Emilio Ambasz, Steven Holl: architecture

Author
Ambasz, Emilio

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GERALD D. HINES INTERESTS ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM
AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK
The fourth exhibition in The Museum of Modern Art's Gerald D. Hines Interests Architecture Program is devoted to the work of Emilio Ambasz and Steven Holl, both of whom practice in the United States. This exhibition focuses on their architecture, ranging from urban design to interiors. Leading members of a new generation coming to maturity, each has produced a distinguished body of work, yet both have as yet built relatively little. While the work of each is quite distinct from that of the other, from a broader perspective they have traits in common.

The two architects represent a generation formed in the aftermath of the collapse of modernist ideology. Unlike the architects who have sought inspiration mainly in the formal language of modernism, or those who sought to recapture meaning and symbol by a return to historic modes of architectural representation, Ambasz and Holl have sought to revitalize the mythopoetic side of modernism. Recognizing that the best modern work grew out of a poetic and allegorical way of thinking, rather than a purely empirical and functional one, and addressed meaning and symbolism in a profound and lyrical manner, they have pursued this path in their own work. Holl speaks of architecture and site as having "an experimental connection, a metaphysical link, a poetic link." Ambasz speaks of architecture as a "mythmaking act," and adds: "My work is a search for primal things—being born, being in love, and dying. It has to do with existence on an emotional, passionate, and essential level."

Both architects have been drawn to that modernist tradition that sought inspiration in the anonymous and primitive vernacular, in an effort to get back to a pure and mythical ground-zero of architecture. As a result a certain simplicity, austerity, and abstraction characterize the work of each. But their sources of inspiration have been different. Ambasz has looked to the archaic and primitive, essentially a preurban architecture, while Steven Holl has drawn from the anonymous vernacular of the city and the small town, to whose building types he has devoted considerable research. However, while deeply conscious of history, each architect has retained the modernist interest in invention, seeking innovative conceptual and formal solutions and new forms of architectural and communal order in their work. Both share a strong sense of the need for an architecture rooted to place—Ambasz through a virtual integration of building and earth, Holl by connecting his work with the existing cultural and physical markings of the site, whether the abandoned elevated rails in New York or the old stone walls in the suburbs.

Both also represent a generation formed by the cultural and social concerns of the latter half of the 1960s, and the ensuing disillusionment with the possibility of social change that occurred in the 1970s. But unlike many in the architectural profession in the last thirteen years (the approximate span of their architectural production), both architects have retained a sense of social idealism. However, gone are the sweeping prototypical proposals of the modern movement that sought all-encompassing social and architectural solutions. Instead both architects focused in their early work on ideal communal projects; often small and removed from the social mainstream, these include Ambasz's Cooperative of Mexican-American Grapegrowers and Holl's Autonomous Artisan Houses or his Gymnasium Bridge in the Bronx. And although unbuilt, posited as ideal communities, these projects will live on as "architectural fables," in Ambasz's words, long after constructed buildings have crumbled.

But both architects' work also reflects the schizophrenic nature of late 1960s attitudes toward engagement and withdrawal. It is probably not a coincidence that each has designed "mythic retreats," placed below the earth's surface: Ambasz's partly sunk in the midst of open wheat fields outside Cordoba, Spain; Holl's floating underwater off the coast of St. Tropez (a retreat from the noise and activity of a couple's vacation house). And while the mood evoked by each project is different, Ambasz's idyllic and arcadian, Holl's gloomy and "Hadian," they both represent an eloquent social statement. In a similar vein, the interior has become a vehicle of architectural expression for both architects. And while the studied minimalism of Ambasz's interiors contrasts with the complexity of Holl's, they share common ground in the surreal.

However, more recently they have been among the few architects who have continued exploring innovative solutions in urban design, addressing in their work issues posed by urban growth at the periphery and exurban settlement.

Emilio Ambasz has proposed, through the example of his architectural projects, a new relationship between nature and architecture and in the process eliminated the clear-cut distinction between the two. They have become integral and inseparable. While architecture integrated with the earth is not totally new within the context of the modern movement (one thinks of, among others, energy-conscious architecture), Ambasz has given it a new formal and aesthetic distinction. He has drawn not only on his own inventive mind, on archaic and primitive architectural sources, but also on the model of the English garden.

