

WATER COLORS

THE HORIZONTAL DIMENSION OF COLOR IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF STEVEN HOLL

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Fig.1. S. Holl. Daeyang Gallery and house, 2008

There is something extraordinary about drawing the first lines of a project. You can never quite tell where they will take you. The drawing act unfolds a process of formalizing the desires of an architect by joining intuition with the concept. Steven Holl always starts a new project by sketching his first thoughts on a thick paper notebook with decisive brushstrokes of watercolor. Line drawings remain explanations of the shapes by defining their contours. Pencil drawings — like those ones produced by Holl during his first years of career— explore the light and saturation qualities of an environment, even the texture of surfaces, with a rational representation that controls form and size. But the intensity that pencil drawings may have also requires a lot of time and effort. On the other hand, watercolor is a much more agile technique which can easily explore the effects of light and shadow on volumes. In this sense, watercolors can visualize the spatial idea faster than any other kind of diagram. Water has the capacity to dilute pigments and spread them on the paper with no preconceived shape. It opens up the form of color to adapt it on the bumpy surface with each brush gesture, with an uneven deposition of the dyes with the resulting heterogeneous depth. So the difference between pencil drawing and watercolor is not just technical but also conceptual. In the “aquarelles” water is the amorphous medium that transports and distributes pigment throughout the paper, swinging the dyes with its capillary action. It is like surfing on an uncontrolled wave: each brushstroke is a constant adjustment to direct the indeterminacy of hydraulic principles. Pigments in the water have a certain freedom of movement, they are dynamic. Color flows in the water relentlessly changing its place and depth until water evaporates.

It could not be any other technique. The work of Holl itself relies on this autonomy of color versus its support. His watercolors are tests to meditate about forms; with dissolved contours, where lines and colors travel on the space of the paper creating spatial tensions between them. Most of his paintings are investigations about imagined volumes with different light and color properties without any other constraints: no scale, no gravity. They are abstract drawings that remind suprematist compositions, or those paintings by Wassily Kandinsky, which seem to be testing his own thoughts published in *Point and Line to Plane* (1926).¹ In Holl's abstract compositions color patches float on the space of the canvas in a random flow, with no restraints. As in Kasimir Malevich's paintings, the flowing movement of color stains relates to nothing at all, it is *autofigurative*. These elements are enough to express the most pure sensibility without the need of figures or symbolic meanings in art.

