



Thermal Bath at Vals by Peter Zumthor: AA EXHIBITION GALLERY, 16 FEBRUARY —22 MARCH 1996

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Thermal Bath at Vals by Peter Zumthor

AA EXHIBITION GALLERY 16 FEBRUARY – 22 MARCH 1996

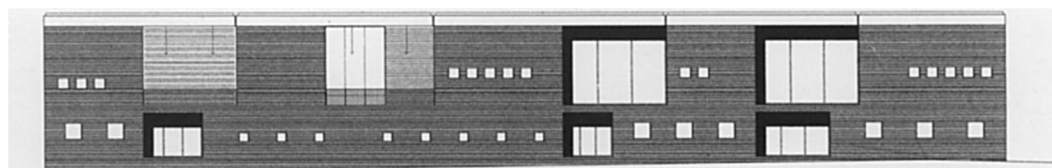
GRAVITY AND LIGHT

The Swiss architect Peter Zumthor has over the last years completed a series of built works that have captivated us with their object simplicity and their material sophistication. More than anyone he has reinforced the physical power of architecture. Avoiding rhetorical gesture he has managed to complete a series of buildings that are joyful in their manifestation of form, material and construction.

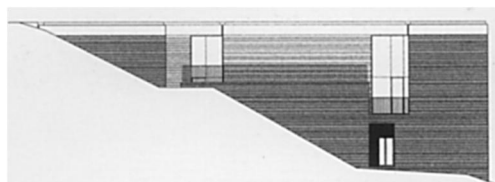
The exhibition held at the AA showing Zumthor's designs for a project under construction, *The Thermal Bath at Vals*, gave us a rare opportunity to understand his working method and ideas. The decision to exhibit an architect who so thoroughly dismisses the superfluous narrative of so much contemporary architecture and design also sends a message about the direction of the school, so long absorbed in artificial and inbred language.

In his lecture about the project, Peter Zumthor carefully described the overlapping ideas and determinants of the building. Avoiding formal representations Zumthor wove an intricate explanation of process. The departures of this process are not functional or deterministic, rather they follow enthusiasms and possibilities. Through this process we start to understand a project of evolving, overlapping, supportive ideas. Each idea physically linked to the other, Zumthor works with the project, intensely trying to understand what it wants to be, making explicit and elaborating physical ideas. One idea stimulates another, each idea gradually evolving the form and nature of the building. The rules develop and physical ideas become evident. Through his description we understand a process, desperately avoiding formal solutions, while dwelling as long as possible in the abstract. Yet this abstract seems to have body, as each drawing has physical presence. By the end of the lecture we have shared Zumthor's route, we nearly feel his effort, he describes each process as if he were a sculptor following the grain of the material and the process of formation.

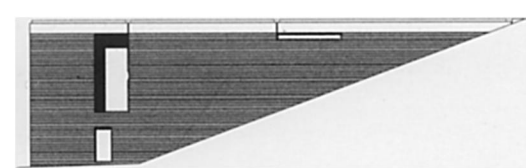
For a culture that is obsessed with imagery, in an institution that has over recent years been seemingly more concerned with image than idea, how extraordinary to enjoy a lecture without images of the project, where idea was central and the purpose construction. Nor was this idea a narrative. For Zumthor, idea is not a script that must accompany the project, in order to aid its legibility. Architectural idea can only be relevant in so far as it resides within architecture. Zumthor is not providing an ideology that verifies the work, his description does not demonstrate knowledge or intellect, but rather intelligence and perception.



East façade



South façade



North façade

The design of and debate about buildings is primarily concerned with form. In England this is quickly developed into a discussion of style. The work of Peter Zumthor demonstrates how form can be given purpose without borrowing meaning from preconceived solutions.

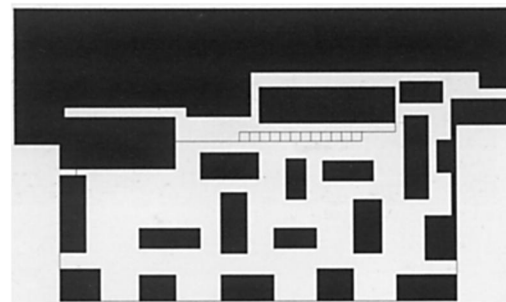
What was stimulating about Zumthor's description was his attitude to making form. Consciously avoiding formal preconceptions, he develops concepts that are rooted in ideas of making space and construction. Zumthor's ability seems to lie in his openness to follow idea, and enjoy the overlapping of ideas. He builds the vision out of complex and often ambiguous links. These cues are sought at every level, metaphorical, constructional, functional and material.

