

Indelible Deference

Steven Holl's Addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

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The stone is heavy, the feather is light. The stone was 1933, the feather is 2007.

The stone has directed circulation, the feather open circulation.

The stone is bounded, the feather unbounded.¹

Stone and Feather

Steven Holl's addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, unveiled to the public on June 9, 2007,² was immediately celebrated as one of the most engaging, captivating, and poetic projects in recent years, receiving no less than six prestigious awards in the year since it opened, including the AIA Institute Honor Award. The Bloch Building complements the museum's flagship Beaux Arts style structure, designed by local architecture firm Wight and Wight in 1933,³ in almost every respect, bringing a new and completely authentic experience to the stately museum and grounds.

Sinking, Shrinking

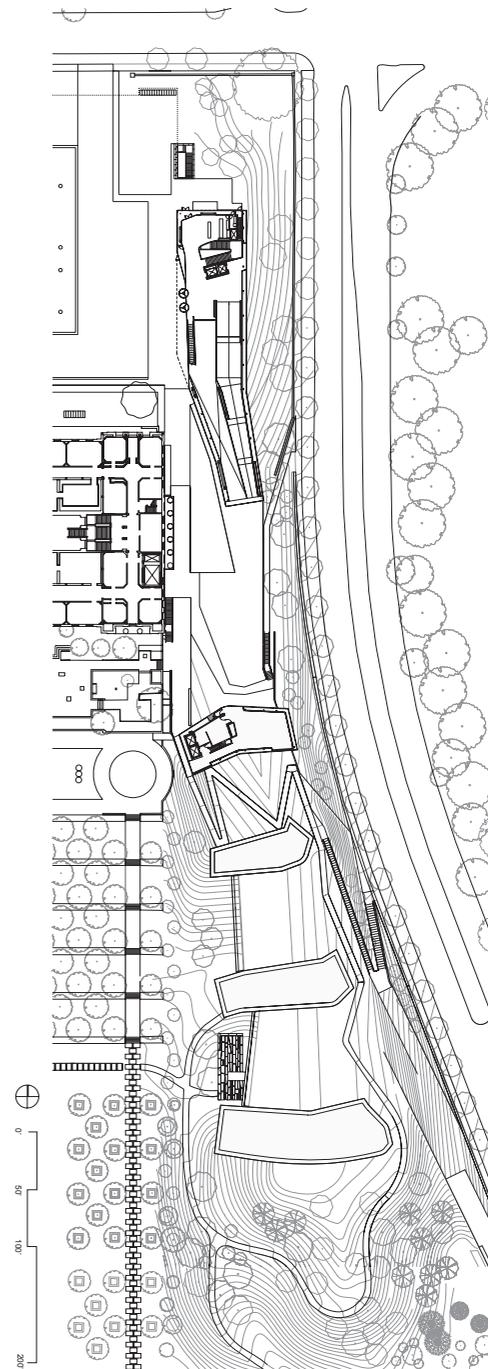
The idea of complimentary contrast drove our design for an addition to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, a classical stone temple and surrounding landscape. The addition is not an object: we envisioned a new paradigm fusing landscape and architecture. In contrast to the stone building, the new lightweight architecture of glass lenses is scattered about the landscape framing sculpture gardens.⁴

Though oppositional, Holl's design is deferential, almost humble, in its relationship to the main building and grounds. The most evident manifesta-

