STEVEN HOLL

Breaking the rules

Steven Holl was named “America’s Best Architect” in 2001 by Time magazine. His architectural achievements range from museums to chapels, to embassies, to academic and residential projects in the United States, as well as in the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Austria and China. The Kiasma, Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, Finland, is considered his masterpiece, as is the expansion of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri. His numerous prestigious awards include France’s Grande Médaille d’Or, Finland’s Alvar Aalto Medal, and the National Design Award of Architecture from Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.

How do you define creativity?

I think that creativity is breaking out of the habitual ways of thinking, approaching anything you are doing in a creative way. Breaking out of habitual patterns that often times are not the best ways of doing things.

I feel that what we need in the world right now is a big dose of creativity on a whole national planning level. As an architect, I am not just talking about buildings. I am talking about how to preserve the natural landscapes and how to live our lives. This model of suburban big box stores, subdivisions, sprawl, and dependence on petroleum to get us from point A to point B – this is uncreative. These are habitual ways of thinking and it is time that we realized that we need to change this.

We need a new program to unlearn all these habitual ways and have new and creative ways to think about how we’re going to occupy the earth. Creativity is not just for artistic entertainment. Creativity is central to our survival. Imagination is central to our survival. Without these, we are dead.

From early tinkering to professionalism

I grew up together with my brother James, who is a sculptor and an artist, in Bremerton, Washington. It’s a no man’s land, a military town. There were only about 30,000 people living in Bremerton at the time. It was a typical American
Steven Holl at his desk surrounded by his sketchbooks from many years. Photo: Richard Gerstman