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Allure of Water: An Interview with Steven Holl

Peter Olshavsky

College of Architecture, University Nebraska–Lincoln

Steven Holl is the founder and principal of the award-winning Steven Holl Architects and is a tenured professor of architecture at Columbia University. His work around the globe has demonstrated a deep affinity for and exploration of the power of water. What follows is Peter Olshavsky's interview with Holl, conducted in Holl's New York office and edited for length and clarity.

Peter Olshavsky: To begin our conversation, I'd like to talk about water in your work. Water is and has been an abiding design element and theme for you. What is it about this element that is so compelling?

Steven Holl: I grew up on the edge of Puget Sound, a large body of salt water connected to the Pacific Ocean. In the sound, the tide changes about thirteen feet twice a day. In and out. So it's not just the fact that this body of water is reflecting the sunrise across its surface; you also have this engagement with the moon through its light and the tidal pull. From a very early age, I was always next to this body of water. I started working more seriously with water after I got my license in 1974; since then, almost all my projects engage water deliberately in some way.

To me, it's like air because it's the basic element. Water elements are always in my architecture because I feel like there is a kind of utter emotional dimension that's captured. I learned that no matter what intellectual depth your project has, there is an emotional engagement like at our Chapel of St. Ignatius. There is a shallow pool as you arrive on the south side of this place; it's called "the thinking field." Children love to come and put their hands in the water. There is a bench around the pool, so people sit and have lunch. It becomes a reflective space.

The reflecting pool also picks up the seasons. Sunset is reflected in this big sheet of water. When it rains, as often happens in Seattle, the nodal lines of the raindrops ripple across this pool. In the winter, it turns into a thin sheet of ice. This is common in my pools—at St. Ignatius, Kiasma in Helsinki, or Nelson-Atkins in Kansas City. I design them so the water never drains. It freezes in winter and becomes a sheet of ice, and you have this quality of the reflection off the ice.



Figure 1. Steven Holl Architects, Chapel of St. Ignatius, 1997. (Image by Paul Warchol)

Olshavsky: Speaking of this lived emotional dimension, your orientation in architectural phenomenology is well known. How has your understanding of phenomenology shaped this long-term engagement with water?

Holl: I started in the late '70s and '80s as a student of Aldo Rossi and Giorgio Grassi, under this idea of the city, of the typology and morphology of the city. This was a way to counter the tendencies of late modernism at that time and postmodernism, which was just about kitsch, to try to find my own way forward. I had a crisis: I couldn't find a way through existing typologies to do something new.

I was on a transcontinental rail trip, on my way to a conference in Banff, where I was going to present on typology and morphology. I was sitting next to a philosophy teacher, and he started to talk to me about Maurice Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology. On that train trip from Toronto to Banff, there's a place called the spiral tunnel. To negotiate two

elevations, the train goes through a mountain, and the tunnel turns and rises to the other elevation. That was a great change in my life: I was so eager to find a way philosophically to underpin my work. When I went into that tunnel, I was influenced by Italian rationalists, but when I came out the other side, I had another path in phenomenology. And then I meet Juhani Pallasmaa and Alberto Pérez-Gómez when we were working on the Kiasma addition in Finland, and together we wrote the book *Questions of Perception* in 1993.

The experience of a building is where the real measure comes. I believe there needs to be an idea that drives the design, a concept, something that has more meaning, but I don't believe that you need to know it to make the whole experience of a building. A three-year-old child can walk into a space, like my daughter does in the chapel, and she understands. She understands the light and water. Later on, when she learns to read, she can read about "seven bottles of light in a stone box," the complementary colors, and all the other ideas. But the experiential dimension is a key thing, and water plays a big role in that.



Figure 2. Steven Holl Architects, Round Lake Hut, 2001. (Image by Steven Holl Architects)

Olshavsky: Water is also interwoven into your practice of making architecture through your watercolors.

Holl: Right. That started in 1979. I'll tell you why. I came to New York in 1977, and Andrew McNair, who was at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, saw my portfolio. He was impressed by my drawings of light and space and told me that I should only draw in black and white. And I did from '77 to '79. I was just making these big, complicated black-and-white pencil drawings, and there were a lot of them. But they took forever to

do. When I entered the Les Halles competition in Paris, I was making one of these drawings that was as big as this table. It took me a whole week. Nobody else could work on it because it was my hand, and I was so exhausted that I said I have to change.