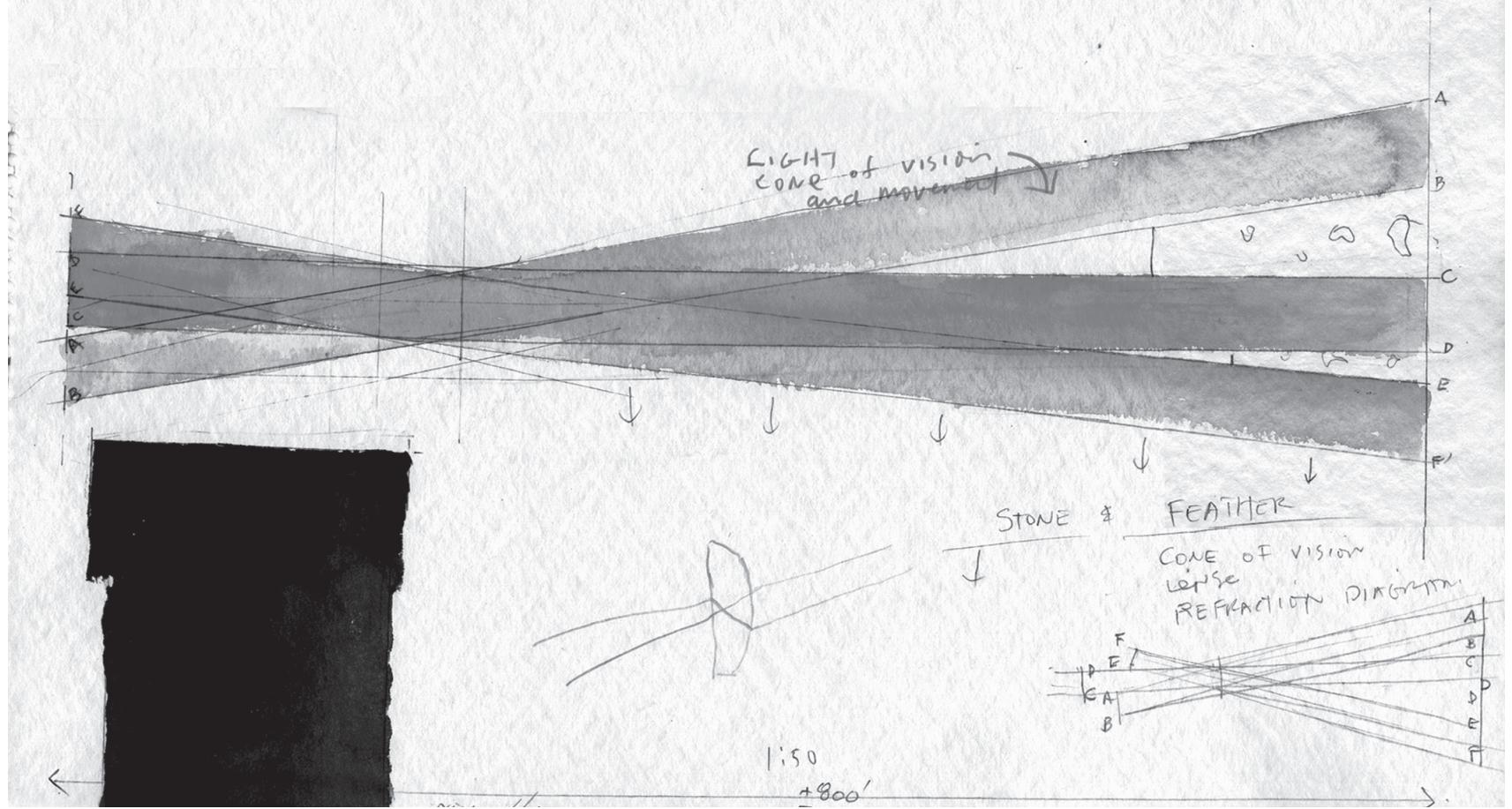
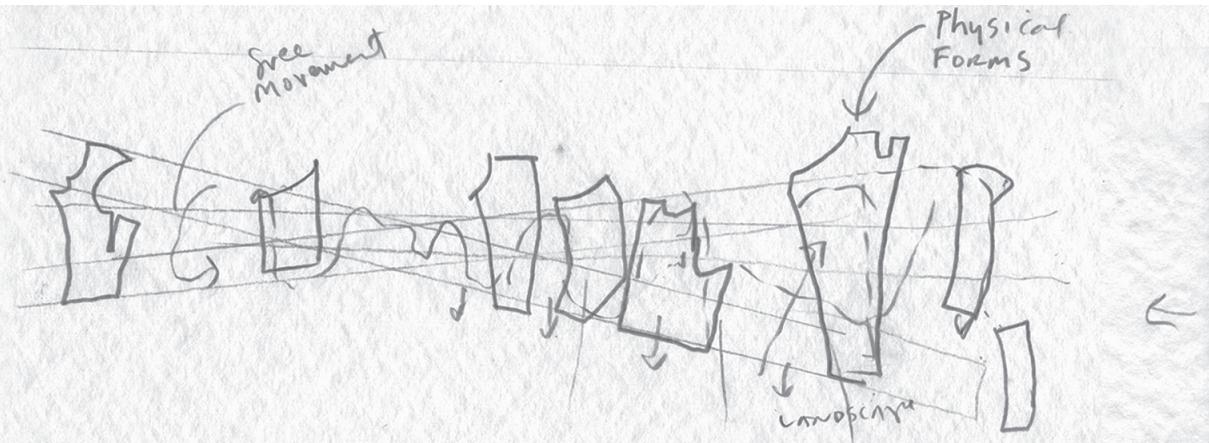
tion of this attitude is its interaction with the extant landscape. The site drops steadily in elevation from north to south. The original building stands tall on the high north end, using the long, steady south drop to exaggerate the monumentality of the structure. The new addition buries itself into the ground, drawing the lawn up and over the building, through which five crystalline forms, termed "lenses" by Holl, emerge. Moreover, the Bloch follows the slope of the land, maintaining a close connection to the ground itself, lending an earthy informality to both the interior spaces and the new building as a whole.

