

TILTED ARC

Art and Space

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New York, NY

Art and Space :: Steven Holl

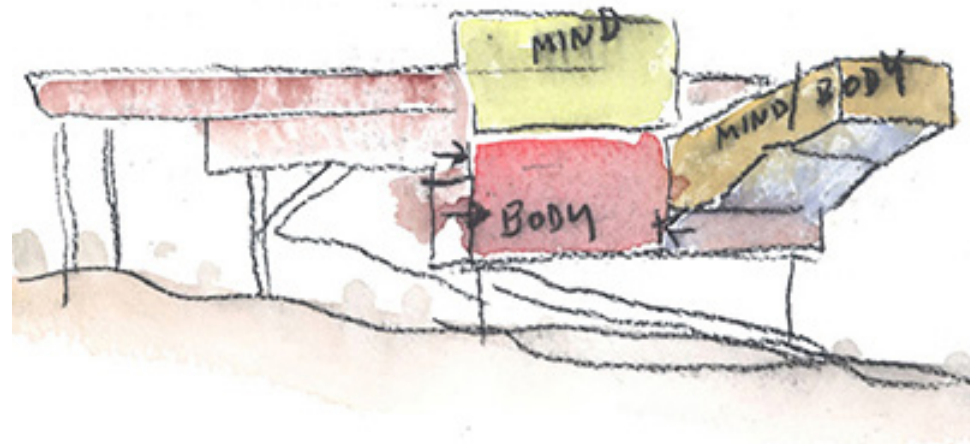
This is the first installment in a *Tilted Arc* ongoing feature, *Art and Space*—interviews with leading architects who design space specifically for the viewing of art.

This conversation is with Steven Holl, head of Steven Holl Architects based in New York City and Beijing. Mr. Holl, a faculty member at Columbia University since 1981, has designed over XX museum projects worldwide. He has won numerous awards including the 2012 AIA Gold Medal, the French Grande Medaille d'Or in 2001 and the Alvar Aalto Medal in 1998, among others. Time Magazine named him America's Best Architect in 2001.

— LAUREN HENKIN
CO-EDITOR, TILTED ARC

LH In 1988, in your book, *Anchoring*, you stated, “The site of a building is more than a mere ingredient of its conception. It is its physical and metaphysical foundation. Building transcends physical and functional requirements by fusing with a place, by gathering the meaning of a situation. Architecture does not so much intrude on the landscape as it serves to explain it. Architecture and site should have an experiential connection, a metaphysical link, a poetic link.” Do you still feel this way? Can you give examples of projects where you (or another architect) achieve that metaphysical, poetic link between architecture and site?

SH Yes, I believe that architecture needs to be anchored in its program and site. Its meaning must be deeply rooted in the conditions of its inception, and therefore it’s unfazed by fashion. If architecture’s original concept can get deeper, rather than broader, it builds a meaning on the site. It fortifies a locus of thoughts and philosophical hopes, or even humor and stories, which are oblivious to whatever style it is.



Sketch, Campbell Sports Center at Columbia University, New York, City.
© Steven Holl. Courtesy Steven Holl Architects.

Wherever we work we always try to anchor the architecture to the specific site and program. In our Campbell Sports Center at Columbia University for instance, which is located on the corner of West 218th Street and Broadway, the northernmost edge of Manhattan, the crossing of Broadway with Tenth Avenue and the elevated tracks of the 1 subway line were key in the design. With an exposed concrete and steel structure, and a sanded aluminum façade, the building connects back to Baker Field's unique history. In 1693, The Kings Bridge, which spanned the Spuyten Duyvil Creek was the main access route into Manhattan. The current infrastructure of Broadway Bridge carries the elevated subway, and Broadway, with a lift capacity of hundreds of tons. Its detail and structure are reflected in the Campbell Sports Center. The new building becomes a piece of the urban infrastructure, rather than an isolated building, and shapes the urban corner on Broadway and 218th street.



Campbell Sports Center at
Columbia University,
New York, City.
© Steven Holl.
Courtesy Steven Holl Architects.

LH In your firm's profile, you talk about obtaining "a deeper beginning in the experience of time, space, light and materials." I'm curious about the notion of time. Are you referring to how one experiences a building in a single encounter or over many years? How do you incorporate the idea of time in your work and do you hope one's experience of the buildings will evolve over time? Or, are you thinking about the time it takes to engage the building in ways similar to sculptors like Richard Serra talk about time being an important part of the engagement of their work?

