

The Spiritual Dimension of Architectural Atmospheres: The Sogn Benedetg and Bruder Klaus Chapels

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Introduction

Atelier Zumthor's buildings have been variously described by critics and scholars as having "atmosphere," a "sense of presence,"¹ "evoking mystery," fostering experiences of the "spiritual", of "transcendence,"² even of the "sacred."³ The present paper aims to investigate how architecture that evokes such experiences is designed, focussing on the Sogn Benedetg Chapel near Sumvitg (1988) and the Bruder Klaus Chapel near Cologne (2007).

These two chapels differ in many ways – one is light and wooden, the other heavy, dark, and made of rammed concrete – but they both arise from the meeting of two different conceptions of spirituality. Both chapels were built for Catholic clients. However, due in large part to Peter Zumthor's leanings away from explicit Christian imagery, both projects are almost devoid of symbols and images, and bear almost no resemblance to traditional chapels. Yet, they have both become architectural pilgrimage sites, providing spaces of silence, presence, and contemplative introspection for believers and non-believers alike, as recorded experiences by visitors testify.

This paper analyzes the spiritual dimension of the atmospheres of these two chapels, as well as the intentions and design processes behind them. It draws on scholarship about these two chapels and on Peter Zumthor's writings. It is also informed by the author's documentation of the buildings, and interviews that she has carried out with Peter Zumthor and with people who were involved in the design process.

The Sogn Benedetg Chapel

The Sogn Benedetg chapel, located in the hamlet of Sogn Benedetg in the mountainous Surselva region of south-east Switzerland, replaces a nearby Gothic stone chapel destroyed in an avalanche. The former chapel, like other chapels in the region, was a white, stone, rectilinear building. On either side of the entrance were two large frescoes, one depicting heaven and the other hell. For Vitus Bass, the current custodian of the chapel, these images represent his understanding of the Christian faith: those who follow God's will go to heaven, and those who do not will be punished in hell for eternity. He says that this belief had caused him to live under pressure and in fear.⁴

Zumthor's new chapel moves away from this expression of religion. It has no images or frescoes, save for a small icon. There is no crucifix, only a small abstract cross on the altar and another etched into the wall above the entrance. The floorplan shape is also intentionally unconventional. Zumthor explains:

¹ Philip Ursprung, 'Presence: The Light Touch of Architecture', in *Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined*, by Kate Goodwin, Philip Ursprung, and Royal Academy of Arts (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2014), 48–52.

² Bert Daelemans, *Spiritus Loci: A Theological Method for Contemporary Church Architecture*, Studies in Religion and the Arts 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 81–82, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004285361>.

³ Jerneja Veber, 'Sveto v Arhitekturi = The Sacred in Architecture', *Piranesi* 20, no. 31 (2012): 40–41.

⁴ Vitus Bass, interview by Isabel Potworowski, 29 June 2023; Vitus Bass, *Nichts Ist Wie Es War! Wenig Wie Es Sein Sollte! 70 Jahre Evaluation* (Sogn Benedetg, Switzerland: n.p., 2019), 19, 114–15.

If it is true that spaces which are right-angled and have dominant intersecting axes radiate dominance, 'masculinity,' then the form of this church is sheltering, feminine – a 'forma materna,' which evokes the image of mother church and avoids creating an atmosphere of the classical didactic church.⁵

The materials are also unconventional for a chapel. Rather than being built out of stone, like most other chapels in the region, it is made of wood, the material used for local residential buildings.

For more traditional community members, this chapel was too unusual, and some go instead to an older chapel in the nearby hamlet of Clavadi.⁶ However, according to Bass, who regularly gives tours of the chapel, visitors often say that they feel whole, protected, and free there. He also says that the emptiness of the chapel gives the space a sense of freedom, which for him is appropriate for a village where most people, he says, live and think more freely, and no longer (or seldom) attend mass.⁷

What qualities of the chapel might contribute to the visitor experiences described by Bass? In addition to the lack of images, the following aspects may have played a role:

Path of arrival. Visitors arriving by train must walk 40 minutes uphill to reach the chapel. Those arriving by car must also walk about 110m uphill, perhaps contributing to a sense of anticipation and openness.

