

# The Predicament of Diversity through the Architectural Pedagogy of Beginning

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Cultural diversity is an epistemological object—culture as an object of empirical knowledge—whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as 'knowledgeable'; authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification.  
– Homi K. Bhabha, *Cultural Diversity and Cultural Difference*<sup>1</sup>

An encounter with exemplary objects, spaces and ideas in the state of beginning design often leaves one to wander through a multiplicity of sources. This roaming across other disciplines and through a multiplicity of histories has given rise to a wide range of styles and movements in architecture. One might argue that this architectural situation bespeaks the uncertainty of the contemporary architect and his/her mode of thinking. However, this uncertainty, the state of flux and constant relocation, yields to transformation and newness in design. In other words, the disposition toward diversity in design by means of consulting the architecture of the precedent, as a basic design strategy, indicates a demand on the part of the designer to explore the territory of "otherness" in seeking new cultural, formal or typological structures. Although the path toward diversity does not always guarantee creativity, it begins with the act of re-presentation as imitative pedagogy that offers a disruption from familiar architectural ideas and premises. In a sense, the repetition and *following* of an existing design prototype or image as exemplary has the potential to displace the designer outside him or herself and a known paradigm, thereby enhancing the possibility of generating diverse examples.

This, however, leads us to the question: can any form of re-enacting the architecture of exemplary for the sake of diversity instill signification in architectural design and thus bring meaning to our

dwelling spaces? How can we interpret the architecture of diversity in such a way that accommodates cultural differences and their possible intersections in the condition of globalization today?

Our inquiry into the phenomenon of diversity leads us back to a more originary concept as "difference" in the state of beginning design. In characterizing the significance of diversity in architecture, we must first distinguish between the concepts of diversity and difference. Only then can we approach the possibility of expanding the notion of diversity from a mere formal/physical feature toward the incorporation of social/cultural structures. The first part of this paper addresses such critical thinking on the notion of diversity/difference from the perspective of critical theory.

Indeed, in our journey from the diversity of examples to the originary concept of difference, we need to recognize the effect of such theoretical understanding in the milieu of beginning design. How are we then to move from the mimetic pedagogy of re-presentation to the pedagogy of difference in the studio context? The second part of this paper seeks to characterize and situate such phenomena in the process of global design thinking through the analysis of Steven Holl's design practice and his methodology of beginning.

## FROM DIVERSITY TO THE ORIGINARY DIFFERENCE

In order to illustrate the significance and priority of difference over diversity in architectural design education, I reflect upon the theoretical discussion

of difference in Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, among other critical thinkers, that resonates with architectural thinking. Difference, understood as a virtual ground and the originary structure, gives way to the actualization of diversity in numerous forms.<sup>2</sup> Deleuze designates a place for the projection and coming together of differences in their dynamism: the plane of consistency or composition. This is the virtual site where plurality of spaces and ideas pass into one another in order to achieve a synthetic composition. The path to creativity is thus associated with the conscious effort to articulate and discern intersections among different possibilities upon this plane, which in turn gives rise to an array of qualitative changes and transformations.

The plane of composition thus characterized indicates a mediatory site of experimentation for encountering heterogeneous, incompatible juxtapositions, constantly defying linear-time history and detached geographies. In other words, the plane of composition as the site of formation and an in-between milieu brings the possibility of thinking about genuine difference before giving form to diversity in its physical spatial sense.

Indeed, Deleuze's characterization of the plane of composition is not unfamiliar to architects who constantly reach out to a multiplicity of spaces and ideas to be drawn together on the virtual plane of thought or other representational space/screen. However, when it comes to the creation of difference in the context of the design studio, it is always a matter of how to resort to the architecture of the exemplary, namely the history of architecture and ideas. Therefore, the activity of repetition of forms and concepts becomes a subject of learning for architectural beginners as they decide not to take flight from difference for the sake of an immediate loose diversity. In this regard, Deleuze's account of difference, in close rapport with the idea of repetition, offers insight into the relationship between the pedagogy of repetition and difference, as it speaks to the necessity of incorporating history/theory into the design studio.

