11

Zumthor's Trousers - a critical guide

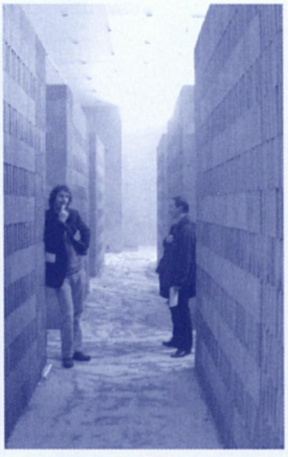
HUGH CAMPBELL

What's the problem with Peter Zumthor? He is, after all, one of the most widely revered architects of the last decade: creator of seminal works at Chur, at Vals, at Bregenz, renowned teacher, source of a thousand student projects, deployer of delicious details, transcender of fashion and taste, champion of architecture's enduring value. Everything about Zumthor exudes an unassailable rectitude. And yet despite all this, and despite the undoubted accomplishment and beauty of the architecture, there remains, for me, something fundamentally unsatisfactory about Zumthor's work.

After a recent visit to the Kunsthaus at Bregenz, the reasons for this became a little clearer. On a side excursion from a college trip, four of us arrive, slightly bleary-eyed, in Bregenz on a grey Sunday morning. When, replenished by black coffee in the black café, we finally enter the gallery building, a slowly unwinding joke is set in motion. We're greeted by a scattering of acro-props spanning floor to ceiling. A moment of doubt (is Zumthor falling down?) is followed by a flicker of Schadenfreude (Zumthor has failed!) before it becomes clear that the current exhibition, by the Spanish artist Sebastiao Sierra, is called 300 TONNES, which presumably means there's something very big and heavy upstairs that needs to be supported down here. Accordingly, as we mount from floor to floor, we find each space disrupted by a field of props. Glass panels from the suspended ceiling are removed and leant against the side walls to allow the props uninterrupted passage. The serenity of the spaces is rudely interrupted. The crude, roughly painted metal of the props jars with the exquisite perfection of the spaces' finishes - the jointless *terrazzo* floor, the chromed doorframes. And after this long set-up, on the top floor, the punchline. We emerge from the stairs to find that the whole space is occupied by large stacks of concrete blocks, sitting on plastic sheeting. Builders' debris is scattered across the floor. In one corner, a table is laden with hardhats, tabloids and teacups. The effect is uncanny – a builders' yard stacked with the base materials of construction is secreted within a lovingly crafted casket. The raw meets the cooked.

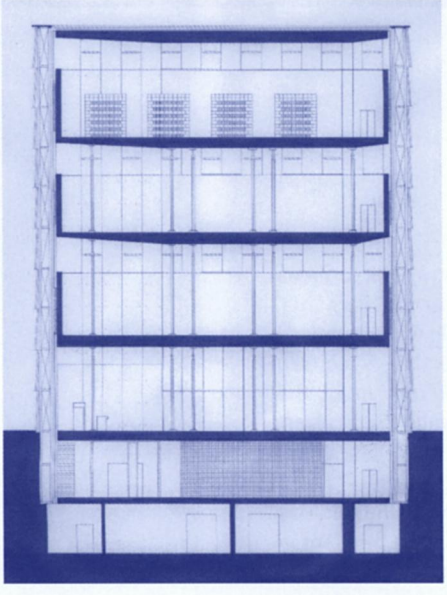
While most of the impressive roster of artists who have inhabited the Kunsthaus - from James Turrell to Olafur Eliasson – have seemed content to work with its serenely precious atmosphere, Sierra's witty installation is determined to challenge the architecture's self-importance. 300 tonnes - the combined weight of the blocks and a maximum 100 visitors (there's a counter at the entrance, keeping tally) – is apparently the safe limit of the building's structure, but what Sierra is really testing are the limits of Zumthor's architectural thinking.

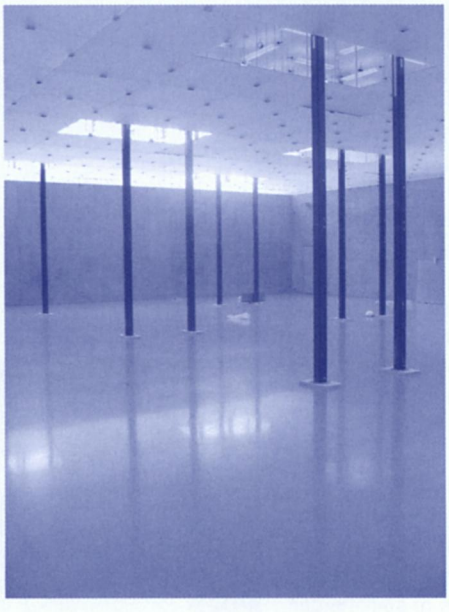
For Zumthor, architecture is fundamentally concerned with making: 'Construction is the art of making a meaningful whole out of many parts. Buildings are witnesses to the human ability to construct concrete things. I believe that the real core of all architectural work lies in the act of construction.'[1] Hence, his buildings are presented as constructs – as elements and components joined together carefully and systematically. The 'feathered' glass skin of the Kunsthaus is an obvious example: it reveals its own construction; the constituent parts are evident in the finished product. There is an interest in tectonic truth-telling here which can be traced back through Kahn and Mies to Perret and Viollet-le-Duc. And for Zumthor, as for many of these figures, construction, truth and morality are fundamentally linked. The attention paid to construction and, maybe more importantly, to the presentation of construction allows architecture to become coherent and comprehensible. This comprehensibility in turn begins to acquire - in Zumthor's view – an ontological status. The constructed object – the made thing – stands as a quiet sentinel of truth in a world devoid of 'the real'. Here's a passage that typifies this thinking:



