

Conflicting views on Holl

Steps to better buildings

Reflections on Holl – and arq

It was good to receive the first copy of *arq* (3/1) under its new publishers. I was also delighted to find a satisfactory increase in legibility through a sharper type face and daring use of blacker ink! As for content, well, the mixture is before, impenetrable in some places, extremely interesting (especially on U.S. practice in the context of Holl's Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki), lucid and enriching in the book reviews, especially Maxwell on 'Rhetoric'.

Then good to see a building well published with decent plans even if my experience and perceptions of the building did not embrace the significance of its relationship to the city and our culture. My diary refers to it as '... not a bad thing but a thin affair after Aalto – ramps and architectural high jinks ...' Maybe Holl got the 'generator' right given the distinction drawn in the article between 'modern' art and 'contemporary' art but, as at the Tate of the West Gallery at St Ives, there seems too much architecture in relation to contents.

On the other hand, Ada Louise Huxtable would persuade us that these new 'Museums' at their best are dedicated '... not only to collecting and preserving but to the search for meaning that has always been among civilisation's highest achievements. This has produced a unique building type today, based on an unprecedented kind of collaboration between artists and architects. At its most successful it is a new art form ...' (*New York Review of Books*, 11 April 1999)

The distinction between 'modern' and 'contemporary' seems a fine one in this instance. Does 'contemporary' need

architecturally highly articulated even dominating space? The recent 'Sensation' exhibition at the Royal Academy showed that traditional spaces suit well that sort of thing while most Installation Art surely needs to start from 'neutral' space which, for example, I'm sure Herzog and de Meuron's new Tate Gallery at Millbank will provide.

Are these new museums, these ecstatic works, cultural cruise missiles which land in old cultures that are perhaps deeper than we know, and which offer instant touristic visual stimuli rather than content? As Pound put it, '... the age demanded an image of its accelerated grimace ...'

But *arq* sets one thinking about these and other issues – and isn't that what it's for? Congratulations on getting it going again.

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More on Holl

There are two issues which might have been expanded on in Esa Laaksonen's review (*arq* 3/1) of Steven Holl's Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki – the echoes of Aalto's Terrace Square proposal and the relation between the building and the art for which it provides a setting.

The chosen site was once a part of an urban plan by Alvar Aalto to create a new cultural centre in Helsinki. He proposed a string of buildings embracing Töölo Bay's western shoreline and culminating with Terrace Square, a piazza in city

centre. The proposals were objected to for many different reasons: Terrace Square was considered dreary and lacked the surrounding density needed for an urban square and nearby Mannerheimintie has wide pavements and many cafes. The area didn't need Aalto's vast piazza. The public wanted the area around Töölo Bay to be preserved as a park.

In the end, the only part of Aalto's grand scheme to be built was Finlandia Hall, sitting without its intended context on Töölo Bay. Aalto objected to the area being preserved as an 'urban forest' and the authorities have recently returned to his ideas, holding competitions for public buildings to be built around the bay. The site for the Museum for Contemporary Art may have been on what was originally Terrace Square in Aalto's scheme but the intentions reflected his idea of a line of cultural buildings around the bay. Holl has created enough of a public piazza in front of his building to serve the same purpose as Aalto's square. And Holl's building conveys the feeling that, had it not been sliced through at its north end, it could have extended, in Aalto's words, '... as far as Lapland ...'

The competition brief emphasised that in no way should the architecture take over from the art itself. It stated that:

'Art should be given priority in the design of the new museum. It should be borne in mind that a good deal of contemporary art is intended to be shown in relatively unembellished settings. The focus of the museum should be the space in which the spectator encounters the works of art...'

Each of the 25 unique exhibition spaces successfully remains silent

as the brief specified, eliminating intermediate details and fittings which might distract from the art: they form a successful setting for a wide range of exhibitions and installations.

The most published image though, the space with which most people will associate the museum, is the circulation hall which marks the internal meeting of the building's two elements. There is a constant reference to this space as you move through the building, it orientates you by providing carefully studied views but it is also introverted and encourages the spectator to analyse the space created, like a work of art, an inverted sculpture. This space can be examined from every angle and height possible: it controls the building.

Though the circulation hall was intended to be mute by masking the constructional details, it is animated to the point of being confusing. The angle of the view as you enter the building is such that the landing point at which the long ramp meets the curving stairs is concealed, suggesting infinite growth. There is a very strong sense of spatiality as the vanishing point disappears between the black concrete floor and the bright roof light. The strong sense of ground and sky allows the ramps to move gracefully within the space, cantilevered off the wall without appearing to defy gravity. The ramp which takes you from the ground floor at the beginning of your journey moves away from the earth imperceptibly, its solid balustrade appearing later. The walls on either side are solid and unforgiving except where punctuated by openings to the spaces beyond.