SH In my book, *Color/Light/Time* (Lars Mueller publishers, 2012), I describe seven types of time in architecture. We can imagine space as a clocking, timekeeping paradigm. Something tangible emerges from its continuous unfolding of spaces, materials and details. Within its spatial frame, a wealth of incidental and phenomenal experiences are time-

contingent. Our experience of foreground, middle ground, and distant view merges with the quality of material and light in a measure of time. The time experience of the physical spaces of architecture include the time of day and the time of season with all its subtle variations. The glowing light of sunrise, an aerial blast of light at noon, or an orange wash at sunset; all are diurnal celebrations via architecture. A full moon's glistening light in glass reflected on snow animates night. We can feel the sidereal time of the night's sky inscribed in a courtyard. The intensity of a work lies in overlapping relations, just as the experiential time in a space is integral to seasonal and diurnal time.

"We can imagine space as a clocking, timekeeping paradigm. Something tangible emerges from its continuous unfolding of spaces, materials and details."

Our Knut Hamsun Center, sited two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle in Hamarøy, Norway, serves as an extreme measure of the time change in seasonal light. Stark contrasts to the severity of time's transformations are framed in the architecture. On this site, the sun never sets from June 5 through July 20, with the summer solstice rising to a maximum angle of 47 degrees. Beginning on December 20, the sun never rises again until January 12—leaving the days dark except for an orange glowing horizon. Studying these angles during the design development process, we envisioned the concept of “building as a body with invisible forces” as being activated by these extreme changes in seasonal light. With drawings, models, and calculations, the towering, shifting space of the interior was organized around light and time. Window openings were cut according to the movement of the sun through the building section. The entire interior volume catches particular moments of light as an index of time.

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Knut Hamsun Center,
Hamarøy, Norway.
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LH You have worked on numerous museums in your career. What do you find to be the challenges and benefits of working on spaces specifically created for the viewing and housing of art?

SH While I was working on the Kiasma Museum in Helsinki, my friend the sculptor Richard Nonas told me “Steven, my sculpture exists where the floor meets the wall, and I must have the right angle!” Today, we see two types of art museums: the white box – there the building can suck the life out of the art; or the expressionistic form where the complications of the geometry overshadow the art. We are interested in a third way where the spatial energy of the architecture is inspiring, while the primacy of art is engaging.

LH In 2007, you completed a large addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City. The Bloch Building beautifully complements/contrasts the original 1933 classical building. You created a list of elements describing the original building and one “in Complementary Contrast” for the new one. Can you expand on your approach to this project? Why the need to create complementary contrast to what was there already?

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Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art,
Kansas City, Missouri.
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Courtesy Steven Holl Architects.

SH Architecture is an Art, and can be seen as part of the works in a museum's collection. In the original design competition for the Nelson-Atkins Museum, there was a strong mind-set for building the new addition against the existing building to the north. When I first visited the site, the feeling of the landscape and the integrity of the original 1933 building impressed me. I felt the new addition could fuse with the landscape, offer new views out into the south gardens, and connect to the existing building without blocking off the north façade. In other words, the integrity of the original building would be preserved and restored while the new addition would merge with the landscape. The idea of this complementary contrast drove our design. The addition is not an object: we envisioned a new paradigm fusing landscape and architecture. In contrast to the stone building, the new lightweight architecture of glass lenses is scattered about the landscape, framing sculpture gardens. We believed this was the correct strategy here; the original stone building stands free with integrity in the overall composition and the new lenses stand more minimally, forming garden courts and outdoor sculpture.

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LH When the building opened, the New York Times wrote, "The rest of us can draw comfort from the fact that public works of our own day and age can equal or surpass the grand achievements of past generations." When working on projects where there is a historic, strong architectural structure in place, do you feel it's important to make a statement about what is possible in contemporary architecture? How much of the intent for the design is focused on a response to what is already there?

SH Yes, we occupy a unique and exciting time in human history. There are many negative but also many positive aspects of our time. The amazing technology and energy efficiency of new types of glass for example, offer the potential of a glowing presence at night, complementing the 1933 stone structure. For today's architects to simulate the past offers a hopeless example to our children. We are of our time - we can organize and create art of our time. Architecture is an art.