Thresholds. The entrance threshold is a series of separations, starting with the gap between the concrete steps and the wooden chapel. The entrance area is separated from the main space by two columns, forcing one to re-orient, a gesture that for American architect and scholar David Friend constitutes an embodied and symbolic shift.⁸ One steps up to the raised floor of the chapel, which is separated from the wall and perimetral columns by a gap, as though it were suspended.

Light and interiority. There are no views to the expansive alpine landscape. Instead, rays of sunlight enter through the band of clerestory windows and are reflected off the grey-silver wall.

Craftsmanship. According to the Benedictine Abbot Emeritus Daniel Schönbächler, who was part of the client team, the variations in the hand-cut wooden shingles and the slight tapering of the columns, window slats, and pews give the chapel a "living" quality.⁹ This attention to detail expresses for him the reverent handling of things, which accords with St. Benedict's rule to regard all objects, whether sacred or profane, as sacred vessels.¹⁰ This level of craft was supported by the collaboration with skilled craftsmen: The shingles were cut by the only two local craftsmen who still possessed these skills,¹¹ and the silver-grey paint colour was selected by the Swiss-German abstract painter Jean Pfaff.¹² Zumthor, who has a background in carpentry, insisted on making the window slats very thin and tapered, even when the carpenter at first said that it was impossible.¹³

⁵ Peter Zumthor and Hèlene Binet, *Peter Zumthor Works: Buildings and Projects 1979-1997* (Baden: Lars Müller, 1998), 56.

⁶ Daniel Schönbächler, interview by Isabel Potworowski, 24 May 2022.

⁷ Bass, interview; Bass, *Nichts Ist Wie Es War!*, 141.

⁸ David Friend, 'Intimate Transcendence: Proximity and Depth in Christian Architecture' (Dissertation, Berkeley, California, Graduate Theological Union, 2012), 105–7.

⁹ Schönbächler, interview.

¹⁰ Daniel Schönbächler, *Caplutta Sogn Benedetg: Gedanken und Bilder zur Architektur und Symbolik* (Sumvitg: Fundziun ecclesiastica Caplutta Sogn Benedetg, 1997). Section "Der ehrfurchtige Umgang mit den Dingen."

¹¹ Schönbächler, interview.

¹² Schönbächler, *Caplutta Sogn Benedetg*. Section "Festsaal und Hain."

¹³ Schönbächler, interview.



Figures 1 and 2: Sogn Benedetg Chapel by Atelier Zumthor, exterior (left) and interior (right). (Photos by author)

Representation practices

The light wood tectonics of the Sogn Benedetg Chapel contrast with the monolithic Bruder Klaus Chapel, a difference that is also reflected in the drawings and models for the two buildings. The drawings for the Sogn Benedetg Chapel were done in pencil, and there seems only to have been one working model at 1:50 (except for a site model for the competition).¹⁴ This model is made of thin pieces of wood, and the wall is a sheet of paper wrapped around and pinned to the structure, suggestive of the lightness of the realized building. The representation practices for this project contrast with those for the Bruder Klaus Chapel, for which the design process involved much more material testing and model-making, resulting in a more monolithic and sculptural building with a raw, elemental atmosphere.

The Bruder Klaus Chapel

The Bruder Klaus Chapel is a private devotional chapel in Wachendorf, close to Cologne. It was commissioned by two farmers, Hermann-Josef and Trudel Scheidtweiler, and dedicated to Saint Nikolaus von Flüe (1417-1487), also known as Bruder Klaus. When Hermann-Josef first wrote to Zumthor in 1998, he had in mind a chapel with a wooden figure of Bruder Klaus humbly kneeling before a meditation image.¹⁵

The realized building, in contrast, has minimal imagery and was intended by Zumthor to be a chapel with “an open form that would hint at existential questions.”¹⁶ It shares common qualities with the 1988 chapel, but differs in its heavy, monolithic structure and in the intensity of its threshold and contrasts:

Path of arrival. From the dedicated parking lot to the chapel, one walks just over 1km through fields, gently uphill, a journey that for Slovenian architectural scholar Jerneja Veber is a “preparation for our entry into something else,” which she compares to a pilgrimage.¹⁷

¹⁴ This description is based on the drawings that the author studied during her visit to Atelier Zumthor in June 2022. When she discussed the project with Zumthor in a 2023 interview, he did not mention any other models.