Right after that I started to do everything on 5" × 7" watercolor paper. I found that I could show where the light was coming from with a wash, and I could indicate the concept quickly. And then in 2007, when smartphones arrived, it became a secret weapon. I could take a photo and send it to five people in Beijing and five people in New York. They were off and running because they had the concept drawing. In 2002, my first collection of watercolors was published by Lars Müller called *Written in Water*.



Figure 3. Steven Holl Architects, Concert Hall in Ostrava, 2019. (Image by Steven Holl Architects)

Olshavsky: These drawings have been so instrumental to your pursuit of the work and the way in which the studio is structured in contemporary practice. How do you see the watercolors enhancing your way of thinking and making?

Holl: They are not enhancing. They are the origin of a thought process. They are thought diagrams; they are the seed for the thing to develop.

We just won the competition for a concert hall in Ostrava. We had the idea to raise the public up into the hall and have the proposal jump over the existing nineteenth-century building. It has a large pool and faces out to the quiet side of the park. I did a single watercolor with the whole concept: it's just a rapid way of communicating. We go from a watercolor of a concept to a young person drawing it up in Rhino for the digital printer. I can have an idea and have a test model in forty-eight hours. That's a supercharged process.

Olshavsky: You've also had the opportunity to design works about water itself—for instance, the Whitney Waterworks Park in 1998 and, more recently, Cité de l'Océan et du Surf in 2011. How have these projects shaped your understanding of issues surrounding water?

Holl: The Museum of Ocean and Surf in Biarritz, France, was a competition with fifteen competitors. We made a simple diagram: “under the sky / under the sea.” The idea was that the body of the building would be shaped like a wave in a way but tilting out to the horizon.

We had to go to Biarritz to present the project. I had surfed in high school. I surfed every beach in the state of Washington and down the coast, all the way to San Diego. Collaborator Solange Fabião was from Rio and surfed. The mayor of Biarritz was keen on making surfing part of the museum along with the ecology of the ocean. When I got up to introduce our project, I said that I don’t know about the competing architects, but this team knows how to surf. He followed us out of the room and said, “Before you came in here, you were in last; now you are in first place.” So I’m sure that when I presented our scheme, the fact that I had surfed had something to do with the fact that we won.



Figure 4. Steven Holl Architects, Cité de l’Océan et du Surf, 2011. (Image by Iwan Baan)

Olshavsky: Are there upcoming projects that you’re looking forward to investing yourself in that deal with water?

Holl: Yes. I’m working on a project now called the Powerhouse. It is on the Parramatta River, about forty minutes north of Sydney, Australia. This river is at a location where Aborigines have inhabited for thirty thousand years. They have an incredible culture, and Parramatta means “the place where the eels lie down.” It is right where the brackish water meets the clear water, and that’s where the eels would spawn. The water is quite still, like

a mirror, and the whole project is conceived in reflection, as a reversal. This is very exciting because it is a way of thinking about that special site with a very still river's edge.



Figure 5. Steven Holl Architects, Linked Hybrid, 2009. (Image by Iwan Baan)

Olshavsky: Watery metaphors and descriptions appear throughout your body of work: “under the sky / under the sea,” “rivery air,” “liquid light,” and so on. Can you talk about the way this kind of language is operative in the work?

Holl: I think it’s a poetic reality, as is light. This is the notion of luminosity as a kind of giver of an intelligent dimension. I think water has this same potential. Gaston Bachelard, of course, who wrote *The Poetics of Space*, also wrote *Water and Dreams* on the poetry of water. This language brings to mind analogies. There’s a mystery to water, especially if you’re out on the ocean, where the horizon surrounds you. I used to go out of Grays Harbor on the Pacific Ocean and on the Columbia River where the salmon would be biting two or three miles out. But when you get far enough out on the ocean, and there is nothing on the horizon, it’s just the swells that bring you up and down, up and down. To me, that’s a poetic dimension. It reminds me of Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where he described a special feeling we have in life. He said that feeling is the “oceanic,” and I have felt that. I think the landscape and the experience outside the city is as important as any urbanism because it brings us back to our fundamental relation to nature.

Olshavsky: Are there projects in which you've experienced the oceanic?

Holl: Yes. Actually, I made a house called Oceanic Retreat on the island of Kaua'i, on a point of land that sticks out very high above the beach. I made the whole house around these ideas of tectonic plates and the movement of the Hawaiian Islands that shift about two inches every year. It was all about the oceanic.

Olshavsky: One of the criticisms of the use of metaphor and poetic language is that it can become too iconic or potentially literal. I'm curious how you would respond to that criticism.

