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Zumthor's Baths — a sensual guide

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## Zumthor's Baths – a sensual guide

ORLA MURPHY



## 1. Sight (and blindness)

Still clothed on entrance, 4 doorways on the bathers' left are described in the wall by deep reveals of reflective red lacquer. Glimpsed bodies, limbs, reflections of skin and curves are part revealed and part concealed by black leather curtains across the entrances and exits. A threshold is established between the world of the bather and that which belongs to the outside world. By catching glimpses of bodies in states of undress this threshold confronts the expectant bather and tempts them beyond the curtain. Mystery renders the space of the private world beyond tantalising; erotic, intriguing. In the words of Francis Bacon, "*the sensation doesn't come straight out at you but slides slowly and gently through the gaps.*"<sup>i</sup> The mood of the building is set.

*the mahogany in the changing rooms  
looks a little bit sexy, like an ocean liner,  
or a bit like a brothel for a second,  
perhaps.*<sup>ii</sup>

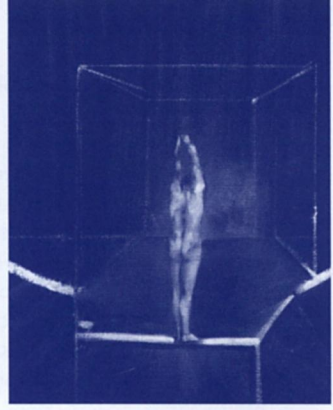
Parting a black leather curtain in the centre; clammy leather touches the cold body. The Turkish baths [42°C] consist of 2 suites of 3 rooms, each the same dimension, approximately 2.5 metres in depth, width and height. Darkness. The eyes begin to adjust and two black beds of stone reveal themselves, one to either side of the entrance axis. The body begins to acclimatise to the heat. It sweats. Lie down. The limits of the space can be barely understood in the darkness. Are there other bodies beyond the next curtain? Go and part the next curtains and investigate. Go further into the blackness, the increasing heat and humidity. Sweat more. Re-adjust the senses. Lie down and let the heat take over. A black hose in the corner invites discovery. Turn the valve and cold water pours relief and shock. Cool the feet, the stone. Watch as the water finds its level and flows to the channel in the black floor, the sound of water draining through a tiny hole. The third black curtain leads to the final room of two more black stone beds. Bodies lie there enjoying the heat and intimacy in the knowledge that this is a public space but also an intensely private moment. The heat is just bearable; the humidity is choking, but cleansing.

The second suite of steam rooms is for the unclothed body and differs only in the line of clothes pegs added to the vestibule wall.

Blackness and darkness in the Turkish baths are materials to be manipulated, reinforcing the atmosphere of mystery already hinted at in the changing rooms. By controlling darkness and by carefully lighting blackness, movements and rhythm of the bodies moving in the building are slowed. Walking, wading, showering – all motion is slow and deliberate. Eyes need time to adjust to the half-light. Fill in and elaborate the details not visible.

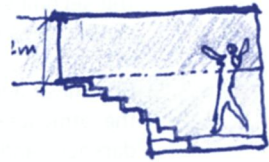
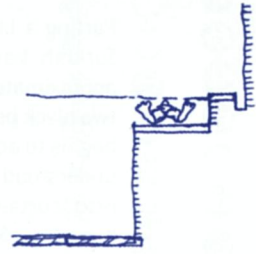
The main internal space of the building contains the indoor pool [32°C]. Here bathers move past, appearing and disappearing around and emerging from the other pools located within the massive stone clad columns in the central space. Blue square roof lights are pieces of artificial sky and slender handrails effortlessly descend into the water. Bathers become voyeurs and actors. Everyone watches each other as they stroll or float by. Peter Zumthor says of the baths that everyone looks nice in them. Old and young, fat and thin, wrinkly, everyone somehow looks *nice*. Not gorgeous, not glamorous, but nice. This too is what Peter Salter means when he speaks of the beauty in our ugliness.<sup>iii</sup> At peace. Moving in rhythm with the building - clear alpine light pouring through the deep wall facing across the valley.

Swim through the façade to the outdoor pool [36°C]. A tall glazed screen separates the indoor pool from the outside. One glazed panel has been omitted and water flows to three quarters of its height. The remainder of the opening is filled with clear plastic hanging sheets like the kind in supermarkets. The body adjusts to the change in the air temperature. Head and shoulders over the meniscus are cool; body and limbs below are warm. Steam rises off the water. The mountains are an arm's length away and are capped in snow. Between them and the bathers, the building rises to frame a vertical plane of mountain and huts. The spa waters of Vals are extremely high in iron. This iron oxidises on contact with air forming a red tide mark at the point where the stone meets the top of the water. The rear wall of the outside pool is provided with a shelf about 350mm below the water level - the dimension of a body lying. Bathers recline here concealed by water, suspended just below the surface. At the other end of the pool huge curved brass spouts shoot water under pressure onto pleased backs. A tiny but high niche provides a cubby-hole for lovers, who disappear out of sight.



