

Maestro of materials

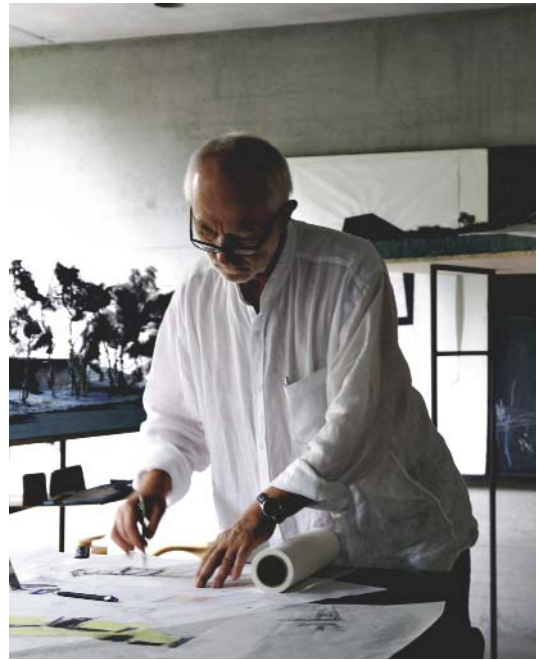
Peter Zumthor, the 2009 Pritzker Architecture Prize laureate, is the antithesis of today's celebrity architect. He's the consummate "architects' architect", highly esteemed by his peers and revered by young architects who find inspiration in his idiosyncratic buildings.

By Mary Krienke | Zumthor works in a material world. For him, materials are to an architect what notes are to a musician. “Each has its own physicality, its unique contribution to an architectural composition,” he says. His chosen materials – his musical notes – become a composition in stone in the sculptural thermal baths in Vals; a composition in wood in the St. Benedict Chapel near Sumvitg; a composition in glass in the Kunsthau in Bregenz, Austria.

In fact, the Jury Citation of the Pritzker Prize – architecture’s equivalent of the Nobel Prize – singles out Zumthor’s use of materials for special praise: “In Zumthor’s hands, like those of the consummate craftsman, materials from cedar shingles to sand-blasted glass are used in a way that celebrates their own unique qualities, all in the service of an architecture of permanence ... In paring down architecture to its barest yet most sumptuous essentials, he has reaffirmed architecture’s place in a fragile world.”

Grounded in Graubünden

Born in Basel in 1943, the son of a cabinet-maker, Peter Zumthor served a four-year apprenticeship to a carpenter before entering the Basel Kunstgewerbeschule, followed by further study at Pratt Institute in New York. “Chance” – in the form of a job with the cantonal Department for the Preservation of



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Zumthor works on a design in his studio

Old meets new: Zumthor added a 20th-century wing to a 17th-century farmhouse in the Safien valley



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Monuments – brought him to Graubünden in the '70s, where he has remained ever since.

“The best things happen without planning,” he says. “I never would have imagined making my life in Graubünden.”

In 1979, Zumthor established his own architectural practice in Haldenstein, a bucolic village just outside Chur, far removed from the international architectural scene. Past the local castle and up a quiet side street, one encounters the architect's combination atelier/residence. Fronted with weathered wood, it consists of a sequence of connected spaces built around a garden planted with maples. While contemporary in design, it relates beautifully to the village structures of another age, as well as to the fences, pastures and woods of its environment.

The jumble of bicycles parked outside attests to the youth and casual style of the some 20 architects from seven countries – average age about 30 – who work within. A stocking-footed Zumthor greets me at the entry. I adopt the Japanese no-shoes dictum and we pad through the working area, past the architectural mock-ups, which resemble pieces of sculpture more than working models, into the residential area beyond. In the corner of the Canadian maple-panelled room stands a cello; in Zumthor's world, music is more than a metaphor.

Humanistic approach

Relaxed, soft-spoken and modest in manner, Zumthor reveals that he has been up “since five a.m.,” attending to the myriad details involved in his all-consuming creative process. Among projects currently in development are buildings in Los Angeles and Leiden, the Netherlands, about which he quietly declines to give further information.

He admits to turning down about half of the commissions that come his way, and so I ask what prompts him to accept a project. “The task has to make sense in a humanistic and cultural way – not only commercial – and have a social importance,” he responds. He recently refused commissions in Tokyo and Milan, which he deemed “too commercial”, but insists that this is not a snobbish attitude. He examines every project very carefully before he decides whether to proceed.

Two projects, currently in the works at opposite ends of Norway, fulfil his criterion of a humanistic, cultural dimension. One is a memorial to 135 women burned as witches in the 17th century, located in Varde, at the northern tip of Norway. It consists of two simple buildings, one of dark tinted safety glass and steel, one of wood. The other project is a cluster of four buildings on the site of a former zinc mine in Sauda, in southern Norway, which will serve as a memorial to mining, a museum and a place for local social functions.

