

Peter Zumthor 2009 Laureate Essay

Earthworks: The Architecture of Peter Zumthor

By Philip Ursprung

Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art, University of Zürich

More than the legendary episode at the beginning of Marcel Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past*—when the narrator dips a madeleine into a cup of tea and experiences a flashback to his childhood—was always intrigued by another, less-known episode at the end of the novel. Namely, the moment when the narrator gives way to an approaching carriage in a courtyard in Paris, steps back, and stumbles against some unevenly placed paving stones. He remains there, repeating the movement, one foot upon the higher flagstone and the other on the lower. He tries to figure out what this movement reminds him of, while the passers-by watch him with amusement. Eventually, he recalls the same sensation he had many years ago and is overwhelmed with happiness: "It was Venice." The occurrence in the courtyard evoked the feeling he had experienced as he "stood on two uneven stones in the baptistery of St. Mark's." What Proust describes—the tactile sensation of the uneven ground under his slow moving feet—is intrinsically connected to what Maurice Halbwachs described as "spatial memory." And this spatial memory, I would argue, is a crucial component of the architectural experience.

Peter Zumthor is among those architects who consider more than just the visual aspects of a project. For him, it is not only important how a floor, stair, wall, room or façade look, but also how they feel when one touches them with his or her finger tips, how they smell, how they resonate and sound, and what kind of associations, mental images, expectations and memories they evoke. His buildings always revolve around the relationship between the human body and its environment, and the way the individual subject experiences very specific situations. However, it took me some time to realize this. Until recently, I had a very clear yet narrow image of his architecture. I had much respect for the beauty and atmospheric effects of his buildings. I admired the calm and steady pace with which his small team produced projects, uninterested in expansion and spending more inventive energy on seemingly marginal projects than many international architects invest in spectacular skyscrapers. Nevertheless, I could not subscribe to Zumthor's idea of authenticity, his anachronistic conception of nature, and his romantic impulse that I felt pervaded his oeuvre. Although I had visited some of his buildings, my image of his work was mainly influenced by photographs, especially those of the Saint Benedict Chapel (1987) in Sumvitg in the Swiss Alps, taken by the Swiss photographer Hans Danuser in the late 1980s. Danuser's interpretation, depicting the chapel in misty black and white photographs, had shaped my image of Zumthor as an earthbound, quasi-romantic architect, working far from urban centers in the remoteness of an untouched landscape.

Then, in early 2004, I went to visit Saint Benedict Chapel. I walked through the tiny hamlet above Sumvitg, passing farmhouses, stables and vacation homes. A narrow gravel road leads up to the chapel. The effort of walking uphill, the crunching gravel under my shoes, the smell of fresh pines in the nearby forest, and the arrangement of the small stables and vacation houses shaped my perspective. I was waiting for my mental image of a remote chapel hovering in the sublime Alpine landscape to materialize. Then suddenly the building appeared before me, much smaller and much more elegant than expected. The shingle surface of the outer skin was burned black by the sun, just as the stables and wooden huts in the area. The few, narrow concrete steps that led to the door of the chapel felt not only firmer than the gravel road but also more comfortable. After the ascent on the rough path, the steps to the chapel required no effort. My impression was not so much to ascend the steps but to descend toward the chapel. My strenuous walking turned into relaxed striding. My movements became more measured, more rhythmically structured, more focused. They became appropriate to the building, so to speak. I immediately remembered the episode by Proust, and I recalled various moments when one or two steps had led to a radical shift of my spatial experience. Almost automatically, my hand followed the thin metal handrail the way one holds onto a gangway before boarding a ship. I was now facing the door panel made from vertical wooden laths. It appeared lighter and more welcoming than the usual massive doors barring church entrances, but I had a brief moment of hesitation. Will the chapel be locked? Did I

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make the long journey in vain? Then the door swung open, almost by itself. The unexpectedly long and narrow doorknob, which increased the leverage and lay in the hand like a comfortable tool, facilitated the entry further. From the very beginning, I was already involved in the chapel's spatiality. I became part of choreography of everyday movements and gestures. I was neither impressed nor dwarfed by the building. On the contrary, it made me pay attention because of its fragility. The details of the building subtly guided the way I moved and helped me become familiar with the environment. Later, Peter Zumthor told me that he always developed his spaces from a bodily experience and "a feeling for the body, for a physical presence, or a certain aura" motivated the design process.