In defining his theory of 'openness' Umberto Eco has described how the modern work of art is distinguished from traditional art by its engagement of ambiguity. Eco argues that traditional or classical works are essentially unambiguous. They worked with a preferred reading. The modern work is 'deliberately and systematically ambiguous', a great variety of potential readings consist within it, and none can be said to be dominant. Traditional works of art confirm existing attitudes, stabilize cultural prejudices, institutionalize existing patterns of knowledge, and ground

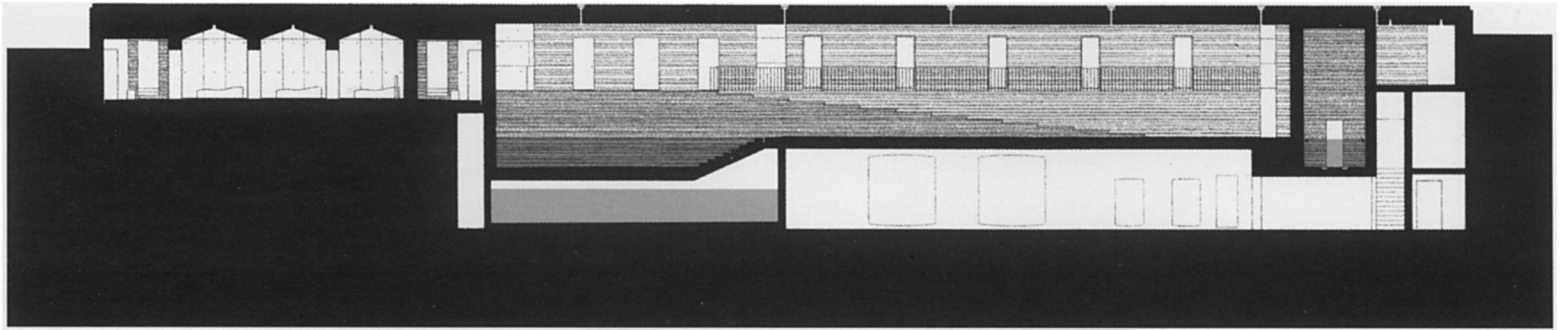
existing opinions. The modern work puts all these things into question by means of ambiguity. Eco claims that this places art at the centre of the 'modern questioning culture', and might even come to 'represent man's path to salvation, towards the reconquest of his lost autonomy at the level of both perception and intelligence'.*

In the conceptual process it is clear that Zumthor integrates both perceptual and intellectual responses and stories, intertwining and reinforcing ambiguity. Zumthor relates decisions about material, light, organization and construction without preconceived hierarchical order.

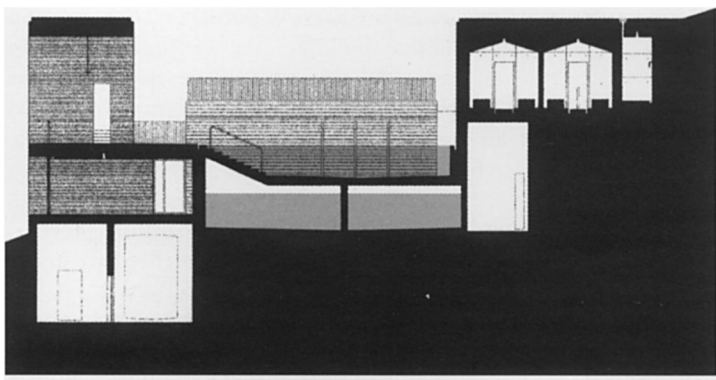
The power of Zumthor's work lies in his ability to find abstraction through construction. While the modern movement often suppressed, even denied, technique, tradition, craft and material in order to attain abstraction, Zumthor dives deep into the constructive process, coming up with solutions that are both sensual and abstract. While fashionable minimalism achieves its results by exclusion, Zumthor's work is informed by complex understanding and the working-through of problems. This is a skill rarely witnessed in an age where construction solutions and techniques are seen not to be the responsibility of the architect, and where the development of products has pushed architectural construction into a process of selection, rather than invention. Zumthor possesses a craftsman's knowledge of construction. In the project for the Bath, he gives integrity to the stone facing by integrating it into the process of pouring the concrete walls. Rather than face concrete walls in stone, Zumthor's 'need' to relate material, form and construction to each other has evolved a double-sided 'rectangular wall' construction. As part of this process another concept evolved, one of considering the roof as a series of 'tables', articulating the roof (externally the most visible elevation) into a constructive idea. This constructive idea is in