LH When walking through the new gallery spaces, one has a strong connection to the outside landscape, especially as you move down through the spaces, or "lenses." Can you talk about the idea behind the five spaces you call "lenses?"

SH The idea of fusing the building with the landscape of the sculpture garden took the form of "lenses" in the gardens. They define and separate the sculpture gardens above, while bringing spatial excitement of natural light developed in perspectives below. It is as if the building defines a new field of senses to be experienced on different levels.

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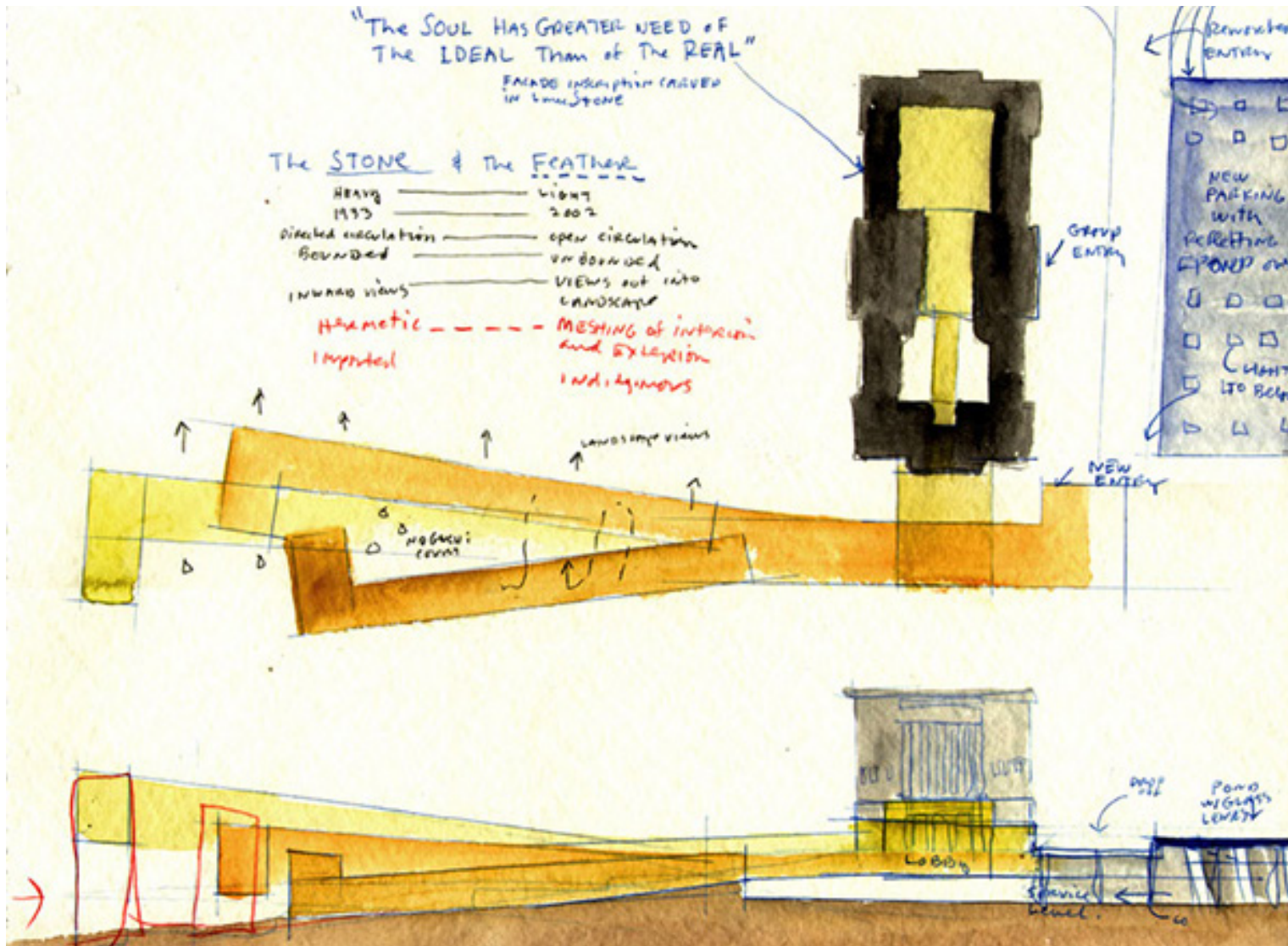


Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art,
Kansas City, Missouri.
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Courtesy Steven Holl Architects.

