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# **Teaching Architecture:**

Peter Zumthor and the  
foundations of composition

Università IUAV di Venezia  
Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio

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## Teaching Architecture: Peter Zumthor and the Foundations of Composition

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*to Andrya*

Within the thesis, a number of abbreviations is used to avoid textual repetition, which are indicated as follows:  
AAM - Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio  
EPFL - École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne  
ETH - Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich  
KUB - Kunsthaus Bregenz

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# 1. Introduction

*“As expressed at the beginning of the Academy’s activity, it is our intention to develop a three years first phase of Primo Anno teaching in architecture projects. These three first years have been conceived and are developed as a continuous didactic structure. It will leave a complete and specific documentation of its activity, results and, hopefully, conclusions”.<sup>1</sup>*

Peter Zumthor, 1997

*“The course teaches the foundations of composition. The departure point was the perception of the world through the five senses, which was practically and directly related to architectural themes. Primary situations were identified and analyzed by means of practical exercises which taught the student to handle such elementary architectural situations from a design standpoint. The course sought to create a first conscious and intelligent approach to typologies: a sensorial approach linked to images”.<sup>2</sup>*

Atelier Zumthor AAM, 1996

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<sup>1</sup> P. Zumthor, *Proposal for an Atelier Verticale in the second cycle (Atelier Zumthor II) of the Academy of Architecture*, AAM Archives, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Atelier Zumthor, description of first-year course, in: Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, *Report on Teaching Activities* 1996-97, Mendrisio 1997.

In 1996, the newly created Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, located in Switzerland's Italian-speaking canton of Ticino, invited Peter Zumthor to be the professor in charge of one of its first three design ateliers, sharing with Mario Botta and Aurelio Galfetti the task of setting the bases to the school's approach to architectural training at the moment of its foundation. What took form from such particular circumstances was a unique educational experience, designed by Zumthor as a continuous project spanning three years of first-year teaching - 1996-97, 1997-98 and 1998-99 - and exploring a remarkably disruptive methodology. Referred to as *Primo Anno*, the course comprehended a sequence of 19 exercises aimed at teaching students *the foundations of composition* - understood as the basic set of skills from which their future education and practice would evolve. However, as any educational action, Zumthor's atelier inevitably offered the professor an occasion to learn as much as to teach. The radicality of his course represented thus a privileged opportunity for personal research, condensing in an educational project what can be reversely read as an author's epistemological investigation on the nature of his own craft. The present thesis is structured around this event, documenting the activities of Zumthor's *Primo Anno* atelier and exploring how the principles contained in his teaching may offer an interpretation of his architecture.

### 1.1. The archive

Interest in Zumthor's presence in Mendrisio comes not only from the fact of a renowned architect becoming a teacher. Actually, this represents a rather frequent situation considering the European training tradition and particularly evident in the context of Swiss architectural training, which has long been characterized by the proximity between the instances of practice and theory.<sup>3</sup> In his case, the value of teaching as a research object is magnified by the unexpected conditions specific to the event - namely the contradiction between the poignancy of the project and the fact that it remained unclaimed by its author. With

<sup>3</sup> See *Swiss architecture between theory and praxis*, in: I. Davidovici, *Forms of practice: German-Swiss architecture 1980-2000*, 2nd. Ed., gt-Verlag, Zurich 2018, p. 17.

few exceptions, as in the essay *Teaching Architecture, Learning Architecture*,<sup>4</sup> Zumthor seems to have avoided exploring the content of his atelier as a continuation of his authorial oeuvre. There are no direct mentions to it in his *complete works*,<sup>5</sup> nor are there any publications featuring its effective outcome,<sup>6</sup> something intriguing when considering the evident creative effort employed in the course's conception - as well as Zumthor's well-known tendency to keep control over the projection of his external image. Ultimately, this silence reflected the destiny of the atelier's archive, which remained in oblivion for the last 25 years and was rediscovered in Mendrisio as part of this doctoral research.

In fact, the documents that are found today at the Academy's archives represent only a part of the original documentation of Atelier Zumthor. For unclear reasons, all of its material remnants, including the models produced by students, have disappeared or been discarded over the years - only a few random fragments have survived, scattered across different buildings. Although their absence represents an irreparable loss - especially considering the role played by physical objects in the course - the remaining material contains a thorough record of the atelier's activities in the form of teaching journals, exercise reports and extensive mailing, among others. Its most appealing feature, however, are the over 4.000 slides containing the photographic records of students' works which, combined with written documentation, provide a vivid insight on the atelier's dynamic. It is important to observe that, as registered in some documents, the archive's construction was consciously planned by Zumthor as an inherent part of teaching, taken as a primary media to register and later to communicate what was described as a truth educational experiment.

<sup>4</sup> Originally written in 1996, the essay represents a condensed description of his atelier in Mendrisio. It was later incorporated into the book *Thinking Architecture*, first published in 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Published in 2014, the collection of six books featuring 42 projects can be seen as a sort of autobiographical image: P. Zumthor, T. Durisch, *Peter Zumthor 1985 – 2013: Buildings and Projects*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2014.

<sup>6</sup> A letter from Köbi Gantenbein, chief editor of Hochparterre Verlag, to Zumthor in 2000 reveals the plan for publishing an especial issue on the atelier, which was never realized.

That such a valuable material has remained silent for so long is inevitably a surprise, even greater when considering the fundamental role played by Zumthor in the construction of the Academy of Mendrisio. In that sense, his rise to the role of protagonist in contemporary architecture coincided with the school's initial years, lending to the Academy a visibility that contributed to its consolidation in the international scene. However, more than this external operation, Zumthor generated a lasting impact in the school's identity, something particularly evident in the conceptual and instrumental correspondences between his atelier and the work currently developed in Mendrisio. The archival material represents a unique opportunity to render visible the instances of such a relationship, bringing light to the lesser-known facet of Zumthor as a teacher while at the same time registering the basics of his architectural thinking. To explore the multilayered value of Atelier Zumthor's archives represents thus the fundamental proposition of this study, assuming the importance of teaching as a primary means of authorial research.

### 1.2. Beyond atmospheres

The rediscovery of Zumthor's archives in Mendrisio represented a turning point for the present research. Belonging to the curriculum of Architectural Composition, its basic premise is to assume the conveyance of meaning as something fundamental to architecture's relevance, recognizing in Zumthor's work an exemplary value stemming precisely from its eminent communicative quality. The study's first hypothesis was to take the concept of *atmosphere* - which became central in his production after the publication of the homonymous book<sup>7</sup> - as a sort of referential measure encapsulating the main components of his design process. In other words, if *atmosphere* - a term associated to the notion of *stimmung*<sup>8</sup> - refers to the distinctive character of a place or event perceived at preconscious level, the idea was that it could of-

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<sup>7</sup> Originally a lecture delivered on occasion of the literary festival *Wege durch das Land* in Germany, *Atmospheres. Architectural Environments. Surrounding Objects* was first published as a book by Birkhäuser in 2006.

<sup>8</sup> See G. Böhme, *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2009.

fer a promising interface to the production of meaningful architecture in a world where the occurrence of recognizable order seems to be increasingly harder.<sup>9</sup> To investigate the *composition of atmospheres* in Zumthor's buildings was thus the research's initial aim, challenging the limits of a concept whose subjective nature is amplified by the appreciation of an author whose persona seems to have contributed, as much as the quality of his buildings, to his establishment as one of today's most relevant architects.

In fact, despite the reduced number of completed buildings - around twenty in four decades since the creation of his studio in Haldenstein in 1979 - Zumthor's oeuvre has assumed a paradigmatic condition in contemporary architecture that goes beyond the appraisal received in awards such as the Pritzker Prize (2009) or the RIBA's Royal Gold Medal (2013). Since the emergence of first major projects in mid 1980's, much rooted in the context of German-speaking Switzerland, his production managed to avoid the trap of taking the thematics of regionality and craftsmanship as limiting borders, spreading not only geographically but, most importantly, acquiring referential value as one of today's most original artistic expressions. Buildings such as the Sogn Benedetg Chapel (Sumvitg, 1985-88), the Kunsthau Bregenz (1989-97), the Thermal Baths in Vals (1990-96), the Kolumba Art Museum (Cologne, 1997-07) or the more recent Allmannajuvet Zinc Mine Museum (Sauda, 2003-16) became milestones of contemporary architecture whose exemplary dimension is summarized in the ideas of site-specificity, innovative and accurate construction, sensual use of materials and the conception of highly communicative spaces.

It seems important to observe how Zumthor's prominence derives also from the poignancy of his theoretical reflections and ultimately from his writing skills. The publication of books such as *Thinking Ar-*

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<sup>9</sup> "A consideration of the widespread knowledge about the production of atmospheres, with its specific variations in many different professions, suggests that significant power adhered to this knowledge. It uses neither physical violence nor commanding speech but engages the affectivity of people; it affects their mind, manipulates moods and evokes emotions. This power does not appear as such, it rather impacts the unconscious." G. Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: the Aesthetics of Felt Space*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, London 2017 (2013), p. 28

*chitecture* (1998) and *Atmospheres* (2006) represented a significant contribution to the spread of his ideas and to the popularization of his work, especially considering the success they have reached among students worldwide. In that sense, the second proved to be particularly effective as a means to transform the concept of *atmosphere* into a sort of personal motto strongly attached to the external perception of his architecture. The ambiguity of the term found itself useful both to disseminate Zumthor's image as an enigmatic author, as to provide a conceptual reference to the hard-to-grasp quality of his work, namely its communicative potential. As mentioned, the study's initial hypothesis was based precisely on the assumption of *atmosphere* as a measure of architectural quality able to offer an interpretation of the referential value of his work.

However, as the research evolved, the isolated concept seemed to be increasingly insufficient to translate the manifold richness of Zumthor's architecture. As it tends to happen in any kind of labelling, to reduce a complex phenomenon into a fixed word implies the overlapping of a much richer set of transmissible concepts. More recently, in a conversation with Mari Lending, who criticized the use of *atmosphere* as a central concept for being *too cute and private*, Zumthor himself seems to have sensed its inevitable limits by suggesting *emotional reconstruction* as an alternative translation of the core quality of his architecture.<sup>10</sup> When it comes to the research, the concept's insufficiency generated a curiosity about Zumthor's atelier in Mendrisio, imagining that the process of teaching could have exposed the fundamental ideas of his architecture that go beyond the *atmospheric propaganda*. The investigative process triggered by that led to the finding of the atelier's archives and, as a consequence of its unexpected abundance, a significant reorganization of the research. In that sense, the archival material contains an additional value linked to its temporal opportunism, as it takes place immediately before the consolidation of his international reputation. Zumthor's didactic project in the early years of Mendrisio offers thus a transparency that may provide an effective contribution to broaden the understanding of his architecture.

10 M. Lending, P. Zumthor, *A Feeling of History*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2018, p. 68.

### 1.3. *Primo Anno*

The documentation forming the current state of Atelier Zumthor's archive spans from its initial year in 1996-97 until 2001-02, covering six of the eleven years of Zumthor's teaching in Mendrisio.<sup>11</sup> When going through this material, something that stands out from general fascination is the poignancy of his *Primo Anno* atelier. Both due to the disruptiveness of its methodology and the unusual decision to conceive it as a three-year continuum, the course represents a unique event whose consistency allows a clearer reading of its didactic structure. Distributed along the three years, exercises such as *The personal construction module (A)* - where students should produce a block of given dimensions using a material that could tell the content of a biographical experience - or *Prototype of a door handle (L)* - which required the production of real metallic components to be assembled on a door staged in the atelier - were indeed designed as non-reproducible learning experiences whose originality emphasizes their value as a *project* themselves. More important, however, is the fact that the course was aimed at first-year students, meaning that it naturally contained the seminal dimension inherent to foundational gestures. In that sense, the atelier's purpose of offering the most necessary knowledge to make architecture, implied the inevitable selection of the skills considered as the fundamental ones to be transmitted, therefore defining a theory whose radicality contained the main elements of a practice. That Zumthor seized the occasion as an opportunity for research is something evident in the archive's content and in its written descriptions, which stated his clear intention to teach what was defined as the *foundations of composition*.

The use of the term *composition* to address the process of making architecture is something containing both the discipline's definition as an art field and the central question to any critical reflection on its practice. Stemming from Latin *compositus* - past participle of the verb

11 Zumthor continued to teach until 2006-07, when he left the school. The reasons for the archive's interruption are not clear, but certainly related to the presence of his main assistant, Miguel Kreisler, who left the atelier in 2002. A chronology of Atelier Zumthor in Mendrisio is presented in the Appendix, pp. 313-318.

*componere*, meaning to *put together* or to *unite*<sup>12</sup> - the idea of *composing* architecture alludes to the act of creating a new object through the meaningful arrangement of different elements. However, more than generating a thing made of more parts, *to compose* means to embed the created reality with an identifiable subjective content, thus defining its artistic value around its communicative ability. As put by Pérez-Gómez, architecture's purpose is poetic, necessarily an abstract order but in itself a metaphor emerging from a vision of the world and Being.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, by defining its educational ambition around the foundations of composition, Zumthor's atelier inevitably produced a hypothesis on which are the concepts basing a design process whose outcome holds the capacity of conveying meaning.

In that sense, the radicality of his didactic program found correspondence with the original objective of the research, which is the identification of the fundamental *compositional principles* contained in Zumthor's architecture. Through the analysis of the exercises, it is possible to observe the occurrence of a set of fundamental ideas, as for instance the assumption of biographical memory as the project's starting point, the use of construction and materiality as communicative instances of design, the definition of sensory perception as architecture's main interface and the understanding of architecture as a space-time event - indeed, every task was designed to be performed by students. *Memory*, *construction* and *performance* emerge thus as key concepts that, even if never clearly stated in the atelier's program, represent a synthesis of its content potentially translated into effective *compositional principles*. In the research, these are taken not only as a means to reach a critical reading of Zumthor as an author, but also as the basis of a conceptual program potentially relevant for the production of contemporary architecture. In other words, they are expected to represent the components sustaining the alleged communicative quality of Zumthor's work, and therefore how it could be eventually reproduced. Here, it seems important to observe that such a standpoint was clearly informed by my personal view as a practicing

architect. The idea of extracting exemplary principles from teaching conserves a certain naivety characteristic of the observer who aims to learn as much as to describe. The decision to focus the study on the analysis of Zumthor's *Primo Anno* atelier is thus based, even more than on the event's palpability, on the coincidence between its content and the researcher's gaze.

### 1.4. Research structure

The research presented here was jointly developed at the Phd School of the IUAV University of Venice and at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio. Its main objective is to investigate the didactic project of Zumthor's *Primo Anno* atelier as a potential interpretation of his architecture, assuming an argumentative structure based on two movements. The first analyses the atelier activities through the documentation rediscovered in the Academy's archives, aiming to identify the main concepts contained in its program. The second investigates how the *compositional principles* extracted from didactics inform Zumthor's architecture through the critical analysis of the design process of his projects, especially that for the Topography of Terror in Berlin (1993-04), taken as the research main case-study.

As a methodological instrument, the study of the archive requires some clarifications concerning the conditions of its construction. Although it represents a collective construct, the agent behind its documentation process was Zumthor's main assistant - the Spanish architect Miguel Kreisler - whose central role in the atelier will be discussed in Chapter 3. Therefore, it is important to observe that any depiction of the course emerging from the archive is deeply impregnated with his vision, especially considering the accuracy and intimacy of his reports. Kreisler's importance as a privileged translator becomes more visible if considering that the temporality of the existing documentation corresponds precisely to the period of his presence in Mendrisio, interrupted in 2002 when he left Atelier Zumthor.

Besides the already mentioned absence of students' original works, a further limit to be acknowledged in the archive is the fact that its

<sup>12</sup> O. Pianigiani, *Vocabolario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana* (www.etimo.it).

<sup>13</sup> A. Pérez -Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1985, p. 326.



static record tends to capture only a partial view of the multilayered nature of the atelier. As will be more evident in the documentation of exercises, these can be read as learning devices whose essence is not limited to the material outcome, but belongs also to an eminent temporal - and performatic - dimension. Aiming to bridge this gap, the research conducted a number of interviews with former students of Zumthor's *Primo Anno* course, using their recollections to trace a more consistent narrative on the event by clarifying some questions that remained opaque when described only by the archive. Interviews were also made with Miguela Tamo and Pia Durisch who, as assistants to Zumthor at the time, provided a fundamental contribution to the comprehension of the course structure. Also, in order to better understand the interaction between Atelier Zumthor and the environment of Mendrisio, further interviews were made with Mario Botta - responsible along with Galfetti for inviting him to the school - Valentin Bearth and Manuel Aires Mateus - both professors in the Academy for over two decades whose ateliers present evident parallels with Zumthor's (Bearth was also a collaborator in the early years of his studio in Haldenstein). This series of interviews represents an original documentation whose documentary consistency is comparable to the archive itself. Hoping to conserve their value as primary sources, they are fully published in the thesis' appendix.

Among the many voices that helped to tell the story of Atelier Zumthor, two silences are particularly heard. The first is that of Zumthor himself, who decided not to take part in the research and justified his absence by the impossibility of accessing the original models produced in the atelier. His recommendation to consult his former students and assistants was, however, fulfilled. The second is that of Kreisler's who, despite several attempts, chose not to respond to our contacts. Even if representing an inevitable loss, the research tried to transform the lack of their contribution into an opportunity for a more detached reading of the event.

The thesis's initial part is thus composed of three chapters, two of which are dedicated to the comprehension of the external elements informing Zumthor's didactic project. The first analyzes the foundation

of the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, the environment responsible for creating the conditions that allowed such experience to take place. The school's insertion in the Swiss context of architectural education is explored, as well as its strong relation with the territory and with the architectural tradition upon which the legitimacy of a new school for the Ticino was based. Also important is the observation of how the school's humanistic identity and multidisciplinary ambition are translated in the pedagogical structure, what was the role played by the design ateliers and how they interacted with each other. A second chapter focuses on Zumthor's work, aiming to understand who was the architect that arrived at Mendrisio to become a professor in 1996, which were the main characteristics of his production and how the opportunity to teach represented for him a moment of intellectual exposure. In the specific case of Zumthor, it is also important to consider how his personal formation - trained as a craftsman, attending a school of design and working for a long period in the heritage department of the Grisons - may somehow inform the definition of his educational approach. The third chapter is dedicated to the effective documentation and analysis of the activities of Atelier Zumthor in Mendrisio from 1996-97 to 1998-99, presenting the course's complete sequence of exercises through the combination of textual descriptions and the reproduction of selected students' works.

The second part of the thesis suggests the extraction of fundamental concepts present in Zumthor's didactic and the investigation of how they are present in his architecture as *compositional principles*. The first of these concepts is presented around the idea of *memory*, that is the evocation of a personal experience as the first act in the design process, as verified in numerous exercises. Despite its apparent self-referentiality, the action is used as an instrument in the conception of an image containing a typical experience, taken as the content to be communicated through the project and tendentially incorporating ordinary elements of the context. The second idea is that of *construction*, assumed as a defining and legitimizing process of architectural form, not determined abstractly by functionalist technique but tending to assume a symbolic value. As much as students would explore materiality as a communicative instrument defined not by material itself



but from the meaning generated by construction, Zumthor's projects tend to assume a formal composition that can be traced back to a radical action of building.<sup>14</sup> A third principle is suggested in the concept of *performance*, that is the idea of architecture as a spatial event activated through experience, taking as object of design not just the building but also the actions taking place in it. Besides the theatrical value of exercises conceived as collective performances, a constant value of Zumthor's teaching is found in the assumption of sensory perception as the primary frame of experience, relating to the importance assumed in his work by a scenographic dimension of architecture. It is important to stress that the ideas here suggested as key concepts do not intend to encapsulate Zumthor's didactic by reducing it to a diagrammatic list and certainly do not exhaust its value as an educational experience. The intention is precisely an attempt to identify principles that could be directly related to a compositional dimension of architecture and therefore potentially reproducible in practice.

As argumentative structure, each of the suggested concepts is presented as an individual chapter and confronted with the analysis of the compositional process of Zumthor's design for the Documentation and Visitors Center of the Topography of Terror Foundation in Berlin (1993-04). Its selection as main case-study is based on the exemplary value it holds as a project whose radicality provides a clearer vision on how such principles correspond to effective design operations. While the need to provide a tangible expression of the traumatic events contained in the material fragments of the former *Gestapo* headquarters constituted the basic project task, the concept designed by Zumthor was based precisely on the assumption of individual perception as the main resource to be explored for the generation of collective meanings of the past. The city's history was therefore intended to be written through the sentences of personal images - providing a significant parallel between the project's concept and the central role assumed by biographical memories in the atelier in Mendrisio. Similarly, the design's audacious constructive method - based on the lateral assembling of

slender elements made of white concrete - and the temporal dimension inherent to its exhibition approach, provide a palpable comparison with the constructive and performative instances of Zumthor's course.

In the case of the Topography of Terror, the particular importance of the site in the debates around the traumatic memory of Nazism and the reconstruction of unified Berlin lends to Zumthor's design a paradigmatic representativity that seems to have only increased with the project's definitive abandonment and demolition in 2004. In Zumthor's career, the project represents one of his first major European commissions and still remains as one of the most consistent manifestations of his architectural thinking - a limpidity somehow intensified by its non-realization. A further reason for taking the Topography of Terror as a main case-study is the programmatic similarity with other important projects of Zumthor, as the Shelter for Roman Ruins built in Chur (1985-86) - one of his most influential projects in the Swiss context - and the Kolumba Art Museum in Cologne (1997-07) - a building that instantly acquired the status of reference and the largest project realized by him so far. Finally, the temporal relation between the project in Berlin and the atelier in Mendrisio seems to be an important condition to legitimize the suggestion of any contamination between them.

The fundamental instrument applied to the analysis of the case-study is that of *redrawing*, meaning the dissection of a project by means of reconstructing its compositional process. Starting from the construction of 3D and physical models - considered the most accurate process to globally understand a project - a series of interpretative drawings was produced with the objective of rendering visible the conceptual meaning of specific design operations. Considering how the expressiveness of drawings produced by Zumthor tend to acquire an eminent authorial value, the drawings produced in the research sought consciously to employ a language different from his - as for example by using axonometric projections. The process of redrawing proved to be an opportunity for the constant questioning of the hypothesis aroused, contributing to build an argumentation always related to the architectural object itself and not only to abstract concepts.

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<sup>14</sup> See M. Steinmann, *Understanding through the Senses: some Remarks on Peter Zumthor's Work*, in: *Architecture and Urbanism*, vol. 316, january 1997, p.88.

The thesis concluding chapter seeks to trace a synthesis on the relation between the suggested principles and Zumthor's architecture, discussing the relevance of his lesson from a contemporary perspective. Aiming to understand which developments may have followed the experience of his atelier, the chapter observes its possible reverberations on both the teacher and the school. In what comes to Zumthor, it seems possible to trace parallels between some transformations of his vocabulary and the instrumentality explored by him in Mendrisio, namely the use of physical models as the main interface of a formal composition based on plastic operations. As for the school, Zumthor seems to be a lasting presence in the Academy's institutional identity today, mainly visible in the perpetuation of a working culture drawn from the methodology disseminated through the success of his course. In that sense, Atelier Zumthor's foundational character seems to have lent it the condition of an event whose reverberations are more evidently perceived at a distance of 25 years from its beginning.

## 2. An academy in Mendrisio

*"The rapid changes taking place on the territory and the increasing complexity of the problems that affect the field of architecture leave a wide gap for the construction of a new architecture school with academic level. Particularly essential is an approach that explores the various possibilities without preconceived notions. That is an attempt to address, also in our time, an organization of the human habitat that reacts to the current contradictory developments and generates an increasingly necessary quality".<sup>1</sup>*

Mario Botta, 1993

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<sup>1</sup> M. Botta, *The profile of a new architecture school*, in: *A New Academy of Architecture in Ticino*, Archithese 2/93, march-april 1993, p. 17. The text is originally part of the Preliminary project for the creation of an architecture school in Ticino, commissioned to Botta by the Swiss government.

### 2.1. *School of Ticino*

A proper understanding of the event represented by Peter Zumthor's atelier requires consideration of the particular conditions it emerged from. In many ways, the disruptiveness of his teaching and the relevance it eventually acquired were only possible as reactions to an environment whose uniqueness managed to provide both freedom for experimentation and necessity of affirmation. The Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, whose activities began in the fall of 1996, was the outcome of a long political process marked by Ticinese claims for the creation of an Italian-speaking university in Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> The absence of such an institution, more than a cultural gap, was locally perceived as a competitive disadvantage in relation to the cantons of German and French languages - whose educational system counted eight Cantonal Universities and two Federal Polytechnic Schools.<sup>3</sup>

The positive economic impact generated by a new university as a means to oppose Ticino's traditional emigration trend was therefore an important component of the environment that allowed the debate around its creation to arise from the mid-1980's on. After the failure of the project for the Centro Universitario della Svizzera italiana - rejected by popular vote in 1986 - the idea of a Ticinese university matured through a process that found a central figure in Mario Botta. Following previous consultations, in 1992 the Swiss federal government commissioned him the development of a preliminary study for the implementation of an architecture academy in Ticino. Its results - which included not only a pedagogical project but also legal and economical details - managed to achieve the necessary consistency and support to put the political process in motion and set the basis for the creation of the forthcoming school.

<sup>2</sup> A document conserved in Lucerne's historical archive, registering the attempt in creating an university in Lugano in 1588, is taken as the symbolic birth of the Ticinese cause. In modern times, a concrete proposal for the creation of an Accademia Ticinese was presented to the Grand Council by Stefano Franscini in 1844, and abandoned by lack of financial resources. In: *Square USI - Magazine*, Quadrimestrale, Università della Svizzera Italiana, n. 20 2016. P. 34.

<sup>3</sup> The number of cantonal universities rose to ten with the creation of USI in 1995 and the University of Lucerne in 2000.



Fig 1  
Poster advertising the beginning of school's activities, AAM Archives

Officially created on October 3rd, 1995, the Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI) was initially formed by the Academy of Architecture, located in Mendrisio,<sup>4</sup> and the Lugano-based Faculties of Economics and Communication.<sup>5</sup> It is important, however, to observe that architecture played a fundamental role in USI's composition, initially defined as the university's first course. Its importance was stressed by Giuseppe Buffi - the state counselor who assumed the political leadership of the process - who declared that "Ticino considers legitimate to claim [the creation of an architecture academy] by virtue of a significant tradition in the architectural and artistic fields". Continuing, he added:

<sup>4</sup> The municipality of Mendrisio decided to adhere to Botta's project, offering the facilities of Villa Argentina and the former Ospedale della Beata Vergine (Palazzo Canavée) to house the new academy.

<sup>5</sup> Later, it incorporated the faculties of Informatics (created in 2004) and Biomedical Sciences (created in 2014).



## 2. An academy in Mendrisio

"I know that the Ticinese architects of today do not love to have their work put in relation to a tradition whose roots are found in an alleged vocation towards architecture. [...] Accept at least, the contemporary architects of Ticino, who have marked and are marking also our time, in our country and beyond its borders, the expression of our appreciation".<sup>6</sup>

Buffi's rhetoric renders visible how much the legitimacy of the claim for a local university relied on the perception of excellence regarding architectural and constructive traditions and - even more than that - on the importance of its contemporary manifestation. In that sense, the protagonism assumed by Botta is representative of the cultural relevance acquired by the generation of Ticinese architects whose work drew international attention in the 1960's and 70's. Famously defined by Kenneth Frampton as a manifestation of *critical regionalism*, the local production generally addressed as *School of Ticino* emerged as one of the most fruitful revisions of Modernism, assuming a transversal attitude characterized by a "concentration on issues which related directly to its specific place while adapting methods and approaches drawn from outside".<sup>7</sup> Sharing a pragmatic approach translated in the use of concise geometries and a non-vernacular attention to places,<sup>8</sup> the architecture of Mario Botta, Tita Carloni, Luigi Snozzi, Flora Ruchat, Aurelio Galfetti and Livio Vacchini - to mention a few - was first presented as a collective phenomenon in the exhibition *Tendenzen: neuere architektur im Tessin*<sup>9</sup> - curated by Martin Steinmann and staged at ETH Zurich in 1975. Besides the poignancy of its architectural contribution, the School of Ticino became also the subject of a fascination built around its depiction as an event containing a genealogy of charismatic authors belonging to a picturesque land. The external reception of this narrative favoured the increasing interest in the work of these architects, allowing some of them to emerge also in the international scene - this was especially the case of Mario Botta, who by the 1980's became an important figure of Postmodernism.

<sup>6</sup> State counselor Giuseppe Buffi, in a speech addressing the Grand Council of Ticino on 2 October 1995, the day when the law creating USI was voted.

<sup>7</sup> K. Frampton, *Modern architecture: a critical history*, 4th ed., Thames and Hudson, London 2007, p. 323.

<sup>8</sup> R. Masiero, *Architettura in Ticino*, Skira, Milano 1999, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> M. Steinmann, T. Boga, *Tendenzen - neuere Architektur im Tessin*, ETH gta, Zurich 1977.

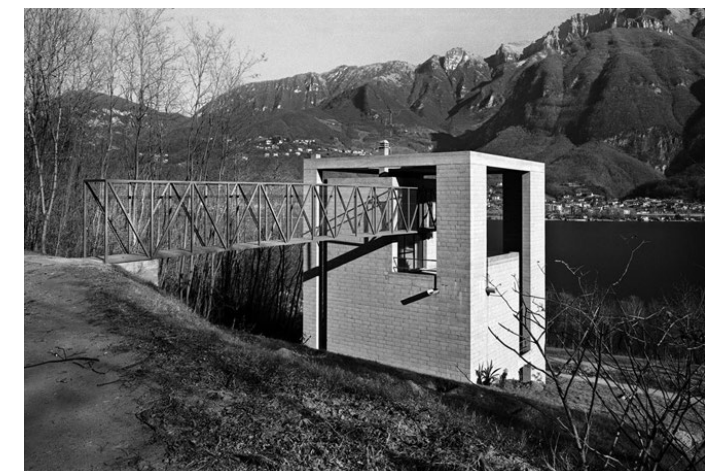


Fig 2  
Poster of exhibition Tendenzen (1975),  
gta Archiv - ETH

Fig 3  
Rino Tami, Melide-Grancia Gallery  
(1963), Archivio del Moderno - AAM

Fig 4  
Aurelio Galfetti, Flora Ruchat-Roncati  
and Ivo Trümpy, Bagno di Bellinzona  
(1967-70), photo by Pino Brioschi

Fig 5  
Mario Botta, Casa Bianchi (1971-73),  
photo by Aldo Zanetta



However, as any collective event, the ascension of Ticinese architecture found its origins in a process marked by the transformation of its environment at a broader level. Traditionally a marginal geography of Switzerland outshined by the economic strength and political weight of cantons lying beyond the Gotthard, Ticino witnessed an important economic growth in the second half of the 20th century, mainly by exploring its strategic condition as a privileged industrial periphery of Lombardy and as element of transalpine connection. The consequent urbanization of valley bottoms and expansion of the *diffuse city* represented a territorial transformation requiring urgent architectural responses.

Naturally, such context provided fertile ground for the emergence of an architecture that had to address practical issues concerning the production of new spaces while at the same time mediating the quest for identity in a region whose tradition was being rapidly shifted from rural to urban. Besides the residential program - which remained a main subject for Ticinese architecture - infrastructure also played an important role in translating the process of local affirmation into the territory's landscape. In that sense, major works such as the construction of the N2 highway in the 1960's - designed by Rino Tami, who built the famous portals of the Melide-Grancia tunnel in 1963<sup>10</sup> - and the monumental AlpTransit project started in the 1990's - for which Aurelio Galfetti developed a project in 1993 - represented the consolidation of a potent image of modern Ticino, something that put architects in the challenging position to operate on the scale of the territory. A

s a cultural phenomenon, the School of Ticino can be described as the coincidence between critical appraisal and local relevance, an event that by the early 1990's was found at the base of the emancipatory agenda that found its corollary in the creation of the Academy. The correspondence between these two instances was in many ways assured by the program of Botta's preliminary study, which transferred to the new school's didactical project much of the intellectual and po-

<sup>10</sup> A. Volpe, Rino Tami: *L'autostrada come problema artistico*, in: Firenze Architettura, vol.21 no. 1, September 2017, pp. 28-37.

litical positions shared by the architects of his generation. Thereby, the Academy's identity was defined around the formation of the *generalist architect*, taken as an opposition to architecture's "subjection to the pressures of the technical-scientific specializations of the industrialized world and to the dismantling of the design process by the exasperated work division on which globalization is based".<sup>11</sup> Also referred as *territorial architect* or simply *the new architect*,<sup>12</sup> such an idealistic image eventually encapsulated Ticino's self-confident mood. In fact, as observed by Fulvio Irace, by the early 1990's:

*"The proposal to establish precisely in Switzerland - a neutral nation that remained outside the European Community - a high level school that claimed the specificity of the territory, the centrality of Modern tradition and the contestation of the architect's technical specificity, sounded almost revolutionary".<sup>13</sup>*

Here, the heroic feeling emanating from the Academy's program seems also to contain an allusion to the Bauhaus, taken as a model from which to draw its own image - especially visible in the motto 'a new school for a new era', and in the idea of gathering great masters of the craft.<sup>14</sup>

Defined as central component of Mendrisio's educational project, the radical quality of the *generalist architect* was identified in the integrative ability to "perfectly master the complexity of the relationships between specific competencies and the critical interpretation of their role",<sup>15</sup> basing the development of a multidisciplinary approach deeply rooted in the tradition of Mediterranean culture. In that sense, as much as a reaction to the challenges posed by globalization and the spatial

<sup>11</sup> M. Botta, *Necessità dell'architetto generalista*, in: C. Frank, B. Pedretti (ed), *L'architetto generalista*, Mendrisio Academy Press, Mendrisio 2013, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> When talking about the Academy's pedagogical approach, Botta and Galfetti frequently define its scope alternating the expressions *generalist architect*, *territorial architect*, and *new architect*.

<sup>13</sup> F. Irace, *Mosaico Ticinese*, Archi: rivista svizzera di architettura, ingegneria e urbanistica, 2 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Not by chance, the cover of *Tracce di una Scuola* - the book published by Mario Botta in occasion of the Academy's 25th birthday - is a citation of the Bauhaus' first exhibition catalogue, designed by László Moholy-Nagy in 1923 with cover by Herbert Bayer. A facsimile edition was published by Lars Müller Publishers in 2019.

<sup>15</sup> M. Botta, *A New Academy of Architecture in Ticino*, Archithese 2/93, march-april 1993, p. 15.





Fig 6  
Journal de Genève, 20th January 1993  
*Archithese*, 2 1993, p. 11.

transformation of the territory, the humanistic profile assumed by the Academy also represented a strategic positioning in a context strongly conditioned by the presence of the Polytechnic Schools of Lausanne and Zurich. Its very characterization as an *academy* was meant to stand as a differentiation from the eminently technological programs of the EPFL and the ETH<sup>16</sup> - seeking to establish a space of autonomy for the new school and at the same time amplifying the range of its influence southwards.<sup>17</sup>

16 The differentiation from the two Polys was also important to justify the creation of a new academy, according to Botta: “it would make no sense to propose in Ticino an education model already present in the German and French linguistic-cultural areas; on the contrary, it was necessary to propose an alternative profile, even if contiguous, to the two Swiss schools”. In: C. Frank, B. Pedretti (ed), *L’architettura generalista*, Mendrisio Academy Press, Mendrisio 2013, p. 7.

17 G. Capellato, *Fondazione di una scuola: the history of the Accademia told by Gabriele*

In this context, it is also important to observe how much Mendrisio’s peripheral geography - described by Valentin Bearth as “a sort of nowhere land placed in the middle of Europe”<sup>18</sup> - was intentionally explored as a condition of such autonomy. That is visible, for instance, in the original conception of an institution with reduced dimensions and strong international presence.

More than that, however, when confronted with the school’s ambitious project, the lack of strings characteristic of the periphery eventually generated the need for strong foundational gestures. Zumthor’s presence among the Academy’s first teachers can be seen as an answer to this opposition. When talking about the reasons for his invitation, Botta often stresses how the presence of *strong figures* was a fundamental part of the strategy to reinforce the school’s relevance and attractiveness.<sup>19</sup> In this case, Zumthor’s personality and the fascination that tends to evolve from it seemed to fit the need, while also providing a geographical complement to the *all-Ticinese* formation of vertical ateliers with Botta and Galfetti - respectively founder and first director of the school. However, it must be said that the decision of bringing him also represented a rather audacious move.

By the mid-1990’s, Zumthor’s relevance was mostly restricted to the Swiss audience, strongly attached to the image of *craftsman-architect* that emerged from his major 1980’s wooden buildings - namely Atelier Zumthor (Haldenstein, 1985-86), Shelter for Roman Ruins (Chur, 1985-86) and Sogn Benedetg Chapel (Sumvitg, 1985-88). As explored in the next chapter, the range of his work would be significantly amplified with the realization of the Thermal Baths in Vals (1996) and the Kunsthhaus Bregenz (1997), transcending the context of Alpine regionalism to become a protagonist of contemporary architecture. Therefore, at the moment when the Academy opened its doors, his figure was somehow read as a riddle that had in teaching an occasion to be exposed.

Capellato, professor and founding assistant of AAM.

18 Interview with Valentin Bearth, published in Chapter 9, pp. 300-308.

19 Interview with Mario Botta, *ibidem*, pp. 297-299.

2.2. The initial year

“During this first year of activities, professors, assistants and students have proved the feeling of being part of something new, an event, an adventure - how Mario Botta loves to define it - called Academy of Architecture. This was, indeed, an experience lived in the condition of a ‘cantiere’, both physical and intellectual, for which we developed a particular didactical program.[...] It seems to us that the image of the ‘cantiere’ suits well the kind of work being done in our school. Clearly, it is a ‘cantiere’ of other times, where it is still possible to try, verify and to correct what was designed. Just like the architect used to do until some years ago: taking advantage of the building site to improve the project”.<sup>20</sup>

Aurelio Galfetti, 1997

The building site - *cantiere* - as a constant process of improvement stands as an appropriate depiction of the Academy’s educational project, both at the moment of its foundation as in the tradition that followed. The original design of the school consisted of a 6-year architectural training divided into two cycles of studies. The first with a duration of two years - of which the second reserved to external internships - and the second cycle with a duration of four years - the last of them dedicated to the *diploma*. Additionally, the project foresaw the future realization of a third cycle of postgraduate studies leading to the achievement of a PhD degree.

This program was progressively implemented from the academic year of 1996-97, with disciplines grouped in three departments: History and Culture, Science and Technology, and Architectural Design. Its humanistic emphasis was visible in the great attention given to courses such as *History of Modern and Contemporary Art* - taught by Harald Szeemann - *History of Architecture* - taught by Francesco Dal Co - *History of Regions* - taught by Leonardo Benevolo - and *Human Ecology* - taught by Albert Jacquard - where the presence of renowned professors shows how much Botta’s *strong figures* strategy was not limited to design studios.

<sup>20</sup> A. Galfetti, *Director’s foreword*, in: Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, *Report on Teaching Activities 1996-97*, Mendrisio 1997.

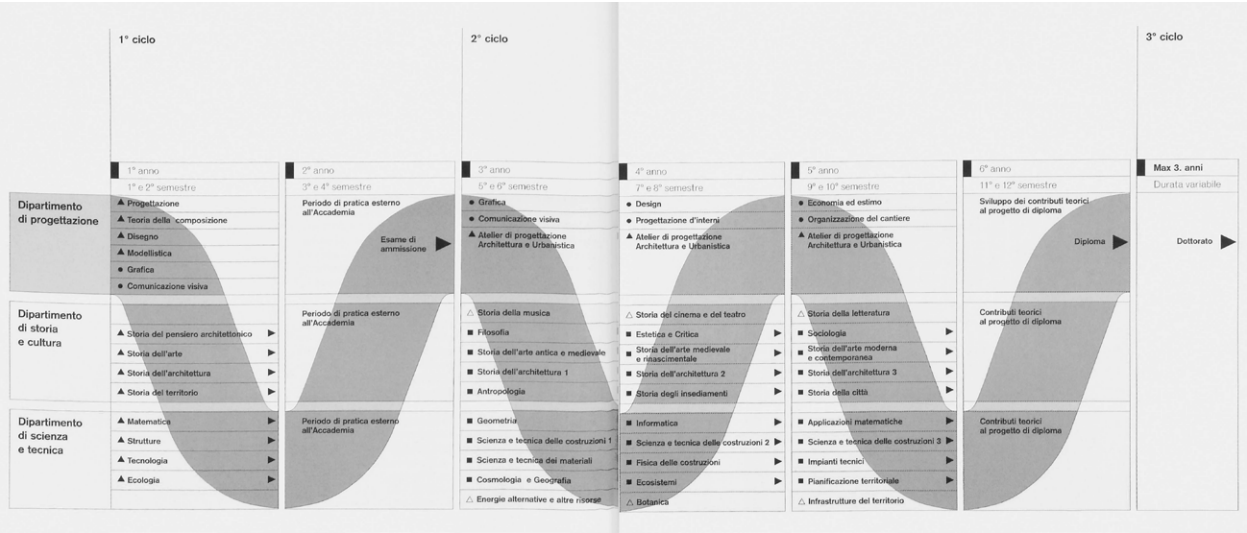


Fig 7  
The three cycles of the Academy  
Report on Teaching Activities AAM, 1997

In that regard, it is also clear how, from its very beginning, the Academy envisioned to become a privileged arena of contemporary thought operating beyond the strict limits of the classroom. Prove to that are the numerous public lectures traditionally integrated to theoretical courses and the constant realization of collateral events, in such a way to transform the school into the focal point of wider local community.<sup>21</sup> The transdisciplinary nature of the *generalist architect* informed the relationship between departments, with the allocation of atelier activities in the afternoons and theoretical courses in the mornings - a distribution aimed to promote daily contamination between the two realms.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> This vocation preceded even the effective start of the school's activities. In 1995, a preliminary series of public events was held in Lugano with guests Achille Castiglioni, Franco Sbarro, Eladio Dieste, Frei Otto, Clorindo Testa and Juan Navarro Baldeweg. In: M. Botta, *Tracce di una scuola: Accademia di Architettura a Mendrisio, 1996-2021*, Mendrisio Academy Press - Electa, Mendrisio - Milano 2021.

<sup>22</sup> As explained by A. Galfetti in the 1997-98 *Report on Teaching Activities*, Mendrisio 1998.





Fig 8  
Atelier Botta's final critics

Fig 9  
Aurelio Galfetti and Peter Zumthor  
in Atelier Zumthor's final critics

Fig. 10  
Panos Koulermos, Joseph  
Rykwert and Aurelio Galfetti with  
Mario Botta in his atelier

AAM Activities, 1997  
photos by Ralph Feiner

Besides that, the department of Architectural Design included the creation of a horizontal studio to act as a connective element between its three different vertical studios. Taught by the Greek architect Panos Koulermos, the *atelier orizzontale* was the space for students to learn the “elements and concepts of composition and architectural design as well as the representational systems and graphic techniques”.<sup>23</sup> Eminently instrumental, its transversality should prevent the ateliers from becoming isolated experiences, acting thus as a sort of common ground to the Academy’s architectural training.

In that sense, it seems important to observe that students arriving at Mendrisio represented a rather diverse public, both in terms of cultural backgrounds - with many of them coming from abroad - and of training levels, since the creation of a university in Ticino tended to encourage local architects with a technical degree to continue their studies there.<sup>24</sup> In retrospect, such heterogeneity can be seen as an effective contribution to the evident richness and high level quality of works produced during the school’s inaugural year.

As already mentioned, the Academy’s first vertical studios were led by Mario Botta, Aurelio Galfetti and Peter Zumthor, each comprising a third of the 104 initial students.<sup>25</sup> Their didactic projects were conceived with great freedom, transferring to ateliers the personal approach of each professor as much as replicating their differences. In fact, the contrast between their methodologies and discourses seems to provide a fairly accurate representation of the individual practices behind them - thus alluding to the value of teaching as an instance of authorial work. This condition becomes more visible when comparing the descriptions of each atelier’s courses, which can be potentially read as brief *manifestos* of their architectural intentions.

23 P. Koulermos, *Report on Teaching Activities 1996-97*, Mendrisio 1997, pp. 117-118.

24 This was the case of Davide Scardua and Nicolas Polli, whose interviews are published in Chapter 9, pp. 271-277 / 278-280.

25 As told by former students, the division between the three ateliers in 1996 was made randomly by lot.



2. An academy in Mendrisio

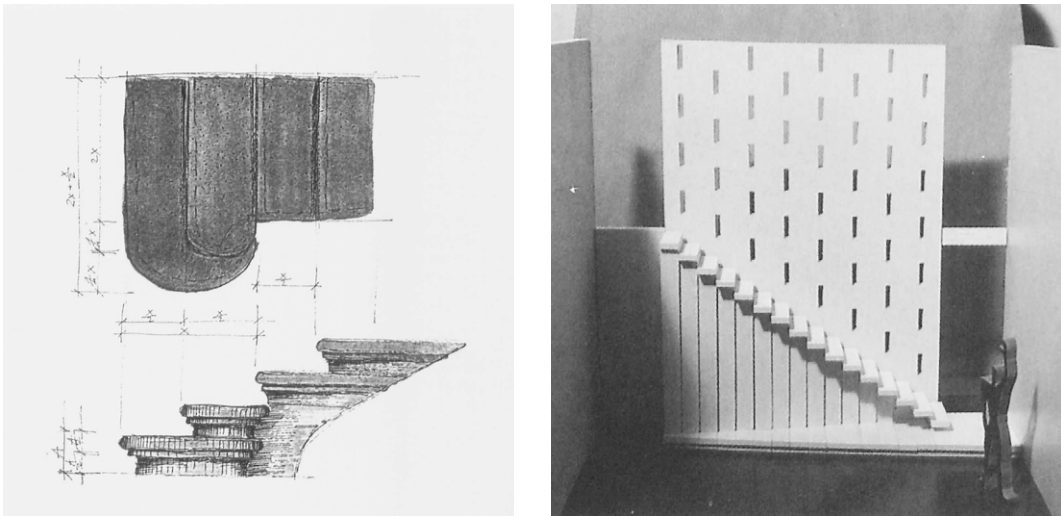


Fig. 11 - 12  
Atelier Botta 1996-97, works by Andrea Viglino and Aldo Celoria  
Report on Teaching Activities AAM, 1997

In the case of Botta, the studio was aimed at:

*“offering students an opportunity of study and exercise to control the design process. As introduction to architectural composition, the atelier is intended to provide awareness and measure of spaces constantly put in relation to man’s fruition and dimension. In order to establish a close relation between project and man as its user, the course foresees a series of exercises [...] around the architectural element ‘stair’, taken as a simple object capable of providing a number of spatial experiences in different situations”.*<sup>26</sup>

Galfetti, who developed a particular attention to the urban scale through his infrastructural projects, defined his studio as:

*“a formative path that will examine those elements and processes that together define the layout of a territory. In particular, the phenomenon of spread urbanization will be investigated, taken as a way of territorial occupation that has affected and apparently flattened the identities of regions geographically and culturally distant. [...] The road is a simple space containing complex events. The course will deal with the project of the road: to design a road means to design a space with a minimum amount of means, that is, with a surface”.*<sup>27</sup>

26 *L’Atelier di Mario Botta*, Rivista Tecnica, Mensile della Svizzera italiana di architettura e ingegneria, 9 1996, p. 50.

27 *L’Atelier di Aurelio Galfetti*, *ibidem*, pp. 50-51.

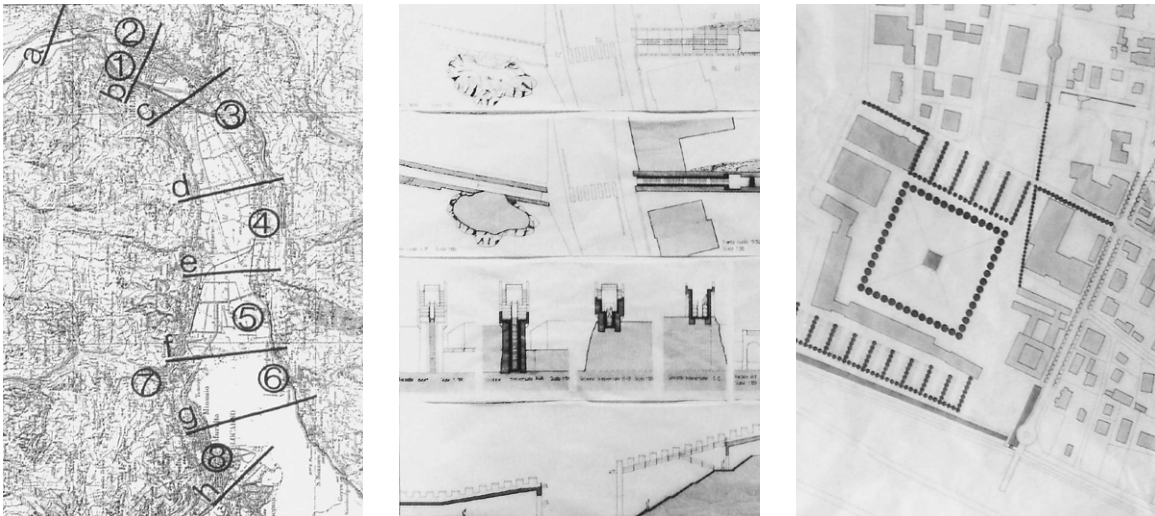


Fig. 13 - 15  
Atelier Galfetti 1996-97, distribution of project sites and works by Alex Bommarito and Luca Bazzi  
Report on Teaching Activities AAM, 1997

Zumthor, in turn, sought a more reflexive attitude, stating that:

*“first of all, we must explain to students that the person standing in front of them is not someone who asks questions whose answers he already knows”. His description followed: “The roots of our understanding of architecture lie in our childhood, in our youth; they lie in our biography. All design works of the first year studio are based on this physical, objective sensuousness of architecture, of its materials. It is about having a concrete experience of architecture, to touch, to see, to feel, to hear and to smell the body of architecture. The discovery of these qualities and the conscious working with them are the course’s themes”.*<sup>28</sup>

The autonomy of each vertical studio is better realized when considering the difference in their work scales and tools. In the case of Atelier Galfetti, for instance, the instrumental frame tended to be naturally defined by its territorial ambitions. Exploring Ticino as a case-study of diffuse urbanization and the street as the main component of its spatial design, students operated in scales that ranged from morphological studies at 1:200.000 to the final project at 1:500. In Atelier Botta, exercises were structured around the design of a staircase, taken as a simple element that could provide basic notions of spatiality and

28 *L’Atelier di Peter Zumthor*, *ibidem*, p. 51.

dimensioning. With the use of very traditional training methods - like the redesign of historical references and the survey of existing buildings - the course's interface was mainly concentrated in 1:100 and 1:50 scales. The opposite end of the gradient was occupied by Atelier Zumthor, whose specific focus on instances of perception and materiality was translated in the assumption of the 1:1 scale as architecture's primary measure. As will be discussed later in Chapter 4, its exercises employed a number of techniques unusual to the environment of an architectural school, with a strong emphasis in the use of physical models as central design tools.

Externally, the experiences of the vertical studios were also received differently. While the educational projects contained in the ateliers of Botta and Galfetti tended to be perceived as a natural extension of their well-known personas - an outcome rather expected - the activities of Atelier Zumthor aroused great interest and curiosity. In a 1996 article holding the suggestive title of *Object, Territory and Sensations*, the Ticinese journal Rivista Tecnica published a review on the Academy's first months, observing how his studio proposed 'a very particular approach requiring students to materialize their own sensations, ultimately defined as a formal research with many points of contact with art'.<sup>29</sup> However, instead of strangeness what emerged from Atelier Zumthor's uniqueness was an evident fascination, something that collaborated to its prompt establishment as the most visible and captivating element of the school - an effect naturally increased by his emergence as a leading figure of international architecture in the period.

Although the Academy's overall structure would remain mostly unchanged, in following years adjustments were constantly made as part of a revision process that should also keep track of the school's effective growth. In 1997-98, for instance, an additional vertical studio was created under the lead of Koulernmos, with the horizontal studio being taught jointly by all four atelier professors. Aimed at fostering integration, this change was undone in 1998-99, when Arduino Cantafora

<sup>29</sup> *Oggetto, territorio e sensazioni*, Rivista Tecnica, Mensile della Svizzera italiana di architettura e ingegneria, 12 1996, p. 40.

