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“The Reach” by Steven Holl: a small but assertive cultural center

Our visit to the Steven Holl’s enlargement of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington

Washington DC (United States). Three pavilions of varying sizes and dimensions emerge from the sloping site tightly framed by the pharaonic platform of the **Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts**, the broad and soft-shouldered Potomac river, and the coils of the interstate highway converging onto the bridge to Virginia.

In thorough contrast to the monumental weight, the huge size, and the orthogonality of the Kennedy Center, **“The Reach” offers its sinuous, slight forms** emerging from the landscaped ground rather than lifted above a towering terrace.

The **three pavilions** are the work of **Steven Holl**, part of a segment of his work well practiced in performance spaces with fluid programs. “The Reach” offers landscaped gardens and water pools, classrooms and studios, meeting rooms, a lecture hall, and event spaces.

In form, materials, and fluidity of function, this addition to the Kennedy Center could not be further in appearance and expectations from the original building, a 'living memorial" to the assassinated president. **There are some connections nonetheless**.

The most rigorously function-specific space, the **Justice lecture hall** – with its innovative crinkled concrete texture – recalls Kennedy's core principle; the **Peace Corps Gallery** is named after the signature agency founded as the cornerstone of Kennedy's foreign policy, and meant to involve the youth of the USA in understanding "people of other nations and cultures" (and intended to replace the customary governmental charities with practical education).

Further space names and their shape uphold the dedication to the president and his family. For example, the **patrol torpedo boat** that Kennedy commanded in WWII is commemorated in the form of the reflecting pool, the presidential grove is comprised of **35 gingko trees**, reminding us that he was the country's 35th president; the welcome lobby offers the Hyannis Port café; there are **studios numbered J, F, K**; the **Hammersmith lounge** honors Jackie Kennedy's childhood home; the **Macaroni** and **Sardar** classrooms are named after Caroline Kennedy's pony and the First Lady's Arabian pure-breed.

The entire compound is playful, countering the ponderous solemnity of the older center. When I visited, in one of the studios parents and children were enjoying a fight with shiny silver pillows that floated dreamily about, bringing in a Warholian flavor. Great staircases, broad transparent walls, curving ceilings and mostly monochrome white surfaces **enclose large and amorphous, but not oppressive, spaces** that are waiting to be occupied by the colorful activities of art making, performance, and engaged self-expression, countering emphatically the more conventionally spectatorial activities of the adjacent Kennedy Center.

According to the architect, his design strategy aims to create "*a language of forms, from conical sections to hyperbolic paraboloids, a visual acoustics echoing across*

the pavilions, cupping space between them, and dispersing sound on the inside."
In fact, while none of the surfaces or volumes adheres to Euclidian geometry, **they all work as screens for display of brilliantly lit images, dispersing the broad message of this small but assertive cultural center**.

About Author



Martha Pollak

Nata in Transylvania (1951), ha conseguito la laurea in architettura all'Università Cornell e il dottorato al Massachusetts Institute of Technology di Cambridge. Insegna Storia dell'architettura presso il Dipartimento di Storia dell'arte dell'Università dell'Illinois a Chicago. Ha pubblicato libri sui trattati di architettura italiani, su Torino nel Seicento e sull'urbanistica barocca. Già curatrice delle recensioni per il «Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians», è corrispondente del Giornale dell'Architettura dal 2003.
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