The lenses' multiple layers of translucent glass gather, diffuse and refract light, at times materializing light like blocks of ice. During the day the lenses inject varying qualities of light into the galleries, while at night the sculpture garden glows with their internal light. The "meandering path" threaded between the lenses in the Sculpture Park has its sinuous complement in the open flow through the continuous level of galleries below.

At the heart of the addition's lenses is a structural concept: "Breathing T's" transport light down into the galleries along their curved undersides. For me light is for space, the experience of architecture, the overlapping perspectives: it is the equivalent of what sound is for music. If you have a piece of music: you have the score, you have the rhythm, you have some kind of polyphony, you have some kind of a structure, then there is sound that executes and brings it all to life. Otherwise it is just an abstraction. The same applies to architecture: In the case of the Nelson-Atkins you have the spatial conception, the conceptual strategy, the integration of lenses in the landscape, the fusion of architecture and landscape and urbanism, but none of that is anything really alive until you infuse it with the light.

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Sketch, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art,
 Kansas City, Missouri.
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LH Art critic Jerry Saltz recently wrote about the reopened Queen's Museum: "The single most important thing is how the interior space of a museum works or doesn't work for art. Can you tell me why architects love huge, open, useless vanilla spaces? Instead of this soaring, double-height atrium, the entire second story could have been used for art or cultural artifacts or whatever ... this museum might want to install." Do you believe that institutions should dedicate as much possible space to exhibitions, even if it means potentially losing large open public areas?

SH Historic great museums – such as the Altes Museum in Berlin – are examples of the great cultural contribution of the art of architecture. Of course exhibition space is important, however, the whole museum experience is important and it begins when you open your car door in the parking lot.

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LH How important is flexibility when designing a space for art? You are asked to accommodate both small works and very large ones. You are asked to think ahead, about what the needs will be environmentally for the building as well as for the capacity of the spaces. How far ahead are you thinking about the functionality of the building and does it vary by client/site?

SH Fine architecture is built of excellent proportions, great light and air and smooth circulation. A well-proportioned factory space with good light serves art well in Dia Beacon for example. One thing we can be sure of in the future is change. Looking very far ahead, it's clear there will be change.

