

## president's column

*David Epstein, AIA, LEED AD  
2005 President AIAVT*

aiaVT



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### Learning by Design

Last month I wrote about AIA's advocacy effort at the national level. This month I want to talk about another kind of advocacy for the profession: education. aiaVT is currently developing an educational program for K-12 schools. Modeled after the Boston Society of Architect's (BSA) program, aiaVT's "Learning by Design" is intended to get interested architects and allied professionals into elementary, middle and high schools to work with students on design-related activities. In fact, aiaVT was awarded a \$2500 matching grant from the American Architectural Foundation to implement this important program. I was fortunate enough to accept this on behalf of aiaVT at this year's Grassroots conference in February.

Spearheaded by several aiaVT board members, a core group of professionals has been meeting monthly to organize the program (See [www.aiavt.org](http://www.aiavt.org) for time and location). In consultation with the BSA, they are developing a program to increase design literacy among school age children. The idea is to work with local educators to integrate Learning by Design with their existing curriculum. From physics to citizenship, there are many ways in which architecture and design can enrich the classroom experience. Similar to the importance of media literacy in understanding our world, design literacy helps students "read" the built environment. This skill helps create the objectivity necessary for their development as critical thinkers and helps them make sense of the world around them. It just might also get them excited about a career in architecture as well!

cont.

excerpt from  
'Giancarlo De Carlo'  
Benedict Zucchi  
Appendix p.204-205, 1992.

A lecture by Giancarlo De Carlo originally published in Parametro, No. 5 1970

### The Modern Movement between Commitment and Uncommitment

Obviously, at this point, one could object that there was the Modern Movement, a movement which has produced many ideas and many heroes. And it is a pertinent objection: there was a Modern Movement and it represented an important chance for cultural renewal in architecture.

But now we would like to investigate architecture's 'credibility,' i.e. its capacity to have a 'public.' And therefore we must clarify right away

cont.

# 4.05:1



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*The format will be a series of specific practice-related questions to  
 be answered by members of the panel. The objective is to get to the  
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- *Building commissioning*
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*While VTBGS projects will be discussed, we will also be looking at how  
 other projects have handled these issues.*

*For more information, contact Donna Leban, AIA at Light/Space/  
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*Participants will be able to obtain 3 hrs of continuing education  
 credits from AIAVT.*

There is still much work to do on this initiative and member participation is critical for its success. If you would like to participate, visit the aiaVT website for more information or contact Lauren Davis at [lad@gvvarchitects.com](mailto:lad@gvvarchitects.com).

### **Building Professional Association Summit**

As we discovered at the Grassroots conference, several chapters across the country have K-12 education programs in place. In fact, just before we left for the conference this past February, I received a call from Diane Gayer of the Vermont Design Institute asking if we would accept a grant on their behalf at the conference. She explained it was for a Learning by Design program that her group was implementing!

At that point, it became painfully obvious that the two groups needed to talk to see if there were opportunities to share resources and coordinate strategies. Out of this coincidence was born the idea that aiaVT should host a Building Professional Association Summit where a wide variety of building professional organizations could gather and discuss their agenda for the upcoming year. The purpose of the “summit” is for each participant to learn about the different groups, their members and mission and to see if there are opportunities to co-sponsor events, share mailing lists and other resources, and join forces for mutual advocacy goals. The summit is happening April 14 in Montpelier. We have emailed invitations to representatives of specific groups but welcome broad participation. If you are an AIA member or are part of a group that you feel should be involved, please contact Hanne Williams at [aiaVT@madriver.com](mailto:aiaVT@madriver.com). Hanne has a list of those organizations invited. There is limited space but we will try to include all who are interested.

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a question which seems to be fundamental: who is architecture's public?

The architect's themselves, or the clients who commission the buildings, or the people, all the people, who use architecture?

If the third hypothesis is true- all the people who use architecture are its public- and today it seems unequivocally true, then the presence and the work of the Modern Movement and its heroes must be seen in a different perspective from that which has been built up by the publicity of the Modern Movement and its heroes. We cannot neglect the fact that the Modern Movement has preserved, in its origins and its development, the substantial defects of the amorphous condition from which it emerged. For example, it has preserved the ambiguity of the role it had assumed when it took the form of a bourgeois profession, and it has continued to achieve the reconciliation of art and technology by means of the simple qualitative modification of the

*cont.*

# 4.05:2

**holl and dorm nation at MIT:  
a review of “steven holl”  
todd gannon, ed.  
princeton architectural press, 2004**

\$29.95

*donald maurice kreis*

Forty thousand dollars will buy a lot of things in today's world, one of which is the opportunity to spend nine months living in a building that looks like a giant sponge and that (according to a recent account by two inhabitants in Architecture Boston) howls at night "like a coyote during a full moon." Lectures, labs, term papers, binge drinking and ready access to sexually transmitted diseases are included.