In his theory of difference, Deleuze calls for a creative "asymmetrical" repetition upon the plane of composition that maintains a critical distance from following any predetermined map or pre-given model. As opposed to the "dead" repetition that generates successive similar elements far from

complexities, asymmetrical repetition makes the object, space, form or any singular idea undergo transformation and change from within while repeating. In the end, the representational figure or space substitutes the "a-presentation" of the "Idea" that moves toward change.<sup>3</sup> In this light, as Deleuze indicates, the idea of repetition is entangled with a continual displacement and thus creates fragmentary connections among disparate elements. Therefore, the plane of composition is the place where the act of repetition is coupled with the process of articulation among heterogeneous territories, ideas and objects. As he writes,

Consider [...] the repetition of a decorative motif: a figure is reproduced, while the concept remains absolutely identical ... . However, this is not how artists proceed in reality. They do not juxtapose instances of the figure, but rather each time combine an element of one instance with *another* element of a following instance. They introduce disequilibrium into the dynamic process of construction, an instability, dissymmetry or gap of some kind which disappears only in the overall effect.<sup>4</sup>

Surely, the ideas of repetition and synthesis as design strategies for the architecture of difference raise the question of the authenticity, originality and identity of the work of architecture, especially under the conditions of globalization. What is at stake, in this case, is architecture's disposition toward diversity as portable commodity in a mere act of static, dead repetition, regardless of the subtleties and depth of cultural differences. However, Deleuze's theory of difference offers a critical response to the dilemma of identity and originality while preserving the image of mobility and displacement. As he defines it, authenticity is nothing less than the creation of something new that arises not from a tabula rasa but from the internal transformation of Ideas, thus making it possible for heterogeneous concepts to coexist in a single composition.

The image of difference presented by Deleuze suggests pedagogical implications for architecture by engaging novice designers in a creative and originary practice of repetition, displacement and "disjunctive"<sup>5</sup> synthesis based on what is already present, namely the history of architecture, its objects and ideas. In this light, the architecture of the precedent in its coexisting assemblage—beyond the misleading labels and dualities of traditional and modern, West and non-West, or exotic and native—inhabits students' virtual plane of composi-

tion and thereby contributes to their understanding of difference in design.

This theoretical reflection on the notion of difference, as opposed to diversity, paves the way for an analysis of Holl's design strategy as one example of the architecture of difference and the synthesis of a multiplicity of cultures in design. As I will demonstrate, Holl's design method engages the repetition of the concept of space-time appropriated from Japanese, Persian and modern Western contexts, while translating them in his design work.

### THE DIMENSION OF DIFFERENCE IN HOLL'S ARCHITECTURE

Repetition is everywhere .... It is in the Idea to begin with, and it runs through the varieties of relations and the distribution of singular points. It also determines the reproductions of space and time .... In every case, repetition is the power of difference and differentiation: because it condenses the singularities, or because it accelerates or decelerates time, or because it alters spaces.<sup>6</sup>

In this passage, Deleuze extends the notion of difference considered originally as the virtual Idea to space and time as its forms of actualization. But how is this theory understood in the context of architectural design insofar as time and space are its constituent elements? Holl's design discourse with time and space in its multiplicity of forms translated from different cultures provide an effective response to this question.

"A new topological openness in the form of a field that extends to a 'horizon-structure' became my theoretical frame," writes Holl as he remembers the turning point in his architectural thinking.<sup>7</sup> Although most architects tend to excuse into a formalistic approach in translating philosophical theory into built form, Holl's architecture is distinguished by his flight from earlier typological studies to topological perspective. Reflected on the phenomenological understanding of space and time developed in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, Holl has devised design methods for practicing the "simultaneity of spatial depth" in architecture. As I will suggest, this method also engages other time-space conceptions associated with an understanding of depth in Japanese and Persian cultures.

