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Material Experience: Peter Zumthor's Thermal Bath at Vals

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Although most of his buildings are located in his native Switzerland, the architect Peter Zumthor has achieved international recognition for his work. He won the prestigious Carlsberg Architecture Prize in 1998, and his work continues to be covered widely by the international architectural press. Unlike some of his well-known contemporaries, Zumthor's oeuvre is not characterized by a signature style. Rather, each project represents an opportunity for the architect to explore the circumstances particular to each building – its site, its intended use – and to design a sensory experience that is both inventive and appropriate. In each of Zumthor's buildings, which often display exquisite minimalist detailing, one can sense the importance of architectural materials such as concrete, wood, glass and stone, in shaping the interaction between the building and its occupants. In fact, it is this dual fascination with materials and a person's direct sensory experience of architecture that defines Zumthor's approach to design. He writes that "all design work starts from the premise of this physical, objective sensuousness of architecture, of its materials. To experience architecture

in a concrete way means to touch, see, hear, and smell it" (Zumthor 2006: 66).

One of Zumthor's buildings – *Therme Vals* (the Thermal Bath at Vals, Switzerland) – is particularly notable for its use of materials and attention to sensory experience. Completed in 1996, the building is located in a small farming village on a steep hillside site 1,200 m above sea level, adjacent to natural hot springs which have been utilized for therapeutic bathing since the late nineteenth century. The building, which is connected to an existing 1960s hotel complex, contains pools of various temperatures and sizes, as well as changing rooms, steam baths, indoor and outdoor lounge areas and spa treatment rooms. On a typical day, visitors may include "archi-tourists," drawn from around the world to Zumthor's famous masterpiece, as well as local residents, for whom a percentage of each day's available tickets are reserved.[1]

When one visits the building, arriving after an hour-long drive that winds through the mountains from the city of Chur, the architecture does not immediately announce itself from the exterior. This is partly because of trees planted between the village's main road and the building, but is primarily the result of Zumthor's decision to engage the building with the land such that it is built partially underground. Covered by a planted roof of wild grasses that appears as an extension of the hillside above, the new facility is almost invisible when viewed from the hotel. This is the first clue that in this design,

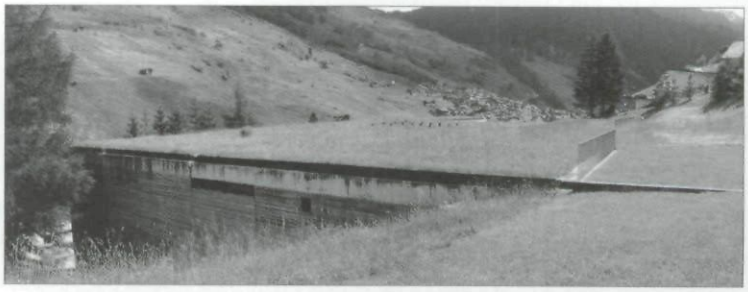

Figure 1
Exterior view of building showing planted roof and surrounding context. 2006. Photograph © Scott Murray.

Zumthor subverts the notion of architecture as a primarily visual medium – an object to be seen—in favor of a multisensory approach, creating a series of experiences revealed to the individual through use in space and time.

The dominant materials of Zumthor's building are stone and water. The stone, in conjunction with concrete, forms most of the wall and floor surfaces both inside and out; it is a bluish-gray gneiss (similar to granite) quarried from the mountains nearby.[2] The water comes from the on-site natural hot springs and is used to form pools for bathing, as well as to create other experiences of sound, smell and taste throughout. Although water is not often thought of as a building material (except as an amenity running through plumbing

hidden in walls), here it is integral to the architecture. Zumthor's design exploits the symbolic significance of water, which Ivan Illich calls "the fluid that drenches the inner and outer spaces of the imagination" (Illich 1985: 24). Here, spring water is channeled and collected in various ways to enable the visitor's direct interaction with and contemplation of it. It is this unique combination of two materials extracted from the surrounding mountains – stone and water – which forms the architecture, inextricably ties the building to its site and, in a sense, mediates between the visitor and the specificity of the place, its history and geology. Zumthor articulates this relationship, writing of his project for Vals: "Mountain, stone, water, building in stone, building with stone, building into the mountain, building out of the mountain – our attempts to give this chain of words an architectural interpretation, to translate into architecture its meaning and sensuousness, guided our design for the building and step by step gave it form" (Zumthor 1998: 138).

