

Title

Seeking the Real: The Special Case of Peter Zumthor

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Title

Seeking the Real. The Special Case of Peter Zumthor

Abstract

Peter Zumthor writes about “developing an architecture which sets out from and returns to real things “ referring to both his own design process and the qualities he wishes his architecture to convey. In an architecture culture long accustomed to media saturation and the image, the phrase “real things” is provocative and potentially archaic. This paper examines what Zumthor means by that term by investigating how he establishes the core ideas or principles that come to inform design development; namely, by his approach to a brief, a site, and a context. The paper draws on his writings as well as our own experience of being in his buildings, particularly through a rare interview that we conducted with him in his new house and atelier in Haldenstein.

Introduction

With only a handful of buildings, most in Switzerland and all in German-speaking Europe, Peter Zumthor (1943-) has achieved world renown as an architect of exceptionally rigorous, formally understated and moving architecture.¹ Against the current climate of celebrity culture and media saturation, Zumthor eschews almost all interviews, is very selective about being published, refuses more commissions than he accepts and is generally regarded as something of a recluse. Some of his Swiss colleagues affectionately refer to him as 'The Monk' and to his work as 'slow-architecture'. Furthermore, his buildings are generally realised within far-from-common-timescales. Perhaps only the Australian Glen Murcutt is comparable as another sole, remote practitioner producing world-class architecture that seems rooted in a particular place and culture.

Zumthor's own writings on architecture have appeared sporadically since 1988 as essays or booklets. In them he elaborates what he considers influential in his work and working process; namely, memory, materials, the senses, atmospheres, drawings, details, fine art, music, clients and place. They are remarkably consistent but do show a development of his desire for "developing an architecture that sets out from and returns to real things"² In that short statement Zumthor is commenting on the nature of his own design process as well as the qualities he wants the architecture to convey. The term "real things" is provocative, arguably archaic, and in this paper we will examine the term by investigating how he establishes the core ideas or principles that come to inform design development by his approach to a brief, a site, and a context. We will draw on his writings, particularly *Thinking Architecture* and *Atmospheres*, but primarily our personal experience of being in his buildings and the interview we conducted with him in his new house and atelier.

Caves and Linings

Zumthor has practiced from the tiny village of Haldenstein outside of the small, cantonal capital of Chur since 1979. From 1968 to 1978 he was an architect in The Department for the Preservation of Monuments in Graubunden. One drives through a characteristic edge-of-town sprawl from Chur before reaching the huddle of stone and timber barns and houses that make up the village, which is unified by materials, form and an alignment gable-on towards the neighbouring Alps. [Fig. 1] As of 2005 Zumthor has two ateliers facing each other. A short comparison of them shows the consistency of his approach and the development of his architecture. [Fig. 2] The atelier built in 1986 is obviously contextual. Its form is that of the simple buildings of the village, it is likewise clad in timber and it is sited as are the village's other buildings. But it is also explicitly archetypal, with its height and roof form unmistakably resembling a barn. [Fig. 3] But there the obvious deference ends. It is clad on three sides with very narrow, tightly laid vertical larch slats (which have weathered to brown) without apparent fasteners [Fig. 4]. Its roof is indeed pitched but gently so and detailed without eaves. Its generously glazed south façade is an open-framed structure shaded by external fabric blinds that faces a garden.

Across from that building is Zumthor's atelier and house of 2005. It dispenses with archetypal references all together. It has a u-shaped plan arranged around a small courtyard garden. Each arm of the U has an entrance; the one facing the older building is to the one story atelier wing and on the other side to the two-storey residence wing. [Fig. 5] House and atelier are connected internally at the bottom of the U by a meeting room as well as in the section of the house, the ground floor of which is Zumthor's private office and study. The three parts of the U are connected visually across the garden by large glazed areas facing onto the garden, giving an immediate relationship to its green, with reflections of the glass and rooms being either illuminated and thus visible or not helping to create a rich perceptual experience. The building's appearance internally

and externally is of precise and beautifully cast concrete, the initial impression being that everything built has been composed entirely in shades of grey [Fig. 6].

Prompted by the overwhelming presence of concrete in the building and Zumthor's own claim to "expose the very essence of...materials."³ we ask at what point it was clear to him that it was to be a concrete building. He resists, however, this material characterisation of the house, the notion that there was an architecturally important moment when that material was defined, or that it is important that it is concrete at all. The concept behind the building he describes is more about an elemental feeling than about a specific material: "This is about a big mineralic kind of idea, a lot of caves. It could have been stone. But with different linings. Don't tell me any more about concrete please! Atmosphere is key."