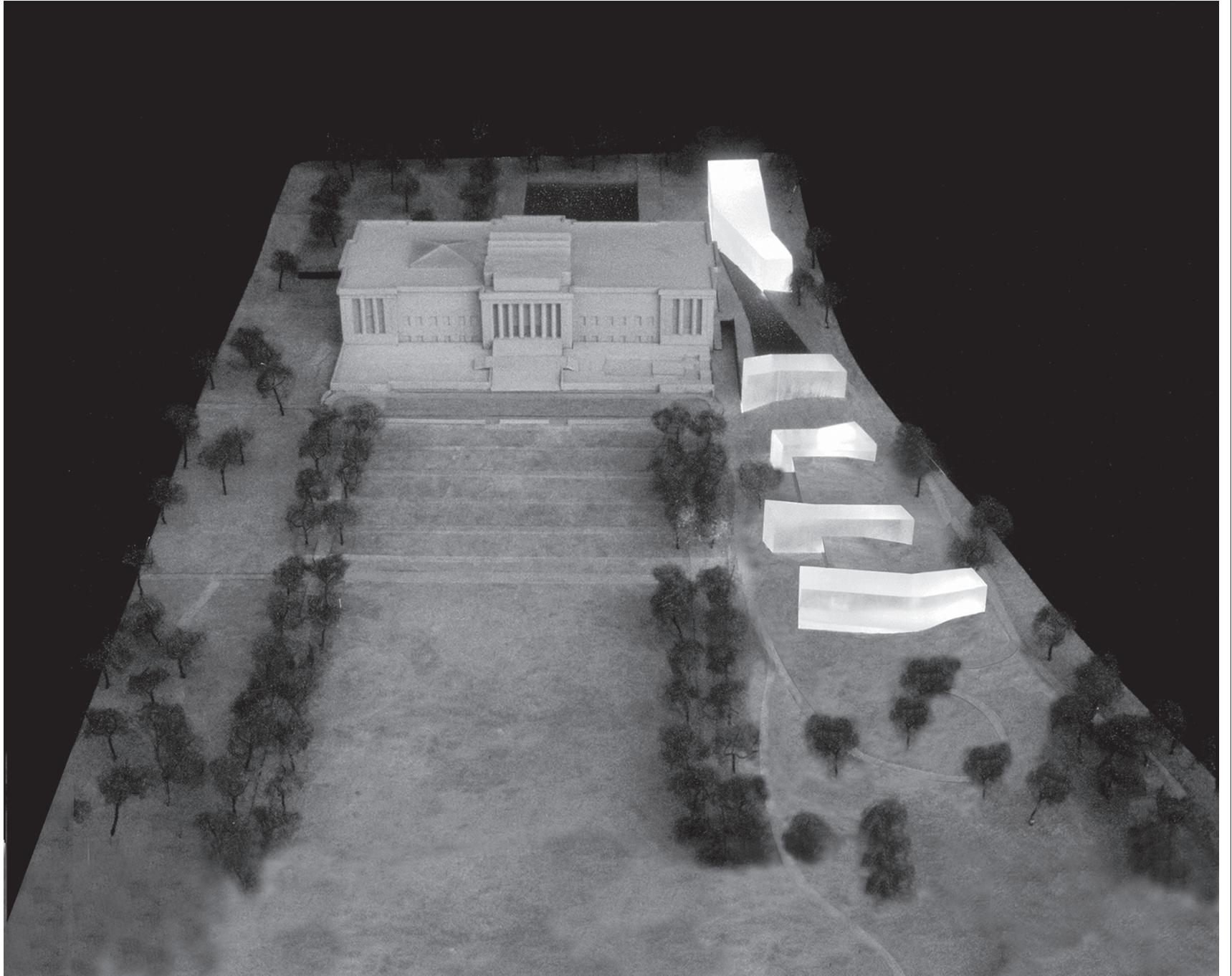
Another manifestation of this deferential quality is the curious relationship between the new and old wings of the museum. Often, one of the most charged gestures in the dichotomy of existing building and addition is the issue of connection, of reconciling two quite different logics. The Bloch seems to eschew this issue. Holl's building shrinks away from the original, connecting to the main galleries only through an underground tunnel. The existing museum entrance, on its north façade, is reinforced by the first lens of the Bloch wing to the east. Holl kept the profile of this component lower than its predecessor, further accentuating the interaction by tapering the form as it passes behind the original building.

