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# Hollein Calling: Architectural Dialogues

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# Wilfried Kuehn

## Kuehn Malvezzi

Can you tell us about your personal connection to Hans Hollein?

WK Frankly, I've always leaned more towards Czech and Krischanitz than Hollein. But there is a point where their orbits overlap, namely Hans Hollein's groundbreaking *MAN transFORMS* exhibition in New York (1976), for which Hermann Czech was the project architect. Hollein did not always make it easy for him in Vienna, but Czech is of course not one of his disciples, either age-wise, or in terms of the content of his work. Those who did study with Hollein are, like all students, a little traumatized by the experience. In this respect, Hollein cast a large shadow, and his legacy should not be entrusted to his followers alone.

Some of us studied here in Vienna in the mid- to late 1990s. At that time, we were quite clear that we did not want to study in Hans Hollein's masterclass.

WK By then, Hollein had already passed his peak. It's interesting that we don't know of any outstanding students—his architecture has remained a one-off. That's quite different from Rossi, who had prominent students like Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, or O.M. Ungers, who taught Hans Kollhoff and Rem Koolhaas. My generation has engaged much more intensely with those younger figures, and with architects like Alvaro Siza, and largely rejected their postmodern predecessors.

What aspect of Hollein's work would you define as a central moment?

WK I always use a lot of Hollein material to tell my students stories that are important to me. Hollein is fundamental, especially in his exploration of curatorial and art-related aspects in architecture. This bears fruit in his museum projects, like the one in Mönchengladbach. These Hollein museums have small fan base, admittedly, but contemporary artists appreciate them because they have spaces they can engage with as an artist: they're based on a strong attitude. Personally, however, I sometimes find Hans Hollein's formal language difficult. It doesn't always attract me—it has repelled me as well.

The museums are spatially very complex and not easy to read from the floor plans.

WK The museums display a level of spatial mastery and complexity that is very rare in architecture. And if you actually visit them, you find the spaces much easier to read than the drawings and plans. The approach is not schematic, but corporeal. Hollein is a spatial artist, designing the experience of the space. For me, this spatial principle has its origins in the baroque. Rather than first designing the core, he begins with certain spatial situations, for example, a staircase opening up to all sides. The staircase is like a nerve center of the building—the point at which

it begins to live. It is not an object, but neither is it hidden away, treated as a repeatable core, as it is with the neo-rationalist architects. It's conceived almost in biological terms, as an organ: before Hollein even begins to draw, there is a real sense of the physical experience of the space. This approach is a testament to Hollein's design ability. It's also unrepeatably, and very hard to teach.

One could argue that the staging of the staircase is something typically Viennese; it can also be seen in the work of Adolf Loos, Josef Frank, or Hermann Czech.

WK Hermann Czech, however, works with different scales.

Exactly, what Czech produces are more like miniatures. But wasn't it also in his large-scale works that Hollein ultimately came unstuck?

WK There's an ambivalence with Hollein, as seen, characteristically, in the Haas Haus. I remember thinking it was a dubious project, but when I came to Vienna in the mid-1990s and saw it for myself I was impressed by the experience of the space. Its quality lay not in its surfaces, but in its spatiality. Later, in the course of a refurbishment, the whole interior got ripped out, destroying the integrity and the central value of the building. But a museum like the MMK in Frankfurt remains an outstanding space on a large scale, and if Hollein had built the museum at Salzburg's Mönchsberg (1989) or Disney Hall in LA (1988), they would be outstanding spaces too.

When Hollein was designing a building, he had a very strong perception of the space that was difficult to convey in plans at that stage. For this reason, working models and photos were important for his way of working.



Hans Hollein, Abteiberg Municipal Museum, Mönchengladbach, Germany, 1972-1982. Working model of the so-called "cloverleaf principle" gallery spaces. Archive Hans Hollein, Az W and MAK, Vienna. Photo: Elmar Bertsch

WK I became aware of how intensively Hollein worked with models and photographs when I was preparing the double exhibition at the MAK and the Abteiberg Museum. He used all scales and also photographed the models in order to generate spatial views or test a space in relation to the hanging of specific paintings in a museum collection. Hollein's office produced some huge models; they probably needed them to avoid the pitfalls of the floor plan. But many architects today are trapped, especially when they're designing on the computer, because CAD soon imposes a very systematic approach—something that didn't fit with Hollein at all.

You referred to Hollein in relation to other architects—Alvaro Siza, Rem Koolhaas?