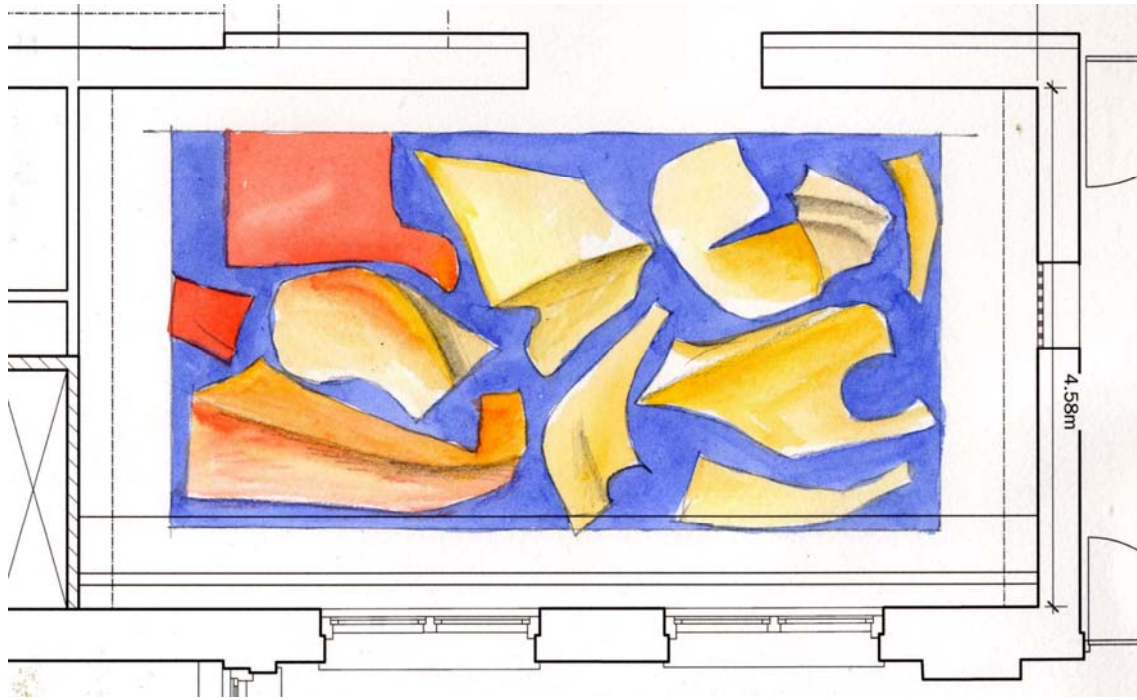


Fig.2. S.Holl. Watercolor, carpet "Chance", 2000

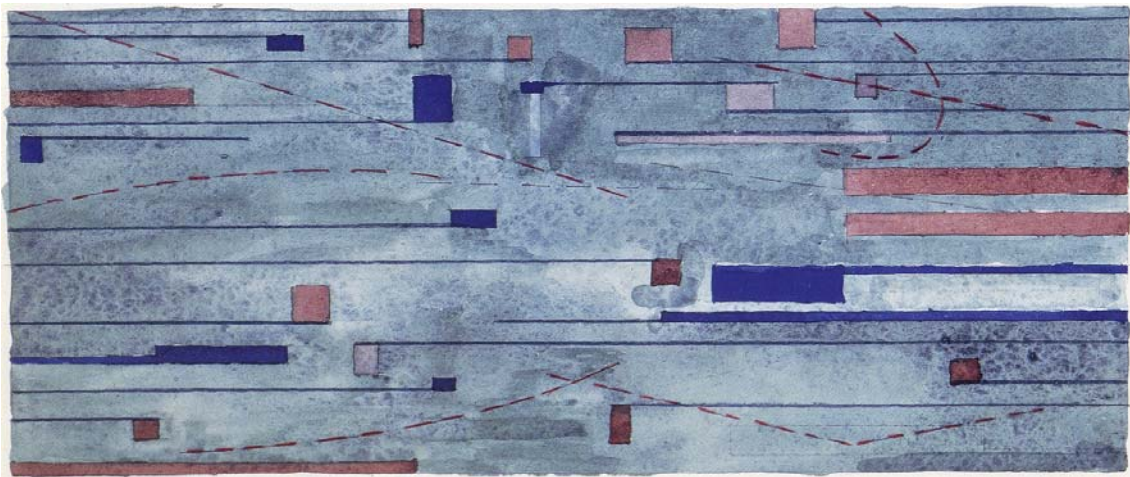


Fig.3. S. Holl. Watercolor, carpet for MoMA Tower Apartment, 1986

What is notable is Holl's ability to translate these characteristics to define the perception of color into his architecture. It is exactly what these watercolors transmit that is applied into space. Chromatic effects and light beams move freely on the surfaces of walls, floors and ceilings. These phenomena generate a sense of dynamism and mutability of space. Now, if we focus on the horizontal dimension, the flooring, it seems obvious that these floating like compositions will also reinforce a sense of weightlessness. Holl explored in some of his early apartment projects the designing of carpets as a way to emphasize the floor as a colored surface. He does not think carpets as an industrialized furniture element but they are manufactured just for each unique situation. The watercolor of Fig.3 is actually the design for one of the three carpets at the MoMA Tower Apartment of 1986. This longitudinal composition was placed at the entrance corridor to produce a playful sense of dynamism and vitality. In the Metropolitan Tower Apartment in New York (1988), the floor is finished in a black and white terrazzo with variable grain density in order to recreate a walk on a cloud, and this sensation is also reinforced by the free-form walls. The horizontal plane, then, is designed to enhance the feeling of being so high up in the city; weightlessness. The introduction of color elements on the floor seeks to wrap the spectator in a complete psychological space. Subsequently, the carpets are designed to