How can this be? How could all the forces of the universe have conspired to create such an interesting, and possibly funny, condition?

A trip to the landmark in question, Steven Holl's year-old and award-winning Simmons Hall dorm project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, will reveal little. It's well worth the trip to Cambridge – Briggs Field at MIT, behind Alvar Aalto's Baker Hall, is a kind of Salisbury Plain and Holl's creation along the north edge of this field is as compelling as Stonehenge. But Simmons Hall is a dorm and, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, dorms are locked and its occupants busy surfing the internet for term paper nuggets.

**cont.**

former of the two factors, substituting modern art for the academic art instead of setting aside the superfluous dilemma and overthrowing objectives and methods in order to open the way for architecture to become scientific and to permit a radical expressive renewal.

But this was only the consequence of a more serious inheritance, which the Modern Movement in architecture had taken over from the amorphous matrix in which it was generated: the deliberate programmatic attitude of an elite. This is not a criticism of the dimensions of the group - the fact that only small groups can set off

*cont.*

**4.05:3**





Though apparently preoccupied by undergraduate life these days – see his most recently published novel – Tom Wolfe appears to be unavailable, which is a shame. The evolution of the college dormitory over the roughly 25 years it took for tuition, room and board to go from \$7,000 to \$40,000 would be as good a case study as any from which Wolfe could extract even more madcap architectural agony and ecstasy than he did roughly 25 years ago with *From Bauhaus to Our House*.

So thanks are due the Princeton Architectural Press for its recently issued account of Simmons Hall as part of its Source Books in Architecture series. All monographs are pretty, some are informative and a few are page-turners. This one falls squarely within the latter category.

Not since Suzanne Frank deconstructed her architect Peter Eisenmann in *House VI: The Client's Response* has the underlying story of important work of New England architecture been told so compellingly. It turns out, we discover, that Holl began his relationship with MIT in 1998 by declaring his rejection of the campus master plan.

MIT chancellor Lawrence Bacow apparently went along with this Wrightian opening move, whereupon Holl set himself to the task of creating a new master plan for MIT's undeveloped Vassar Street corridor, roughly parallel to and north of Memorial Drive. "Porosity became the theme," Holl reports. "The absence of building would be the object of the plan."

This is an unmistakable sign of danger. As the feisty architecture critic Philip Nobel said in *Sixteen Acres*, his book about Ground Zero in New York: "When architects start talking about 'porosity' . . . you know they're planning to build a honking big wall."

In this case, it was a wall of four dorms arrayed along Vassar Street, admittedly with gaps designed to preserve certain view corridors. Each of the four, according to Holl, represented "different manifestations of porosity." He played with ideas of

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processes of real renewal seems unquestionable - but rather a criticism of the choices of this group in the definition of the field of reality within which it purposed to operate. The field of reality which the Modern Movement in architecture intended to conquer (and did in fact conquer) was the same field in which academic or business architecture had wandered around; a field restricted to the relations between clients and entrepreneurs, land owners, critics, connoisseurs, and architects, a field built on a network of economic and social class interests and held together by the mysterious tension of a cultural and aesthetic class code; a field which excluded everything

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**4.05:4**

“towers, a sponge, a folded street, a dendritic or treelike scheme, a void space scheme, and various hybrids.”

You who are architects and enjoy this kind of thinking, beware. To the non-architect – say, a student contemplating the payment of tuition bills, the potential lead donor of an eponymous dorm or a harried dean with a PhD in risk avoidance who has oversight responsibility for facilities planning – this kind of willful disregard of anything that smacks of practicality seems a worthy candidate for ridicule.

Nevertheless, Holl leaves nothing to the imagination when it comes to declaring his stance. “We no longer allow typological thinking to be the driving force in our designs,” he proclaims. Translation: Things like dorms, dining halls, classroom buildings or laboratories, at least insofar as these phrases have come to have generally accepted meanings in the built world over the years, are the last thing Steven Holl wants to be pondering as he sits down at his drafting table. It dawned on him around 1985 that maybe “any conceptual strategy, if properly harnessed, could be used as a point of departure for architecture.”

