IN CONVERSATION

PETER ZUMTHOR

The 'New Nordic – Architecture & Identity' exhibition (July–September 2012) at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark is significant for the way that it has defined architectural identity in a Northern European context. Here its co-curator, **Michael Asgaard Andersen**, provides an edited version of a conversation between **Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor** that was featured on a large screen at the show and included at full length in the museum catalogue.

When architects design buildings in places that are not well known to them, the interpretations of local and regional traditions are often sharpened. The unfamiliarity allows the architect to see the building traditions of a place with fresh eyes. In his built and unrealised work in the Nordic countries, the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor has explored the traditions of these places with a particular sensitivity towards topography, daylight and materiality. This has resulted in projects that simultaneously continue and renew tradition. In this conversation with Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, he discusses this in relation to the significance of identity in architecture.

PZ: I get older and I see that actually there's a connection between the past and the future. Everything I do comes from the past, not only as forms but as real things. Everything is connected to the past in real things, but it's also connected to the future, because these things here will be part of the future, of my future and the future of other people. This actually makes me very calm, this idea.

PZ: Art and architecture are about beauty and truth, about the happy moment. It's not about old or new. It's about quality and beauty. I remember some 15 years ago a lady at a lecture in Holland asked me this really courageous question: 'Peter, do you think you are a modern architect?' I said: 'I don't understand this question. I live now. Whatever I do must be contemporary. This is my response to everyday life today.'

PZ: Yes, I share this view. The world is full of beautiful old buildings and cities; the evidence is overwhelming. Old buildings well made add to human dignity. I think in the end it's a matter of dignity. You surround yourself with good things and you work for good-quality things, beautiful things. This is dignity. Of course it's also a privilege.

PZ: Well, maybe the question of identity comes down to distinctiveness: that something becomes recognisable, has character and is a bit different from something else. And of course, as you said, there is almost a spiritual aspect of identity. I think there is character in good architecture. It creates place – place that you can relate to, and this produces identity.

Michael Asgaard Andersen

HALDENSTEIN | MAY 2012

JUHANI PALLASMAA

JP: *I think it's an important aspect of tradition that the better new works are, the better they make us understand old works. They reveal and expose old works in a new light, and I think that it's our responsibility not to turn our back on what was done earlier, but somehow to reveal its essence.*

JP: *You referred to the dimension of life in architecture and landscape. Isn't one aspect of life in architecture the traces of time and use, which Modernism has tended to neglect, because we have an ideal of being eternally young? That's what we want to be and want our buildings to be, but you seem to have a different attitude, as I do. I think the traces of use and patina and the traces of weather and all that enrich the building: they bring in the narrative of life and time.*

The sense of place makes me happy. I like to travel the world. But it's important for me that I'm anchored here. To come from a place, I think, is a very basic human thing.
— Peter Zumthor

JP: *We tend to think that the settings of our life are stages where we act out our life. But I have learned as I grow older that this bond is much stronger. The mental world and the outer world are actually one and the same continuum. When you begin to think in that way the significance of architecture and landscape, or any surrounding, is definitely enhanced, because in addition to the physical things we are also dealing with mental things, and not only our own, but also those of other people and people to come.*

JP: *Perhaps even in a wider sense. For instance, it's clear to me that each one of the Nordic countries has its own architectural identity. It's easy to say this is a Norwegian building, this is a Swedish building, a Finnish building. Architecture can also support cultural identity at a wider*

Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor filmed in conversation in Haldenstein, Switzerland, on 7 May 2012, in preparation for the exhibition 'New Nordic – Architecture and Identity' at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark.

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Peter Zumthor, Steilneset Memorial to the Victims of the Witch Trials, Vardø, Norway, 2012
The memorial comprises two structures, the one here, conceived entirely by Zumthor, and a second housing an installation by the late Louise Bourgeois. Zumthor reinterprets the spare wooden fish-drying racks once common to this region in the extreme north of Norway: a renewal of memory, and a reconnection between place, past and future.

PZ: Right. If I think of no identity, of architecture without any identity, would this be globalised architecture?

PZ: Identity has something to do with the real thing.

PZ: You also have to respect the other: you can't just get stuck in your own identity-making. There's a responsibility in this. It's beautiful that the tree belongs to a family. It's completely unique, but as a type it belongs to the family. In my buildings I like the way they are part of a bigger family of other buildings, as types and as pieces of an urban landscape or organism.

PZ: Normal buildings, simple buildings, anonymous buildings – this is something that should be taught again. This is very interesting and important to us, the ability to see certain qualities in the ordinary and to use it, work with it.