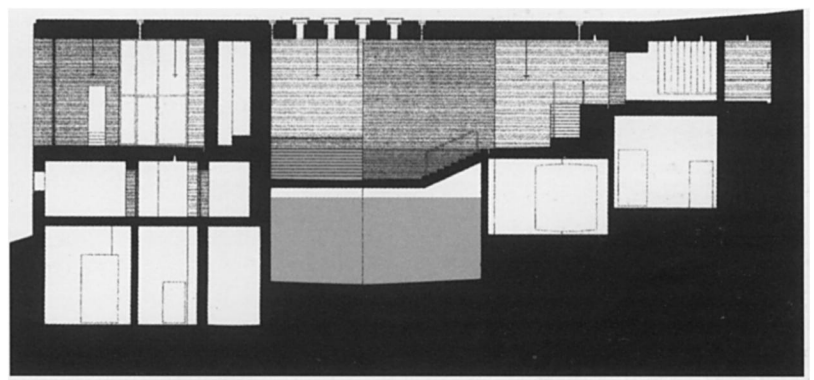
Block structure of bathing level



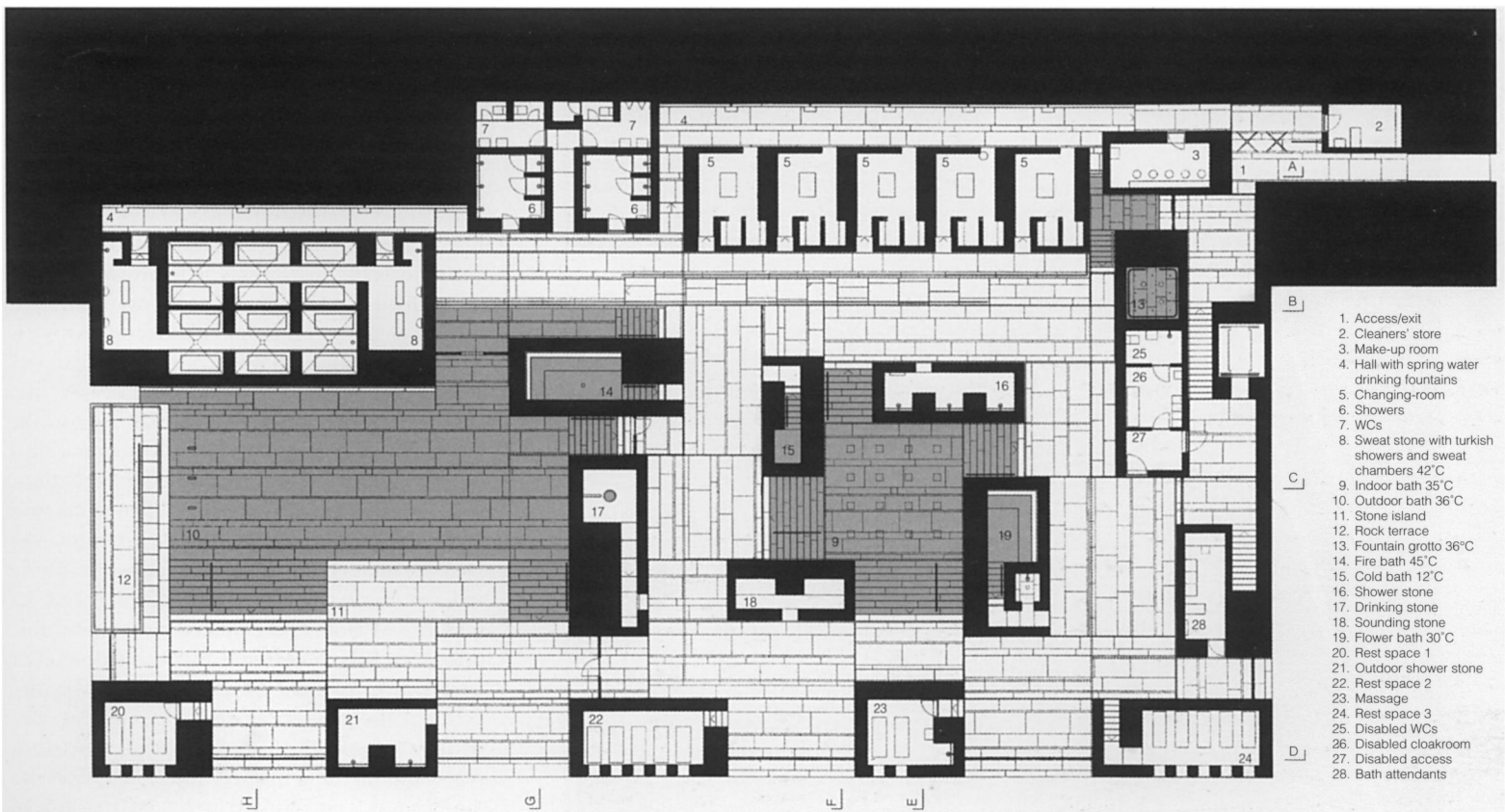
Longitudinal section B



Cross-section H



Cross-section F

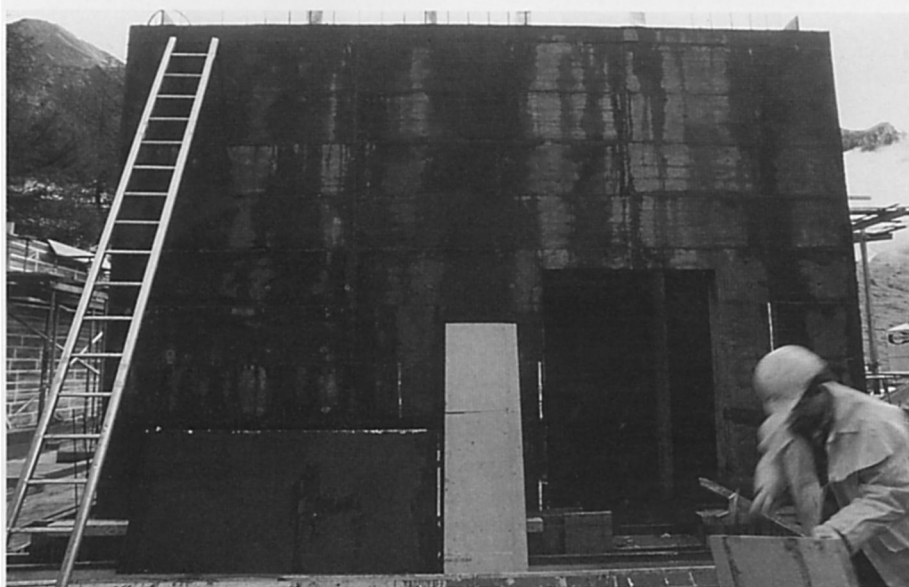


Plan of bathing level

- 1. Access/exit
- 2. Cleaners' store
- 3. Make-up room
- 4. Hall with spring water drinking fountains
- 5. Changing-room
- 6. Showers
- 7. WCs
- 8. Sweat stone with turkish showers and sweat chambers 42° C
- 9. Indoor bath 35° C
- 10. Outdoor bath 36° C
- 11. Stone island
