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5 ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY
Stan Allen, perhaps better than any of his architectural contemporaries, has negotiated the competing agendas of academia and practice. Straddling the millennium, Allen has revitalized pragmatism by combining the conceptual advances made in cultural theory with the technical expertise developed in digital technologies to address contemporary social, political, and cultural realities. If his major contributions to date have been in writing rather than building, it is also true that his generation of American architects have not had the opportunities of their European and Asian peers. In spite of this disadvantage, Allen has marked his development with significant creative work: the early field theory explorations with competition entries for the Souks of Beirut (1994) and KoMA (1996); an expansion of this interest into landscape with the Fresh Kills Landfill (with James Corner, 1999-2003) and park proposals for Suwon Korea and Taipei and Taichung, Taiwan (2007-2009), to a recent concentration on architectural concerns that combine the definition of the object with the fluid expanse of the field, most notably at the New Maribor Art Gallery (2010) and the Tainan Museum of Fine Arts (2015). The result is a coherent body of work, the establishment of “a conceptual and aesthetic identity from collected parts over time, an explicit value system and/or voice that is constructed and reconstructed again and again.” Allen’s work has gained momentum since he completed his deanship at Princeton, and it is not too much to align his intentions with his appraisal of SANAA, “a maximum of social, cultural and political effects with a minimum number of elements.” While the scale of this aspiration is far reaching, that of this essay is more modest: to examine a pair of buildings, the Hudson River Studio and the M&M House, as they relate to the unbuilt projects’ aspirations.

At first, this would seem unpromising. The buildings are small private commissions on rural sites, while the projects are for large public institutions on urban sites. It is also true that Allen favors program, process, and effect over formal similarity and yet the most obvious kinship between these disparately scaled works is that of form. Nevertheless, Alberti was not the last architect to consider the house as a microcosm of the city, and if formal repetition is to be avoided, so, too, is formal ineptitude. The house, after all, has been the means by which architects have often worked out the translation of drawing to building, a translation more comfortably worked out in private than in public and especially difficult for a generation that has foregone models provided by either an extended professional apprenticeship or an adherence to vernacular type. How, then, do these buildings advance a new understanding of object and field?

The Hudson Studio is quite literally sited on the edge of a field, obscured upon arrival by an existing house and adjacent shed. Although adamantly object-like, the studio thwarts easy categorizations: it presents not one but three elevations, its gable appears as a reverse roof profile and only belatedly as a folded elevation, and it withholds entry so that circulation mimics the form’s tendency to spin. Fenestration alternates between small stabilizing squares and vertical glazing that hugs edges and reinforces the tendency of the elevations to be seen in tandem rather than in isolation. Only along the broad southwestern face does the form resolve itself, but is a shed, not a gable, and its two square windows are of different sizes and throw scale into doubt.
Below: Hudson River Studio, Plan and elevation studies
Bottom: Hudson River Studio, Unfolded elevations
Opposite: M&M House and Studio, Axonometric
The plan is a regularized variation of Allen’s favored pentagon. The gable reappears, outlining a square and further regularized with 90 and 45-degree corners. The interior is mute, the entry level prosaic with framed views to forest and meadow. Yet, the entry pierces the gable’s flank, conspiring with the decentered plan geometry to reinforce circulations’ spin. The spin is carried vertically with the stair to the second level where the roof joins in, folding and sliding along the diagonal. More garret than loft, the space spirals and lifts, and gives way altogether at the voided corners.

The gable, finally, is a trickster: appearing where least likely (in plan) and offering only glimpses where expected (in section and elevation). Betraying its conventional cladding of banded base boards and taut upper-story clapboards, the studio seems to tumble at the forest’s edge. The form is uncanny, vaguely recognizable and slightly unsettling. Located along a line in the landscape, the studio does not mark the boundary and contrasting moods of forest and meadow so much as set them into motion.

Unlike the Hudson Studio, the studio block of the M&M House is not freestanding. Instead, it is linked to an existing two-story residence by an informal gallery that provides entry from the parking court below and the garden above. Nevertheless, the studio asserts itself on approach, the lone skylight at its peak presenting a looming hooded figure amidst the site’s deciduous trees. The standing seam metal cladding accents site effects, countering foliage in brilliant summer sunlight while echoing atmosphere and tree limbs during overcast winter days. The studio is equivocal to sky and ground, its reach to daylight matching its accommodation of the slope from garden to parking court. Equivocation continues at the entry, where a metal canopy carries the line of the studio’s overhang to the existing house’s projecting upper story. Neither existing nor new constructions are anchored to the ground. The existing construction projects over the ground on muscular concrete piers while the new construction teeters above the ground as if it were of no consequence. Modulating between heroics and slapstick, the entry glazing is bisected by its canopy, which casts upper and lower level in a reflective rather than hierarchical position.

Landscaping reinforces these effects. Concrete retaining walls bound both lower entry court and upper
garden, yet this is a curious plinth. The taut combination of grass and concrete paving in the lower court seems too thin to be trusted, while the garden's gravel surface, stepped path, and floated plantings seem too porous. Like pond ice and quicksand, neither register as a solid mass against the surrounding boulders and forest. This sensation is most pronounced in the gallery. Forest views from the existing house are rather conventional and the studio, by necessity, has only restricted views. The gallery space modulates the horizontality of the existing house with its ceiling and the verticality of the studio with its skylights. More importantly, the gallery links entry court and upper garden, yet the sensation is not so much that of bridging between an upper and lower landscape as hovering between them.

Programming echoes this dynamism: couch and cabinetry are on equal terms with wall-hung paintings, eroding the conventional division between art and the everyday. Clearly, both house and landscape are constructed, yet the construction intensifies flux rather than barricades against it, registering as a thick zone of activity rather than as a stable opposition of upper and lower, building and landscape.

Restraint in form, humble in size, and generic in construction, Hudson and M&M also seem very, well... livable. They seem, in fact, everything that significant architecture often strains against. And yet, these modest buildings propose new ways of understanding architecture and landscape, object and field. Hudson spins like a top, coiling the line of forest and field. M&M bobs like a buoy, marking a landscape more liquid than solid. Architecture and landscape remain discrete while avoiding conventional roles, and instead, invite us to join in a zone of play.

Notes


3. "In the history of Western civilization forests represent an outlying realm of opacity which has allowed that civilization to estrange itself, enchant itself, terrify itself, ironize itself, in short to project into the forest's shadows its secrete and innermost anxieties." Robert Pogue Harrison, Forests, The Shadow of Civilization (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), xi.