

Peter Zumthor's Beautiful Silence

Wendy Redfield

Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana

redfield@tulane.edu



"To me, buildings can have a beautiful silence that I associate with attributes such as composure, self-evidence, durability, presence, and integrity, and with warmth and sensuousness as well; a building that is being itself, being a building, not representing anything, just being."

-Peter Zumthor, from "The Hard Core of Beauty"

Dreams, energy, emanations; presence, density, atmosphere; memories, permanence, concentration; transcendence, being, silence: these are words the architect Peter Zumthor has used consistently and in recurring fashion throughout his writings on architecture. In describing his creative process, he speaks in terms that are closer to evoking a meditative state of contemplation, than descriptive of an explicit methodology. Intuition, stored memories, close observation of the world and nature are his touchstones, coupled with an intensely studied mastery of the properties of materials, their capacities and limitations. He sees the task of architecture as ultimately redemptive, as capable of embodying and restoring 'wholeness' in a world in which 'the inessential' is celebrated, and 'Arbitrariness prevails'. Indeed he calls upon Architecture to "put up a resistance" to the vagueness, disposability, and inauthenticity he sees as characteristic of "the hostility of our day and age."

Personally, I still believe in the self-sufficient, corporeal wholeness of an architectural object as the essential, if difficult, aim of my work...Yet how are we to achieve this wholeness in architecture at a time when the divine, which once gave things a meaning, and even reality itself seem to be dissolving in the endless flux of transitory signs and images.

-Peter Zumthor, from "*The Hard Core of Beauty*," *Thinking Architecture*

There is a certain type of utopian vision embodied in this pursuit of recovered wholeness, authenticity, and 'ordinary and natural things' to which Zumthor aspires. He has faith in the inherent divinity of things and places that may be revealed through a peeling away of what he sees as the superfluous 'signs and information' that clutter our contemporary culture: "Nevertheless, I am convinced that real things do exist, however endangered they may be."

When the monograph *Peter Zumthor Works: Buildings and Projects, 1979-1997* was published in 1999, many in the international architectural community became suddenly aware of a magnificent if small body of work, seemingly overnight. This work, slowly and painstakingly conceived and crafted over the course of the previous two decades, had remained relatively obscure during this twenty-year period. For a variety of reasons, Peter Zumthor had resisted coverage of his work by the various architecture and design journals actively publishing at the time. Meanwhile, the rising cult of the "architect as international celebrity" was in full swing, leading to a frenzied rush to publish any errant sketch, quote, or tidbit of gossip about any of the leading figures of the day: Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Michael Graves, Richard Meier, Zaha Hadid, and many more. The overwhelming majority of architects who could attract this level of the attention, were as eager as the journal editors who followed them to stir up continued interest and attention for their work, their ideas, and increasingly, simply their name. The voracious appetite of our media-driven, consumptive culture obliged, continually supplying new images, new stars, and far too little substantive analysis or critical commentary.

Located mainly in remote Swiss alpine villages in the Graubünden region of Switzerland, most of Zumthor's buildings of this early period are actually very hard to find, even if one is looking for them. Their author, unlike the vast majority of his peers, did not seek their promotion, and in fact withheld their publication until he was ready to publish them himself in a book as carefully crafted, restrained, and well-executed as the buildings and projects it at last made available to the public.

The eight buildings and twelve projects included in this original monograph exhibited a startling range of program, scale, form, and material construction. Among the built works shown were a tiny, tear-drop-shaped chapel made almost entirely of wood and clinging to the steep hillside of a small, ramshackle alpine village; a bold, glass-shingled cube of an art museum located in a prominent urban location in the border town of Bregenz, Austria; a modest and understated, but thoughtfully executed addition to a centuries-old Swiss farmhouse. Indisputably, the project that more than any other, then and now captivated the imagination and excitement of all who love and make architecture was a bathhouse made of concrete and 60,000 slabs of gneiss stone, hewn from the quarries of the surrounding mountains of Vals, and buried within them.

These meticulously crafted master-works somehow embodied all of the simplicity and powerful authenticity that had been almost entirely missing from the architectural production of the Post-Modern period, dominant during the 1970's and '80's. Bracing in their formal clarity, explicit in their material and constructional logic, and mindful of the multi-sensorial capacity of architecture, these buildings seemed to remind us of what buildings could and should be. Eschewing superfluous decoration or applied historical references, Zumthor's buildings derived their aesthetic power from simple, timeless architectural attributes: material presence, formal restraint, and rigorously studied geometry alone. These were buildings satisfied with the simply stated, but terribly difficult task of offering worthy contexts for the fundamental human activities they were intended to serve, and clarifying the disparate environments to which they ultimately belonged.

Deceptively simple--cubes, oblongs, cylinders--the 54-year-old architect's buildings cannot be captured in photographs; their true essence comes from the experience of textures, the play of light, the celebration of craft, and the kinesthesia of their spaces.... Each work goes to extremes to eliminate the superfluous, yielding the paradox of an architecture of pure materials and continuous space that is at once impossibly simple yet wrenchingly mysterious.

-Richard Ingersoll, *Architecture Magazine*, October 1997

For six years, between 2001 and 2007, Peter Zumthor worked without compensation on the design of the Bruder Klaus Field Chapel, in Wachendorf, Germany. Small, virtually without program, and so impossibly remote as to elude all but the most dedicated visitors, this work may be his most succinct and complete statement to date on the redemptive capacity of architecture. This paper will recount the process by which this work came into being, and use it as a case-study to demonstrate the various threads of inquiry that have consistently preoccupied an architect who perhaps more explicitly than any other practicing today maintains an abiding commitment to "the connection of architecture to landscape and the creation of buildings that serve less a practical purpose than a spiritual need."

References

Irina Davidovici, "Introduction," "The Background of Practice," "Towards a Swiss Model," and "Notions of Resistance," in *Forms of Practice : German-Swiss Architecture 1980-2000*. Zurich: Gta, 2012.

Adam Hubertus, "Introduction," Maya Birke von Graevenitz, *New Swiss Architecture*. Thames and Hudson, 2015

Kenneth Frampton, "Minimal Moralia: Reflections on Recent Swiss German Production," in *Labour, Work and Architecture: Collected Essays on Architecture and Design*. London ; New York: Phaidon Press, 2002.

Philip Jodidio, "Introduction," *Architecture in Switzerland*. Koln: Taschen, 2006.

Hubertus Adam, "Introduction," Maya Birke von Graevenitz, *New Swiss Architecture*. Thames and

Steven Spier, 2009. "There's Just Something About Switzerland: The Swissness of Swiss Architecture". AA Files, no. 59. Architectural Association School of Architecture: 50-55.