

Stretto and Style

by

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No house published in these pages is likely to be less than a tour-de-force of architectural composition, and Steven Holl's Stretto House in Dallas—a concerted exercise in form-making, material control, and tense, museum-quality detail—is no exception.

The front door opens to a rush of light and space, to sheeny planes, etched edges, pale color, and a distant view of green water framed, it initially seems, fifty times over in successively smaller overlaps between cross-sliding bars of space. Around this experience the house pivots, is "anchored." To the right, facing east, are large rooms with billowing ceilings giving on to a lawn sloping to the creek; to the left is the "business" side of the house, rooms more closed and dark: spaces for the storage of art and of persons. This much is understood soon upon entry.

Now: no baseboards, no moldings, just incisions, swoops, and tight, instantaneous changes of planarity and material and color. Integrally colored plaster walls gleam with workmanship, as do floors, sills, joinery, and hardware, the etched and stained metals, the cast glass panels, the Pyrex window corners...

Indeed, one quickly notices that no significant corner remains unquestioned or unchallenged, not in two dimensions, and not in three. The Box is not so much exploded in Rietveldian or Wrightian fashion, but each of its corners is undone, unstitched, taken out, reconfigured, re-seamed. Windows are shifted to the extremes of scale, to the gigantic "missing wall" and to the small "punched opening," or slot, the former energized by Mondrianesque division,

the latter fetishized by subtly curved glazing and apparently serendipitous placement. Columns are free-standing; here and there commas and cuts expose structure otherwise invisible. In short, one witnesses the masterful execution of a *style*, a coherent set of formal, color, and material choices, in this case predicated upon the grammar of De Stijl and Suprematism, but unique nonetheless to Holl and to this, his time.

Of course, one can hardly say "style" without thinking "mere," and herein lies the question that Steven Holl poses for us all. Can a style ever be deep? Or must style be ignored, denied, dissolved into other, more serious, more abstract modes of discourse? With his built work and with his writing respectively, Holl answers each question in the affirmative. I would affirm only the former. Architecture no less than music can work with motifs. Architects no less than composers (and musicians) can admit to a swirl of stylistic influences from contemporaries, and still speak to us urgently and coherently. There is nothing to fear. Wind and rhythm, water and dust, voice and value, these are the tuned substructures of consciousness, and a "style" is but a way of sounding their ancient strings. At the same time, we continue to call to each other as co-makers and co-inhabiters of the contemporary world.

I say all this in defense of style because Holl is a master of it but would have us think not, that his work is far more abstract, far more theoretical, an outcome of insight, pure and direct, into the nature of architecture. If sublimity, as G. H. Hardy said of Mathematics, arrives upon the achievement of depth, universality, novelty, inevitability, and economy, then Holl aims to score on all points. Cleanly. Without metaphor.

One wonders then about the value of the name given to the house, "stretto," a musical term meaning to "speed up the tempo as though through the narrows" or, alternatively, referring to an overlapping of call and response. As the house descends towards the north, its "aqueous space" can indeed be felt to speed up as it passes the kitchen and flows out to the "flooded room;" and inside, the floor indeed seems to lap over into three subsequent levels with liquid, rail-less, terrazzo steps.

But the house's graceful roof shells never actually overlap, and their energy never surmounts the "dams" constituted by the masonry segments. If anything, they seem somewhat pressed between them, broken, rearing up. This would

not matter if Holl did not also pose the house as an analog and reply to the call of the thrice-dammed stream that runs through the site, a stream, we might note, that runs in the opposite direction.

Holl would also like us to consider the house's relationship to Bela Bartok's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste*, which, strettos aside, cleanly divides heavy (percussion) and light (string) sounds in four movements in just the way the Stretto House cleanly divides its heavy and light elements. This may well be. Any number of Modernist buildings do the same. But we might also remember that, just as Bartok began his musicological investigations by analyzing the vernacular folk tunes of Hungary, deriving from them certain unique, pentatonic orderings that he expanded into a scale system that privileged no note except by imperceptible intervallic symmetries around it, and ended with music distant indeed from anything folk-like or functional as folk music, so too does Holl begin with pure phenomena and putatively local materials and end with a house that bears little relationship to Texas, its climate, coloration, fundamental materials, or vernacular. If this is forgivable, it is because we all dream of Eden and know that a measure of denial is essential to Architecture.

Moreover, Bartok was as interested in style as the rest of us. •

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