As I entered the building, I felt as if I were putting on a coat. The moment of entry was not marked by a specific threshold but by the sudden change of perception. My experience was discontinuous in the sense that the outside was incompatible with the inside; the process of transition resembled a series of cuts in a cinematic montage. Hearing, smelling, touching and seeing were inseparably intertwined. The warmth and softness of the wooden floor under my shoes clearly differed from the coolness of the concrete steps. Inside the chapel, the smell of the wood was radically different from outside, where the scent of the forest mixed with the meadow. Because the floor seemed to be suspended, I felt like I was part of a resonant body, walking through some kind of huge instrument that echoed the noise of my footsteps. The light was unexpectedly bright. However, because there was no view to the outside, I was taken aback. While approaching the chapel my movement had been linear, so to speak. Once inside, however, the teardrop-shaped floor plan directed my movement into a loop, or spiral, until I eventually sat down on one of the massive wooden benches. For believers, this was certainly the moment for prayer. For me, it became a moment of great attention, where the memories of my trip to the chapel, the transition from the outside to the inside, the various sensations, and the reflection of the site blurred together.

My image of Saint Benedict Chapel had changed. Or, more precisely, I could no longer reduce the building to a mere image. I now perceived it as a narrative structure, almost like a movie. Instead of a misty phantasm dissolving into the surrounding landscape, I was facing a contemporary building. In fact, it was a building so up-to-date that it seemed to have been built just recently, not almost 20 years ago. I was in a remote part of the Alps, yet this building did not subscribe to any local typological conventions. For example, it was built entirely of wood, not of stone as every other Alpine chapel. Rather than relating to the local context and historical tradition, this chapel was in dialogue with the international, cutting-edge architectural discourse. Several years before the notion of "topological architecture" appeared, Zumthor had designed a building that seemed to consist entirely of surfaces. These surfaces are superposed on each other, unfolding in layers, and defining or "performing" a topological spatiality, rather than a continuous spatiality. There was no such thing as a "window" that would have better articulated the transition between inside and outside and would have been a sign for a more conventional kind spatial continuity. Instead, the roof seemed to be slightly lifted like a lid on a pot to let in some light. Moreover, the "wall"—the outermost layer covered with shingles that was pulled around the building like a textile membrane—spread apart only as far as necessary to give way to an opening that could hardly be defined as a "door." Furthermore, the building was anything but earthbound. The few steps before the entrance seemed to hesitate before actually touching the chapel, as if a direct connection between the ground and the building would be impossible. The topography of the Alpine landscape and the topology of the architecture were incompatible and discontinuous.

The relationship between the building and the ground is, in fact, a crucial question in Zumthor's oeuvre. It is part of a more general cultural turn that takes place in the late 1960s and early 1970s—namely, the shift from the abstract to the concrete. This period is marked by a renewed interest in the specific materiality of surface in sites and places, on the one hand, and a new concept of history on the other. Rather than conceiving history as a linear evolution or development driven by an inner logic, many artists, architects and theorists perceived history as discontinuous and fragmentary. They focused on the individual action, on contradictions and complexities rather than the grand narrative. In the words of Thomas Pynchon in his novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973): "Will Postwar be nothing but 'events', newly

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created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history?" The shift can be observed in the earthworks by Robert Smithson, who saw earth not only as physical matter that he could use for his pieces like *The Spiral Jetty* but also a metaphor for historic and psychological processes, such as when he compared the earthworks to "a sedimentation of the mind." The shift can also be observed in the videos and films of urban performances by Gordon Matta-Clark, who worked with fragments of houses and was interested in what he called "living archeology:" the means to transform leftovers into something new. It can also be traced in the work of artists such as Ana Mendieta, Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer, who all dealt with the complex relationship between the human body, the ground, and the historical and political metaphors that any kind of terrain implies.

Zumthor's skepticism toward abstraction, the diagrammatic and generalizations, as well as his interest in detail, fabric, texture, the sensual quality of materials and surfaces and the individuals who exist in these environments are part of this cultural shift. It is a result of his professional activity, which went through various stages. After his early training as a cabinet-maker and attending the art school in Basel, he studied at the Pratt Institute in New York in 1967. He was certainly affected by the dynamism of the New York art world. Upon returning to Switzerland, he worked for the Department for the Preservation of Monuments in the Canton of Graubünden until he founded his own architectural office in 1979. His activity as a historical villages analyst and restoration architect took place during a radical change: the urbanization of the Alps. He dealt with topographical surveys, historical layers, traces, and, of course, the fragility of materials. While his contemporaries in New York, Liverpool, the Ruhr area, and northern Italy experienced the effects of de-industrialization and "urban blight,"—the disintegration of the metropolis—Zumthor observed from his own front door how economic pressures transformed a once agriculturally oriented and culturally isolated region into an area marked by infrastructure and buildings for energy, transport and tourism industries.

