

## Peter Zumthor: an “Acontemporary” Architect?

Stéphane FÜZESSÉRY

**The highest prize of the architectural world was awarded to Swiss architect Peter Zumthor in 2009. His phenomenological approach, paying special attention to natural landscapes and local building traditions, is at odds with the dominant contemporary architectural design. He has the merit of raising the thorny question of what architecture means at a time of widespread urban living and the crisis of place.**

The Pritzker Architecture Prize, the true “Nobel prize of architecture,” was awarded to Swiss architect Peter Zumthor in 2009. The jury’s decision was both unexpected and bold, rewarding an atypical and unconventional architect. As the members of the jury explained, “for thirty years, Peter Zumthor has been living in the small, remote village of Haldenstein in the Swiss Alps, keeping his distance from the chaotic activity of the international architectural scene. There, with a small team, he dreams up buildings with remarkable sincerity, free from the influences of fashion and passing trends. His “modesty”, “humility” and “courage, indeed temerity” characterise his work, which was described as being “without compromise.”<sup>1</sup>

### **An architect removed from the world**

Is Peter Zumthor atypical? Since his firm was established in 1979, the Swiss architect has actually only completed around thirty buildings, most of them fairly modest in comparison with the standards reached by the major architectural firms. His most important projects – the Therme Vals, in the Swiss canton of Grisons, the Kunsthaus Bregenz (KUB) on Lake Constance, the Kolumba art museum in Cologne – have neither the scale nor the symbolic strength of major urban public works. Moreover, his production has barely crossed the Swiss borders. It is divided between the canton of Grisons (*Graubünden*), where Zumthor lives and works, and where most of his buildings are concentrated<sup>2</sup>, and Austria and Germany, where this German-speaking architect has taken on and completed a small number of projects – such as the Swiss pavilion for Expo 2000 in Hanover and, more recently, the Saint Nicholas of Flue chapel in Wachendorf (2007). With the exception of Berlin, where he won the

---

<sup>1</sup> The complete explanation given by the jury can be consulted (in French) on the website [www.cyberarchi.com](http://www.cyberarchi.com).

<sup>2</sup> We should mention his own studio in Haldenstein (1986), shelters for the Roman archaeological site at Chur (1986), the Saint Benedict chapel in Sumvitg (1988), a retirement home in Chur (1993), the Spittelhof housing estate in Biel-Benken (1996) and a small number of private homes: the Gugalun house in Vesam (1994), the Luzi house in Jenaz (2002), the Annalisa house in Vals Leis (2007), and his own house in Haldestein (2005).

competition for the Topography of Terror documentation centre<sup>3</sup>, Zumthor has never been in a position to build in a major city of international standing. There is nothing in his body of work that can compare with what is produced by very large firms, now known by the fashionable portmanteau “starchitects”, who regularly appear on the shortlists of international competitions. Zumthor runs a small firm, is highly selective in his choice of projects and meticulous in his attention to detail, refusing to sub-contract his construction projects – a common practice in the world of major architecture firms. He is somewhat slow to research and accept conditions when implementing projects, practising a kind of “slow architecture” that is clearly no longer the norm in his profession. He seeks neither success nor fame. In fact, he often takes an ironic view of contemporary architectural production and its wild forms, and does not hesitate to state that “architectural quality does not mean appearing in a guide to architecture or in the history of architecture, or even being quoted here and there.”

### **A singular conception of the art of construction**

Nevertheless, the Swiss architect’s situation, the limited scope of his production and his working methods are not entirely original in the panorama of current architecture. A great many professionals today could be said to practise an architecture that is “without compromise”, “sincere” and “modest”, if these terms did not freeze – by their virtuous declaration of faith – a debate that should first and foremost remain critical. The admiration shown by his peers is not so surprising: the Pritzker prize has often been awarded to “unconventional” architects, as was the case recently with Glenn Murcutt (Pritzker 2002) and Jørn Utzon (Pritzker 2003).