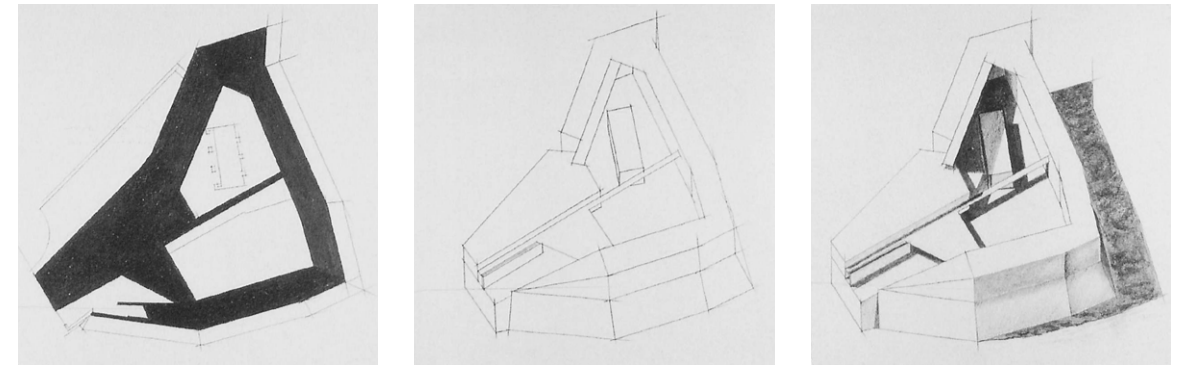


Fig. 16 - 18  
Atelier Koulernos (orizzontale) 1996-97, drawings by Urs Baumann  
Report on Teaching Activities AAM, 1997

assumed the horizontal studio to give it a more consistent structure, and Koulernos established the second-year vertical studios along with Kenneth Frampton. The original tripod structure of first-years would last until 1999-00, when Galfetti moved to the third year and Zumthor to the fourth, leaving Botta in charge of the initial course. In the case of Zumthor, after the conclusion of his *Primo Anno* experience, his vertical studio would alternate between third, fourth and fifth years until he left the Academy in 2006-07.

The building site of Mendrisio reached an important milestone in 2001-02, when the first 48 architects graduated from the Academy. More than completing the school's full format in terms of dimensions, the moment represented the conclusion of an educational project containing an inevitable level of experimentation. Along the last 25 years, the Academy has been consolidating its didactic proposal and expanding its international relevance through two complementary movements. One is the constancy of an intellectual agenda that stems from the original project and is assured by a continuity of people directly related to it. This was translated in the progressive incorporation of teachers who belonged to the Ticinese context or represented the extension of previous collaborations - as in the case of Valentin Bearth, invited by Zumthor to share his vertical studio in 1999-00.

The second movement was the strategic opening operated from Mendrisio towards the outside world. By attracting important names of contemporary architecture, such as Manuel Aires Mateus from Portugal, Bijoy Jain (Studio Mumbai) from India, Shelly McNamara and Yvonne Farrell (Grafton Architects) from Ireland, and many other renowned visiting professors, the school managed to reinforce its image as an international center of excellence. Despite the many transformations undergone by its original project - as for instance the adaptations required by the Bologna Process, to which USI adhered in 2001 - the footprint of the Academy's initial year is still discernible in the current picture of its activities, especially present in the vicinity between practice and theory, and in the existence of a state of mind evidently favorable to experimentation.

### 3. Peter Zumthor

*"Peter Zumthor is no silent architect. He is someone who communicates vigorously. But his precise formulations, fundamental and seductive as they are, are dangerous. He leaves tracks, trails, and maybe traps are set sometimes. This assumption may even be a trap. But I have the impression that Zumthor talks facts. His facts. In this, he is already quite different from other architects who often speak about things other than their facts. But what are 'facts' in architecture?"<sup>1</sup>*

Friedrich Achleitner, 1997

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<sup>1</sup> F. Achleitner, *Ritorno al Moderno? L'architettura di Peter Zumthor*, in: Casabella, vol.61 no.648, September 1997, p.52.



### 3. Peter Zumthor

If a depiction of the architectural scene in the first decades of the new millennium should be made, the figure of Peter Zumthor would certainly appear among its most prominent protagonists. Initially defined by the geographical and cultural environment of German-speaking Switzerland - where he established his practice in the canton of Grisons in 1979 - in the years that followed, his production would become progressively wider in terms of scale, function and location, until achieving international recognition mainly through the completion of major projects in the mid 1990's. It is not hard to identify Zumthor's work as a milestone of contemporary architecture, not only due to the unquestionable quality and originality of his buildings - which have reached an almost transversal status of reference - but perhaps even more because of the role the author himself has assumed in the cultural landscape of architecture. In this sense, even the prestigious awards received along his career, which include the Praemium Imperiale of Japan (2008), the Pritzker Prize (2009) and RIBA's Royal gold Medal (2013), seem to be a sort of reduced confirmation of an acclamation that transcends their own meaning.

Zumthor's ascension onto the shimmering position of 'starchitect' represents an interesting event of our globalized media-pervaded times, one that allowed an architect based in the small town of Haldenstein, working in what could be called a small studio and dedicated to a relatively small number of projects to be among those whose work is spread the most through the never-ending flow of images that defines today's culture - a diffusion that tends only to increase as the author tries to be more reclusive. Such contradiction is certainly not exclusive to Zumthor and is probably even more evident in other artfields. However, it helps to understand the instances of the relevance he has reached as an author, one that goes beyond the strict appreciation of his buildings' quality. In fact, much of his influence on the contemporary scene is based on the values his figure stands for. Integrity, authenticity, originality and non-compromising may be found as some of the ideal components projected upon him by an audience who sees the same values progressively disappear in almost every dimension of contemporary life. Despite the external wish for romanticism, Zumthor's approach to the discipline - more specifically to the conditions of its

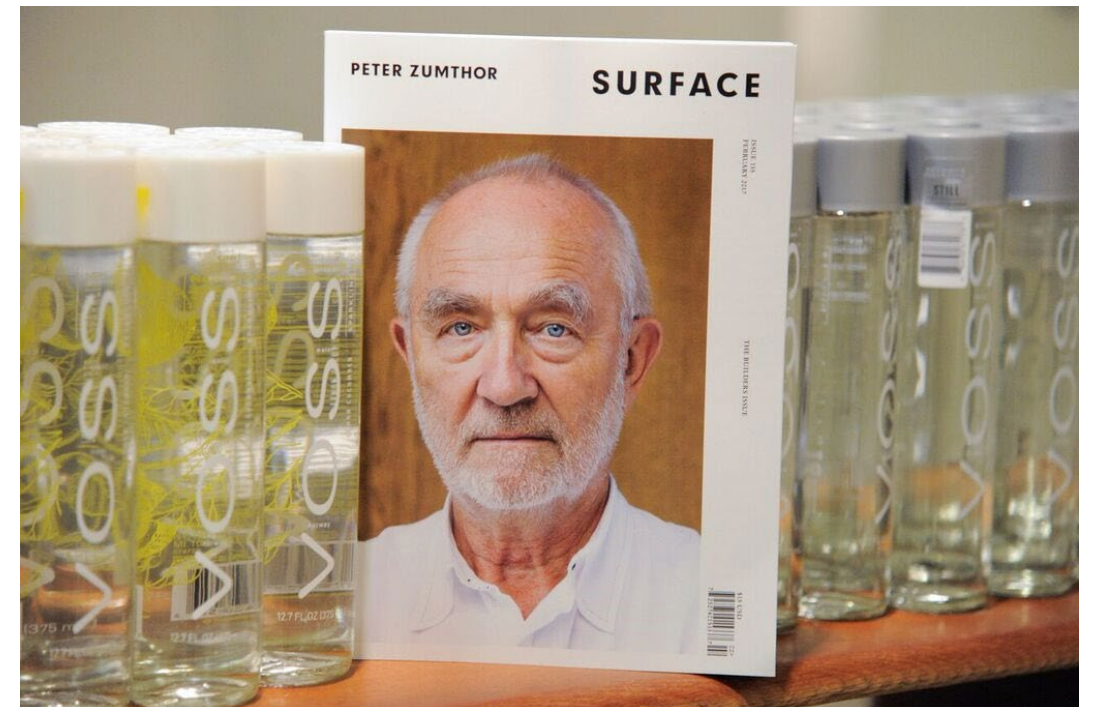


Fig. 1  
Cover of Surface Magazine 135, presented during the Design Dialogues series  
held in February 2017 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York  
photo: Matthew Eisman

practice - do represent an attitude of resistance against what might be the expected *modus operandi* of a globally renowned architect today. The most evident manifestation of that are probably the commercial consequences of refusing to expand the studio's structure - counting around 35 people - in order to be able to personally control the development of every project's details. In that sense, authoriality is one of the main components of the fascination built around Zumthor's figure, a dimension that tends to keep an intimate connection between his architecture and his biography - both components of a production whose position has constantly sought the condition of being an exception.

#### 3.1. Personal formation

In her book *Forms of Practice* - an analysis on the architectural production of 1980's and 1990's German-speaking Switzerland - Irina Davidovici observes how Zumthor stands as a sort of outsider even within the regional context he belongs to.<sup>2</sup> While the almost totality of his colleagues have been trained at ETH Zurich - traditionally the main intellectual reference for practicing architects in the country - Zumthor's education took place in what can be seen as a non-linear path that eventually managed to gather different experiences in a composite background strongly connected to his identity. Born in Oberwil in the outskirts of Basel in 1943, his first training was as a cabinet-maker in the workshop of his father - more specifically as a joiner, the artisan dedicated to build the connections and articulations between objects' different parts. The experience would prove to be a real foundation upon which his work would evolve, defining a particular sensibility towards materials and an ethical approach to the profession that can be related to what Richard Sennet describes as the craftsman's "slow rhythm, in which the technical skills are matured into personal qualities".<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the working process that would become central in Zumthor's architecture - where the dimension of the body is fundamental - contains much of the craftsman's approach, evolving also as a differentiation instance in terms of practice.

2 I. Davidovici, *Forms of practice: German-Swiss architecture 1980-2000*, 2nd. Ed., gt-Verlag, Zurich 2018, p. 108.

3 R. Sennett, *L'Uomo Artigiano*, Feltrinelli, Milano, p.280.

In 1963, after completing his workshop apprenticeship and with the initial intention of becoming a furniture designer, Zumthor attended the Kunstgewerbeschule Basel.<sup>4</sup> The school, which as characteristic of German-speaking cultures fostered a close vicinity between education and practice, followed at the time a structure based on the Bauhaus model of *Vorkurs* and *Fachklasse*. According to Zumthor's words, the influence of this experience on him was two-folded. On the one hand, he describes the school's modernist vision as a somehow limiting paradigm that he eventually had to overcome, especially in what concerns the value of history to design.<sup>5</sup> On the other, the *Vorkurs* as educational instrument for learning a profession's basic set of skills required is acknowledged as of fundamental importance in his personal formation<sup>6</sup> - something that might be present in the future conception of his first-year course in Mendrisio.

Motivated by a growing interest in industrial design, in 1966 Zumthor decided to enroll as a visiting student at the Pratt Institute of New York. This American experience represents an interesting chapter of his manifold biography, whose importance seems to transcend the facts of his short stay. During the one year spent in New York, Zumthor would transit between Pratt's departments of design and interior architecture and, when finally decided to pursue a degree in architecture, returned to Switzerland for family reasons.<sup>7</sup> The sequence of unfinished studies, however, seems to have given him the opportunity to be in touch with the many cultural and artistic events taking place in the effervescent scene of late 1960's New York. A contamination of his architectural work by some of the fine arts avant-gardes of the time is suggested by Zumthor himself, who frequently indicates as influences the work of artists such as Joseph Beuys, Mario Merz or the Italian group Arte Povera. The period at the Pratt Institute probably gave him

4 From 1980 on, the school is named Schule für Gestaltung Basel ([www.sfgbasel.ch](http://www.sfgbasel.ch)).

5 See P. Zumthor, M. Lending, *A Feeling of History*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2018, p. 73.

6 P. Zumthor, *Different Kinds of Silence*, interview by Marc-Christoph Wagner to the Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015.

7 P. Zumthor, *Different Kinds of Silence*, interview by Marc-Christoph Wagner to the Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015.

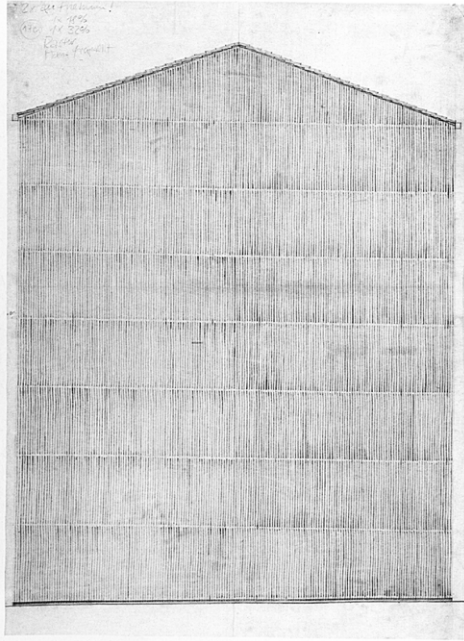
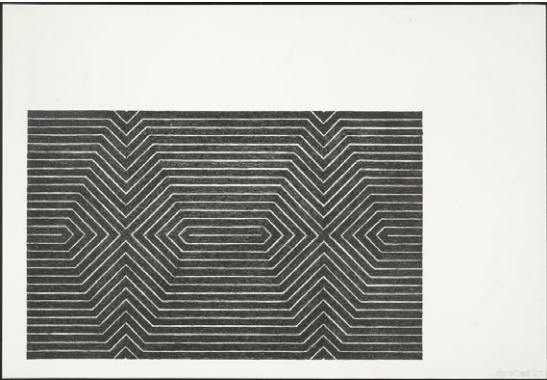
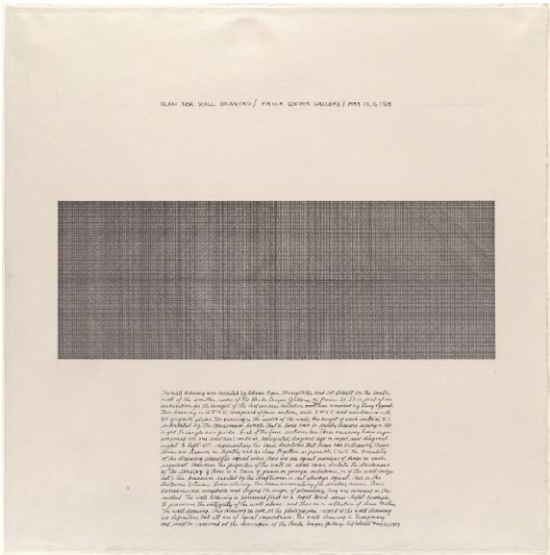


Fig. 2 - 4  
Donald Judd, Untitled (1960)  
Sol LeWitt, Plan for Wall Drawing  
(1969)  
Frank Stella, Black Series II (1967)  
*The MoMA Collection*

Fig. 5  
Atelier Zumthor  
(Haldenstein, 1985-86)  
executive drawing of facade  
*Partituren und Bilder exhibition,*  
1988

a transformative input on a creative level, as well as a greater awareness of the dynamics of the contemporary art world. This would eventually inform the development of his career as an architect, as visible for instance in the careful development of presentation strategies for his early projects and even in the maintenance of a peripheral questioning attitude that may very well contain the traces of a late 1960's counterculture rebeldy.

Zumthor's return to Switzerland would mark the beginning of the longest and perhaps most unexpected chapter of his formation period. In 1968, he started working for the *Denkmalpflege* in the canton of Grisons - the local department of architectural heritage conservation - a position he would keep until 1978. The work at the department was basically dedicated to the documentation, study and conservation of the region's built heritage, in the case of the Grisons, an alpine area formed by small towns and hamlets predominantly dedicated to agriculture and gathering three different language groups - German, Italian and Romansh. This decade-long experience would represent a decisive element in the definition of Zumthor's approach to architecture as well as many circumstantial characteristics of his later work - as for example his geographical establishment in Haldenstein, a town adjacent to the canton's capital Chur. It also provided the opportunity for his first architectural exercises to take place, in the form of renovation and restoration projects for endangered buildings.

A major part of his work however, was dedicated to the effort of producing the inventories of a number of settlements, some of which published in the form of books, as in the cases of Castasegna and Vrin.<sup>8</sup> These works register Zumthor's careful research on the settlements' global reality, including the investigation of the historical development of their urban morphology, the relation to the landscape and topography, the typological evolution of buildings and also the specificities of constructive techniques that could very often suffer subtle differentiations from one hamlet to another. As put by him in the introduction

8 P. Zumthor, J. Rindisbacher, *Vrin, Lugnez, Siedlungsinventar Graubünden, Kantonale Denkmalpflege Graubünden, Chur 1976.*



of the Castasegna inventory, the documentation method was meant to offer “an insight into the relationships between the local economy and the structural development of the village, something allowing the justification of certain structural manifestations through historical indications and therefore to render something of their cultural meaning visible”.<sup>9</sup>

It takes no great effort to identify in this long and meticulous work the source of many components that define what is currently known as characteristic in Zumthor’s architecture, as for example the deep understanding of place, the conception of strong relationships between building and landscape, the valorization of historical components, and also a specific sensibility towards materiality and constructive tradition. However, the rich background gathered along his biography would only be put to test from 1979 on, the year in which a then 35 years-old Peter Zumthor takes the decision to begin his career as a practicing architect. The reasons behind this move may be found both in the personal ambition to engage in his own projects as in the imminent interruption of the *Denkmalpflege*’s inventory activities.<sup>10</sup> Anyway, the establishment of his studio in Haldenstein would find in the well-known Swiss tradition of architectural competitions the necessary occasion to present his first designs and consequently to obtain his first commissions.

3.2. Postmodern lessons:

In the four decades that followed, Zumthor’s production would be characterized both by the remarkable originality of his buildings and by a significant transformation in his architectural language. In fact, the body of work most commonly associated to his figure does not include a number of his early projects, a narrative in many aspects produced by himself, as seen in the conscious choice to start the presentation of

9 P. Zumthor, *Siedlungs-Inventarisierung in Graubünden: Aufgabenstellung und Methode des Bündner Siedlungsinventares, mit Inventar Castasegna*, Kantonale Denkmalpflege Graubünden, Chur 1981, p. 14.

10 The interruption of inventorization in the Grisons is mentioned in Zumthor’s introduction to the book on Castasegna as one of the reasons for the fragmented publication of what was meant to be a complete work on the region. *Ibidem*, p. 13.

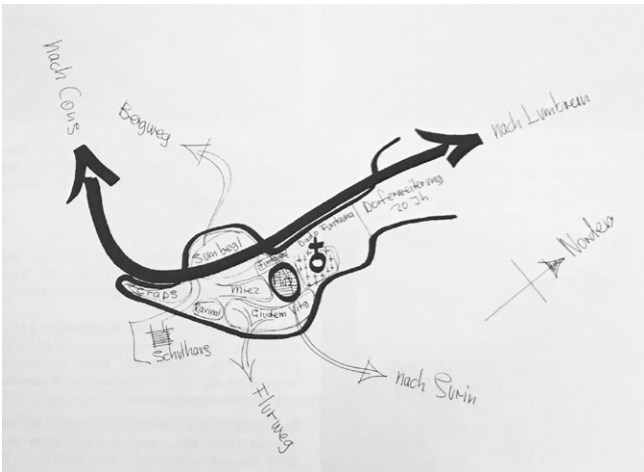
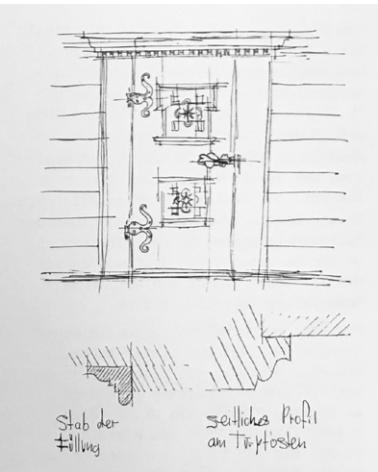


Fig. 6  
Vrin inventory  
detail of the door of the *Stübe* in Haus 141

Fig. 7  
Sketch of the village’s system

Fig. 8  
Passageway to Dorfplatz in *Funtauna*

Fig. 9  
View of Vrin from the south

Peter Zumthor,  
*Siedlungsinventar Vrin*, 1975

his 'complete works' - published in 2014 - with a group of buildings realized only from the mid-1980's on. Among the projects that register Zumthor's initial phase, and the natural experimentation in the search for an own vocabulary, the most representative are the School Expansion in Churwalden (1979-83) and the Haus R  th in Haldenstein (1982-83). In the first, result of a competition, the school's need for additional spaces is fulfilled through the distribution of a sequence of new structures along a linear path. This one becomes the ordering element of the ensemble, generating a hierarchy that connects the volumes between themselves and also the entrance from each building to its adjacent outer terrace.

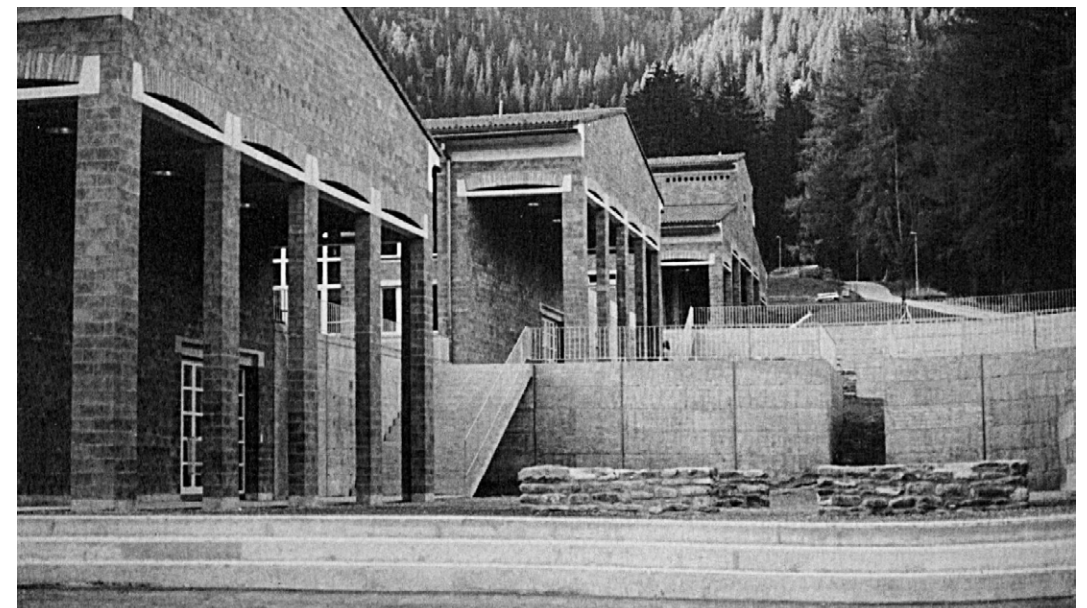
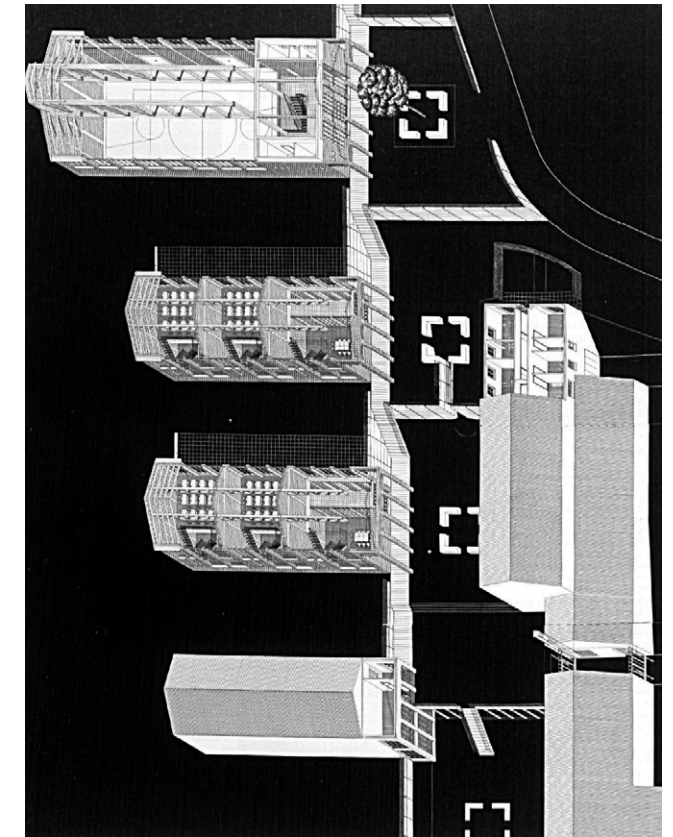
Interesting to observe are the formal and constructive languages applied. The pavilion-like buildings with gable roofs are built with plain exposed concrete blocks and inner wood structure, with a detail in the frontal arcades clearly referring to the work of Louis Kahn - the flat arches and the concrete lintel on top of the columns allude directly to Kahn's Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad (1963). Another interesting element in Zumthor's project for the school is the relationship with its surroundings, towards which the ensemble seeks connection through the distribution of accesses in a morphological level, and in a symbolic level through the insertion of stone sculptures on each of the terraces. Those, produced by the artist Hannes Vogel, should refer to the ancient watchtowers that once existed in the valley.<sup>11</sup>

A similar concern is present in the composition of Haus R  th, a two-family house whose U-shaped volume is crossed by an existing path used to move sheeps up and down the hill.<sup>12</sup> Here, the project's most striking feature is the absolute symmetry applied in the creation of two independent dwellings separated by a central court, a formal solution whose abstract formalism and monumentality would be elements frequently criticized in Zumthor's later thinking.

<sup>11</sup> O. Gm  r, *Schulhauserweiterung in Churwalden-GR*, Archithese, Zeitschrift und Schriftenreihe f  r Architektur, 2 1984, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> P. Zumthor, *Haus R  th in Haldenstein-GR: Ein Gespr  ch*, Archithese, Zeitschrift und Schriftenreihe f  r Architektur, 1 1984, p. 28.

Fig. 10 - 11  
School extension  
(Churwalden, 1979-83)  
Axonometry and view from the west  
Atelier Zumthor  
Archithese 2, 1984





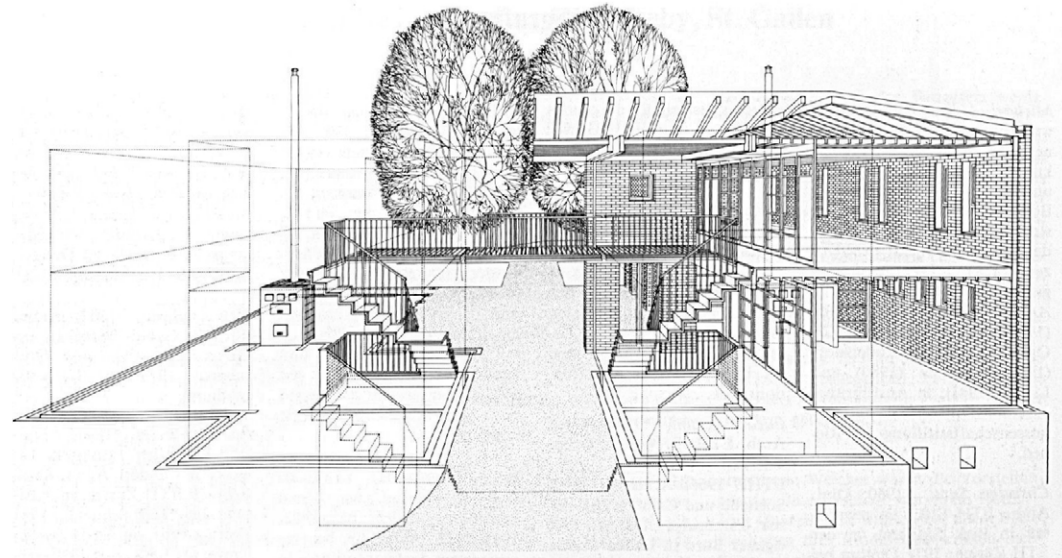


Fig. 12  
Haus Râth (Haldenstein, 1982-83), section in perspective  
Atelier Zumthor, published in *Archithese 2*, 1984

These two buildings are representative of a moment in which the development of his personal language is articulated through the incorporation of external references belonging to what can be generally identified as a Postmodern component in the architecture of German-speaking Switzerland at the time. That relates to the local reception of new ideas that tended to broaden the functionalist paradigm of Modernism through a transversal valorization of the cultural values contained in elements of history and tradition. The main protagonist of such transformation was the Italian architect Aldo Rossi (1931-97), whose teaching activity at the ETH Zurich - first in 1972-74 and later in 1978-79<sup>13</sup> - was responsible for promoting a sort of transalpine inception of Rationalist components.

13 Irina Davidovici suggests the existence of three phases of Rossi's activities in Zurich: first his own studio from 1972 to 1974 with Bruno Reihcllin and Fabio Reinhard as assistants; second the collaborative studio with Bernard Hoesli and Paul Hofer in 1978-79; third would refer to studio *Analogue Architektur*, carried by Fabio Reinhard and Miroslav Sik from 1983 to 1991. In: I. Davidovici, *Forms of practice: German-Swiss architecture 1980-2000*, 2nd. Ed., gt-Verlag, Zurich 2018, p. 59.



Fig. 13  
Haus Râth, frontal view  
photo by Fortunat Anhorn, *Archithese 2* 1984

In fact, Rossi's presence in Zurich would prove to be an event whose influence would transcend the space of the classroom, generating multiple reverberations and reinterpretations of his ideas that eventually defined a sort of common ground for local architectural debate. Even if Rossi can be seen as a pivotal figure in this context, other elements contributed to the mixture of influences to which the Swiss architecture of the late 1970's and 1980's collectively reacted. Among these were the Ticinese production - much diffused by the 1975 exhibition *Tendenzen: Neuere Architektur im Tessin*<sup>14</sup> - and the local reception to the ideas of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown published in *Learning from Las Vegas*.<sup>15</sup>

14 The exhibition was curated by Martin Steinmann and gathered projects designed in the 1960's and 1970's by names such as Aurelio Galfetti, Mario Botta, Dolf Schnebli, Luigi Snozzi and Giancarlo Durisch. In: M. Steinmann, T. Boga, *Tendenzen - neuere Architektur im Tessin*, ETH gta, Zurich 1977.

15 R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1972.

In the case of Zumthor, the presence of such components in the first steps of his career becomes evident not only in the formal vocabulary of his first buildings, but also in the theoretical reflection he develops around them. An example, in a 1984 edition of the journal *Archithese* that published the completion of the School Expansion in Churwalden, Livio Vacchini and Aurelio Galfetti's Losone School were pointed by him as references for the project, also describing his vision on the new building as that of "a simple, spacious Italian structure".<sup>16</sup> The analysis of Zumthor's early designs reveal then not only some aspects of a conceptual genealogy that would later become less evident, but also brings light to the particular transformative nature of his architecture, transversal to the investigative condition of his work. The contrast between the different versions of his project for the Thermal Baths in Vals is probably representative of that. In an earlier solution of 1986 which included a hotel building, the glass facade and the symbolic references to the region's 'ordinary' tourist tradition<sup>17</sup> - which included a luminous sign with the inscription \*\*\*\*Hotel Therme - are difficult to relate with the language that Zumthor would explore a few years later in what would become his most famous building.

#### 3.3. The architect-craftsman:

A more consolidated expression of Zumthor's architecture would be found in a group of buildings realized almost at the same time and located just a few kilometers away from each other. These are the Atelier Zumthor (Haldenstein, 1985-86), the Shelter for Roman Ruins (Chur, 1985-86) and the Sogn Benedetg Chapel (Sumvitg, 1985-88). The first, a two-story single volume built to be used as his own studio-house, establishes an interesting dialogue with its surroundings. Positioned along an alley and perpendicular to the village's main street in such a way to create a garden in the plot's inner portion, the building presents itself as a contemporary variation of the vernacular theme.

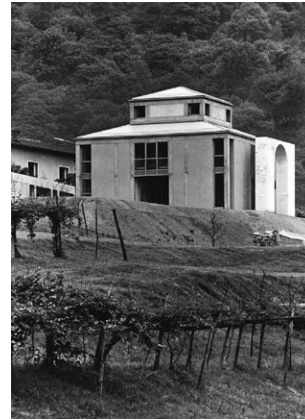


Fig. 14  
Bruno Reichlin and Fabio Reinhardt  
Casa Tonini (1972-74)  
*Archi* 12 2017  
photo by Fabio Reinhardt

Fig. 15  
Livio Vacchini and Aurelio Galfetti  
Scuola Media Losone (1973-75)  
Studio Vacchini

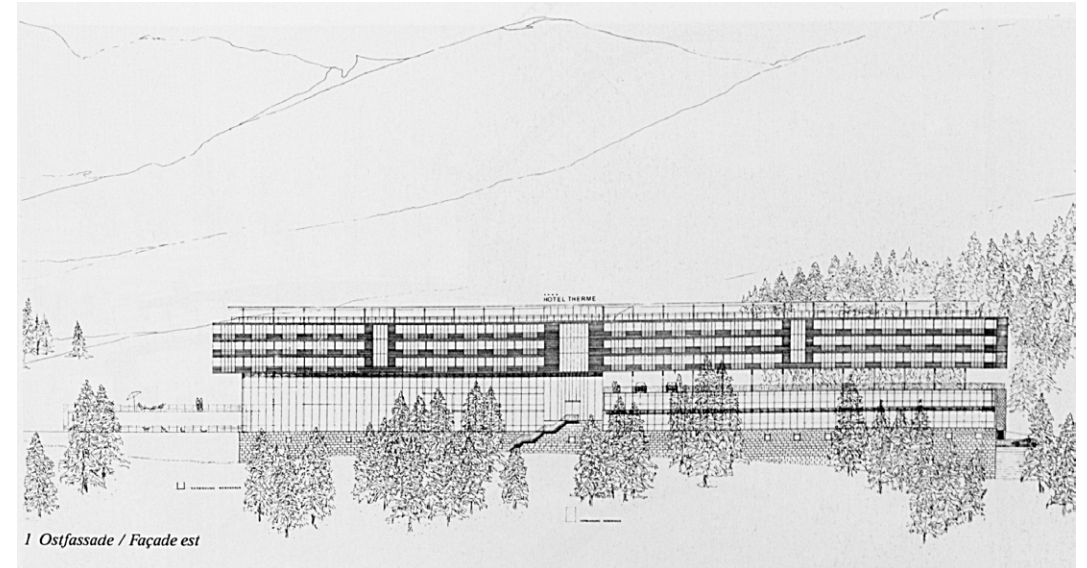


Fig. 16  
Hotel Therme Vals, western facade  
Atelier Zumthor, *Archithese* 6 1986

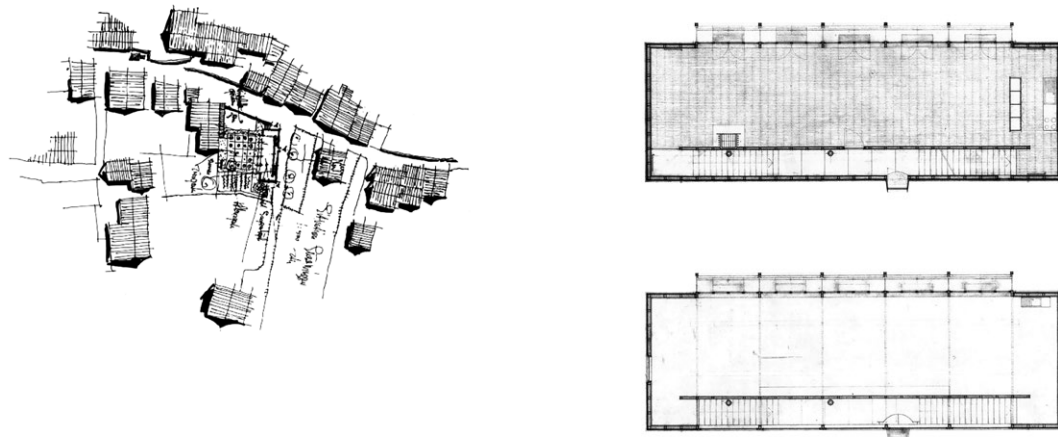
Its volume absorbs the traditional gable roof in a simple geometry whose unifying element is the refined covering made out of wooden laths. All other elements - such as the entrance door's volume, the exposed rain gutters and the windows - are part of a composition in which they assume a figurative role over the building's unifying texture. In the interior, a single space unit is separated from the stairs by a long wall, opening towards the inner garden through a wide window. The most interesting element of the project is probably the refinement of its wooden skin, whose scale, says Zumthor, "is so fine that it looks as if a little drawer has been placed on the village. There is something challenging about it and it says: please, you can do better with wood, beauty can be built with wood".<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> P. Zumthor, *Das Fremde und das Eigene - Ein Gespräch mit Irma Nosedà*, *Archithese*, Zeitschrift und Schriftenreihe für Architektur, 6 1986, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> O. Gmür, *Schulhauserweiterung in Churwalden-GR*, *Archithese*, Zeitschrift und Schriftenreihe für Architektur, 2 1984, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> I. Nosedà, *Hotel Therme in Vals*, *Archithese*, Zeitschrift und Schriftenreihe für Architektur, 6 1986, p. 29.





An analogue approach to materiality is found in the *Schutzbauten*, built to protect and render accessible the archeological findings of Roman age in Chur. Situated on a peripheral site at the edge of the Old City, the ruins are the result of excavations made during the 1970's, which revealed the foundation walls of three buildings - one of which, like many other findings in the area, remains partially buried under an adjacent building. Zumthor's project reacted to this reality by suggesting the virtual reconstruction of the original Roman volumes, conceiving the new structure as the additional ensemble of three wooden envelopes following the foundations' perimeter. The ruins and the site's naked ground remain exposed and accessible, contained by a light and permeable structure whose construction condenses the overlapping images of a rural barn and the almost textile quality of its outer surface.

The external replication of the screens made of fine wooden louvers represent the design's central element, one providing the desired in-between space for the inside - temperature, sounds and light are allowed to penetrate - and the symbolic monumentality of a public

Fig. 17-19  
Atelier Zumthor  
(Haldenstein, 1985-86)  
Sketch of situation,  
ground and first floor plans  
Atelier Zumthor  
View from Süesswingel  
photo by RL



building. As much as in his Atelier, the continuous surface created by Zumthor on the facades is explored in its visual and sensual qualities, a highly sophisticated technical solution that presents the familiar element of wood in a new contextualization somehow detached from the vernacular. As observed by Davidovici:

*"[in the Schutzbauten] the choice of materials and the form they are given provide complementary meanings. At one level, the timber construction refers to a local culture of timber craft. However, rather than propagating a vernacular convention, it is visually manipulated to veer towards abstraction. The repetition of elements borrows the seriality of Minimal structures, and exhibits the quality of an industrial pattern".<sup>19</sup>*

Along with wood, the steel elements of the window boxes, skylights, entrance door and the footbridge that crosses the ensemble - all conceived as autonomous objects freely inserted over the volume's plain geometry - compose a language that stands a poignant reaction to the permanent challenge of how to manipulate the elements of tradition

<sup>19</sup> I. Davidovici, *Forms of practice: German-Swiss architecture 1980-2000*, 2nd. Ed., gt-Verlag, Zurich 2018, p. 114.

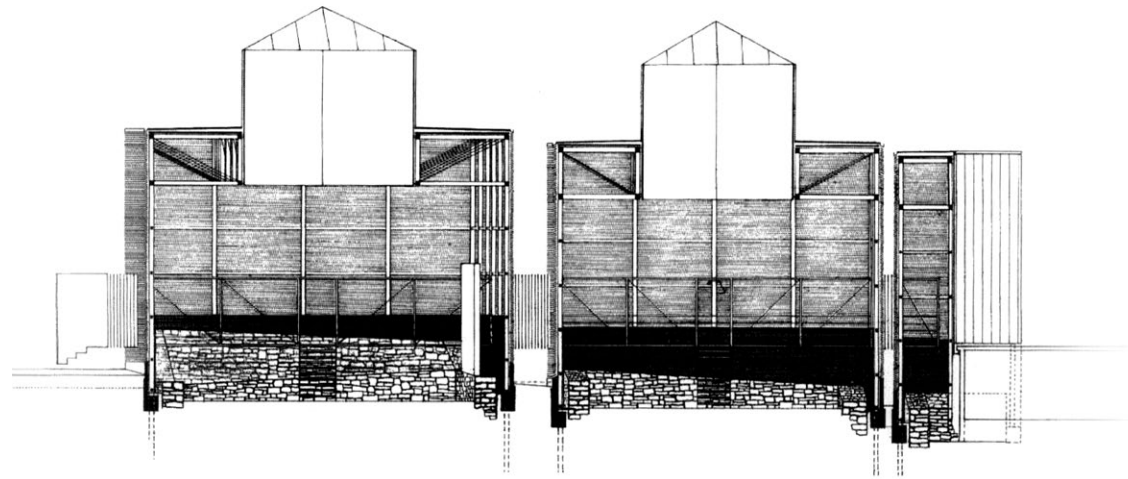


Fig. 20-21  
Schutzbauten  
(Chur, 1985-86)  
Longitudinal section  
Atelier Zumthor  
View from Seilerbahnweg  
photo by RL

without falling into the dangers of regional fetishism. The themes of place, landscape, material tradition and history, strong components of the cultural identity of Alpine regions, would be particularly explored by Zumthor in his project for a chapel on the hamlet of Sumvitg. Conceived to replace a baroque chapel destroyed by an avalanche, the new building is located slightly up on the hill, assuming the shape of a tower-like structure that rises vertically from the slope to be accessed in the halfway of its height through a small volumetric addition containing the entrance door.

Its particular planform - a curvilinear shape reminding a leaf or a boat - is translated into a geometrical order that coordinates the construction of a wooden structure that stands as a statement of skilled craftsmanship. Internally, the main protagonist of the space is the roof's structure, which seems to float above the peripheral line of windows responsible for the penetration of an ever-changing stroke of sunlight. The chapel's apparent simplicity contains a subtle richness in terms of spatial transitions and sensual stimuli, as for example in the noises, scent, texture and even instability of its fragile wooden structure - the constructive solution with a hollow space between the suspended ground and the hill generates an effect similar to that of a resonance box. In that sense, it is interesting to observe the description made by Philip Ursprung of his first visit to Sogn Benedetg:

*"From the very beginning, I was already involved in the chapel's spatiality, I became part of the choreography of everyday moments 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 that way I moved and helped me become familiar with the environment. 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".<sup>20</sup>*

<sup>20</sup> P. Ursprung, *Earthworks: The Architecture of Peter Zumthor*, on the occasion of the announcement of Peter Zumthor as the 2009 Pritzker Prize laureate.





As the last chapter in Zumthor's mid-1980's wooden trilogy, the chapel in Sumvitg renders visible the condition of ambiguity that may be found as an important component in the success achieved by this body of work. The symbolic references to local tradition contained in its materiality are transformed through an abstraction process that eventually generates an object whose presence has no direct relation to any surrounding structure both in terms of typology and volumetry. The use of wood in the new chapel represents also a meaningful opposition to the old one built in stone - whose ruins are kept as part of the place's narrative. In the region, institutional buildings and churches are traditionally built in stone, while houses and working premises are instead made of wood. In that sense, it is significant how Zumthor's architecture explores the condition of ambiguity - as in the case of a religious building that contains the image of a rural structure, or in the use of ancient constructive traditions in a sophisticated, almost artistic way - as a means to generate new meanings, therefore managing to achieve a wider degree of universality. The greatest achievement of his production lies precisely on the strong connection established

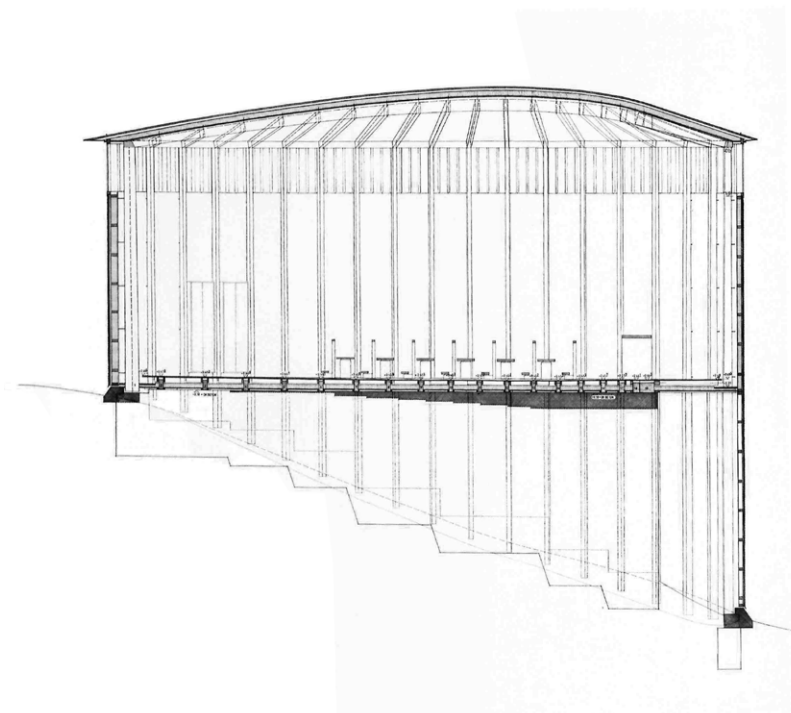
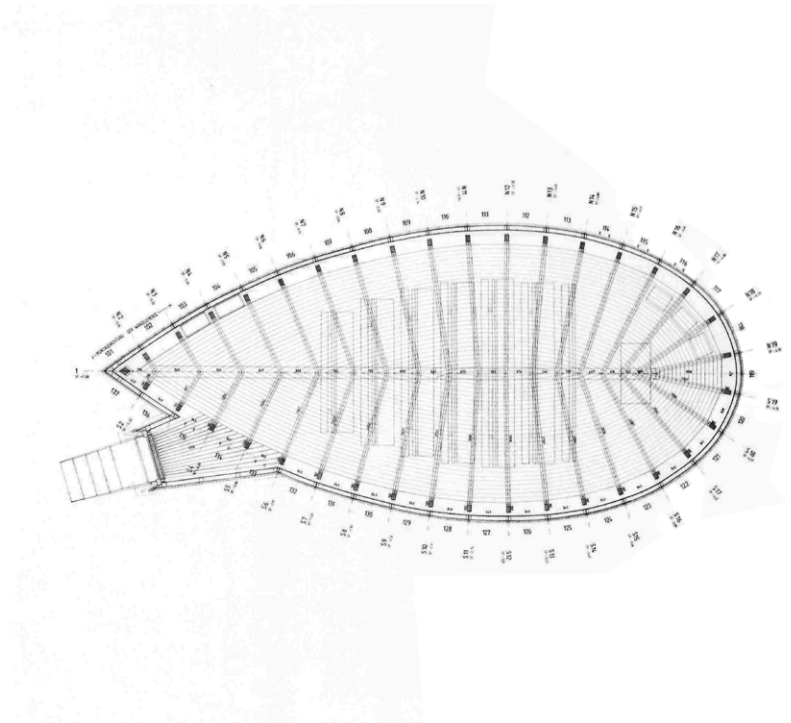


Fig. 22-24  
Sogn Benedetg Chapel  
(Sumvitg, 1985-88)  
Exterior and inner views  
photos by RL  
Plan and transversal section  
Atelier Zumthor

with the territory, providing the contemporary image of a local identity which had to face the inevitable challenges brought by the modernization and economic prosperity of previous decades.

As observed by Ursprung, the emergence of Zumthor's work must be seen as part of the global picture of Alpine Switzerland in the 1980's, a region whose landscape has been progressively transformed by the growth of urbanization, the expansion of the tourism industry and also by the national infrastructure plan responsible for the construction of an intricate system of dams and power plant stations literally inserted into the Alp's geography.<sup>21</sup> In that sense, the architecture developed by Zumthor in the period may be seen in close connection with what Frampton defined a few years earlier as Critical Regionalism, something able to "mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place"<sup>22</sup> - of which the Ticinese production of the 1970's was presented as an example.

#### **3.4. An architecture of resistance:**

The realization of these projects would be accompanied by the emergence of a more personal and articulated exposition of Zumthor's thinking, registering also an important step on the construction of his persona as an author. In this regard, it is particularly significant the strategy adopted by him in the presentation of this first group of works. After the completion of Sogn Benedetg in 1988, an exhibition displaying the chapel, the Atelier and the *Schutzbauten* was staged at the Architekturgalerie Luzern with the title *Partituren und Bilder: Architektonische Arbeiten aus den Atelier Peter Zumthor 1985-1988*.<sup>23</sup> The event was the first public presentation of Zumthor's work, fea-

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21 See P. Ursprung, *Envisioning the Invisible - Hans Danuser and Peter Zumthor*, in: H. Danuser, K. Gantenbein, P. Ursprung, *Zumthor Sehen. Bilder von Hans Danuser*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2009, p. 75.

22 K. Frampton, *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Renaissance* (1983), in: *Labour Work and Architecture: Collected Essays on Architecture and Design*, Phaidon, New York 2004, p. 82.

23 P. Zumthor, *Partituren und Bilder: Arbeit aus dem Atelier Peter Zumthor 1985 - 1988*, 2. unveränderte Auflage, Architekturgalerie Luzern, Luzern 1994.

tured through the complementary presence of executive drawings and pictures taken by Swiss photographer Hans Danuser. The intended analogy was that of music, the drawings alluding to the abstraction of musical scores whose real content are only brought to the real world through their performance. The exhibition thus contained a statement of Zumthor's approach, pointing to the understanding of architecture as something ultimately belonging to the realm of perception - a building's reality belongs effectively to its experience.

It is also interesting to observe the particularities of the photographs, produced to convey the value of this unreplaceable dimension. They did not assume the detached vision of the building as an isolated object, but instead registered the photographer's subjective view on architecture as part of a lived reality. Such an outcome is certainly not casual. In fact, the commission was Danuser's first documentation of architecture and, considering also the nature of his previous work - the IN VIVO series (1980-89), for instance, had as thematic the inner spaces of atomic power plants and research laboratories<sup>24</sup> - it is clear that it did not approach it from the traditional point of view of architectural photography.

Besides the role played in the exhibition, Danuser's pictures contributed on a much broader level to the definition of the reception to Zumthor's work in the late 1980's. As observed by Köbi Gantenbein, as soon as they were revealed in Luzern, "the images circled the globe in journals and books and set a precedent in the history of architectural photography: images that derived from one artist's radically subjective view of the other artist's buildings".<sup>25</sup> Their expressiveness, the subtle melancholy and mystery of the buildings emerging from the misty landscape, would deeply inform the audience's conception of Zumthor's image - something that, as any first impression, would tend to last. Shortly after the exhibition's opening, a second act in the dif-

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24 According to Danuser, it was during an exhibition of his IN VIVO series that Zumthor approached him to discuss a future collaboration. Further information about the series can be found at [hans-danuser.ch](http://hans-danuser.ch).

25 H. Danuser, K. Gantenbein, P. Ursprung, *Zumthor Sehen. Bilder von Hans Danuser*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2009, p. 7.



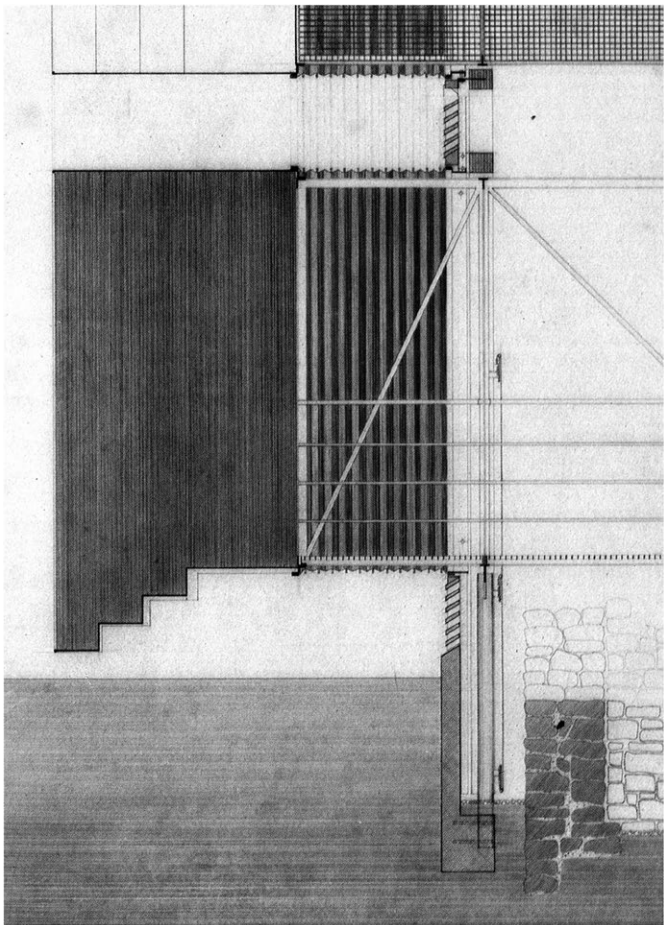


Fig. 25-26  
Hans Danuser,  
Photos of *Schutzbauten* and  
*Sogn Benedetg Chapel*  
*Partituren und Bilder* (1988)  
The MoMA Collection

Fig. 257  
Atelier Zumthor,  
Executive section of the  
*Schutzbauten* facade  
*Partituren und Bilder* (1988)



Fig. 28-29  
Hans Danuser,  
In Vivo: Medicine I, III 5 and Energy I, 1  
*In Vivo Series* (1980-89), *The MoMA Collection*

fusion of his work took place in California, where as visiting professor invited by the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc), he delivered a seminal lecture in November 1988.