resemble a floating cloud-like habitat. Holl's drawings for this flooring were based on an intuited version of a piece of music; *Landscapes of the Mind*, inspired on a painting by Georgia O'Keefe entitled *Sky Above Clouds*. Like suprematist color marks, these carpets proclaim a horizontal plane with no gravity.



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Fig.4. MoMA Tower Apartment, 1986

Fig.5. Andrew Cohen Apartment, 1984

Fig.6. Metropolitan Tower Apartment, 1988

But what happens when these floating color patches occur in water? What does take place when *Watercolors* become *Water Colors*? In our physical environment, water absorbs and reflects colors of its surrounding to present them with no preconceived form and making them look more intense. In his book *Parallax*, Holl writes: "We might consider water a *phenomenal lens* with the powers of reflection, spatial reversal, refraction, and transformation of rays of light."² Traditionally, architecture has been essentially a shelter to expel, contain, collect or divert water; but the most interesting actions arise when water is integrated into the design. Apart from all its climate control qualities, water can also be used for its phenomenological properties. It is the reflecting capacity that interests us more here. Water has an amazing mirror quality that changes according to light or the breeze. Colors in the reflection appear with a new depth, like in a Monet's painting, the color phenomena on the water are full of mysterious reflections and magic. The horizontal plane of the floor suddenly becomes alive and colorful for the visitor that walks around the perimeter of a pool, changing constantly the angle of reflection. The observer sees on the water an inverted colorful world.

Then, the idea of a dynamic and weightless floor seen on the carpets designs can also be recreated by the use of the water pond as an architectural element. If we think the water plane as a mirror with changing nuances, it is possible to propose new floating colors reflected on this horizontal plane of the floor. When we look at a lake's reflection we probably can see the blue sky with nearby passing clouds, the surrounding trees and their leaves falling on the water. But when a pond becomes part of an urban environment, we shall expect another kind of reversed architectural image. For instance, in the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe, water plays an important role to generate a sense of spatial symmetry and depth. The entrance pond was designed to reflect its context, as a mirror carpet. When sitting on the continuous bench along the back wall at dusk, we can observe the moving reflections of the colored Magic Fountain of Montjuic (also built for the occasion of the 1929 World Exhibition). Life color is introduced on the floor through the use of water to multiply the colored glows of the environment.