His breakthrough as an architect is intimately related to his practice as a surveyor and restoration professional, as well as the tension between the visible and the invisible. In his Protective Housing for Roman Excavations in Chur (1986), he designed a shelter for the ruins of Roman houses that were excavated at the outskirts of Chur. He left the discovered terrain as it was, protected it with a wooden construction set gently on the ground like a box, and lit it with a skylight from above. The wooden constructions recall the shapes of the absent Roman houses, whereas the actual remains are conserved and framed. The present-day intervention neither simulates nor interprets the absent past. It does not fixate the meaning of the archaeological traces, rather it allows the visitors to emotionally and intellectually reconstruct the lost entity in their imagination and feel like archeologists who are discovering the historic fabric under various layers of the past. In Zumthor's hands, history is not a commodity to be consumed, nor an image to be looked at from a distance, like a diorama, but an open process that can be individually experienced.

The project in Chur prefigured the project of "Topographie des Terrors" in Berlin. The planned structure, both commemorative and documentary, was supposed to enhance the site and respect the fact that the immense tragedy it had witnessed—the site bore the ruins of the former Gestapo headquarters, the infamous secret police of the National Socialist dictatorship—could never be adequately "represented" or "symbolized." Like in Chur, the various historic layers of the site would have been left almost unchanged, as the architecture would be gently placed on the ground like a crate or protective shell that would not destroy the terrain on which it stood. As in Chur, the theme that the "walls" of the construction were permeable—the light, street noise and temperature could be experienced while inside the construction—now turned into a specific concept for a museum. Instead of wood, Zumthor used an extremely elegant, elaborately calculated concrete frame, which again replaced the wall with a grid of concrete beams. Its purpose was to provide both the necessary beauty and "dignity" to the site, as Zumthor says. Additionally, its purpose was to reveal the place to visitors. He had planned to leave the ground floor almost without heating so that the viewers, at least during cold weather, would feel physically exposed. They would be driven, by an architectural decision, to keep their coats on and, thus, avoid perceiving the site and the exhibits from a comfortable distance.

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By manipulating—or rather not manipulating—the temperature inside the building, Zumthor would have allowed the visitors to identify with the content of the exhibit, not by being confronted with a visual spectacle but by partaking in an overall atmosphere. The project did not intend to mimic the topography but to leave it as found, frame it and articulate it. Although this building was not realized due to lack of funding—the city of Berlin was forced to drastically reduce its budget for culture and public buildings in the second half of the 1990s—it remains one of the most original contributions to the concept of the museum in the late 20th century. It proposed a radical alternative to iconic museums, such as Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, or museums that transform industrial ruins, such as Herzog & de Meurons's Tate Modern in London. Zumthor put forward an alternative to the symbolic monument commemorating a historic event, in contrast to Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. Eisenman's method of representation is mimetic and symbolic. For the present-day visitors, the crooked ground is supposed to evoke an experience of loss, trauma, and disorientation. The forest of concrete blocks allows them to reenact the experience of claustrophobia, loss, isolation and separation. Although Eisenmann's concept of history is also discontinuous, in the case of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, he operates within a spatial and semantic continuity. In contrast, Zumthor's project structurally embodies the very problem of the non-representational. The site, including the surface of the earth with its scattered debris and the excavated foundations and basements, is visible and can be experienced. But there is no way to symbolize or reenact the historic tragedy by means of architecture.

A decade after the non-realized project for Berlin, Zumthor built a museum of a site: the Art Museum Kolumba in Cologne (2007). Located on the ruins of medieval church that was destroyed during World War II, the museum permits visitors to experience the traces of history in the ground, recall the dimensions of the lost church hall, and visit the vast collection of religious and contemporary art. The protective shell has now turned into a brick construction, which allows the visitors inside to partially experience the street noise, the exterior temperature, and daylight. Again, the "wall" is fragile and precarious, and can be read as the very enactment of the interrelation between the present and the past we are evoking. It clarifies how difficult it is to radically distinguish the content of a museum from its context, or which "objects" that are exhibited and those that elements of the physical environment. The Kolumba Museum offers viewers a palimpsest of layers of history and allows them to inscribe themselves into the narrative to become part of the story. As I walked over the site on a raised platform, I found no place where I could oversee the whole. I was part of a puzzle that no one, not the architect, the curators, the archeologists nor myself, could possibly put together again. I was reminded of the earthworks by Robert Smithson, such as *Asphalt Rundown* (1969); his non-realized projects, such as his *Island of Broken Glass* (1970); and his drawings, such as *Entropic Landscape* (1970). The seemingly chaotic juxtaposition of different historical layers—of bricks and stones, fragments and ruins—resembled Smithson's scenarios of man-made landscapes, or wastelands half-way between ruins and a construction site. I felt like I was wandering through one of the engravings by Piranesi, where a shattered whole is depicted and the imagination is stimulated to reassemble the fragments over and over again. Destruction and construction became inseparably intertwined, the act of covering and discovering blurred. The past, present and future overlapped as I followed the zigzag path over Kolumba's abyss. Once again, I realized in the Kolumba Museum that the mere visual representation of architecture as a static object only does partial justice to Zumthor's oeuvre. Zumthor himself is very much aware of this. During the retrospective held in 2007 at the Kunsthaus Bregenz—a museum he built a decade earlier—he completely renounced documentary photography. Rather, he focused on conceptual models and invited Austrian artists Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch to present a video installation. The artists shot images of daily life in and around some of Zumthor's built projects. The projections gave the impression of normal activity and put the viewers in a position to participate in the buildings' function by not reducing them to static, cropped images. Instead, there were people walking, birds singing, and bicycles parked outside. In short, it depicted daily life.