Entitled *A Way of Looking at Things* - later published in the first edition of *Thinking Architecture*<sup>26</sup> - it presented Danuser's images of his first completed buildings alongside some drawings and referential images. The lecture's content, both text and iconography, can be seen as a meaningful *manifesto* of Zumthor's architecture - or perhaps even as a *scientific autobiography*. It condenses and presents key concepts that would remain the fundamentals of his architectural thinking in the following decades, as for example the value of personal memories, the importance of materials and construction, the role of place, tradition and ordinary things of everyday life in his work. In that sense, an effective synthesis of the message that emanated from this first exposition is found in the lecture last subchapter, under the suggestive title of *Resistance*:

26 P. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, Birkhäuser, Basel 1998.



Fig. 30-33  
Peter Zumthor  
Conference at the SCI-Arc,  
November 1988  
SCI-Arc Media Archive

*"I believe that architecture today needs to reflect on the tasks and possibilities which are inherently its own. Architecture is not a vehicle or a symbol for things that do not belong to its essence. In a society that celebrates the inessential, architecture can put up a resistance, counteract the waste of forms and meanings, and speak its own language. I believe that the language of architecture is not a question of a specific style. Every building is built for a specific use in a specific place and for a specific society. My buildings try to answer the questions that emerge from these simple facts as precisely and critically as they can".<sup>27</sup>*

The turn from the 1980's to the 1990's registered a transition in Zumthor's production, which reacted to the exposure to more complex programs and more conditioned sites by assuming an approach that transcended the limits of regionalism in favour of more universal architectural language. Even if much of the projects designed in the period would still remain strongly connected to the Swiss geography, as

<sup>27</sup> P. Zumthor, *A Way of Looking at Things* (1988), in *Thinking Architecture*, 3rd ed., Birkhäuser, Basel 2017, p. 27.

in the case of the Spittelhof Siedlung (Biel, 1987-96), the Apartments for Senior Citizens (Masans, 1989-93) and the Gugalun House (Versam, 1989-93), it is possible to observe how they register the exploration of a more abstract formal composition made of simple geometries and a materiality whose expressiveness tended to be less based on the symbolic content of tradition - so incorporating many aspects of what could be said a more urban or industrialized language. That is visible in Zumthor's sketches of the plan for the project in Masans, where the definition of inner spaces is represented in the dynamic interplay of volumes and plans that assume the condition of autonomous elements. If it seems legitimate to suggest a Postmodern component in the genesis of his early works, at this moment Zumthor's architecture seems to assume an approach closer to that of Modernism. Such inflection is observed by Friederich Achleiner in an essay suggestively entitled *The Return to the Modern?*:

*"[Zumthor's buildings] speak with the site, not with the region. In them, all the Modern Movement's experience can be discovered, from the utilization of space to serial construction methods. [...] The craft discipline is not an end in itself but, rather, a radical method of pressing thoughts into service. Thus, one can see in Peter Zumthor, if one will, a designer who designs not according to societal and thus cultural rules, but according to an 'image' of a site that he remembers as being specially intense, infused with mood".<sup>28</sup>*

A consolidation of this language found expression in a sequence of projects that would also represent an expansion of Zumthor's visibility in the international scene, a second trilogy formed by the Kunsthau Bregenz (1989-97), the Thermal Baths (Vals, 1990-96) and the Topography of Terror (Berlin, 1993-04).

The development of the project for the Kunsthau in Bregenz - Zumthor's first winning proposal in a major European competition - offers an example of the already mentioned transformative nature of his architecture, something materialized in the long and careful design process that progressively became characteristic to his work. In that sense, it is interesting to observe how the initial project present-

<sup>28</sup> F. Achleiner, *Ritorno al Moderno? L'architettura di Peter Zumthor*, in: Casabella, vol.61 no.648, September 1997, p.54.



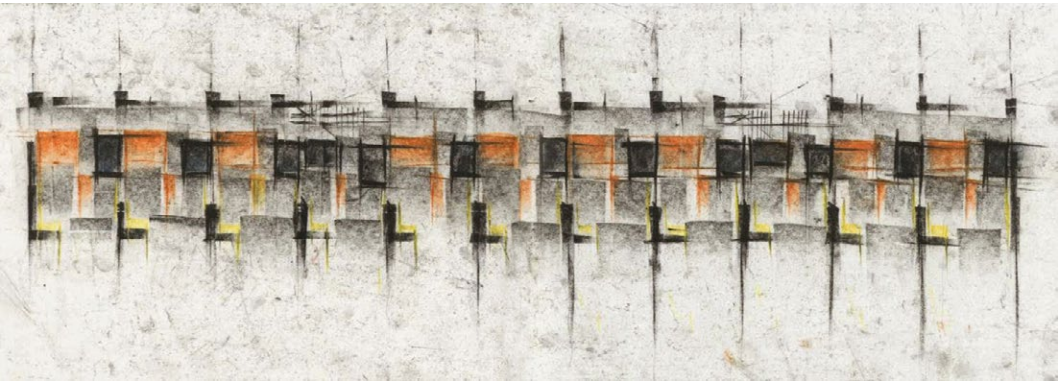
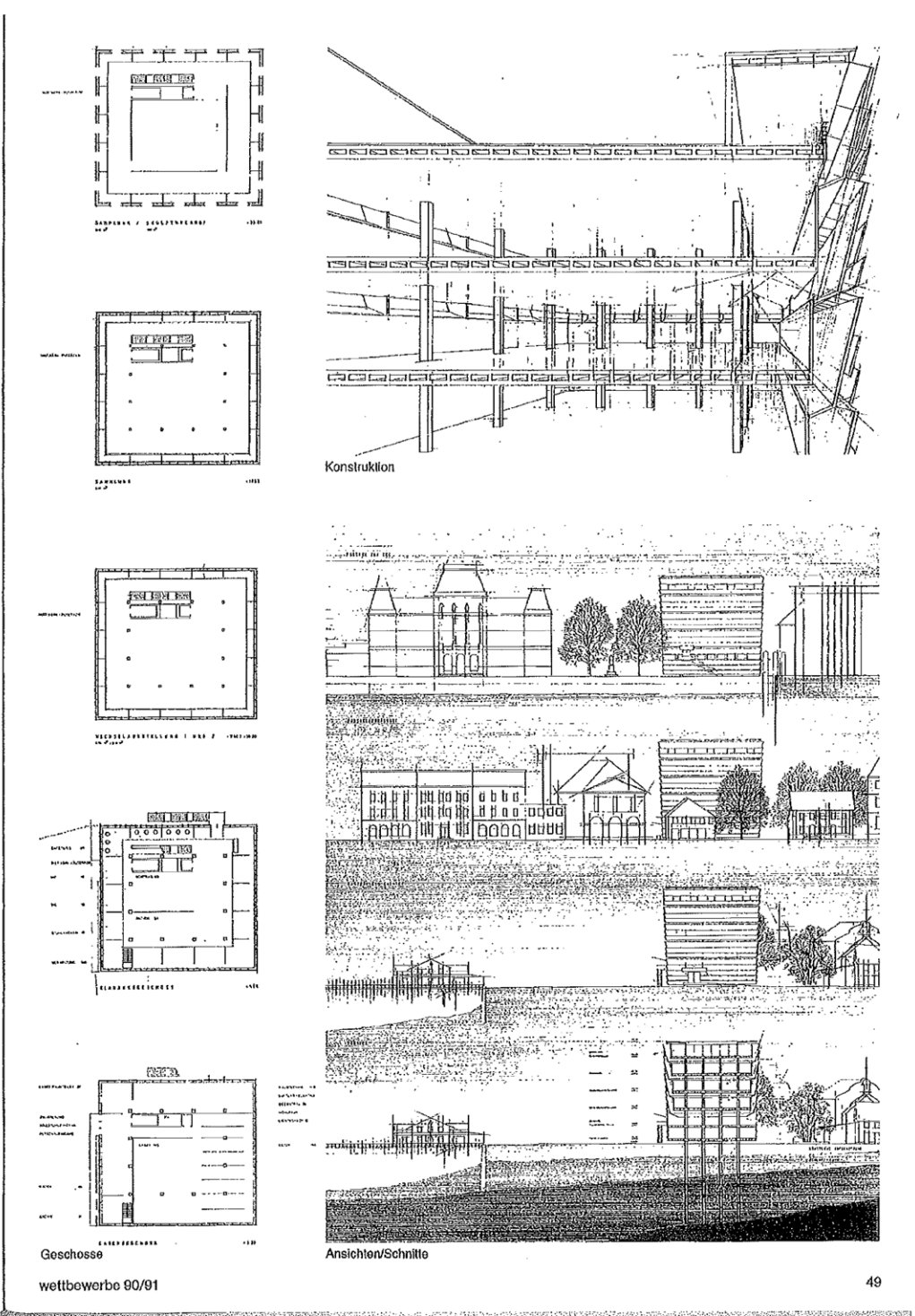


Fig. 34  
Apartments for Senior Citizens (Masans, 1989-93), sketch of general plan by Peter Zumthor  
Atelier Zumthor

Fig. 35  
Kunsthaus Bregenz competition entry, 1989  
Atelier Zumthor, *Architekturjournal Wettbewerbe 90/91*

ed significant differences in relation to the final built version. Even if the volumetry - a cuboid placed on the edge of the Old Town facing the Bodensee's boulevard - is basically the same, the first project conceived the museum's relationship with the city in a contrasting way, with its main access positioned over the street facing the lake side, where an external stair would provide access to the elevated entrance floor.

This solution was substantially changed in the final version, where the possibilities created by modifications in the city's traffic allowed the creation of the Karl-Tizian Platz, a small square connected to the Old Town onto which the museum's entrance was then placed. The inner spatiality was also transformed, originally proposed as a free-plan space with exhibitions distributed along a peripheral zone defined by four rows of columns and illuminated through the positioning of reflectors on the ceiling. The ambition to explore the presence of natural light in the building's interior remains as the main concept in the final solution, which evolved the reflective strategy into an articulated vertical composition revealed only in the project's section. The original six floors were transformed into four, conceived as enclosed spaces



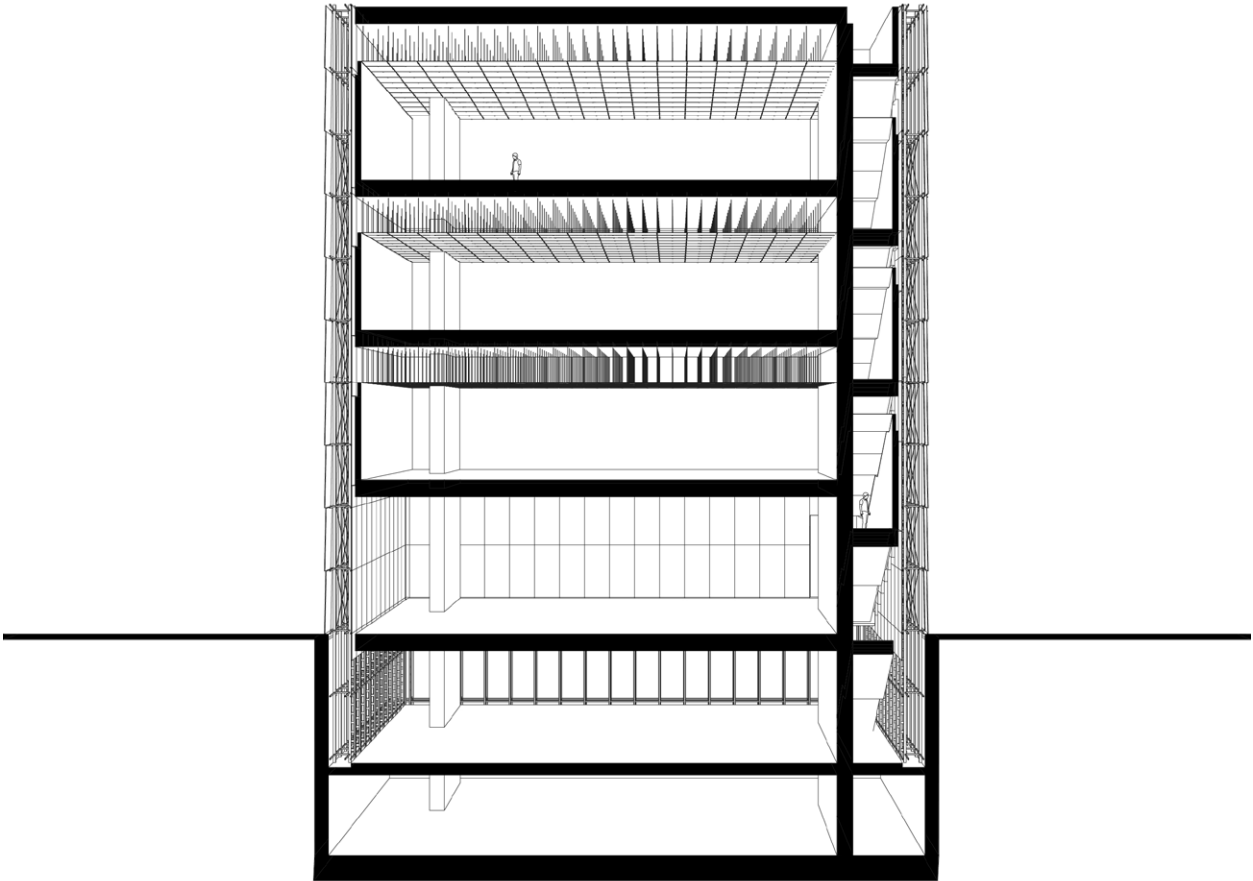


upon which a man-high void - a sort of in-between floor with “light trapped in glass”<sup>29</sup> - allows sunlight to penetrate laterally through the glazed facade and ceiling directly into exhibition spaces. In its final version, the Kunsthaus assumes the materiality of a layered construction where a sculptural core made of concrete - whose anatomy ultimately defines the museum’s spatiality - is encased by a sophisticated and autonomous envelope made of steel and etched glass. As in his earlier wooden buildings, Zumthor conceives the museum’s external presence as a finely crafted outer skin, a unifying element whose components’ scale allude once again to an eminent textile quality.

However, more than a demonstration of constructive excellence on an urban scale, his Kunsthaus Bregenz represents a clear statement both in terms of architecture’s role in the interface with contemporary art and of the museum’s value in the context of the contemporary city. Considering its relationship with artworks, the building is not conceived as a neutral background upon which objects could be effortlessly displayed. On the contrary, the materiality of walls and floor made of exposed concrete, along with the ever-changing light entering through the ceiling - its direction following the sun’s movement - generate an expressive ambiance to which any artwork must actively react.

<sup>29</sup> P. Zumthor, in: E. Köb, C. Schedler, P. Zumthor, *Kunsthaus Bregenz*, Hatje, Stuttgart 1997, p. 14.

Fig. 36-39  
Kunsthaus Bregenz (1989-97)  
Sketch of plan by Peter Zumthor  
*Atelier Zumthor*  
Section in perspective  
drawing by RL  
Inner view of exhibition spaces  
and view from Karl-Tizian Platz  
photos by RL





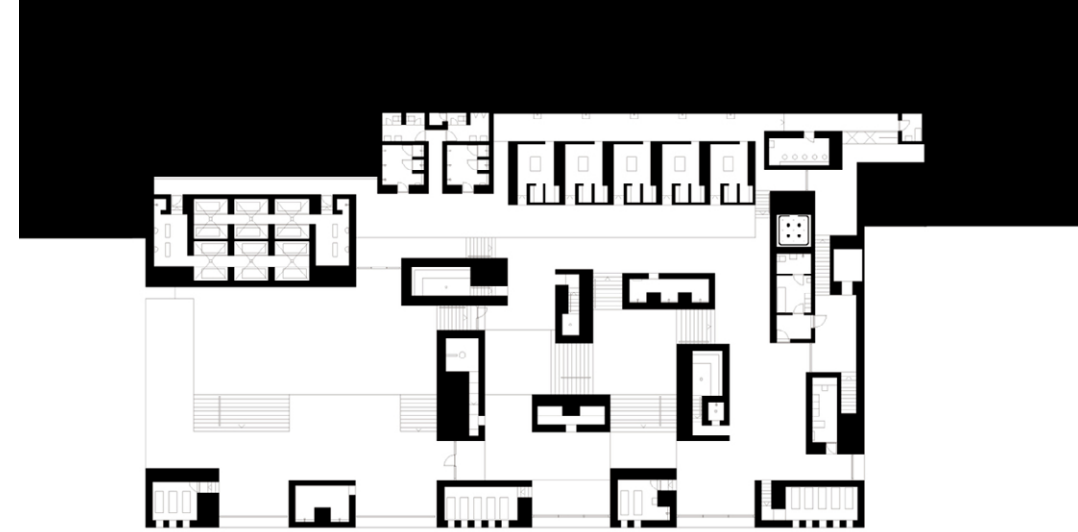
“The dematerialisation of surfaces - says Zumthor - which often occurs with additive construction methods using layered materials, has been avoided. [...] We believe that the works of art will benefit from the sensuous presence of the materials that define the space”.<sup>30</sup> The intensity of such interplay between space and art is enhanced by the building’s introspectiveness, something that can be directly related to the absence of any visual connection to the city or even an element of collective symbolism such as a hall. The purity of the Kunsthhaus as an object dedicated specifically to the experience of art is achieved through the conscious choice of dividing the museum’s program in two buildings. A second element of the composition, a dark structure containing the administration offices and a café bar - is placed on the newly created square.

Such a quiet arrangement speaks loud in the context of the early 1990’s culture market, a moment when many European cities became particularly vulnerable to the pressures of globalized economy. The proliferation of museums conceived as large-scale players of an entertaining industry defined by commercial interest is the most visible effect of this condition. It seems significant enough to remember that Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum (1991-97) in Bilbao was built at the same time as the Kunsthhaus in Bregenz, registering a radically different attitude. In that sense, Zumthor’s design contains a strong vision on the cultural value of the art museum as an institution, something that eventually highlighted the perception of a component of resistance in his work.

An analogous attitude can be identified in his project for the Thermal Baths in Vals, the building that ‘presented Zumthor to the world’. In this case, the spa complex plunged into the Valsertal mountains represented a striking contrast to the well-diffused clichè of the Alpine hide-away destination. Instead of the ordinary facility of well-being tourism with sophisticated machinery and decorative motifs, Zumthor’s baths are conceived as an intimate experience deeply rooted in the physical relationship between body, building and place. The context

<sup>30</sup> P. Zumthor, in: E. Köb, C. Schedler, P. Zumthor, *Kunsthhaus Bregenz*, Hatje, Stuttgart 1997, p. 13.

Fig. 40  
Thermal Baths (Vals, 1990-96)  
Ground floor plan  
Atelier Zumthor



from which the project emerges is also intrinsically connected to the economic and social dynamics of the region. It addresses the need for updating the touristic structure built around the presence of thermal springs in Vals - a local richness explored also by an extractive plant of mineral water. The decision to replace the previous 1960’s baths building was taken and conducted by the local community, in a demonstration of the almost exclusive Swiss condition of municipal autonomy. Besides the political organization, the project was only possible due to the revenues collected by Vals in the form of royalties for the installation of an electric power plant up into the valley<sup>31</sup>. This peculiar arrangement allowed the community to invest part of its resources in the construction of a new thermal complex - a process to which belonged also Zumthor’s 1986 design. The final project, initiated in 1990, was intended to conceive a new building to house the baths and correlated activities, a structure to be commonly used by the guests of surrounding hotels.

*“The beginning was easy. Going back in time, bathing as one might have a Thousand years ago, creating a building, a structure set into the slope with an architectural attitude and aura older than anything already built around it, inventing a building that could somehow always have been there, a building that relates to the topography and geology of the location, that responds to the stone masses of Vals Valley, pressed, faulted, folded and sometimes broken into thousands of plates – these were the objectives of our design”.<sup>32</sup>*

<sup>31</sup> The relation between the Grisons’ landscape and the power stations infrastructure is observed by Philip Ursprung in: H. Danuser, K. Gantenbein, P. Ursprung, *Zumthor Sehen. Bilder von Hans Danuser*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2009, pp. 64-65.

<sup>32</sup> P. Zumthor, *Therme Vals*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2007, p. 23.



3. Peter Zumthor

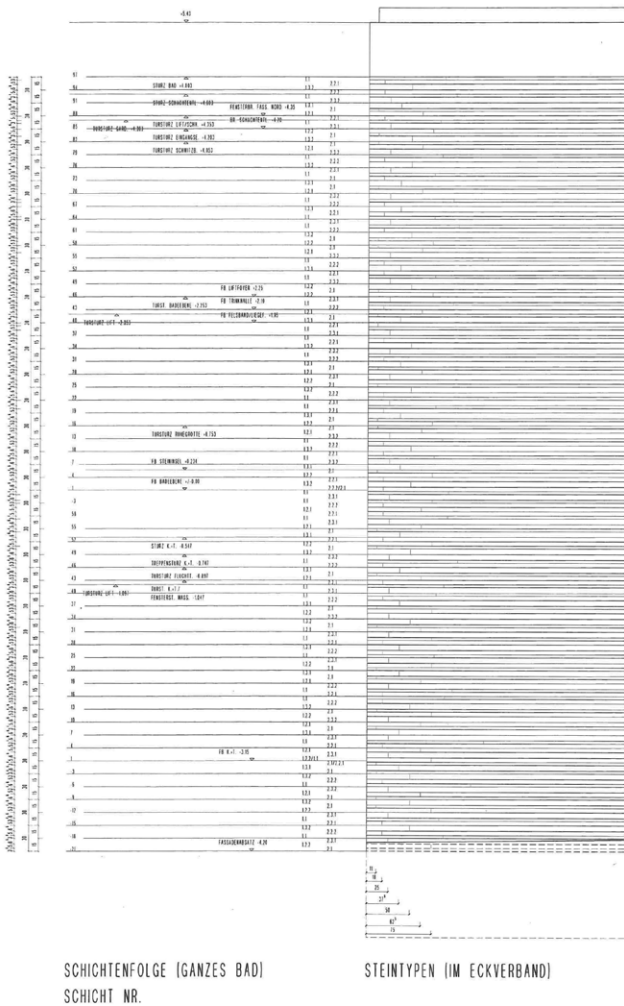
The idea of architecture as the self-evident expression of a place’s identity - a concept that finds in the archetypal condition a claim for authenticity - is frequently found in Zumthor’s elaboration on his design for Vals. The contradiction in the metaphor of a building that in its newness aims to be older than the surrounding structures is revealing of the ambiguous contextualism characteristic of his work. In the Thermal Baths, the rectangular stone block that emerges only partially from the ground seeks no connection with pre-existing buildings of the surroundings - be they mid-century modern hotels or the vernacular Old Town - but with the natural *facts* belonging to the site.

The physical presence of architecture is therefore interpreted as a reverberation of the place’s topography and geology - an expression of their “primal and culturally innocent attributes”<sup>33</sup> - ultimately condensed in Zumthor’s use of local gneiss as the element defining the building’s materiality. However, it is precisely the stone element to render visible the intellectual effort and the process of material transformation required by the project’s ambioned primitiveness. The Baths building is not carved in the rocks, but carefully erected using long fine slabs of cut stone which follow a precise pattern carefully crafted to assure the final seamless visual effect of the whole. Also the monolithic external volumetry is formed by a composition of smaller parts, an articulated arrangement that defines the spatiality in the interior. Its main element consists of an enclosed rectangular space upon which a larger roof plate is placed.

The variations in size and direction of this modular component is explored by Zumthor to generate an interior containing the potential for multiple narratives to evolve throughout the interstitial spaces that give form to the pools and connect one block to another. These are conceived as containers of special activities, singular spatial units where visitors can find hot or cold water, interactive showers and even an immersive musical experience. In opposition to the natural presence of stone in the outside, the reality inside these enclosed volumes is cre-

33 P. Zumthor, *The Hard Core of Beauty* (1991), in: *Thinking Architecture*, 3rd ed., Birkhäuser, Basel 2017, p. 31.

Fig. 41-42  
Thermal Baths (Vals, 1990-96)  
Layout of stone slabs and  
transversal section  
*Atelier Zumthor*  
*Therme Vals,*  
*Scheidegger & Spiess, 2007*



### 3. Peter Zumthor

ated by Zumthor as highly scenographic spaces made of colored concrete walls, fragrant smells and artificial lights. The almost ritualistic sequence that visitors can go through is certainly a main component both in the bathing experience and in the general fascination that was immediately generated around Vals. The project proved to be not only successful as a tourist magnet, but triggered a powerful diffusion of Zumthor's work worldwide, and as a consequence contributed significantly to his establishment as an international leading figure.

Besides its milestone condition, the project for the Thermal Baths seems to register also a moment of maturation regarding Zumthor's way of working, something that would progressively become a condition strongly informing his production. In several publications, the project for Vals is presented with a particular emphasis on design processes, which are put on display through the images of expressive models made of real stone and water. It seems possible to suggest that such physical objects register a subtle transformation on the studio's design tools, substantially differing from early 'traditional' models mostly made of cardboard. "Raised in the spirit of classical modernism and besieged by fashionable postmodern designs, we were cautious about models",<sup>34</sup> said Zumthor about the first steps of the Vals project.

It is certainly not by chance that in the 1997 exhibit *Three Concepts*, staged again at the Architekturgalerie Luzern, models appeared as the central representational media. The projects for the Kunsthau Brengenz, the Topography of Terror and the Thermal Baths were not displayed as executive drawings nor as pictures, but presented through conceptual drawings and physical models. In what can be related to his craftsman background, it is possible to observe how Zumthor's architecture became progressively linked to his working process, as if the two represented only different stages of a single action. The iteration of praxis represents thus the ultimate dimension of theoretical speculation, something that would be translated into his teaching and inevitably manifested in his buildings.

34 P. Zumthor, *Therme Vals*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2007, p. 27.

Fig. 43-44  
Thermal Baths (Vals, 1990-96)  
View of inner pool  
Casabella 648 1997  
photo by Michael Bühler

Detail of model built with  
natural stone and water  
Atelier Zumthor  
*Three Concepts* exhibition, 1997





In that sense, the beginning of his teaching activity in the Academy of Mendrisio in 1996 - a moment when the major projects of Vals and Bregenz were about to be completed - provided a unique opportunity for the development of a critical reflection on a particular design methodology that would increasingly stand as the legitimizing instance of his architecture.<sup>35</sup> The reversibility between the instances of practice and didactic is taken as the fundamental assumption of our study. In the next chapter, an analysis of Zumthor's *Primo Anno* course is presented, investigating how it may contain and therefore render visible the fundamentals of his architectural thinking.

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<sup>35</sup> An interesting description of his working method is found in Zumthor's conversation with Barbara Stec, in: *Casabella*, Rivista internazionale di architettura, n. 719, 2004, pp. 6-13.

## 4. Atelier Zumthor AAM

*"The course is based on the questions: 'What is architecture?' and 'What may be a specific way of doing architecture?'. The student's abilities to perceive the world through the five senses were challenged in a conscious, phenomenological approach. The student's biography was examined 'scientifically'. His early experience with the 'constructed' universe was recalled from his memory".<sup>1</sup>*

*Atelier Zumthor AAM, 1998*

*"Participation has been general in all departments, but particularly the design ateliers have aroused great interest and it seems to me that Atelier Zumthor, due to its quite new approach, very different from others, has been the one to draw greater attention. It seemed to me to see that assistants and students participated in the course with a feeling of being part of something absolutely new".<sup>2</sup>*

*Aurelio Galfetti, 1997*

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<sup>1</sup> Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, *Report on Teaching Activities 1997-98*, Mendrisio 1998, p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Aurelio Galfetti, talking about the Academy's first year in: *La Regione Ticino*, May 29, 1997.



#### 4. Atelier Zumthor AAM

An inevitable sense of newness is probably the first impression to be aroused when examining the archival material documenting the activities of Atelier Zumthor's *Primo Anno* in Mendrisio. It emerges from the vision of a didactic whose essence, as put by Galfetti, was to "intentionally forget conventional methods".<sup>3</sup> The feeling is also quite alive in the memories of former students, who more than remembering the natural excitement of their very first steps in a school that was also being born, recall small details of the atelier as in a deep personal experience. Considering the numerous testimonies collected throughout the research, it seems evident how Zumthor's teaching eventually transcended its own circumstantial boundaries and became an event whose seminal force was described by Manuel Aires Mateus as "a true revelation".<sup>4</sup> The reasons for such a lasting impact can be found in the combination of the remarkably original methodology applied and the pungent radicality of its conceptual content.

##### 4.1. Concreteness:

Through the analysis of its activities, it seems possible to identify as a basic premise of the atelier's structure the rejection of any sort of abstract theory as a legitimization strategy. In fact, the term *abstract* - stemming from Latin *abstractus*, meaning 'detach' or 'an action separated from a subject'<sup>5</sup> - was often employed by Zumthor and his assistants to indicate the non-reliable artificiality of instances such as formalism or functionalism.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, the need for a referential value upon which to base design processes tended to find in the idea of *concreteness* a consistent opposition to the unbearable arbitrariness of anything that is not *self-evident*. Taken thus as architecture's primary quality, 'to be *concrete*' stood as the cornerstone of Atelier Zumthor,

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> M. Aires Mateus describes his perception of Zumthor's teaching in the interview published in Chapter 9, pp. 309-312.

<sup>5</sup> O. Pianigiani, *Vocabolario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana* (www.etimo.it).

<sup>6</sup> When questioned about the reasons behind some of the atelier's characteristics, as the focus on sensory perception and personal memories, the answers of former assistants Miguella Tamo and Pia Durisch often alluded to the idea of "because that is how the world works", or "architecture is not abstract", stressing how didactic was based mostly in practical self-evident knowledge.

Fig. 1-2  
Atelier Zumthor AAM, 1996-97  
student at work and a group of models from  
exercises A and B displayed in the atelier  
AAM Archives



4. Atelier Zumthor AAM

defining a phenomenological approach in which all instances of the educational process were constantly referred to the student's experience of the world.<sup>7</sup> This is visible, for example, in the emphasis given to sensory perception as a fundamental theme of the course's didactic. Particularly evident in the structure of the first year, many of the proposed exercises were developed with the intention of making students aware of the value of their five senses. In that regard, it might be said that their own bodies represented a central instrument to the atelier, explored as privileged mediators between the project and the object's *concrete* qualities - assessed through embodied perception.

Besides this instrumental frame, the absence of external references to validate students' works seems to have also lent a particular importance to authoriality as a project's positive and expected value. In other words, while institutionalized training in many architecture schools tends to promote equal and standardized education - often understood as their main duty - every activity of Atelier Zumthor was aimed at encouraging students to explore personal expression and individuality as necessary qualities of their designs. In that sense, it seems important to observe that the presentation of Zumthor's projects as examples to be followed was something consciously avoided.<sup>8</sup> Focus on the individual dimension of learning can be seen thus as a transversal feature of the course, as stated in its intention to offer "a new, personal approach to 'training' in architecture".<sup>9</sup> From this conceptual framework, innovation and authoriality emerge as important components of a methodology that found in the process of making the most effective tool to convey a *theory* closely related to a *praxis*. As the analysis of exercises will make evident, the atelier's didactics was based on an eminent practical dimension, meaning that its instrumental dimension represented a fundamental space for investigation.

7 Stemming from Latin *concrētus* (past participle of *concrēscere*, meaning 'to condensate'), the word *concrete* relates not only to physical matter, but indicates the quality of an object that is graspable.

8 In some parts of the interviews with former students and assistants, it is clear how Zumthor pushed students to find their own personal expression. As in the interview with Davide Scardua, Chapter 9, pp. 271-277.

9 Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, *Report on Teaching Activities 1997-98*, Mendrisio 1998, p. 118.

Fig. 3-6  
Atelier Zumthor AAM, 1996-97  
Exercise Sheets with descriptions of  
students' memories and evaluation  
made by assistants  
AMM Archives

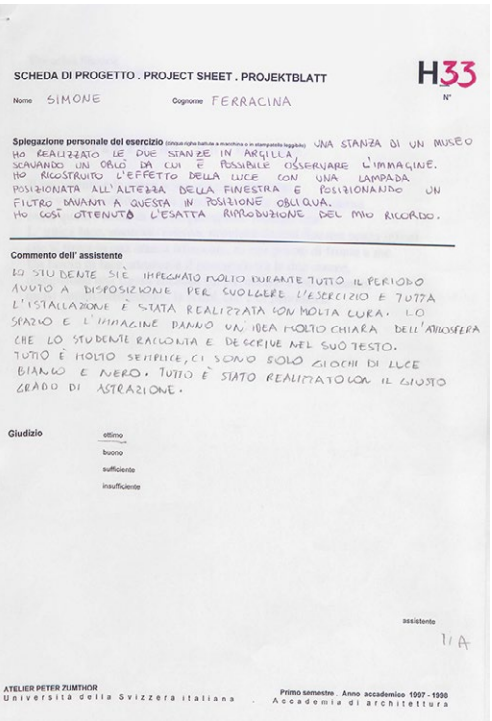
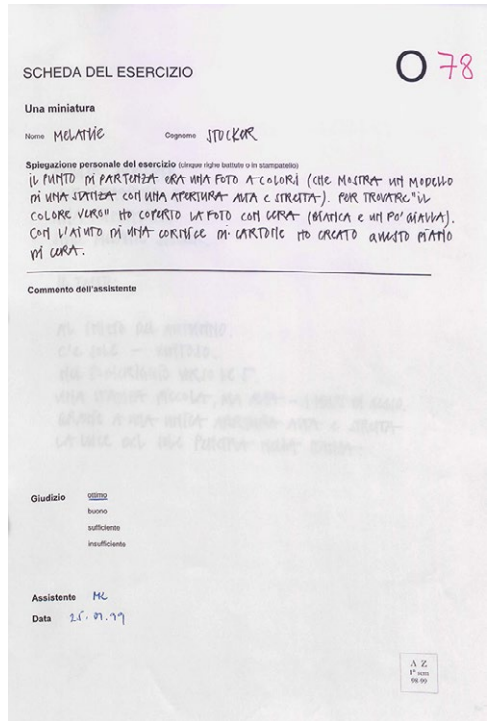
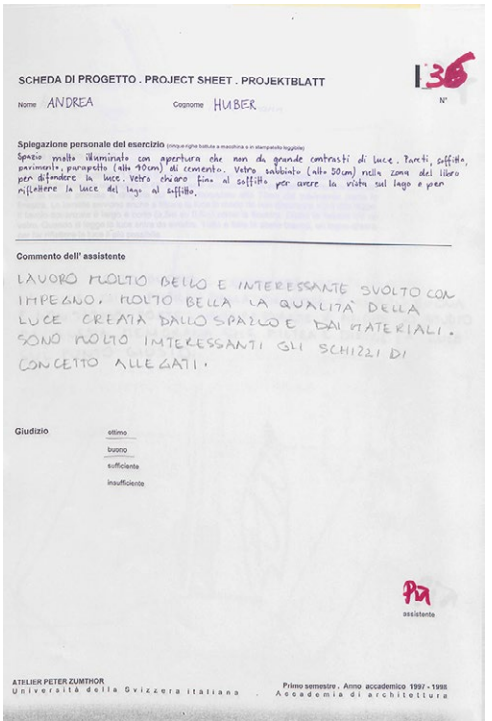
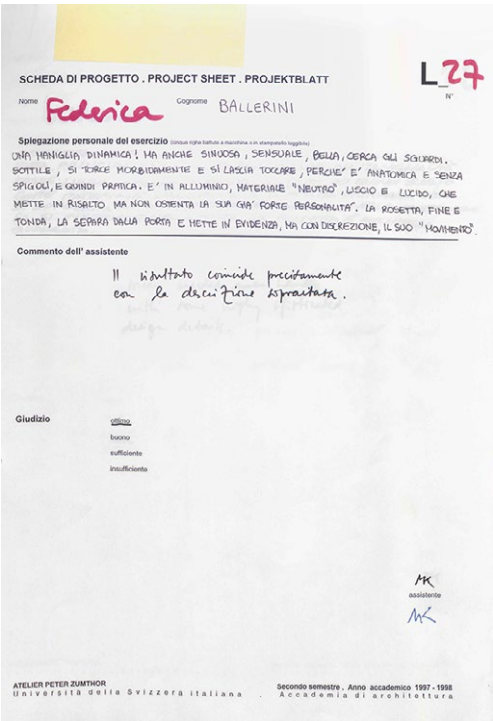






Fig. 7  
Atelier Zumthor AAM, 1997-98  
Pia Durisch, Miguela Tamo and  
Miguel Kreisler in the final critics  
AMM Archives

Related to that is the rich variety of techniques explored by students which, as earlier mentioned, transcended the set of tools one could expect to find in an architecture school. The extensive use of hand drawing, painting, filming and photography, as well as the particular attention given to model-making, eventually became a distinguishing feature of Atelier Zumthor, stressing the experimental value of its teaching. As registered in the interviews made, this was somehow intensified by the reflexive nature of a course where students and teachers were meant to engage together in a process of collective research. The atelier's initial bibliography offers an interesting view on such dialectic attitude, presenting to students a set of references containing Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*,<sup>10</sup> Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*,<sup>11</sup> Italo Calvino's *Lezioni Americane*<sup>12</sup> and Louis Kahn's *Writings, Lectures, Interviews*.<sup>13</sup>

10 C. Alexander, M. Jacobsen, S. Ishikawa, M. Silverstein, *A Pattern Language: towns, buildings, construction*, Oxford University Press, New York 1977.

11 G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1957), Beacon Press, Boston 2011.

12 I. Calvino, *Lezioni Americane: sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (1988), A. Mondadori, Milano 1996.

13 L. Kahn, A. Latour (ed), *Writings, Lectures, Interviews*, Rizzoli, New York 1991.

In that sense, it seems important to stress how much Zumthor's atelier consisted of an educational experimentation where assistants played a fundamental role. As registered in the numerous Teaching Journals kept in the archives, assistants tended to assume the larger part of teaching activities along the course, something naturally related to the limited time availability of a professor who was also a practicing architect - in the case of Zumthor, someone involved with the conclusion of his major works so far. His presence in Mendrisio was, in fact, most frequent in the moments of intermediate critics and final presentations. However, more than merely absorbing practical tasks, his assistants collaborated effectively to the conception of the atelier's intellectual project, which might be ultimately seen as a collective construct. The composition of the group of assistants was therefore a central element of didactics,<sup>14</sup> originally formed by three architects - Miguel Kreisler,<sup>15</sup> Pia Durisch<sup>16</sup> and Thomas Durisch<sup>17</sup> - and one artist with a degree in sculpture - Miguela Tamo.<sup>18</sup>

While a connection between Zumthor's atelier in Mendrisio and his studio in Haldenstein was assured by the inclusion of collaborators from the studio to the group - this was the case of Thomas Durisch and Kreisler - the presence of a component with a background in the fine arts offered a fundamental contribution to the course's eminent multi-disciplinary character. Besides that, the collaboration with professionals belonging to different fields appeared as a constant throughout Zumthor's teaching in Mendrisio - something clearly welcomed by the

14 Assistants for the academic year 1996-97. The group was reduced in 1997-98 with the absence of Thomas Durisch and in 1998-99 with that of Pia Durisch Noll, the same year in which Austrian architect Gerold Wiederin was incorporated. A constant collaborator throughout the course was also Myriam Sterling.

15 Miguel Kreisler, degree in architecture from ETSAM Madrid, collaborated with Atelier Zumthor in Haldenstein, assistant to Zumthor in Mendrisio until 2001-02, practicing architect in Madrid.

16 Pia Durisch, degree in architecture from ETH Zurich, practicing architect in Massagno (Durisch+Nolli).

17 Thomas Durisch, degree in architecture from ETH Zurich, collaborated with Atelier Zumthor in Haldenstein and edited Zumthor's complete works published in 2014, practicing architect in Zurich.

18 Miguela Tamo, degree in sculpture from the Florence Fine Arts Academy, assistant to Zumthor in Mendrisio until 1999-00, lives and works in Basel.



school’s humanistic profile. As an example of that, the academic year of 1996-97 registered lectures such as *Basic Information on Acoustics* - by Ermanno Briner, degree in experimental physics - *Basic Information on Fluorescent Lighting* - by Enrico Lorenzon, lighting technician - and *Basic Information on Smell* - by Silvano Schierini and Giuseppe Lafranchi, teachers of biology and chemistry - as well as special participations of poet Antonio Rossi and philosopher Massimo Daviddi. Such external contributions were in general connected to the theme of a specific exercise.

The testimonies of Miguela Tamo and Pia Durisch are particularly valuable to the understanding of the atelier’s ongoing nature. As reported in their interviews, Zumthor’s first conception of the course was progressively developed as it evolved, exploring the initial results as tools for improvements and corrections. In this constant process of verification, the construction of the archive played an important role, since it was meant to gather both the factual documentation of exercises and the critical reflection on each of them, registered by assistants in ‘Exercise Reports’. As in any experiment, adaptation was an important characteristic of the atelier, whose activities tended to react to new demands emerging along the process. One example was the creation of complementary classes such as *Remarks on graphic techniques* and *Remarks on proportion in architecture*, aimed to equip students with specific skills whose need was identified as the work developed. Such creative adaptability was clearly related to the positive interaction between Zumthor and his assistants.

Here a special mention must be made in relation to Miguel Kreisler, who in an essay published in 1997 summarized the atelier’s enthusiasm in the expression “architecture is not taught, it is contaminated through contact with matter”.<sup>19</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, Kreisler was the central figure of Atelier Zumthor mainly because he was the one in charge of its management, centralizing all its activities and sometimes even replacing Zumthor in professors meetings. While other assis-

19 M. Kreisler, M. Sterling, *5 cosas: una recopilación de cuatro fragmentos del Atelier Zumthor*, in: bau, Revista de Arquitectura, Urbanismo, Arte y Diseño, 16, 1977, p. 13.



Fig. 8-9  
Atelier Zumthor AAM, 1996-97  
Assistants and students working on *The time of the place* (F2)  
Critics of *100 steps for a blind* (B) with Peter Zumthor, Aurelio Galfetti and William Curtis  
AAM Archives

tants collaborated in the atelier only part-time, Kreisler was entirely dedicated to Mendrisio. However, more than an administrative role, all narratives collected along the research coincide in portraying him as someone whose intellectual contribution was fundamental to the course's success. In that sense, the content of numerous letters kept in the archive indicates also the existence of a close relationship between him and Zumthor at the time. With regard to Kreisler's importance, it seems enough to remember that the documentation upon which this research is based was built from him and therefore inevitably stands as an expression of his vision.

The didactic structure of Atelier Zumthor's *Primo Anno* was based on the proposition of an exercise series to be performed by the students of each of its three years. Mostly conceived as short tasks, each exercise represented a singular non-reproducible event aimed at teaching first-year students the fundamentals of architecture. According to Miguela Tamo and Pia Durisch, their conception followed the atelier's overall development, meaning that there was no previous scheme dictating how exercises would be, nor which would follow the other. Starting from Zumthor's first input, each one of them was developed collectively with the contribution of assistants, stressing both their experimental character and their value as a creative project.

Aiming to offer a clearer comprehension of Atelier Zumthor's didactics, the series is integrally documented in the next pages, following the archive's nomination from A to S - nineteenth exercises distributed along three years. In order to conserve their value as primary research sources, all materials are reproduced in their original format. Each exercise is presented through the combination of an *Assignment Sheet* - the instructions received by students - and the photographs of a number of selected works. The sheets were translated from Italian, respecting the dynamic rhythm and layout characteristic of the original text, while the photographs of student's works were obtained through the digitalization of the analogic slides kept in the archive.



Fig. 10-11  
Atelier Zumthor AAM, 1996-97  
Student at work and an inner view on the atelier  
AAM Archives



ESERCITAZIONE . ASSIGNMENT . AUFGABESTELLUNG

A

**The personal construction module**

Each student builds a block of predefined format. For his block, he chooses his material, a material with which he has a particular personal approach. A material which he likes, loves to touch or to see, which brings him wonder or irritation, because it reconnects him with a personal experience, because it reminds him of a particular situation of his life.

The exercise is simple. It is considered fulfilled when the student is able to find, produce or to elaborate the material possessing the characteristics he believes to remember. On the occasion of a final presentation of the construction modules, each one will be asked to talk about the relation between his memory and the produced object.

**Submission:**

Block with dimensions 36x18x18cm  
Material samples are free to choose

**Deadline:**

Thursday 31 October hour 13:30

ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR

Università della Svizzera italiana . Accademia di Architettura

Anno accademico 1996-1997



works by Nicolas Polli, Urs Baumann, Lukas Camponovo, Stefanie Hitz, Laura Perolini and Davide Scardua



ESERCITAZIONE . ASSIGNMENT . AUFGABESTELLUNG

B

100 steps for a blind. A closed passageway from city to park

Students were invited to imagine a path for the blind; it was necessary to provide a sense other than vision as a means for moving through space. Touch, smell, hearing or taste should therefore be strongly represented in this exercise.

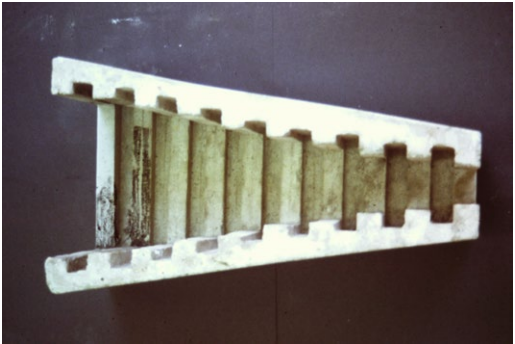
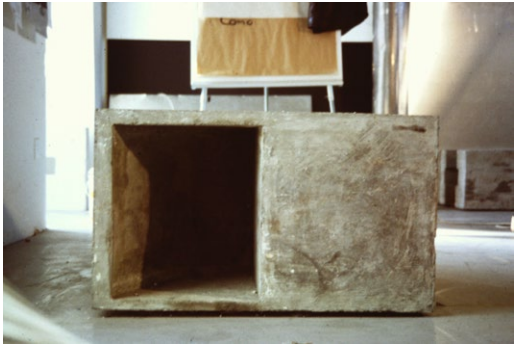
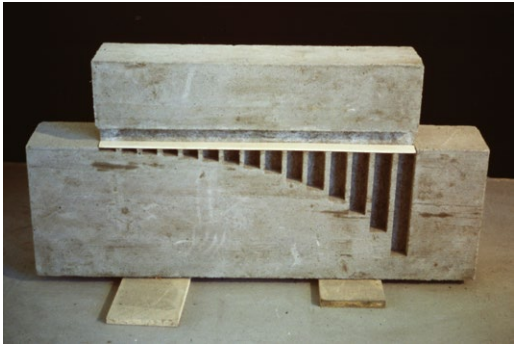
*\*The presentation sheet of exercise B kept in the archives does not contain a textual description of the exercise, only indications regarding its submission.  
The text above reproduced is found in the presentation of the atelier's results as published in the Report on Teaching Activities 1996-97.*

**Submission:**  
Resonance body scale 1:20  
Sound test (acoustics) in an appropriate form (free choice)

**Deadline:**  
Thursday 28 November 1996 hour 13:30

ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR  
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Anno accademico 1996-1997



works by Nicolas Polli, Lukas Camponovo, Urs Bauman, Amos Matteri, Tomà Berlanda and Matias Ostertag

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C

An indirect-lightning lamp

With the fluorescent tube received by each student, a functioning lamp is to be produced, whether standing or hanging from ceiling or wall.

Rules:

1. Indirect light (the fluorescent tube must not be seen), through reflective surfaces the light emanates from the lamp's body.
2. Simple shape.
3. Use few parts.
4. The lamp must work.
5. Materials: metal sheet, natural color or painted.

Each student takes on his own account the safety measures required to work with electricity, seeking the necessary information with an expert, and takes full responsibility for his own work. Whoever does not know how to do that should contact the assistants before starting to work on the lamp.

Exercise parallel to design exercise C

Each student chooses a suitable object for the exercise, an object that when exposed to different types of illumination makes visible the effect of light regarding the volume, tonality and structure of the surface. Each student photographs the chosen object always in the same position, changing only illumination, and records the type of light chosen to each photo in a small sketch. From the at least 50 shoots made of the object, each one produces a number of samples, from which the 8 most indicative images will be chosen and developed in 10x15cm format. The photos are to be presented in an appropriate manner, attached on a cardboard.

Rules:

1. Photograph in black and white.
2. Do not use the flash (unless it is mobile).
3. Do not use wide angle lenses.
4. To remain constant: neutral background, the object's position itself, the position between photograph and object (distance, angle), focalization.
5. Single variable: light.

Works must include 1 source of indirect light and 1 of direct, varying their position (distance angle). Artificial light, natural light or both.

Example: a white cup of coffee.

I choose as key lightning an indirect light from above: 1st photo. I add a direct light from the right in the cup's high: 2nd photo. The direct light can be moved back and forwards and up and downwards achieving a number of variations. Then I add a second direct light from the left etc. It is not about making beautiful photos, but understanding and documenting the relation between object and light.

Submission:

Lamp and eight photos

Deadline:

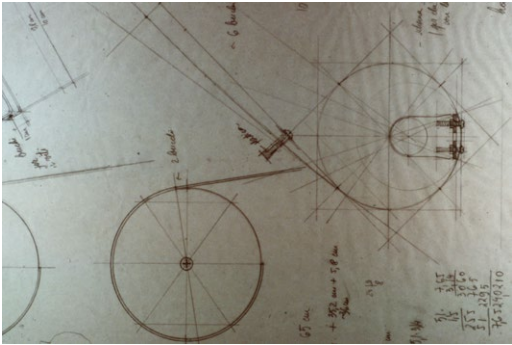
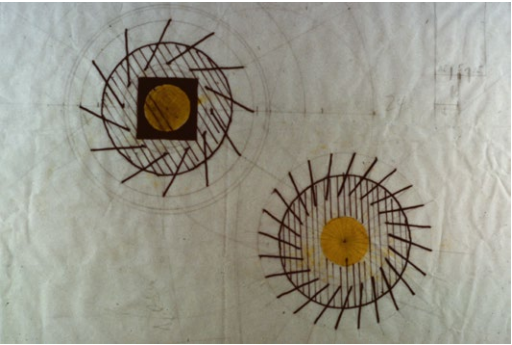
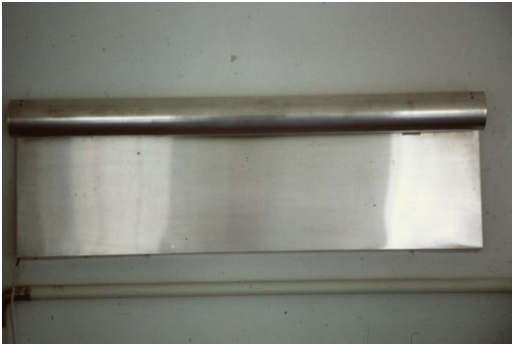
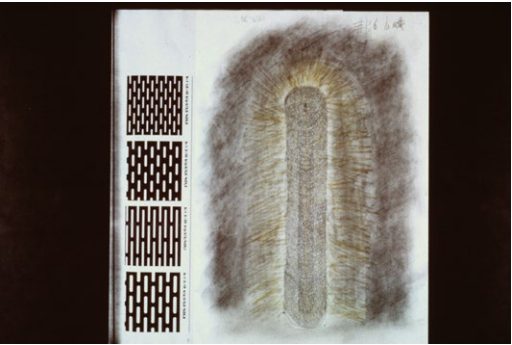
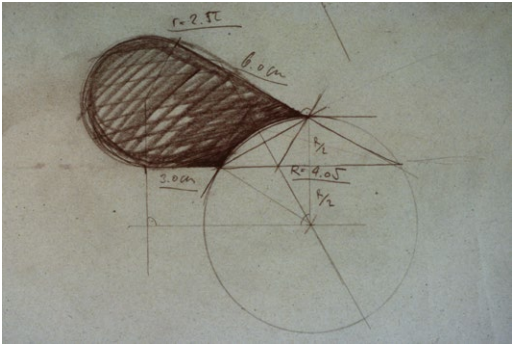
Photos: Friday 20 December 1996 hour 13:30

Lamp: Thursday 9 January 1997 hour 13:30

ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR

Anno accademico 1996-1997

Università della Svizzera italiana . Accademia di Architettura



works by Lukas Camponovo, Tomà Berlanda, Nicolas Polli, Nathalie Bieler and Elena Saricu



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D

**The aroma and fragrance street**

The Tiber runs through Rome. Its bank is fortified. In the fortification small niches are inserted in regular intervals facing the street that follows the river. They are suitable to contain small places for shopping and degustation. The city makes them available to rent. Each student has a shop to furnish a specific type of product that has a specific smell/scent, for example tee, pigments, paper...

At the core of the design task stays this scented product. Each student chooses a product with a specific smell.

The material's choice, preparation and furnishing of the shop should harmonize perfectly with the product. Besides scent, all other product's properties are to be taken into account. A tee shop as a tee shop, a fish shop as a fish shop... Each one clearly usable for its purpose and holding the particular atmosphere on the inside and outside!

And by the way: remember that particular spaces also have particular sounds.

**Rules:**

1. The given spaces cannot be changed in a constructive level (exception made for skylights if required by the product).

2. A maximum of 3+1 materials are to be used (depending on the product).

Submission:

1. The project is built with the chosen materials and inserted in the 1:10 model present in the atelier.

2. Besides the model, each student should present a smell-box, through which it is possible to feel the chosen product's scent as contained in the chosen material.

3. The sequence of shops along the street is to be planned by students in a reasonable way.

4. Design elements: - floor, wall, ceiling (depending on the product) - arrangement of facade and entrance (depending on the product) - storage open or closed, shelving (depending on the product) - sales counter or alike (depending on the product) - daylight (depending on the product) - artificial light (depending on the product) - air exchange (depending on the product).