While the masters of the modern movement also sought a new and more immediate relationship to nature in their work, they remained preoccupied by buildings that in all cases remained distinct from the landscape—even Frank Lloyd Wright, whose architecture mimicked nature's striated and layered forms. Le Corbusier's great landscape designs of earth works at Chandigarh, while conceived as integral with the total composition of the buildings, remained distinct from them. In contrast, projects such as the house at Cordoba, Spain; the house at Bierges, Belgium; the Schlumberger Research Laborato-
ries in Austin, Texas; or the Botanical Gardens in San Antonio, simply cannot be separated from the landscape: they are the landscape. The Schlumberger Research Center, a sculpted landscape with most of the building volume underground, has the rambling yet carefully composed informal layout of an English garden with architectural pavilions (the tips of the programmatic iceberg), like follies, emerging here and there to lend an accent. At the botanical gardens, consisting of sunken courtyards—some open, others covered with great pyramidal skylights set in rolling lawns—the composition becomes more axial and hierarchic, in the manner of an ancient temple.

Ironically, it is a marriage of the archaic and modern technology that has made Ambasz’s return to an architectural set in the earth both possible and attractive. The damp, cold, and dark environment of our ancestral cave-dwellers has, with the aid of new waterproofing and mechanical systems, skylights and large expanses of glass, been transformed into a well-tempered environment, both sheltered and open, with rolling vistas of a new arcanadian landscape. As the problem of the unprecedented destruction and defacement of nature and the landscape by suburban and exurban sprawl becomes increasingly acute, Ambasz’s nonurban projects provide an architectural model for a pastoral ideal, a new harmony between man and nature.

In his urban projects landscape also remains central to Ambasz’s architectural work. In a series of projects he has brought the garden to the city, not like the early modernists by destroying it, but rather by taking (in his proposals for Houston and Salamanca) the traditional urban square as a point of departure and providing an architecturally elegant and dignified sense of place and occasion. In the recent Nichii Department Store project for Oshihoro, Japan, he has created a multileveled interior garden as an integral element of the architecture. In a variation at the Sanda Cultural and Athletic Center, also in Japan, the architecture becomes the wall around the garden.

On a larger urban scale Ambasz proposed, in his prize-winning master plan for the 1992 Universal Exposition in Seville, Spain, that most of the pavilions be placed on floating barges in three large lagoons surrounded by parks adjacent to the historic city. After the end of the exposition, the pavilions would be remodeled for the use of the university. In this innovative solution, which combines Ambasz’s fascination with floating mobile modular units (also used in the early Mexican Computer Center) and his commitment to landscape, Seville gains both a university campus and a park system that complements rather than challenges its historic urban character.

While Ambasz’s work on the whole addresses the primal psychological urges in us that have been basic to man since time immemorial, Holl’s architecture tends to address the more elusive, complex, and brittle psychological states of modern urban man. His work is a remarkable combination of the simple and straightforward with the complex and enigmatic.

Anonymous vernacular building types have been Holl’s point of departure. By abstracting and generalizing, he has sought their underlying principles of form, construction, and psychology in order to reach a neutral architectural base that he can then particularize and elaborate. His sense of materials, detail, and form, as well as his subtle and restrained sense of proportion and his frequent addition of an unexpected element, transform the basic type into something extraordinary. The tension between ordinary and extraordinary, the general and the particular, give his buildings their power.

In contrast to the general restraint of Holl’s exterior architecture, the interiors he has designed for New York apartments and boutiques exhibit a sensuousness of materials and a studied complexity. The work is characterized by the use of rough and polished stucco surfaces, by exquisite detailing in metal and glass, and by fractured and transformable planar elements that exhibit the intricacy of a Chinese puzzle. While this aspect of Holl’s work suggests a connection to the brilliant detailing and use of materials of the late Italian architect Carlo Scarpa, the psychological dimension and the enigmatic and subtly surreal quality of Holl’s interiors, and their contrast with the restraint of the exterior, actually suggest a deeper affinity to Adolf Loos. Holl’s ability to evoke psychological states is expressed over a wide range. They include the cacophonous but ethereal interiors of the Metropolitan Tower apartment, which seek to capture the shirliness of that wedge-shaped building in its urban context as well as the sense of immateriality of living high above the sky; and the spare and enigmatic interiors for the three distinct apartments at Seaside: facing the sea and the sunrise, they are designed for “melancholy types,” whom Holl imagined as a mathematician, a musician, and a poet.

Holl’s theoretical and experimental urban design projects represent an important contribution to finding an alternative to both discredited modernist town-planning principles and the currently popular historicist models. Seeking to define a new urban landscape based on the notion of psychological urban space that would allow “the modern soul to emerge,” Holl, in the Porta Vittoria project for Milan, set on its head the usual urban design approach, which focuses on an overall plan first, followed by a detailed three-dimensional design. He also freed himself from using any existing urban building types (contrary to his own previous approach as well as standard method) as a point of departure in favor of inventing new urban elements and buildings of an undetermined and open-ended use.