WK There are not only contrasts, but also parallels between Hollein and Siza. If you try to understand Siza's work from the floor plans, you soon find yourself thinking, "I can't make sense of it. It's just not logical." But spatially, Siza's projects are fantastic. Siza's office also worked a lot (and still does) with models, and Siza, like Hollein, sketches brilliantly. Siza and Hollein could be real role models here, for all those architects



Kuehn Malvezzi, *HOLLEIN*, exhibition design, MAK, Vienna, Austria, 2014. View of installation including a scale model of the Feigen Gallery and the Kohlmarkt lamps. MAK, Photo: Mika J. Wißkirchen

who think mainly from the floor plan and who can't draw freehand. On the other hand you have Koolhaas, not known for his drawings, but whose *Delirious New York* is in line with Hollein's artistic and publishing work of the 1960s, reconnecting architecture to societal transformation at all levels and expressions.

How is this Holleinian spatial approach expressed in your work at Kuehn Malvezzi?

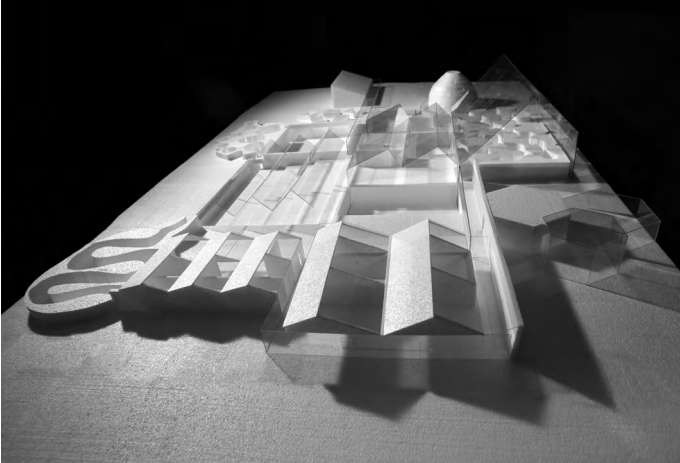
WK Not long after those exhibitions at the MAK and Abteiberg, where I engaged strongly with the content of Hollein's work, we did a competition where we worked in a completely different way from before. It wasn't a conscious decision, and I only thought about it afterwards. We made a working model that was several square meters, even though we don't usually build such large models. The forms were also different from our previous designs, which was perhaps down to my exposure to Hollein. It was a museum competition, and we won it. Half of the museum is underground, and the spaces are not orthogonal but organic—effectively Hollein themes.

Which project is this?

WK It's the Montreal Insectarium, which opened in 2022.<sup>1</sup> It was liberating and very satisfying to work in a different way. In a sense, Hollein helped me to develop in a direction I might not otherwise have taken, even though I'd made a conscious decision to study in Portugal and had



always been very interested in Siza. This corporeal mode of perception was always something that had interested me, but working on the Hollein exhibition was probably the catalyst for applying this principle more organically in combination with the kind of temporally structured museum architecture that we'd developed with our projects for Okwui Enwezor's Documenta 11 (2002) and Rieckhallen Berlin (2004).



Kuehn Malvezzi, Insectarium, Montreal, Canada, 2014–2022, with Pelletier De Fontenay, Jodoin Lamarre Pratte, Atelier Le Balto (Landscape). Model from the competition stage. Photo: Kuehn Malvezzi



Kuehn Malvezzi, *Documenta 11*, Kassel, Germany, 2002. Intersection of exhibition spaces with bench. Photo: ULRICH SCHWARZ, BERLIN

Another project that Kuehn Malvezzi is currently involved with is the “House of One.” In terms of the process of planning and construction, can you see parallels to the Haas Haus situation? There, Hollein went on producing model studies even after he’d submitted the design.

WK In the House of One project, we also built models after the competition, in this long phase of planning before construction, when everything is often in flux. As the planning drags on, it’s helpful to build new models and modify the existing ones. The House of One is not influenced by Hollein, but the themes it deals with are akin to Hollein’s principles: how do you translate urban space into the space of the building? This question has always moved me, and it underpins the work of our practice in general. How can you do urban planning, whatever the scale you’re working at? Whether you’re planning an exhibition, doing just one room, or designing a large building, each space is in the first instance an urban space. The House of One can be seen as a paradigmatic example: it’s a building like a city, condensing in one place three buildings—a synagogue, a church, a mosque—a model city. There’s an interesting publication about squares that Hollein did with his students at the University of Applied Arts.<sup>2</sup> This kind of analysis of urban morphology based on public space rather than buildings interests me a lot. I worked with Adolf Krischanitz and he is much less concerned with these questions—his thinking revolves around typology, which I share of course. Krischanitz’s architecture is conceptually rigorous and very beautiful, but when I was working at his office I found myself missing this space-oriented, sculptural-morphological approach.