The least iconic of all his projects is the Brother Klaus Field Chapel (2007) in Wachendorf, Eifel, about an hour from Cologne. More than anywhere elsewhere, photography cannot reproduce the actual

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encounter with the building and the manifold effects of the materials on the visitor, specifically the tactile and the smell. The tiny chapel revolves around the theme of the imprint. The hull was created by rammed concrete, which was applied layer by layer. On the façade, the traces of the various “day’s works” remain visible and tangible, as in a medieval fresco where one can distinguish the traces of the daily work. Upon approaching the chapel, I could not refrain from touching it and following the time span of the construction in my imagination. At first sight, the chapel looked like a monolith, but the massive concrete door in the shape of a triangle swung open very easily. Its shape announced the tent-like interior. Because of the narrow entrance, it was almost impossible to get into the chapel without touching the rough walls with my shoulders and arms. I inevitably relied on my sense of touch during the first few minutes until my eyes adjusted to the darkness. Inside the chapel, Zumthor did not use smooth formwork boards but pine logs that were piled up like a tent. The surface of the interior is thus a negative impression of the tree trunks. To dry the wood and detach it easily from the concrete, a smoldering fire burnt for three weeks, like in a charcoal kiln. This gives the concrete surface a dark, lustrous shine and provides the entire building with a charcoal odor. The floor, in turn, was made from molten lead, a material that visually corresponds to the blackness of the charcoal. Traces of the different stages of production are still present and allow visitors to imagine the way the building was made. The unevenness of the metal floor, with a surprisingly soft and warm surface, seduced me into wandering around aimlessly and devoting myself entirely to the unexpected pleasure of discovering a room with my feet. As with Saint Benedict Chapel, the environment slowed down my steps and turned it from a linear movement into a kind of loop. The traditional emblems of spatial continuity are eliminated altogether. It is hardly possible to distinguish the “door” from the “wall.” The connection pipes, which bracket the inner and outer casings, are closed with glass stoppers and provide light in the shape of hundreds of small dots, like a starlit sky. Most of the light, however, comes through the hole in the ceiling, through which one can look upward, like in an open fireplace. The outer shape, a sharp-edged monolith on a pentagonal plan, is completely independent of the inner cave-like spatiality. Although most critics and even the architect himself place emphasis on the relationship between the building and the region (the building was commissioned by a local farmer, who partially built it with his friends and used local materials), I would argue once again that discontinuity prevails.

Nothing can be taken for granted. There is no typological relation between the shape of the chapel and historical chapels in the area. For the visitor, every step, every new experience, and every movement is unexpected. It is a sequence in an ongoing experiment, so to speak. There is no coherent materiality or spatiality but rather a juxtaposition of various materials and different levels of representation. By moving in and around the chapel, however, we can simultaneously perceive discontinuity and synthesis. The building enables us to simultaneously experience alienation and identity, disorientation and certainty.

The chapel serves as a place where mental images, spatial memory, religious faith, and skeptical reflection converge. For the time being, the complexity of this space can neither be adequately represented by any image nor any theoretical concept. But everyone, believers or not, can easily experience it physically by touching the rough surface of the walls, following the surface of the ground with their feet, smelling the charcoal odor, feeling the dampness of the concrete bench after a rainfall, and perceiving the many changes of light and shadows as the hours of the day pass. What more can one ask a building to perform in service of religion and architecture, memory and expectation, and the past, the present, and the future?

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For more information, please contact:

Martha Thorne, Executive Director
The Pritzker Architecture Prize
71 South Wacker Drive
Suite 4700
Chicago, Illinois 60606
email: marthathorne@pritzkerprize.com