PZ: I think there must be young architects who have the same ideas as we have – there must be – who have got beyond this commercial stuff where all the buildings are just a neat and nice pattern on the facade. I can see the young people in the office here, there's a lot of interest in going beyond these superficial things. There's hope in terms of talent. People are talented. ⌂

level, not only on an individual basis. And then at the more abstract level, in my view, architecture creates certain frameworks for understanding things. We understand landscape, for instance, in relation to architecture. We understand the passing of time in relation to architecture, etc. We understand human institutions in relation to architecture, so architecture somehow organises our experiences on a preconceptual level. That's one aspect of how architecture has its impact on what we think about ourselves.

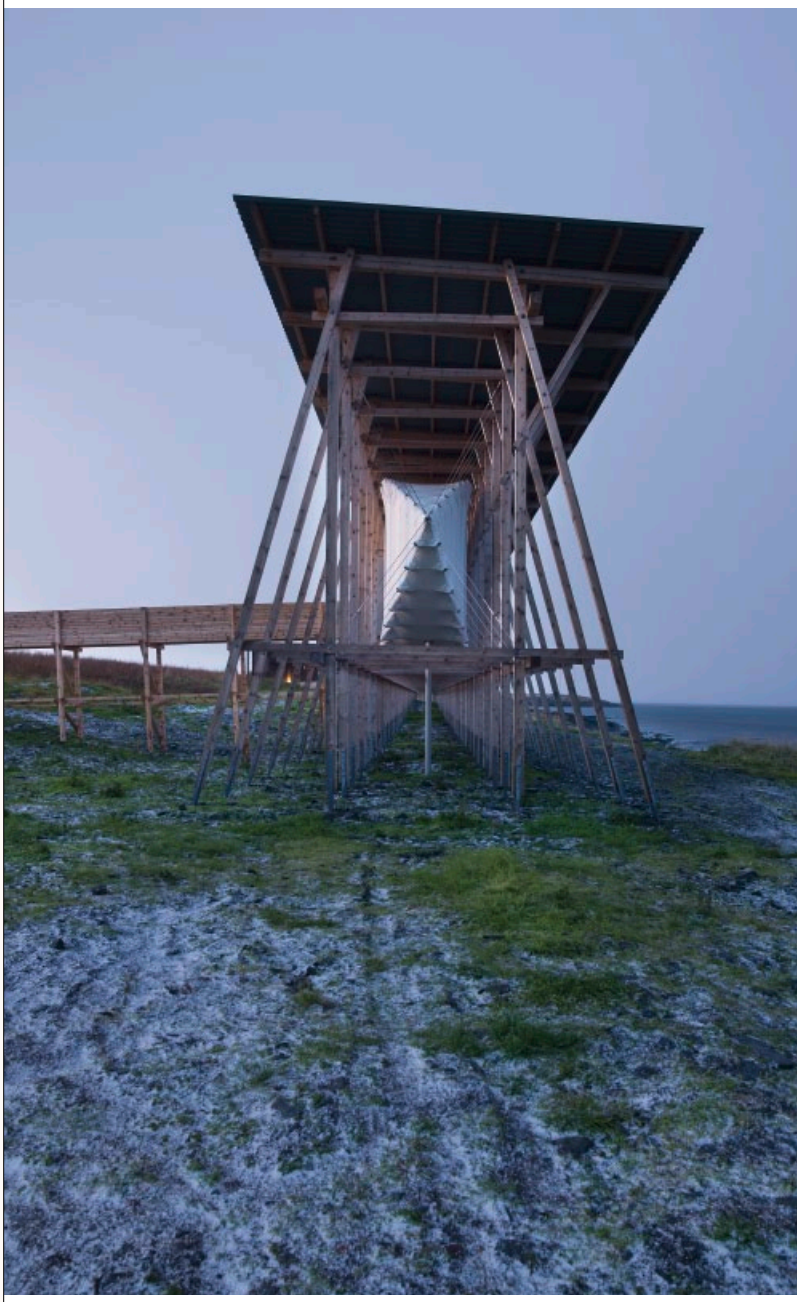
JP: *Probably.*

JP: *Yes, and it has to do with your personal history and your family history and the history of your wider world. We are not only here and now, we are here as products of time in many ways. But that tends to be forgotten, particularly in today's world, which is increasingly a world of 'nowness'. For instance, identities are sought in fashion, which vanishes in three months. That, I think, levels down the whole notion of identity.*

JP: *I think that's an important point, because today so many people seem to believe in uniqueness and individuality, and I don't understand how those could mean anything exclusively positive in architecture or arts. I think we need a certain anonymity and universality in things. Otherwise they won't speak to us.*

JP: *Those are almost like swearwords in today's architectural world – normality and ordinariness. But I think they are the juice of life, that they have to be and can be refined into beautiful things.*

Peter Zumthor, Steilneset Memorial to the Victims of the Witch Trials, Vardø, Norway, 2012
Memory, landscape and architecture are entwined in a delicate balance within this extreme and haunting Arctic Circle environment.



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