Hearing that, the aforesaid hypothetical dean has likely had a fatal heart attack. Chancellor Bacow simply moved on to the presidency at Tufts. But not before presiding over a bizarre prelude to Simmons Hall.

Told that he could build only one of his “manifestations of porosity,” Holl passed up the sponge in favor of a concept he called the “folded street.” This involved a two-level ribbon of dorm rooms, zig-zagging skyward nine times until reaching a height of 180 feet, with the open spaces between the ribbons encased in transparent glass. An entire chapter of the monograph offers a detailed look at this unbuilt project – an uncommon and riveting digression for a published tribute to a realized work.

Holl claims, and the monograph uncritically accepts, that what unfolded the folded street was MIT reneging on a commitment to pursue a zoning variance from the



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in economic, social, cultural, and aesthetic terms which was not shared by the class in power. It is true that a few 'heroes' have had intentions and produced works which have gone beyond these limits, but always leaning out of their elite positions, never stepping out of them to stand on the other side which was the side of the people, all the people who use and bear architecture. The ideas and accomplishments of these 'heroes' - for example, a Loos or a Le Corbusier or a few others (the greater part of the others being different from this group, although the negligence of official criticism has celebrated them all together) - have an inestimable value which architecture can no

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**4.05:5**



applicable 100-foot height restriction. It's an unsatisfying explanation, leaving in its wake a yearning for the publication of Big Sponge: The Client's Response.

The bad news arrived on June 30, 1999, with the even badder news that a new schematic design would have to be complete by September. What supposedly happened next is a kind of Lincolnesque moment. Remember the story about President Lincoln taking a vote of his cabinet on some momentous issue, ascertaining that the cabinet was unanimous in its opposition to the proposal yet declaring that the motion carried because he had voted in favor of it? Similarly, Holl reports putting the future of the commission to a vote of his project team. This time, it was the boss casting the sole dissenting vote.

Why did Holl cave? "I voted no for selfish reasons, because I didn't want to give up my summer vacation," he reports. Just as Honest Abe did, Holl ultimately knew that principle must govern. The sponge must go on.

The as-built manifestation of porosity is ably and thoroughly documented here, with sufficient construction details to satisfy the building scientist and enough of Holl's fabled watercolor drawings to decorate a coffee table credibly. It becomes clear that when Holl builds a sponge, it's no decorated shed – a series of curvaceous "void spaces" snakes its way through the building, often impinging on the rectilinear dorm rooms.

According to Holl, he knew the students would love these departures from the Cartesian grid but the MIT building committee to whom he reported believed otherwise. And here he admits something that every representative of an institutional client has long suspected: Architects work on a last-minute basis to avoid letting clients "dilute ideas," in Holl's words. "On a tight schedule, you can avoid all these compromises."

Apart from the interesting depictions of the project itself and the amusing though self-serving revelations from Holl about the process, the monograph raises



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longer do without. Nevertheless, they represent a tiny hole in the enormous mountain of unsolved problems of the contemporary human environment. The elite attitude of the Modern Movement in architecture, in terms of distance from the real context of society and its most concrete environmental needs, has accentuated the superfluity of architecture. On top of the old gaps due to an ambiguous professional condition, the new set of gaps due to estrangement from reality has plunged architecture into a condition of indefiniteness which, if it has favoured the formation of a few great free spirits projected in a daring search for newness, has favoured the formation

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**4.05:6**



broader questions about ambitious architecture and its assessment. Let's say you were an aspiring poo-bah in the architectural academy – the sort of person eager to shed words like “lecturer” and “adjunct” from his job title, in quest of tenure. You might be inclined to publish a hyperbolic assessment of a much-heralded project. If history proved you correct, you're a genius – i.e., a full professor at an Ivy League architecture school. If you were wrong, only patrons of the architecture shelf at used bookstores will ever know.

Yehuda Safran, adjunct associate professor at Columbia, concludes the monograph with an essay proclaiming that Simmons Hall “can be said to revolutionize everyday life in the university, releasing the ordinary street into a world of experiment and play as an alternative to the dangers of political apathy and personal isolation, the negative extremes of student experience. In so doing, it decisively alters our way of seeing the public life of the street and the organization of living space.”

Perhaps. But, particularly in the near term, a building as important as Simmons Hall deserves a more skeptical assessment than that.

There is an abundance of exposed concrete in the actual student rooms of Simmons Hall, carrying the lingering imprint of the wooden formwork that so delights architects but that seems less impressive to others. A certain small liberal arts college in Vermont gutted its 1970s dorms designed by the local firm of Freeman French Freeman in the 1990s precisely because exposed concrete was deemed incompatible with cozy student living. Et tu, brutalist?