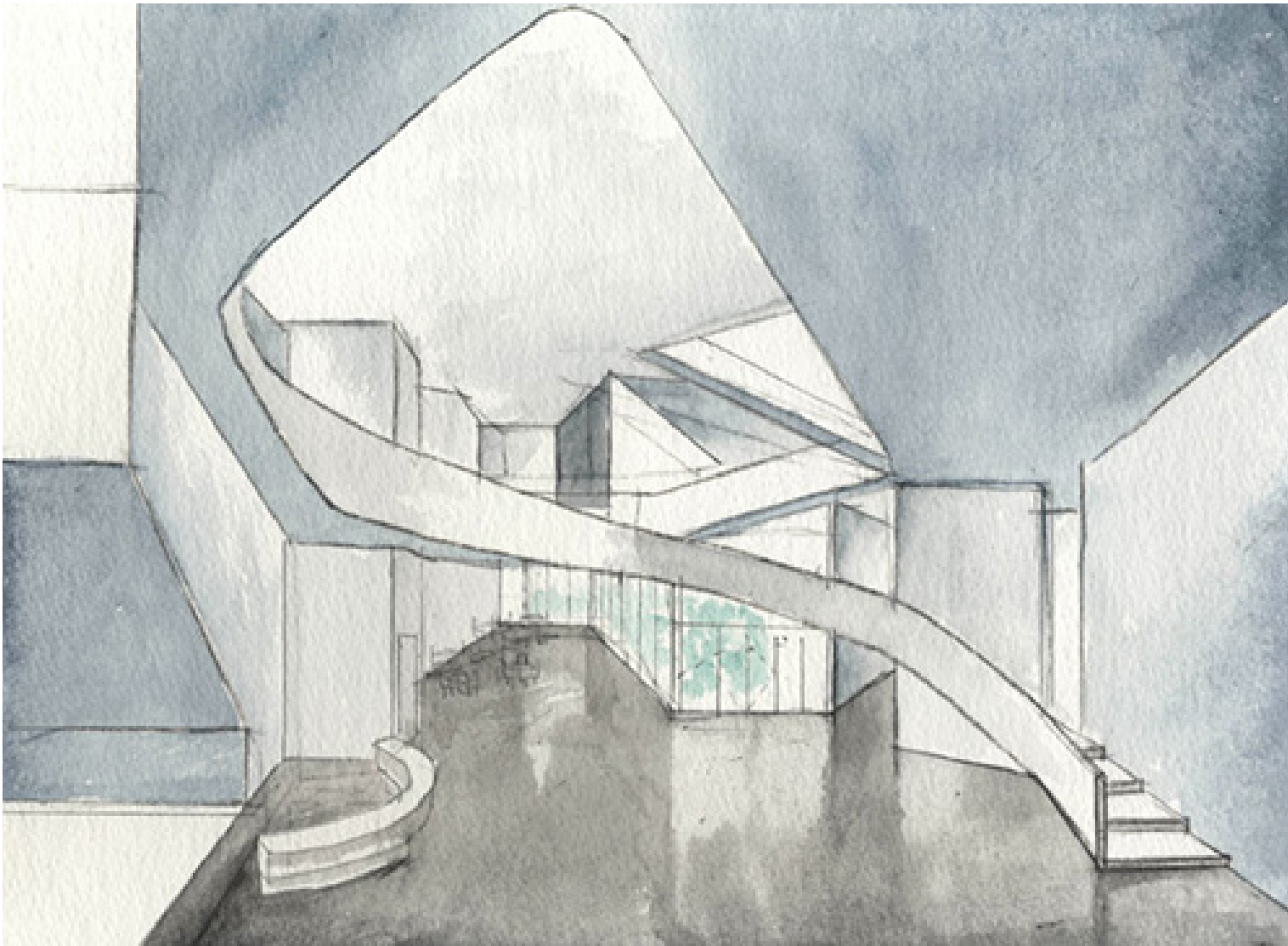
LH I'm certain that one of the biggest considerations in a space for art is light—how much to allow into the spaces (considering the preservation of the work), how it interacts with the works of art, and how it can be used as an architectural element. As an architect who uses light as a main ingredient, how do you adapt your use of light to protect the works and to not distract from the experience of viewing the art?

SH Our buildings have 25 foot candles of natural light, 5'-6" off the floor. You can operate our gallery spaces without turning lights on in normal day light. However, all our museums contain black out shades, 20% light shades and more that are electronically activated. The choice is up to each curator.

LH In 2001, *Time Magazine* named you America's Best Architect and described your buildings as ones that "satisfy the spirit as well as the eye." How can and should architecture satisfy the spirit?

SH Architecture is a phenomenological discipline in the sense that the only understanding of architecture is when you move with your body through the space—when you experience the overlapping perspectives. If you turn your head or turn your body you see a different space unfolding, you sense a different texture, you feel a different materiality. That is really the way to experience architecture: you can't see it in a book properly; you cannot experience the acoustic realm, the realm of materiality, that spatial energy, the changing light. If we allow magazine photos or screen images to replace experience, our ability to perceive architecture will diminish so greatly that it will become impossible to comprehend it.

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Sketch, Institute For Contemporary Art,
Virginia Commonwealth University,
Richmond, Virginia
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Courtesy Steven Holl Architects.