**Deadline:**

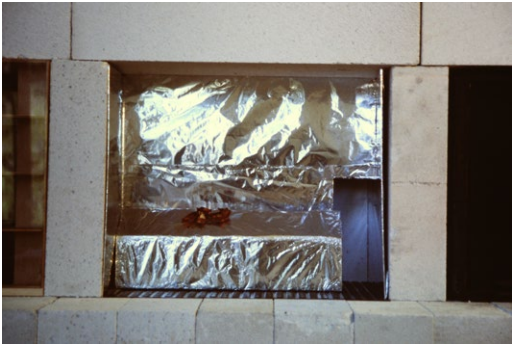
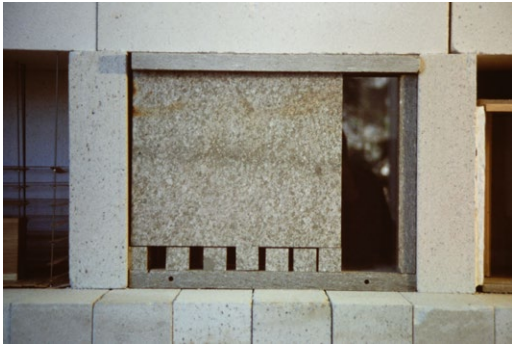
Thursday 6 February 1997

Friday 7 February 1997

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Anno accademico 1996-1997



works by Urs Baumann, Matteo Boscolo, Stefanie Hitz , Amos Matteri and Mathias Ostertag



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E

**Nature, street, house +1. Video-project**

In the next semester we are going to address the subjects of place and landscape, of architecture and territory; of the house (and the city) as part of place.  
The present video-project is intended as preparation for this work.  
We all have our 'personal landscape', our places and our houses which we know, which are familiar to us, which we love, in which we find ourselves comfortable, because in those we grew up, in those we have lived.

During the summer holidays, each student makes a video of his 'personal landscape'.  
The video may have a maximum length of 5 minutes. It must contain the elements nature (landscape, vegetation), street (and/or pathway, square) and house (and/or home from the inside, from the outside, town, village etc.), and one additional element of free choice (+1) which the student considers as belonging to his personal landscape. The video-films will be publicly presented in the beginning of next semester, March 11th, hour 15:00 in the aula magna.

For each film it is required a short personal comment, with which the student explains to the public in a simple way why the presented images are important for him or her.  
The exercise is considered fulfilled if the images have a precise relation to the biography.  
Requested are not spectacular images, but specifically the images appreciated by the student for any personal reason.  
The images must be presented in a flowing sequence, video-stills are possible.

**Submission (in aula magna):**  
1. Exercise C sheet with personal explanation.  
2. VHS video tape.

**Deadline:**  
Tuesday 11 March, hour 15:00

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F

**In Situ**

Architecture has its place in the concrete world. With each new house an existing situation is changed, an existing place is changed, an existing place is transformed. Who designs and builds houses, must understand the places in which interferes with his work, must know how to read, interpret and comment on his places: their geography, their topography, their materiality, history and biography, their configuration, their light, their color, their sound, their scent, their time...

What is a place? What makes a place to be a place? How do we feel and live a place? How can we describe it? How can we get to know of a place?  
What does it mean to intervene in a place with a concrete object or with a building? How can we proceed so that an intervention in a place conveys new sense and richness to it, or makes us see the place in a new way?  
Are there behavior models or rules that determine the relation between architecture and its places?

The second-semester course of Atelier Zumthor's first-year design studio aims at finding the first answers to these questions. Students will work in groups on concrete places, in Mendrisio and its surroundings. Places have been chosen in such a way to present a number of typical situations regarding our time and our culture. They span from the industrial periphery to the hill surrounded by trees with an historic church.

The course was introduced through the video-project Nature, street, house +1, in which each student during summer holidays portrayed his own 'personal landscape'.  
The course begins so to speak in a ceremonial way with the observation of sunrise upon Monte Generoso. The writer Antonio Rossi (Diafonie, Scheiwiller, Milano 1995), raised on the foot of Monte Generoso, who occasionally will follow the in situ activities of the semester, in this opportunity will intervene for the first time.

**F1 First encounter:**  
Together, each group of students visits for the first time their received place, Friday 14 March in the morning. First of all, each student individually and personally meets the place. In a second moment, there will be an exchange of observations within the group, and groups will present their first encounter with the place on Friday afternoon.  
The place's presentation must talk about the first direct and spontaneous encounter with the place, visualize what of the place has impressed the most, in the form of: sketches, drawings, materials, reading descriptions, polaroids and simple small models.

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**F2 The time of place:**

Each group produces a series of 24 visual and acoustic documents of its place: 24 slides and correspondent sound records of ca. 19 seconds length, recorded at every hour, beginning at 00:00 and finishing at 24:00, with camera and recorder fixed, recording always from the same position.

The position is to be chosen in a way that something of the place's essence can be conveyed. Base for this choice are the outcomes of the first encounter with the place.

The record series of the 5 places will be publicly presented by groups in the aula magna on Tuesday 25 March hour 15:00.

**F3 Remodeling the place:**

Each group of work brings its exercise place into the atelier.

This work is a work of remembering and summarizing the place that was visited, lived. Guided by your senses, your hands will build the essential elements in a model. It is not about representing everything. Not even about making a scheme. It must be a selective model, expression of your experience of the precise place.

So, this model will contain the seed of your future intervention.

**Deadline:**

Tuesday 25 March hour 17:00

**F4 Analysis of place**

**Deadline:**

Tuesday 15 April hour 15:00

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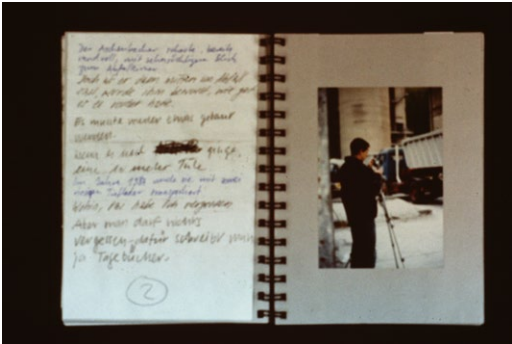
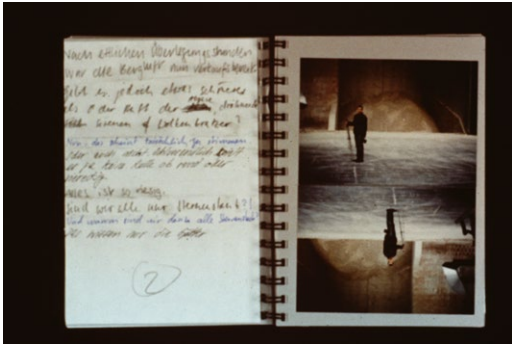
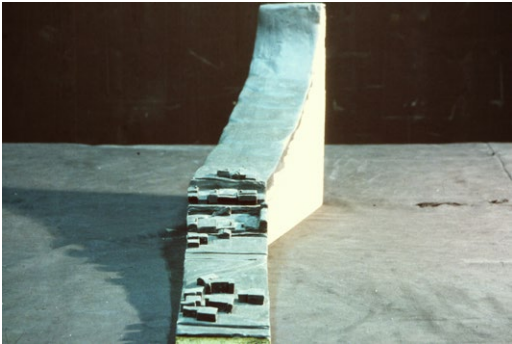
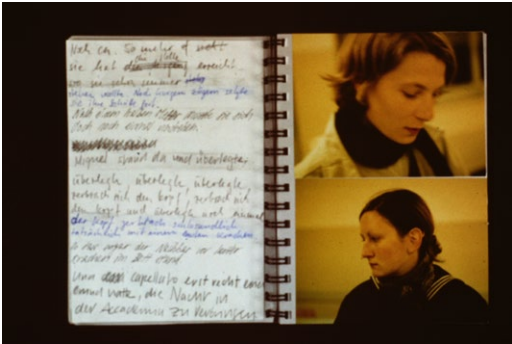
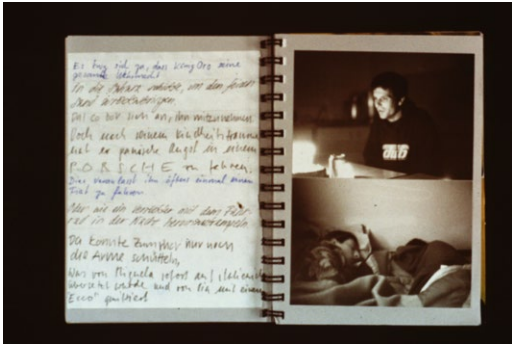
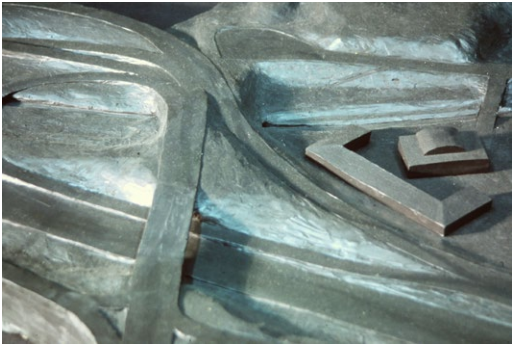
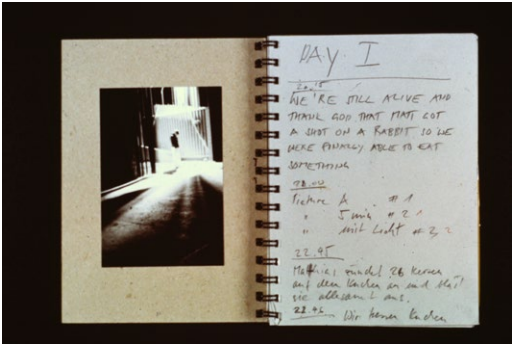
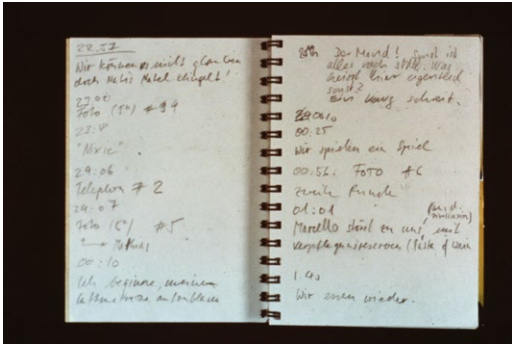
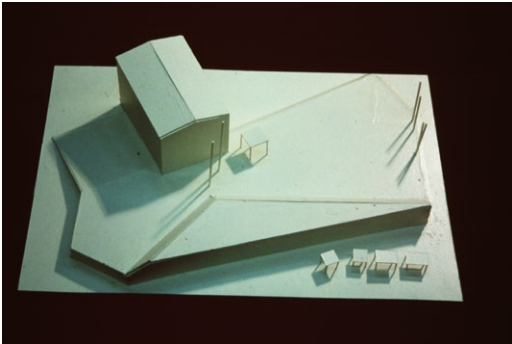
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The time of the place (F2)  
records by Group E  
M. Boscolo, D. Camata, A. Matteri and  
L. Massari





Remodelling the place (F3)  
models by Goups A, B, C, D and E

Analysis of Place (F4)  
book by Group D: N. Bieles, L. Camponovo, N. Kupferschmid, M. Ostertag and M. Pomiggia



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G

**An intervention on place in 1:1 scale**

Goal:  
The project renders visible and/or perceivable anything of the place's particularity.

Design method:  
Sensual and personal approach.  
Possible contents of the project:  
Topography, geography, geology, use, function, morphology (aspect, form), architecture, urban-ism, history and meaning.

Possible means for the production and/or execution of the project:  
For example water, light, materials, plants, sounds...

Motivations:  
Pleasure! Joy!

**Submission:**  
1. Exercise G sheet.  
2. Group project.

**Deadline:**  
Wednesday 15 May 1997, hour 15:00.

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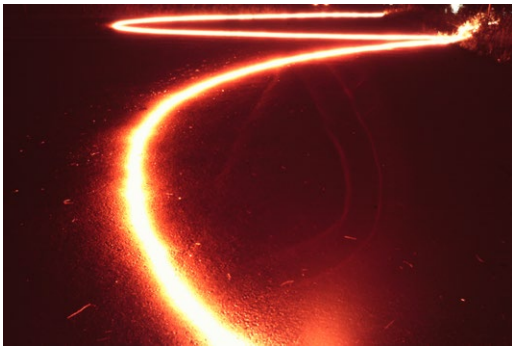
Anno accademico 1996-1997



interventions by Groups A, D and E  
photos by Ralph Feiner



4. Atelier Zumthor AAM



intervention by Group C: U. Baumann, T. Berlanda, S. Hitz,  
N. Polli and D. Scardua  
photos by Ralph Feiner





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H

A space that looks at the landscape of my youth

Our memory is rich in images. We remember certain images. Some of them move like the images of a film. Others are still and silent. We find ourselves in a space, quietly looking at a landscape or looking inside another space. We recall exactly the space where we were, and remember exactly the view, what we saw then, as if it was a multicolored image or the scene of a movie.

Something of this view, of this gaze, of this image, made an impression on us. It has become an inner image that we can summon at any time.  
What is that that struck us then? Which were the characteristics of the space, of the landscape, of the view?

The design exercise:

1. Students are asked to reproduce a personal image that has impressed them particularly. An image that belongs to the following theme: "I find myself in a space and look at a landscape or inside another space". I look at this landscape, look into the landscape, look out the landscape...
  2. The space in which I was then is reproduced in clay, in scale (1:50 or larger). One must build the spatial boundary that frames the memory's image, the first spatial plane of the image, or the space in which I was and gazed. On the back of the space-model, an opening is to be made, allowing one to look inside. The eye must be able to take the exact standpoint that coincides to the memory's image.
  3. The view of the memory, the "landscape" of which we remember, is to be reproduced in a way as realistic as possible, as photo, as photocopy of a photo, as a collage of more photos, as slide or still image (video) etc.
  4. The space made of clay, from which I see the image, and the reproduction of the "landscape" view, are assembled in a way that allows to see through the space's frame the memory's landscape, as in a photo or video camera.
- And something of the atmosphere of the moment comes back.  
The design exercise is considered fulfilled if what we see corresponds to the memory's image.

Submission:

1. Exercise H sheet.
2. Space-image collage.
3. Brief and concise written description (eventually also recorded) of the memory.

Deadline:

Thursday 6 November, hour 14:00 (in atelier)

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Anno accademico 1997-1998



works by Leonardo Bich, Giovanni Cavallaro, Simone Ferracina, Beatrice Morelli, Mohammed Tazi and Matteo Ferroni



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**A window for my friends, to read by the light of the lake**

With no more than three materials, an opening is to be "built" in the simplest way, a window in 1:1 scale with real (construction) materials. Those are to be assembled in such a way that allows the opening to be documented in a typical photo. Only what eventually appears in the photo is to be built. The materials (plates, poles, fabrics, sheets, boards etc.) are to be put together in a way that creates a realistic impression of the opening. It is possible to use elements found on the place, as for example the piece of a wall, as part of the composition.

At the end of the work a black and white photograph is to be presented, size 60x90cm. The photo shows an opening or an important shot of it in the (indirect) light of the lake. Light and shadow give shape to the elements that define the opening: wall, floor or ceiling, jamb, sill or bribe... true materials. There is no sunlight coming in. Through the opening one sees the light of the lake, perhaps also water and sky, nothing else.

One sees also an open book or a part of it, or one feels that there could be a book, that it could be joyful to read by this opening. The exercise is considered fulfilled, if our friends, from the photo's promises, would long with pleasure to read by the window, by the lake's light.

**Installation place:**  
Comune di Riva San Vitale

**Submission:**  
4 slides (200 ASA) 1 magnification 60x90cm (vertical) on hard support (the magnification will be organized by the atelier)

**Deadline:**  
Friday 14 November, hour 8:30: concept (individual critics, Pia, Miguela, Miguel)  
Friday 21 November, hour 8:30: installation on place (place inspection, Peter, Pia, Miguela, Miguel)  
Friday 28 November, hour 8:30: 4 slides (individual critics, Pia, Miguela, Miguel)  
Friday 5 December, hour 8:30: 1 magnification (final critics, Peter, Pia, Miguela, Miguel)

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works by Federica Ballerini, Ludovica Belloni, Marisia Conn, Sandra Giovanacci, Gustavo Gulino and Andrea Huber

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J

**Blue Reflections**

Architectural design for the Jazz Festival at Cinema Teatro in Chiasso.

Departing from an existing building, the 1930's Cinema Teatro of Chiasso, the project should create a new and "strong" atmosphere, in harmony with the characteristics of the intended performance.

It was a group project on a 1:1 scale. Artificial lights and colors were the basic distinguishing elements which conferred specificity and "corporeality" to this atmosphere. The exercise was conceived and realized as a "Gesamtkunstwerk". \*

*\*The presentation sheet of exercise J is not contained in the archive's material. The text above reproduced is found in the presentation of the atelier's results as published in the Report on Teaching Activities 1997-98.*

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photos by Ralph Feiner



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K

The typical space

We all know typical spaces that correspond exactly to what their names mean: kitchen, greenhouse, tee shop, barbershop, porch, boathouse, room in a tower, library...

The typical space is "beautiful", it remains impressed in the memory, perhaps it does not impress us by its particular being, but because its particularity is the non-particularity - precisely its typicality.

What is a typical kitchen to me, to you, which aspect does it have? Our answers will be different. However, among all the answers a certain basic-tone, a certain basic-color, certain properties e certain forms will repeatedly appear. That is typicality. It is about the specific use of space and the story of the respective way of use. We all know it. It is part of our collective memory.

Exercise:

Each student chooses a typical space that he knows, that he happily recalls, for it was (is) so typical, for it has (have) the atmosphere of the typical and documents it with: 3 materials (+ 1) arranged in a box (outer dimensions 35x45x25cm). The box is closed on five sides, one side (35x45cm) is open. The box's material is of free choice and is part of the documentation. The disposition, shape and dimension of the 3 materials (+1), visible in the box, are of free choice.

It is part of the box a written sheet with the same dimensions containing title (name of the typical space, for example lounge) and rows of words (there is no need for sentences linked to each other), describing the space, its properties (form, material, type of use, light-atmosphere, sounds, scents etc.).

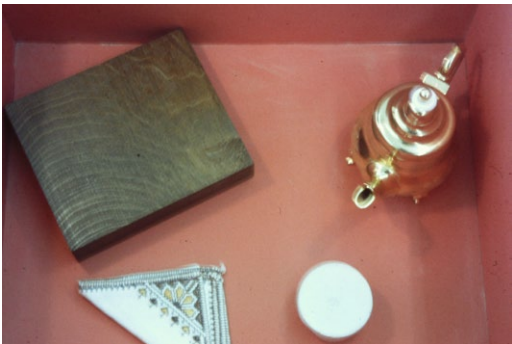
Objective descriptions are required, not descriptions of feelings!  
At the exercise's presentation, each student reads the text.

The exercise is considered fulfilled, if through the vision of the box and the reading of the written sheet, the atmosphere and quality of the typical space are conveyed.  
+1= a small extra (optional)

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works by Marisia Conn, Andrea Huber, Fabrizio Pasquin, Mohammed Tazi,  
Sandra Giovanacci and Norma Zoni



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L

Prototype of a door handle

A prototype (scale 1:1) of a door handle must be produced, to be used in the locking of an ordinary door that will be assembled in the atelier. The prototype must work entirely. The proof will be made on the atelier's door. The prototype includes all components, that is two handle-pieces that can be joined and attached, and two rosettes or a folder with the keyhole. In the prototype's basic structure (pin, cotter pin, adjusting screws), it is suggested to use standard components which can be found on the market.

The type of metal used is of free choice. Non-metallic parts may be used only if they provide an improvement in the handle's functionality.

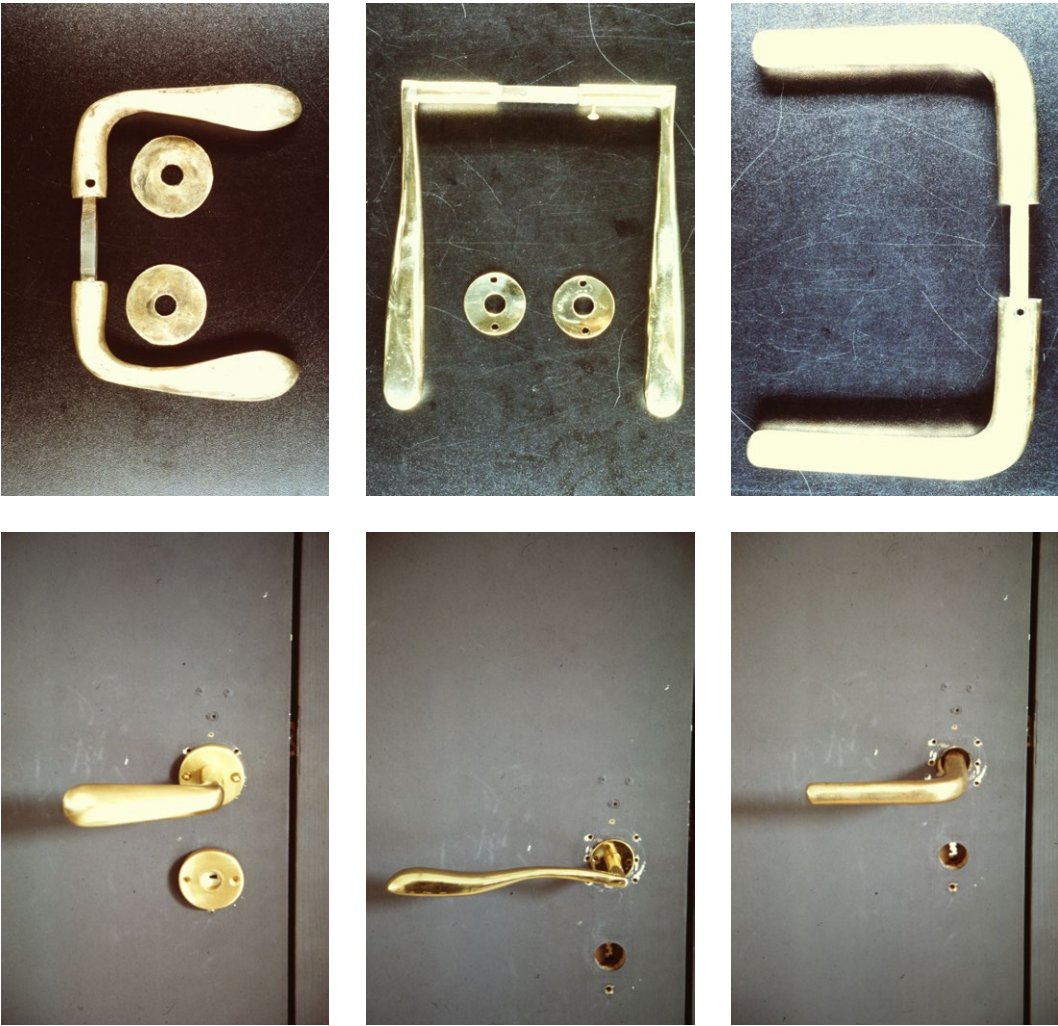
The door handle must be stable (firmitas), suitable for use (utilitas) and beautiful (venustas). It must feel good in the hand.

It must be pleasant to touch: edgy, elegant, soft, roundish, firm, slender, affectionate, distant...? In a week, a series of first sketches and/or model studies are to be presented. The standard pieces found in the market will be made available by the company Valli e Valli on Friday 20 March.

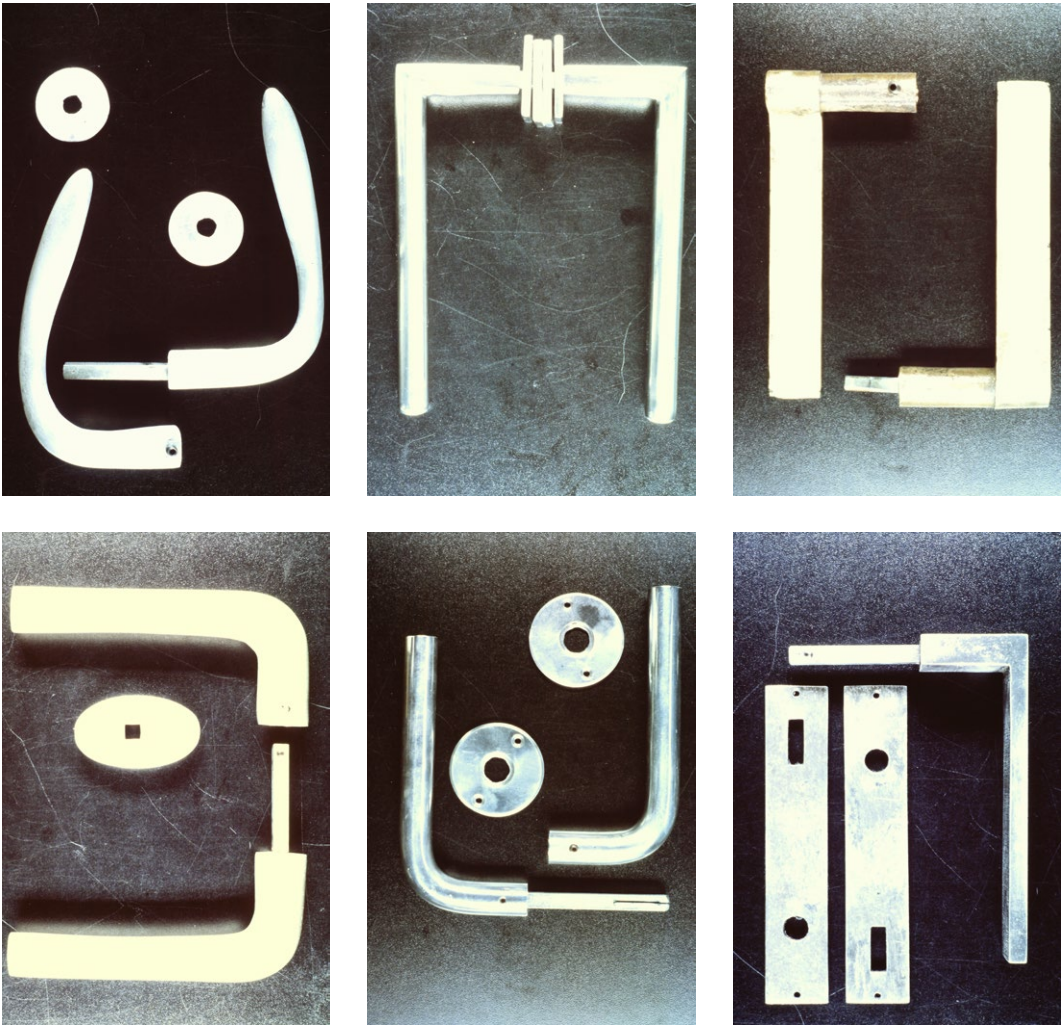
**Deadline:**  
9 April 1998

ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR  
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Anno accademico 1997-1998



works by Marisia Conn, Fabrizio Pasquin and Gaia Pusterla



works by Federica Ballerini, Ludovica Belloni, Reto Burri, Giovanni Cavallaro, Marisia Conn, Gustavo Gulino and Tobias Lindenmann





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M

A tableau vivant in Laveno

Mr. M. von D. crosses Lago Maggiore with the ferry twice a day, always in the sun direction.

Today Mr. M von D., in the twilight of his life, would like to leave a sign on the landscape of his youth, in front of the Isole Borromee: a park of the seasons designed to be perceived from three particular standpoints on the walk path along the shore: - the lakefront, the lake, the opposite bank. - the small square one meets before entering the village when coming from Luino, in Monbello. - the terrace on the foothill located after the park's upper exit, the hill above.

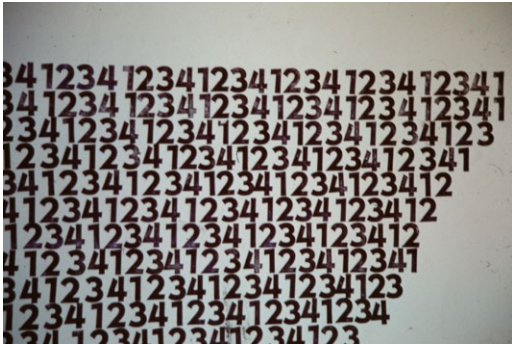
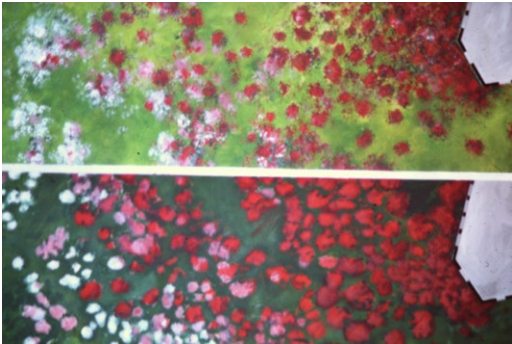
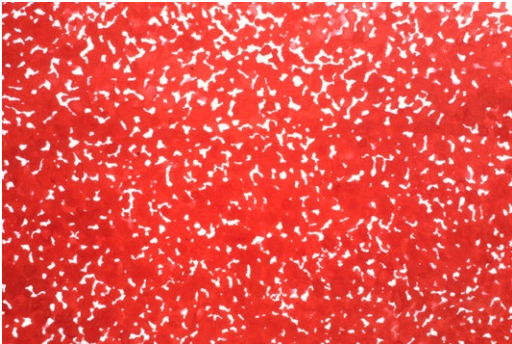
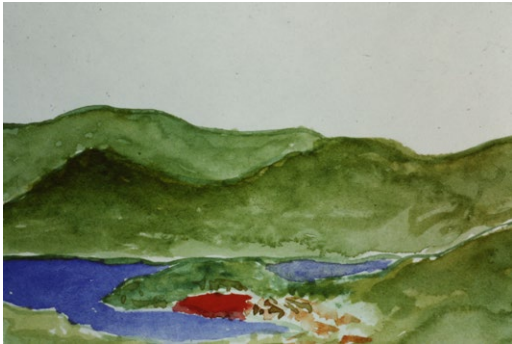
Each student produces a complete concept for the park: presence on the landscape, aspect during the different seasons, type of plants and structure of plantations, watering system, function, growth, care, ageing and destruction (by atmospheric agents).

The concept is to be presented in four or more representation documents (various drawing techniques required, painting, collages, models...).

Deadline:  
31 April 1998

ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR  
Università della Svizzera italiana . Accademia di Architettura

Anno accademico 1997-1998



works by Giovanni Cavallaro, Marisia Conn and Sandra Giovanacci



ESERCITAZIONE . ASSIGNMENT . AUFGABESTELLUNG

N

Questioning architecture \*

Peter Zumtor  
Dialogues on the profession with:

- 16.06.98 Max Neuhaus, artist, Texas 1939, Forio d'Ischia
- 17.06.98 Vladimir Spacek, photographer, Prague 1945, Wiesbaden
- 18.06.98 Pio Corradi, cameraman, Läufelfingen 1940, Zurich
- 19.06.98 Helmut Federle, painter, Solothurn 1944, Vienna
- 20.06.98 Thomas Kling, poet, Bingen am Rhein 1957, Cologne

Curated by: Atelier Zumthor  
Academy of Architecture of Mendrisio

*\*The presentation sheet of exercise N in the usual format was not contained in the archive's material. The exercise foresaw the planification of the event "Questioning Architecture", including the design of its furniture and its realization. The content above reproduced is part of the disclosure material inviting to the event, which took place in Milan at Aam Gallery on the indicated dates.*

ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR  
Università della Svizzera italiana . Accademia di Architettura

Anno accademico 1997-1998



Peter Zumthor in conversation with Vladimir Sacek and the Aam Galley in Milan

ESERCITAZIONE . ASSIGNMENT . AUFGABESTELLUNG

O

**A Miniature**

The sun and the rain.  
The morning sun in a courtyard;  
A long bench after rain;  
A sunny spot by a wall.  
The brightness of wet cobblestone;  
A red house on the gray storm;  
The thin rain in a fiberglass boat;  
Barefoot on dark and warm sand;  
The first ten drops on a pond;  
Rain or sun.

We all are capable of producing images of places, on which the atmospheric conditions of rain or sun were determinants. It has happened to all of us to live through literature, painting or cinema, through other people or through personal experience of the phenomena of rain and sun that have moved us particularly. We remember certain experiences with joy or would like to summon them back.

Each student must produce an image that conveys the essential quality of such an autobiographical experience. This image - a drawing, a painting, a collage, a colored or black and white photograph, a stamp or a sheet of a real material - must be both bidimensional and of maximal-reduced dimension: a miniature.

A miniature is precise and concentrated.  
A miniature is essential and minimal.  
A miniature is gracious and magical.

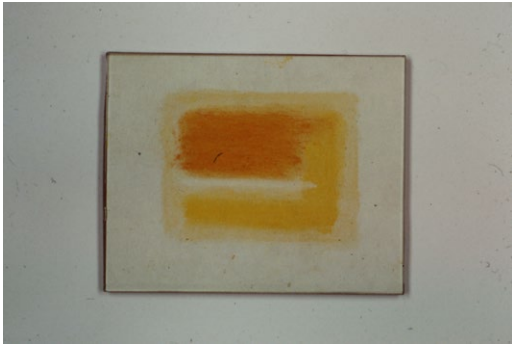
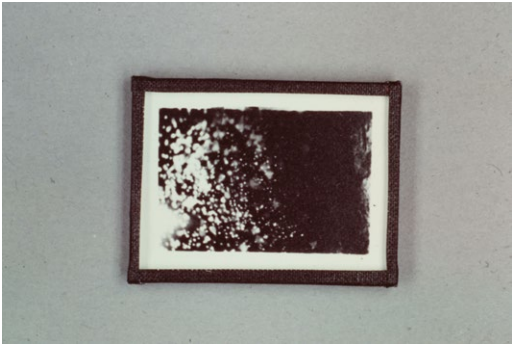
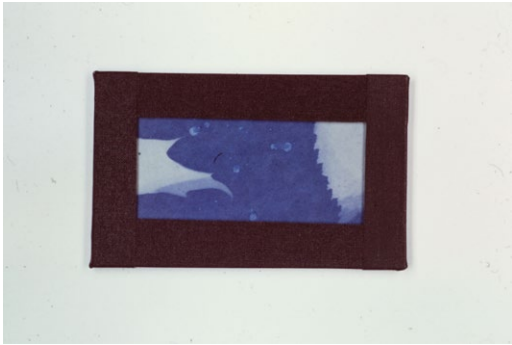
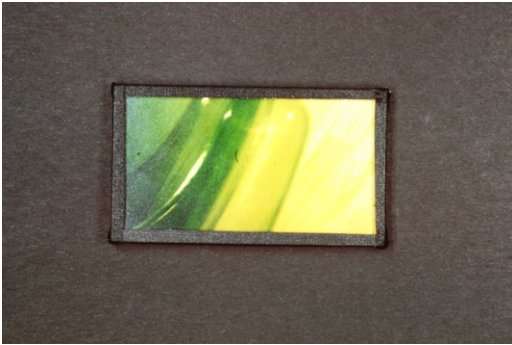
Each image must be presented on a rigid carton board, under transparent non-reflective glass of 2mm, with a frame made of black insulating tape.

Also, it is to present a short text precisely describing the lived experience.

**Deadline:**  
Wednesday 4 November.

ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR  
Università della Svizzera italiana . Accademia di Architettura

Anno accademico 1998-1999



works by Chiara Del Corso, Matteo Dotti, Anastasia, Jela Herrling, Jolanthe Kluger and Julian von der Schulenburg



ESERCITAZIONE . ASSIGNMENT . AUFGABESTELLUNG

P

After work in the silver mine

Indication on climate and territory: - Average temperature January 30°C (by day), 15°C (by night). - Average temperature July 22°C (by day), 15°C (by night). - Southern winds. - Annual precipitation 0mm. - Arid desert climate. - Desert terrain, non-productive. - Uninhabited zone (<1 pers./km2). - Substrate of crystalline rocks veined with rich silver strands, covered by sandstone sediments until -30m bsl.

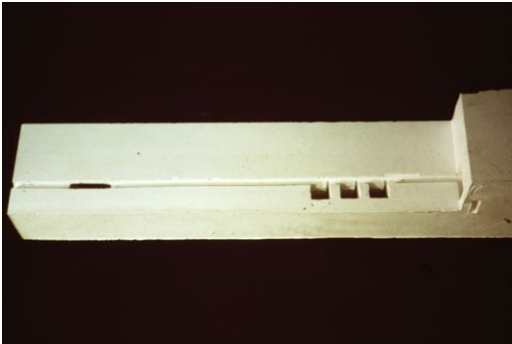
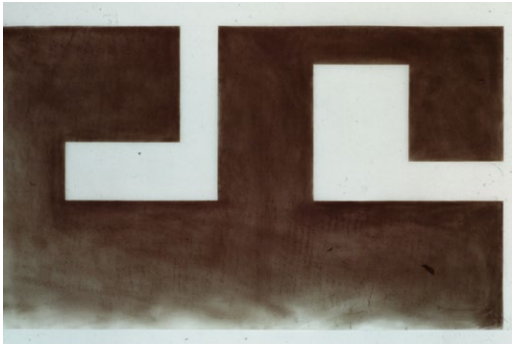
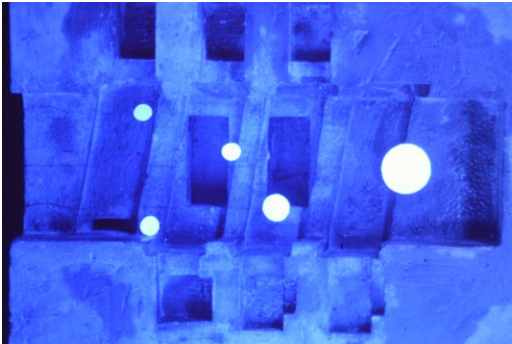
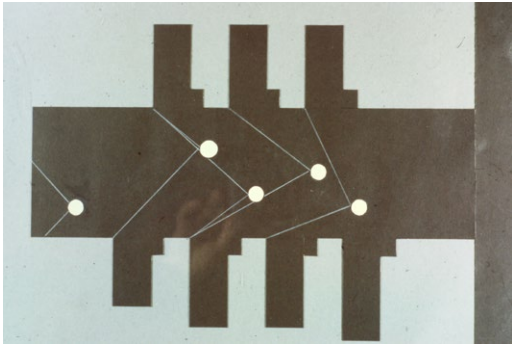
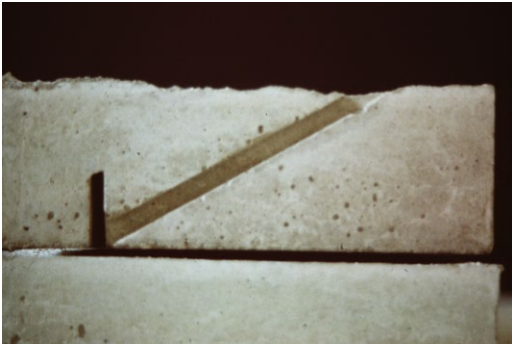
Technical and static characteristics of the rock: - Eroded superficial layer (150cm). - Compact and uniform golden-colored sandstone. - Constant temperature inside the mine ca. 22°C. - Maximal span 400cm. - Maximal width of walls 75cm. - Minimum high of insoles 150m. - Minimum dig opening 200cm. - Digging in right angles.

Program: 30 beds. Bathroom (10 workers at a time). - Common area (lunch, living). - 1 surface water deposit. - Catering provided from the outside (organization of the program's parts as well as their dimension are to be defined according to each project's concept).

**Deadline:**  
15 December 1998

ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR  
Università della Svizzera italiana . Accademia di Architettura

Anno accademico 1998-1999



works by Matilde Brenner, Francesco Gallarini and Julian von der Schulenburg

ESERCITAZIONE . ASSIGNMENT . AUFGABESTELLUNG

Q

**The love for things, after work in the silver mine**

The trembling light of a candle on a niche with an idol, the sound of workers when eating. Tangled linen under the bed, the distant sound of the sea, a hand on the bed throws the cigarette ashes down on the ground.

Beer cans reflect the sunset, lined along the living room's wall.  
Each student chooses a favorite place within his own project and imagines that it is inhabited. The place is presented in a specific situation of life with its light and its colors, perhaps also its sounds. The recorded images should speak of the project's "tone" and present a +1 (a cloth, a TV that is on etc.)

**Submission:**  
60 seconds, one or more still images, recorded on super 8. It is not allowed to work with zoom, and it is not allowed to move the camera during shooting. If there is a sound, it must be recorded separately. In a first work phase a "storyboard" is to be developed with drawings and texts containing all important indications for shooting. In a second work phase, the students must look for materials, objects, the right place for shooting etc. Editing must be made in a fast, spontaneous and simple way, must not be recreated from models. Shooting is to be made by a cameraman following the "storyboard" with the support of the student-director.

Each student will present his own film with a line or with three words or with a term (title). The exercise is to be considered fulfilled if the structure (the model), along with the recorded 60 seconds, is able to convey the sensation of a seductive and real whole.

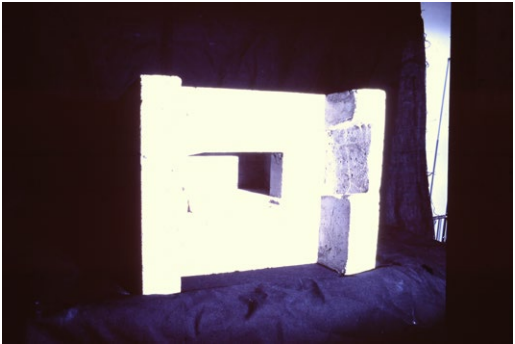
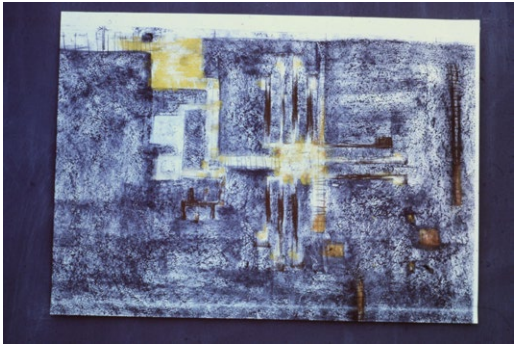
**Shooting:**  
from 25 to 29 January

**Presentation:**  
4 February 1999

**Questionnaire:**  
1. What aspect of my project interests me?  
2. Which element could I produce to stress this aspect?  
3. Now what is the aspect of my project?  
4. How do I make it visible?

ATELIER PETER ZUMTHOR  
Università della Svizzera italiana . Accademia di Architettura

Anno accademico 1998-1999



works by Selina Walder, Stefano Valzer and Melanie Stocker



ESERCITAZIONE . ASSIGNMENT . AUFGABESTELLUNG

R

Intermediate exercise from 4.2.1999 until 8.3.1999

Students should talk about an artwork of their choice – painting, sculpture, film or music (not architecture) for around 2-3 minutes.

A) The chosen artwork must be of great importance for the speaker and his Befindlichkeit. From students, it is expected a personal way of seeing (being impressed by) – presentations of reflections taken from art history books are not of interest.

B) It is about practicing the communication of concept and vision (mediate).  
Structure of the short conference:

The artwork will be presented through slides projection etc.  
The organization and order of presentations is up to the students.

ESERCITAZIONE . ASSIGNMENT . AUFGABESTELLUNG

S

Monks, refugees, abandoned animals + seven stones  
(A retreat for marginalized groups)

Students should choose a place in the surroundings of Chiasso for the construction of a structure for the above-mentioned users.

Any place is possible, from the city center to the countryside. Important is that the place becomes an integral part of the concept.

Any form of building or park is possible! However, there must be a minimum infrastructure in order to guarantee users' wellbeing.

The whole project should not depend on feasibility criteria but should be measured by its visionary quality and its capacity to create an atmosphere. Through the architectural concept, the appropriate atmosphere is to be conceived, still without falling into conventions. The sociological aspect of the theme is not fundamental.

How is it possible to generate the identity of a group at the margins of society, without dealing exclusively with formal aspects?

We think of themes as,  
Closeness and distance,  
Openness and closure,  
Abandonment and protection,  
Density and lightness,  
Intimacy and generosity.  
Looking around and looking inside,  
Of themes as hot and cold,  
Darkness, shadow and light,  
Material and scent,  
Sound and silence:  
Of themes as transition and fracture,  
Beauty and melancholy,  
Memory and experience.  
We do not think of formal themes.

Program:

The group of users is to be defined personally: monks, refugees, marginalized groups from around the world, former circus animals, old racing horses, dogs, homeless cats or butterflies. The number of inhabitants must be between 10 and 100. The number of animals must also be between 10 and 100.

Each one defines the place: any place is possible in the surroundings of Chiasso.

In the vicinity, seven stones are to be placed.

Students have the possibility to work only on one part of the theme (one single group of users), or to deal with more groups together in a single project.

**Calendar:**

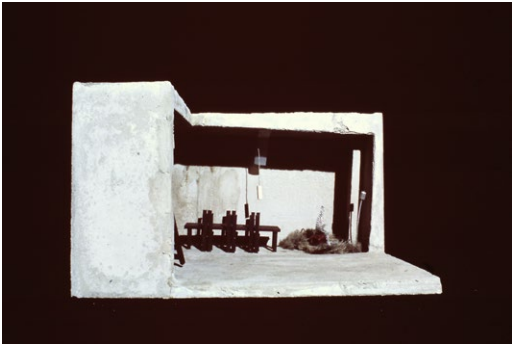
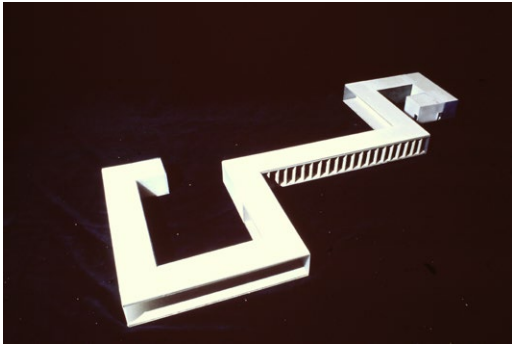
Main theme: 8.3.99 - 18.6.99

First phase: 8.3.99 - 19.4.99

Until Thursday 11 March it is to define and document 2-3 concepts (place, users).

On Thursday night the concept that will guide the rest of the project will be decided.

Until Monday 19 March (intermediate critics) it is to be presented a working model, sketches, documentation material, examples of environment as well as realized examples that testifies the successful generation of identity – between content and architecture.



works by Gastone Boisco, Maria Victoria Saravia and Selina Walder



### 4.3. The foundations of composition:

Despite the uniqueness of each exercise developed along Atelier Zumthor's *Primo Anno*, the analysis of their sequence allows the identification of a shared program informing the structure of each year. Starting from the most elemental exercises regarding perception in the first semester, and evolving to more complex activities dealing with the scale of place in the second, this conceptual coherence provided both autonomy and consistency to a project spanning three years.

An illustrative example of such structure is found in the atelier's inaugural year. Its first exercise, *The personal construction module* (A), required students to build a block with the dimensions of 18x18x36cm, using a material that should tell the content of a personal experience. The simplicity of the task condensed a much deeper process, starting from the selection of a biographical memory and then followed by identification of the role played by a specific materiality in its conception. Davide Scardua - a former student interviewed in the research<sup>20</sup> - tells how, from the experience of penetrating a grass field as a child, he produced a block built as a dense weave of grass branches. Another student, whose memory was that of walking on a melting sidewalk on a hot summer day, built a block entirely made of asphalt. Important, however, was not the material itself, but the effective experience it could convey to the audience, bringing characteristics like scent and touch to be central components of the constructive challenge. Therefore, the grass block should contain the scent of a spring Alpine morning, just as the second had to smell like melting asphalt. The exercise's fulfillment was assessed in the block's capacity to successfully communicate the content of the experience in such a way it was understandable by colleagues, assistants and Zumthor himself.

The importance given to presentation as a moment of verification was another transversal feature of the atelier. In *100 steps for a blind* (B), the second exercise, students were required to design a tunnel connecting a town to a park, imagining how a blind person could find orientation

inside it. Clearly aimed at the valorization of hearing as part of design, the exercise's final submission consisted of a *resonance body* - a model in 1:20 scale - which was then submitted to a real *sound test*. Students' projects tended to explore different materials and morphologies as a strategy to obtain different acoustic responses, as in the case where a crescent scale of voids was carved beneath a wooden floor inside the tunnel, generating a progressive change in the reverberation of steps guiding the blind walker.

In *An indirect-lighting lamp* (C), students had to build a lamp using a given set of materials - 1 aluminium sheet and 1 fluorescent tube - and following a set of rules such as "the lamp must not be seen" and "use simple forms". More important, however, was the fact that the lamp was meant to work effectively, stressing how much the practical challenge stood as one of the atelier's main mottos. The closing exercise of the first semester was called *The fragrance and aroma street* (D), requiring the construction of a small shop to be inserted into a sequence of niches built in the atelier. Each shop should contain a product characterized by a particular scent, in such a way designs were developed as aroma-driven strategies. Walking along the street in the final critics, the public could enjoy the fragrances of a fish, a honey or a hot chestnut shop.

Moving on to the spring semester, a transition in complexity reached the scale of the territory. Before any design action, however, a preliminary exercise called *Nature, street, house + 1* (E) intended to increase students' awareness of the instances of place and landscape. During summer holidays, they produced a video documenting what they considered to be their *personal landscape* - a collection of ordinary places perceived as familiar or important to their biography. Returning to Mendrisio, the process of reading a place was intensified in the exercise *In Situ* (F), conceived as a sequence of three shorter tasks. Divided into groups, students were given a specific site to work with, representing typical situations of the school's surroundings. The *First encounter* (F1), where each student visited the assigned place individually, was followed by *The time of the place* (F2), which required each group to produce a series of 24 documentations of the site - hourly records

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Davide Scardua, Chapter 9, pp. 271-277.

made with a fixed camera during the period of a day that should register sound and image. The final task was *Remodelling the place* (F3), which summarized the collected information through the construction of a model meant to “express the experience of each place”.

*An intervention on place in 1:1 scale* (G) closed Atelier Zumthor’s first year, asking groups to operate a *concrete* transformation in their sites, in such a way to “render visible or perceivable anything of their particularity”. In what can be read as a sort of condensed depiction of the course’s didactics, students designed their projects as interventions whose material presence was directly conditioned by a temporal narrative. This is visible in the work produced by Group C on a peripheral plot near to the highway exit to Mendrisio. In her interview, Stefanie Hitz explained how they took advantage of the steep topography to design an intervention made of 300m of flexible light tube installed over the slope in the shape of a huge heart.<sup>21</sup> The original form, however, could be seen only from a sighting platform on top of Monte Generoso - from the site itself, the tubes were perceived as the chaotic intertwining of light strokes. The design concept was based precisely on the changing perceptions of the landscape, and executed through the temporal experience of an audience that climbed the mountain by night to behold the glowing heart in the valley below. Such ceremonial condition was visible in all works, which also shared the use of a language intentionally close to that of conceptual art. Together, the five interventions could be seen as a collective performance whose narrative ultimately expanded from the Academy to the city.

Despite the singularity of each exercise developed along the atelier’s three years, a critical reading of them as the documentation of a singular event renders visible a set of elemental concepts potentially translated into compositional principles - the *foundations* upon which students’ education was built. Among those, a fundamental principle is found in the concept of *memory*. More evident in some exercises, such as *A Space that looks at the landscape of my youth* (H), or *A miniature* (O), the use of autobiographical experiences as the source of a

21 Interview with Stefanie Hitz, Chapter 9, 266-270.

Fig. 12-13  
Student working in the construction of a model in the atelier in 1996 and final critics in 1998  
AAM Archives





project's initial image is transversal to the course activities. Even in exercises dealing with an external object, a process of assimilation can be seen taking place, tending to filter the given event into a set of typical situations condensed in images. Taking the *In Situ* (F) series as an example, it is possible to identify an approximation sequence to place that extracts from the primary situation a number of qualities then condensed in a *selective model*. Inside the exercise, the process was described as "bringing back to memory the place that was visited and lived",<sup>22</sup> meaning to summarize a concrete situation into an initial image from which the design could evolve.

*Memory* here is not necessarily something connected to a distant past. To conceive an image taken as the content to be conveyed through architecture - and its reverse reconstruction through architectural experience - is therefore the first and most fundamental design principle as taught in the course. In that sense, students' autobiographical memories were explored as sources of *typical situations*, that is, images whose value as design references stems from their potential of being collectively perceived - the quality of *typicity*, as pointed out by Zumthor in *The Typical Space* (K). In the atelier, the thematic of *type* is never addressed as a formal theme. On the contrary, there is a clear emphasis on the potential of *experiences* to be taken as shared elements.

A further element of the course's principles can be identified in the use of *construction* as the primary means to imbed an object with meaning, stressing architecture's value as a concrete fact itself. The importance of making is evident in the hands-on nature of all proposed exercises, which encouraged students to work with "real (construction) materials". In *A prototype for a door handle* (L), for instance, the exercise required the making of wood, clay or wax models which were then taken to a casting company where the final metal objects were produced. The technical challenge of Atelier Zumthor seems to have been also an important trigger to students' enthusiasm and the consequent popu-

<sup>22</sup> Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, *Report on Teaching Activities 1996-97*, Mendrisio 1997, p. 110.

larization of the atelier in the environment of Mendrisio. The preference for working in 1:1 scale and the central role played by physical models are examples of a direct relation with the working methods used by Zumthor's studio in Haldenstein, something that also contributed to convey to students a sense of the discipline's identity based on its instrumentality.

