

The Museum of Modern Art

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EMILIO AMBASZ/STEVEN HOLL: ARCHITECTURE

February 9 - April 4, 1989

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. The exhibition focuses on their architecture, ranging from urban design to interiors. Stuart Wrede, director, Department of Architecture and Design, has organized the exhibition, which opens on February 9.

Emilio Ambasz, born in Resistencia, Argentina, in 1943, and Steven Holl, born in Seattle in 1947, represent a generation of architects formed in the aftermath of the collapse of modernist ideology. They have sought to revitalize the mythopoetic side of modernism, unlike other contemporary architects whose reaction has been to seek inspiration in the formal language of modernism or to recapture meaning by a return to historic styles of architectural representation. Ambasz and Holl are each represented in the exhibition by fifteen projects, some realized, others as yet unbuilt. Their designs are presented through drawings, models, photographs, and, for Ambasz's work, also in an audio-visual presentation.

Ambasz and Holl recognize 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. Holl states that architecture and site have "an experimental connection, a metaphysical link, a poetic link." Ambasz refers to architecture as a "mythmaking act" and considers that his work addresses primal concerns of human existence such as "being born, falling in love, and dying." Wrede states that

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Ambasz' and Holl "have been drawn to that modernist tradition which sought inspiration in the anonymous and primitive vernacular, in an effort to get back to a pure and mythical ground-zero of architecture. As such, a certain simplicity, austerity, and abstraction characterizes each of their work."

Early in the careers of both architects, they focused on small-scale communal projects, such as Ambasz's Cooperative of Mexican-American Grapegrowers or Holl's Gymnasium Bridge in the Bronx, that were both visionary and socially idealistic. Though unbuilt, these projects--suffused with a poetic vision--live on in the imagination as "architectural fables." More recently, they have been among the few architects proposing innovative solutions to problems of urban planning. Ambasz's prize-winning master plan for the 1992 Universal Exhibition in Seville, Spain, and Holl's proposal for the renovation of Milan's Porta Victoria district demonstrate their commitment to discovering new conceptual solutions, an aspect of the modernist legacy that they continue to embrace.

Emilio Ambasz

In his projects Ambasz proposes a redefinition of the relation between nature and architecture. Eliminating a clear-cut distinction between the two, he draws not only on his own inventiveness and on archaic and primitive sources, but also on the model of the English garden. A marriage of the archaic and modern technology makes Ambasz's return to an architecture set in the earth both possible and attractive. For instance, his Schlumberger Research Center (1982) in Austin, Texas, is a sculpted landscape with most of the building volume underground. Architectural pavilions emerge here and there, like the "follies" of a traditional garden, to lend an accent. In another project, The Lucille Halsell Conservatory, San Antonio (1984), sunken

courtyards set in the rolling lawns of a botanic garden literally are at one with the topography. The earth helps shelter the plants from the Texas sun.

Landscape is also central to Ambasz's urban architecture. In his plan for the 1992 Universal Exposition in Seville, the pavilions are to be placed on barges in three large lagoons surrounded by parks adjacent to the historic city. At the conclusion of the exhibition, the pavilions would be remodelled for the permanent use of the city university, and the parks would be opened to the public.

Steven Holl

Vernacular building types are a characteristic point of departure for Holl. He abstracts and generalizes their form to create works that embrace a contrast between straightforward exteriors and complex, sensual interiors. Wrede observes, "The tension between ordinary and extraordinary, the general and the particular, gives his buildings their power."

Holl's buildings draw upon the existing cultural and physical characteristics of the site. His proposed Bridge of Houses, New York (1981), is constructed on an abandoned elevated railway. The choice of simple board and batten construction for a house on Martha's Vineyard (1984-87) respects traditional building methods in that area. In contrast to his understated exterior architecture, Holl's interior designs, such as those for a Madison Avenue shop and a Metropolitan Tower apartment in New York (1987), are intricate compositions of juxtaposing planes. These designs feature an imaginative use of rough and polished stucco surfaces and exquisite detailing in metal and glass.