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Sketch, Nanjing Sifang Art Museum
Nanjing, Jiangsu, China
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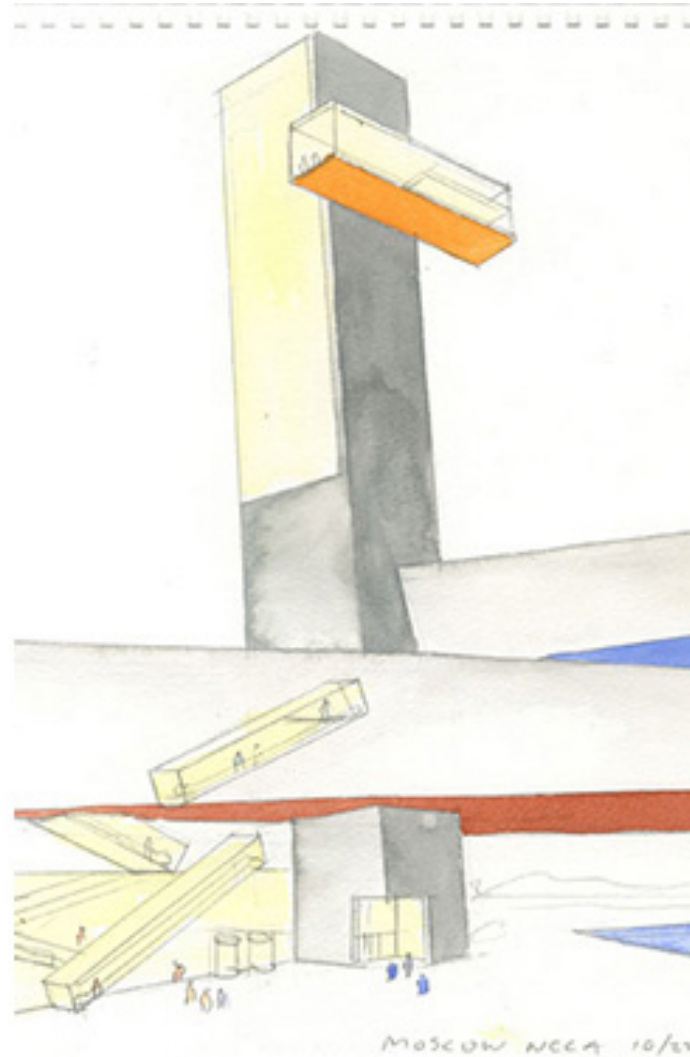
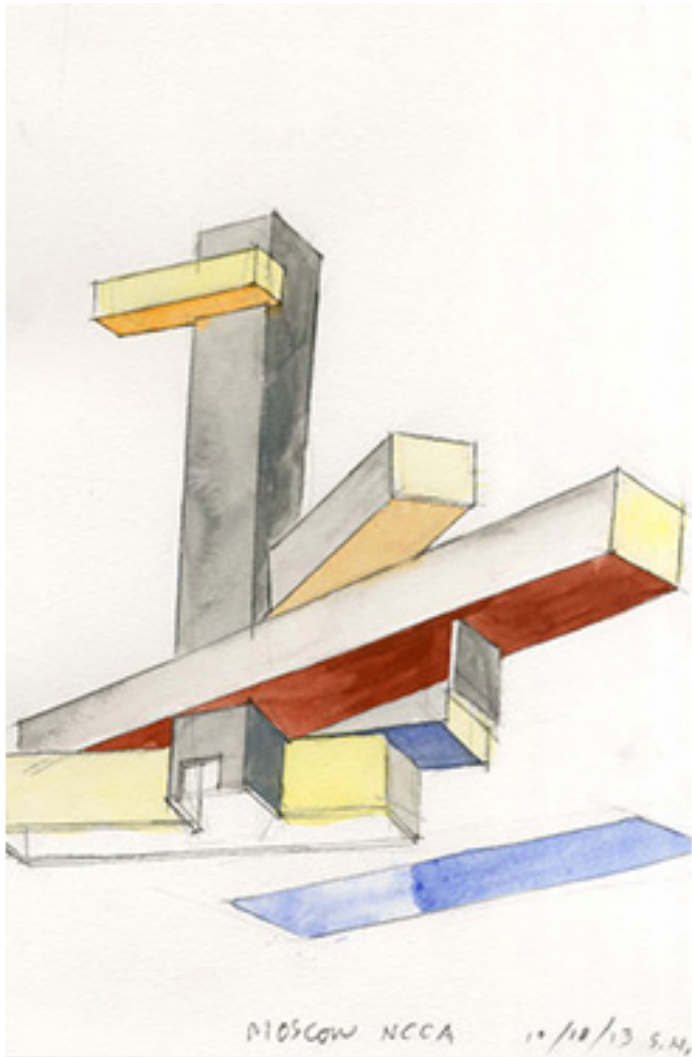
Nanjing Sifang Art Museum
Nanjing, Jiangsu, China
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Our faculty of judgment is incomplete without this experience of crossing through spaces. The turn and twist of the body engaging a long and then a short perspective, an up-and-down movement, an open-and-closed or dark-and-light rhythm of geometries – these are the core of the spatial score of architecture.

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