The focus of the museum is thus the circulation hall rather than the space in which the spectator encounters the works of art but perhaps this is appropriate for a contemporary art gallery whose transient exhibitions need to be situated in a more restful setting. The brief stated that the interior spaces should be '*spatially unobtrusive and unarticulated*' but at the same time the architecture should '*reflect the function and character of the building.*' Holl's building successfully satisfies this requirement.

BETH KAY
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Beth Kay is an architecture student and has recently written a dissertation on 'Designing Museums in the Millennium: the Intertwining of Art and Architecture'

Learning cycle problems

Donald Watson's paper on the link between practice and research (arq 3/1) was very interesting, but appeared directed toward the 'converted', rather than to the generality of architects and their clients. Perhaps that is indicated in the use of the phrase 'the *astute* (my italics) client'. Despite all the advances in recent years in the process of commissioning, significant gaps remain, and the clients who claim to be astute are sometimes perilously close to believing that they can obtain a fail-safe building if they and their advisers complete sufficient paperwork.

The development of a learning cycle would have to be funded, perhaps by a version of the Dutch system, in the form of a 'tax' on building construction. However, into that learning cycle, we need to inject a clear analysis of the problems that learning cycle is intended to tackle.

Three examples:

First, clients – astute or not – have to be made aware of the consequences of their own decisions. Building failure claims reveal a substantial contributory negligence aspect for the client – where they have stopped and changed programmes, cut budgets, insisted on certain materials, certain contractors and particular procedures. Sharing of the results in peer-reviewed publications may be excellent for academic progression but seems highly unlikely to command a wide professional or client market. Once again, it is the *provider's*, rather than the consumer's perspective. I think it is only in Scotland that there has been regular detailed feedback on buildings claims openly published – even in its fairly rudimentary way.

Second, there is the question of language. It is quite possible that the most important person of the future is a translator between architect and client. In one project, great offence was given when a user desire was rejected by the architect on the grounds that 'it would interfere with the design' (his words). An analysis of the project has revealed that the user desire would have been impossible because there was insufficient space for it: a completely different and understandable matter.

Finally, I wonder if the profession has always been as sophisticated as it could have been about

communicating what architecture can achieve for the client. The user should be able to take basic competence and improving knowledge for granted. So what are the *values* the architect can bring to the project with 20/21st century materials and technology: light, uninterrupted space, volume, comfort, sustainability, materials and surprise – for a start. Whether in an office or a block of flats, is it to be the same old plan with consistent ceiling heights with marginal pyrotechnics around the entrance, circulation and lavatories, fashionable cladding and a wavy roof, or something rather deeper?

Donald Watson suggests that dissemination of knowledge through conferences and publications. It would be a start, at any rate, if every building in receipt of government funds were required to have produced, upon completion, a simple A4 document giving the basic information on the building, design and construction, including a statement of client intention and architect response, and a brief summary of how the design developed during the project, if it did. Ideally, all UK Lottery funded projects should expand that with the addition of a post-completion analysis and evaluation.

The existence of such information in a consistent way could be the first step in preparing a suitable practice/academic research culture: for at the moment, we have no coherent and systematic body of knowledge in which such a proposed culture could take root.

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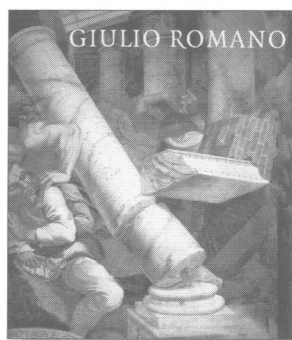
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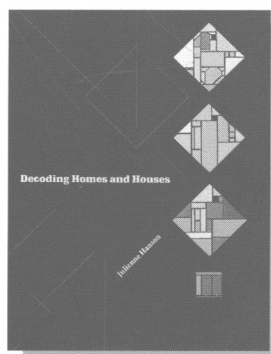
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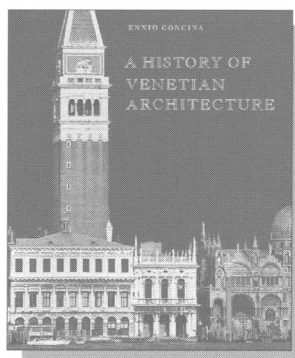
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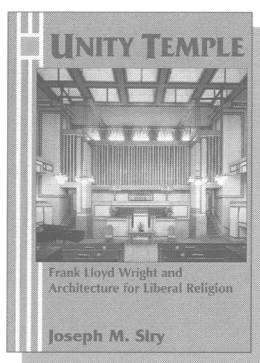


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