

In the presence of craft, colour and concrete



Feted for his forceful architecture of presence, Valerio Olgiati is both well known amongst, and at one remove from, the Graubünden architectural community. Here Olgiati discusses the aesthetics informing three new projects, and its less well-known connection to integrating craft into this building culture.

Craft into concrete: the Bardil House and its dancing sun-motifs

The road to Flims from Graubünden's first and last valley town, Chur, gradually climbs the Alpine mountain-side. Approaching the town, ski-resorts hug the steepening slopes. Flims itself, feels a centigrade or two quieter than the tide of conspicuous consumption that arrives every winter down the road. Close to the half-way point of the long, shop-lined street that threads through the town, is a building which immediately pulls you into its ambit. Initially, one registers that the building is entirely white, next that it is a cube with deeply inset, evenly spaced windows. But look at the building longer and there is something unsettling, on the edge of uncanny about it. As with some other buildings from Graubünden, the feeling and atmosphere evoked, goes deeper than first sight would suggest. Despite its complete white-out, the building is called the Gelbe Haus – the Yellow house, and acts as the region's main Architecture centre. It is one of the first buildings by Valerio Olgiati, who grew up in Flims – though this is misleading as Olgiati is one of most international sons of Graubünden's architectural scene. It is also a building which speaks of the qualities Olgiati is immersed in pursuing, an unusual mix of a highly abstracted language of aesthetic value and the practical hands-on language of craft.

'I always knew I had to paint it white, because when it was natural grey stone it always looked too much like a rural building, or too much of a professional idea of what a rural building would look like. It was ridiculous. So I painted it white, and it looked like a phantasmagoria, in a certain way it looked like an invention. And also like a Taj Mahal. It was amazing how it looked.' Valerio Olgiati, bespectacled, suave, in his early fifties and living and working again in Flims, speaks with passion about the building, and not without reason. Gelbe Haus is historically linked to Olgiati's father, Rudolf Olgiati, also well-known in the Swiss architectural world. It is the second of six buildings completed or reworked since resettling in Flims four years ago, after a spell in Los Angeles ended when the younger Olgiati returned after his marriage to a Californian broke up bringing him back to Graubünden. After studying at ETH, in 1986 he set up an office in Zurich, though during our conversation, he remarks that his younger pre-architectural school years helping his father on the practical side of building has been an equal if not more significant influence. He is often identified as part of the Graubünden community of architects, a point he protests with some energy. 'I never studied with or worked at Peter Zumthor's office' – (one of the