- 12. Rock terrace
- 13. Fountain grotto 36° C
- 14. Fire bath 45° C
- 15. Cold bath 12° C
- 16. Shower stone
- 17. Drinking stone
- 18. Sounding stone
- 19. Flower bath 30° C
- 20. Rest space 1
- 21. Outdoor shower stone
- 22. Rest space 2
- 23. Massage
- 24. Rest space 3
- 25. Disabled WCs
- 26. Disabled cloakroom
- 27. Disabled access
- 28. Bath attendants



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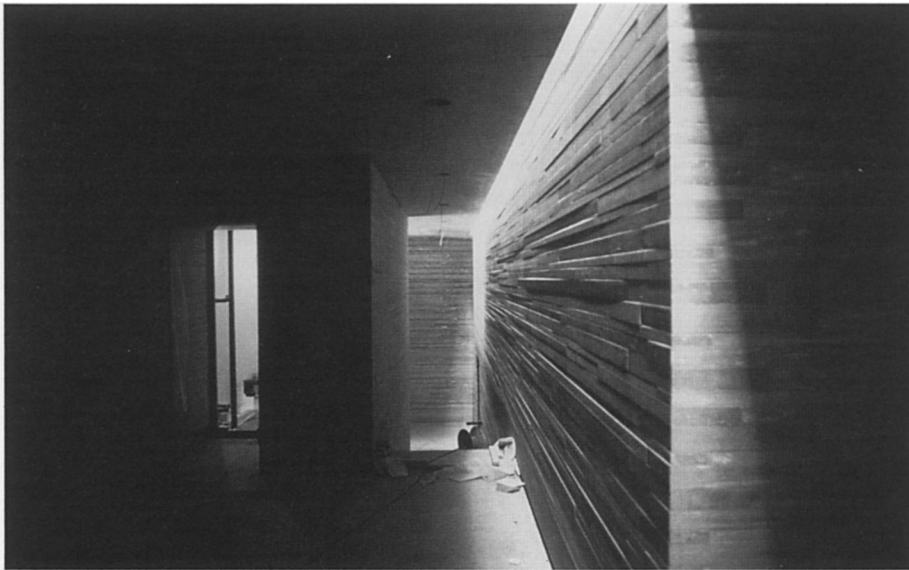


turn reinforced as a way of permitting light into the building.