¹⁵ Peter Zumthor, *Sie stehen auf der Erde, aber Sie spüren die Öffnung zum Himmel*, interview by Dina Netz, 1 July 2007, <https://www.kulturwest.de/inhalt/sie-stehen-auf-der-erde-aber-sie-spueren-die-oeffnung-zum-himmel/>, accessed December 21, 2022; Thierry Greub, ‘Zumthors Zitate: Architekturzitate am Beispiel von Peter Zumthors Bruder-Klaus-Kapelle bei Wachendorf’, in *Kreativität des Findens - Figurationen des Zitats*, ed. Martin Roussel, Morphomata 2 (München: Fink, 2012), 299–300.

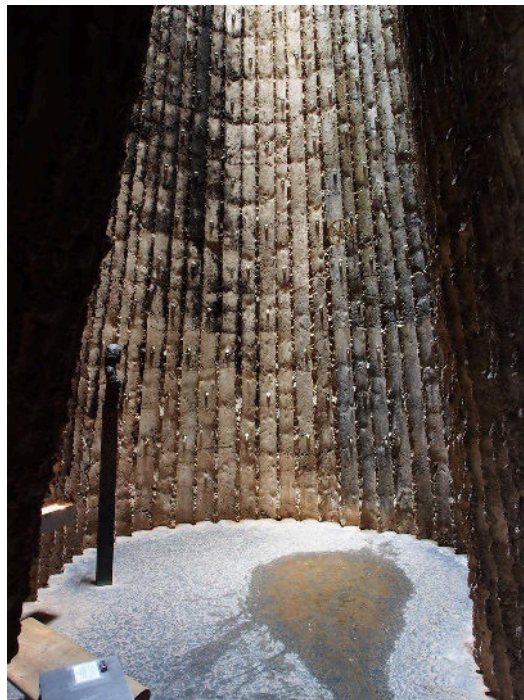
¹⁶ Peter Zumthor and Thomas Durisch, *Peter Zumthor: Buildings and Projects. Vol.3, 1998-2001*, trans. John Hargraves (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014), 122.

¹⁷ Jerneja Veber, ‘Sveto v Arhitekturi = The Sacred in Architecture’, *Piranesi* 20, no. 31 (2012): 40.

Thresholds. The 3.5m-high, 15cm-thick triangular steel door is heavy. Inside, a dark, slightly curving passage, triangular in section so that one must stoop down slightly, leads to a central space.

Light and interiority. In the centre is a 12m-high space with inward-leaning walls that point towards an opening to the sky. Because of the thick, rammed concrete walls, there is complete silence, save for the whispers of visitors and the occasional buzz of insects.

Raw materiality. The walls have imprints of tree trunks that were arranged in a tent-like structure. They are blackened from smoke, and large pieces of aggregate give them a rough texture. This raw, cavernous space, together with the strong threshold, provoke a heightened awareness and connection to one's surroundings, as evidenced by the many visitors who walk up to the walls to touch them, and who stand in the centre, gazing upwards.¹⁸



Figures 3 and 4: Bruder Klaus chapel by Atelier Zumthor. (Photos by author)

¹⁸ Author's observation of visitors on June 20, 2023.



Figure 5: Bruder Klaus Chapel by Atelier Zumthor, looking towards the sky. (Photo by author)

Design and construction process

These qualities emerged from the material testing process. The chapel was designed shortly after the model making workshop at Atelier Zumthor was expanded in the early 2000s and relied much more on in-house model-making than previous projects.

To save costs, the Scheidtweilers wanted their local community to build the chapel out of materials that they already had, mainly earth and trees. The first models tested the possibility of using logs as formwork for a rammed earth-cement mixture. Working with these materials and constraints also led to the simplicity that gave the project its strength. Initially, before deciding to open the chapel to the sky, Zumthor had envisioned the light source to be a twisting hanging filament, powered by solar panels that covered almost two entire facades. At a certain point, the design team realized that it was too complicated, and that it would also be difficult for the farming community to build. They decided to remove building technologies and electricity altogether, reducing the project to essentials.¹⁹

The design team continued to develop the chapel through drawings and large models. A series of 1:10 models with bamboo sticks and white clay were made to test the arrangements of logs and the effect of light. A 1:1 model of the interior space was also made with black sanitary tubes to test the proportions, how one would move through the space, and where the objects inside would be placed. With this model, which gave an embodied perception of scale, adjustments were made, and the measurements were transferred back to drawings.²⁰

¹⁹ For images of this earlier design, see: <https://www.pavlinlucas.com/1993-2010/fbk.html>

²⁰ Niels Lofferød, interview by Isabel Potworowski, 27 June 2023. Lofferød was one of the project leaders for the chapel.