In truth, if the recognition given to Peter Zumthor comes as a surprise, it is not so much on account of the architect’s supposed virtues but rather because *his conception of the art of construction* – and his entire body of work – raises a radical question for architecture today. Indeed, if this architect from Haldenstein can legitimately be perceived as being an outsider in the architectural scene, it is because he is, in a sense, a contemporary. We should first dispel any doubt: Zumthor is unmistakably a *modern* architect. Like all architects of his generation, he inherited the lessons of the Modern movement as well as all the criticisms that accompanied them. However, at the same time he has adopted a conception of the art of construction that is entirely unique in the panorama of contemporary architecture, a conception that one might call *phenomenological*. In a lecture delivered on 1 June 2003, the architect tried to clarify his position. Describing his recollection of a sunny afternoon spent under the arches of a city, presumed to be Italian, he said:

“So what touched me? Everything. Everything – things, people, the air, noises, the sound, colours, material presence, textures and shapes. (...) What else? My state of mind, my feelings, the wait I experienced while sitting there. And I think of that famous expression in English, a reference to Plato: “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. It means that everything is only within me. But then I do the following experiment: I eliminate the square – and my impressions disappear. I would never have had them without their atmosphere. That is logical. There is an interaction between human beings and things. That is what I am faced with as an architect<sup>4</sup>.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Having got underway in 1997, work on the site was interrupted then completely abandoned due to a lack of finances. The parts that had been built were demolished in 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Zumthor, *Atmosphères. Environnements architecturaux – Ce qui m’entoure*, Basel, Boston, Berlin, Birkhäuser, 2008, p. 17.

In Zumthor's view, architectural quality can only exist through the *atmosphere* created by a building, through its capacity to make a *place*. By "atmosphere" (*Stimmung*), Zumthor means an *immediate* relationship with our environment; an emotional relationship – rather than intellectual – with space and matter, heat and light, sounds and smells. It is a relationship that engages our entire being and brings our inner state into unison with what surrounds us. Zumthor clearly believes in our *presence* in the real world, what Edmund Husserl called the "world of life" (*Lebenswelt*), that "spatio-temporal world of things, as we experience them in our life before and outside of the scientific sphere"<sup>5</sup>, and what Martin Heidegger called "being in the world", *Dasein*. As an architect, Zumthor's aim is not to create images or symbols: he deliberately ignores any differentiation between body and consciousness, endeavouring only to create living spaces.

### **Nine points for an architecture of places**

For this architect from Haldenstein, there is indeed "skill involved in creating architectural atmospheres"<sup>6</sup>. While he admits that the weight of childhood memories or subjective impressions often bears an influence – running the risk of producing idiosyncratic forms – he believes that one can make that skill more or less objective. Architecture, like a language, can be taught and transmitted. Its language can be broken down into nine points, as Zumthor himself suggests.

1. The language of architecture is anatomical: architecture is like a body "that can touch me"<sup>7</sup> with its masses (like the heavy blocks of concrete and gneiss that demarcate the Therme Vals), its membranes (like the wooden clapboards that envelop the Saint Benedict chapel in Sumvigt) and its matter (like the lead alloy and recycled tin covering the floor of the Saint Nicholas of Flue chapel).

2. The language of architecture is physical: it brings into play a harmony between materials, as in the Saint Nicholas of Flue chapel, where the imprint left by spruce trunks burned into the concrete inner walls creates a cave-like atmosphere. That harmony, its vibration and presence, cannot entirely be thought of *a priori*: they must be felt *in situ*. That is why the construction project is an important space for trial and error and for making choices regarding the often-subtle harmony of a shade of wood resonating with rough concrete, as at the Spittelhof housing estate in Biel-Benken.

3. As well as corporal and material, the language of architecture is also acoustic. For Zumthor, a space is the same as a musical instrument: it brings together, amplifies and makes sounds vibrate in a particular way, as in many of the baths at the Therme Vals.