## 2. Hearing & tasting.

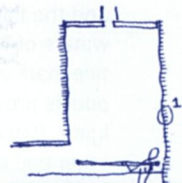
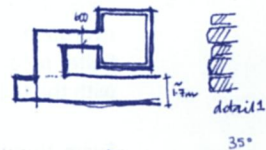
Back indoors the bather swims into the fountain grotto, (36°C) turning through ninety degrees and finally turns again through a low narrow passage, no wider or higher than one body, into a square chamber, lined with rough-cut stone on walls, floor and ceiling. A single thin bronze rail runs around the edge of the bath just above water level, inviting bathers to recline in the corners and spread their arms out. Bather after bather does this. Chanting seems to come from the stone itself, or from the core of the earth, channelled through the rock to this space. Distant sounds are muffled through the stone all around, reverberating on the hardness of the surfaces. The sounds within the building are all enjoyable, the sound of water mainly; gently splashing as a body enters the pools, the sound of a bather emerging from water, the sound of the giant showers splashing water on the stone surfaces. The far off sound of the powering of the baths is a little like a distant ship engine. This sound is the only perceptible clue to any servicing of the building, which otherwise seems to be lit, heated and serviced by the nothing but the mountain itself. In a world too full of signs and unnecessary directions there are no distractions here: no instructions, no information other than tiny beautiful bronze figures indicating the temperature of each bath. This is all the bather needs to know.



The sounding stone is a tiny chamber containing two narrow black leather beds in separate niches. Lie down. Have a rest. Two bodies doze in one another's arms, listening. In another tiny chamber an older couple stands around the drinking stone watching the water appear to bubble up from the mountain. A brass cup hangs by a chain from the guardrail, allowing a sample taste of the spa waters. Bitter oxide. Voices echo around the small space. Smiling at one another the couple try to make out the distance to the source of the spa water below.

## 3. Smell

The flower bath (30°C) is entered up steps and then down again. This bath and the fire bath share a similar type of space within the stone caves. Longer than wide, the concrete along one long wall and the back wall is profiled to form a seat. Feet on the floor, bottom on the seat, head and shoulders are above the water. A channel separates the back of the seat from the wall of the bath. Fragrance fills the air, in the water hover thousands of petals. Catch one if you can. Breathe. Laugh.



#### 4. Touch

The fire bath (**42°C**) is stepped into like a bath (or broth?). Red concrete walls and seat, black floor, the only relief here is the backrest, just wide enough to support a body suspended out of the hot water for a moment. Hands reach up from the water to leave a wet print of the surface of the concrete. It dries and fades away within seconds. Out and plunge into the blue ice bath (**12°C**). Pores close. Bring the body temperature down. And out.

Everything the body comes in contact with is luxurious in its materiality and meticulous in its detail. The ironmongery in the hand, stone under the foot, terrazzo to sit on. Bathers leave small traces of their presence throughout the building; wet footprints thread their way around the central space and discarded towels hang from slender rails.

*You can have a lot of sexy things with stone, stone and naked skin; the feel of it when you walk barefoot, and how it feels if you go over it with your hands. Pleasant for the body comes first.<sup>iv</sup>*

There is a subtle quality at Vals that anticipates the sensuous actions of the bather and celebrates the primal simplicity of the body in contact with water and stone. Entering the baths, the bather embarks on a journey, during the course of which all the senses are tested and re-charged; he becomes acutely aware of his body and how it experiences space, texture and sound. This process also signals an intensification of the relationships between all of the bodies in the building and a harmony of movement emerges. As a mother wades by, supporting a child on her shoulders, couples young and old embrace, holding one another's bodies made light in the water. Pairs of bathers float together hand in hand, or lie side by side on the heated terrazzo bed, chatting in the heat.

Vals is a building that demands the bather relate to it. In return, it provides the bather with a renewed awareness of the power of the senses and beauty of the human body.

*It is only through the figure that we really see the space and, in turn, it is only through the space that we learn to see the individual human body.<sup>v</sup>*

Orla Murphy is an architect and studio tutor in University College Dublin.

#### References:

<sup>i</sup> Quoted in *Francis Bacon in Dublin*, Hugh Lane Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, p. 53. Bacon termed the use of the curtain as a device in his paintings as 'shuttering'.

<sup>ii</sup> Peter Zumthor in Spier, S., 'Place, Authorship and the Concrete: Three Conversations with Peter Zumthor,' *Architectural Research Quarterly*, Volume 5, No. 1, 2001, pp. 15-36.

<sup>iii</sup> Salter P. in *Building Material 8*, 2002, p.24.

<sup>iv</sup> Peter Zumthor in Spier, *op. cit.*

<sup>v</sup> Schmeid, W. - *Francis Bacon: Commitment and Conflict*, Prestel-Verlag, Munich, 1996, p.31.