Most important, however, was the use of *construction* as the action defining an object's formal configuration and conceptual value. While the course consciously avoided exploring the symbolic dimension of architectural form as a valid argument, the focus of composition was transferred to its *physical presence*, meaning that an object's *materiality* acquired a fundamental communicative role. *Construction*, as seen in *The personal construction module* (A), becomes the transformative act allowing materials to assume the condition of meaning-bearers - it is through the module's materiality that the image of a memory is recalled. Inside the course, the conditions in which artifacts were produced were therefore never taken as a secondary argument or a mere circumstantial limit, but employed in its narrative potential to generate a connection with a given preconceived image. In students' works, the consequence of such an approach is visible in the tendency to produce objects whose material expressiveness stood as the direct translation of their design concept.

When looking for the main concepts contained in Zumthor's teaching, an evident presence at the core of exercises is found in a sort of theatrical element, better described around the idea of *performance* as a compositional principle. Conceptually, it relates to the notion that "architecture has its place in the real world",<sup>23</sup> meaning that it is not limited to the production of an object, but is understood as a space-time event whose ultimate dimension of effectiveness is verified through experience. As seen in many exercises, this performative component is translated in the importance assumed by action as an inherent part of the design task. Their conception as something that must be *played* or

<sup>23</sup> "The reality of architecture is the concrete body in which forms, volumes and spaces come into being. There are no ideas except in things." P. Zumthor, *The Hard Core of Beauty* (1991), in: *Thinking Architecture*, 3rd ed., Birkhäuser, Basel 2017, p. 37.

4. Atelier Zumthor AAM

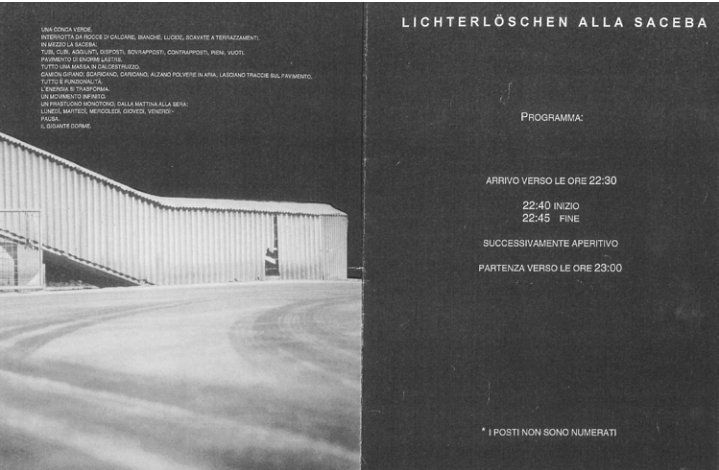


Fig. 14-15  
Atelier Zumthor AAM, 1996-97  
Invitations for the performances designed by  
students in *An intervention on place* (G)

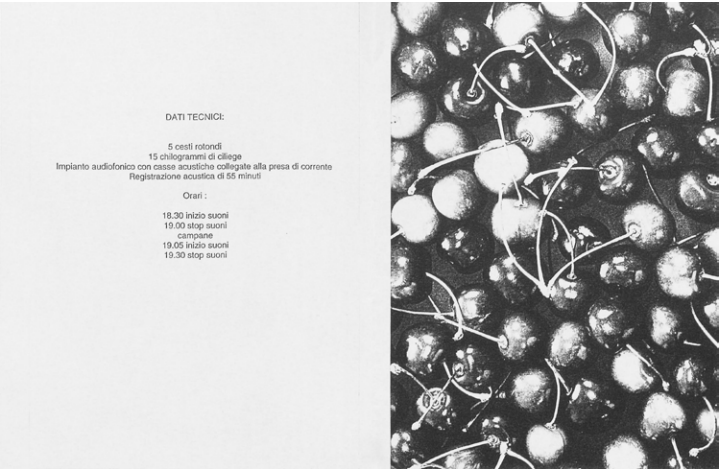


Fig. 16-17  
Atelier Zumthor AAM, 1997-98  
Invitations for *Blue Reflections* (J) and  
*Questioning Architecture* (N)

AMM Archives

*executed* was stressed by the use of a language very similar to that of performative art. *Blue reflections* (J) and *Questioning Architecture* (N) - suggestively described in archival material as examples of *Gesamtkunstwerk* - were exercises in which students had to literally design an event, not limited to what could be defined as the ‘architectural’ part of it - furniture and scenography - but dealing also with ceremonial items such as music and drinks - “the background of all human acts”.<sup>24</sup>

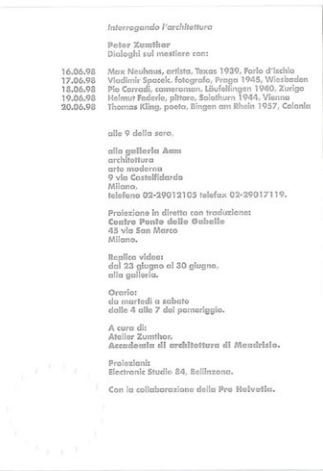
Theatricality - the performance of actions that acquire meaning as part of a narrative - is clearly an important concept in the atelier. An example can be seen in the works produced for *An intervention on place in 1:1 scale* (G), which were complemented by the realization of what can be described as true *mise-en-scènes*, action taking place during a specific temporality, where physical elements were complemented by the performance of planned gestures belonging to the same design concept. In *Prototype of a door handle* (L), Kreisler’s description of final critics seems to capture the exercise’s performative spirit: “William Curtis and the song ‘Monkey do’ accompanied the final presentation: 100 people tested all handles trespassing our fake threshold”.<sup>25</sup> Even the social dynamic of the atelier seems to have been contaminated by a certain ceremonial dimension, no doubt reinforcing the development of a group identity among *zumthorian* students.<sup>26</sup>

*Teaching Architecture, Learning Architecture* was written by Zumthor in September 1996 as a brief description of his atelier. Later published as part of *Thinking Architecture* (1998) the text acquires new meaning when read at the light of the presented documentation. Excerpts like: “Students have to learn to work consciously with their personal biographical experiences of architecture. Their allotted tasks are devised to set this process in motion;” or: “There are no cardboard models. Actually, no ‘models’ at all in the conventional sense, but con-

<sup>24</sup> “We will care about the background of all human acts happening in it (the Theatre) during the 5 nights of the Jazz Festival. [...] An unforgettable night event for some 400 people. Please, look at the photos, listen to the tapes.” in: Atelier Zumthor Mendrisio, *Exercise J report*, written by Miguel Kreisler, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Atelier Zumthor Mendrisio, *Exercise L report*, written by Miguel Kreisler, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> The expression *zumthorian* appeared frequently in the interviews with former students as a way to identify those belonging to Atelier Zumthor in the Academy’s environment.





crete objects, three-dimensional works on a specific scale;" and still: "Architecture is not abstract, but concrete. [...] Music needs to be performed. Architecture needs to be executed";<sup>27</sup> acquire transparency when confronted with the outcome of the project they refer to. They seem also to corroborate the extraction of *memory*, *construction* and *performance* as the fundamental components of Zumthor's teaching.

Although Zumthor's personal assessment on the course's results is not possible to be presented, an interesting analysis is found in assistants' voices registered in the *Exercise Reports* kept in the archive. In that sense, it is interesting to observe that, despite the general excitement perceived in every manifestation related to the atelier, a number of instrumental details frequently appeared as effective concerns. In the report of *The personal construction module (A)*, Miguela Tamo observed:

*"Only half of students (12) have understood and performed the exercise with precision. Seven students performed the exercise wrongly, the correspondence between memory and the presented object is inaccurate (of those, three haven't even respected the dimensions). Another five students have completely misunderstood the exercise, using material as a representation of events, atmospheres etc. until it becomes a symbol".<sup>28</sup>*

Considering the experimental character of Zumthor's *Primo Anno* it seems only natural that a certain skepticism might arise from the observation of its facts. A possible criticism could relate to the eventual difficulty in reaching students' full comprehension on the dynamics of specific exercises. In fact, the non-ortodox nature of Atelier Zumthor was not necessarily well received by all students, posing a particular difficulty to those who had already been through some sort of architectural training.<sup>29</sup> In fact, this innovative methodology could sometimes generate confusion in students who did not find a clear association between the course and the profession as they knew. In particular, the strong personal dimension of some exercises proved to be a challenge to those who did not feel comfortable with such an intimate exposure.

<sup>27</sup> P. Zumthor, *Teaching Architecture, Learning Architecture*, in: P. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 3rd ed., Birkhäuser, Basel 2017, pp. 65-66.

<sup>28</sup> Atelier Zumthor AAM, *Exercise A report*, 1996.

<sup>29</sup> This was the case of Davide Scardua and Nicolas Polli, who previously attended the Technical School in Lugano, interviewed in Chapter 9, pp. 271-280.



Fig. 18-19  
Students watching the sun rising on top of Monte Generoso in 1997,  
and Zumthor at work in the atelier in 1999  
AMM Archives

However, as observed by Miguela Tamo, it is important to register that a certain level of strangeness was consciously expected as an inherent part of a process that aimed to reset the rigidity of ‘traditional’ training and to benefit from the ‘ground-zero’ condition of first-year students. In retrospect, an evaluation of Atelier Zumthor by those who took part in it is by all means positive. Most former students recall that as a period of discovery and learning, an experience in which they identify the assimilation of radical concepts upon which a disciplinary basis of their craft as architects evolved. An exploration of these principles is presented in the following chapters, in which the key-ideas of Zumthor’s teaching are confronted with the composition of his architecture.

## 5. Memory

*“Everything about this kitchen was typical of a traditional kitchen. There was nothing special about it. But perhaps it was just the fact that it was so very much, so very naturally, a kitchen that has imprinted its memory indelibly on my mind. [...] Memories like these contain the deepest architectural experience that I know. They are reservoirs of the architectural atmospheres and images that I explore in my work as an architect”.<sup>1</sup>*

Peter Zumthor, 1988

*“Our incursions into the world of the ordinary and the everyday constitute a search for collective meanings. Following the collapse of national mythologies and territorial arrangements, this research attempts to recover the traces of an identity in the affected mobility of our contemporary culture”.<sup>2</sup>*

Marcel Meili, 1991

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<sup>1</sup> P. Zumthor, *A Way of Looking at Things*. The essay was originally written as a lecture held in november 1988 at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-ARC) in Santa Monica, and later integrated into *Thinking Architecture* (1998).

<sup>2</sup> M. Meili, *Ein Paar Bauten, viele Pläne*, in: P. Disch, M. Steinmann, *Architektur in der Deutschen Schweiz 1980 1990*, ADV Advertising Company, Lugano 1991, p. 22.



## 5. Memory

If a single element should be presented as the most recurrent in Peter Zumthor's thinking, that would probably be the concept of *memory*. The suggestion of personal memories as a source of referential images and thus of *remembering* as the project's first action is evident in the didactic applied by him in Mendrisio, as well as in his writings since the emergence of his first projects in the early 1980's. In an *Archithese* edition of 1984, documenting the completion of Haus R  th (Haldenstein, 1982-83), Zumthor describes how design decisions in that project were taken aiming a correspondence to specific images drew from his personal experience, as for instance the use of wood to convey a "natural smell", or doors built in such a way they would "produce little noises when closing".<sup>3</sup> Despite the project's formal contrast in relation to his most diffused oeuvre - an U-shaped all-symmetrical house - the intentions contained in its design refer to a creative process that would become characteristic of Zumthor, where remembered situation becomes source of ordinary images:

*"I find it important that as a first thing one asks himself questions such: How is a kitchen actually? What is the first thing that comes to mind when hearing the word? The ordinary? Smells play a role too, and noises".*<sup>4</sup>

In architectural theory, a potential misunderstanding may arise from the apparent self-referentiality of addressing the concept of *memory* in these terms - that is, specifically as something autobiographical. How could the reconstruction of a personal event offer a contribution to design other than the author's self-satisfying nostalgia? To bridge the gap between the individual value of a memory and the collective instance of architecture, it is necessary to consider the process it condenses. *Memory* - from Latin *m  morem*, which in turn relates to the Sanskrit *m  n*, meaning 'to think'<sup>5</sup> - stands basically for the use of associative thinking based on images as structure for the creative act. "Working with images is not only everything I record in the moment to generate a new image, but also the processing of images that already exist in the

<sup>3</sup> P. Zumthor, *Haus R  th in Haldenstein*, in: *Archithese, Zeitschrift und Schriftenreihe f  r Architektur*, 1 1984, pp. 27-31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> O. Pianigiani, *Vocabolario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana* (www.etimo.it).



Fig. 1  
Apartments for Senior Citizens (Masans, 1989-93)  
The design of common spaces incorporates personal belongings of dwellers,  
aiming to create an environment of familiarity  
Atelier Zumthor  
photo: Ludwig Abache

5. Memory

sensitive background of the search for the new form”,<sup>6</sup> says Zumthor in a dialogue on the relation between ‘images’ and ‘reality’. He highlights the fact that memories are not necessarily linked to the past, a condition visible in many of the exercises in Mendrisio.

His interest is actually focused on the potential such images have to contain *typical experiences*, that is the reference to ordinary situations which even if individually perceived hold the potential of being shared, whether by belonging to a common cultural context or by expressing a fundamental human condition. The compositional principle suggested around the idea of *memory* can thus be described as a process operating by analogy in which the content of *type* - the elements that through their constancy acquire communicative dimension - is defined in the assumption of shared experiences as a transmissible content. Such a dynamic is visible in the effort of Zumthor’s didactics to avoid formal iconography as a means to articulate architectural thought. While symbolic form is considered something *abstract* and therefore arbitrary, typical situations contained in images are *concrete*, rooted in our experience of the world, therefore acquiring legitimacy in the phenomenological perspective that informs much of Zumthor’s thinking.

The importance given by him to the theme of *memory* indicates the understanding of contextualism as a fundamental quality in architecture, that is the intention to conceive a new object able to establish positive interactions with its surroundings. Such an approach is much conditioned, both at conceptual and instrumental level, by the influence exerted by Aldo Rossi in the Swiss architectural culture through his didactic activity at the ETh Zurich in the 1970’s. Rossi’s ideas, diffused mainly through the publication of *The Architecture of the City* in 1966, represented a fundamental contribution to a moment in which the functionalist paradigms of Modernism were questioned in favor of a more integrative approach in relation to instances of place and history. Even though Zumthor didn’t attend the school and therefore had no direct contact with Rossi as a student, the characteristic Swiss environ-

6 P. Zumthor, *Mit Bilder Arbeiten*, in: R. Konersmann, P. Noever, P. Zumthor, *Zwischen Bild und Realität*, gta Verlag, Zurich 2006, p. 58.

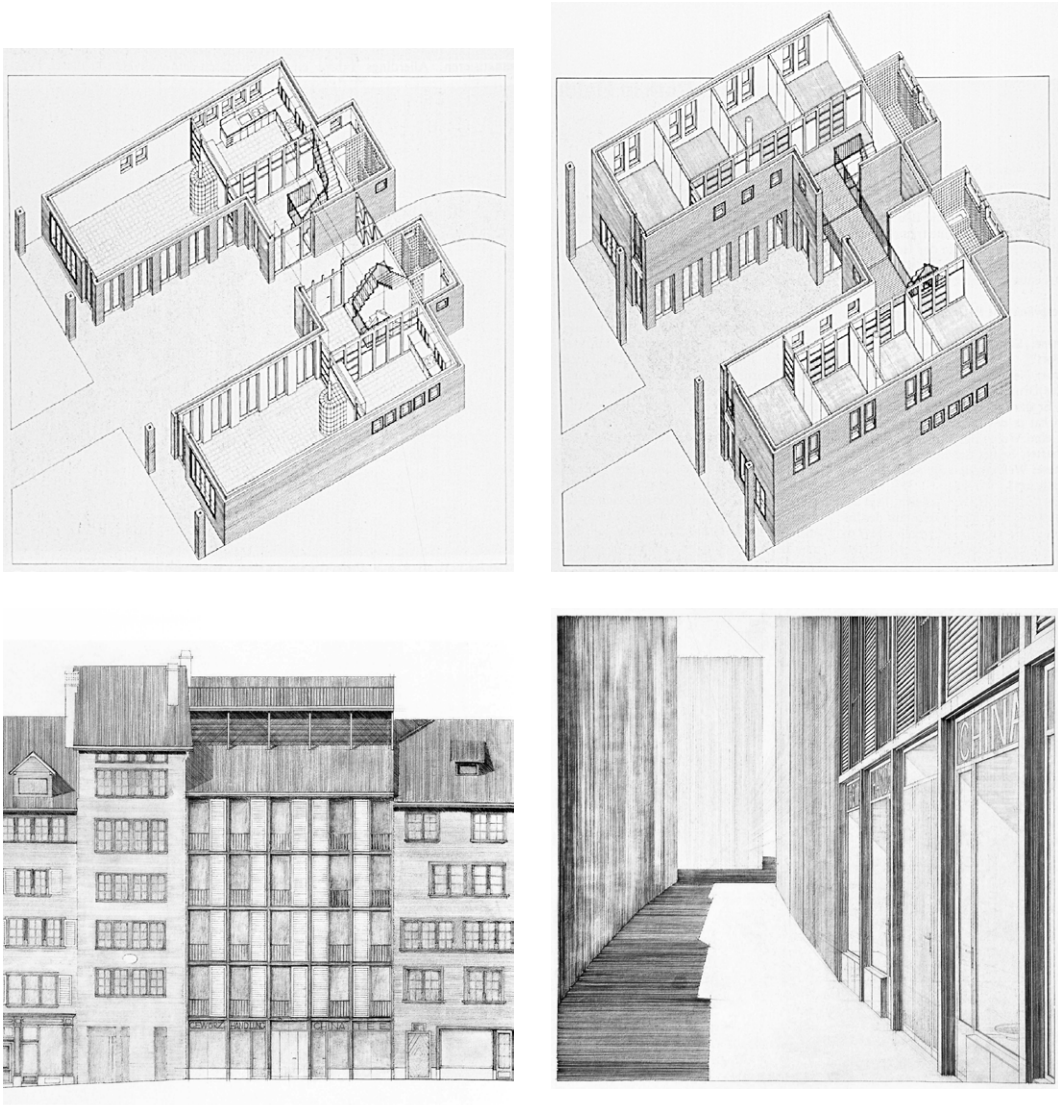


Fig. 2-3  
Haus R  th (Haldenstein, 1982-83), axonometry  
Atelier Zumthor, Archithese 1 1984

Fig. 4-5  
Rindermarkt Apartment Building (Zurich, 1988)  
Atelier Zumthor



5. Memory

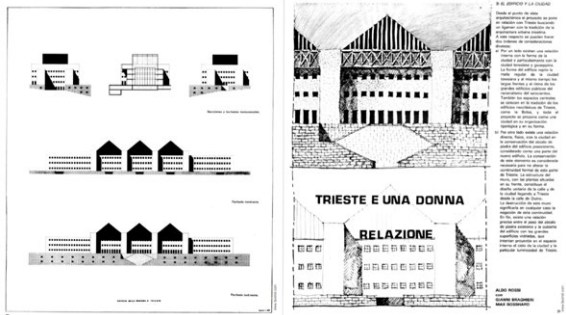
Fig. 6  
Aldo Rossi and Fabio Reinhardt  
working on the exhibition  
Europa-America: Centro  
Storico-Suburbio, 1975  
photo: Lorenzo Capellini



Fig. 7  
Competition project for  
Regional Administrative Center  
in Trieste, 1974  
Aldo Rossi, Max Bosshard and  
Gianni Braghieri  
Fondazione Aldo Rossi

Next page:  
Fig. 8-9  
Analoge Architektur  
projects by Alberto dell'Antonio  
and Quintus Miller (1986-87)

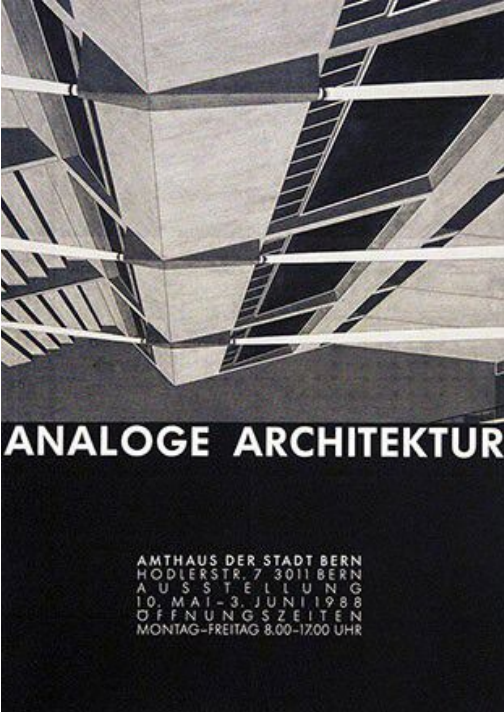
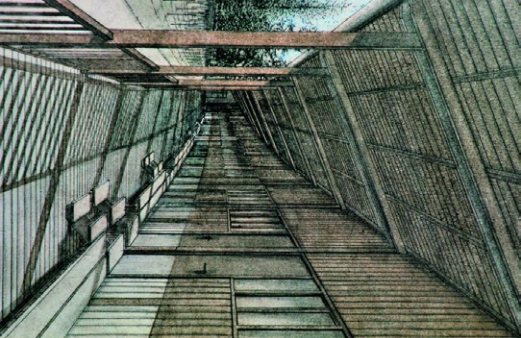
Fig. 10  
Poster of exhibition, 1988  
Analoge Altnuee Architektur,  
Quart Verlag



ment of vicinity between theory and practice proved to be successful in spreading his ideas to the point they became the main component of a conceptual common ground shared by most of the architecture produced in the country during the 1980's and 1990'. In fact, Zumthor often identifies a major influence in Rossi, to whom he addresses as the one that “has opened his eyes to the history of architecture and the architecture of his biographical memory”.<sup>7</sup>

In this regard, a differentiation must be made in order to specify which of Rossi's ideas are present in Zumthor's notion of *memory*. According to Irina Davidovici, who suggests that the theories of Rossi operated at different levels within the Swiss context - Zumthor's approach would be closer to what could be called a second phase in Rossi's work, one that amplified the initial preponderance of architecture's formal dimension as a condenser of collective meaning:

7 P. Zumthor, T. Durisch, *Peter Zumthor 1985 – 2013: Buildings and Projects*, Vol. 1, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2014, p. 9.



“Rossi's development since the mid-1970's, articulated in ‘A Scientific Autobiography’ in 1981, took analogy into the subjective sphere, implying an experience of the object through perceptions and associations that were haptic rather than purely visual”.<sup>8</sup>

It is certainly not by chance that *A Scientific Biography*<sup>9</sup> emerges as a frequent reference for Zumthor. In his words, the architectural situations described in the book from the perspective of a personal lived experience are a much more consistent content to be communicated through design than the formal taxonomy explored in Rossi's ETH course, which he criticizes as “academic formalism”, something “certainly interesting, [...] but always fabricated”.<sup>10</sup>

8 I. Davidovici, *Forms of practice: German-Swiss architecture 1980-2000*, 2nd. Ed., gt-Verlag, Zurich 2018, p. 70.

9 Rossi, *Autobiografia Scientifica*, Pratiche Editrice, Parma 1990.

10 P. Zumthor, in: F. Arnold, *L'hypothèse Aldo Rossi : entretiens tirés du film*, Les Productions du Effa, Paris 2012, p. 50.

Zumthor's skepticism towards symbolic form is revealing of a more diffuse criticism of Rossi's work that emerged in the local scene. It is related to the tendential mimetic replication of his vocabulary by students and to the difficulty in relating its abstract monumentality to the context of the Swiss cities. As a reaction, many local architects turned their attention to a wider notion of contextualism, one that would incorporate the ordinary elements of everyday life as an architectural theme - a sort of realist component much indebted to the local reception of Venturi and Scott Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas*.<sup>11</sup> Such amplified understanding is present in the conceptual basis of Miroslav Sik's *Analogue Architektur*,<sup>12</sup> probably the most representative of the *rossian* reverberations in Switzerland. His notion of *altneu* - "an ensemble in which old and new, the local and the specifics are mixed into a new whole"<sup>13</sup> - describes an architecture that seeks to merge with its surroundings, be them the city's historic centre or the anonymous industrial periphery.

In the case of Zumthor, it seems useful to trace a further differentiation between his approach and what can be seen as a collective ambition for contextualization in the Swiss architecture of the period. While much of this general production would address the thematic of *memory* by establishing a formal dialogue with the surroundings - as for example in the proposition of continued geometries between old and new, incorporation of vernacular elements or the replication of symbolic themes - the architecture of Zumthor would instead be focused in taking such references to a higher level of abstraction. That means that his buildings would not resign from their contemporary condition, nor try to merge to what already exists, but seek to enhance the perception of the context by introducing a new component - many times one that generates fragmentation.

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<sup>11</sup> R. Venturi, D. Scott Brown, S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1972.

<sup>12</sup> The *Analogue Architektur* studio at the ETH was run by Fabio Reinhart between 1983-91, with assistants Luca Ortelli, Santiago Calatrava and Miroslav Sik, who eventually became its central figure.

<sup>13</sup> E. Willenegger, L. Imhof, M. Sik, *Analogue Altneue Architektur*, Quart Verlag, Luzern 2019, p. 50.

In that sense, his use of *memory* as a compositional principle is close to the differentiation made by Maurice Halbwachs between *history* and *collective memory*. For him, while the first consists of an abstract knowledge of the past, the second represents a notion tied to the reconstruction of lived experiences, something fundamental to generate a sense of identity within a given group.<sup>14</sup> Zumthor's buildings operate precisely by condensing the communicative content of collective memory into an object that conveys its references in an indirect, non-obvious way - an architecture that is not meant to be read as the page of a history book, but to be lived through the reconstruction of a lived memory.

### **5.1. Haunted memories: the Topography of Terror**

To learn the history of a place "*from the bottom up*", an expression used by Peter Zumthor when alluding to his long work as an inventor in the Grisons,<sup>15</sup> seems to apply well as a metaphor for the project designed by him for the Documentation and Visitors Center of the Topography of Terror in Berlin (1993-04). As much as the factual transformations in Alpine villages are seen as the concrete - and hence more 'real' - dimension of history, in his project for the Topography, architecture is used to summon the site to speak for itself. Zumthor's design for this extremely complex place - where the thematics of German national identity, the trauma of National-socialist and the task to reshape a city once divided by a wall are overlapped - emerged as the result of a competition held by the Berlin Senate in 1993. Its intention was to build a physical structure for the activities of the Topography of Terror Foundation, an institution created with the aim to promote the conscientization - and rediscovery - of the memory of the so-called Gestapo-Terrain (*das Gestapo-Gelände*).

The site's history however, goes back beyond the traumatic symbolism acquired by being home to many of the Third Reich's persecution offices during the 1930's and 1940's. Its origins reach events such as

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<sup>14</sup> M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992.

<sup>15</sup> P. Zumthor, *Different Kinds of Silence*, interview by Marc-Christoph Wagner to the Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015.





Fig. 11  
US Air Force reconnaissance fly  
over Berlin, after the bombing of  
February 3, 1945  
The area known as Prinz-Albrecht-  
Terrain is seen at the center, in the  
lower part of the image  
Stiftung Topographie des Terrors

Berlin's establishment as Prussian capital in the 18th century and the unification of Germany in 1871. In fact, the piece of land commonly known today as Topography of Terror - defined to the south by Anhalter Straße, to the west by Stresemannstraße, to the north by Niederkirchnerstraße and to the east by Wilhelmstraße - once belonged to the southern part of Friederichstadt, a district founded by Frederick I of Prussia in 1691.<sup>16</sup> Originally an autonomous suburb in the outskirts of the Cölln-Berlin center - the two settlements that gave birth to modern Berlin - Friederichstadt witnessed a rapid growth due to government-sponsored occupation and the arrival of immigration waves. In 1710, it was incorporated along with the surrounding districts to the newly-established Royal Residence and Capital City of Berlin, a move that increased the area's development in the following decades and the establishment of northern Friederichstadt as an aristocratic suburb mostly occupied by palaces.

Among those stood Palais Vernezobre, built by the homonym baron along Wilhelmstrasse and bought in 1830 by Prince Albrecht of Prussia - who then commissioned its renovation to the architect Karl Friederich Schinkel.<sup>17</sup> The building, which became known as Prinz-Albert-Palais, played a particular role in the flourishment that took place in the area following the German Empire unification in the late 19th century and the setting of Berlin as its capital. By this time, many of the aristocratic palaces were transformed into administrative buildings, and along with the creation of new museums, Friederichstadt became known as an emergent government and artistic district. To this period belongs one of the protagonists of was then known as *Prinz-Albrecht-Gelände* - the area around the homonymous palace that later became the Topography of Terror - the Martin-Gropius-Bau (1877-81), built along Prinz-Albrecht Straße - today Niederkirchnerstraße - originally as the Museum of Industrial Arts and Crafts. After the dissolution of the German Empire in the aftermath of World War I, transformations

<sup>16</sup> K. Till, *The New Berlin: memory, politics, place*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2005, p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Among the main modifications brought by Schinkel were the redesign of the Palace's street front with the insertion of a colonnade hall and the one-floor addition to the employer's wing.



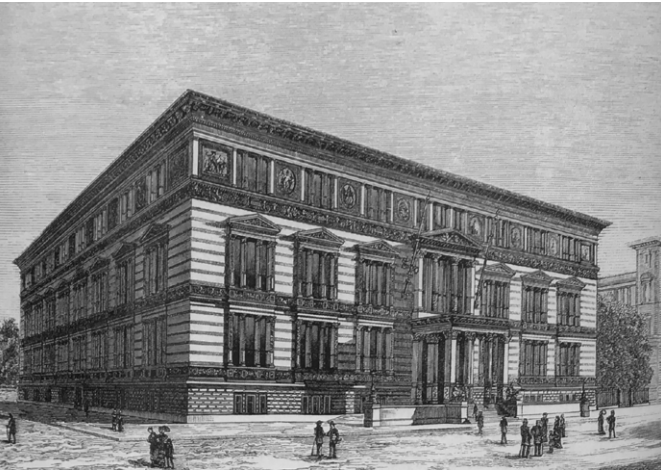


Fig. 12  
Northern facade of the Museum  
of Industrial Arts and Crafts, later  
known as Martin-Gropius-Bau  
wood engraving, 1881  
Stiftung Topographie des Terrors

Fig. 13  
Prinz-Albrecht-Palais, view from  
Kochtrasse, 1885  
Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin  
photo: F. Albert Schwartz

Fig. 14  
Reichssicherheitshauptamt,  
Prinz-Albrecht Strasse 8, 1933  
Bundesarchiv

in the site included the construction of the Europahaus (1926-31), built as a cultural and leisure complex occupying a plot facing Königgrätzer Strasse - today Stresemanstraße - once a part of the Prinz-Albrecht-Palais' gardens.<sup>18</sup>

Considering the area's deep connection with an image of national identity, it is not surprising that many of the buildings that once represented the core of the German Empire were chosen by the Nazi government to become the center from which the Third Reich's power would emanate. *Das Regierungsviertel* (the Government District) became a constellation of high-rank administrative offices occupying much of the area along Wilhelmstrasse south of Unter den Linden. In its southern extremity, this power axis lent particular symbolism to the buildings located on what was then known as Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain, which were occupied by the most feared persecution units of the Nazi regime. The terror that would later name the land was planted by the installation of the Gestapo headquarters in the former building of the School of Industrial Arts and Crafts - built adjacent to the Martin-Gropius-Bau between 1901 and 1905 - the SS House in the former Hotel Prinz Albrecht - built between 1887 and 1888 - and the Security Department of the SS in the Prinz-Albrecht-Palais. From these main structures, numerous buildings of the surroundings were progressively occupied by an ever-growing machinery of persecution. During the expansion of the Third Reich and the tragic events of World War II, the addresses of the Gestapo headquarters and the Prinz-Albrecht-Palais became haunted components of the city's imaginary, the first as the place where political opponents were kept and tortured, the second as the rooms from which orders for mass extermination across Europe were issued.

By the end of the war, the majority of these buildings were severely damaged or completely destroyed. The partition of Berlin among the Allies divided the former Friederichstadt into two districts, to the north Berlin-Mitte in the Soviet sector, to the south Berlin-Kreuzberg in the American sector. The border between them was set along Nie-

18 Topography of Terror, *Site Tour*, Stiftung Topographie des Terrors, Berlin 2010, p. 53.



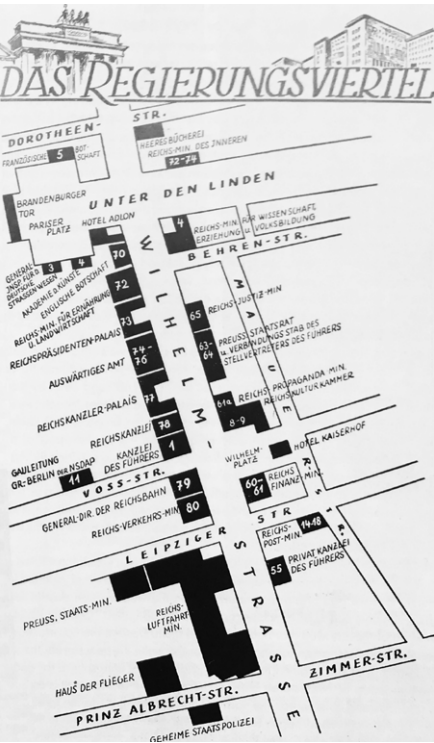


Fig. 15  
Map of Nazi government district along Wilhelmstrasse, 1936

Fig. 16  
Conference at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8.  
From the left: Werner Lorenz, Reinhard Heydrich  
Heinrich Himmler and Karl Wolf

Stiftung Topographie des Terrors

derkirchnerstraße, an invisible line that would later be materialized with the construction of the Wall. The inevitable need for reconstruction that followed the overwhelming destruction of German cities was something that took place not only in a material dimension, but triggered a complex process of historical significance that forced Germans to face a traumatic memory inevitably imbued in guilt.<sup>19</sup> This ‘year-zero’<sup>20</sup> condition found in the material evidence of the past a first dimension upon which to operate the rewriting of the country’s identity. A first reaction to the unbearable burden of responsabilization - which increased particularly with the revelation of atrocities committed in concentration camps after their liberation - was that of destruction. This process, that also conditioned the first reaction to the ruins of the Gestapo buildings, is described by Karen Till:

19 J. Wüstenberg, *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017.

20 Reference to the film *Germania Anno Zero* (1948) by Roberto Rossellini.

“Attempts to rid the city of the Nazi presence at the terrain began shortly after the war [...]. Streets were renamed to reflect the ideologies of the occupying troops, and many buildings were destroyed. Western Allies, in particular Americans, supported this utilitarian approach of destruction to deal with the past. The more horrific reminders of the Third Reich, such as concentration camps like Dachau, were razed in the American sector during the 1950’s to ‘avert the spread of disease’. Even after the area was transferred to German authorities, material remnants of National Socialism were destroyed, and the recent past was represented in ways that did not trouble citizens”.<sup>21</sup>

As a consequence, the Prinz-Albrecht-Palais was blown up in 1949 and many other buildings along Wilhelmstrasse and Prinz-Albrecht Strasse - including the former Gestapo headquarters - were demolished during the 1950’s. Exceptions to this selective cleansing were the Martin-Gropius-Bau and the Europahaus, the two reminiscent structures in the desert area located on the border between East and West Berlin. The site’s abandonment increased considerably with the construction of the Wall in 1961, transforming the once government district into a peripheral plot facing no-man’s land. The general decay of Kreuzberg in West Berlin reflected in the site’s use during the following decades, with the installation of rubble-recycling company in the early 1970’s and the creation of an Autodrom - a place to drive without a license - in the area where once the gardens of the Prinz-Albrecht-Palais stood.

By the late 1970’s, site’s abandonment and the rise of a new attitude towards Germany’s recent past promoted mostly by a generation born after the war, eventually created the opportunity to critically question the role of Nazi ruins in the contemporary city. Such a process belonged to a wider ‘memory boom’ that took place across Germany, with different expressions in West and East. In the case of the Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain, a trigger was found in the proposal for the restoration of the Martin-Gropius-Bau and the establishment of a new cultural center as a means to promote the urban development of West Berlin.

21 K. Till, *The New Berlin: memory, politics, place*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2005, p. 76.



Fig. 17  
Berlin Wall along Niederkirchnerstrasse in 1984  
photo: John Davies

As part of the initiative, in 1981 the exhibition called *Prussia: an Attempt at Reappraisal* - was staged as a trial for the new building function. The event, which presented an interpretation of the place in terms of imperial history, generated the reaction of many sectors of civil society who began to question the partial obliteration of the site's memory. This movement took place mainly in the form of citizens' initiatives which, in opposition to the silence of authorities, tried actively to rescue the evidences of a traumatic past contained in the memories of survivors and in the landscape itself.<sup>22</sup> In a broader picture, the need to confront such a difficult past brought light to the question regarding the appropriate modes of symbolic representation required by it. In contrast to the nature of a traditional memorial erected to celebrate a heroic event, the memory of National Socialism in Germany demanded a more active response to the facts - one that should contain both the realms of education and of absolution.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 80.



Fig. 18  
Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain in early 1980's  
with Autodrom to the right and the Gropius-Bau to the far left  
Stiftung Topographie des Terrors  
photo: Magret Nissen

In the case of the Gestapo-Terrain - as the Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain started to be called in an attempt to stress its link to the Nazi pass - civic pressure for the acknowledgment of its recent history eventually led the Berlin Senate to hold a competition for the construction of a memorial in 1983. The outcomes, however, were not so auspicious in their too-literal symbolism, as they translated a somewhat confused program that required spaces for "leisure and reflection", including the creation of a national history museum in the Martin-Gropius-Bau.<sup>23</sup> The winning project, designed by the landscape architect Jürgen Wenzel and the artist Nikolaus Lang, proposed to level the terrain's land and cover it with cast-iron plates reproducing the footprints of former buildings - a covering surface upon which trees would be planted in regular intervals. The project was soon abandoned, as the idea of erasing the most important element of the site - its own materiality - was firmly rejected by the many movements interested in its significance.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.



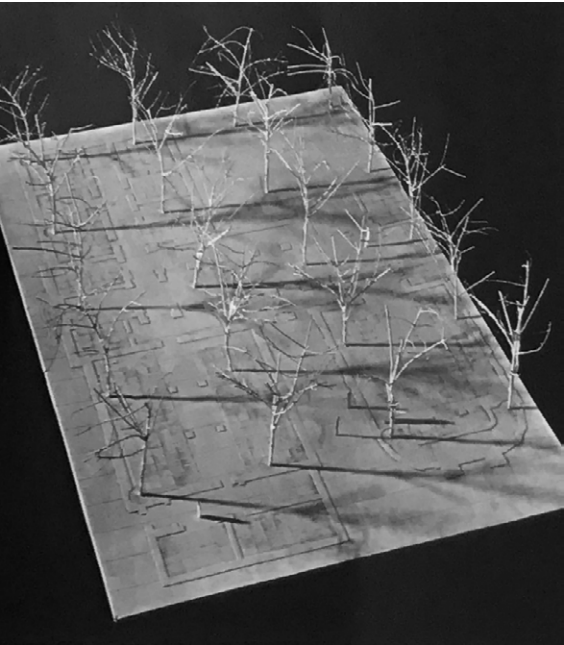


Fig. 19  
Project by Jürgen Wenzel and  
Nikolaus Lang (1983),  
detail of ground relief

Some of these, gathered around the Active Museum Association (*Verein Aktives Museum Faschismus und Widerstand in Berlin*), promoted in 1985 a collective action on the Gestapo Terrain called ‘Let’s Dig!’, symbolically translating into the act of excavating the appropriation of the landscape as a factual repository of collective memory. The group defended the idea that the site should be transformed into a place condensing functions such as the commemoration of victims, the collection of documents and the education of new generations. They advocated for an active reaction to the site, “an archeological approach to memory, one that interpreted and created meanings of landscape, time, and identity through existing public discourses of memory”.<sup>24</sup> Pressure for investigating traces that could have survived the 1950’s cleansing eventually led to the official excavation of the site in 1986, revealing the foundations of buildings along Niederkirchnerstrasse and some remnants of the Prinz-Albrecht-Palais, as well as an entire section of the basement kitchen and part of the prison cells belonging to the former Gestapo headquarters.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 94.

Fig. 20  
Let’s Dig!, 1981  
photo: Jürgen Henschel

Fig. 21  
View from the Gropius-Bau towards Wilhelmstrasse showing  
the ruins of the Gestapo prison cells and the rubble mounds,  
1986

Fig. 22  
Pavilion of the Topography of Terror exhibition with the Gropius-  
Bau in the background, 1991  
*Stiftung Topographie des Terrors*  
photo: Magret Nissen



These unearthed evidences led to the creation of the *Topography of Terror*, born in 1987 as an exhibition that assumed the basic concept of presenting historical facts while transferring to the visitor the responsibility for their interpretation. Above the ruins of the Gestapo kitchen and prison cells, ephemeral structures were erected to provide protection and space for public debates, while other documents were displayed directly on meaningful points of the terrain. Initially intended to last a few months, the *Topography of Terror* exhibition proved to be successful both in terms of public and collective significance. Its consolidation as a place of symbolic relevance in West Berlin sparked the debate about the construction of a permanent center, leading the Senate to form a commission which recommended the creation of an international documentation center in 1990 - shortly after the fall of the Wall - and founded the *Topography of Terror Foundation* in 1992. The process led to the realization of an architectural competition in January 1993 in which 11 invited studios participated. Looking at the competition guidelines, it is interesting to observe how they reflect the long conscientization process that evolved around the area over the previous decades. Besides the general character of an *active museum*, it was clear how projects should provide a synthesis for a building described as “Exhibition Hall, Visiting and Documentation Center, and International Meeting Center”.<sup>25</sup> Even clearer, however, was the role the site should play in the composition:

*“In its current character, the terrain is perceived as a disturbance of the familiar, as an ‘open wound’ in the city and also in history, and thus offers the opportunity to grapple with the history of the Nazi terror”.*<sup>26</sup>

Zumthor’s response to this unique situation was conceived as a rather condensed intervention in the form of a single volume located in the central portion of the site. His proposal - declared as the competition winner in March 1993 - took the ruins of the former Gestapo kitchen and the two existing rubble mounds as referential elements over which a long abstract object was placed.

25    Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen, *Ausschreibung Realisierungs- und Ideenwettbewerb Ausstellungshalle Besucher- und Dokumentationszentrum Internationales Begegnungszentrum Topographie des Terrors*, Berlin, Januar 1993.

26    *Ibidem*, p. 5.

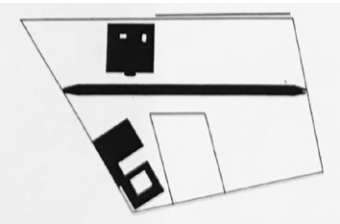
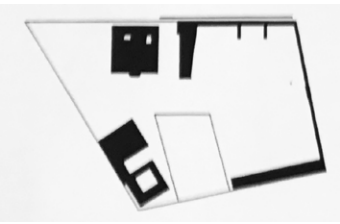
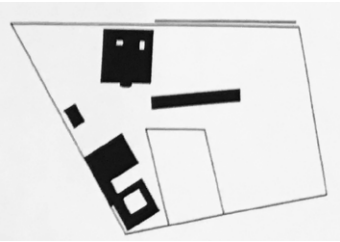
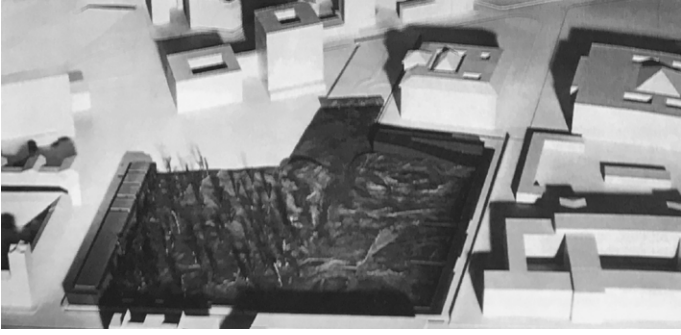
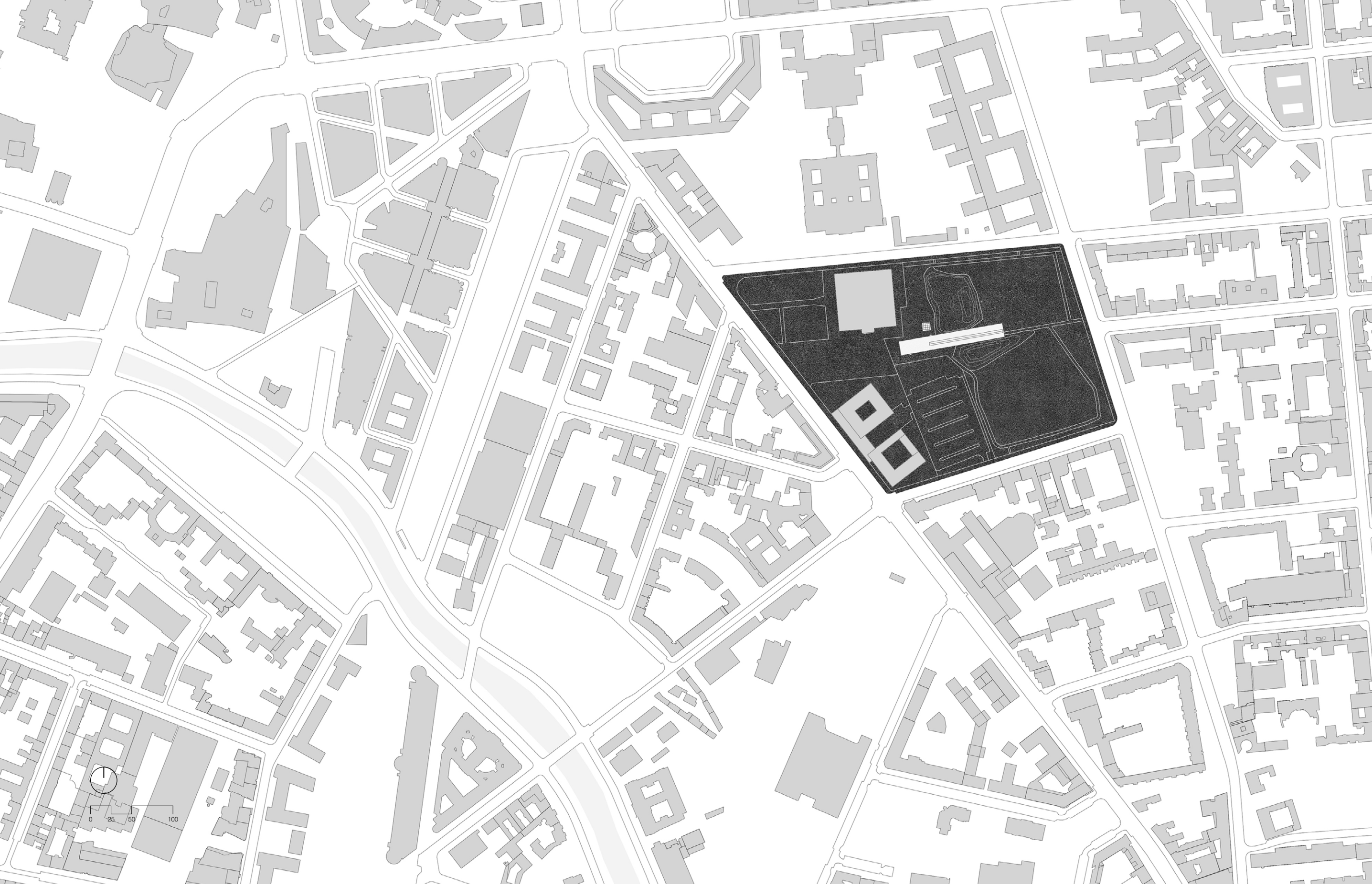


Fig. 23-28  
Topography of Terror  
Competition entries by Peter Zumthor, Müller, Reimann and Schold, and Max Dudler (1993)  
*Ergebnisprotokoll*

Next page:  
Fig. 29  
Map of Berlin showing the Topography’s site and the urban relation between Zumthor’s project and the surrounding city  
*interpretative drawing: RL*







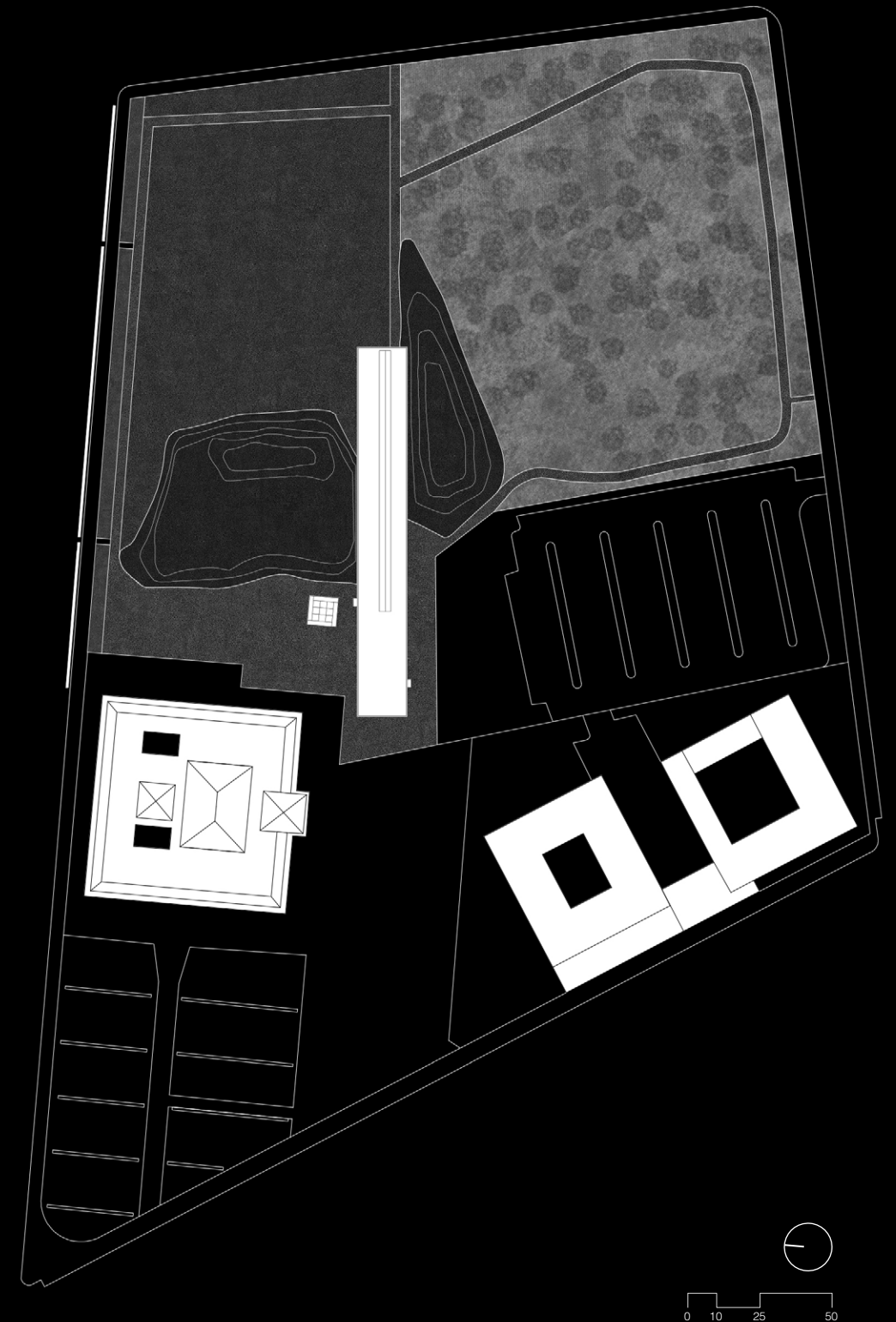
## 5. Memory

When compared to other submitted projects, the quality that seems to differentiate Zumthor's design is that of concision, allowing him to deal with a complex environment in a single-move action. Many other participants reacted to the site's strong presence by spreading the required spaces in different buildings, as in the project by Müller, Reimann and Scholz - 2nd prize - which suggested the construction of two structures in the terrain's edges connected by an elevated path - hence defining the Topography as a contained void. A further answer to the site's dimension is seen in the conception of large-scaled structures, as in the design by Max Dudler - 3rd prize - who conceived a bridge-building (*Steggebäude*) crossing the entire site from East to West, representing "a continuation, not a superposition of the historical processes".<sup>27</sup>

Considering the city's context, an interesting aspect of Zumthor's proposal is the fact that it sought no direct relation with any elements other than those of the Topography itself. The positioning of his long structure, for example, is slightly eccentric to the alignment of the Martin-Gropius-Bau, plainly assuming the angulation generated by the ruins and the rubble mounds. In that, his approach represents a contrast to other projects, which tended to justify their implantation by means of an orthogonal orientation towards the Gropius-Bau or by straight connections with the surrounding elements. A detail in Zumthor's project that probably was taken as a further pragmatic advantage was the fact that it managed to achieve conceptual consistency while answering to some objective program requirements, like the conservation of the site's southern green area and the protection of excavations positioned along Niederkirchnerstraße.<sup>28</sup>

27 M. Dudler in: *Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen, Ergebnisprotokoll Realisierungs- und Ideenwettbewerb Ausstellungshalle Besucher- und Dokumentationszentrum Internationales Begegnungszentrum Topographie des Terrors*, Berlin, März 1993, p. 43.

