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### Reconfiguring Architectural Agency

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STEVEN HOLL:  
**MAKING**  
ARCHITECTURE





Steven Holl Architects, Hunters Point Library, 2017.  
Photograph © Paul Warchol,  
courtesy of Steven Holl Architects.

## RECONFIGURING ARCHITECTURAL AGENCY

Peter Olshavsky

Set on twenty-eight acres of stunning rural landscape in Rhinebeck, New York, Steven Holl's Ex of IN House (2016) began as an exploration of the notion of "In." Through iterative geometric exercises that studied spherical intersections coupled with a partial tesseract, Holl resolved the resulting spatial conditions, programmatically and materially, as a small guesthouse (fig. 49). To accompany the physical process of this exploration, the architect developed a seven-point manifesto. In this text, Holl proposes that architecture should be "freed from the purely objective," so that it can have an "elemental force of sensual beauty."<sup>1</sup> As demonstrated in the sumptuous wood and glass interior of this exploratory house, the architect notes, the power of this approach does not arise from its function. Nor should it be viewed as architecture reduced to a mere object. Its elemental force or agency is more complex.

This example from Holl's recent work hints at a deeper truth about the architect's position: when done well, architecture has the profound ability to alter "the way you can see, the way you can feel,"<sup>2</sup> and more. Placing us at the intersection





of the relationship between bodies and buildings, architectural agency is crucial to phenomenology and to Holl's purposeful engagement with this tradition.

#### CONTEXT

Architectural phenomenology appears in the middle of the twentieth century as a broad set of priorities that first found resonance with individuals—Christian Norberg-Schulz, Charles Moore, and Kenneth Frampton—working in architecture history and practice. Modulating the modernist belief that techno-sciences are

primary driving forces for architecture, the first generation espoused phenomenology by opening themselves to existential questioning and embodied agency in an effort to reground architectural discourse.<sup>3</sup> Consequentially, they initiated a varied and lasting architectural tradition that drew on philosophy to make their case.

Developing decades earlier than its architectural counterpart, philosophical phenomenology emerged in its modern sense from Edmond Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901).<sup>4</sup> Husserl arrived at new insights about structures of consciousness in the world and set in place descriptive practices that would influence later philosophers, including Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hannah Arendt, and Paul Ricœur, among others. This philosophical work, as a variety of what is now dubbed “continental” philosophy, would find fertile soil with the post-WWII generation in Europe and North America. Alongside this geographic expansion, the scope and practices of phenomenology have also diversified to address both perennial and topical concerns.<sup>5</sup> Philosophers and academics continue to cultivate work in a global context that is reliant on or extends questions, insights, and practices from phenomenology.

From the inception of this approach, advocates of phenomenology produced work that was far from monolithic. Yet, we can recognize common concerns. They seek to address issues as they relate to human experience. To broach a particular issue, they

set their argumentation in its textual and historical context rather than addressing the subject as a discreet problem. By examining an issue in this way, philosophical discourse becomes a means to produce a “crisis.”<sup>6</sup> In Husserl's work crisis appears in the rift between science's “mathematization of nature” and everyday life practices. Crisis for Merleau-Ponty emerges in the problematic separation of mind and body and body and world. Identifying and unpacking a crisis makes possible a philosopher's work of relearning how to look at the world from a perspective not complicit in the crisis. Through processes of inquiry and redescription, they attain the understanding necessary to reimagine aspects of the world.

When it comes to imagining things differently, of course, architects took notice of the possibilities. Steven Holl was among them. His embrace of phenomenology occurred rather abruptly. Immersed in education and practice during the predominance of postmodernism in the United States and Europe, Holl became disillusioned with the typological research he was pursuing in the vein of the Italian Rationalist Alberto Sartoris that was characteristic of the period.<sup>7</sup> Then, in the winter of 1984, he had a fortuitous encounter with a philosopher traveling across Canada, who introduced him to phenomenology and the work of Merleau-Ponty.<sup>8</sup> Holl would go on to engage phenomenology in architecture as a philosophical orientation. This position began



as no mere transcription of philosophy into architecture. With interlocutors like Kenneth Frampton, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Holl sought to work out an alternative understanding of the discipline and its future through histories, theories, and innovative architectural projects. These phenomenological pursuits have resulted in a successful design practice that has built elegant and acclaimed works around the globe.