One could be forgiven for thinking that Zumthor's architecture is preoccupied with materials and tectonics--the "song of a material". His architecture is a rigorous and understated examination of place and purpose, and is often realised through the medium of one key material. In publications of his work images emphasise the presence of a material and carry an authority for the overall architectural presence. One of the authors, after visiting his work, had assumed that his design process somehow began and ended with concerns about physical matter; that materials were the alpha and omega of his working process. He imagined that with each project Zumthor must develop a love affair with a material early on, exploring its potential until it forms the major influence on the building's final character: stone in the Thermal Baths in Vals, glass in the Art Gallery (*Kunsthaus Bregenz*), timber in the Saint Benedict chapel in Sumvitg, brick in the Kolumba Museum in Cologne and concrete in his recently-completed house and atelier in Haldenstein to name just a few examples. All could suggest that each building is an essay in examining the architectural potential of the '*logos of techne*'.⁴ in other words, built stuff as the generator for an architectural concept. But he vehemently refutes the inference that the character of the building in which we are sitting was

driven by a decision about materials and construction. Rather, he starts from atmosphere, which he recalls through memory and images that he can, crucially, retrieve through his being an architect: “When I think about architecture, images come to mind. Many of these images are connected through my training as an architect. They contain the professional knowledge about architecture that I have gathered over the years. Some of the other images have to do with my childhood. There was a time when I experienced architecture without thinking about it...Memories like these contain the deepest architectural experience that I know. They are the reservoirs of the architectural atmospheres and images that I explore in my work as an architect.”⁵

Furthermore, he insists that the subsequent key architectural characteristics of his buildings were always there from the start. Speaking of the house and atelier he says (getting impatient): “Right from the beginning! This first image. If you saw the exhibition (recent retrospective on Zumthor’s work in the *Kunsthhaus Bregenz*) you saw a set of small models; tiny, concrete blocks. Inside you could see red and blue. [Fig. 7] This is the beginning. It’s all there.” But those models could as well suggest a formal description or material starting point.

The images and atmospheres that he is working from at the beginning are less derived from Gaston Bachelard’s psychotherapy than from a description of architectural effect that is indeed remarkably consistent with the result: “This was a feeling; a spatial feeling of...a composition of inside volumes, completely differently shaped. They would be long and tall, narrow, wide and so on. They would be completely different in their inner linings and character and atmosphere, light quality and so on. And they would be connected to small transitional spaces, a sculptural kind of feeling...There is something for me like a glove, like an organism. The first drawings talk about that. It’s a feeling about moving through this organism.”

Pressed by the authors, he further describes the atmosphere he envisaged at this early stage through concepts, qualities, materials and programme: “One, intimacy; being in an organism of spaces. Travelling--of having to walk and go through spaces. Some would have colours, dark wood, light wood, morning sun. One would be a living room, one would be a working room, one would be a kitchen.”

Alchemy and Atmosphere

We face Zumthor in the meeting room across a long wooden table, sitting on leather chairs opposite the floor to ceiling window on to the garden. Above the table is a single hooded strip light that creates a strong contrast between the brightly-lit table surface and the relative gloom on three of our sides. A large wax site model of an ongoing restaurant project on an island in Lake Zurich sits on a high plinth close by. Through the huge sheets of glass behind Zumthor himself, the foliage's delicacy and the branches' tracery in the courtyard give way to the trees beyond and finally to the houses set into the base of the hillside beyond. Not much sky is apparent but the reflections in the glazing wrapping around the courtyard create an almost cubist-like effect.

The one storey studio at the entrance facing the earlier atelier is occupied by assistants. It has a black wall used for pinning up drawings for design reviews opposite the glass screen facing the courtyard. Across the courtyard from it is a delicate and beautiful two storey space used by Zumthor as a private studio that also acts as the link between the private kitchen and living spaces upstairs. Next to it, slightly raised, is a warm, timber-lined study, reminiscent of the *Stube* characteristic of Graubunden. Despite its full glazing the study feels private and tranquil. The light in it is soft and owes its quality to the enclosure provided by the courtyard, the glazing, the soft grey of the walls and the relative narrowness of the plan. Wall finishes are precise, perfect and seemingly all concrete. Doors are thick, door handles are thin; often a simple steel bar wrapped with narrow leather strips. The prevailing aura is hushed and conducive to thoughtful, concentrated work. One

senses the physical weight of the building at the same time as the ethereal quality of the light.