Holl: I think some people cannot read a poem. They would say, "When I read a poem, it is like reading a name on a check." Their brain can't function to read poetry, so they don't get it. I have a huge collection of poetry. I love it; I think it is important. But you're not going to change people who say that poetry is like reading a name on a check. Their minds are constructed in a different way. Well, so be it. I'm going to enjoy my life because we only have so long to live.

Olshavsky: I have little doubt. I want to stay with the issue of language and the imagination. Historically, the understanding of water has shifted from one of the four classical elements to the chemical formula of H₂O. Assessing this arc, the philosopher Ivan Illich in *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* worried that water had become a degraded metaphor. This degradation, he feared, made it hard to see water as anything more than a recycled toilet flush. Is this degradation a concern for you?

Holl: When I think about language and a culture—for example, when I started to work in China—I went back to a book that my godfather gave me: *The White Pony*. It's the first collected anthology of ancient Chinese poetry. Some of the poems are at least two thousand years old, and the element of water is very much in a lot of these great poems. I think that when you read those ancient poems and think about China today, there is something very positive about the culture that comes out in these poems: the connection to nature, to water, to light, and to animals. What I would say to Illich about this question of degraded metaphors is to look back in time.

Olshavsky: Illich, I think, is worried that when we work to make things poetic or see things poetically, we need to overcome the reduction of water to a mere chemical or a cleaning fluid used to scrub and sanitize.

Holl: It is an act of the imagination. How do you make a building that's supposed to hold ten thousand office workers into something interesting? It is an act of the imagination. This is very important in architecture because otherwise you're just an obedient servant to commercial industries.

Olshavsky: What do you see as the value of that poetic dimension?

Holl: It is the value of life, and it is bringing forth the important things in life. In America now, people are angrier, are working harder, and losing their health because they don't really reflect on life. I reflect every day. I get up at dawn every day and work two hours on my watercolors in my notebooks. Before going to work at the office, I have already had two hours of poetic reflection about the day. Each day is a gift that we are given, and there are not that many of them.

Olshavsky: There is increasing awareness of socioeconomic discrepancies and how these relate to environmental degradation. The public displays of water in reflecting pools, fountains, and other features in our buildings and cities can be seen as a privilege. How do you negotiate the ethics of these dilemmas?

Holl: Every circumstance is different. I just try to take every project individually, like our current project in Shenzhen, which has a huge body of water called "the pool of knowledge." That pool is all recycled water. There's a fountain on the space below and all this public space between living and working towers. This is a genome company called iCarbonX on the cutting edge, working with CRISPR and gene splicing. I bring a public space to the project and a body of water. They are open for everybody. To me, that's important—to do as much public space as you can.

At a smaller level, water is also a key to renewable energy. We are building a little archive building in Rhinebeck with a single geothermal well five hundred feet deep that will heat and cool the entire building of three thousand square feet: with super insulation, solar control, and a closed-loop radiant system in the floor. This can be done everywhere in China and in the Northeast. Geothermal is an underutilized dimension in terms of heating and cooling. There's an upfront cost, but when it's running, there are not as many moving parts, and there's no fossil fuel. That's the future, I think.

Olshavsky: Do you sense that the broader discipline will continue to change as these things evolve?

Holl: I think individual architects with a certain level of idealism could change it. But the problem is that there are too many obedient architects with no idealism, architects who are just interested in commercial returns. This is why we have whatever it is that we have.

But I believe in education. I think teaching architecture is enormously important. I've taught my whole life. I believe that's an important dimension, and I continue to do that with Dimitra Tsachrelia.

Olshavsky: And what do you see as education's role relative to these issues?

Holl: Architecture is an art. It's a gift to realize a good public space and give it to generations in the future. I think it's important to remember the positive dimensions and not be swayed into the commercial entity. I believe that a really great small work of architecture

is much more important than two or three glass skyscrapers, however big they are. I have grave doubts about the values presently because the bigness of an architecture firm somehow became a value. I feel strongly that the whole education process needs to take this on and not just pay lip service to bad corporate architecture. We must make the argument for quality space and make the argument for quality over quantity.

Author Biography

Peter Olshavsky is an associate professor of architecture at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Besides UNL, he has taught at McGill and Temple Universities and practiced professionally in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He holds a PhD and MArch II in the history and theory of architecture from McGill University and a BArch from Pennsylvania State University. Peter's focus is in history, theory, and design. He received a Canada-US Fulbright Fellowship, and his scholarly and design work is recognized and published internationally, including a recent essay for Steven Holl's traveling exhibition *Making Architecture*.