Holl tells us in *Parallax*, "Merleau-Ponty's concepts are pivotal to our architectural method."<sup>8</sup> Indeed,

Merleau-Ponty's conception of the originary experience of space and time as a "transitional synthesis" and the "passage" between different spaces largely influenced Holl's architectural philosophy. Likewise, the "simultaneity of spatial depth" as architectural synthesis relating spatial to the temporal, worldly beings to bodily perceptions, has found its way into Holl's methodology of design. Following Merleau-Ponty's notion of primordial depth as an encompassing thickness, Holl creates continuous surfaces and planes that constantly transforms into screens embodying multiple characters.

The idea of spatial simultaneity also has its roots in Bergsonian thinking of time and space to which Holl often pays homage in his works. The continuous multiplicity for Henri Bergson implies the "inner space"<sup>9</sup> as "succession without separation" and mutual interpenetration which bridges the gap between temporal and spatial qualities. Accordingly, the simultaneous indivisible continuity in Holl's architectural space is achieved through overlapping and successive qualitative changes effected through light, color and material, which merge into one another, delineating a temporal path for the observer to pass from one space to another. Therefore, the perceiving subject is invited to experience the continuous unfolding of overlapping spaces and their reciprocal concealment, intertwining the seer and the seen.

In this regard, Holl has adopted a conceptual strategy to explore "pre-objective" space and time in two-dimensional watercolor drawings, before giving them form in the perceptual field (Fig. 1). Such intent underlies his preoccupation with manifold perspective episodes on the design process preceding other traditional drawings of plans and elevations. This "pre-spatial" and "pre-temporal" world that Holl has explores in his drawings indicates the coexistence of all dimensions beyond any particular point of view, thereby having affinities with modern language of time and space. With this, Holl pays tribute to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenal approach to time and space, which best corresponds with aesthetic modernism and its conception of spatial simultaneity. This view is reflected in Paul Klee's words highlighted by Merleau-Ponty in *Eye and Mind*:

There is that which reaches the eye head on, the frontal properties of the visible; but there is also that which reaches it from below—the profound postural latency whereby the body raises itself to see—and that which reaches vision from above like the phenomena of flight, of swimming, of movement,

where it participates no longer in the heaviness of origins but in free accomplishments.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy provides a foundation for Holl to discover other forms of time and space conceptions. Having dedicated himself to achieving a sense of "transcultural" architecture, Holl espouses a "transforming link" that would fill the gap between a multiplicity of time and space conceptions associated with different cultures. In this "continuous space-time fusion" as his originary model of difference, he maps the two closely related images of time and space: Japanese and Islamic Persian conceptions of time and space.

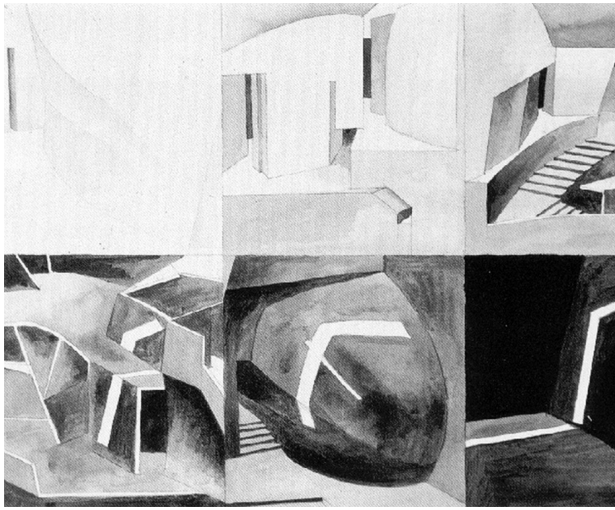


Figure 1. Pre-Spatiotemporal Sketches, Steven Holl. (Photo Courtesy of © Steven Holl.)

