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. 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 realized 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”. 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.

Caveat 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 Graubünden. 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. The look of the village is unified by materials, form and an alignment, gable-on, towards the neighbouring Alps (Fig. 1). Since 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 orientated in the same way as 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 defences 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 face a garden.
Figure 1. Haldenstein, unified by characteristic stone and timber barns. Photo: Christopher Platt.

Figure 2. Contrasting characters reflect Zumthor’s development as architect. Photo: Christopher Platt.

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).
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 realized through the medium of one key material. In publications of his work, images emphasize 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 (Kunsthalle, Bregenz), timber in the Saint Benedict chapel in Sarnvis, 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’—in other words, built stuff as the generator for an architectural concept. But he vehemently refutes the suggestion 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.

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 Kunsthalle, 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 program:

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 onto 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' trajectory 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" rather than "directed". 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".

Externally from the atelier side the building appears tomb-like with virtually no openings (Fig. 8). Its impossibly thick, cantilevered canopy suggest the entrance to a substation or heavy engineering laboratory where experimental explosions might threaten, rather than 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 façade. 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 myster-
ious. The concrete, window frames, coursed
rubble walls and granite sets 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 impor-
tance 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 emphasizes, is
not an intellectual or a formal concept but is
“full of atmosphere”. 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 architect, Zumthor empha-
sically 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 start-
ing! 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 de-
sign drawings and working drawings is a
common one in most countries and a close
relationship between them arguably distin-
guishes a good design from a good building.
Zumthor’s architecture and his description of
atmosphere imply that decisions about materi-
als 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 Miesian ab-
solutism 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 pre-
vailing 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
Zumthor is not, however, a sole practitioner and has built some large and complex buildings. He insistently pleads to be left alone to get on with his work, regularly refusing invitations to lecture, for example, but “alone” now means working with some 19 (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 reiteration of the meaning of materials in favour of an investigation into their effects. The actual palette has grown hugely with mostly hybrid materials now. Ecologicalcriteria 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 explanation. One that is so struck by its presence proves how unusual it is. Tatsuzumi Aida wrote that the architect’s gift to contemporary life was to provide a moment of silence in a tumultuous world. 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.

When listening to Zumthor describing 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 tactonics; the emphasis placed on “the container” as well as “the contained”. It is clear, however, 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 “[m]inimal tends to discard rather than embrace. Quiet in contrast, admits complexity but only a complexity that is modulated, that is distilled and condensed.”

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” while also describing the “essential substance” of architecture coming from “feeling and insight”. It is this craftsmanship of architecture that makes the work so rich.

Like Utzon, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, Ákvaro Sza 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.” The qualities of Zumthor’s smallest works (Atelier Zumthor, Kloster Bruder Chope), 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 recognize 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” but it unlocks something in us that completes his composition. “We see things not as they are but as we are.” 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.”

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. Among his latest accolades is the Premiun Imperiale in 2004, given by a prize awarded annually since 1989 by the Japan Art Association and also known as the Nobel Prize for the Arts.
9. Interview with Peter Zumthor, 10th December 2007, Haldenstein, Switzerland.
11. T. Marshall and S. Newton, “Scholarly Design as a Paradigm for Practice-Based
RUDOLF STEINER: Occult Crank or Architectural Mastermind?

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) saw architectural creation as a means of apprehending our place in the cosmos and his esoteric system of Anthroposophy aimed to demonstrate the correspondence between the spiritual and material worlds. Much of the literature available on Steiner tends to polarize him as either a creative genius or eccentric oddity, with architectural historians generally tending to adopt the latter view. Despite the fact that Steiner’s architectural conceptions have remained marginal, the highly acclaimed works of many Anthroposophically inspired architects suggest that his gnostic perceptions may have something worthwhile to offer contemporary architecture.