28 The conditionings were detailed in the competition's program and foresaw also the construction of a future metro line beneath the green area. *Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen, Ausschreibung Realisierungs- und Ideenwettbewerb Ausstellungshalle Besucher- und Dokumentationszentrum Internationales Begegnungszentrum Topographie des Terrors*, Berlin, Januar 1993





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Previous page:  
Fig. 30  
Topography of Terror  
Situation plan with the Europahaus to the right, the Martin-Gropius-Bau to the left below, the section of the Berlin Wall to the upper left and Zumthor's building at the center.  
The project manages to provide a concise solution by condensing all activities in a single building whose insertion finds justification in the distribution of the site's own facts.

Next pages:  
Fig. 31-33  
Compositional diagram  
The project is conceived as a threshold space that assumes an elongated shape running from the ruins of the Gestapo kitchen to the two existing rubble mounds. The site's own materiality is explored as a means to non-mediated contact with historical traces, in such a way the ruins and the naked ground would be freely accessed by visitors.  
A permeable wall is the main component of Zumthor's design, generated by the replication of columns whose positive-negative rhythm allows the building to assume the condition of an in-between space. Spaces housing institutional functions would be placed in upper floors, their boundaries defined by a second layer of columns while their ground would be covered in asphalt.

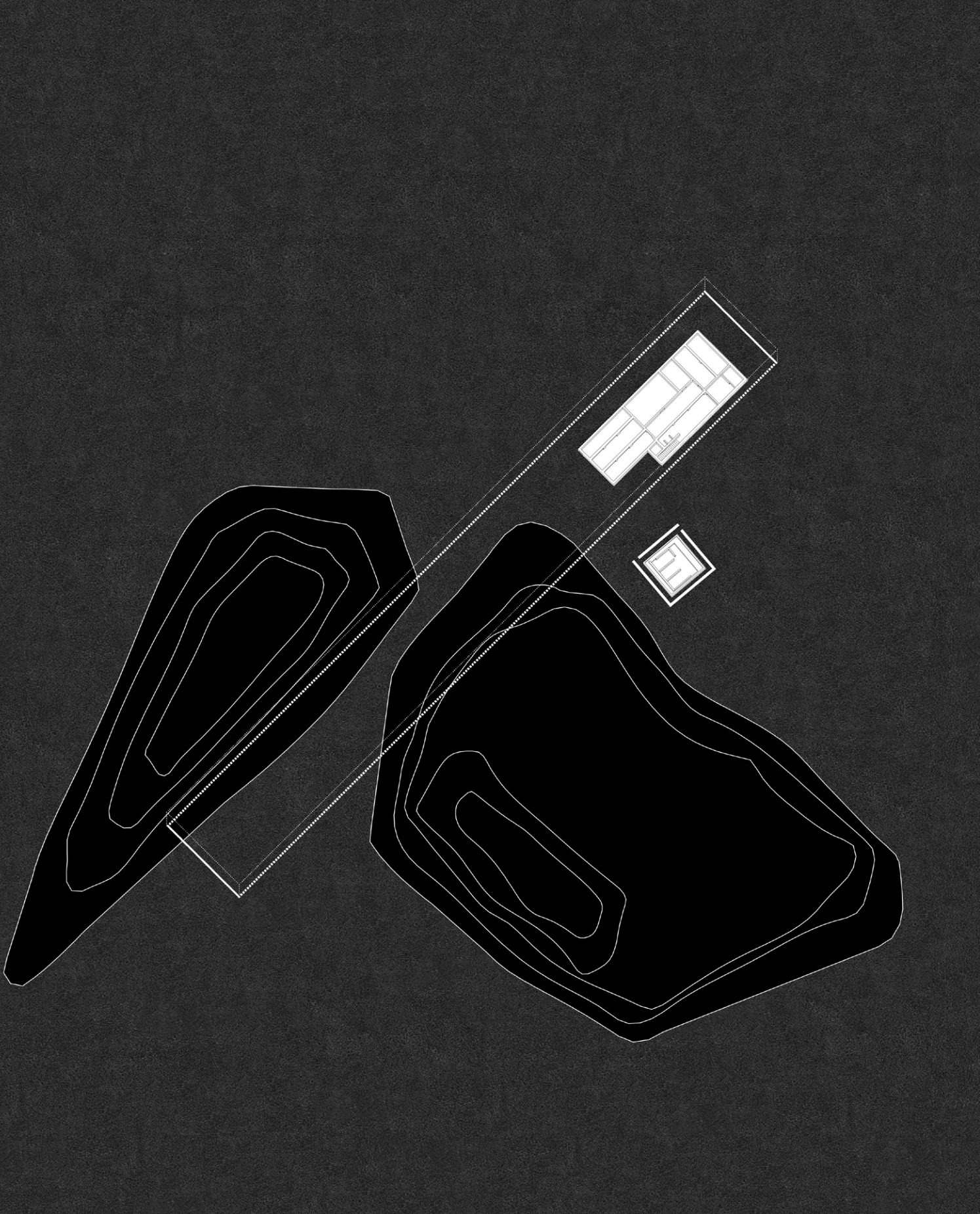
interpretative drawings: RL

5.2. A threshold space

The most important aspect of Zumthor's design, however, was the appropriate translation it provided for the conceptual approach already present in the original Topography of Terror exhibit, one that advocated for non-mediated experience as a means to actively confront the past. However, due to their traumatic content, the memories to which the new building should relate generate a particularly complex situation in terms of symbolic representation. As pointed by Claudio Leoni:

*"It is simply impossible to understand these terrible events in their full dimension and what they mean for every single human being that was affected by the Nazi terror. Conversely - and this is equally as important on this particular site - it will always be very challenging for us to understand how everyday people could become perpetrators. Hence, at this place of perpetrators where the actual victims are absent, commemoration must provoke reflection on those unconscious aspects which may sleep within ourselves".<sup>29</sup>*

29 C. Leoni, *Peter Zumthor's 'Topography of Terror'*, Architectural Research Quarterly, 18, Cambridge 2014, p. 117.





The impossibility to represent the site's haunted memories, or simply the idea that any kind of institutionalized interpretation should be avoided, led Zumthor to conceive an ambiguous building whose symbolism stems precisely from its non-symbolic nature.<sup>30</sup> To the absurdity of the facts, the project offers an alien object, an abstract structure whose objective is to enhance the perception of the site's materiality and, in doing so, to stir the individual construction of collective meaning.

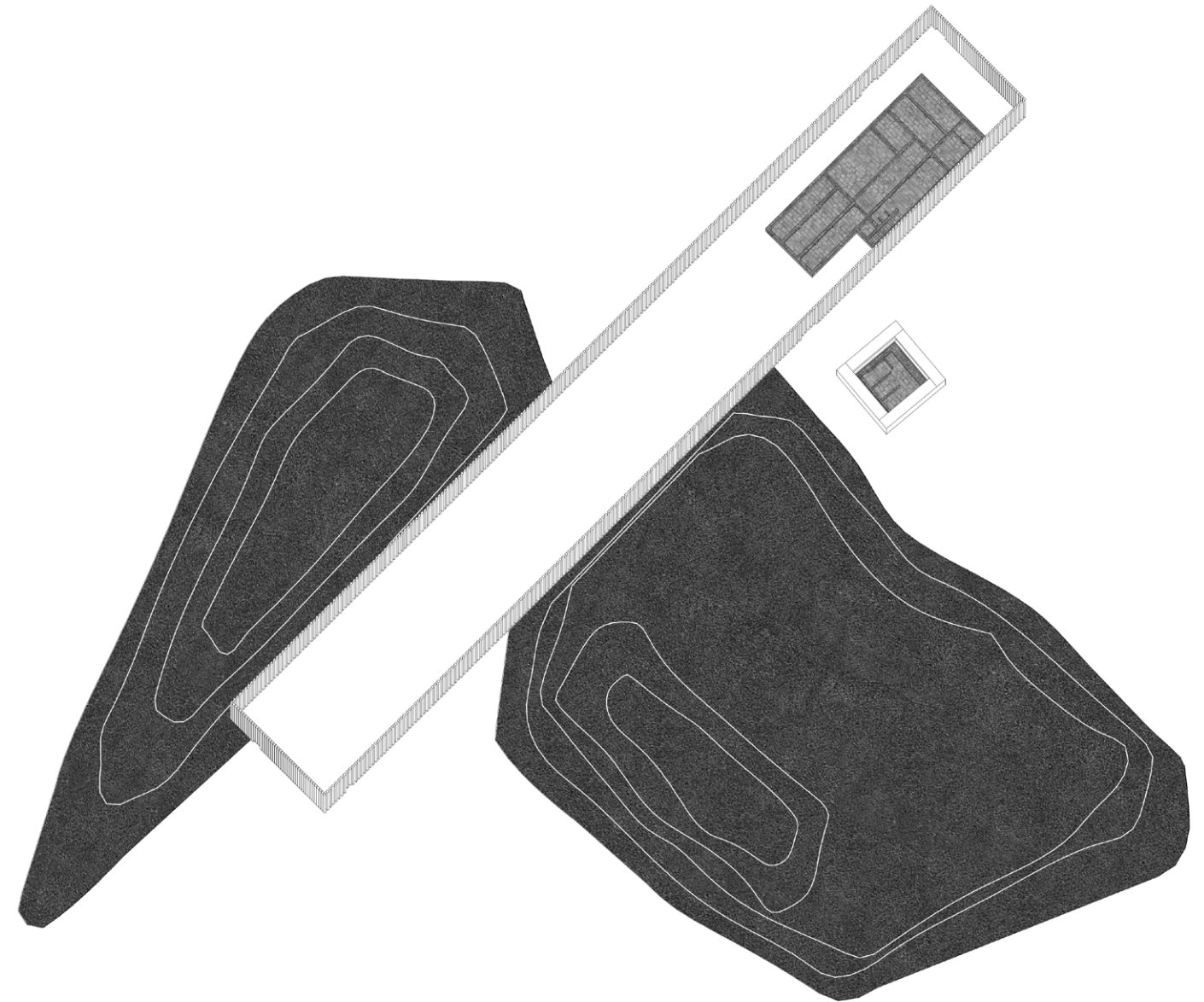
The fundamental element of the building's composition - literally the almost totality of its physical presence - is the permeable wall following a rectangular elongated shape extending from the ruins of the Gestapo kitchen to two existing rubble mounds.<sup>31</sup> This structure, generated by the replication of identical columns in a regular interval, condenses the project's approach to the intricate theme of the Topography of Terror. On the one hand, its outer perimeter is defined in such a way as to incorporate elements of the site belonging to different temporalities, namely the Nazi ruins and the post-war recycled rubble. There is no established hierarchy between the remnant's values, as the project addresses the site's memory in its full extension - including the processes of erasure and rediscovery that took place over time. In that sense, the ordinariness of the elements justifying the building's form - a simple kitchen<sup>32</sup> and the anonymous traces of demolished buildings - seem to be part of an interpretative experience whose shocking contrast alludes to Hanna Arendt's notion of *banality of evil*.<sup>33</sup>

30 S. Spier, *Place, authorship and the concrete: Three conversations with Peter Zumthor*, Architectural Research Quarterly, 5(1), 2001, p. 31.

31 The interpretative drawings presented in this study are based on the project's version presented in the exhibition Stabwerk, staged in Aedes Galerie und Architekturforum Berlin from December 1995 to February 1996. This version is taken as the most consistent manifestation of Zumthor's concept. In relation to the original competition design, it presents a more evolved definition of uses and constructive themes. Some further versions are found in later publications, registering modifications as the simplification of the original Vierendeel Trusses and alterations in inner accesses and stairways - such transformations were probably motivated by questions of security regulations and the polemics around the building's increasing costs that ultimately justified its abandonment.

32 In informal conversations with visitors and employees during a visit to the Topography of Terror in 2018, many expressed the opinion that it was not appropriate to render the kitchen such an important element of the museum, for there 'only potatoes were cooked, no harm was made'.

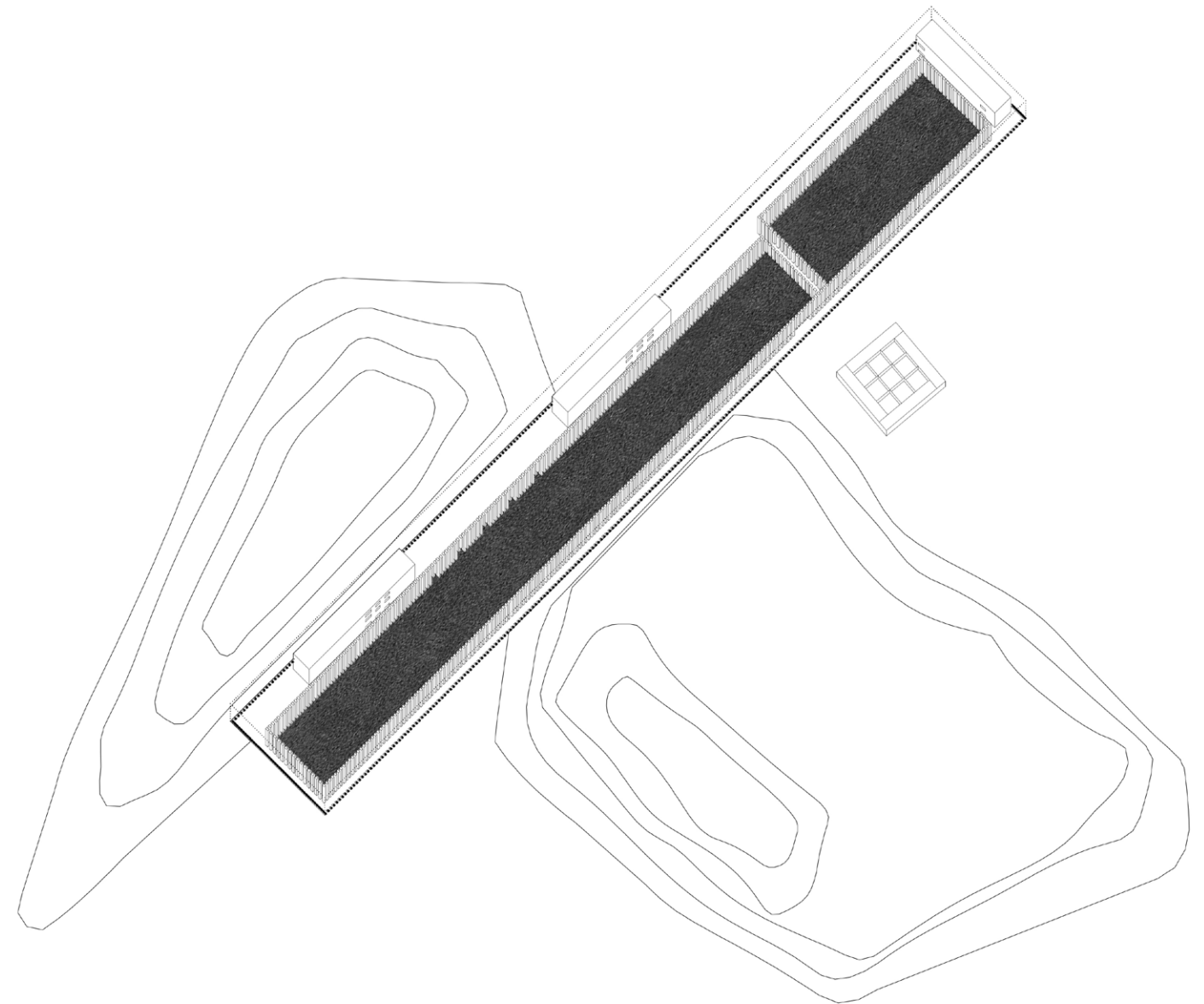
33 H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*, Viking Press, New

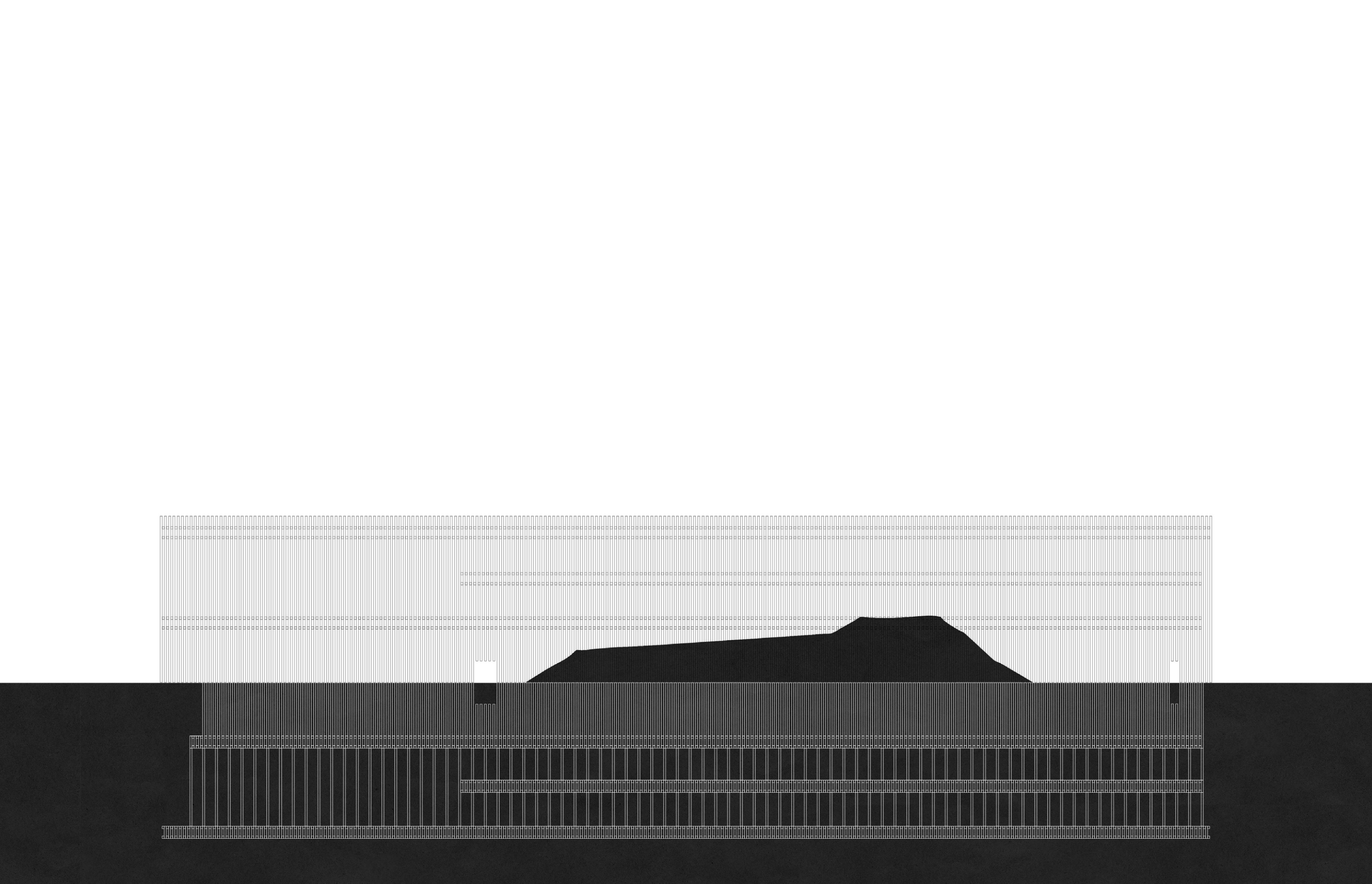




On the other hand, the permeability of the envelope was explored by Zumthor as the necessary quality in order to conceive the space of non-mediated interaction between users and the historical events contained in the site's materiality. Earth itself plays thus a central role in the composition. The Topography's soil was taken as the main container of memories, a factual evidence upon which the entire user experience is structured. In fact, the decision to conceive the main exhibition hall as a single space on ground floor level, where not only the ruins of the kitchen would be freely accessed but also the site's naked soil would be felt, is probably the strongest idea in Zumthor's concept - especially considering its technical implications. In upper floors, the delimitation of spaces housing the library, offices and the auditorium is made with the same principle of permeability. The creation of a second row of columns is applied as a strategy not only to generate an interior in relation with the outer context, but also to avoid major interruptions on the articulated rhythm of facades. Inner spaces, along with the three towers containing circulation and technical facilities, consist of autonomous cells standing on the interstitial space defined by the building's envelope. Significantly, all areas dedicated to research or to the presentation of any already-processed information on the site's history were positioned above ground floor, only accessed after the first and direct impact with the soil and the ruins.

The positive-negative opposition defining the building's volumetry can be taken as an allusion to the desired relationship between architecture and earth. That means that the lightness and almost ephemerality of the new structure acts as a positive negation of the gravity and roughness of the ground - and obviously of the troubling memories it relates to. In that sense, it is interesting to observe how the building's composition could hardly be more elemental, based on the almost primitive intertwining of vertical and horizontal sticks barely touching the ground. The multiplication of these opposing pairs - in section, one module stands as the exact negative of the other - generates an archaic and fragile composition, clearly standing as an alien presence in relation to its surrounding neighbors. That is particularly evident in the







5. Memory

contrast that the new structure with no windows and no walls eventually produces in relation to the neoclassical Martin-Gropius-Bau. By resisting typological references, it seems like Zumthor has conceived an object with the intention of avoiding even the incorporation of the cultural significance characteristic of a museum building. Considering the general arrangement, it is the smaller structure positioned over the ruins of the prison cells that assumes the character of a monument. This subtle distinction is stressed by the opposed materiality of the two volumes - the smaller as a dark structure whose construction twists the general intertwining principle of the larger - alluding also to the conceptual difference between the ruins of a kitchen and those of the cells where crimes were committed.<sup>34</sup>

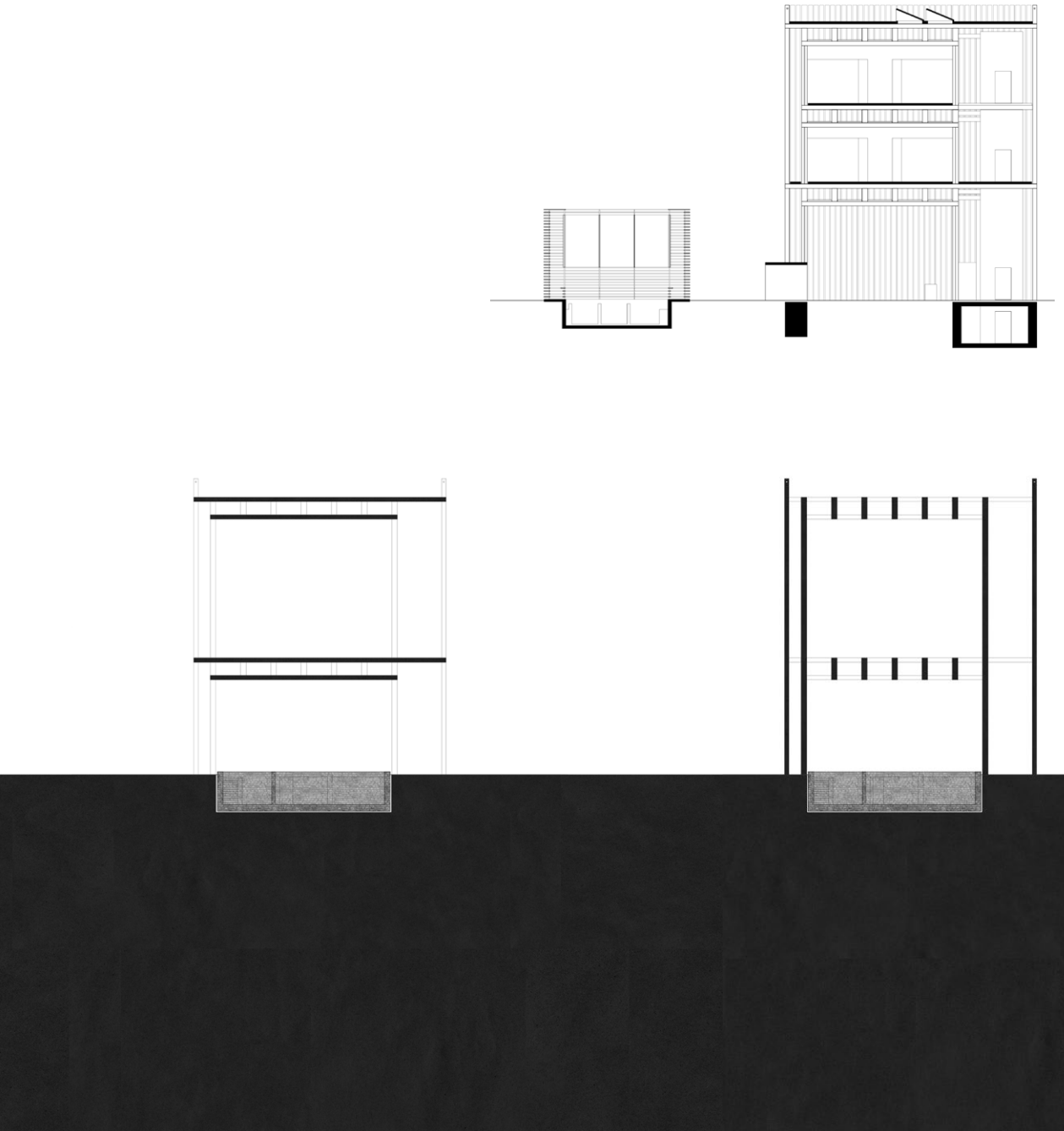
The project for the Topography of Terror represents a paradigmatic example of a conceptual approach to memory recurrently found in Zumthor's work. In the many cases in which he has faced a design task whose program is built around the memory of a given place conditioned by existing remnants, the transversal attitude of his architecture is that of privileging non-mediated contact with artifacts holding historical value. This is something directly related to the notion of designing by exploring the typical content of personal memories, where remembering is taken as the process of individually conceiving images that may be communicated to others. When confronted with the question of history - and therefore with the theme of memory at collective level - Zumthor's attitude is that of seeking a threshold condition where the image of the past is individually conceived through the effective contact with factual materialities. Therefore, traces of the past are tendentially not taken as monuments to be admired from distance, but as evidences of a temporality which is felt and reconstructed in the present - an approach that relates to what Bruno Reichlin calls the "trivialization of the historical reference".<sup>35</sup>

34 Here, it is interesting to note that the ruins of the prison cells assumed the status of a symbolic memorial as soon as they were rediscovered in 1987. Since before the staging of the Topography of Terror exhibit, symbolic homages such as flowers were already placed over them.

35 *Ein Wohnhaus aus der Werkstatt - Gespräch mit Marcel Meili, Markus Peter und Bruno Reichlin*, in: *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen*, n. 11, 1993, pp. 16-27.

Previous pages:  
Fig. 34  
Topography of Terror  
The building stands as an alien presence on the site, an abstract object whose facades and volumetry make no reference to any known typology of the surroundings. The outer envelope acts as a unifying layer containing the structure's inner variations.

Fig. 35  
Transversal sections  
The building's porosity is obtained through the linear opposition of vertical and horizontal pieces, an operation whose primitiveness stresses the intention of leaving the historical ground untouched.  
*interpretative drawings: RL*



## 5. Memory

Next pages:

Fig. 36-37

*Schutzbauten*

Compositional diagram

Zumthor's project recreates the volumetries of the original buildings by conceiving a wooden envelope following the perimeter of Roman foundations.

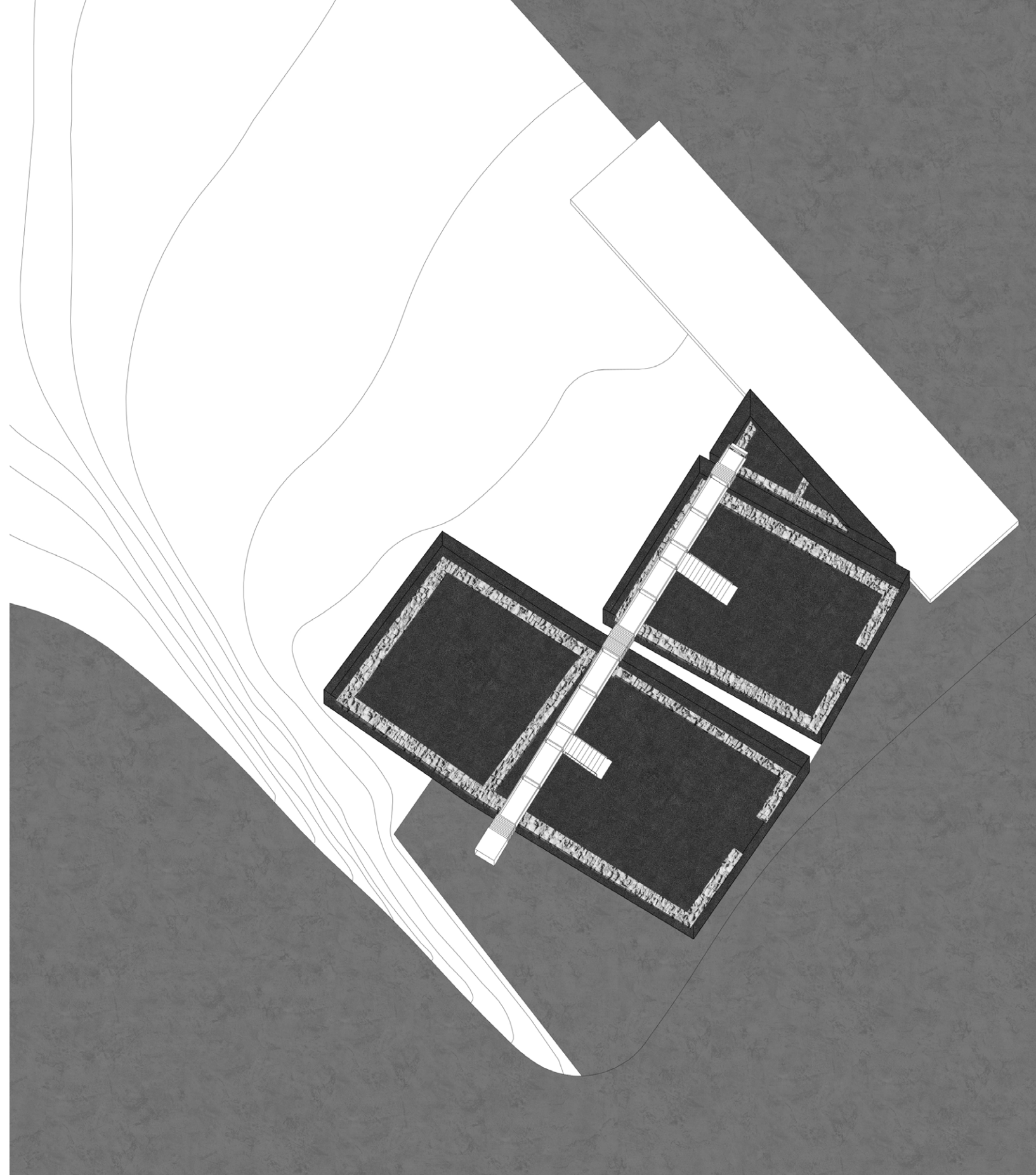
The porosity of the outer membrane generates the threshold condition required to stir direct non-mediated contact with historical remnants, which are left exposed inside the building.

A metallic footbridge acts as connective element unifying the fragmented volumetry into a spatial narrative.

interpretative drawings: RL

In Zumthor's career, a first example of this interpretation is found in the *Schutzbauten* in Chur (1985-88) - a project that would become a sort of prototype for his design strategy when dealing with historical sites. The central element of its composition is precisely a permeable membrane, which follows the perimeter of the Roman foundations and virtually recreates the volumetry of the original structures. In avoiding a single-volume solution - a hypothesis that would unite all ruins under a single roof - Zumthor consciously explores a more complex spatial narrative in which the materiality of the past is made accessible and stands as a formal justification for the new building.

Differently from the material continuity of grounds present in the *Topography of Terror* - where the external envelope rests directly on the soil - in Chur the fine wooden membrane is slightly elevated, standing upon a layer of new foundations made of concrete. Such a scheme conceives the contemporary structure as a container for the original ground, which is kept naked on the inside as an opposition to the domesticated asphalt covering the small entrance square. The spatial articulation generated by the footbridge that crosses the enclosed volumes is used as a strategy to create different perceptions of the artifacts on display. If in the first moment these are seen from above as precious fragments of the past, when visitors climb down the stairs and walk upon the site's raw earth, those things are reduced from their historical content and become part of a real experience taking place in the present.



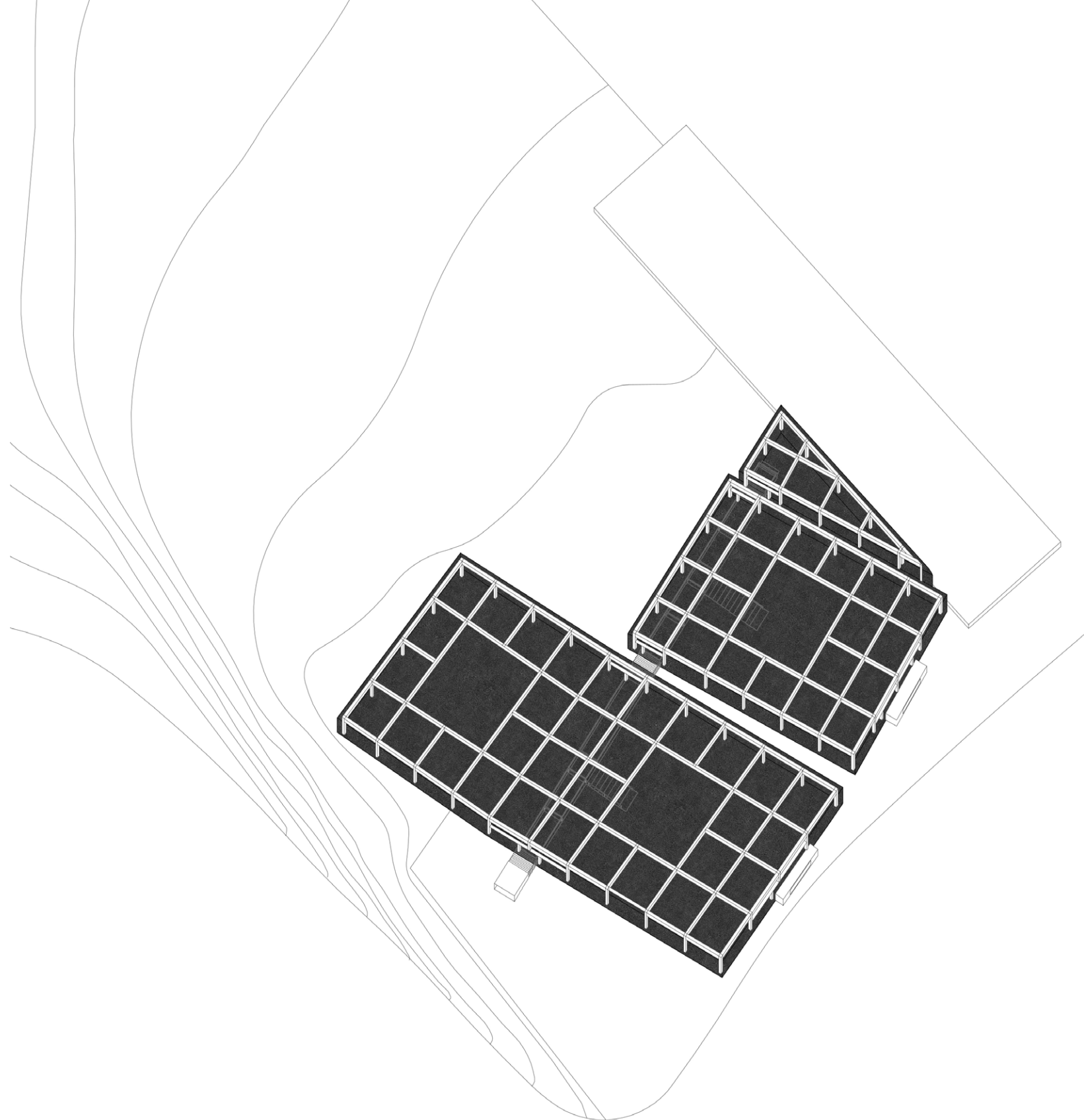


## 5. Memory

The permeable wall is fundamental in this arrangement, defining the place of perception and at the same time allowing the temperature, sound, breeze and light of the place to be actively present in the experience. Naturally, there is a difference between the nature of the past contained in the Roman ruins of Chur and the one contained in the Topography of Terror's traumatic soil. This is translated in the subtle monumentality Zumthor lends to the *Schutzbauten* through the use of a finely crafted wooden envelope and the verticality obtained with the insertion of skylights, marking the center of each volume. When it comes to its relationship with the city, the ensemble of three different volumes rises as a rather unnatural presence in this industrialized periphery so characteristic of Swiss cities?. The building stands indeed as the single wooden structure along the street. However, its contextual insertion operates at a different level. The allusion to typical images contained in the volumetry and materiality of the barn-like structure are condensed by Zumthor in an object that manages to address both the question of regional tradition in the Grisons and the Roman origins of the European city.<sup>36</sup>

Further examples of an analogous interpretation of *memory* are found in his project for the Museum Kolumba (1997-07) in Cologne, and more recently in the project for the Allmannajuvet Zinc Mine Museum (2003-16) in Sauda, Norway. The first - an art museum built upon the ruins of a Gothic cathedral destroyed during World War II - also draws its formal composition from the morphology of pre-existences. In this case, however, the operation of recreating the virtuality of a long-gone presence is completed in a more articulated and radical manner. In the Kolumba, Zumthor brings memory to be an active component of the present by literally generating a material continuity between different temporalities. The decision to build the museum's new brick masonry walls over the ruins' original stone walls is an operation that applied technical difficulty as a means to clearly state the design's concept. As in the *Schutzbauten* and the Topography of Terror, the Kolumba contains a space specifically dedicated to direct access to the site's excavations.

<sup>36</sup> I. Davidovici, *Forms of practice: German-Swiss architecture 1980-2000*, 2nd. Ed., gt-Verlag, Zurich 2018, p. 120.





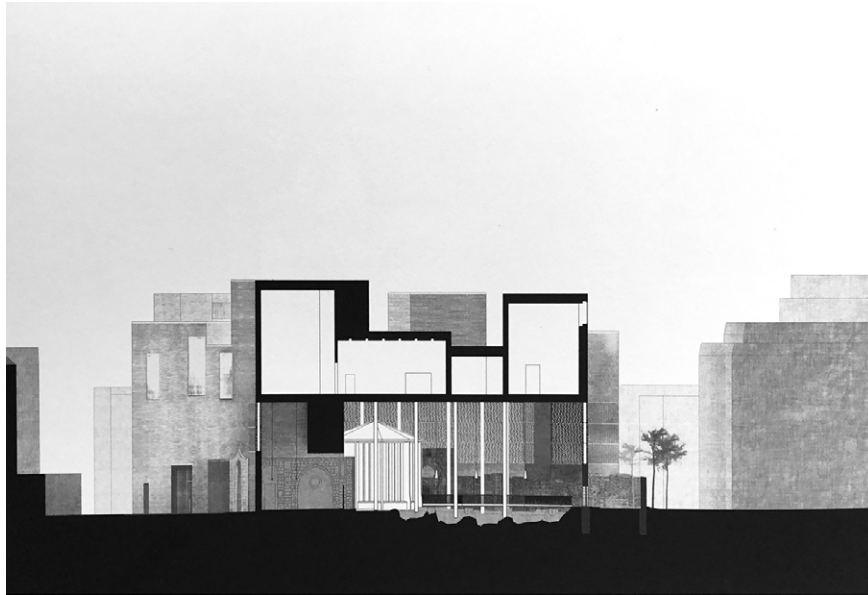


Fig. 38  
Museum Kolumba (1997-07), transversal section, a material collage of different temporalities  
Atelier Zumthor

In Cologne, however, visitors do not step over the cathedral's remnants, but look at them from a wooden footbridge crossing a void in which the presence of the external environment is filtered by the porosity of perimetral walls. In terms of volumetry, the building is conceived as an envelope containing a complex palimpsest of ruins and reconstructions to which also the 1950's chapel by Gottfried Böhm<sup>37</sup> is incorporated. The whole's material continuity absorbs - and hence brings to the same level - the different temporalities of the elements forming the place's history.

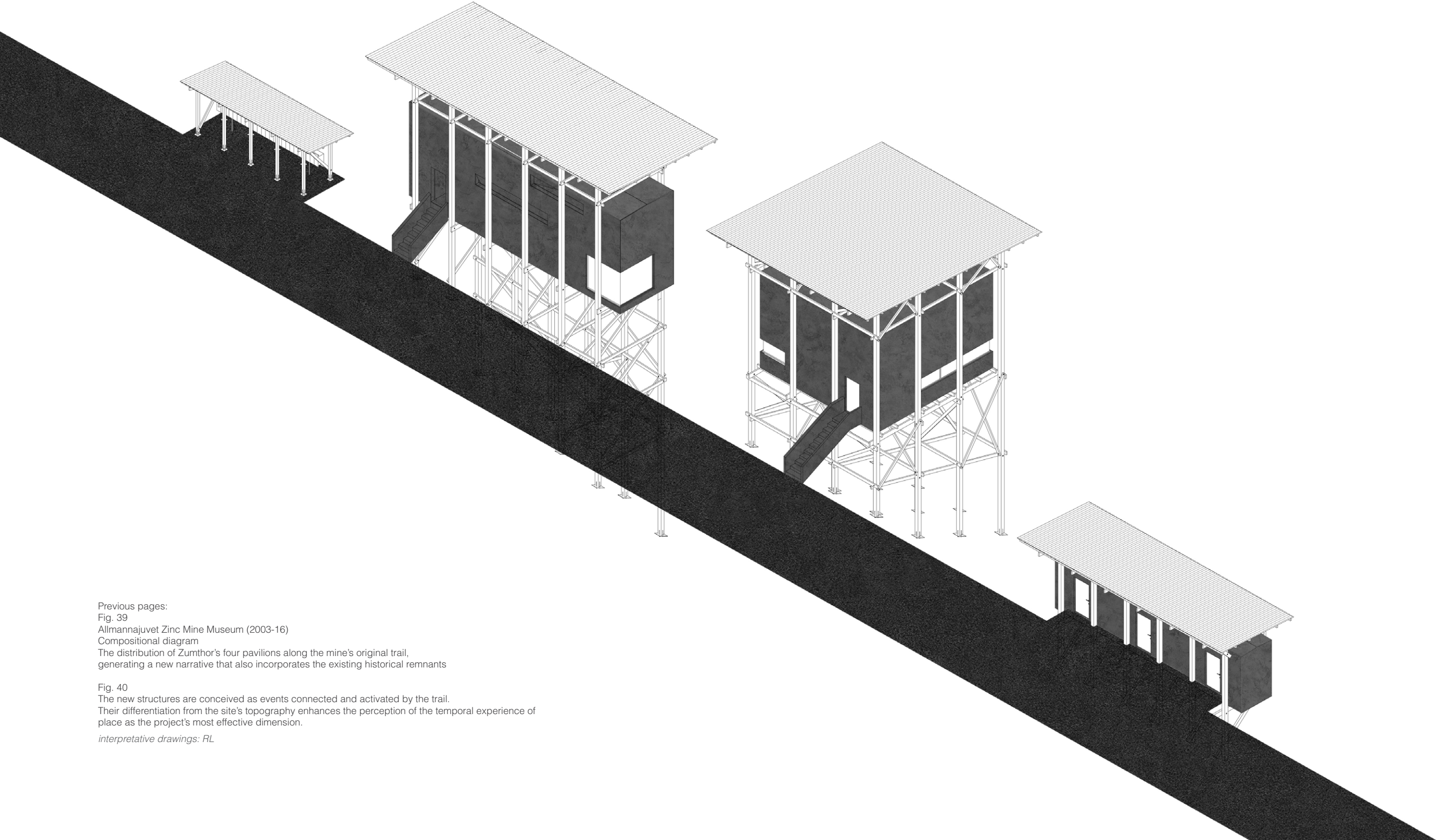
A variation of the motif is found in the design for the Allmannajuvet Zinc Mine Museum in Sauda, Norway, where the narrative of the site's history is extended along a path connecting a series of pavilion-like buildings containing a café, a museum and other facilities for visitors.

<sup>37</sup> After the destruction of the late-Gothic cathedral of St. Columba during World War II, a Madonna was miraculously found intact among the ruins. In 1950, a chapel to house the statue was built following the project by Gottfried Böhm. It became known as *Madonna in den Trümmern* - Madonna on the ruins.

According to: L. Bettinardi, *Kolumba Köln: Costruire in continuità con l'esistente*, Tesi di dottorato in composizione architettonica, Università IUAV di Venezia, 2014.







Previous pages:

Fig. 39

Allmannajuvet Zinc Mine Museum (2003-16)

Compositional diagram

The distribution of Zumthor's four pavilions along the mine's original trail, generating a new narrative that also incorporates the existing historical remnants

Fig. 40

The new structures are conceived as events connected and activated by the trail.

Their differentiation from the site's topography enhances the perception of the temporal experience of place as the project's most effective dimension.

*interpretative drawings: RL*

## 6. Construction

In this case, the central object of the composition is the path itself - the original trail used by miners - used as a connective element between the new artifacts and the existing traces of the site's past use. It is interesting to observe how the new structures - a group of four buildings sharing the same typology - are conceived by Zumthor in such a way they barely touch the ground. This operation enables the new sequence to build a narrative along the original trail while avoiding undesirable modifications in the site's cliffy topography - a single exception is the parking's plateau which, in any case, is effectively treated as natural ground. In the project, the primary element of mediation with memory is once again the topography - here, mostly made of rocks - over which the contemporary pavilions float, but upon which only the original remnants are directly laid.

In Zumthor's architecture, the concept of *memory* represents thus the main element from which composition seeks to draw its meaning. The typical images contained in the collective instance of personal recollection define so a communicative content from which the project stems its thematic configuration. When dealing with the factual memory of the city, such principle finds in the conception of an in-between space the appropriate tool to bring the evidence of the past to be part of a tangible expression of the present. As a design principle, *memory* stands fundamentally as an attempt to address architecture's challenge of communicating the universal in a time when "postmodern life could be described as a state in which everything beyond our personal biography seems vague, blurred, and somehow unreal".<sup>38</sup>

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38 P. Zumthor, *A Way of Looking at Things* (1988), in: P. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 3rd ed., Birkhäuser, Basel 2017, p. 16.

*"Important is that material is a primary choice. It is not possible for me to design without material. If it were otherwise, I would not work on the body of architecture, but think of an abstract thing. I can theoretically imagine that you can do that, but I do not work that way. I am much too impressed, even enthusiastic about the body of architecture".<sup>1</sup>*

*Peter Zumthor, 1996*

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1 Peter Zumthor, in conversation with Martin Tschanz in: *Das spezifische Gewicht der Architektur*, Archithese, Zeitschrift und Schriftenreihe für Architektur, n. 5, September/October 1996, pp. 28-35.



The genesis of form - and its consequent conceptual justification - defines a most fundamental task in architectural composition. Designing an object that physically exists implies always the selective choice of which are the rules guiding its form-giving process - whether conscious or unconscious, whether determined by technical efficiency or related to an iconographic vocabulary. When examining Zumthor's thinking, it is possible to identify a central component of it in the rejection of architecture's symbolic-visual dimension as a reliable reference to design, an assumption eventually translated into the intellectual ambition to define the reasons for form in the configuration of the object itself.

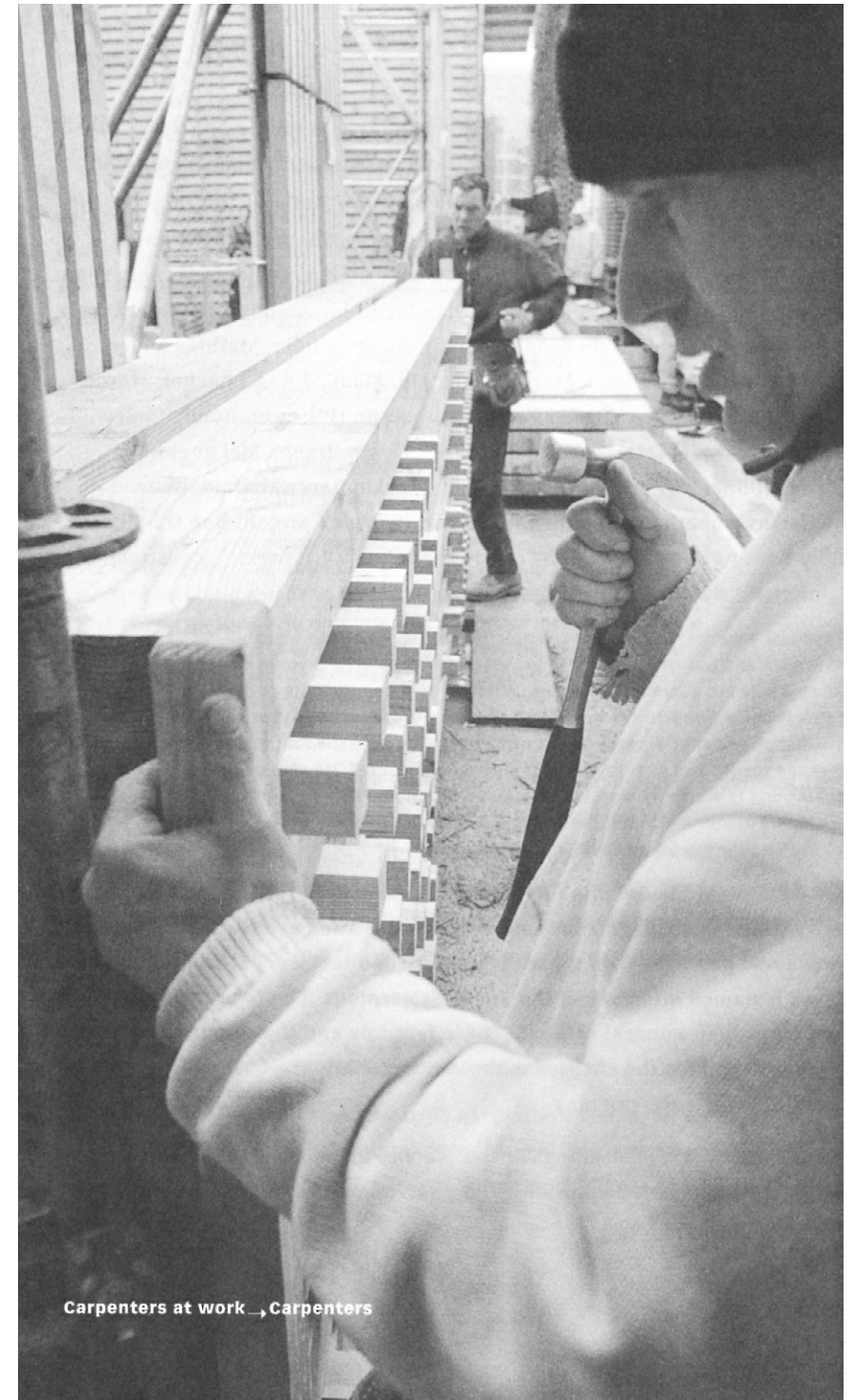
The consequence of such a notion is the importance that the building's physical constitution tends to assume in his projects, taken as the main interface for non-mediated communication - *meaning* is thus primarily conveyed through the experience of an object's *concrete* reality. This was evident in the exercises developed in Mendrisio, where students' works were conceived as "self-sufficient" and "self-understandable" artifacts.<sup>2</sup> Fundamental in their composition was precisely the process behind their configuration, the action of transforming an anonymous material into a meaningful element. In Zumthor's architecture, *construction* emerges as a fundamental compositional principle, not a technical instance subject to abstract functionalism, but itself a generative process defining the configuration of the architectural object.

The loss of value of symbolic form as a design instrument - the interpretation from which stems Zumthor's approach towards construction - is characteristic of a conceptual shift that informed the Swiss production in the 1980's, described as "the transition from the notion of architecture as a system of signs, as a text or language that can be 'read', to that of architecture as an image that affects the viewer and is 'experienced'".<sup>3</sup> Such transformation tended to transfer the architect's

<sup>2</sup> Both terms appear often in Zumthor's writings: "Personally, I still believe in the self-sufficient, corporeal wholeness of an architectural object as the essential, if difficult, aim of my work, if not as a natural or given fact." in: P. Zumthor, *The Hard Core of Beauty* (1991), in *Thinking Architecture*, 3rd ed. Birkhäuser. Basel, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> P. Ursprung, *Envisioning the Invisible: Hans Danuser and Peter Zumthor - a revision*, in: H. Danuser, K. Gantenbein, P. Ursprung, *Zumthor Sehen. Bilder von Hans Danuser*,

Fig. 1  
Carpenters working in the  
construction of the Swiss  
Soundbox (2000)  
*Swiss Soundbox Handbook*



Carpenters at work → Carpenters

attention from the visual-iconographic realm of the project to that of its physical mediation and, consequently, to the processes contained in its materiality.