Once Zumthor accepts a commission, he expects a high level of collaboration from his client. “Authorship is a work of mutual trust and commitment – of pride and pleasure,” he says. His involvement in every aspect of a project explains why he employs such a small staff: “I do everything so that's all I can handle. It's the way I work. It's like a family.” He admits that this is totally different from his architectural colleagues who might employ 200 to 300 people.

A commanding presence

The Pritzker Jury Citation describes Zumthor's buildings as having “a commanding presence ... while expressing respect for the primacy of the site, the legacy of a local culture and the invalu-

© Therme Vals

able lessons of architectural history.” This became stunningly apparent during my recent tour of five Zumthor buildings, including his atelier, all located in Graubünden.

First stop was *Caplutta Sogn Benedetg* (St. Benedict Chapel), located in a small village above Sumvitg in the Surselva valley. A short distance up a narrow road, one is struck by an image of perfection: a small rounded structure faced with larch wood shingles. It has been described as “a giant hot tub” but is more like a graceful raindrop, tapering to a point at one end. A separate ladder-like bell tower stands off to the side.

“At first the village priest told me that this was the only one of the proposed projects for the site that he didn’t want,” Zumthor recalls.

But, over time, perhaps influenced by his exposure to Le Corbusier’s chapel at Ronchamp, in France, the priest decided that a contemporary structure was the best solution and an icon was born. The chapel has become a destination for architectural students, who can be seen standing in silent reverie or busily sketching, as were the two young Asian women the day we were there.

Reinventing the art of bathing

Next stop was Therme Vals, the thermal spa located in the remote mountain village of Vals, which has been proclaimed Zumthor’s “masterpiece” and is his most famous work. This starkly angular structure, faced with slabs of local grey gneiss that create the same striated effect that occurs in nature, was designed as an homage to stone and water.

Here, in a hushed environment, one experiences stunning gradations of light and shadow, the dancing reflection of light upon water, light diffused through steam-filled air or filtering upwards through bubbling water or floating flower petals. Bathing spaces vary from an angular grotto with intimate niches to the principal pool that begins indoors and continues outside to reveal a stunning vista of pastures and mountains. Temperatures in the various baths range from a tropical 42° C in the “fire bath” to a tingling 14° C in the “ice bath” across the way. The ritual of bathing is elevated to new heights.

The project was initiated in 1983, when the commune of Vals acquired a bankrupt hotel complex, built in the ’60s and a drag on the local economy. It went through more than a decade of conceptual planning and political maneuvering before construction began in 1994 and its doors opened in 1996.

Recalls Zumthor: “There was no tradition of bathing remaining in Switzerland. All the new spas looked like sports centres. I started by rethinking the whole context of what bathing means today. The board, composed of local residents, accompanied me through the process of developing a spa in a new way; we developed a mutual conviction.”

This mutual conviction was put to the test when the board encountered local opposition, and outside financial and marketing experts warned the project would fail. Their gloomy predictions proved unfounded, however, according to Pius Truffer, president of Hoteba, the company financed totally by local shareholders that owns the spa.

“We took a big risk by sticking to our conviction to build something unique – to put our complete trust in Peter Zumthor – but it paid off,” Truffer says. “We are averaging 150,000 spa entries per year, with a terrific cash flow.”

And, from the looks of it, the village of Vals, source of the fa-



© Mary Krienke

The modest St. Benedict Chapel has a commanding presence

mous Valser water, is flourishing, with ambitious road works underway and a sleek boutique hotel on the central square. But thankfully, the village, settled 700 years ago by farmers who immigrated from Valais, has resisted “Disneyfication” and retains its authentic rustic charm.

Modest masterpieces

Peter Zumthor’s private dwellings have the same commanding presence as his public buildings, the same quiet integrity, the same harmony with their surroundings. About an hour’s gentle walk from Vals is the small hamlet of Leis, where, above centuries-old, weather-darkened chalets and hay barns, stand two modern-day log cabins. Their wooden façades are broken by spacious windows that capture the peace and beauty of the idyllic alpine landscape. One of these was designed for Annelisa Zumthor, the architect’s wife, who grew up in the mountains.

At the entry to the Safien valley, to the east of the Vals valley, is *Gugalun* (“looking at the moon”, in the local dialect), a 17th-century farmhouse with a 20th-century extension, which was singled out for special praise by the Swiss philosopher Alain de Botton in his book, *The Architecture of Happiness*.

To create this harmonious melding of old and new, Zumthor lopped off the 19th-century kitchen attached to the original structure, and added an annex that angles onto the mountain slope to the rear. The result, according to a young New York architect who knows the house only from photographs, is a “modest masterpiece”.

It is an eloquent illustration of a passage from a little book by Peter Zumthor, called *Thinking Architecture*: “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 itself, being a building, not representing anything. Just being.”