Holl refers to the typical dormitory at American colleges and universities as an “undifferentiated filing cabinet for bodies,” positing his creation in Cambridge as a decisive alternative. Hence the search “for ways to make as diverse a range of spatial experiences as possible” so that students would feel compelled to “revel in the unexpected.”

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of the opposite: a multitude of walk-ons destined to nullify novelties of the former, reducing them to inert symbols, completely commensurate with the requirements of the ruling class.

There is no virtue in describing minutely the prototype of this multitude: the ‘artichoke’ of cultural activity - philosopher, economist, sociologist, politician, historian, educator, technocrat, artist, etc.; decorator, designer, builder, city planner, etc....And, under the hundredth leaf, the hard parchment of the councilor of those in power: the expert exploiter of building areas, the manipulator of building codes, the cultural legitimator of the sack of the city and the territory organized by financiers, politicians and bureaucrats to the detriment of the collectivity etc.

*cont.*

**4.05:7**

The countervailing impulse, also acknowledged by Holl, is to distract the students from the kind of omphaloskepsis one tends to suffer when forced into a high-pressure academic environment in the immediate aftermath of adolescence. In other words, maybe the kids shouldn't hang around their dorm rooms too much. From that standpoint, the filing cabinet typology can start to make sense. So, too, does a sponge, from which contents can be squeezed.

Whether viewed in person or via the monograph, Simmons Hall passes the test for good architecture set out by the discerning Danny Sagan of the Yestermorrow School and Terra Firma in Montpelier: It takes you to a place you've never been before. After Holl's building has been imitated, it will likely remain as an icon of early 21<sup>st</sup> Century architecture in New England. Whether it becomes beloved to its residents forking over \$40,000 a year for the honor of living there is another question altogether.

-30-

*Donald Maurice Kreis, who spent two years living in the gutted brutalist dorms referenced above, is now an attorney who writes regularly about architecture in Vermont and New Hampshire. See [www.dmkdmk.com](http://www.dmkdmk.com).*



To describe this character further is of no interest because he is known to the public, if only at literary level, through novels, comedies, films, television sketches which present him as a stereotype of intellectual alienation in our neo-capitalist age. Although this can serve to explain why architecture is no longer credible, it is more worthwhile to analyse the phenomenon in its primary aspects than in its branches, even if they are very substantial and diversified.

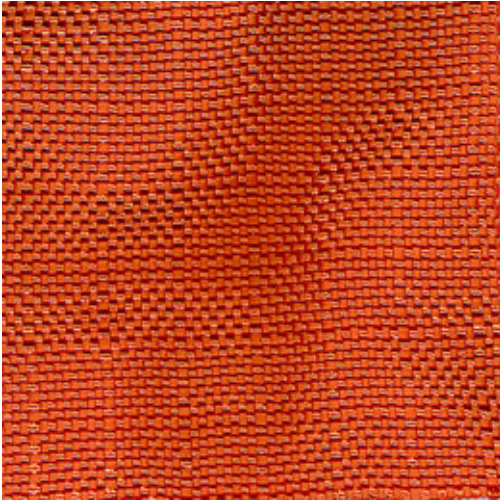
*cont.*

**4.05:8**



more than

orange



*gregor masefield, associate aia*

A folly?.....\$29 million out of your own pocket for 16 days of exhibition? What is art? Why do it? What does art do? What makes it successful, significant? Maybe Christo and Jean Claude know but aren't saying (maybe they don't know), maybe their Central Park installation of The Gates is their way of asking us to contemplate these questions. Have they offered the answers? Do we get it?

Experiencing The Gates in person is very different and in many ways more powerful than seeing it in photographs. The installation's energy, its relationship to nature, the city or the wind and the people coursing through it can't be held captive by photography. Being "in," surrounded by, and now part of the installation, you are aware of an energy that the tranquil setting of Fredric Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux masterpiece does not usually have.

The Park in February is stark and simple, white with snow, gray with trees and transparent in contrast to other seasons. And, suddenly there arrives an outlandishly colored alien stripe, looking more like a serpent of portals than "Gates." Yet with each gate you pass through you're more likely to enter the park...with your mind.

**cont.**

We have said that credibility disappeared when modern architecture chose to have the same public as academic or business architecture, that is, when it assumed an elite position on the clients' side instead of on the side of the users. Elites - historical experience has taught us - even when they claim to be neutral, end up falling into the field of attraction of the forces which benevolently conceded neutrality because they know anyway that in the very act of concealing it they exploit it. Conditioning, in fact, arrives punctually at the very moment in which it is to be expected: when 'neutrally' dealing with the problems of 'how,' the problems of 'why' are forgotten.