The visitor's experience will be newly charged with views and partial views of landscape: sequences of shifting perspectives open to spaces where











landscape merges with architecture. The movement of the body as it crosses through overlapping perspectives, through the landscape and the free movement threaded between the light gathering lenses of the new addition are the elemental connections between ourselves and architecture.⁵

The shrinking away of the new from the old provided an opportunity for Holl to reflect on the existing campus, and his design took full advantage of this. Interspersed between inwardly focused galleries are framed views of the Wight and Wight building, the sculpture garden, and the museum's grand lawn. These views are very specific, and often slightly skewed, offering novel perspectives on the existing context, and invigorating the visitor's consideration of the outwardly staid massing and formal gardens. More importantly, these views provide a phenomenological, experiential connection to the old, far surpassing, one surmises, the meaningfulness a literal connection might have possessed. Holl's substitution of phenomenological effects for more normative strategies, a hallmark evident in many if not all his projects, is a major conceptual underpinning of the Bloch addition.

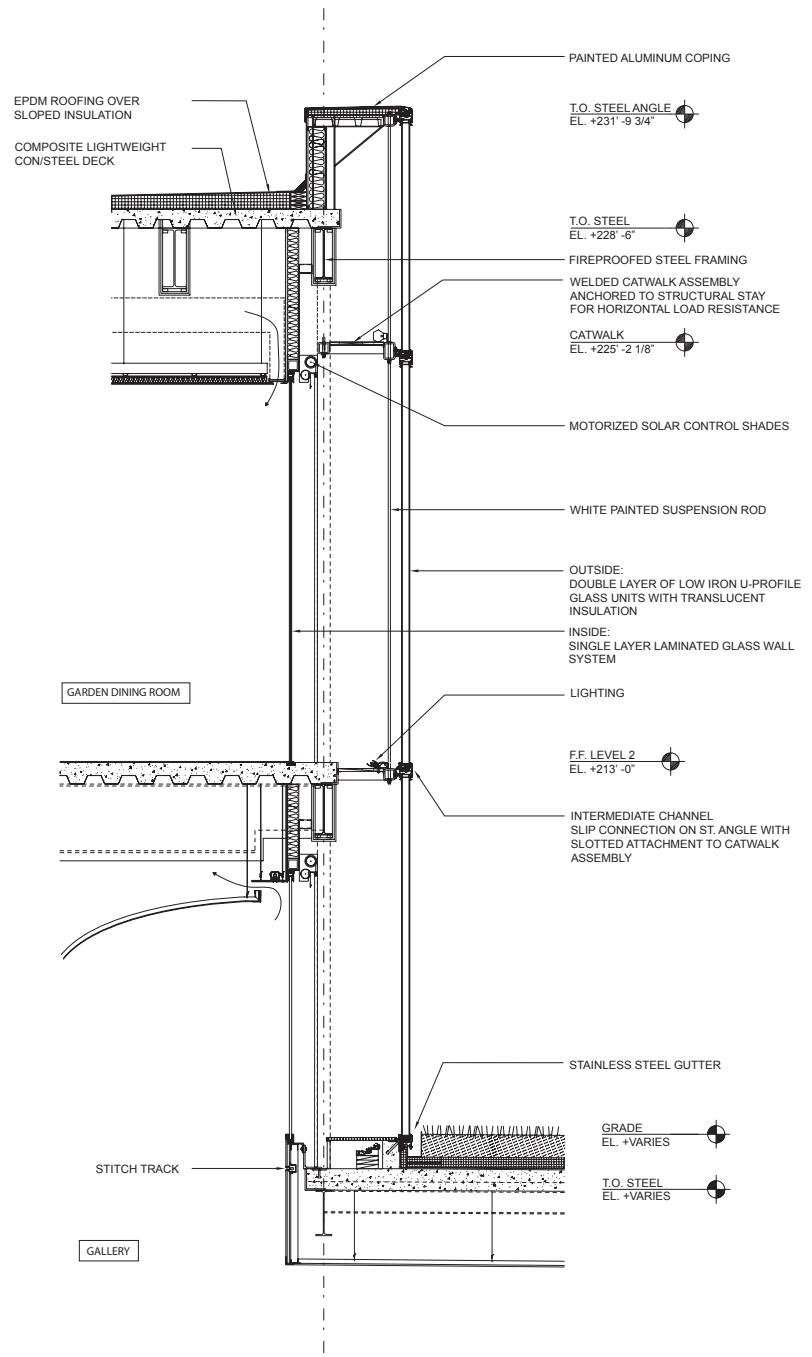
The Haptic Realm

Phenomenology is a discipline that puts essence into experience. Architecture is a phenomenological discipline in the sense that the only real knowledge, the real understanding of architecture is when you move with your body through the space. When you do that you experience the over-

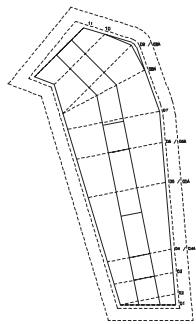
lapping perspectives. If you turn your head or twist your eye, or turn your body you see a different space unfolding, you sense a different texture, you feel a different materiality.⁶