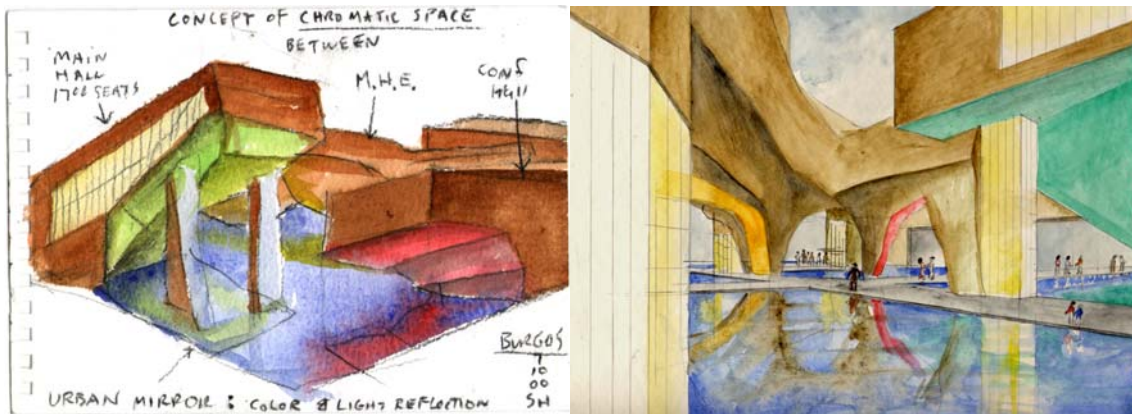


Fig.7. Makuhari Housing, 1996



Fig.8. Sarphatistraat Offices, 2000

There are many examples where Holl has introduced or played with water surfaces to enhance chromatic effects. At the Makuhari Housing the water ponds reflect the different color materials of the pavilions and surrounding blocks to establish bright vibrations and depth to the floor. At the Sarphatistraat Offices in Amsterdam the new building approaches the Singel Canal to duplicate the high of its bulk with its reflection; as well as, during the night, introduces a set of color patches floating in the dark. The Sokolov house in Saint Tropez; the Fukuoka Housing; Little Tesseract House or the Manifold Hybrid Building, they are all ways to use water as phenomenal lens: to reflect hues and shades of the environment or the facades. But sticking into the horizontal dimension, we could highlight those projects that reflect color from another flat surface: the ceiling. When overlapping a building's soffit on a water plane the mirror qualities of the later create a chromatic space between the two horizontal layers. Spectators can perceive the bright undersides reflecting their colors on the wet pavement, wrapping the spectator in a psychological atmosphere.



Figs.9-10. Museum of Human Evolution in Burgos, 2000

One example is the competition for the Museum of Human Evolution in Burgos, where water is beneath the edifice reflecting its soffit. Like in the design for the Palazzo del Cinema in Venice, the set of colored reflections occur underneath the floating volumes and cantilevers, generating a chromatic space in the ground floor plaza. Nevertheless, it is not until the construction of the Vanke Center in Shenzhen (aka Horizontal Skyscraper, 2006-2009), that this concept of chromatic space is not physically built. Here, Holl uses water as one of the materials to build a tropical landscape underneath the gigantic suspended building. He decided to finish the building's soffit —the sixth façade— in various vivid colors, so the visitor in the ground floor would see bright sparkles reflected on the pools that belong to the ceiling. The vibrant whisper

of colors in the water show us regions of the ceiling, a cloud, a staircase, a fragment of a tree: a big emotional impact upon the observer. At night, the colorful glow of the undersides of the building mix with the smell of the flowering tropical plants of the garden. Color does not obey any formal quality any more, but it establishes a play of complex emotions with light, the smell and the landscape elements. Color has been merged with light and water to acquire a new ethereal effect on space. This fusion unties color from its traditional support (the pigmentation of the ceiling); so its reflection becomes a nomadic substance with the capacity of adapting itself to any kind of situation. Now, color floats freely in the space of water, in an intangible area at the boundary between the physic and the abstract.

The purpose of this reflected color is to merge itself with the light, the air and the materials of the project. Color does not belong to the painted surface any longer, but moves around and wraps the whole atmosphere of the place. The final result will always depend on the texture of the lighted materials; so in this case, *water colors* are a blend of reflected tinted light and the wavy water surface. What is fascinating about these colored reflections is their moving unlimited contour; they are an amorphous transparent matter that overlaps onto the crystalline water surface. The immaterial and intangible substance of this color adds a spatial illusion within the space of the pools and generates a certain suggestive ambiance that is constantly changing according to various circumstances such as light conditions, movement or time. So color is persistently changing and crawling. Color is the element that generates the perception accent of these spaces and establishes different relationships with the spectator, always subordinating the form of the building to the chromatic field. The viewers enter a dialogue between the space and their perception of phenomena. Their senses become engaged with the creation and understanding of this suggestive architecture.



Fig.11. Vanke Center, Shenzhen, 2009



Fig.12. Vanke Center, Shenzhen, 2009

Notes:

1. Kandinsky, Wassily. *Punto y línea sobre el plano*. Barcelona, Paidós, 1996.
2. Holl, Steven. *Parallax*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2000. p. 86.

* All pictures provided by Steven Holl Architects.

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