The depth and purpose of Holl's engagement with this orientation is sometimes overshadowed by his careful attention to qualitative lighting, tactile surfaces, bespoke details, human proportions, and graceful atmospheres that come to the forefront of experiences with his projects (fig. 50). Focusing only on the phenomenal, as if architectural phenomenology can be reduced to this, he argues, has its limits. “Though many if not most people who appreciate my work,” Holl says, “seem to focus on its experiential

fig. 49

Steven Holl Architects,  
Ex of IN House, Rhinebeck,  
New York, 2016. Photograph  
by Paul Warchol, courtesy of  
Steven Holl Architects.

fig. 50

Steven Holl Architects,  
Herring Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Herring,  
Denmark, 2009. Photograph  
courtesy of Iwan Baan.



or phenomenological qualities—the light, the use of materials, and so forth,<sup>9</sup> this fixation reduces the work to the mere objects of architecture. “[W]hat is important,” he goes on to say, “is the idea.”<sup>10</sup> Ideas underpin and guide architectural making. We see this ideation through his watercolors, sketches, models, and other modes of production by his project teams seeking the “phenomenal potential of ideas.”<sup>11</sup>

Whether pursuing “luminist space” or the possibilities of “liquid light,” ideas are part and parcel of larger phenomenological questions.<sup>12</sup> It is through these broader inquiries that Holl’s identification of crisis in the phenomenological tradition becomes visible. He is troubled by the proliferation of construction that is artificial, passive, and mute, or “banality in excess.” He sees danger in architecture that shows “indifference to quality of life.”<sup>13</sup> To put it simply, crisis for Holl emerges in the reduction of architecture to a mere object. Holl’s work from a phenomenological orientation can thus be described as a purposeful engagement to redress this crisis.

### RECONFIGURATION

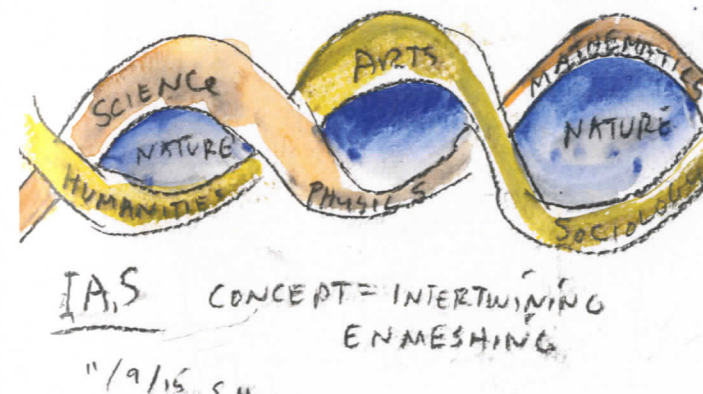
Reading across Holl’s four decades of production, we see him working to learn to look at the world differently. His effort is rooted in the primacy of human experience. Through the body, as Merleau-Ponty maintains, “the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence.”<sup>14</sup> As a locus of intentional action, it has been foundational in nearly everything Holl has done from the mid-1980s onward, including explorations of “parallax,” “haptic architecture,” and “porosity.” What it means

to be embodied is a deep and abiding point of departure for his thinking, making, and reflecting on architecture.<sup>15</sup>

Intimately linked to embodied experience, agency is mobilized in a non-traditional way as a powerful insight for his approach. To be an embodied human is to possess agency, or the capacity to think, feel, and act. This sense of humanness has historically been defined by its categorical difference to non-humans’ lack of agency.<sup>16</sup> In recent decades, however, some philosophers have questioned this older anthropocentric conception and reconfigured agency’s scope. Matter, things, and technologies are increasingly seen as co-constitutive of human agency.<sup>17</sup> This includes architecture.

By the time Holl published the essay “Edge of a City” in 1991, we find a similar reconfiguration of agency in his work. He imagines an “architecture [that] changes the way we live,” one that “alters our experience of time of day or season” and changes our “mood and bodily temperature.”<sup>18</sup> Like a tuning fork compelled into synchronous vibration by another tuning fork struck nearby, bodies resonate with architecture. Architecture in this sense actively shapes the body’s access to the world in sensuous ways. The human capacity for thinking, feeling, and acting in the world is co-constituted by architecture. In the work, Holl carefully elaborates this hybrid form of agency, in both its metaphoric and material aspects, as a corrective to the crisis in architecture that he identified.