Holl points out that he "became aware of another understanding of time" throughout his direct en-

counter with Chinese and Japanese cultures.<sup>11</sup> The concept of "Ma" 間 as it has appeared in Japanese visual and spatial culture, had an explicit impact on Holl's architectural philosophy. Formerly a Chinese concept as an indication of space, *Ma* entered Japanese ontology through the teachings of Shintoism, Buddhism and Taoism. This conceptual term then transformed into a more encompassing idea of space-time<sup>12</sup> covering multiple areas of Japanese cultural life. According to the architect Isozaki, *Ma* is a place in which space is "perceived as identical with the events or phenomena occurring in it; that is, space [as] recognized only in its relation to time flow."<sup>13</sup> This conjunction of time with space emphasizes the immediacy of experience at the interval between spatializing and temporalizing, where time is not perceived independent of space. Visually speaking, *Ma* 間 is the combination of a gateway or opening sign with the moonlight shining through. It metaphorizes the whole process of an intangible energy entering through an in-between depth while referring to the mysterious event of time and space. In a sense, the in-between stillness or emptiness known as *Ma* is the site of space-time where the before and after moments are gathered into the fullness of the present. The concept of *Ma* realized as such is manifested in Japanese visual culture, especially in narrative paintings, in a series of openings or voids situated at the interval depth intertwining discrete non-linear asymmetrical images (Fig. 2). This spatiotemporal device turns measurable objective distances into a qualitative imaginary experience lived by the perceiving body. This is why pictorial continuity and sequential gradation are often disrupted



Figure 2. Japanese Scroll, *Scenes from The Tale of Genji*, Tosa School, 1615-1625.



Figure 3. 'Overlapping of Background, Middle Ground & Foreground,' Steven Holl: Nanjing Museum, 2002-2009. (Photo Courtesy of © Steven Holl.)

by eliminating the sharp outline in-between events to allow the observer to inhabit the interwoven episodes and their sequential depth in the narrative structure of the painting. This sensual awareness is the experience of *Ma* at the interval void between the event of time and space, thus blurring indeterminate boundaries. This concept intimately corresponds with Merleau-Ponty's space-time model. It relates past events to the future, while bringing the far distance into the presence of depth realized as *Ma*. From this standpoint, the synthesis and overlap of background, middle ground and foreground, as creatively repeated in Holl's drawings, becomes a design strategy for invoking an intertwining experience in architecture (Fig. 3). Moreover, Holl's familiarity with the Persian poet Rumi and his Sufi doctrine of space and time became another source of inspiration that projected on Holl's map as his plane of composition. In the model of the "continuous space-time fusion," Holl finds the Persian model of time and space to be the expression of a galaxy of point-instants that suggests an alternate condition to Bergson's conception of time as continuous multiplicity or duration.<sup>14</sup> The Persian model of space-time, on account of being distant from the hierarchical order of spaces with linear succession, represents the ideas of multiplicity and difference. Difference in its ordinary sense is well reflected in Persian miniatures as a series of fragmented surfaces and forms overlapping each other in the space, as though one can, at any time, sneak into the interstitial regions laid in-between different events (Fig. 4). In fact, the atomizing perspectiv-

ism of the miniature with its multiplicity of vantage points articulates the distance between different events in space.



Figure 4. Persian Miniature, Artist Unknown, *Esfandiyar Slays Arjasp*, Baysunghur's *Shahnama*, Timurid Era, 1429 (Photo Courtesy of © Exquisite Manuscript Treasures at Gulistan Palace Museum.)

Indeed, Persian time space ontology forms affinities with the Japanese concept of *Ma*. Yet, unlike the Japanese expression of the space-time event with a seriated succession of forms disrupted by the middle voids, the Persian model of space-time is characterized as a non-linear spatiotemporal progression with a swirling arrangement of intertwined surfaces, lines and colors defining multiple centers within the space. The spatial depth is thus achieved through ambiguity and constant shifting between the interior and exterior or foreground and background within a shallow aggregate of points.



Figure 5. Indeterminate Boundaries in Space, Steven Holl: Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Finland, 1992. (Photo Courtesy of © Steven Holl.)