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**10.05:9**



For some the setting is simply to be delighted over. Others seem oblivious to the event yet all seem to be mysteriously moved by an unexplained and joyful awareness. Thousands and thousands of people coursing through the saffron veins on paths as choked for space as any sidewalk at rush hour; and they're all there to experience the spectacle. Some looked at the ground and talked to the people they came with while others snapped shot after shot. You could see the breeze pick up, coming in The Gates in the distance; the flow of people through the saffron arteries would actually stop to see the wind, and catch it if they can...cameras up! Still others ponder how The Park, and their experience, is different with The Gates. What was it like and will it be like without them?

There are many amazing levels to the project all of which are capable of commanding your attention. The millions of dollars, the logistics of 20 years of planning, the 23 miles installation, 7,500 Gates, thousands of nuts and bolts, thousands of yards of Saffron fabric, tons of steel and much more; all of which contribute to the spectacle. But that's just the surface of it really, "spectacle" holds in its essence a sort of "look at me!" energy. Once that's exhausted The Gates begin to work on a much more subtle and outward level. They're mysterious and strikingly out of place the way an intervention usually is, and in all this they beg you to look at the strange relationships between "it" and the things that are always there. Things that you've never really thought about: your surroundings and your relationship to the world around you. And this is true even for those who call it "a folly" or "interesting but ridiculous"...so what's so ridiculous about it? And what is that makes you think that? What is your relationship to modern culture; how do you define art; what are your values or biases? The Gates organize and re-organize things if you let them.

The Gates function in both a finite and infinite manner. They are both spectacle and phenomena. Naked and asleep without their leaves, the trees dance in the presence of The Gates. The snow streaked with the blue shadows of trunks and limbs reveals the rolling waves of earth. Manhattan isn't flat. And, once it was all woods and streams. The buildings stand on the perimeter as if watching the performance, not invited, not cool enough. Woods and fields and ponds exist in

**cont.**

**The faith in 'how' and the ignorance of 'why'**

...At the same time, we have a right to ask 'why' housing should be as cheap as possible and not, for example, rather expensive; 'why,' instead of making every effort to reduce it to minimum levels of surface, of space, of thickness, of materials etc., we should not try to make it spacious, protected, isolated, comfortable, well equipped, rich in opportunities for privacy, communication, exchange, personal creativity, etc...No one, in fact, can be satisfied by an answer which appeals to the scarcity of available resources, when we all know

**10.05:10**

*cont.*

## preservation burlington's annual spring forums

*Preservation Burlington's annual spring forums are commencing Tuesday, March 22nd, with the generous support of the Preservation Trust of Vermont and supported in part by the Vermont Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Preservation Burlington is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and improving the traditional neighborhoods, architectural and cultural history, and economic vitality of Burlington. The series began on Tuesday, March 22th, and runs through April 26th. The lectures will take place on Tuesday nights. Please visit [www.aiavt.org](http://www.aiavt.org) for locations and times.*

*Admission is free.*

*For more information:  
Call Nancy Williams at 238-2918  
or email at [Director@preservationburlington.org](mailto:Director@preservationburlington.org).*

## aiaVT welcomes

ronald beales, *assoc. prof. affiliate of shelburne*

the greatest city in the world - nature and the manmade environment. Man in the natural environment.

For architects this is no revelation, but for the thousands of people experiencing The Gates it's an interesting message, that art isn't exactly what you thought it was. It doesn't have to be a thing on a wall or in a courtyard or a prescribed performance. The Gates achieve what good architecture does, but then Christo and Jean Claude take them away, completely. All aspects of the physical installation have been recycled. There are no artifacts if you will. All we are left with is our own wonderings about the experience....almost like trying to remember a dream....and then there is The Park and all the amazing things in, around, and about it, that were always there thanks to another pair of artists: Olmstead and Vaux.





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how much is spent of wars, on the construction of missiles and anti-missile systems, on moon projects, on research for the defoliation of forests inhabited by partisans and for the paralyzation of the demonstrators emerging from the ghettos, on hidden persuasion, on the invention of artificial needs, etc. The priority scale established by the power structures has no sense except that of its own self-preservation, and therefore no one can (should) go on believing, according to the dogmas established at Frankfurt, that it is a good idea to establish the dimensions of space in order to cook omelettes faster.

**10.05:12**