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. In the Porta Vittoria project in Milan, he seeks to define a new urban landscape based on the notion of creating a psychological urban space that would allow "the modern soul to emerge." In his recent Edge of the City projects for three American cities, he addresses the issue of suburban sprawl and the lack of a sense of place, at the cities' peripheries, by establishing architecturally-defined edges that mediate between the city and nature.

Biographical Information

Ambasz received his Masters degree in Architecture at Princeton University (1966), where he subsequently taught in the School of Architecture (1966-69). From 1970 to 1976, as curator in the Department of Architecture and Design, The Museum of Modern Art, he organized such exhibitions as Italy: The New Domestic Landscape (1972), The Architecture of Luis Barragan (1974), and The Taxi Project (1976). In 1976 he established practices in New York and Bologna. He is also a well-known industrial and graphic designer. Emilio Ambasz: The Poetics of the Pragmatic, to be released by Rizzoli International Publications in February, presents the full range of Ambasz's work.

Holl studied architecture at the University of Washington and completed its architecture internship program in Rome. He also did graduate work at the Architectural Association School in London. Since 1978 Holl has practiced in New York, where he is currently an associate professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture and Planning. Holl is also a noted creator of furniture and other interior design objects. A book on his work, Anchoring: Poetics of Site, will be published by Princeton Architectural Press this year.

The Museum's GERALD D. HINES INTERESTS ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM, conceived to examine current trends in architecture, includes exhibition publications, lectures, and symposia.

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LECTURES "Anchoring," a lecture by Steven Holl, Tuesday, March 7, 1989, 6:30 p.m.; "The Poetics of the Pragmatic," a lecture by Emilio Ambasz, Tuesday, March 14, 6:30 p.m. Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2. Tickets for each are \$8.00, members \$7.00, students \$5.00, and are available at the Museum's Information Desk.

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For further information or photographic materials, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.

LIST OF PROJECTS IN THE EXHIBITION

Emilio Ambasz

1. Center for Applied Computer Research, Mexico City, Mexico 1975
2. Cooperative of Mexican-American Grapegrowers, Borrego Springs, California 1976
3. Pro Memoria Garden, Ludenhausen, West Germany 1978
4. House, Cordoba, Spain 1979
5. House for Baron and Madame Philippe Lambert, Berges, Belgium 1979
6. Schlumberger Research Laboratories, Austin, Texas 1982
7. Banque Bruxelles Lambert, Milan, Italy 1979
8. Banque Bruxelles Lambert, Lausanne, Switzerland 1981
9. Houston Center Plaza, Houston, Texas 1982
10. Plaza Mayor, Salamanca, Spain 1982
11. Lucille Halsell Conservatory, San Antonio, Texas 1984
12. Universal Exposition 1992, Seville, Spain 1986
13. Nichii Obihiro Department Store, Obihiro, Japan 1987
14. Mercedes-Benz Showroom, Englewood, New Jersey 1986
15. Sanda Cultural Center and Athletic Facility, Sanda, Japan 1988

Steven Holl

1. Underwater House, St. Tropez, France 1976
2. Gymnasium-Bridge, South Bronx, New York 1977
3. House, Staten Island, New York 1980
4. Bridge of Houses, New York, New York 1981
5. Pool House and Sculpture Studio, Scarsdale, New York 1981
6. Autonomous Artisans' Houses, Staten Island, New York 1980-84
7. Fifth Avenue Apartment, New York, New York 1983
8. House, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts 1984-87
9. Hybrid Building, Seaside, Florida 1985-88
10. Madison Avenue Shop, New York, New York 1987
11. Metropolitan Tower Apartment, New York, New York 1987
12. Milan Project-Porta Vittoria, Milan, Italy 1986-87
13. House (Non-dialectic Double House), Cleveland, Ohio 1988
14. Addition to Berlin Library (Gedenkbibliothek/Berliner Zentral-bibliothek), Berlin, West Germany 1988
15. Edge of a City, Rochester, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; Phoenix, Arizona 1988-ongoing