'Arbitrariness prevails.
Post-modern life could be described as a state in which everything beyond our own personal biography seems vague, blurred and somehow unreal. The world is full of signs and information which stand for things which no-one fully understands because they, too, turn out to be mere signs for other things. The real thing remains hidden. No-one ever gets to see it.
Nevertheless, I am convinced that real things do exist, however endangered they may be. There are earth and water, the light of the sun, landscapes and vegetation; and there are objects, made by man, such as machines, tools or musical instruments which are what they are, which are not mere vehicles for an artistic message, whose presence is self-evident.
When we look at objects or buildings which seem to be at peace within themselves, our perception becomes calm and dulled. The objects we perceive have no message for us, they are simply there. Our perceptive faculties grow quiet, unprejudiced and unacquisitive. They reach beyond signs and symbols, they are open, empty. Here, in this perceptual vacuum, a memory may surface, a memory which seems to issue from the depths of time. Now, our observation of the object embraces a presentiment of the world in all its whole ness, because there is nothing that cannot be understood.[ii]

Even as it drifts into mystical obfuscation, the argument here remains clear - clear to the point of banality. Contemporary life bad – confusing, you see. No truth anymore. If only things could justƐehƐ be what they are. Like in the old days, you know - way back. (Needless to say, the childhood memories of the aunt's kitchen have already been wheeled out earlier in the essay.) All the usual characteristics of Zumthor's writing are present: the preachy tone, the peremptory dismissal of contemporary society, the nostalgia for simple, 'true' things, the appeal to some prelapsarian state of grace (to be found, presumably, somewhere in 'the depths of time'.) To the arbitrariness of 'post-modern life' is opposed the certainty of the 'real' object, the supposed value of the latter completely dependent on the supposed bankruptcy of the former. Well, if postmodernism revealed anything to us, it was precisely the inadequacy of thinking through such binary oppositions. If the achievement of true 'meaning' and understanding is made possible only through an outright rejection of the 'mere signs' of the contemporary world, then it seems a fairly hollow achievement. But this is exactly the premise embodied in Zumthor's architecture: it sets itself in opposition to what, for him, are the unmanageable complexities of our contemporary existence. It turns its back on the world and in so doing, actually admits its own weakness. The unalloyed reverence for craft and construction now begins to seem suspiciously like a substitute for any real engagement with the world. Within the bounds of the building, a resplendent perfection reigns. Beyond its limits … well, there's nothing to be done. There is a joke told in Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* about a man who goes to a tailor for a pair of trousers. After weeks of innumerable fittings, adjustments and refinements, the trousers are still not ready, and the man eventually explodes with exasperation: "'God damn you to hell, Sir, no, its indecent, there are limits! In six days, do you hear me, six days, God made the world. Yes Sir, no less Sir, the WORLD! And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months!' [*Tailor's voice, scandalised*] 'But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look – [*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*] – at the world – [*pause*] – and look – [*loving gesture, proudly*] – at my TROUSERS!'"[iii]





Of course, caring about tailoring doesn't mean not caring about the world. Mies van der Rohe, for instance, who pursued purity and perfection in steel for thirty years, always did so out of a desire that his architecture might quietly reconstitute the relationship between people and the world. He quoted Schinkel on the subject: 'A work of architecture must not stand as a finished and self-sufficient object. True and pure imagination, having once entered the stream of the idea that it expresses, has to expand forever beyond this work, and it must venture out, leading ultimately to the infinite. It must be regarded as the point at which one can make an orderly entry into the unbreakable chain of the universe.' Architecture is required to open itself out, rather than closing itself off. It should be a point of entry, rather than a dead end.

In very obvious ways, the Kunsthaus at Bregenz epitomises the closed nature of Zumthor's thinking. From the inside, the outside world is completely absent. There are no views out. Even the light has to be modulated and filtered before being allowed entry. From outside, the building seems an alien presence along the lakefront. It is in the world, but not of it. Its evanescent glass shroud is akin to the transparent mac worn by Gene Hackman in Francis Ford Copolla's brilliant 1973 film *The Conversation*. Hackman played Harry Caul, a sound surveillance expert who preferred to experience the world at one remove, who avoided direct engagement at all costs. But if Caul comes across as reticent and withdrawn, he is also remarkably self-absorbed. In Zumthor, we find a similar solipsism. What is most problematic about his work is not really its narrow focus, and certainly not its interest in materials and construction, but rather his conviction of the absolute moral superiority of these concerns. His architecture claims for itself a position outside the relativism and the 'arbitrariness' of contemporary society. But in fact Zumthor's position is just as arbitrary, just as ideologically loaded, just as much a cultural construct as any other. The potency of Sebastiao Sierra's installation lies in the way it draws attention to this piece of misdirection. The raw power of those dense stacks of rough concrete blocks points up the extreme self-consciousness of the gallery's construction. It's the blocks which, to use Zumthor's words, 'are not mere vehicles for an artistic message, whose presence is self-evident', while the building becomes a 'mere sign for something else.' This role reversal is then further complicated by the knowledge that the stacks of blocks themselves are, in fact, the vehicle for an artistic message. Suddenly nothing seems absolute or certain; nothing seems pure or simple. By upsetting the insistent equilibrium of Zumthor's architecture, Sierra reveals the narrowness, and the precariousness, of its ideological foundations.

Dr. Hugh Campbell teaches in the School of Architecture, University College Dublin.

Drawing by Catherine de Groot, 3rd Year, School of Architecture, University College Dublin.

References:

[i] Zumthor, P. - *A Way of Looking at Things*, Architecture and Urbanism, February 1998 extra edition, p. 8.

[ii] *Ibid*., p. 14.

[iii] Beckett S. - *Endgame*, in The Complete Dramatic Works, London: Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 103.