In the House of One, the interior has little to do with the external appearance. One could see a connection with Hollein's Retti project, where the facade plays a major role in mediating the public space.

WK In general I think the inner structure and the facade are two different things. They can coincide, but I don't see any compelling need for them to do so. You can also have this tension in architecture, which arises when the interior form completely contradicts the exterior. That's often the case with Hollein. He also said that architecture should first be seen as if it were underground. He referred to the Frankfurt Museum as a mine, although it's hardly subterranean. He saw digging and piling up as the basic principles of architectural forming, whereby space is generated through the processes of excavation and sculpting; that's how I've always imagined architecture, too. The House of One is also a good example of this idea of hollowing out.

The House of One will be a spiritual place. What was Hollein's relationship to religion?

WK There were some interesting points of contact between Hollein and the Church in the beginning. The Galerie nächst St. Stephan,<sup>3</sup> where Hollein and Pichler had their 1963 exhibition, was founded by the priest (and art connoisseur), Monsignor Otto Mauer.<sup>4</sup> There's also a crypto-Catholic dimension to the Retti candle shop of course, and you can see other Catholic references in Hollein's work, in his relationship to Beuys and to the director of the Abteiberg Museum, Johannes Cladders, both of whom were indebted to Paul Wember, Rhineland's equivalent of Otto Mauer. Hollein's work looked for the sacred within the secular. He was not a church-going person, but as a young architect he did projects for churches and also designed ideal churches that resembled sexualized representations of women. The decisive transfer from religion into Hollein's architecture, however, was surely the way rituals and ceremonies formed the starting point for his understanding of spatial relations.



Kuehn Malvezzi, House of One, Berlin, Germany, 2012-(under construction). Model of the negative spaces. The project is included in the ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) touring exhibition *An Atlas of Commoning, Places of Collective Production*. Model: Martin Edelmann (ifa). Photo: Simone Gilges

And while we're on an existential theme, you contributed a text to the last issue of *San Rocco* on "Muerte."<sup>5</sup>

WK I'm interested in the subject. I also found points of reference in Hollein's work: the exhibition presenting his work in Mönchengladbach in 1970 was called *Everything is Architecture—An Exhibition about Death*. Architecture is very closely connected with the theme of death. I wrote the *San Rocco* text with Plan Común, while we were working together on a project for the central cemetery in Santiago de Chile. The cemetery is an interesting subject in every way—architecturally, politically. The article we wrote is also about politics and how the way our society is organized in life is then expressed in death as well.

Which is also a very Viennese theme.

WK Of course, these rituals in art—death and the body—apply to Vienna. Actionism could be interpreted in this way, and Hollein's work also fits in very well.

If we're talking about particular Viennese atmospheres and this connection between Church and society, something changes—disappears—between the 1980s and the 1990s, perhaps because you had a new generation that was no longer predominantly brought up in the Catholic faith. How do you see this question of faith today, and how is it expressed in your work?

WK Ritual and sacred spaces are important, even if fewer and fewer people today are believers. I don't think we either can or would want to live without these spaces. I understand the turn to the sacred as not just a religious practice, but as a cultural practice that can evolve and be taken up by younger people. If we think about the many Muslim migrants in Vienna today, some of them very devout, this also raises questions about the spatial order and hierarchy of the European city, which is based on Christian traditions. Now that our cities are multicultural, what form should the place for ritual gatherings take? The House of One is an important project because it brings a mosque into the center of Berlin for the first time in the city's history and addresses the question of a contemporary place of worship as a space of cultural encounter.

One of the first issues of the magazine you founded, *Displayer*,<sup>6</sup> has an article by Stephan Trüby hypothesizing a close link between Hollein's exhibition projects and his architecture. Trüby describes the former as an experimental setup that builds up a tension. Do you also see exhibition design in this sense, as a testing ground for your buildings?

WK Yes, though exhibitions are more closely related to urban design than they are to building, as you're developing a structure that has to allow for other things to happen. With an architectural project, the idea would be to work out every last detail, but you can't do that in an exhibition because there are always other authors involved—curators, artists, the exhibits themselves. Making an exhibition is urban design in the best sense of the word: there are clear forms, clear spaces, clear edges, clear ideas, but the final objects or surfaces are not prescribed. Documenta was a challenge for us, on account of its scale. We actually broached the exhibition layout in terms of urban design: with axes, rings, and labyrinthine paths. Then we had the input from the artists,



and the space again changed a great deal, with passageways being moved, for example. It was a testing ground for our approach, where the question was: how far is this a fixture, and how far can it be moved? Our commercial and residential buildings are also based on principles of urbanism, and the House of One has evolved as an urban idea. It's an evolution of this in-between spatial typology, from a central space that acts as the main means of circulation for the sacred spaces, towards a central space that becomes an important gathering place, like a square. I found that again in Hollein. With him, everything was about these lived in-between spaces, these nerve centers. Exhibitions are a testing ground. Their ephemeral character gives you great freedom in the design, and we've been able to realize typologically specific floor plans in them.