The construction process used 112 spruce tree logs, felled from a nearby forest, and arranged in a tent-like structure over a concrete base.²¹ Around the logs, walls of rammed concrete were built up in 50cm layers. Once the concrete was dry, a slow fire was set inside, so that the logs shrunk and could be pulled out from the opening at the top. The floor was covered with a hand-ladled lead-tin mixture.²² It has a slight dip in the centre, where rainwater pools.

An open contemplative space

The Bruder Klaus chapel, like the Sogn Benedetg chapel, is unconventional. It also has what Zumthor calls a “forma materna” rather than an axial, rectilinear plan. From the outside, it is not recognizable as a chapel, save for a small cross above the triangular door. Inside, there is a roughly sculpted bust figure, selected among the works of Swiss sculptor Hans Josephson, which Zumthor said could represent Bruder Klaus.²³ The figure faces a small six-spoked brass wheel protruding from the wall, with three inward-facing and three outward-pointing spokes. This symbol refers to the saint’s meditation image, in which the wheel represents the Holy Trinity and is surrounded by images from the life of Jesus.²⁴ In their abstractness, however, the sculpted bust and brass wheel do not communicate religious messages directly. For interested visitors, there is a metal box with pamphlets that explain the meaning behind them.

In the same box, there is a book where visitors can leave their comments. These written reflections demonstrate that the chapel offers a place of prayer or contemplation for Christians and non-religious visitors alike.²⁵ About half of the comments are prayers of petition and thanksgiving. Some describe the chapel as a place of prayer and connection to God. Others describe it as a place of calm and tranquility. One person writes, “I don’t pray, but here I am heard.”²⁶ Someone else writes, “We are just a dot! In universe and in history.” And another: “A ‘sacred’ place that touches the inner self, a place that points to the essential.”²⁷ One visitor also wrote:

Centered once again. At peace with my mortality. The power of architecture created by man to help us remember our connection to the infinite.

These experiences of the chapel suggest that, while the building may not communicate an explicit message, it very strongly *points* – to what? The chapel invites visitors to answer for themselves: some have interpreted the chapel as pointing towards the sky, towards the infinite, or towards God. Spiritual meaning is co-produced, or co-discovered, in one’s engagement with the physical presence of the building.

Conclusion

The two buildings do not express the Christian faith as explicitly as most traditional Catholic chapels do. However, by creating introverted spaces that are separate from the surroundings, that engage visitors through their craft and material presence, and that frame views of the sky

²¹ Trudel and Hermann-Josef Scheidtweiler, in Markus Bönsch and Peter Zumthor, eds., *Zum Himmel offen - die Bruder Klaus Kapelle in Wachendorf: Architekt Peter Zumthor*, 4. überarbeitete Auflage (Köln: Bönsch Design, 2016); Chiara Baglione, ‘Peter Zumthor: Cappella Di Bruder Klaus, Mechernich, Eifel, Germania’, *Casabella*, September 2007, 144. According to Baglione, the forest was owned by the Scheidtweilers.

²² Trudel and Hermann-Josef Scheidtweiler, in Bönsch and Zumthor, *Zum Himmel offen - die Bruder Klaus Kapelle in Wachendorf*.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Pater Dr. Michael Schneider SJ, in Bönsch and Zumthor, *Zum Himmel offen - die Bruder Klaus Kapelle in Wachendorf*; Werner T. Huber, ‘Das Sachsler Meditationstuch: Speculum Humanae Salvationis - Ein Spiegel Des Christlichen Lebens’, 20 January 2014, <https://www.nvf.ch/pdf/medi.pdf>.

²⁵ The visitor comments are dated between March 8 and June 20, 2023.

²⁶ Original German: “Ich bete nie, aber hier werde ich gehört.”

²⁷ Original German: “Ein ‘heiliges’ Ort, der das Innere berührt, ein Ort, der auf das Wesentliche hinweist.”

beyond, the chapels hint at existential questions and engage the visitor in the co-discovery of meaning.

Similarly, Zumthor's design process is closer to discovering and recognizing atmospheres than to "design" as invention or imposition of ideas. Representation is central to this process. It is through the observation and engagement with material, especially through models, that this discovery takes place.