactly; it's like two lofts, kind of wedged together. But internally it's not like that. Inside its branches, the house is really one.

jm From the entrance the Y House is very short, very humanly scaled, and then from there it branches out at an angle and gets bigger.

sh You and I have talked about Suprematism, and Malevich was really my beginning, the pivotal inspiration in making my buildings, my first compositions worth mentioning. My first published project was an underwater house in Saint-Tropez which was an "X" suspended underwater, and my second one, the Bronx Gymnasium Bridge, was practically a Malevich drawing turned into a bridge. I have a strong affinity for Malevich, including his writing, which is incredibly impassioned and has a disturbingly urgent feeling, as well as those plaster formal experiments, the architectones.



Steven Holl, Simons Hall, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Construction to be completed in Fall 2002.

jm There's a funny thing about the architectones, that they do not experiment with what I think is the most profound Suprematist thing for architecture and which you show especially in your Y House. Malevich doesn't seem to allow himself to skew the architectones at all, whereas in his painting the skewing of forms generates much of the Suprematist vitality.

sh **But if you skew too often you dilute that effect!**

jm In the Y House I'm fascinated by the way you use steel as if it were just extra-thin, extra-strong wood.

sh **That's the idea. I was using it as lines. Those decks are not possible without steel, and you can see that immediately.**

jm Even though it's painted, you didn't have to tell me that those elements are steel—as Adolf Loos, for one, would have been pleased to attest.

sh **It's red-painted steel, but when you get close to the house there's a detail that really reveals the thinness of the steel: the gaps in the small horizontal I-beams between the two floors, where they don't reach the corners, create a tension that can only be achieved with steel.**

jm It happens that I have written about the house that the 18th-century Anglo-Irish philosopher George Berkeley built in America—with one eye on the problem of the vernacular and the other on Adolf Loos, as a matter of fact; I find that your Y House strikes me as related. I think in America vernacular architecture has been misunderstood partly because of the way the literary people bullshit about the vernacular. *Vernacular* literally means anything but Latin, hence vernacular architecture should be anything but classical, though ironically what turns on most vernacular freaks is really middle-class, hand-me-down classicism. The very topic stimulates Americans to make pronouncements, usually antimodern ones at that, even if they don't know what they're talking about architecturally.

sh **Exactly. I find some discussions of vernacular almost as offensive as Charles Jencks reading the Sydney Opera House as copulating turtles.**

jm I'd like to return to the notion of a generative "concept," this time with respect to a new project: your amazing new dormitory for MIT. Some time ago, I saw you and your associates—including the artist Dan Graham—working with the model, and I heard you emphasize several times the "porous" quality, like your Amsterdam Menger sponge. Did you know that that old Gestaltist Rudolf Arnheim talked about porosity in architecture? And speaking of Viennese Modernism: what about the dormitory's exterior grille of squares and all the Wiener Werkstätte industrial art like that by Josef Hoffmann—itself probably influenced by Mackintosh? (*laughter*) Okay, okay, I'd rather make the last question this: Do you compose on the computer, or do you just use a computer for technical and practical problems?

sh **I believe in the analog as the beginning of architecture. There's a whole school of architecture now that speaks about composing on the computer, which I think is completely wrongheaded. The brain, by the way, has infinitely more circuits. The very first thought, the meaningful first diagram, the "concept" for the building, is a combination of eye and mind and hand, and, one hopes, the spirit. I always begin with these little five by seven drawings in my watercolor notebooks. Two winters ago, for instance, I was working on a house for Richard Tuttle, out in New Mexico, and I put the whole concept of the building on one five by seven sheet. Now of course I can scan that, and work digitally from there, or send it to other people who can manipulate it. Every project becomes in that way digitally supercharged. But even though every one is produced on the computer, it does not begin on the computer. That's a polemical point.**

jm Just what do you mean by believing in the architecture of the analog, presumably versus the digital?

sh **The subtleties and qualities of the role of intuition in conception are best begun directly in the idea/mind/hand/eye. With this directness I feel a fusion of idea-space-conceptions and what I could only describe as spiritual meaning. After, the work can be digitally supercharged . . . it can take off.**

jm *Believe* is a strong word, with various implications of faith. Why the analog as the beginning of architecture?

sh **Let's say that I have a very strong suspicion; more than a rough guess, more than something I could take for granted, and yet "working with doubt" is unavoidable. ⊙**