

The Enigma of Peter Zumthor

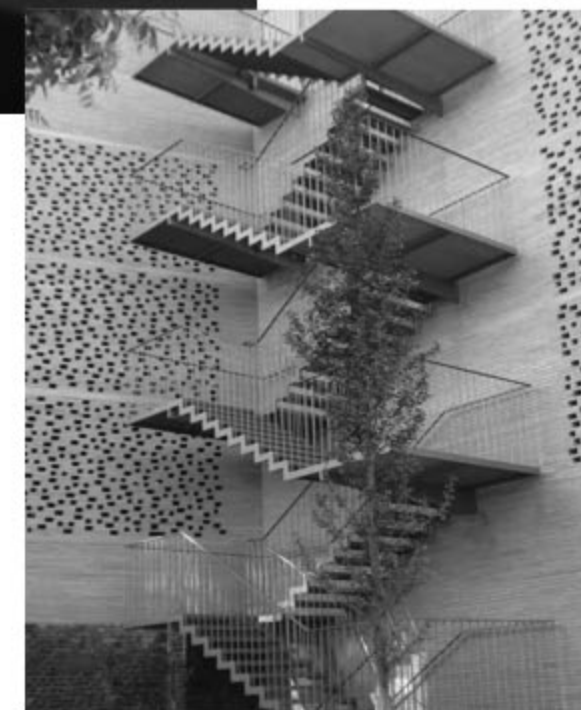
In this extensive interview, Switzerland's materials magician talks about the way of his architectural work and life, recent projects and how his buildings are part of the wider world of art and real life.

I By night Bregenz Kunsthaus glistens, an art cube façade shimmering in its rainbow of artificial colours. By day the clouded glass paneling is a blur of greys, something of the interior half-resolved looking in from the outside, half responding to the day's shifting light. The Kunsthaus, at the edge of Austria's western most border with the Bodensee was ten years old last year, and up till autumn 2007 its Swiss architect, Peter Zumthor's, most recent major aesthetic statement. The glass obscures a steel framed facade, which in turn holds two suspended concrete upper floors. Each is joined by two stair-cases, the murk of outer light never quite penetrating the three floor gallery spaces, let alone the connecting stair well passage. The Swiss do concrete well, and Zumthor is a master of the material. Not for nothing did one writer describe concrete in Zumthor's hands as like velvet. Climbing the Kunsthaus staircases mixes anticipation and augury, as if a final stage of a journey is on the cusp of completion. The concrete is grey, cold underfoot, austere, yet when the final upper floor comes you turn a corner, released into a large open light space. I was reminded of something of the same feeling arriving at Zumthor's Haldenstein practice, where on entering the older of his two studios, the initial experience occurs on the way up to the first floor reception area. Here again, a simple stair-case, immediate, enclosed and reminiscently austere, makes itself felt.

2007 was a busy year for the architect, the first for nearly a decade in which Zumthor returned to the spotlight with a new major building, the Kolumba Catholic museum in Koln. Since it opened in the autumn, the new museum has been garlanded with praise from around the architectural world. Zumthor also completed a small and sculpturally inflected work, the Bruder Klaus chapel, also in Western Rhineland, Westphalia, the beautiful looking piece being designed without charge. And back in Bregenz, through the autumn and into January 2008 the Kunsthaus held a major Zumthor retrospective, *Buildings and Projects 1986 – 2007*, to coincide with its tenth anniversary.

Along with the exhibition, the Kunsthaus timetabled two public talks for Zumthor, which were held in the theatre adjoining the Kunsthaus. Zumthor titled the talks, *Autumn Works* and *Spring Works*

respectively, although the latter was on a cold January day hours before the exhibition closed. Zumthor's continental appeal, perhaps primarily in the German-speaking world, but further afield as well, remains completely undimmed. The audiences for both evenings didn't look particularly fashionable; there were open and youthful faces in the main, along with a smattering of older types. There was a noticeable absence of style-arbiters, and refreshingly, hardly a black polo neck in sight. Instead, there was quite a bit of time warp Bohemian in the feel of the earnest audience. What there was throughout was a definite buzz. I could tell it was an event, the big name of this sub-Alpine region in town. I also came across folk who had travelled from Italy, Paris, and from all over different parts of Germany, as well as from Switzerland and Austria. Zumthor, although hardly without his controversial side, is still a hero of sorts for many and I found



it interesting that he brings out curiosity and fervour in the young.

Bregenz, at the eastern end of Lake Konstanz, and as part of Vorarlberg, isn't short for architects, and Graubünden, the eastern canton where Zumthor has made his home, isn't far from the Austrian county. There are various similarities between Vorarlberg and Graubünden, with their respective homegrown architectural scenes which are explored thoroughly in the accompanying *The river runs regionally* piece (page 76). Zumthor, as the piece makes clear, is one of the striking anomalies, if that is the phrase. There is no equivalent in Vorarlberg. The regard in which he is held within the architectural community has made him, whether he likes it or not, a hero of sorts. He also moved to, rather than grew up in Graubünden, and helped nurture the generation of architects and engineers who have since become known throughout Switzerland and in some cases across the continent. The Vorarlberg Baukunstler were also fascinated by social issues, and talking with Dietmar Eberle from Baumschlager & Eberle, Vorarlberg's most internationally successful practice, Eberle railed against an architecture focused on cultural buildings. He could have been talking of Zumthor here, although the Kunsthaus is considered to be at the far, radical end of the cultural building typology,

providing some integrity against Eberle's critique. And anyway, Eberle and Zumthor go back a long way. According to Zumthor, around the time of the Bregenz competition, Eberle said to him, 'we're all just farmers' and therefore wouldn't be in the running to build an industrial arts complex such as the Kunsthaus. This view is also confirmed by the fact that the short-list for

Zumthor's museums

Opposite page: Kunsthaus Bregenz

This page: the Kolumba museum