The entry sequence to the thermal bath begins in the lobby of the hotel. One descends from there to a lower level, walking through a dark, subterranean passage to reach the entry hall of the baths. Underground, devoid of natural light and surrounded by stone, this hall has the feel of a dark cave, albeit a cave notable for its right angles and refined modernist detailing. The sound of trickling spring water emanates from a series of bronze faucets along the right-hand wall, designed as drinking fountains to give visitors their first introduction (literally their first taste) of the water as it springs from the earth behind the wall. To the left, a series of openings lead to changing rooms, also dimly lit. Passing through doors on the other side of the changing rooms, one arrives on a platform raised above the main floor of the baths, from which the main pool is visible, along with glimpses of the landscape beyond through large glazed openings in the far wall. Very narrow, linear skylights sliced through the roof above bring in controlled natural light, which dramatically grazes the uneven surface of the stone walls. A long processional ramp leads down to the main level, where one may begin to explore the layout of the baths.

This main space of the building contains one large pool with 32° C water, around and within which several large stone-clad volumes are arranged. Upon exploration, one finds an opening into each volume that leads to a room-sized space within, each designed for a different sensory experience and marked by a sense of discovery. These spaces have the feel of being carved out of a block of solid stone, just as the building itself seems to be carved out of the mountain. One volume contains the *fire bath* (42° C) while another is the *ice bath* (12° C). The *flower bath* contains 30° C water the surface of which is covered with floating flower petals, creating an intense aroma and tactile experience. One volume contains a well from which spring water can be tasted, while yet another is a completely dark space called the *sounding stone*, with benches and

Figure 2
Interior view of stone walls and floor, glazed wall, concrete ceiling and slot skylight. 2006. Photograph © Scott Murray.

hidden speakers through which recorded sound art by composer Fritz Hauser is played.

There is no predetermined sequence for experiencing these spaces. Visitors are free to make their own path into and among the various pools and spaces at their own pace and in their own order, resulting in a multiplicity of circulation routes and constant activity. Haptic and auditory encounters prevail: the enveloping of the body in spring water of varying temperatures; the rhythmic sound of bare feet walking on wet stone; echoes of voices and splashing water, louder in the large central space contrasting with quiet solitude in the smaller baths. Elements to be gripped by the hand, such as door pulls and handrails, are all made of bronze, their smooth texture and warm color tone a counterpoint to the ever-present stone. One of the most interesting experiences occurs where an inside pool connects directly to the outside pool through an opening in the large glass wall that divides the two. Here one can move from inside to outside

while submerged in water, as if swimming out of a cave. Outside are stone terraces for relaxation, where emerging from the pool, one encounters a reawakening to the alpine climate as wet skin meets crisp, cool air, tempered by the warmth of direct sunlight.

Any built work of architecture can be read as a study of the materials used in its construction. In the process of design, such materials are typically evaluated for their structural properties, their aesthetic appearance and their suitability in relation to a variety of functional performance criteria. But in some cases, the materials of the building contribute more than mere functionality. As the physical embodiment of the ideas behind a design, materials can take on conceptual importance. Zumthor suggests that in the end, the direct experience of the materials may even surpass the idea. "Material is stronger than idea," says Zumthor, "it's stronger than an image because it's really there, and it's there in its own right" (Spier 2001: 19). Zumthor's Thermal Bath at Vals is an exemplary building in which the selection, deployment and detailing of architectural materials, particularly stone and water, are as important as form-making or the shaping of space and are in fact integral to one's experience of the architecture.

Notes

1. The village of Vals served as Zumthor's client for the design and paid for the construction of the Bath. Reflecting on the difficulties of achieving the construction of such a unique design and the important role of the client in the building process, Zumthor credits the villagers for their progressive architectural sensibility and their desire "to do something special, not something usual, a bath like everybody has" (Spier 2001: 22).
2. The walls of the building are primarily a load-bearing composite of natural gneiss stone and site-cast concrete, which Zumthor refers to as "poured stone" (Spier 2001: 18). For details of the wall assembly, see Zumthor 2001:170–2. To achieve a variety of desired effects throughout the building, Zumthor specified a number of different surface treatments for the gneiss, ranging from "polished, sandpaper grading 550, to sawn, chiseled, and the way it comes out of the quarry – split" (Spier 2001:19). In this way, the material is fine-tuned to suit specific applications.

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