The notion of being enveloped not by a building but by the essence of a building is evident from the moment one first encounters the Bloch. Everywhere the outward trappings of architecture are erased—the building is less material than it is materialized. The lenses, encased in frosted glass channels and only occasionally pierced with clear glazing, defy a clear understanding of interior space or programming. The lenses appear to be pure expressions of form, but this is an extremely superficial reading. The relationship of space to envelope is quite tenuous. There are few internal moments that can even be understood as aligning with the outer shell, and the underground spaces almost completely eliminate cues to any exterior form. The obfuscation of the external is a happy, expectant situation reminiscent of the time just before a theatrical production begins, when the lights are lowered and all eyes are focused on the curtain. Visitors have no choice but to abandon themselves to the spaces Holl has crafted. Holl's show here does not disappoint.

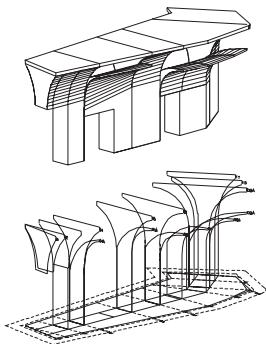
When the materiality of the details forming an architectural space become evident, the haptic realm is opened up. Sensory experience is intensified; psychological dimensions are engaged. The complete perception of architecture depends on the material and detail of the haptic realm,







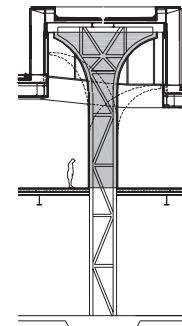
"T" PLAN DIAGRAM



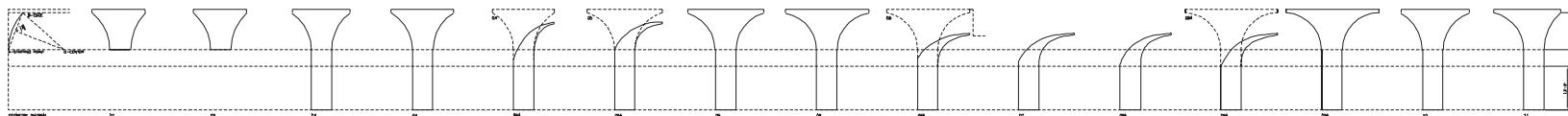
"T" AXON DIAGRAM



"T" PERSPECTIVE DIAGRAM



"T" CROSS SECTION DIAGRAM



"T" CROSS SECTION DIAGRAM

*as the taste of a meal depends on the flavors of its ingredients.*⁷

At first glance, the Bloch's material composition appears to lean towards the minimal, with frosted glass and turf being the major façade elements and plaster and dark stone the majority of interior surfaces. In fact, the immaterial nature of the project evident at larger scales seems to extend to the materials themselves. This certainly holds true at the normative perspective of a visitor, but in some instances is evident at even the closest level of scrutiny. The mirror smooth finish of the unpainted plaster surfaces are somehow less solid than vestigial, a suggestion rather than manifestation. The dark slate floors,

with only a slight sheen, are roughly textured, again somewhat reminiscent of stage floors and backstage surfaces meant to recede from rather than attract attention. Incident light scatters, eliminating glare but also recognizable reflections.