According to Hollein, his museum in Mönchengladbach was itself a work of art. Is this different from your approach?

WK You can't deny that element of artistic narcissism in Hollein, which can be traced back to his beginnings. In the 1960s, he wasn't sure whether he wanted to be an architect or an artist. He ultimately chose architecture in the early 1970s. Perhaps it was a mistake for him to let go of art. His friend Claes Oldenburg, for example, was very much influenced by him. As were Walter Pichler and others.

Our generation is in a different place today. I don't know if any of the architects in this exhibition would identify with the idea of the artist-architect, never mind lay claim to this kind of artistic autonomy. Hollein got really upset when the new director of the Frankfurt Museum had the artist Günther Förg create murals for the two large walls by the staircase. Hollein didn't want another artist to rework his art. He had conceived the room as a white space and was horrified at the thought that it now had four colors, thanks to Förg's permanent installation. I came to understand it wasn't even the colors themselves that irritated Hollein so much as the fact that another artist was becoming part of his own work. That attitude appears somewhat outdated to me. Isn't it the most beautiful thing if the intervention of an artist amplifies, develops further, the thinking of your own architecture?

There is also this question of authorship. Hollein takes himself very seriously as a person; he puts himself to the fore as the protagonist of his buildings.

WK This may also depend on whether you're working as an individual or as part of a group. The strategies you develop will be different if you're in a collective as opposed to working on your own. But it's also the case that you can work as an individual without drawing attention to yourself as the protagonist of the architecture. There are also many architects who give their practice their own name, but who approach day-to-day office life as a dialogue with others, giving their collaborators space to develop as well as public recognition. Hollein had some long-standing, structurally important collaborators, but there is virtually no trace of them in the public record. I find that a bit problematic.

We're interested in the format of the dialogue. You can also have a dialogue across the ages, as *San Rocco* has impressively shown. We'll be very happy if we succeed in doing something similar in Vienna.

WK The topic is a good one for Vienna, for the very reason that Hollein was active here, but this differentiated perception of Hollein is somewhat submerged in the current Viennese discourse. What appears to interest you about Hollein, and interests me too, is not part of the mainstream discourse here. As far as his university affiliations are concerned, Hollein is also not a "product" of the Technical University of Vienna, but trained at the Academy of Fine Arts and was a professor at the University of Applied Arts. In this respect, we are sitting here today, at the TU Wien, in precisely the right place to be talking about Hollein in an unbiased way.

#### Endnotes

- 1 The Montreal Insectarium is part of Space for Life, science museum district.
- 2 *Ort und Platz: Stadträumliche Architekturanalysen*, (Vienna: Hochschule für angewandte Kunst Wien, 1989).
- 3 An art gallery funded by the archdiocese of Vienna that acted as a nexus between the postwar avant-garde and the Catholic Church, through exhibitions and lectures.
- 4 (1907-1973), Roman Catholic priest, publisher, and co-founder in 1964 of the Galerie nächst St. Stephan.
- 5 Wilfried Kuehn, Kim Courrèges, and Felipe De Ferrari, "Life After Death," *Muerte*, *San Rocco*, no. 15 (2019): 132-140.
- 6 *Displayer* (issues 1-4) is a magazine about exhibition design and curatorial practice, edited by Wilfried Kuehn during his professorship at the HfG Karlsruhe (2007-2012).

This Dialogue on Hans Hollein took place on December 11, 2019 in Vienna.

#### Kuehn Malvezzi/Wilfried Kuehn

Kuehn Malvezzi Architects was founded by Simona Malvezzi, Wilfried Kuehn, and Johannes Kuehn in Berlin in 2001. The work of the practice spans from public buildings, museums, and exhibitions, to residential projects and office buildings. Their strong interest in contemporary art and curatorial practice has led them to pursue architecture that forms a robust spatial framework for the content and uses it houses.

Wilfried Kuehn studied architecture at the Politecnico di Milano and ESBAL Lisboa. In addition to the built work with Kuehn Malvezzi, he has co-curated several exhibitions, including the large double show on Hans Hollein in Vienna and Mönchengladbach 2014. He has also published several essays on twentieth-century architecture and was the founder and editor of the magazine *Displayer*, published at the Chair of Exhibition Design at the HfG Karlsruhe, where he taught before becoming a professor at the Technical University of Vienna.