Starting with metaphor, we find numerous examples in Holl’s work. “Intertwining” and “enmeshing” are driving notions for the Rubenstein Commons (begun 2015), a work in progress at the famed Institute for Advanced



Study in Princeton, New Jersey (fig. 51). These suggest important entanglements between nature, architecture, and the community of scholars in reflection. The Arts Building West (2006) on the campus of the University of Iowa, Holl says, is “half human, half scientific,” while the university’s more recent, nearby Visual Arts Building (2016), is “an agent for change,” according to Chris McVoy, senior partner at Steven Holl Architects.<sup>19</sup>

The language used in these examples is more than anthropomorphism or a series of rhetorical flourishes. It is crucial to articulate particular ways bodies and buildings relate. This is because metaphor in Holl’s work underpins the reconfiguration of agency. “[S]eeing as,” Paul Ricœur says, founds and organizes life in an “imagistic fullness” that leads to a manner of being.<sup>20</sup> Metaphor redescribes what it refers to so that imagined possibilities can be acted upon. Such



descriptions are, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call them, “metaphors we live by.”<sup>21</sup> As systematic figurative concepts, these metaphors lead the older view of agency awry. They found a conception in which human agency and architecture cannot be easily disentangled.

In further examining Holl’s elaboration of agency, architectural matter also has a vital efficacy. In the Malawi Library (designed 2017) on a new campus in Lilongwe, architectural agency can be appreciated in the way the work manifests specific microclimates for daily life. The roof extends beyond the library’s enclosure to form an arcade on all sides, breaking the high-sun angle to block solar heat and deflect heavy precipitation during rainy season. This affords qualitative space that urges us to move along or linger at the building’s edges. On the interior (fig. 52), the curved roof blades and bamboo-screened

fig. 51

Steven Holl, *Intertwining Enmeshing*, Rubenstein Commons, Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton, New Jersey, 2015, watercolor on paper. Courtesy of Steven Holl Architects.

fig. 52

Steven Holl Architects, Malawi Library, Lilongwe, Malawi, 2017. Photomontage courtesy of Steven Holl Architects.





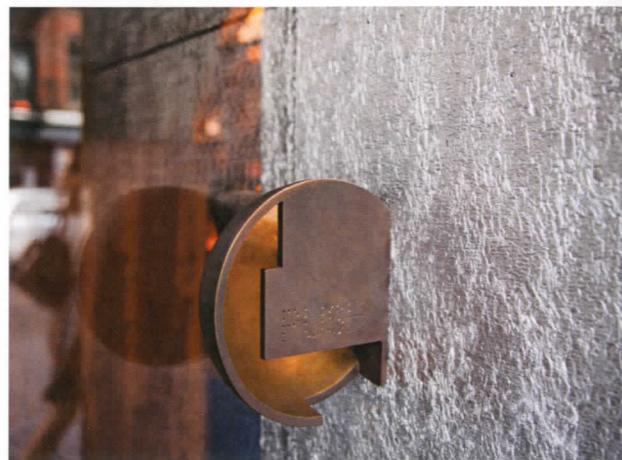
façades limit solar heat gain, but are fashioned to use cross ventilation to temper the southeast African climate, enabling thermal comfort for our actions. All of these elements support the work of the library staff and visitors to expand the access and production of knowledge in the developing nation.

At the Lewis Center for the Arts (2017) on the southern edge of the campus of Princeton University, the architectural form of the new arts complex, programmatic organization, and atmospheres impress their subtle influences on the body. On the exterior of the music building, the cherry-wood practice rooms are visibly nested within a glass enclosure and suspended on steel rods to create acoustic separation (fig. 53). Their forms and fenestration draw our thoughts to their notational arrangement and the private routines of practice held within them.

Music also arises from the elemental force

fig. 53

Steven Holl Architects, Lewis Arts Complex, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, 2017. Photograph courtesy of Paul Warchol.



of the Reid Building (2014) for the Glasgow School of Art. At the center of the project, cylindrical voids organize the volume, enabling light, ventilation, and circulation into the depth of the floor plate to actively support the work of the faculty and students. The agency of these architectural elements has beckoned the school's music students to hold impromptu concerts in the multi-story resonating chambers, saturating academic life in music.