The collective expression of that in Switzerland is pointed by Wilfried Wang as an example of *factual architecture*, suggested as the one that “engages the visibly built and hence really perceivable and thus potentially experienceable, that once again allows architecture to state its specific conception without mediation”.<sup>4</sup> His use of the word ‘factual’ as a more accurate translation of the German *sachliche* - often translated into as ‘objective’ - reveals the intention in keeping the meaning closer to the idea of an adjective that indicates the evident quality of a *thing* or *fact* - the term *sache* meaning literally ‘thing’. Factual architectures would therefore ambition a higher level of autonomy by assuming the non-questionable condition of a fact itself, developing a design strategy that finds in the building’s materiality the more consistent manifestation of its concept.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, they tend to privilege a formal composition that resists purification and leaves exposed all its constitutive components. Thus, the building also expresses the *facts* of which it is made - be them drain pipes, cladding elements, material joints or folded roofs - potentially incorporating into construction the referential components of its surrounding environment.

In Zumthor’s work, material is often identified as a protagonist, a foundational concept from which very often the whole design concept is drawn. That is visible, for instance, in the use he makes of physical models built with ‘real’ materials as central tools of the studio’s work. The idea that when designing a building made of stone, the creative process may benefit from the use of actual stone in study models, reveals the importance given to materiality as an element to be discovered and employed in a construction whose process takes into

Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2009, pp. 64-65.

4 Wilfried Wang, *Instances of Factual Architecture*, in: M. Steinmann, M. Gilbert, *Construction intention detail: five projects from five Swiss architects*, Artemis, Zurich 1994, p. 26-31.

5 R. Lorentz, *Factual*, Vesper Journal of Architecture, Arts and Theory, n.2 Author-Matter, Quodlibet, spring-summer 2020, p. 209.



Fig. 2  
Burkhalter Sumi  
Operation Center for the Forestry Service  
(Turbenthal, 1994)  
Burkhalter Sumi Architekten

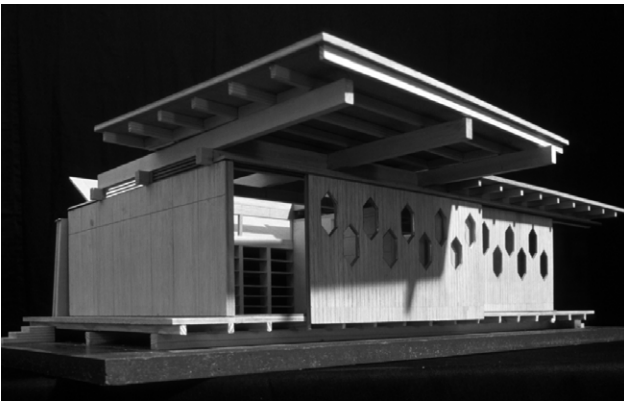


Fig. 3  
Meili Peter Architekten  
Workshop Hotel (Altishofen, 1989)  
Meili Peter Architekten

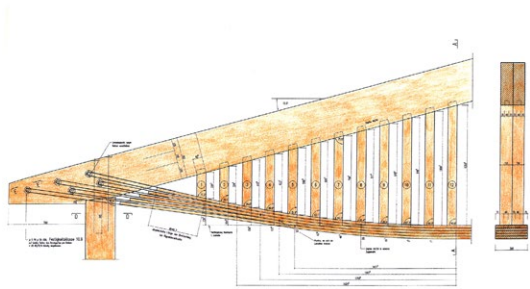


Fig. 4  
Gion Caminada  
Mehrzweckhall (Vrin, 1995)  
Gion Caminada

account not only its visual aspects but all instances of its physical presence. Such models, which became characteristic of his work - both in Haldenstein and Mendrisio - are defined by Zumthor as “concrete objects aimed to discover and show the physical presence of building and place”,<sup>6</sup> something opposed to the traditional value assumed by models as abstract representation devices.

6 “The process of finding the right form is full of insecurities, of despair, pleasure and joy. And it needs freespace to move and think. Our models - structural, sculptural, atmospheric, always different - aim to discover and show the physical presence of building and place. They help us to understand, to think and to dream. We make them to hold the promise of the object we are looking for.”  
P. Zumthor, *foreword to the exhibition Dreams and Promises - Models of Atelier Peter Zumthor*, staged in the Central Pavilion during the 16th International Architecture Exhibition - Freespace, curated by Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara.



Taken as the instrumental core of his practice, this specific approach tends to produce a more intimate and bodily relation with the processes of material transformation, something that stresses the role of *construction* as a means for architectural expression. In that sense, the importance of materials in Zumthor's architecture can be related to a cultural context belonging to the geography of the Grisons - where crafting traditions still conserve its relevance in contemporary economy - and more specifically to his early formation as an artisan in his father's workshop. However, a further element of this background - one that is perhaps even more present in his mature production - can be identified in the influence of the avant-garde movements that emerged in the fine arts during the 1960's and 1970's:

*"To me, there is something revealing about the work of Joseph Beuys and some of the artists of the Arte Povera group. What impresses me is the precise and sensuous way they use materials. It seems anchored in an ancient, elemental knowledge about man's use of materials, and at the same time to expose the very essence of these materials, which is beyond all culturally conveyed meaning. I try to use materials like this in my work. I believe that they can assume a poetic quality in the context of an architectural object, although only if the architect is able to generate a meaningful situation for them, since materials in themselves are not poetic".<sup>7</sup>*

Processes of material transformation acquire thus a central importance in the composition of his architecture. This relates, on the one hand, to the already mentioned idea of reducing the building from the condition of a 'symbol' to that of a 'fact' - an approximation with the minimalist notion of reduction as a means to intensification. On the other hand, his use of construction as manifestation of a design concept may be seen itself as an attempt to imbue architectural form with a sort of 'readable' meaning. This apparent opposition is indicated by Martin Steinmann who observes how in Zumthor's buildings, "form refers to the work that went into its creation: it is a symbol for that work, and moreover, it is intended as such".<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> P. Zumthor, *A Way of Looking at Things* (1988), in *Thinking Architecture*, 3rd revised ed., Birkhäuser, Basel 2017, pp. 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> As suggested by Martin Steinmann in his essay *The Presence of Things: Comments on Recent Architecture in Northern Switzerland*, in: M. Steinmann, M. Gilbert, *Construction intention detail: five projects from five Swiss architects*, Artemis, Zurich 1994, p. 16.



Fig. 5  
Joseph Beuys  
*Fat Felt Sculpture* (1963)

Fig. 6  
Giovanni Anselmo  
*Torsion* (1968)  
The MoMA Collection

Fig. 7  
Extraction of gneiss at the  
quarry in Vals  
excerpt from Christoph  
Schaub's documentary  
'Place, Function and Form'  
(1997)

6. Construction

That is probably the key to understanding the compositional role played by *construction* in his architecture. It implies a more elaborated use of materiality, not limited to the empathic use of expressive surfaces - as a more narrow interpretation could suggest<sup>9</sup> - but one that stems formal legitimacy from the constructive process. In that sense, Zumthor's projects tend to be conceived as objects containing traces of a radical constructive principle - almost as the frozen layer of a continuous action. This is visible, for example, in the many buildings whose form is defined whether by the variation of a basic principle or by the association of tectonic elements which tend to keep their autonomous figurativity. As will be discussed in the next chapter, *construction* in his work is also a process that acquires an evident narrative value. This will be explored as a fundamental component in the proposition of user-building interactions, as well as a condition allowing materiality to take part in what will be suggested as a *performatic* dimension of Zumthor's architecture - something transcending the limits of the object and eventually relating to the temporality of place.

6.1 Pure construction:

To conceive a building whose composition is not determined by the reproduction of any kind of symbolism, in terms of both formal and iconographic meaning, is the fundamental ambition declared in Zumthor's design for the Topography of Terror. As mentioned before, such approach is drawn from the understanding that, considering the negative content of the memories related to the Nazi horror, a more appropriate answer to the design task would be not to represent a pre-conceived idea of facts but to stir in visitors a reflective attitude. The radicality of such a concept poses the inevitable question on how to justify the formal composition of a building belonging to no known typology. Zumthor's response was that of deriving its entire physical presence from the replication of an elemental constructive principle.

9 The most common reading of Zumthor's work tends to emphasize the sensual qualities of his buildings somehow underestimating the intrinsic connection between material and construction, as in the case of Frampton, who says that, like Herzog and de Meuron, Zumthor "displays a tendency to favour surface effect over either spatial or structural values". in: K. Frampton, *Modern architecture: a critical history*, 4th ed., Thames and Hudson, London 2007, p. 372.

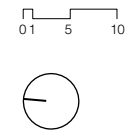
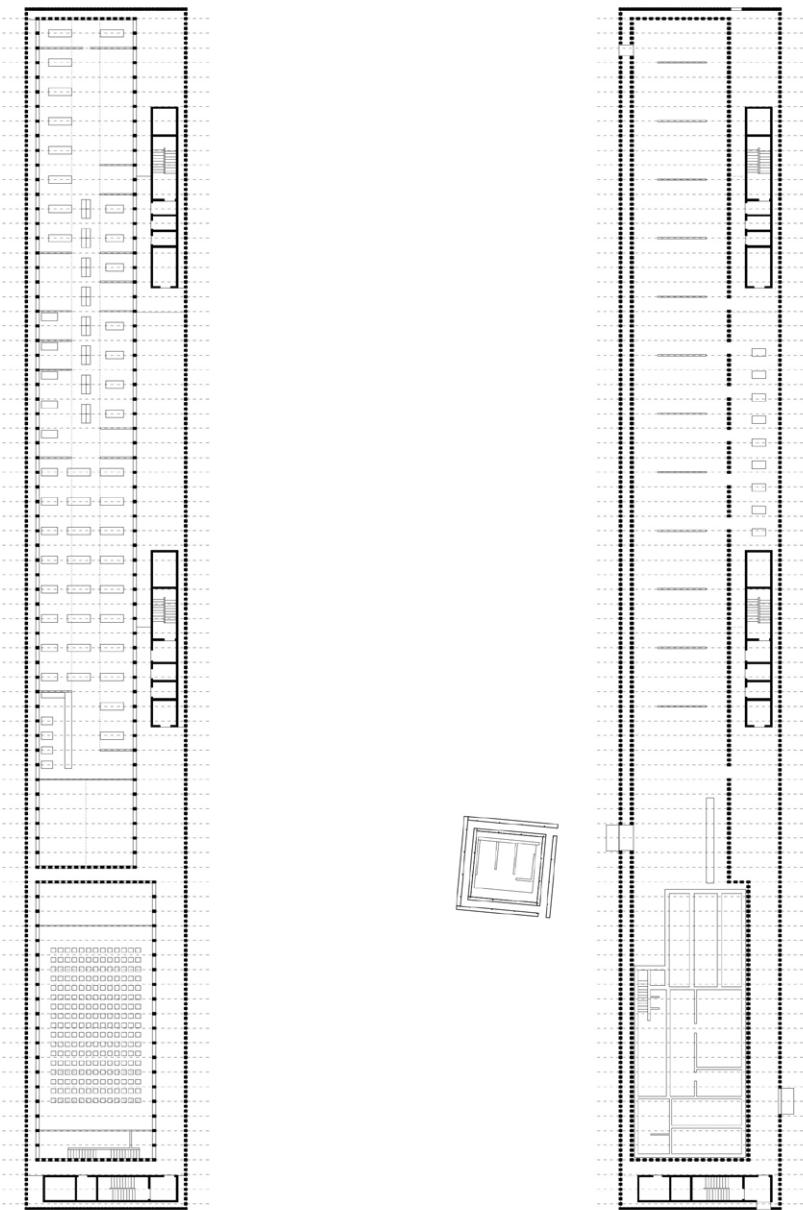
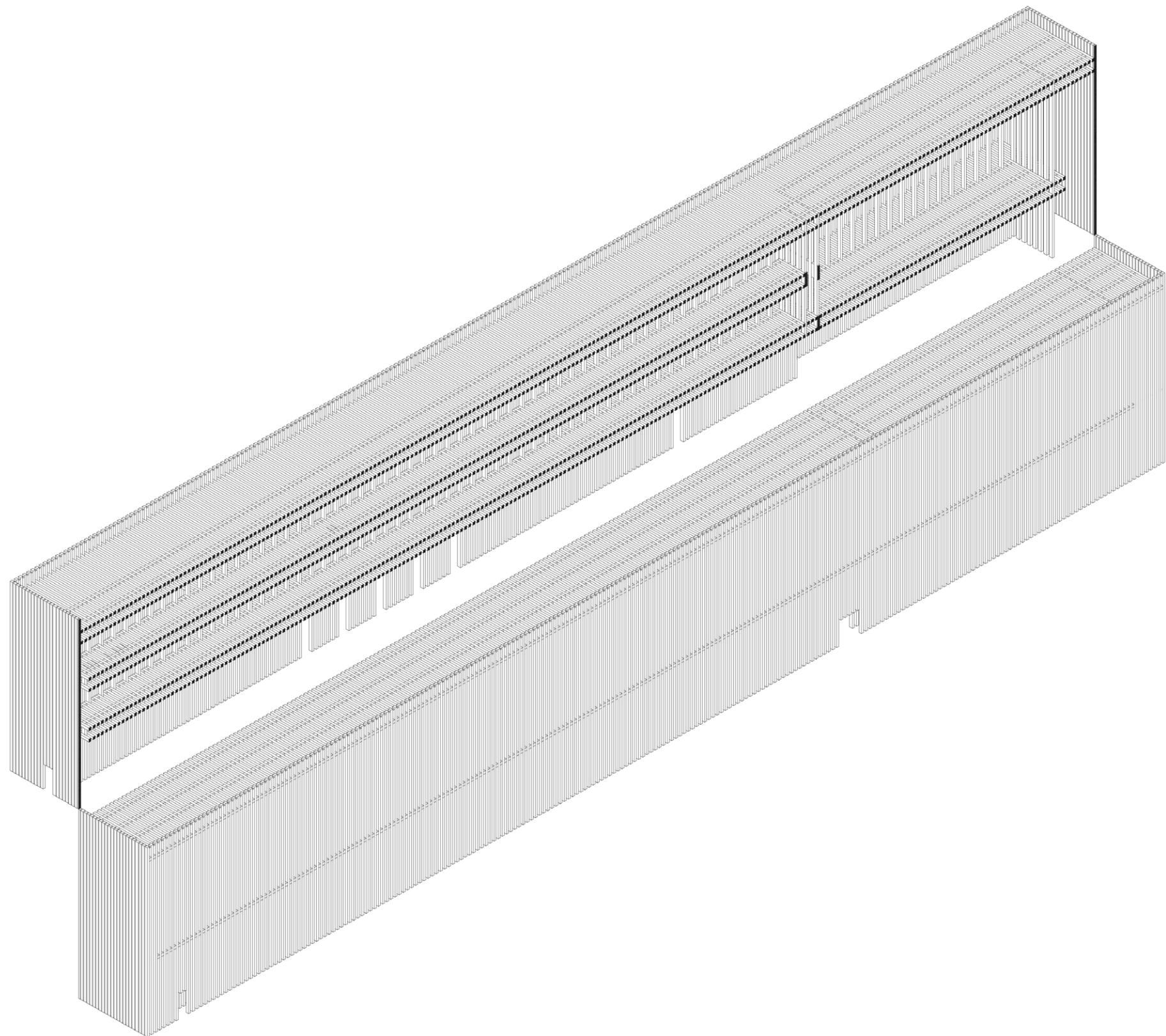


Fig. 8  
Topography of Terror  
Ground floor plan (right) with exhibition spaces and the ruins of the kitchen and prison cells  
First floor plan with library, research spaces and auditorium  
drawing: RL







6. Construction

Previous page:  
Fig. 9  
Topography of Terror  
Isometric diagram  
The idea of 'pure construction' is translated by Zumthor into an object whose material constitution would be entirely made of elements playing an effective constructive role.

Next pages:  
Fig. 10-12  
Compositional diagram  
As a design principle, construction is explored by Zumthor as a process stemming from a concrete action of transformation. In the Topography, the building's configuration would be determined by the rules intrinsic to its assembly system, which are not taken as an abstract grid, but as a compositional process that incorporates technical contradictions in order to stand as an effective manifestation of the project's concept.

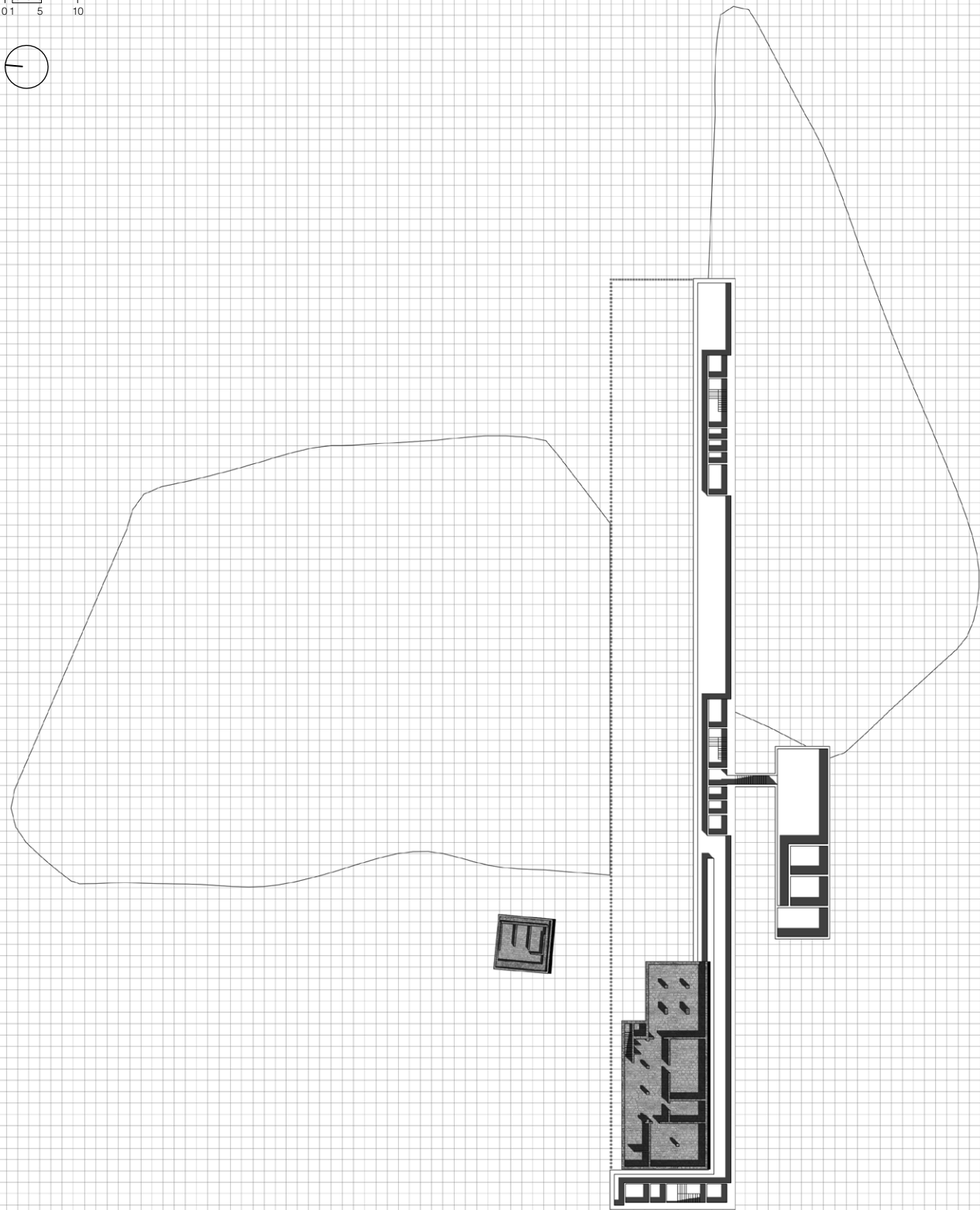
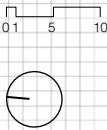
interpretative drawings: RL

In that sense, the project becomes the effective manifestation of a notion condensed here in the idea of 'pure construction':

*"The design, aimed at covering the excavations, keeping the documents of the National Socialism terror, and dedicated to the people who linger in this place, is based on the idea of creating an abstract building shell which is pure structure, which speaks no other language than that of its materials, its construction and its specific use".<sup>10</sup>*

Despite its volumetric simplicity - a long parallelepiped placed over the site's memory-soaked soil - the main building of the Topography of Terror was conceived as the outcome of an almost obsessive combination of small components - all playing a constructive role. The complexity of the operation is more clearly realized when translated into numbers. The overall measures of Zumthor's building are around 130m in length, 17m in width and 20m in height, achieved through the assembling of impressive 5116 individual components - of which 580 outer columns, 526 inner columns, 1260 slabs and 2750 truss posts. The composition's basic principle is that of an alternate association of vertical and horizontal pieces, conceived as two modules linearly distributed along the site. Following the original idea of avoiding alterations in the ground, these are posed over two shallow foundation lines running parallel the kitchen's ruins towards the rubble mounds.

<sup>10</sup> Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen, *Ergebnisprotokoll Realisierungs- und Ideenwettbewerb Ausstellungshalle Besucher- und Dokumentationszentrum Internationales Begegnungszentrum Topographie des Terrors*, Berlin, März 1993, p. 25.



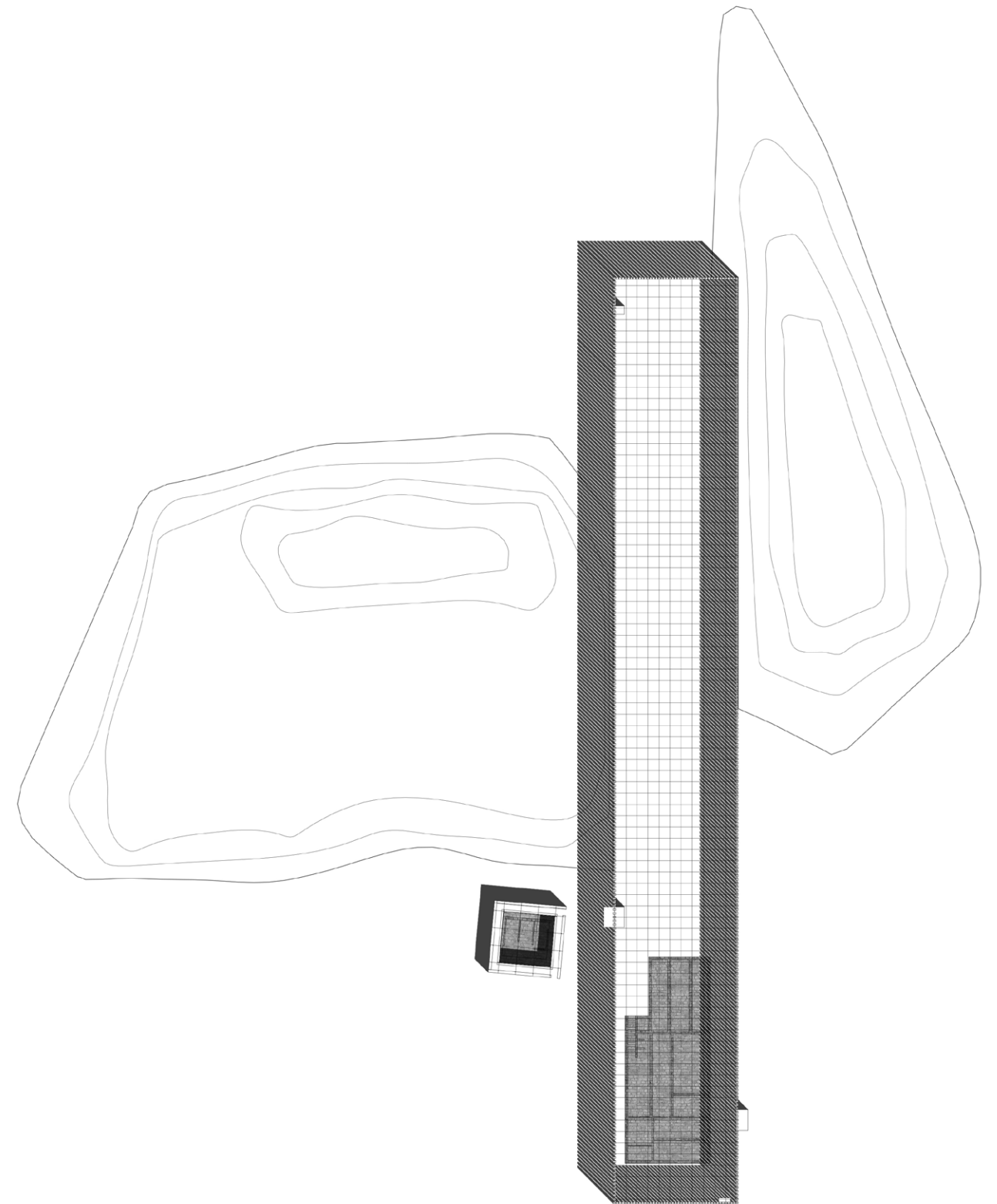


However, rejecting one of statics' most basic conventions, none of the horizontal pieces is laid upon the vertical ones, nor are they poured together in such a way they would merge into a portico-like structural component. Instead, all elements were conceived as autonomous pre-fabricated pieces to be laterally assembled.

*Stabwerk*<sup>11</sup> is how Zumthor referred to the Topography's design concept, alluding to its analogy with the constructive principle of wooden structures in the Alps. Ambiguity here comes to the scene, since as much as the two principles are identical, they are evidently applied in opposed ways. While the Alpine tradition of *strickbau* consists of elements vertically assembled - and therefore resisting gravity by means of their own weight - in Berlin this idea is twisted, producing an assembly system whose compactness depends on the insertion of lateral compression. The dimensioning of the single pieces - made out of white concrete - is another component of the building's constructive complexity. Both vertical and horizontal elements share a basic cross-section of 26x30cm - inner columns are slightly wider with 26x38cm - resulting in remarkable slender pieces whose fragility is counterbalanced by the collaborative association generated inside the overall structure - example of that is the conception of floors and ceilings as Vierendeel trusses containing mechanical installations. It is interesting to observe how the contradiction between a building in which everything that is visible is structure and the fact that its design rejects some of the most basic principles of structural efficiency, brings light to the opposition between the notions of construction and function as present in Zumthor's work.

*Construction*, in that sense, is explored as a 'concrete' compositional principle, meaning a concept that is not determined by the 'abstract' value of technical functionality, therefore finding legitimacy in the effective act of construction. In other words, the genesis of form in his architecture tends to tolerate functional contradictions while standing as the manifestation of a fundamental constructive process.

<sup>11</sup> P. Zumthor, *Stabwerk: Internationales Besucher- und Dokumentationszentrum Topographie des Terrors Berlin*, Ausstellung 6. Dezember 1995 - 4. February 1996, Aedes Galerie und Architekturforum, Berlin.



In the project for the Topography of Terror, for example, this is visible in the non-coincidence between the different elements' positions and alignments. If the replication of columns that gives shape to the building's outer envelope would be translated into a hypothetical orthogonal grid - one that could expand infinitely to all directions - the configuration of other project components is made in such a way they assume an eccentric position against this neutral background. While the longitudinal direction of the building's rhythm is kept constant - defined by the modular dimension of single pieces - a slight differentiation in the transversal distribution of inner column rows leads the auditorium and the research spaces to become self-centered figures - forming a dynamic composition with the three autonomous circulation towers. Instead of an abstract system of coordinates, Zumthor's *Stabwerk* structure draws its configuration from the rules intrinsic to its own assembly method.

A similar solution was previously adopted by him in the *Schutzbauten* in Chur, where the wooden cage spanning over the Roman findings is not translated into an orthogonal grid, but assumes an irregular geometry deriving directly from the ruin's perimeter. Even the footbridge and windows' insertion points are treated as singularities deflecting the whole's purity. In the Topography project, the radicality of the constructive operation also creates important constraints when it comes to the variability of the configuration required by different programmatic situations. Besides the obvious limits in passageways dimensions, the rigidity of the building's general assembly principle generates a long and narrow geometry probably lacking the flexibility ideally required by the foundation's multiple activities.<sup>12</sup> The somewhat difficult distribution of workspaces on upper floors, and of the entrance sequence on ground floor, seem to be tolerated in benefit of the striking statement the building's concept represents - more than anywhere else, architecture acts here as a symbol of the work it contains.

<sup>12</sup> During a visit to the Topography of Terror in 2018, I could hear many positive assessments from employees addressing the functionality of the Foundation's current building. Completed in 2010, it is designed as a squared shaped plan with an inner court, in clear contrast to Zumthor's linear solution.

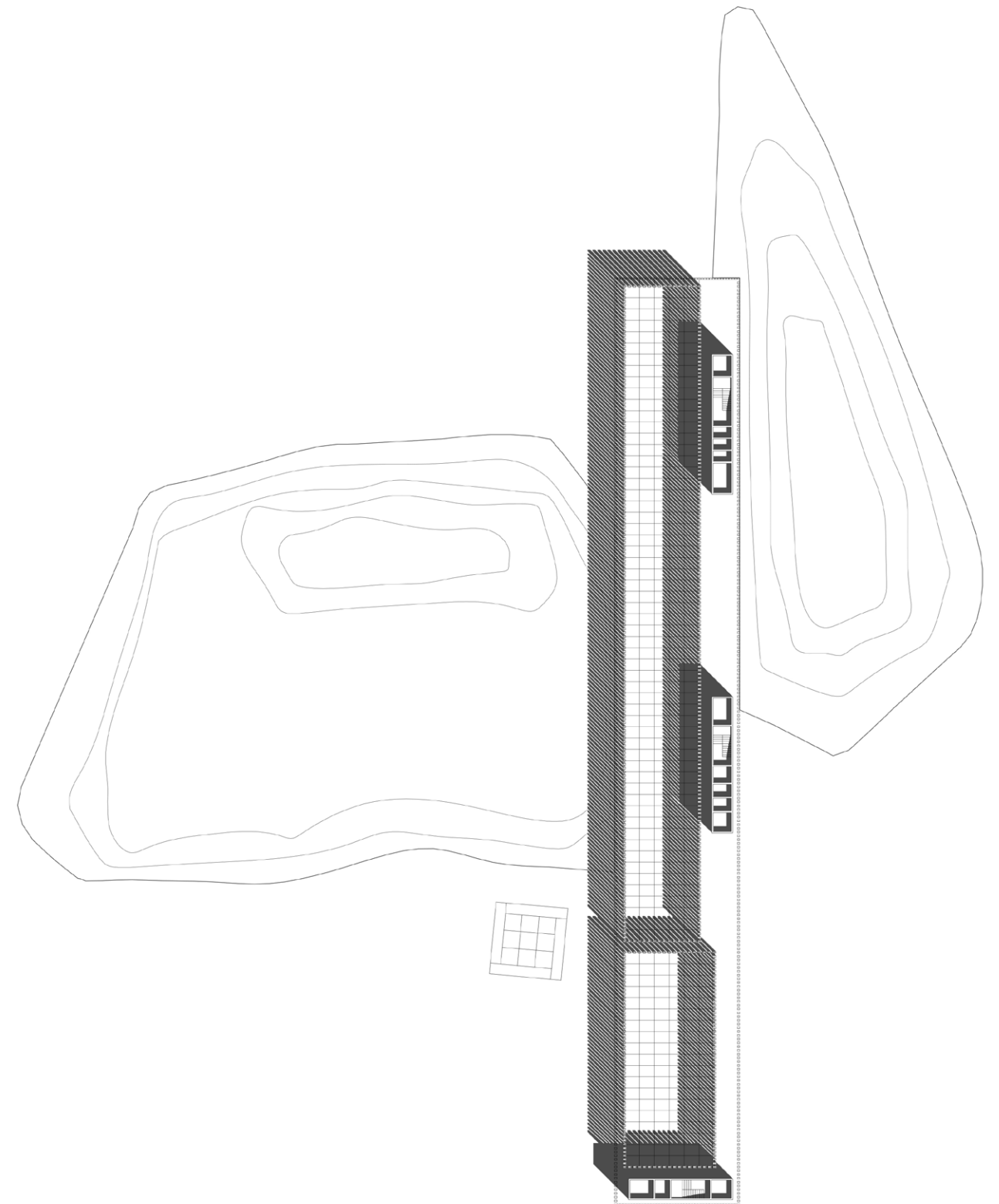
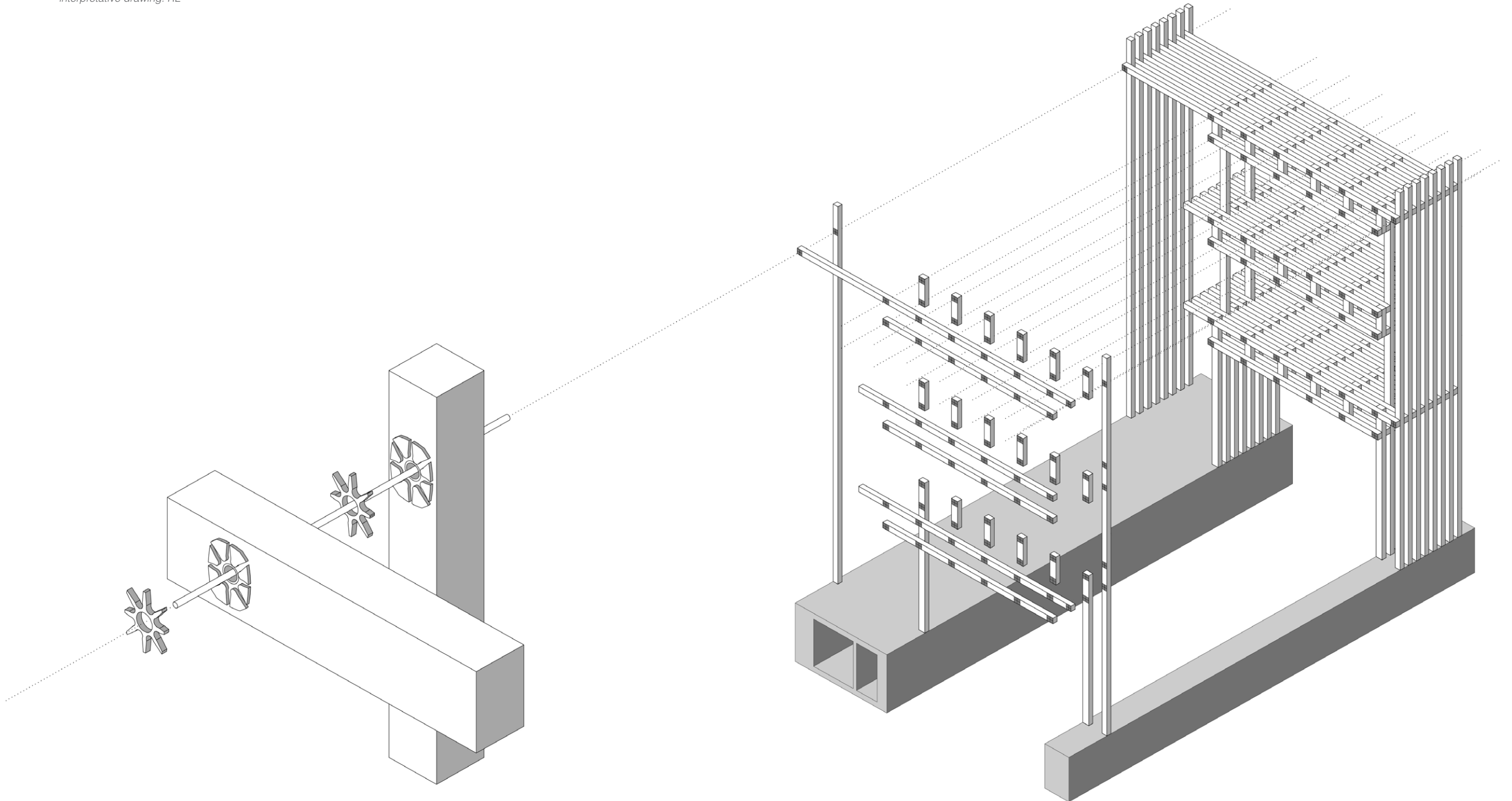




Fig. 13  
Detail of constructive system  
The fragility of the ensemble conceived by Zumthor would require a highly sophisticated solution with the longitudinal insertion of metallic cables and of a star-shaped element at intersection points.  
The complexity of project's assembly system, developed to operate laterally, stresses how much *construction* as an action was something intrinsic to the design concept.

*interpretative drawing: RL*





## 6.2 The invention of materiality:

Considering the effective role played by construction as a form-giving principle in Zumthor's buildings, it is interesting to observe how authoriality is a value which tends to be transferred from design's formal dimension to architecture's physical constitution. That means that materiality itself becomes subject to invention, a first creative act from which design processes stem. The architect's task, therefore, is extended from the correct and meaningful use of existing material resources to the creation of unique materialities where, as much as sensual qualities, the constitutive process is something to be designed. In the case of Berlin, this condition is evident in the interdependence between the project's concept and its innovative and exclusive construction method. Designed in collaboration with the engineer Jürg Buchli, the Topography's assembly system foresaw the longitudinal insertion of steel cables in the points where vertical and horizontal elements intersect.

The solution was necessary in order to provide the required compactness for the overall envelope, which stands only due to lateral forces pushing all components together. Additionally, to avoid pieces from twisting, a sophisticated detail was designed for intersection points, in which a stainless steel star-shaped element would be inserted. On a larger scale, a specific constructive method was also invented to enable the lateral assembling of the building's parts. A crane, similar to those used in shipyards, would move along two rails running parallel to the foundations and progressively set in place the structure layer after layer, an unique process representing much of the project's own identity.

The basic constructive principle designed for the Topography of Terror, based on obtaining resistance through compression, would be later applied in Zumthor's project for the Swiss Sound Box (1997-00) - the national pavilion of Switzerland during the Expo 2000 in Hanover - this time in collaboration with engineer Jürg Conzett.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Conzett is a civil engineer who worked in Zumthor's studio during the 1980's, before establishing his own office in Chur. He is well-known for his innovative bridge projects, many of which spread across the Grisons.

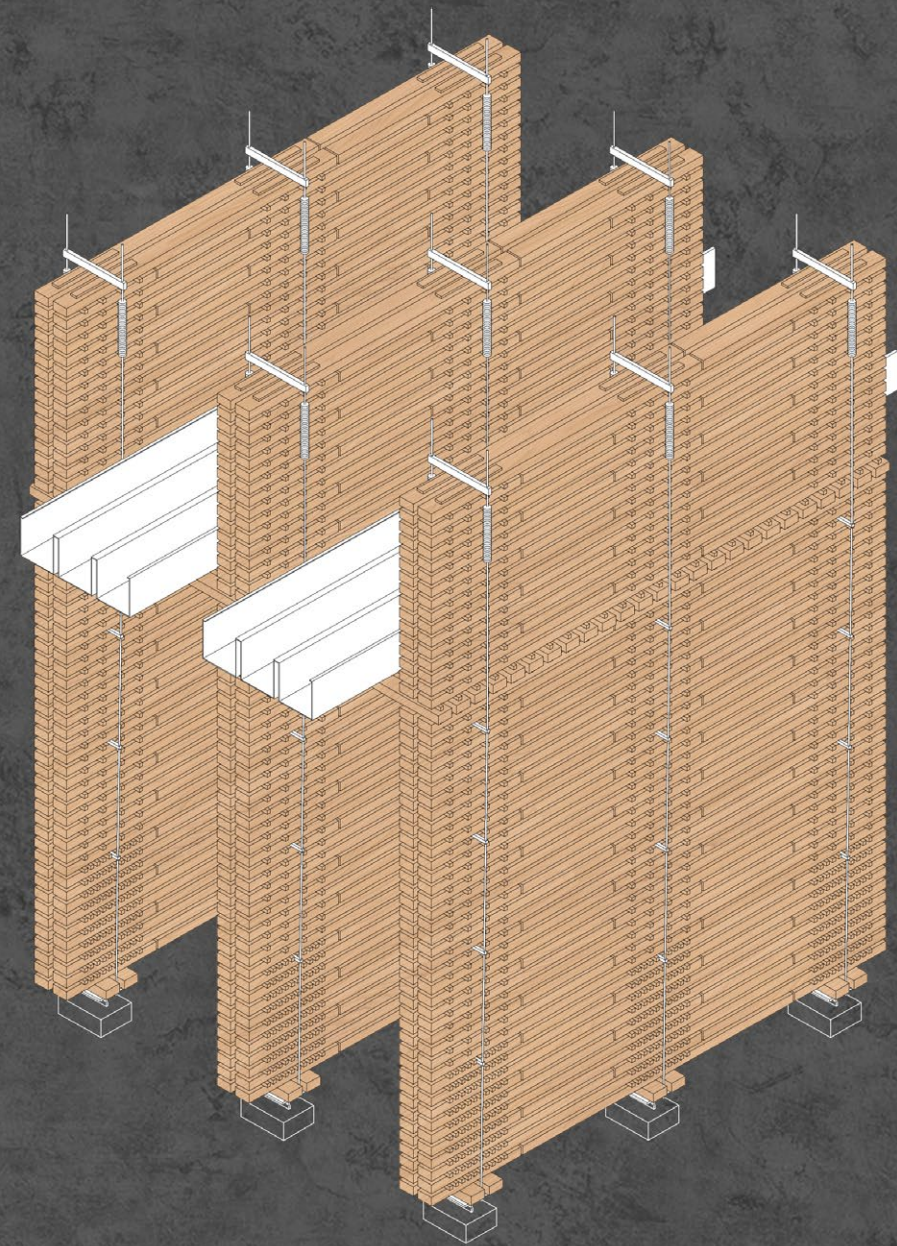


Fig. 14  
Swiss Soundbox (2000)  
Isometric  
The principle of stability through  
compression is applied vertically in  
a composition that stems from the  
primitive act of stacking.  
interpretative drawing: RL



In this case, however, the *Stabwerk* is replaced by the direct piling of wooden pieces, generating a stacked wall which, in turn, becomes the basic module of the pavilion's spatial configuration. It is interesting to observe how each of these walls is built following a carefully crafted composition, an artisanal rhythm dictating the alternate positioning of longitudinal and transversal pieces of different sizes. Again, Zumthor's suggestion that the project's concept might find a reference in the prosaic image of wooden boards drying on a lumber mill yard,<sup>14</sup> indicates the opposition between the ordinariness of the primitive action of log-stacking and the solution's technical sophistication. In fact, the stability of each of the pavilion's walls - which are made out of wooden pieces spanning only a fraction of its overall length - depends entirely on the compactness generated by vertical compression. Also here, external forces are added to the system with the insertion of a device made of metal cables which, pushing the whole ensemble towards the ground, brings also the possibility of calibrating its pressure along wood's drying process. More than a technical solution, the complexity of the Sound Box construction is an inseparable component of the design concept, a true composition which is not only put on display but represents the building's effective physical constitution.

In some of Zumthor's projects, the invention of a materiality seems to transcend the meaningful use of materials in a constructive scheme, and matter itself becomes the object of the author's transformation. This was the case of the *kolumbastein*, the tailor-made bricks developed for the Museum Kolumba (Cologne, 1997-07) which, through its specific consistency and appearance, allowed the design's basic idea of merging new masonry walls and old stone walls to take place. The brick eventually acquired autonomous value as a design object and even became itself a product of the manufacturing company.<sup>15</sup>

14 "Timber yard: Childhood memories of vast timber yards, of wandering between a mass of stacked timbers, the intense woody smell were inspirations for the design. As the project progressed, the image of the timber yard receded into the background since the Sound Box had found its own architectural identity."  
in: P. Zumthor [et. al], *Swiss Sound Box: a handbook for the pavilion of the Swiss Confederation at Expo 2000 in Hanover*, Ed. by Roderick Hönig, Birkhäuser, Basel 2000, p. 240.

15 The 'Kolumba' brick is today a trademark of the Danish company Petersen Tegl, manufactured with the standard dimensions of 528 x 108 x 37mm in more than 30 colors - both size and color can be customised.

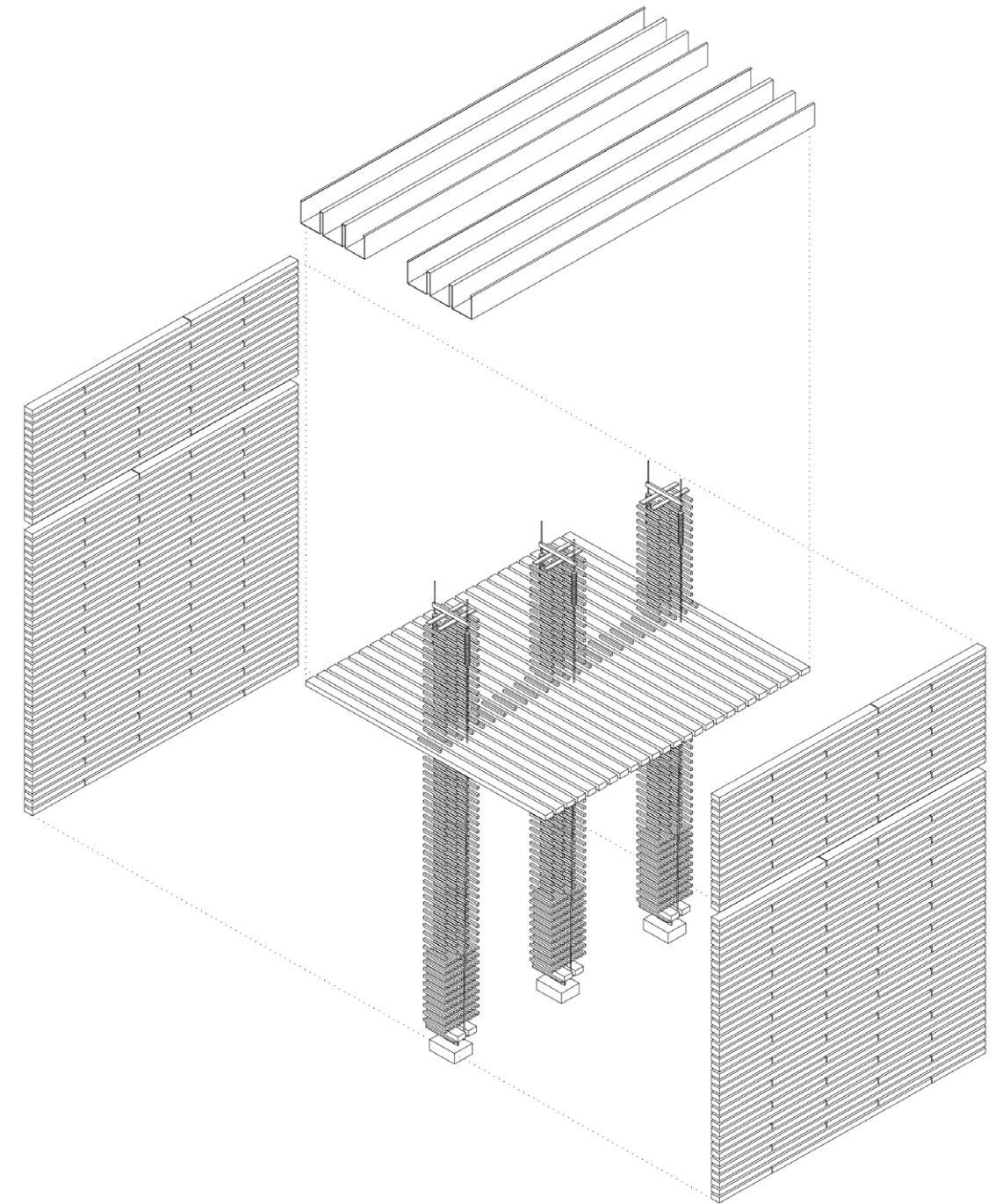


Fig. 15  
Swiss Soundbox (2000)  
Exploded isometric  
In the pavilion, construction is a  
system where all components keep  
their integrity and autonomy  
interpretative drawing: RL



Fig. 16-17  
Invented materialities: Bruder Klaus Chapel and Museum Kolumba  
photos: RL

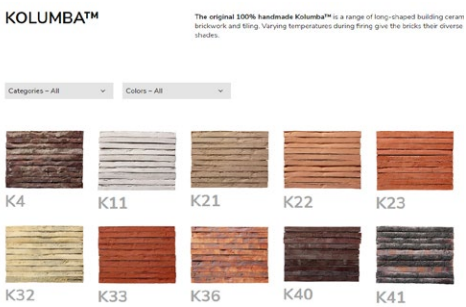


Fig. 18  
The 'Kolumba brick' by Petersen Tegl  
petersen-tegl.dk

A probably more visible example of such material metamorphosis can be seen in his project for the Bruder Klaus Field Chapel (Wachendorf, 2001-07). Built as a concrete monolith around an inner tent-like structure made out of tree trunks which were then set on fire, the chapel stands as the outcome of an almost liturgical act of construction, one that created a unique material presence condensed in the blackened ash-scented concrete of its interior - a matter that exists only as part of this design and as the result of a specific action.

It seems also important to observe how the role played by construction in Zumthor's architecture establishes a strong interdependence with a specific working method. This condition was also much present in his atelier in Mendrisio, where the stated concreteness of architecture was tendentially translated into a practice dealing primordially with design at a physical level - *real* materials, *real* models, *real* scales. In that sense, a fragmentary vision on how projects are developed in the atelier at Haldenstein is offered by the impressive collection of models held today by the Kunsthau Bregenz.<sup>16</sup>

16 More than 300 models by Zumthor are kept in the collection of the Kunsthau Bregenz, visited in November 2018. Their variety in terms of techniques and scale reveals their intensive use as design tools. A selection of those models is kept permanently on display at the Bregenz post Office Building next to the KUB.

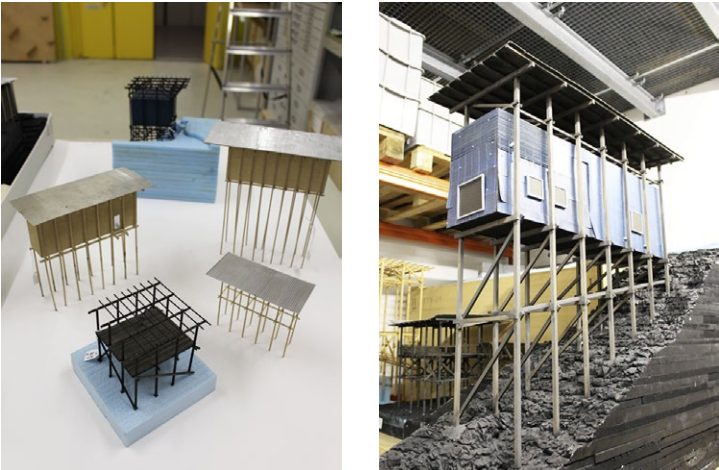


Fig. 19-24  
Study models of Allmannajuvet  
Museum (2003-06), Steilneset  
Memorial (2007-11) and Bruder  
Klaus Chapel (2001-07)  
Atelier Zumthor  
Kunsthau Bregenz collection



Spread over two warehouses, these objects bear witness to Zumthor's accurate and patient design process. Their multiplicity in terms of scale and type reveal their value as investigative tools belonging to different design phases. In some projects, as in the case of the Allmannajuvet Zinc Mine Museum, the presence of numerous variations in the composition of the pavilions' outer structures renders visible the iteration explored around their constructive process. Their configuration ultimately resists functional simplification, standing, like in the Topography of Terror, as the material expression of an order based on their assembly method.

If materiality in Zumthor's architecture is taken as an instance potentially responsible for conveying the design concept to, its fabrication process may be seen as a first dimension of the author's work. To draw the legitimacy of a project's formal composition from a process where *construction* is expressed more as a human action than a technical calculation, represents thus a poignant vision in terms of architecture's cultural and political role in a society increasingly defined by the pressures of environmental and technological issues.

## 7. Performance

*"In that sense, executive drawings of architecture are comparable with music scores. They are, in the highest abstraction level, the most precise representation of the architectural composition and the necessary basis for its performance. The only things that are not found in this score are execution and interpretation, which are left to the artists."<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>*

*Peter Zumthor, 1988*

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1 ZUMTHOR, Peter. *Partituren und Bilder: Arbeit aus dem Atelier Peter Zumthor 1985 - 1988*. 2. unveränderte Auflage. Architekturgalerie Luzern. Luzern, 1994. p. 10

2 In the original German version, Zumthor uses the term *Aufführung* to indicate the realization of an activity following an instruction, as in the case of a musician reading a score. The term is here translated into English as *performance* and *execution*, as well as *Ausführenden*, the ones doing the action, is translated as *artists/performers*.

The suggestion of *performance* as a compositional principle aims to address a quality that is evident in the work of Peter Zumthor, yet not easy to grasp. It relates to an architecture that is not only conceived to be apprehended through experience, but more than that, one that assumes the design of such experience as a necessary part of the architectural task. In his projects, therefore, buildings are designed as containers of meaningful experiences, the collective scripts of personal performances. This notion informs the composition in two levels. On the one hand, it tends to generate an object whose conception is consciously manipulated in such a way it provides a set of stimuli which become the structure of the building's specific narrative - the *performance* of a given space is something intrinsic to its identity. On the other, it sets the base for an architecture that eventually transcends the object's boundaries and becomes itself the player of a never-ending performance - the building is then transformed from a container of action into an actual interactive element. Therefore, the use of the term *performance*, made by the union of the Latin prefix *per* - meaning *movement through* or *intensity* - and the noun *forma* - meaning *form* or *the container of matter*<sup>3</sup> - describes something taking place in time, a task accomplished by means of an action, and alludes to the conscious exploration of a scenographic component in architecture.