There are no spaces dedicated exclusively to circulation. Each space follows the next, giving a feeling of being '*seduced*'⁶, rather than '*directed*.'⁷ There is a clear sense of threshold, territory and containment to each one of these "caves". The individual character of each one is influenced by the different linings, for example the bird's eye maple of the walls and ceiling in the *Stube*. Zumthor likes to describe his enjoyment of combining materials almost in alchemical terms: ".I take a certain amount of oak and a different amount of tufa and then...3 grams of silver..."⁸

Externally from the atelier side the building appears tomb-like with virtually no openings. [Fig. 8] Its impossibly thick cantilevered canopy suggests the entrance to a substation or heavy engineering laboratory where experimental explosions might threaten rather than to an architect's studio. The visual weight of the structure contradicts the building's modest spatial arrangement and transparency, internally and on the residential side's facade. On closer observation the concrete appears as if it is soft to the touch and the physical impression, through what appears to be a fabric lining to the shuttering and rounder corners, gives it a softer, plastic quality. The walls seem to be made of wet mud or rammed earth, something primitive, which is in stark contrast to the sophisticated silver-buckle window systems. They are in some cases inserted precisely into the structural openings and in other cases hang picture frame-like in front of them, allowing a frameless connection to the outside that also has the immediacy of a simple opening in a wall. [Fig. 9] This detail has a profound effect on the character both internally and externally and reinforces the idea of the building as a cave with openings rather than a constructed domain with windows and other building products. (This is one of a number of details that have also been employed in the Kolumba Museum in Cologne (2007) [Fig. 10].) Indeed, the absence of the usual architectural products, of which contemporary buildings are so visibly full, is one striking characteristic of Zumthor's work generally. In contrast to the previous (and still used) atelier, the house and atelier is heavy, poured,

brooding and mysterious. The concrete, window frames, coursed rubble walls and granite setts all contribute to a monochromatic composition.

Initiating the Design Process

Zumthor's approach to beginning a project sheds light on what he is after and the horizons he hopes to reach. He describes the importance of his first reaction to a project invitation, which is born of intuition honed through experience: "This happens automatically. I get a new commission and then the images...Usually the first idea comes quickly. If I don't have an idea early on, maybe I should not do the project." This first idea, he emphasises, is not an intellectual or a formal concept but is "full of atmosphere"⁹. This is a term only recently back in use by architects. What prompts that initial design process to get started, Zumthor continues, is based not on a methodology or on poetry but on two fundamental aspects that he considers most important in building architecture. Despite his being a high-art architecture, Zumthor emphatically reminds one what the use of building is: "There are no methods and I'm not interested in methods. The initial impulse is always use and place. I work for clients and they want something that has a use. Buildings have a place. So I like to think about the use and the place. What makes the first idea, what makes the first spark; this is always different, you never know...(But) it has to be there from the beginning otherwise we're not starting! The project has to be alive from the beginning. At the beginning you need an idea which has this kind of quality. 'Searching around in the fog' doesn't happen."

How then does a project develop once the initial ideas or images or atmospheres have been articulated? The difference between design drawings and working drawings is a common one in most countries and a close relationship between them arguably distinguishes a good design from a good building. Zumthor's architecture and his description of atmosphere infer that decisions about materials and details continue well into the working drawings phase, extending that creative

process as long as necessary. He goes further however, resisting the division of design and working drawings to describe different stages in a project's life. The reality after which Zumthor strives, which could be defined as the future building's DNA, is continually developed. His architecture is that unusual mixture of Mies and Kahn. It exhibits a sense of Miesien absolutism as well as the tectonic aura of Kahn's work. His description of his working process recalls Kahn's statement of starting with the immeasurable, moving through the measurable and ending finally with the immeasurable "Design drawings that refer to a reality that still lies in the future are important in my work. I continue working on my drawings until they reach the delicate point of representation when the prevailing mood I seek emerges, and I stop before inessentials start detracting from its impact. The drawing itself must take on the quality of the sought-for-object... These sort of drawings enable us to step back, to look, and to learn to understand that which has not yet come into being and which has just started to emerge." ¹⁰

Zumthor is not, however, a sole practitioner and has built some large and complex buildings. He insistently pleads on being left alone to get on with his work, regularly refusing invitations to lecture for example, but "alone" now means working with some 18 usually young assistants. "I am more a composer / conductor," he says. "I compose my pieces and then rehearse them with all my soloists in the orchestra. My projects are under development until they are finished."