The forms and spaces rendered in miniatures are “no longer bound into either a ‘here’ or a ‘there,’ self or other, a subject or an object;”<sup>15</sup> rather, they constantly attempt to seize upon the event of becoming by not being frozen at a fixed time and space. This is indeed the representation of a hidden movement and flux that is impossible to achieve in the static voluminous nature of the three-dimensional space. The profusion of objects and events roaming across the fragmentary structure of time and space in Persian miniatures is inseparable from a kind of mobility and disorientation represented by abstract lines. In a sense, the abstract line in Persian space renders the event of passages in an unfinished state. The line renders an unenclosed openness along with multiple trajectories for the body in the same way as the indeterminate floating boundaries in Merleau-Ponty’s view tends to dissolve the enclosing edges for the sake of the body’s free movement in space. The condition of the space-time event belonging to the Persian model also finds its place in Holl’s design through multiple superposing perspectives enveloping each other within space, which in turn gives rise to floating lines and bleeding thresholds (Fig. 5).

Therefore, Holl’s repetition of the image of time and space belonging to different cultures led him to create a virtual map that connects different geographies through translating Ideas into architectural design. Although Holl’s interpretation of the concepts of time and space from different contexts illustrated in his drawings is just one approach among others for the actualization of difference in architecture, he certainly opens up new paths for further exploration in this field. In this regard, Holl’s architectural spaces evoke a sense of modernity that belongs to the global culture, as he rightly observes “strange parallels in ancient Eastern and modern Western thinking.”<sup>16</sup> It is evident that Holl’s morphological lineage rests in modern formal language. Yet, his architectural design method goes beyond simple formalistic and typological associations, as he renders place with a global profile. This non-linear perspective to the history of architecture thus comes into focus by means of the architect’s realization of multiplicity and difference in beginning design.

## CONCLUSION

As the field of architectural pedagogy witnesses the displacement of theory and history discourses from their once prominent position within the architectural design milieu, it gradually leaves behind the methodological exercises engaging critical thinking at the initial stage of design. This transformation in the discipline of architecture during the past decades inevitably delineates pedagogical strategies that are paradoxical in essence, where theory and design as the two opposite poles are constantly bifurcating Architecture. The result of this continual challenge has been the marginalizing of architectural theory even further with the rise of the more pragmatist concerns of design. In this context, the present study is an attempt to rethink the role of history and theory in the architectural studio far from hasty formal translations of philosophical themes.

As I have suggested, the beginning of design can be enriched by the experience of difference before giving form to a diversity of instances and forms. The idea of difference in architecture thus negotiates the gap between history/theory and design discourses, so that the architecture of the exemplary—the history of architectural ideas—begins to influence and interact with the design process. As we have seen in Holl’s design process, the theories of space and time experienced from a multiplicity of cultures play

an important role in actualizing cultural difference through repetition in the context of design studio.

## ENDNOTES

1 Homi K. Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Difference," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (New York, Routledge, 1995), 209.

2 Deleuze explains that, "Difference is not diversity. Diversity is given, but difference is that by which the given is given, that by which the given is given as diverse." Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Trans. by P. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 222.

3 Ibid., 24.

4 Ibid., 19.

5 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Of The Refrain," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

6 Deleuze identifies space, time and consciousness as the three series along which repetition actualizes. For more information see: Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 220

7 Steven Holl, *Parallax* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), 302.

8 Ibid., 305.

9 The experience of spatial extensity as a dynamic process and continuous uninterrupted flow is well expressed in *Time and Free will*, Trans. by F. L. Pogson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960 [1889]).

10 Paul Klee, *Wege des Naturstudiums (Ways of Studying Nature)*, 1923 as found in G. di San Lazzaro, cited in *Eye and Mind*, by Merleau-Ponty, p. 147

11 Steven Holl, *Parallax*, 188.

12 Gunter Nitschke, "'Ma': The Japanese Sense of 'Place'." *Architectural Design* 36, no. 3 (March 1966).

13 Arata Isozaki et al., *MA: Space-Time in Japan* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, n.d., 1979), 13.

14 Steven Holl, *Steven Holl* (Zurich: Artemis, 1993), 28.

15 Michael Sells, "Ibn-Arabi's Polished Mirror: Perspective Shift and Meaning Event." *Studia islamica* (1988): 147.

16 Steven Holl, "Duration (The not yet meets the already gone)," in *Architectural Positions: Architecture, Modernity and the Public Sphere*, ed. Tom Avermaete, Klaske Havik, and Hans Teerds (Amsterdam: SUN Publishers, 2009), 249.