Without visiting the building, even unfinished, it is difficult to offer a critique. It is interesting, however, to consider the project in relation to the architect's other work. While much of Zumthor's work is constructive, modelled in wood, the Bath is carved, a condition that Zumthor is not slow to exploit. While other projects depend for their form and on constructed ingenuity, the Bath is formally complex, invested with complex meanings, but materially simple, obeying the notion of carving. As if the possibility of carving forces a coherent and monolithic building, the architect is free to elaborate delicate and subtle traces into its surface. Moves that may be seen as mannerist in a constructive or plastic work are possible within the discipline of the carved work.

In many ways the Bath seems to be much more self-conscious than the architect's previous work. Construction plays a smaller part in the conceptual process; the making of space dominates the process. Faced with a construction not dependent on assemblage, Zumthor disassembles the monolith. The building form is separated into pieces, as if to avoid it becoming only plastic. The Bath seems more theatrical than other projects, elaborating and manipulating the physical and sensual characteristics of both the building and its programme. It is as if this manipulation was possible owing to the limits of carved spaces. The two aspects of carved shape are the location of edges and the working of the surface in relation to these limits. These two aspects depend on each other. The carved form encourages working and handling of the surfaces, an elaboration not found in Zumthor's other 'constructive' projects, where elaboration is rejected in favour of a minimalization of function. In the Bath each activity is celebrated in physical form.

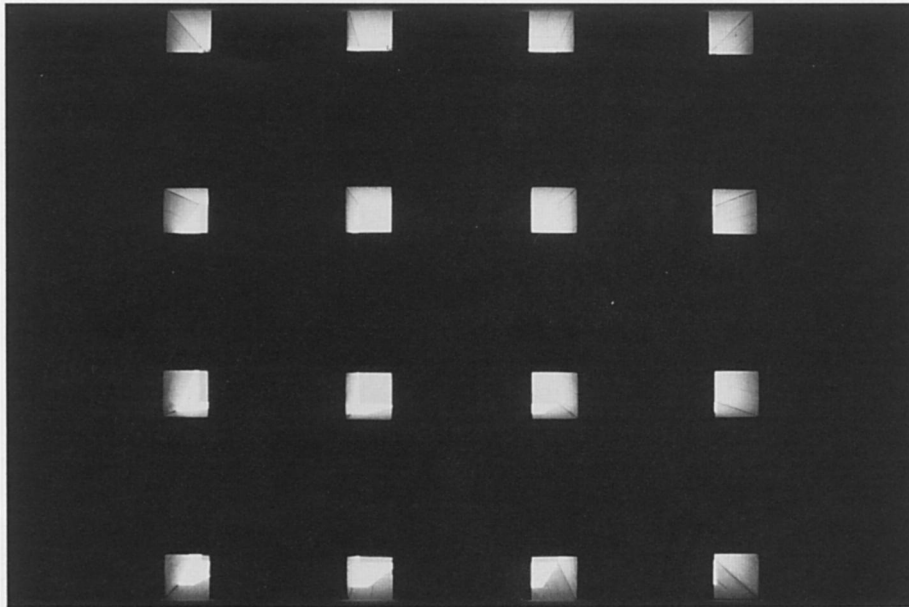
This is not a carved form. However, the spatial construct obeys rules which seem to be internalized. Zumthor gives construction to this 'carved form' by the introduction of the block structure and the 'ceiling tables'. The building is given integrity through this construction (the tectonic tables and the constructional 'retaining wall' system). Despite this ordering and its intellectual clarity, the spatial and monolithic presence of the building is inevitably dominant over the elemental construct. An ambiguity exists in the project between carving and construction, between space and element, between mass and light. Through his description we understand Zumthor's desire (and success) in making a total work. He is concerned (as we all



H. P. SCHULTZ, ZÜRICH

declare) with making buildings where each idea is supported by another, each decision determined by others, evolving a building of abstract perfection where the wilful behaviour of the architect is invisible. The power of Zumthor's built work depends on this completeness. More than any other contemporary architect Peter Zumthor has persisted in maintaining architecture as a constructive craft. Through his built work he shows us how architecture can be invested with idea, how idea does not have to conspire with ideology. He demonstrates that through a multiple and layered process architecture can have intent without rhetoric, purpose without dogma, gravity *and* light.

David Chipperfield



* Umberto Eco, 'Openness, Information, Communication', in *The Open Work*, edited by David Robey (London, 1989).