Potentiality

Glass becomes radiant in transformed states, while its functional role shifts. Bending glass induces dazzling variations to a simple plane with the curvature of reflected light. Cast glass with its mysterious opacity traps light in its mass and projects a diffused glow. Sandblasted glass likewise has a luminescence, which changes subtly depending on the

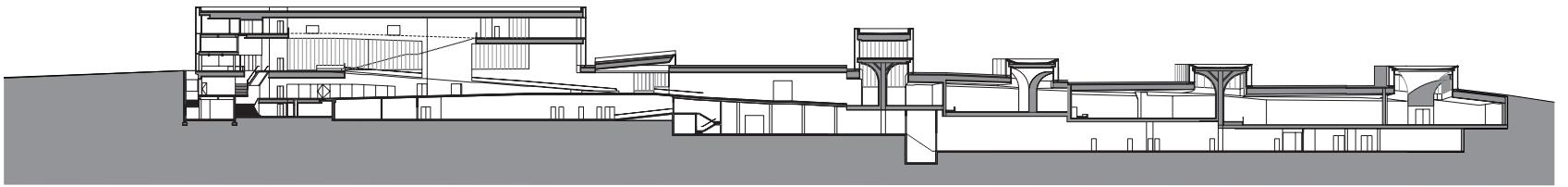
glass type, thickness, and blasting method.

*Channel glass had been used for parking garages in Europe... We first used this glass technique in 1994 in Helsinki. That was beautiful, this quality of white light.... It's like a shoji screen, it's like a durable version of what a shoji screen's light is like.*⁸

Reviews of the Bloch consistently acknowledge the sophistication of the channel glass curtain wall system Holl developed in conjunction with the German manufacturer Okalux. Holl himself has visited and revisited the subject in his own writings and interviews about the project. Certainly there is

much to note. Many of the innovations in the Bloch façade system reinforce the phenomenological translucency, almost intangibility, of the addition. The elimination of mullions due to the structural nature of the bent glass, the translucent insulation, and the inclusion of various systems within the cavity of the double-skinned façade are subtractive strategies designed to remove mechanics and emphasize effect for the visitor—that effect being the modulated infusion of light—soft, diffused, yet somehow tangible. In the most brightly lit spaces, notably the lobby, the channel glass walls seem more a fine screen or cage than solid enclosure, delicately holding light and space. This strategy of dematerializa-







tion extends to building services, as Holl relates below.

“Breathing T’s” transport light down into the galleries along their curved undersides while carrying the glass in suspension and providing a location for HVAC ducts. The double-glass cavities of the lenses gather sun-heated air in winter or exhaust it in summer. Optimum light levels for all types of art or media installations and seasonal flexibility requirements are ensured through the use of computer-controlled screens and of special translucent insulating material embedded in the glass cavities.⁹

The long-standing dialogue between curators and museum designers as to the relationship between building and art seems to have been forestalled by Holl’s strategies in this project. In the Bloch, form, outward expressions, and materiality recede into the background, perhaps for obvious as well as critical reasons. A crucial question arises: what is left to carry the architect’s vision? What elements does Holl use to construct his composition? Holl’s palette has long extended beyond physical materials to include ephemeral effects—notoriously, light. One might argue that in the Bloch, Holl manipulates space itself as if it were material. It is space that is sculpted to induce circulation, to mediate between subject and viewer, to create a place that that underscores harmony between pure and applied art. As Holl puts it, the Bloch Building of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art uses light and space to

capture another insubstantial quality: the ephemeralness of time.

(A)s we experience the open-ended geometry of the new architecture of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, we experience its spatial energy personally; from the viewpoint of our eyes positioned in our moving bodies as they glide through the new spaces. It isn’t just the idea of this architecture being “of its time,” which is at stake here. It is a proposal aimed at the experience of moving through these spaces as an individual act. We personally open ourselves to art as a phenomenon of central importance. Opening up to potential knowledge, opening up to reflect on and to become inspired by something greater than just “of our time,” the hope is that we experience “we are our time.”¹⁰

Notes

¹Steven Holl, *Parallax* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000).

²<http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/HistNewNA.cfm>.

³<http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/HistNewNA.cfm>.

⁴Steven Holl, *op. cit.*

⁵Steven Holl, *op. cit.*

⁶Michael Caldwell and Steven Holl, “Grand Transparent,” *Domus* 904 (2007), 86–99.

⁷*Ibid.*, 86–99.

⁸Inhabitat on Daylight.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Jeffrey Kipnis, Steven Holl, and Chris McVoy, *Stone and Feather: Steven Holl Architects/Nelson-Atkins Museum Expansion*, (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2007).