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Steven Holl
Bellevue Art Museum
Bellevue, Washington, since 1997

Joan Ockman

Not until the turn of the twentieth century did American art museums begin to take on the aspect of classical temples or treasure houses of quasi-sacred objects. In the nineteenth century, they came into being as teaching institutions, often adjunct to art schools, or else as more permanent venues for the artwork shown in commercial exhibitions. With the wide spread adoption of the European model, however, the museum was frequently compared to a mausoleum, a place where art objects severed from their vital connection to the everyday world were interred and embalmed for posterity. In this vein, the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey begins his book *Art as Experience* (1934) with a condemnation of the deadening "museum conception of art," calling for an organic reintegration of painting, sculpture, and architecture with "the significant life of an organized community."

The Bellevue Art Museum, designed by Steven Holl Architects for a contemporary boomtown in the Pacific Northwest and slated to open on New Year's Day in 2000, recalls the American art museum's alternative genealogy. Born out of the Pacific Northwest Arts Fair, an annual outdoor crafts event held since the fifties on the local streets of Bellevue, the museum has no permanent collection. Its mission is to provide community outreach and education, collaborating with local arts groups and schools. Until about a decade ago, Bellevue, located eight miles east of Seattle across Lake Washington, was a nondescript suburb. In the nineties, however, with the founding of the Microsoft Corporation there as well as another computer-industry *Wunderkind*, the book distributor Amazon.com, it acquired a high-tech profile and urban density. Having operated for fifteen years on the second floor of a shopping mall, the museum will now occupy a central site at the beare of the burgeoning downtown area, flanked on one side by a new pedestrian corridor. Intended to provide Bellevue with an active cultural hub, it is dedicated to innovative programming and changing exhibitions that explore the intersection of art with science and technology.

Steven Holl has frequently relied in his projects on a metaphoric or figurative device to trigger his spatial imagination. At the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, the concept of "chiasma" - meaning crossing or exchange - inspired his parti, while in his addition to the Cranbrook Institute of Science in Bloom field Hills, Michigan, the notion of "strange attractors" helped him to situate the new building in relation to the existing complex. At Bellevue, Holl takes the idea of "tripleness" as an organizing concept. The concept comes from the triad of art, science, and technology to which the museum is dedicated, as well as its philosophy of bringing together the experiences of "seeing, exploring, and making" art. Holl has interlaced the concept of tripleness through multiple facets of the project. There are three main circulation levels in section, three loft-like gallery spaces in plan, three qualities of light that filter into the exhibition spaces. He has articulated these triplets by carving into the solid mass of the building, sculpting the residual voids to create a kind of gestural

organism defined by its entry points, courts, and outdoor terraces.

At street level, Holl opens up the northwest corner of the volume to create a diagonal entry to the museum underneath a third-story terrace overhang. Once inside, the visitor encounters the belying space of the Forum, a 30-foot-high atrium for opening receptions and special events. The Forum is circumscribed by a stepped ramp that ascends to the museum's second floor by way of a landing at its apse end, which also doubles as a stage. To the left at street level are a shop and café opening out to an awninged sidewalk terrace, relieving the pressure of the convex central void. On the other side of the Forum are a trapezoidal, 100-seat auditorium and an Art Garage, an unloading area for trucks making deliveries that is also used as a staging zone for informal shows and performances.

The major feature of the second level is the Explore Gallery, an expandable double-height exhibition space reached from the stepped central ramp. Illuminated by punched skylights, it is meant to evoke a sense of time Holl describes as "fragmented" or "gnostic." Adjoining it are an artist-in-residence studio and, carved out of the southeast corner of the floor plate, one of the building's several triangular outdoor spaces. Called the Terrace of Planetary Motion, this one is programmed for the display of digital images of astronomical phenomena, which are projected onto its angled two-story exterior wall.

Continuing up the stepped ramp, one arrives at the museum's two other principal galleries. As its name suggests, the South Light Gallery is illuminated by southern light that filters in from an arcing slot in the ceiling, corresponding roughly to the sun's path at the building's latitude of 48 degrees north. Intended to evoke a "cyclic" sense of time, the gallery's trajectory follows the curve of the adjacent Court of Light. The latter is located directly above the Forum and, as the largest of the museum's outdoor spaces, accommodates al fresco classes as well as exhibitions and events on summer evenings. On the opposite side of the South Light Gallery is the North Light Gallery. This space is evenly lit by northern light emanating from flush pockets carved into the ceiling, representing the idea of "linear" or "ongoing" time. Each of the three principal galleries is inflected about the building's north-south axis and anchored by its east-west end walls. These inflections or deformations pull the building volume apart, articulating its tripartite organization and opening up peripheral and interstitial spaces like those between the outstretched fingers of a hand or the webbed foot of an animal. The deeper ones become outdoor terraces, each celebrating a different natural element or scientific phenomenon, or, in the case of a large triangular indent on the eastern elevation, a water court where, on rainy days, the droplets produce reflective patterns that dapple the surrounding walls.

Holl's preoccupation with organic phenomena and the natural effects of weather and light is most powerfully conveyed by his use of materials. The building's sheer walls are made of shotcrete, a form of structural concrete in which the material is sprayed from a hose at a one-sided exterior formwork. Holl has utilized this technology - typically employed to date in civil engineering structures like dams and reservoirs - to produce a rough-textured carapace, stained rust-red in contrast to the building's nonbearing surfaces and interstitial elements. The latter are sheathed with aluminum plates that are cool bluish in coloration and have been hand-sanded, then acid-etched and anodized to an elegant matte finish. The process was developed in consultation with a local metal finisher for Boeing, the aerospace giant that, together with Microsoft today, dominates this region of the United States.

Originally a native of Washington State, Holl seems to be particularly at home in this project, drawing on the Pacific Northwest tradition of "inventive imagination and irreverence," as he has described it (rather than the stylistic clichés of heavy-timber elements and broad sloping roofs). It is an indigenous sensibility keyed to assertive experimentation with technology and active engagement with the natural environment. At the same time, Holl's longstanding interest in the

experiential phenomena of space, light, and materials has led him to evolve a distinctive architectural vocabulary in which intellectual and intuitive intentions fuse unselfconsciously. While recalling the form-language of a Hugo Haring or Hans Scharoun, his "organic" approach seems particularly apposite to the program of a contemporary American art museum dedicated to a hands-on pursuit of aesthetic and scientific knowledge. "To open architecture to questions of perception," Holl has said, "we must suspend disbelief, disengage the rational half of the mind, and allow ourselves to play and explore. Reason and skepticism must yield to a horizon of discovery. Doctrines are untrustworthy in this laboratory. The creative spirit must be followed with happy abandon. A time of research must precede synthesis."

At the Bellevue Art Museum, Holl has created a phenomenological field for discovery and interaction. Updating the philosophy of art as experience, he has provided an expanding local arts community with a museum that functions as a generator of new energies, a kind of cultural powerhouse.