Conclusion

Authenticity and real things are terms that have come to sound either nostalgic or reactionary. Certainly the predominant architectural developments of the last 25 years have moved in the opposite direction. There has been a decisive move away from archetype and image towards the phenomenology of form or to formal expression. We have seen a rejection of the meaning of materials in favour of an investigation in to their effects. The actual palette has grown hugely with mostly hybrid materials now. Ecological criteria can now overwhelm all other. There is even an

architecture that is not interested in materials or materiality. Indeed, the terms used by Zumthor are most commonly used by so-called traditionalists. And yet Zumthor's architecture is unmistakably contemporary.

In visiting his buildings one is struck by the understated precision in their form, materials and detailing that can indeed best be described as a sense of authenticity. This term can perhaps be understood here as describing work which does not require accompanying text or explanation¹¹. That one is so struck by its presence proves how unusual it is. Takefumi Aida wrote that the architect's gift to contemporary life was to provide a moment of silence in a tumultuous world¹². Zumthor would agree with that: "When we look at objects or buildings that seem to be at peace within themselves, our perception becomes calm and dulled. The objects we perceive have no message for us; they are simply there."¹³

When listening to Zumthor describe his quest to build those atmospheres lodged in memory that he describes as his first ideas, it is clear that it is a lengthy pilgrimage. The constructed architectural moods he creates are closely influenced by the enclosing surfaces of his spaces, which are emphatic, using few materials. They can thus be mistaken as a series of essays in tectonics; the emphasis placed on 'the container' as well as 'the contained'. It is clear though from what he says, that this is not his starting point at all. It is tempting to describe his work as minimal but the authors prefer Marc Treib's distinction that, "Minimal tends to discard rather than embrace. Quiet in contrast, admits complexity, but only a complexity that is modulated, that is distilled and condensed."¹⁴

Through this quietness we draw on our own atmospheres and images, even if not consciously. It is important to note that he writes about the "core" of architecture being in "the act of construction"¹⁵ while also describing the "essential substance"¹⁶ of architecture coming from "feeling and insight"¹⁷. It is this craftsmanship of architecture that makes the work so rich.

Like Utzon, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, Álvaro Siza and Kahn among others, Zumthor also possesses the agility to create architecture that is complex and sophisticated but can also “return to the roots of thought and emotion.”¹⁸ The qualities of Zumthor’s smallest works (Atelier Zumthor, Klaus Bruder Chapel), that intense sense of the jewellery box, tabernacle, treasure chest, sarcophagus, are also shared in his largest (Vals, Bregenz, Kolumba). But Zumthor’s vital contribution to contemporary architecture is to have claimed back from art, literature, theatre and film; that territory that few architects manage to develop during their architectural education. He claims back intuition and the belief that those deepest memories and recollections of architectural experiences from childhood are actually very important to the designer (and by implication, the wider public). Like Aldo Rossi in *A Scientific Autobiography*, the architect must be able to recognise the universal in the personal, to deduce principles (the scientific in Rossi’s title) from analysis and interrogation. And then to give them architectural form anew. The success of this process is what gives Zumthor’s work such an elemental and experiential power. His talent is to connect to that which is general about the human condition by recalling the personal. After Treib, it is effective and memorable because it chooses not to shout this message but whisper it. So we see that the “real things” Zumthor refers to are both the tangible and the intangible, the personal and the objective. He intensifies built stuff to the extent that not only does it “shine and vibrate”¹⁹ but it unlocks something in us that completes his composition. “We see things not as they are but as we are.”²⁰ Although the final excerpt from our conversation with Zumthor refers specifically to working with clients, it could equally be referring to the link between the author and his public: “(The result is) not something you buy in a shop. This we do together, of course.”

--ENDS--

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All quotes are from an interview with the authors on 10th December 2007 in Haldenstein unless otherwise stated.

¹ Among his latest accolades is the *Praemium Imperiale* in 2008, a global arts prize awarded annually since 1989 by the Japan Art Association and also known as the Nobel Prize for the Arts.

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³ (Book) Zumthor P., 'A Way of Looking at Things' in, *Thinking Architecture* 1998 (p10).

⁴ (Edited Book) Marco Frascari, 'The Tell-the Tale-Detail, in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: an anthology for architectural Theory 1965-1995*, ed. By Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), pp 498-514.

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⁶ (Book) Zumthor P., 'Between Composure and Seduction' in, *Atmospheres* 2006, Birkhauser Basel (p.41).

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⁹ Interview

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²⁰ (Journal) Ballantyne I., 'Artists and Materials' in *Mac Journal One* 1994 published by The Mackintosh School of Architecture, Glasgow (p.33).

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