This intention is also carried through in details and elements. Holl's artfully crafted door handles are a highly illustrative example of a detail with sensuous force. The cast silicone bronze half-spherical handles (fig. 54) at the Editions de Parfum Frédéric Malle (2014) in New York greet the hands of visitors to the shop, momentarily drawing our thought to this pre-reflective task that enables us to move from outside to inside. Holl's attention to the elements of primary stairs and

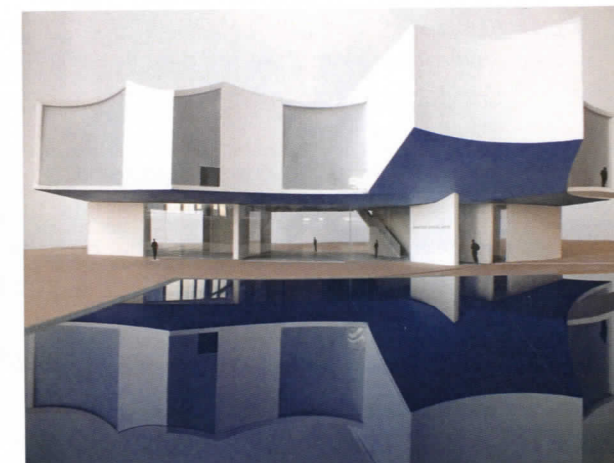
fig. 54

Steven Holl Architects, door handle of Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle, New York, New York, 2014. Photograph courtesy of Susan Wides.



ramps also manifests architecture's agency. In works like Hunters Point Community Library (2017) in Queens, or Maggie's Cancer Care Centre at St. Barts (2017) in London, these elements are spatially generous and gracefully proportioned for our bodies in motion (fig. 55). They are compositionally dynamic and animate the play of diurnal light on and through their forms and patterned material assemblies. The comfortable scale of these elements encourages our social interactions. For the able-bodied, they propel us to ascend and descend rather than seek out the elevator.

A second, more direct example from Princeton's Lewis Center, is no less descriptive of this agenda, is a tilted mirrored surface that was proposed for the theater building's back of house.<sup>22</sup> This design element was meant to alter the dancers' self-perception, making them appear taller and leaner just before they went on stage. This shows architecture



actively altering the dancers' conscious state. The philosopher Alva Noë explains, "Consciousness isn't something that happens inside us: it is something that we do, actively, in our dynamic interaction with the world around us."<sup>23</sup> Consciousness is deeply interwoven with the built environment, which challenges (or supports) the autonomy of humans.

This is also elaborated at the Fine Arts Building (begun 2016) at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The building's massing is lifted to place the studios among the mature tree canopy on campus. To the east of the project, the reflecting pool, which can also handle storm water overflow, offers an inversion of the lofted architecture in the pool's watery hues. This mirror image (fig. 56) is meant to take hold of its campus audience and create a "special articulation" of place.<sup>24</sup> While mirror images teach us about the body's perception, Merleau-

fig. 55

Steven Holl Architects, Hunters Point Community Library, Queens, New York, 2017. Photomontage courtesy of Steven Holl Architects.

fig. 56

Steven Holl Architects, Model, Winter Visual Arts Center, Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 2016, resin-impregnated plaster 3D print and acrylic on chipboard base. Courtesy of Steven Holl Architects.



Ponty notes, they also show us "what things saw" of us.<sup>25</sup> Here, we are directly reminded of architecture's role in our lives in the uncanny way it looks back.

What all of these instances tell us in their various ways, is that Holl's architectural works alter the reductive view that humans are sovereign actors set apart from the world. Rather, Holl puts forward a hybrid agency intertwining flesh, glass, steel, and word. While the architect intends and achieves certain affects, these can never be entirely foreseen or circumscribed. Architecture's agency always exceeds intentions when placed in public. That is to say, architecture's agency only appears when coupled with bodies in space and time. As a socially embedded artifact, this coupling opens sensuous possibilities that reach both inward to change our internal make-up and extend our humanness beyond our skin.

#### VIA THE WORK

Drawing attention to the ways Holl's work figures an expanded notion of agency shows what might otherwise remain hidden, namely the capacity of architecture to prompt people to think, feel, and act in ways particular to it. This conception does not assign agency to architecture as if it were identical to humans, but makes intelligible the entangled relationships between embodied subjects and architecture as an effect of ongoing social-material practices of making architecture.

Situating Holl's work within his broader engagement with phenomenology, we come to realize that his earlier notion—"architecture changes the way we live"—no longer goes far enough. Addressing the crisis of architecture, the deliberate metaphoric and material aspects of agency expose a more profound role for the

discipline. "My own words take me by surprise," Merleau-Ponty wisely says, "and teach me what to think."<sup>26</sup> In the ongoing relationship between bodies and buildings, Holl's architecture now more than ever takes us by surprise and teaches us to see the world through the work. Perhaps this explains why, as he observes, a number of his projects start contentiously.<sup>27</sup> With time the best of his architecture, like the Nelson-Atkins Museum (2007) in Kansas City, goes on to found and organize people's lives in ways that make it impossible to conceive of the world without the work. This reconfiguration leaves us with a bold insight: architecture makes us what we are.

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