4. The language of architecture is also thermal: the shape and surface of the materials used in a given space, along with the manner in which they are assembled and arranged, produce a particular thermal atmosphere, as with the wooden pavilion at Expo 2000 in Hanover, where the stacks of wooden beams allows the temperature range to be neutralised.

5. As a repository for sensory atmospheres, the architectural space according to Zumthor should make room for a proper threshold, as is the case with most of the houses

---

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Husserl, *La Crise des sciences européennes et la Phénoménologie transcendantale*, Paris, Gallimard, Tel, 1989 (1936), p. 157.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Zumthor, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Zumthor, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

designed by the architect, where wide, deep bays – skilfully framing the surrounding landscapes – make one acutely aware of the tension between the interior and the exterior.

6. The architectural space should also create “levels of intimacy<sup>8</sup>”, regulating – by playing with scales – proximity and distance, open and closed spaces, shared areas and sanctuaries.

7. Introverted and in a state of tension, the architectural space should accommodate a world of bodies given the freedom to meander and saunter.

8. The architectural space should also accommodate a world of objects chosen and positioned so as to strengthen the calm presence of the matter – like those “two nails that are in the floor to fasten steel plates alongside a worn threshold<sup>9</sup>”. Thus, “things are in their place. Because they are what they are meant to be<sup>10</sup>”. The Swiss architect, without saying so directly, speaks the language of Louis Kahn, whose monumentality has been extracted in some way.

9. Last but not least, the architectural space and its material harmonies should *reveal* light.

### **Architecture-presence in a world of non-places**

If such a call for architecture-presence is contemporary, it is because the planet’s urban development and the forms used for urbanisation since the 1960s are, it would seem, on the verge of rendering his poetics of place obsolete. The sprawl and heterogeneity of contemporary urban spaces, the disappearance of landscaped backgrounds, the ever-increasing dominance of infrastructures that are out of proportion with their anthropomorphic characteristics, even the environmental crisis – all are proof of a *crisis* or *loss of place* that many consider irreversible, even their advocates<sup>11</sup>. At a time when the paradigmatic spaces of the modern city are themselves willingly described as “non-places”, the “improved communication and information systems (...) not only erase existing borders but eliminate the specificity of place<sup>12</sup>”, as Alberto Pérez-Gómez writes. What is more, as the urban horizon looms nearer, the possibility of conceiving and establishing atmospheres and places seems increasingly difficult and uncertain.

Would Zumthor’s experiment then be constrained to take possession of those scattered fringes of the widespread urban Alpine regions, where an environmentally responsible development model can still be dreamed up, based on an alliance between a high-quality natural environment, a commitment from all parties involved in the construction sector, optimum use of local know-how and innovative architecture, as is the case today in the Vorarlberg region of Austria<sup>13</sup>? Or can Zumthor’s phenomenological conception instead provide us with a number of lessons to consider when inhabiting our cities? Has his call to

---

<sup>8</sup> Peter Zumthor, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Zumthor, *Penser l’architecture*, Basel, Boston, Berlin, Birkäuser, 2006, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Zumthor, *Atmosphère...*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> For the Norwegian Christian Norberg-Schultz, one of the main theoreticians of place, “the loss of place is a proven fact” *L’art du lieu. Architecture et paysage, permanence et mutations*, Paris, Le Moniteur, 1997, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Alberto Pérez-Gómez, “La notion de contexte en architecture et en urbanisme”, in *Le Sens du lieu : topos, logos, aisthesis*, Bruxelles, éditions Ousia, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Dominique Gauzin-Müller, *L’architecture écologique du Vorarlberg. Un modèle social, économique et culturel*, Paris, Le Moniteur, 2009.

rediscover the essence of architecture, to reconnect with its original values and to create atmospheres and places now lost all meaning? Or is it still impossible to live where there is no place? This is indeed the central paradox of architecture in an era of widespread urbanisation, and the real challenge set by Peter Zumthor's contemporaneity.

Translation by Susannah Dale, with the support of the Institut du Monde Contemporain.

Published by Books&Ideas, 30 September 2013. ©**booksandideas.net**

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), 29 May 2009