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Steven Holl (born December 9, 1947) is an American architect and watercolorist. Holl graduated from the University of Washington and pursued architecture studies in Rome in 1970. In 1976, he attended graduate school at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London and established his offices New York City. Holl has taught at Columbia since 1981.

Holl designs from the Golden Ratio. In mathematics and the arts, two quantities are in the golden ratio if the ratio of the sum of the quantities to the larger quantity is equal to the ratio of the larger quantity to the smaller one. The Egyptian Pyramids, for example, were the first structures to incorporate this balance.

After 1984, Holl’s architecture philosophy underwent a radical shift when he became dissatisfied with typology or architectural types and began to study phenomenology: a philosophical movement that describes the formal structure of the objects of awareness and of awareness itself in abstraction from any claims concerning existence. The shift came about partly due to his interest in the writings of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Finnish architect-theorist Juhani Pallasmaa.

As Merleau-Ponty searches for “re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world” through the realm of perception, Holl focuses on phenomenology in architecture in order to “put essences into experience.”

Holl believes “It doesn’t have to be built to be architecture. A play can exist without being performed. A piece of music can exist without an orchestra playing it. The creative act is the most important thing.” An artist since the age of five, Holl uses watercolors to diagram and elaborate concepts to introduce light, color, and texture in the beginning thought.

Holl is perhaps best known for the 2003 Simmons Hall at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the celebrated 2007 Bloch Building addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, and the praised 2009 Linked Hybrid mixed-use complex in Beijing, China.

“Every project is unique: a site and a circumstance, a culture, a climate, a program. All of these forces are unique and you need a concept to hold the manifold pieces together, an idea that makes the project significant in its place and for its purpose. That is always the way I begin projects.
The term stretto (plural: strettis) comes from the Italian past participle of stringere, and means "narrow", "tight", or "close". It applies in a close succession of statements of the subject in a fugue, especially in the final section. In stretto, the subject is presented in one voice and then imitated in one or more other voices, with the imitation starting before the subject has finished. The subject is therefore superimposed upon itself.

Commissioned by an occupant with a true appreciation for great architecture, and given no limitations, the structure of Stretto House was greatly influenced by its landscape. Adjacent to three spring-fed ponds with existing concrete dams, the sound of overlapping water stayed with architect Steven Holl and became the canvas for his melodic design. Holl admired the connections between the traditional and the modern in Béla Bartók’s "Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta," written in 1936. The overlapping water he heard at the site was like the overlapping of notes in Bartok's piece, falling rhythmically like the water on the property. The sound? Stretto notes.

Holl also wanted to also express that as music has materiality in instruments and in sound, the architecture attempts an analogue in light and space. He expresses idea as the equation:

\[
\frac{\text{Material x Sound}}{\text{Time}} = \frac{\text{Material x Light}}{\text{Space}}
\]

Stretto House projects Holl's interpretation of form and structure through phenomenology - the philosophical study of the structures of subjective experience and consciousness:

"...from initial concept to finest detail our aim is for idea and phenomena. In a way the concept that derives a design like the Stretto house disappears completely in the phenomena of the physical reality and yet intuitively the abundance of the idea may be felt."
Parti in Stretto House is effortlessly derived from the symphony “Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta,” written in 1936, by Béla Bartók.

Just Bartok’s extraordinary composition resonated with original melodies, so was the composition of the Stretto house, built in an “aqueous space” divided into four sections, each consisting of 2 modes” heavy orthogonal masonry and light and curvilinear metal. The rectangular block sections fall in accordance with the beat, while the roof top structures flow and overlap like the notes of a stretto movement.

Mode 1 is rectangular heavy orthogonal masonry which makes reference to the concrete dams on the site. Mode 2 is of light and curvilinear metal which covers the various rooms - living room, art storage room, office, dining room and breakfast corner. Each part of the rectangular masonry contains a service zone for the house - the staircases that lead to a bedroom and a sitting room, bathrooms, library and the kitchen. The last section of the house is a partially covered pond.
Parti in Stretto House can also be noted as Holl’s emphasis on materials. As an architect, Holl places enormous importance on materials and its use in the space. He considers materials to be significant to the design because of how they affect the character of the architecture. The house settled on a landscape marked by a stream that feeds three ponds.

The house was designed with poured concrete block and metal roofs that serve as material vernacular for Texas. Due to the climate in Texas, it was essential to incorporate sun shading and opportunities arose to play with light and shadow. Holl used “heavy” materials, or percussion from the symphony, symbolizing the concrete orthogonal masonry. The “light and curvy” strings were personified with curvilinear metal.
Alvar Aalto – Helsinki University Auditorium
Helsinki, Finland

Frank Lloyd Wright – Falling Water
Mill Run, PA

Alvar Aalto – Baker Dormitory
MIT, Cambridge, MA

Historical References

Curvilinear forms

Relationship to space and nature

Use of materials

Relationship of space and light

Use of light in the space

Building in nature

Curvilinear forms

Building in nature

Relationship to space and nature

Use of light in the space

Use of materials

Relationship of space and light

Curvilinear forms

Building in nature

Relationship to space and nature

Use of light in the space

Use of materials

Relationship of space and light

Curvilinear forms
Legend

- Grounds
- Lake
- Living Structure

Site Analysis + Site Plan
Spatial Organization: Linear
Circulation
Poured concrete – glass cast in fluid shapes – slumped glass – liquid terrazzo
Poured concrete – glass cast in fluid shapes – slumped glass – liquid terrazzo

Kenneth Frampton, *Steven Holl Architect*. 2003, Published by Electa architettura.


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