Like a modern Camillo Sitte, Holl proposed carefully composed urban spaces and ensembles in perspective (the way they would be perceived by the city-dweller) before projecting his three-dimensional creation into a two-dimensional plan fragment. At the end the various designed fragments were brought together in an overall master plan. While experimental, Holl’s method provides a fertile approach for generating vital new urban models and images to move us beyond the current moribund state of urban design.

In his recent Edge of a City study, Holl has proposed multi-use projects for three American cities—Cleveland, Phoenix, and Rochester—that addresses the issue of urban sprawl by seeking to establish for each well-defined edges between city and nature. Recognizing that the problem of urban and suburban sprawl and the lack of a sense of place that it entails is not solvable by traditional zoning, Holl has proposed architectural solutions. Concerned about anchoring his projects to existing physical landscape features, he has used the Erie Barge Canal in Rochester, or in Phoenix (a city that is all sprawl), the more obscure traces of the mysterious canals built long ago by the Hohokum Indians.
Born in 1945 in Resistencia, Argentina, Emilio Ambasz attended Princeton University, where between 1964 and 1966 he completed the undergraduate program and received a Master of Architecture degree. From 1970 to 1976 he served as curator of design at The Museum of Modern Art, where he directed a number of influential exhibitions. Also a well-known industrial and graphic designer, he has had his own practice in New York and Bologna, Italy, since 1976.
Cooperative of Mexican-American Grapegrowers
Borrego Springs, California
1976

Aerial perspective

Pro Memoria Garden
Ludenshausen, West Germany
1978

Axonometric
House for Baron and Madame Philippe Lambert
Bierges, Belgium
1979

Schlumberger Research Laboratories
Austin, Texas
1982
Banque Bruxelles Lambert

Milan, Italy

1979

Interior view

Banque Bruxelles Lambert

Lausanne, Switzerland

1981

Interior view

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Banque Bruxelles Lambert, Lausanne

Interior view

Houston Center Plaza

Houston, Texas

1982

Model
Plaza Mayor
Salamanca, Spain
1982

Section perspective

Lucille Halsell Conservatory
San Antonio, Texas
1984

Model

1992 Universal Exposition
Competition entry, first prize
Seville, Spain
1986

Model
Nichii Obihiro Department Store
Obihiro, Japan
1987

Model

Mercedes-Benz Showroom
Englewood, New Jersey
1986

Model

Sanda Cultural Center
and Athletic Facility
Sanda, Japan
1988

Model
Steven Holl

PROJECTS

Born in 1947 in Bremerton, Washington, Steven Holl studied architecture at the University of Washington in Seattle and in Rome. In 1976 he spent a year in London doing graduate study at the Architectural Association. Since 1978 he has practiced in New York. He is Associate Professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, where he is Director of the First Year.
Underwater House
St. Tropez, France
1976

Perspective

Gymnasium-Bridge
South Bronx, New York
1977

Plans and perspective

House
Staten Island, New York
1980

Perspective
Bridge of Houses
New York, New York
1981

Site axonometric

Pool House and Sculpture Studio
Scarsdale, New York
1981

Exterior view

Autonomous Artisans' Houses
Staten Island, New York
1981-84

Perspective
Fifth Avenue Apartment
New York, New York
1983

Interior view

Hybrid Building
Seaside, Florida
1985-88

Exterior view (under construction)

House
Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts
1984-87

Exterior view
Metropolitan Tower Apartment
New York, New York
1987

Interior view

Madison Avenue Shop
New York, New York
1987

Door detail

Milan Project—Porta Vittoria
Milan, Italy
1986-87

Perspective of water-basin, amphitheater, and jack-up rig
House (Non-dialectic Double House)
Cleveland, Ohio
1988

Addition to Berlin Library (Gedenkbibliothek/Berliner Zentral-bibliothek)
Competition entry, first prize
Berlin, West Germany
1988

Edge of a City
Rochester, New York
1988-ongoing

Model
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STUART WREDE

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Santi Caleca, 8; 9 top and center. Louis Checkman, 5 top; 6. Beckett Logan, 16 center. Courtesy of Nichii Obihiro, 12 top. Paul Warchol, 18 top and bottom; 21 top.

This brochure serves as a visual documentation of the exhibition. Monographs on each of the architects have recently been published: Emilio Ambasz’s The Poetics of the Pragmatic (Rizzoli, 1989) and Steven Holl’s Anchoring (Princeton Architectural Press, 1989).
Emilio Ambasz  Steven Holl
ARCHITECTURE

Steven Holl. Milan Project—Porta Vittoria. Model

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK