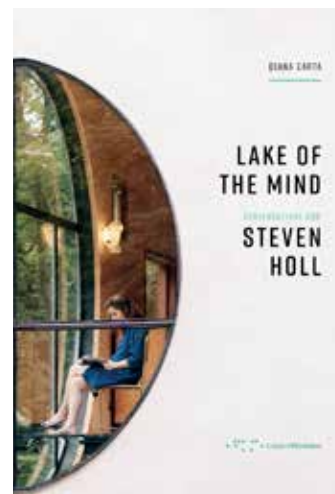


# *Lake of the Mind. A Conversation with Steven Holl*

Christopher Platt

Book Review / THEORY

**Lake of the Mind.  
A Conversation with Steven Holl**  
By Diana Carta  
Syracuse, It.: LetteraVentidue, 2018  
80 pages  
€15.00 (paperback)  
ISBN: 978-8862422888



The sleeve note to this small intriguing publication reads:

Holl recounts how his creative process originates and develops through a particular style of working, leading to what characterizes his form of architecture. It is through a description of his latest projects that the architect will illustrate the tools of his work and the place where this is conceived and contemplated.<sup>1</sup>

Is there anything new to discover about Steven Holl's working methods that has not already been written about? Images of his completed buildings

or competition winning designs are often published with accompanying watercolour studies, whose brushstrokes reveal each project's architectural DNA. Interviews reinforce his intimate relationship between thought and medium and this is a topic which has provided rich contributions to our understanding of the creative architectural process. Yet the subsequent process of transforming and developing those same sketches into fruitful plans and sections is left for us to imagine and speculate about. That further developmental step in the realisation process would surely make a fascinating investigation and broaden our understanding of the creative process of one of America's most provocative and unpredictable architects.

This book is constructed around two distinct topics. Firstly there is a conversation between author and subject and secondly, a commentary by the author on the recently-completed *The Ex of IN House* (Fig. 1). The conversation focuses on Holl's (by now well-known) monastic-like early morning ritual of watercolour investigations and its relationship to the physical setting where he undertakes these. As we know through other documented interviews and publications, this routine forms both his crow's nest as well as his engine room in initiating and developing his architectural projects. It is also the theatre for his personal research studies exploring form, light and narrative. These "dawn daydreams" play a similar role to Richard Meier's evening collage sessions, described by John Hedjuk as "his midnight boxing ring." Both architects make great effort in creating time and space to step away from the hot house atmosphere of their professional studios in order to pursue and explore more personal formal preoccupations. In both cases, this discipline is as much about informing and shaping their individual way of thinking, as about the actual formal outputs and projects on paper. "...It keeps the hand and eye trained..." as Hedjuk tellingly commented on Meier's collage making.

In the interview with Holl, the author Diana Carta probes him about the importance of physical place in his creative process; a highly relevant question given the architect's fascination with phenomenology. Crucially, Holl's answer suggests that it is the regularity of the activity itself, rather than the place where the activity takes place, that is significant to him. Like the religious believer whose prayer life corresponds faithfully to particular moments in the day, Holl sustains his early morning watercolour exercises regardless of where he is (and indeed even when he is – in-between, flying between destinations for example). As he describes, "...the site of contemplation is really this five by seven inch watercolour."<sup>2</sup> Physical place seems less important to his working method than the ability "[...] not to ruin the poetry of the moment..."<sup>3</sup>

A revealing moment appears in this conversation when Holl explains that his watercolours are not just the medium for initiating an idea, but also for reconsidering an idea which has not proved fruitful. "...Sometimes the first idea is not just right... when I am not satisfied, after a critique, I start over



Figure 1. The Ex of IN House completed by Steven Holl in 2016. The 918 sq. ft. property [85 m<sup>2</sup>] sits on 28 acres [11,3 ha] of forested land in Rhinebeck, NY.

again...”<sup>4</sup> This statement alone is an important enough revelation to build an entire conversation around and a topic which has not yet been explored in other publications to my knowledge. How does an architect like Holl return to a project after the first promising idea has proved unfruitful? When is it clear to him that an idea has not got what it takes? When does he know when he needs to initiate a new beginning, rather than simply invest more work in what had previously shown promise and potential? Such a conversation might have shed new light on the further complexities of his design process; possibly also dispelling a myth that his morning sessions concern themselves solely with lighting the blue touch paper, rather than accommodating the later stages of a design’s gestation as well.

Within the book, this conversation is illustrated with images of five projects. The majority of this visual material centres on The Ex of IN House, giving the strong impression that this is the focus of the conversation. However, in reality it does not feature at all, having not been constructed at the time of the interview. The Ex of IN House appears to be a fresh and compelling example of Holl’s ongoing examination of space, place, light, experience, geometry and *terroir*. Like Charles Moore’s early, brilliant weekend houses

built in the early sixties such as the Jobson House, Bonham House and Otus House, this tiny building creates a number of memorable places within what is in effect a single volume structure. There is an extraordinary juxtaposition of Euclidian geometries which appear to have been executed in full-size three dimensionality with great panache and constructional craftsmanship. The photographs provide a stimulating sense that this is a building that will repay close attention for the experience both of its internal architectural qualities as well how the external landscape is revealed and experienced from the inside. Where Moore's dwellings owe much to the relaxed modesty of local vernacular forms, Holl's subsumes its architectural signature in the anonymity of colliding geometries.

It is to Holl's credit that it is both an impressive piece of architecture, and also that such an internationally-busy architect still chooses to undertake such a modest-sized commission. The design investment and attention to detail is high. From the wall lights and furniture, to the overall contrasting characters of inside and outside, the momentum and conceptual charge seem to have been sustained from the "five by seven inch watercolour" all the way through to the building site. Given that my comments are being made on the basis of drawings and photographs solely, I must acknowledge their limitations due to the absence of the all-important experience of the architecture itself. However, one dissonant note is the rather insubstantial stair and balustrade; an element which also appears lacking in presence in Holl's Y-House designed in 1999. Otherwise, the building reconciles contrasting characteristics of invigoration and serenity and as a result, produces a thoroughly hospitable and welcoming weekend retreat.

Given all this, it seems to this reviewer that this book would have been much the stronger for focusing the conversation with Holl on the specific design of this house and carrying out that conversation in the house itself. The conversation could have been more focused and intense and could have both departed from and returned to this particular building during its own gestation, providing potentially fresh insights and reflections from such a consummate architect at the height of his powers. However, for some reason, this rather obvious approach was not chosen. Had it been so, this publication could have been a more inspiring pocket book probing his design process through the medium of one small project.

The overall format is appealing and a book about one building is an ideal vehicle to explore deeper ideas and larger concepts than those contained in a single case study. It is also attractive for student audiences on modest budgets and an endless digital library at their fingertips; a cohort which may appreciate a little gem of a book when they come across it. What I find distracting and somewhat confusing about the book design is how text and graphic embellishments (such as the full bleed "supergraphic" interpretation of the intersecting geometries, text duplications or the vertical "zip" lines beside the transcribed interview) fight with the real content of the

book. Images of models and watercolours are adequately revealed, but the plan and sections are undecidedly presented between showing technical information or simply line and enclosure. They also sit uncomfortably on each page in an oversized manner.

All this generates a fragmented character and breaks the flow, on an otherwise interesting pocket book. Yehuda E. Safran's "j'adore" introduction, Carta's interview and her essay on The Ex of IN House are all independently worth reading, but all exist as separate entities. As much as the book is a valuable addition to studies on Steven Holl and his oeuvre, a more coherent structure and flow of the discourse on this tiny but inspiring work would have rendered better justice to both the architect and the architecture.

## Notes

1. Diana Carta, *Lake of the Mind. A Conversation with Steven Holl* (Syracuse, It: LetteraVentidue, 2018), sleeve note.
2. Carta, *Lake of the Mind*, 19.
3. Ibid., 21.
4. Ibid., 29.

## Credits

Figure 1: photo by © Paul Warchol.

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