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Steven Holl: the Open Thought

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Steven Holl – The Open Thought

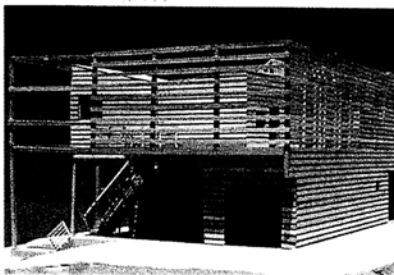
Review by Noel Brady

Steven Holl
 Edited by Francesco Garafalo
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Architecture can be a frustrating artistic endeavour. Before there is the possibility of completing a built work there is the intervening period of thought and reflection that makes the foundation for practice. Into this space a thought grows. In the essay "Yet another monograph?" Francesco Garafalo provides a very effective guide through the main points of the landscape that Holl occupied. This is particularly useful for the uninitiated and even worthwhile for those already familiar with the work. While works such as Kiasma are widely known today, Holl's reputation was founded firstly upon the idiosyncratic architectural methodology published in the early editions of the *Pamphlet Series* (Princeton University Press). Part of this reputation was the recognisable form of representation, using in particular iso and axonometric projections, before developing a reverse perspective design process. Supplementing these almost technical exercises emerged a softer, almost naive form of concept sketches, with little or no pretensions. By reproducing these vignettes alongside models, photographs and other more technical drawings, a sense of the real emerges. However the most effective means by which architecture's spatial configuration and material reality can be witnessed is in reality. No amount of computer-aided virtual walkthroughs and simulations have come close to the haptic confirmations a real building evokes. Neither can a monograph truly explore the nature of work in the way but this modest publication does better than even more expensive editions, especially in evoking the intentions behind the executed work.

One of the inevitable characteristics of an open work is that it is possible to misinterpret the intention, even if accidental or incidental. In presenting the ever-widening range of Holl's oeuvre it opens up the other possibility, that of inconsistency, where the scale, location or building type starts to inflict their own pressures. The monograph, in quite a concise manner, portrays the emergence of a consistent voice. The work evokes a sense of being beyond analysis conforming to a personal vision. By replacing type (early researches) with thought, a poetic world enfolds all things. It also shows a level of openness in



Concept sketch of the theme of 'writing with lights' in watercolour and model

thought that is lacking in many other contemporary works. The ability to carry multiple meanings, impressions while responding to the most basic aspect of architectural production is Holl's particular achievement.

The reasons why this might occur are subject to much speculation but in this case one might look at the limits of language, or rather the use of limits in developing a language, ensuring that only the most important elements come to the fore. In this case it has become a dialogue about light, a particular form of light, as if reflected from water on the underside of a bridge. Perhaps this is why there are so many barrel vaults in his work, and the presence of cast glass. This deconstruction of light is perhaps abhorrent to those influenced by the Mediterranean but it has become his core theme.

Comparing for instance the Berkowitz House (1984) to the Writing with Light House (2002), it seems that the very fabric of the Berkowitz, itself based on the conjunction between metaphor (a sub story in Melville's *Moby Dick*) and type (telescope house), has been crumpled and shorn to reveal a new configuration. Yet they are palpably from the same hand, both singing with the same voice.

What is clear from this review of the essential works is that his methodology has not limited the didactic relationship to the unfolding work. While the work conveys "turmoil in the whole", the character remains stubbornly consistent, from house to museum and back. Even the largest of his projects have a domestic sense about them, characterised by the sensitivity to touch and warmth in terms of light and space. This may be due to the origins of Holl's architectural research into the typology of early American houses and in the early residential projects such as the Berkowitz Odgis House (1984-1988), where Holl designed the various bespoke elements of the interior. It is clear that Holl's formative years became a foundation for a type of unending completeness, an open thought.

Through his teaching, his published drawings (competitions and researches) and completed works have been highly influential amongst students and practitioners. Inevitably such a personal poetic structure is difficult to mimic and often the results of such adulation are problematic. If there is a danger in the monograph as a form of publishing, it is that it lacks depth of understanding. Garafalo's essay is a perfect antidote to this. Also in defence of this published work the range of photographs in this volume conveys a more complete picture of the works than others. Some of the photographs used in this book are new to me and are carefully chosen to reflect the intentions of the architect. However there are some odd choices, especially the parking system in the Sarphatistraat Office project (2000).

The detail that Holl ascribes to his built work, door handles, wall finishes and other components is unfortunately absent, but this may be a feature of the scale of work. In the last 10 years there has been a major change in the quality of production and range of architecture books and these are receiving a wider readership than architects or their students. In light of the more elaborate examples of this genre this is a fine exploration in the tradition of the monograph.

Noel Brady is principal of NJBA Architects & Urban Designers and a studio master in the School of Architecture, DIT Bolton Street. He was educated at DIT and at MIT Department of Architecture, USA.