An apparent contradiction may emerge from the suggestion that Zumthor's work contains an inherent scenographic quality. Such strangeness may be related to the conflict between the image of an author whose approach to construction is commonly associated with an idea of integrity and truth - eventually transferred to the ethical dimension of his figure - and the somewhat negative meaning that the word *scenographic* may assume as something that is false, artificial or at least unnecessary - an interpretation revealing the traces of a culture much informed by several instances of functionalism. Fact is that allusions to architecture's *performatic* condition are recurrent in Zumthor's thinking, as much as evident in his teaching.

3 O. Pianigiani, *Vocabolario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana* (www.etimo.it).

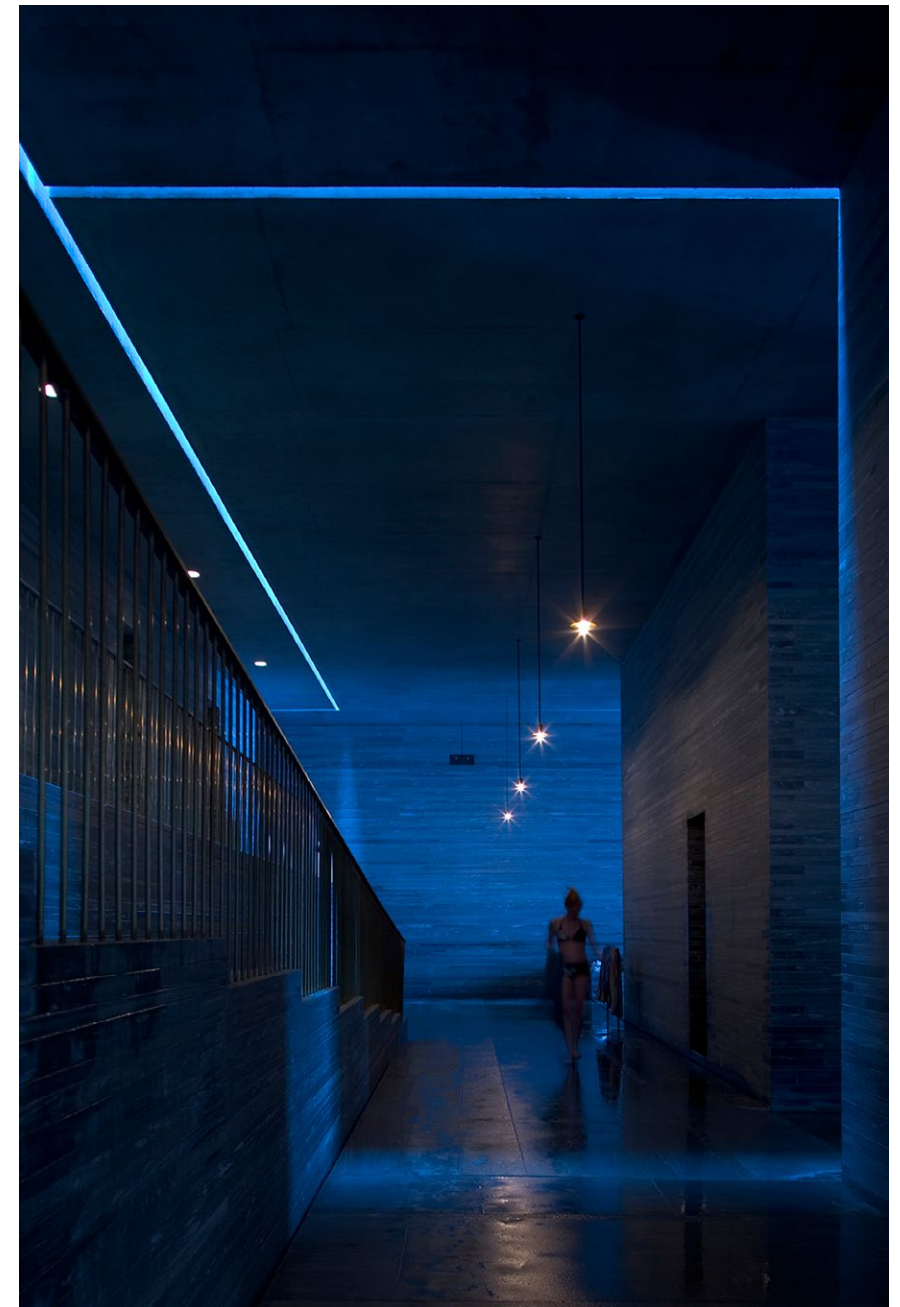


Fig. 1  
The scenographic interior of the Thermal Baths in Vals  
photo: Fernando Guerra



Words such as *ambiance* and *Gesamtkunstwerk*,<sup>4</sup> for example, are often used by him when describing the specific quality of projects that assume the condition of a temporal event. The recurrent analogies between architecture and cinema, as in the case when the consecration procession of the Bruder Klaus chapel is described by him “as the scene of a movie by Fellini”,<sup>5</sup> reveal the traces of an architect-director fascinated with the way his projects are lived. If Zumthor’s architecture seeks the object’s perfection through accurate construction, it also seeks to imbue its materiality with a ritualistic dimension contained in carefully crafted details - door handles, handrails, candle holders, lamps - through which the artisan becomes a screenwriter. The result of such an approach is the conception of architectural spaces which manage to establish an interactive relationship with users, buildings that, as much as physical objects, are also a lived reality emotionally experienced. Rather than an abstract void, space is present in Zumthor’s architecture as a concrete element, something that Pérez-Gómez relates to the Greek notion of *chora*, a concept described as “both cosmic place and abstract space, [something that] undermines the common distinction between contained space and material container”.<sup>6</sup> The void is thus the primary stage for a building’s performance.

For Zumthor, the continuity between object and action, and therefore the understanding of architecture as something whose execution goes beyond the effective production of the building, was clearly stated in the 1988 exhibition *Partituren und Bilder*. The event’s own concept was designed with the intention to overcome the inevitable representational limits of a show whose real subject - the experience of the

4 “*Gesamtkunstwerk*: Total work of art. The combination of art and daily routine, of relaxation and inspiration, within a performance that maintains its creative tension throughout the exposition. The Sound Box is based on the notion of the cultured host who liberates himself from usual marketing and offers a place for repose and contemplation. (...) The blend of poetry, music, dance and the visual arts has a definite German heritage (for example: Bauhaus, Ivan Goll, Erwin Piscatos, Max Reinhart or Richard Wagner).” P. Zumthor [et. al], *Swiss Sound Box: a handbook for the pavilion of the Swiss Confederation at Expo 2000 in Hanover*, Ed. by Roderick Hönig, Birkhäuser, Basel 2000, p. 97.

5 Zumthor commented on the photos of the procession during a conference held in Mendrisio on June 14, 2007.

6 HOLL, Steven; PALLASMAA, Juhani; PÉREZ-GÓMEZ, Alberto. *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*. A+U. Tokyo, 1994. Pg. 13



Fig. 2-4  
Ritualistic interaction with the details of the Bruder Klaus Chapel  
photo: RL

buildings themselves - could not be put on display. The three projects were then presented only by means of executive drawings and photographs.<sup>7</sup> The metaphor was that of music, as Zumthor suggested that the drawings were to be read as architectural scores whose actual performances take place in the “concrete world”.<sup>8</sup> The photographic images ‘spoke about’ those performances. They left an imaginative gap meant to be fulfilled by the visitor’s mind, yet not able to replace the effective experience of the building’s presence.

7 It is interesting to observe that Danuser had never photographed architecture before the exhibition, having achieved recognition at the time mostly through his *In Vivo* series. An exploration of his relation with Zumthor is found in: DANUSER, H; GANTENBEIN, K; URSPRUNG, P.; Zumthor *Sehen. Bilder von Hans Danuser*. Zurich: Verlag Hochparterre und Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess, 2009.

8 P. Zumthor, *Partituren und Bilder: Arbeit aus dem Atelier Peter Zumthor 1985 - 1988*, 2. unveränderte Auflage, Architekturgalerie Luzern, Luzern 1994, pg. 9.

7. Performance

Also the concept of *atmosphere* - which, as earlier mentioned, became a motto strongly attached to Zumthor's production - can be potentially related to the suggested *performatic* component of his architecture. Usually described as the distinctive character of a specific space or event, *atmosphere* is a concept that basically addresses a space's capacity to acquire identity in the interaction between user and building. In Zumthor's thinking, it can be seen as a transversal component that tended to assume a particular protagonism mainly from the late 1990's on, when *atmosphere* as a main reference for architectural quality becomes more evident in his production - eventually outshining other concepts which were central to earlier articulations on his work. A record of this shift is also visible in some transformations of his teaching at Mendrisio. While it was possible to observe how his *Primo anno* course encouraged students to engage in the representation of architecture as something that is not strictly visual - as for instance in the exercises based on senses - the later years of his atelier would explore a more elaborated and theoretically ambitious use of *atmosphere* as a design criterion.

In 2002-03, for example, Zumthor's fourth-year atelier published a book called *Make it Typical! : A Small Atlas of Architectural Atmospheres*.<sup>9</sup> Its content registered an investigation around *atmospheres* both in epistemological and instrumental levels - it is particularly evident the focus given to the exploration of representation techniques. A further example of this shift is found in his 2003-04 atelier which, dealing with an urban project for the city of Chiasso, suggested the use of a survey method called *energy modelling*. Aimed at the production of an "emotional relief in the form of a model", it required students to register the occurrence of elements such as "the places where I feel small", or "the silent moments of Chiasso".<sup>10</sup> Even if a more precise elaboration on *atmospheres* from a theoretical standpoint is not the ultimate objective of Zumthor's use of the term, it is also true that it manages to condense some of the most important concepts of his work.

9 Atelier Zumthor, *Make it Typical! : A Small Atlas of Architectural Atmospheres*, Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, 2005.

10 Atelier Zumthor, *Ciao Chiasso! Interventi per la doppia periferia*, Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, 2005.

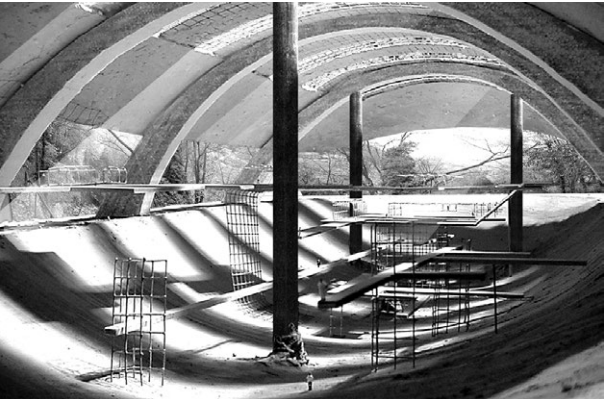
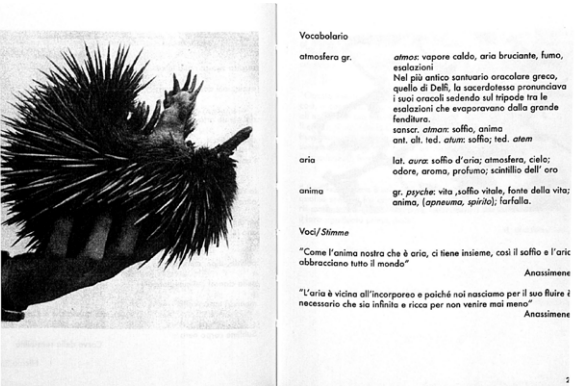
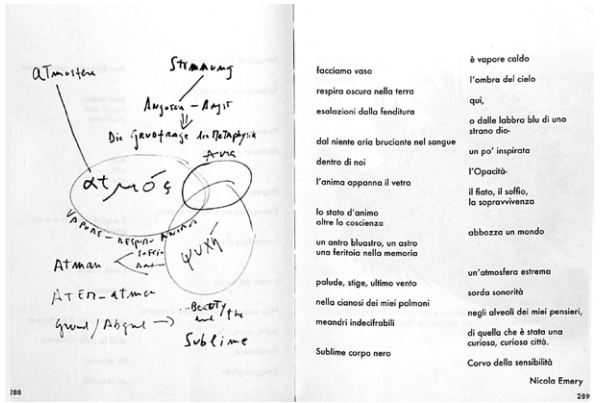
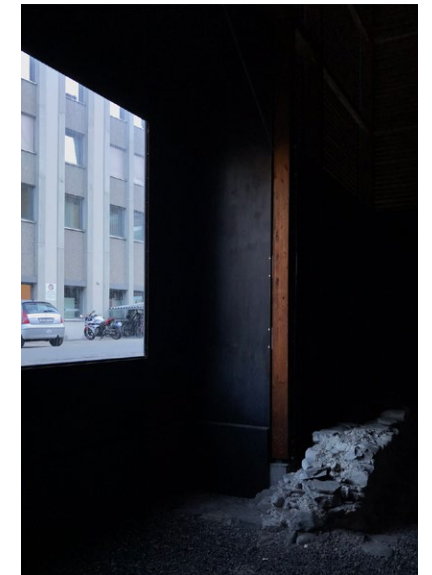
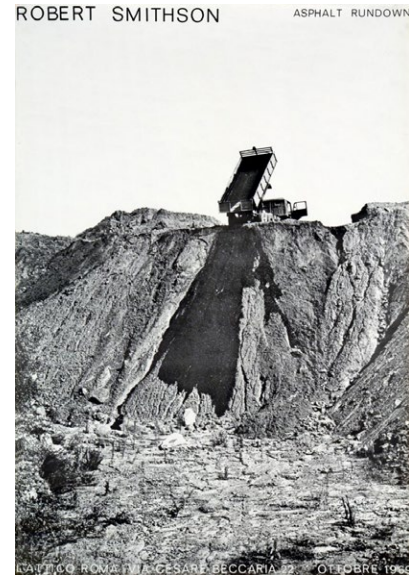


Fig. 5-6  
*Make it Typical!*  
Etimological explorations on the concept of *atmosphere* and works by Anna Hotz, Alberto Fresco and Fabian Wichers  
Atelier Zumthor AAM 2002-03

Fig. 7-10  
*Ciao Chiasso!*  
Map of 'scars on the ground'  
Atelier Zumthor AAM 2003-04





One of these is the prevalence of embodied perception as architecture's main communicative interface, something that once again points to the phenomenological component transversal to his thinking. Interesting is also his eventual collaboration with Juhani Pallasmaa, one of the main contemporary preachers of the idea that architecture as a discipline must raise a greater awareness on the holistic condition of man's interaction with his surroundings, avoiding the limits of an exclusively vision-oriented production.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, Zumthor's frequent use of multisensory stimuli in his projects, which explore elements such as light effects, scents, textures and sounds, shows how much the experience of the human body through space is taken by him as an active element of the architectural composition. Clearly, the exercises proposed to students in his first-year course in Mendrisio represent a manifest on the importance played by embodied perception in architecture.

<sup>11</sup> Pallasmaa's essay *Six Themes for the next Millennium* (Architectural Review, July 1994) is found among the texts presented to students in the first years of Atelier Zumthor. More recently, they have often collaborated in lectures and writings. Among Pallasmaa's most influential books are: *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Academy, 1995), *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009) and *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

Fig. 11  
Robert Smithson  
*Asphalt rundown* (1969)  
Archivio Lattico  
photo: Fabio Sargentini

Fig. 12  
Joseph Beuys  
*I like America and America likes me* (1974)  
xxxxxx

Fig. 13  
Walter De Maria  
*The New York Earth Room* (1977)  
photo: John Cliett

Fig. 14  
Peter Zumthor  
*Schutzbauten* (1985-86)  
photo: RL

### 7.1. Factual scenographies:

If *construction* is suggested as a compositional principle related to a building's physical dimension - and therefore to its material value - *performance* can be seen as a principle addressing its temporal component. On a first level, it refers to the scale of users, the narrative of their experience of a given space over time. On a second level, time is an element of Zumthor's work that conditions the establishment of a specific relation between architecture and place, one that ambiguously seeks connection through rupture. This notion of temporality is deeply influenced by the experimentations in 1960's and 1970's conceptual art, characterized by the emergence of "a new concept of history, [...] perceived as discontinuous and fragmentary rather than as a linear evolution".<sup>12</sup> Such temporal disruptiveness - and also the iconoclast attitude attached to it - clearly influenced Zumthor's architectural production, especially his understanding of history as something "stored and accumulated in landscapes, places and things", consciously re-

<sup>12</sup> P. Ursprung, *Earthworks: The Architecture of Peter Zumthor*, on the occasion of the announcement of Peter Zumthor as the 2009 Pritzker Prize laureate.

jecting the institutionalized version of “history-history, an intellectual system that works from document to document, from paper to paper; ten papers become a hundred and so on”.<sup>13</sup> In that sense, the temporal experimentation of conceptual art is transferred by Zumthor onto an architecture that seems to be reduced from the condition of a ‘building’ to that of an ‘intervention’, shifting architecture’s temporality from static to dynamic.

Such transformation becomes visible in the idea, very often expressed by Zumthor, of conceiving buildings so deeply bound to their context that they “look as if they have always been there”.<sup>14</sup> That is, at the same time that the new object wants to be perceived as a natural component of the site, it also wants to produce a rupture by belonging to a temporality other than the present. This opposition between naturality and strangeness stands as the basic structure of a relationship between architecture and place seeking to generate a new, intensified perception of the environment activated through the presence of a primitive element.

In Zumthor’s work, this process occurs in the many projects whose narrative structure is extended from the single object to a wider level, which also includes the building’s *performance* in place. That means that in his architecture, the processes of construction and ageing - and eventually even of disappearing - tend to be incorporated as design elements. This understanding of architecture as something continuously taking place on time is very often stressed by the creation of collateral elements that belong to the project’s narrative, yet not specifically to the building itself. A clear example of that was the importance that students’ performances had in the exercises in Mendrisio, which many times acquired a sort of ritualistic dimension. The very language in which these exercises were introduced and presented, manifests the proximity to an aesthetics clearly related to that of a performat-

<sup>13</sup> M. Lending, P. Zumthor, *A Feeling of History*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2018, pp. 17-18.

<sup>14</sup> S. Spier, *Place, authorship and the concrete: Three conversations with Peter Zumthor*, Architectural Research Quarterly, 5(1), 2001, p. 16.

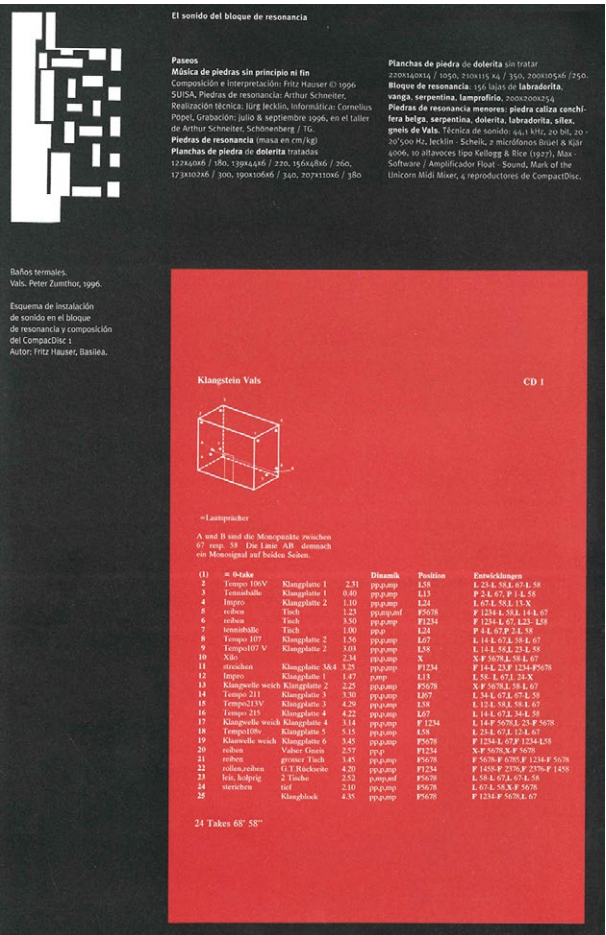


Fig. 15-16  
 Scheme of sound installation inside the Klangstein in Vals, and the intervention designed by Atelier Zumthor AAM as a piece of performative art  
 M. Kreisler and M. Sterling, 1997

ic installation.<sup>15</sup> In that sense, it seems important to observe how the scenographic dimension of Zumthor’s architecture is no superfluous element, but emerges as the necessary script for a project *performed* in multiple layers.

<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to observe how Miguel Kreisler, in an essay of 1997, uses the characteristic language of the performative arts to present the work produced by students for the In Situ exercise, the musical composition by Fritz Hauser and the architectural concept of the *Klangstein* in Vals. The students’ work is described: “300m of Non-neon silicone white tube with 12.000 volcanized lamps, 10 W/m, 200m of electric cables. A Jackie-boy brush cutter, 2 walkie-talkies.”  
 M. Kreisler, M. Sterling, *5 cosas: una recopilación de cuatro fragmentos del Atelier Zumthor*, in: *bau*, Revista de Arquitectura, Urbanismo, Arte y Diseño, 16, 1997, pp. 130-141.



## 7. Performance

The Topography of Terror was originally born as an exhibition staged directly on the site where the events it related to took place. More than a geography, however, the site's own materiality acquired value by keeping the traces of such events.<sup>16</sup> It also represented the effective outcome of a collective process of active remembering. The exhibition's built structures, two simple and fragile pavilions erected in 1987 above the ruins of the Gestapo prison cells and kitchen, were thus the physical stage for an action initiated with the 1981 'Let's Dig!' initiative. In the same way, the project designed by Zumthor for the 1993 competition can be understood as a continuation of this process, an architectural concept whose composition was meant both to provide the base and to become part of a performance rooted in the original act of unearthing the ground's memories. The design's central idea explores earth not merely as a symbolic metaphor, but stands as a concrete fact of the building's experience:

*"I needed to invent a building which would resist all existing typologies, a building which would be close to the ground, close to the earth, a building which would be almost a little bit uncomfortable. A building which would be 20 degrees all year, all the time, was impossible for me there".<sup>17</sup>*

Temperature, as mentioned by Zumthor, is probably the most evident feature of the uneasiness designed to intentionally conditionate the experience of users inside exhibition spaces positioned directly over the site's naked ground. Considering the low temperatures registered in a city like Berlin, it is not hard to realize the contrast produced by such a radical concept and the commonly highly standardized and controlled spaces of contemporary museums. Besides that, exposure to the Topography's soil would become a strong element in users' experience by means of scent and acoustics, also becoming an active medium constantly changing consistency according to people's movement through time.

<sup>16</sup> Even if it is right to assume that events such as the mass murdering ordered by the Nazi government took place somewhere else, the source of terror, which in many aspects is the ambiguous object of the Topography's memory, was actually operating from this specific site.

<sup>17</sup> S. Spier, *Place, authorship and the concrete: Three conversations with Peter Zumthor*, Architectural Research Quarterly, 5(1), 2001, p. 31.



Fig. 17-18  
Opening of the Topography of Terror  
exhibition in the pavilion built over  
the kitchen ruins, and the exhibition  
staged directly on the site, 1987  
*Stiftung Topographie des Terrors*

The act of stepping on real ground, walking on real ruins, feeling the site's cold and getting shoes dirt, would certainly raise in visitors an enhanced awareness of their bodily interaction with space - in such conditions, automatic movements would tend to become choreographed actions. Zumthor's use of earth as a performative element is something that presents a further parallel with some conceptual art works. This connection is observed by Philip Ursprung in an essay significantly entitled *earthworks*<sup>18</sup>, suggesting the existence of a shared conceptual ground between the work of Zumthor and artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark, Ana Mendieta, Joseph Beuys and Robert Smithson - the last one known for his sequence of large-scale installations and performances called precisely *earthworks*.<sup>19</sup>

In that sense, it is interesting to observe how the relationship with ground was for Zumthor a fundamental component also in the conception of the building's expography. In an interview of 1997, recorded when the project was still being developed, he described a vision where everything belonging to the exhibition would be displayed laying directly on the ground.<sup>20</sup> His concept would be to distribute simple wooden tables along the main hall containing the original documents telling the Topography's history. He also mentioned that the Foundation would prefer an opposing solution, where all expographic elements would hang from the building's structure, avoiding to touch the ground - two conflicting visions that synthesize a great part of the debate which ultimately led to the project's abandonment.

In his project for the Topography of Terror, the role assumed by the site's original ground is enhanced by the contrasting presence of the building's materiality. To the roughness of the soil and the ruins' damaged brick walls, the new structure made of fine pieces of white concrete would react in terms of lightness and ephemerality.

<sup>18</sup> P. Ursprung, *Earthworks: The Architecture of Peter Zumthor*, on the occasion of the announcement of Peter Zumthor as the 2009 Pritzker Prize laureate.

<sup>19</sup> P. Ursprung, *Von den Nonsites zu den Land Reclamation Projects: Earthworks von Robert Smithson*, in: *Archithese, Zeitschrift und Schriftenreihe für Architektur*, 4 1997, pp. 32-39.

<sup>20</sup> S. Spier, *Place, authorship and the concrete: Three conversations with Peter Zumthor*, *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 5(1), 2001, pp. 15-36.

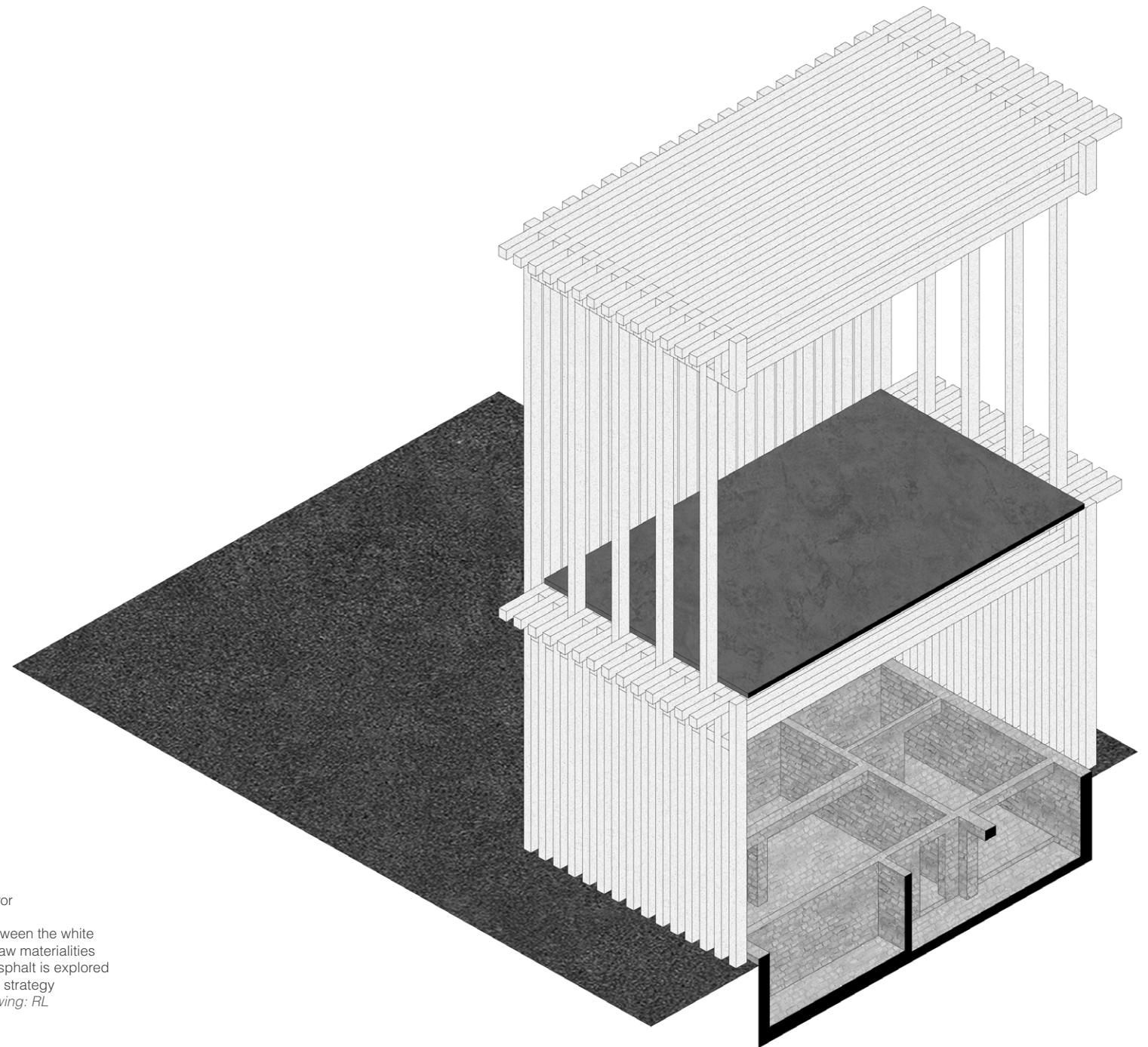


Fig. 19  
Topography of Terror  
Isometric section  
The opposition between the white concrete and the raw materialities of soil, ruins and asphalt is explored as a scenographic strategy  
interpretative drawing: RL



Such opposition is fundamental in the conception of the overall scenography, not only because of the visual framing produced by the envelope's background, but also because its refined texture subtle alludes to the monumentality expected for a place of memory - the white concrete stands as an ordinary material containing the nobility of marble. In the two upper floors, where the auditorium, library and working spaces would be positioned, Zumthor seems to extend his original idea of discomfort by covering the floor's surface with asphalt. The earth-architecture contrast is therefore replicated, although with a more domesticated materiality - yet one that would not allow users to completely forget the place on which they would be standing. The thoughtful use of materials as components of a project's scenography - meant as the conscious arrangement of elements in order to stir a specific performance - is one of the main characteristics of Zumthor's production.

A perhaps clearer example of scenographic arrangement can be found in his project for the *Schutzbauten* in Chur. There, the wooden envelope acts as the holder of a detached temporality present in the original ground it contains. When arriving at the building, visitors firstly walk on the civilized floor of the contemporary city, a small square covered in asphalt just like an ordinary sidewalk. A transition is made by climbing the entrance stairs and walking on the metallic footbridge - whose floor is actually transparent in the sections spanning over the ruins, solid only in the closed passageways between different volumes. The historical soil is only stepped when visitors climb down and find themselves in a completely different spatial situation. The building's wooden structure is then perceived as a unifying background filtering the presence of the city, which penetrates only decontextualized by means of noises, temperature, light and the framed view through one single window. The situation's evident theatricality is stressed by the insertion of a hanging frame of dark cloth, which occupies the inner perimeter in such a way the background behind the ruins is perceived as a shade over which the presence of the historical remnants stands out. The building's whole tectonics, revealed only from the inside, is intrinsically intertwined with the conception of such scenographic effects.

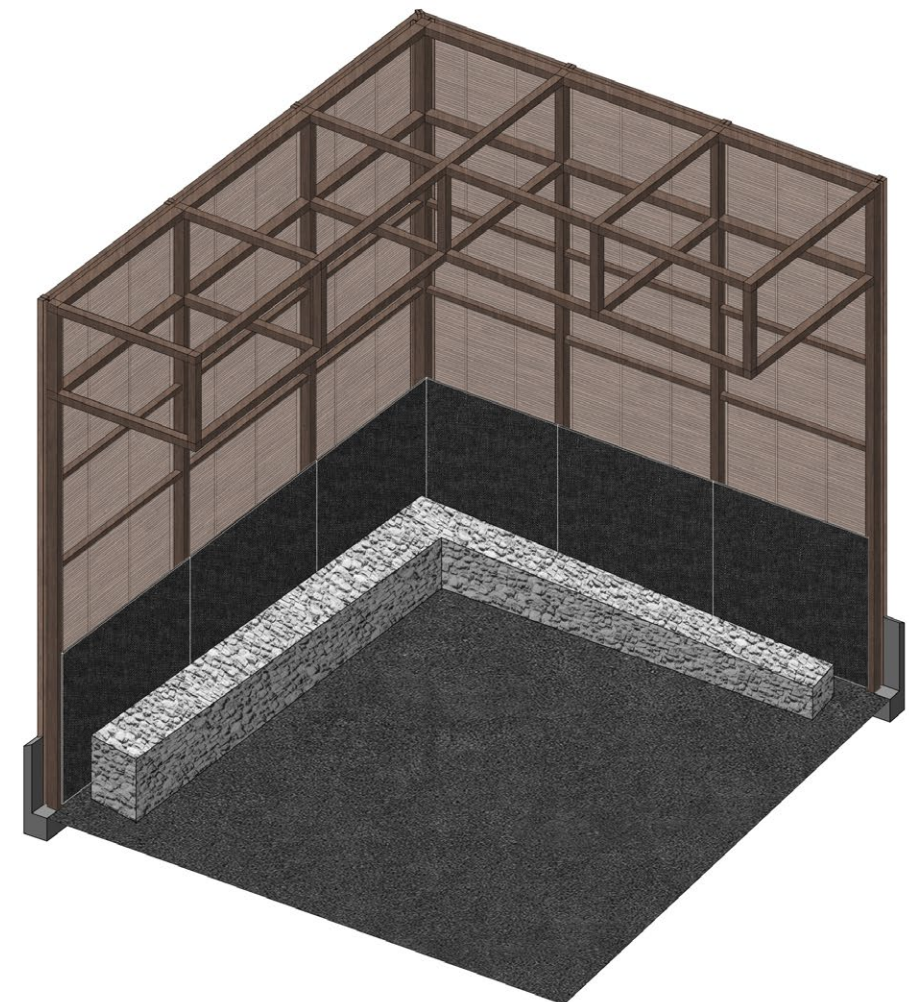


Fig. 20  
*Schutzbauten*  
Isometric section  
The dark cloth layer placed  
between the ruins and the wooden  
envelope produce a scenographic  
effect where the perception of the  
stone foundations is highlighted by  
means of lighting contrast  
interpretative drawing: RL

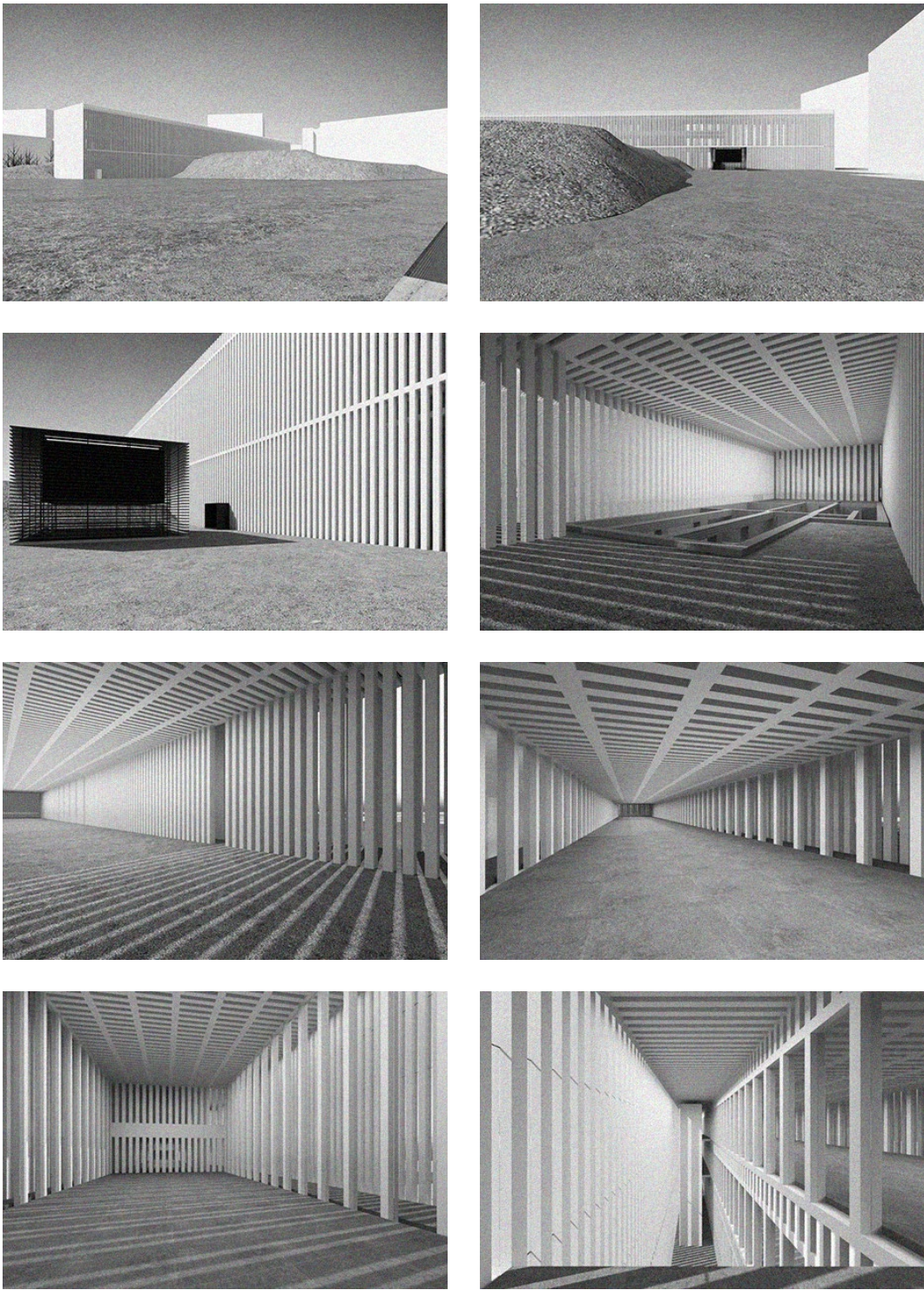


In Berlin, as much as materiality, the spatial sequence is also a component in the production of the uneasiness Zumthor felt necessary. The project's basic constructive principle - the replication of identical columns following the rhythm of their own width - would be responsible for the generation of a somewhat disorienting visual situation on the inside. Even if it is true that half of the building's consistency is made of transparency - the gap between two columns was to be filled with a plain sheet of glass - the accumulation of the vertical elements in perspective would enable visitors to get only controlled and limited views to the outside. In that sense, despite the structure's lightness, the long exhibition hall on ground floor level would be perceived rather as a self-centered reality where the presence of the surroundings would be felt mostly by means of the changing effects of light and occasional unexpected fragments of the landscape.

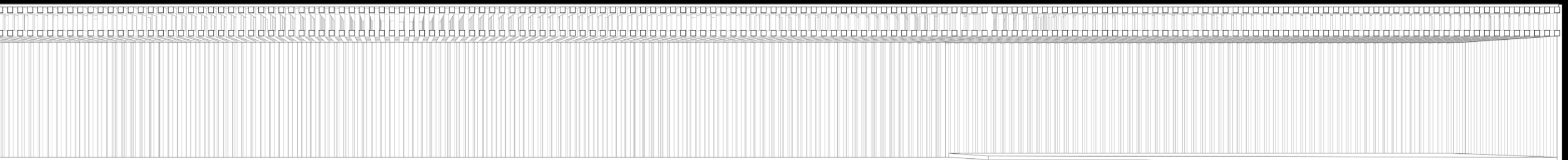
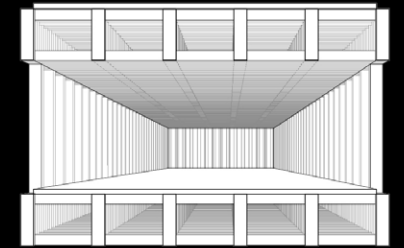
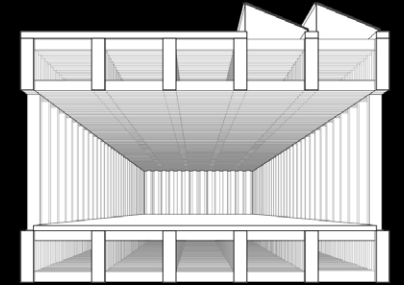
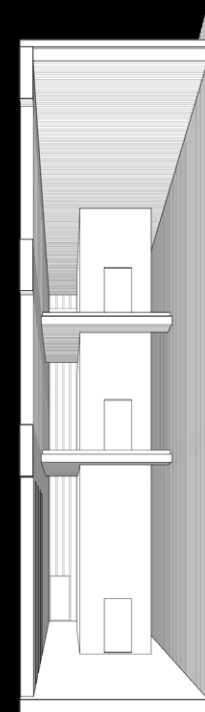
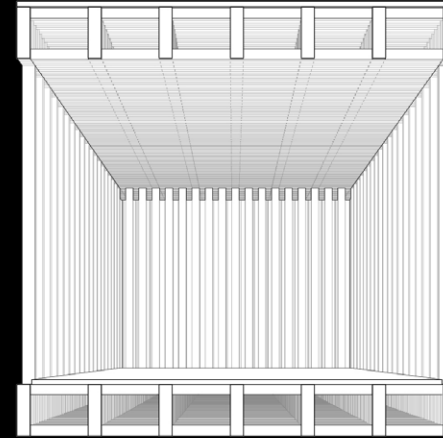
The same situation would be found in the upper floor spaces where, even if the spacing between the columns of the inner row was doubled, the constancy of the outer envelope's density would continually break the visual connection to the outside. Also the articulation between different spaces of the building can be seen as designed to produce a sort of spatial fragmentation. While visitors would access the building through its longest facade plan - and therefore would be confronted with long and closed perspectives at both sides when crossing the exhibition spaces - the connection with upper floors would be always mediated by a narrow three-storey atrium. The lack of an integrative space such as a hall or inner court, represents the conscious choice of avoiding any sort of collective symbolism, keeping the experience of the Topography of Terror as something eminently individual.

Fig. 21-28  
Topography of Terror  
Reconstruction of visitor's experience  
An atmosphere of uneasiness was conceived by Zumthor as an strategy to stir in visitors a reflective attitude when confronting the traces of a traumatic past. Their body would be put in direct contact with the ruins and the soil, mainly in isolated situations of controlled perspectives.

Next page:  
Fig. 29  
Diagram of spatial sequence  
The building's inner fragmentation would be stressed by the absence of a connective space such as a hall or an inner court. All spaces would tend to be perceived as self-centered environments.  
*interpretative drawing: RL*







Also, the performatic component of Zumthor’s architecture becomes evident in those projects whose programmatic requirements benefit more directly from it. That is the case, for example, of the Swiss Sound Box and the Thermal Baths in Vals. The first one - which holds the special condition of an ephemeral pavilion - was defined as a total work of art whose concept was jointly developed in terms of architecture, music, gastronomy and even clothing. In that sense, the project’s remarkable feature is not merely the fact that the building was designed to house a multiple set of actions - something naturally expected from Expo participants - but the fact that architecture was designed itself as the player of a multilayered event. Actually, the pavilion’s spatial distribution and the musical performances which took place inside it were conceived as inseparable realities - the configuration of the one cannot exist without the other.<sup>21</sup> That means that the design’s narrative transcended its physical constitution in such a way there were no clear distinctions between architecture and other instances of the pavilion’s performance.

A similar situation can be observed in Zumthor’s design for Vals, where the building’s design was explored to generate what could be called a contemporary version of the bathing ritual. Within each of the tower-like enclosed spaces forming the building’s basic module, a unique situation is created by means of specific scenographies. The *Steins*, as Zumthor called these spaces,<sup>22</sup> were conceived as highly artificial realities in clear contrast with the material integrity of the overall stone volume. They can be seen as containers of particular performances to be executed following a script that includes shifting temperatures, colors and light effects, as well as tailor-made artworks - like the music composed by Fritz Hauser exclusively for the *Klangstein* and mechanical devices:

21 “Music: It is a non-stop feature involving some 350 musicians from all around the world. The musical concept devised by the curator of music Daniel Ott comprises the basic sound, improvised passages and the so-called music windows. Through the use of three infinitely variable elements, Ott responds to the principle of variation that underlies the architecture of the pavilion.”  
P. Zumthor [et. al], *Swiss Sound Box: a handbook for the pavilion of the Swiss Confederation at Expo 2000 in Hanover*, Ed. by Roderick Hönig, Birkhäuser, Basel 2000, p. 164.

22 Each enclosed space is named after the motif it contains: *Blütenbad* (Flower Bath), *Klangstein* (Sounding Stone), *Klangbad* (Sound Bath), *Schwitzstein* (Sweat Stone), etc.

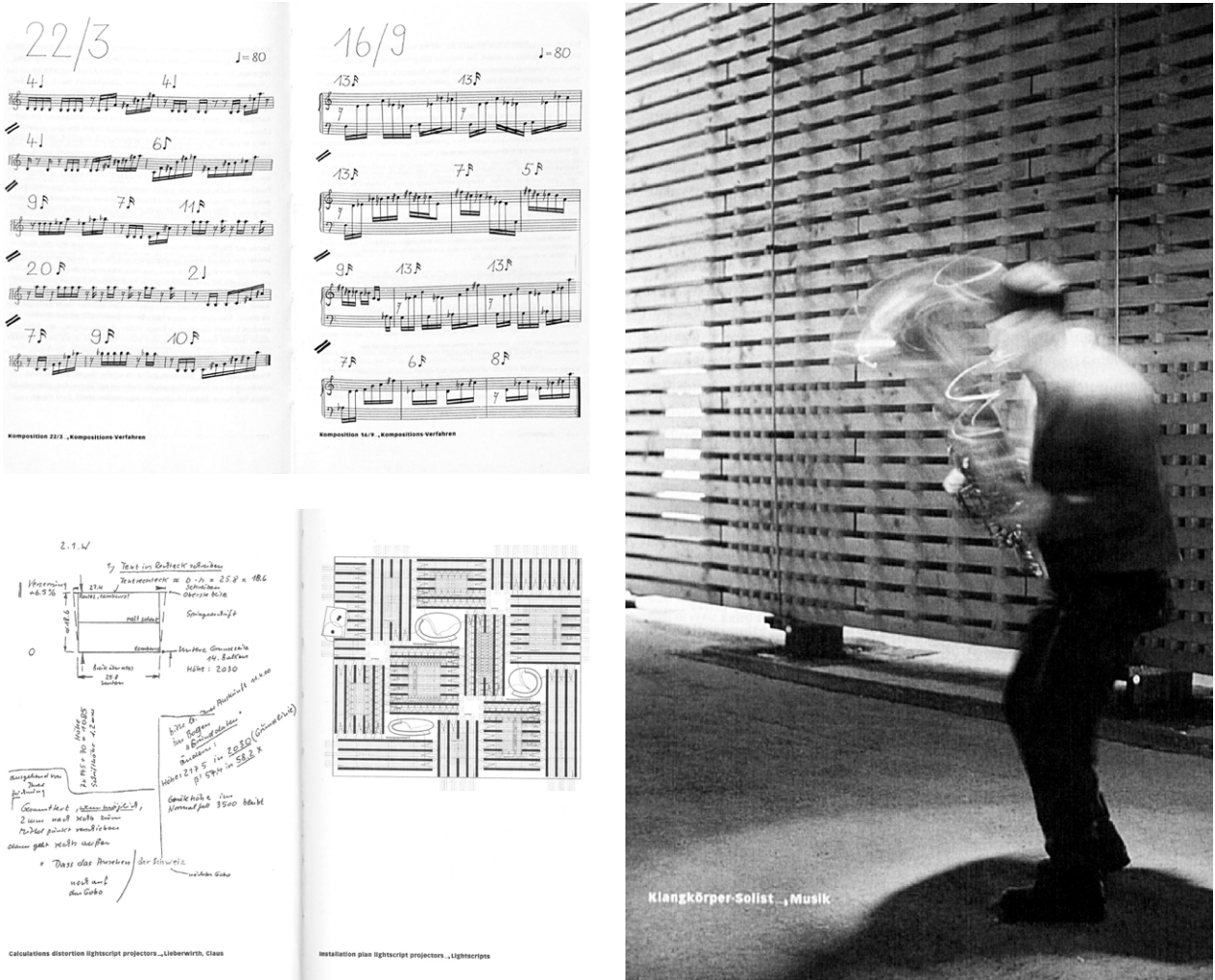


Fig. 30  
Swiss Soundbox, scores of musical composition, distribution of lightscript projectors and a music performing throughout the pavilion  
*Swiss Soundbox Handbook*



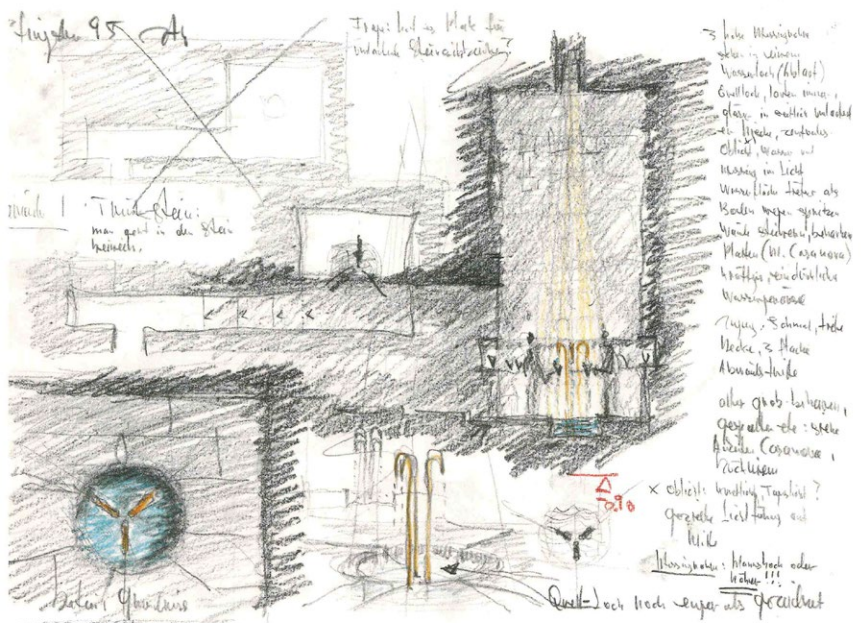
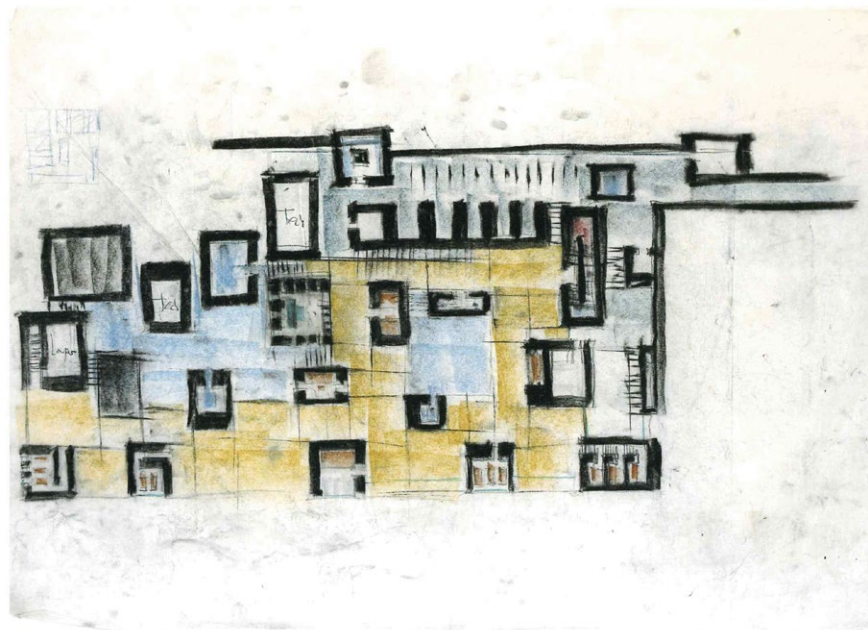


Fig. 31-32  
Thermal Baths Vals  
Sketches by Zumthor showing  
a plan with the different actions  
contained in the Steins and a  
section detail of the Trinkstein  
Atelier Zumthor

*"The underwater illumination in the Blütenbad creates a special aura of magic: above the water level the concrete wall is black, below it white, the floating marigold petals shimmer golden yellow in the backlight. The fragrance that fills the room doesn't come from the water, it is in the air, filtered in from behind a small metal cover on the wall, the administering of lavender oil in the vaporizing mechanism also takes place downstairs".<sup>23</sup>*

In this regard, it is possible to observe how the complementarity between architecture and other art fields is recurrently explored by Zumthor through the production of exclusive elements which, yet belonging to other media, are integral parts of his projects. An interesting example of that is also found in the Allmannajuvet Zinc Mine Museum, for which three books were commissioned as part of the project - a historian wrote a volume on the mine's history, a geologist wrote a volume on the place's natural features, and a writer wrote an anthology of texts where the thematic of the underground appeared.<sup>24</sup> Along with an additional volume presenting the project's architectural concept, these unique pieces exist only in the original versions displayed in the museum - their reading is therefore an action belonging integrally to the project's narrative.

The performative dimension of the Museum's project seems to be enhanced by the ambiguous language explored by Zumthor in the composition of its new structures. Pinned on the clifflandscape by means of an intricate wooden envelope, the four pavilions float above the original trail as autonomous realities designed to provide an interactive experience whose narrative evolves through spatial compression, lighting interplays and framed views of the landscape. Their material fragility, which employs a pre-fabricated structure of plywood covered in jute burlap and black tar - the same solution used in the Serpentine Pavilion (2010)<sup>25</sup> - contains the image of the ephemeral constructions typical of site-specific events.

23 S. Hauser, in: *Therme Vals*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2007, p. 34  
24 *Sub Terra, Sub Sole*, an anthology written by the Norwegian writer Kjartan Flogstad, as mentioned by P. Zumthor in: *A Feeling of History*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2018, p. 50.  
25 C. Slessor, *Allmannajuvet Zinc Mine Museum in Norway by Peter Zumthor: The progeny of an artist-architect*, Architectural Review, January 2017.

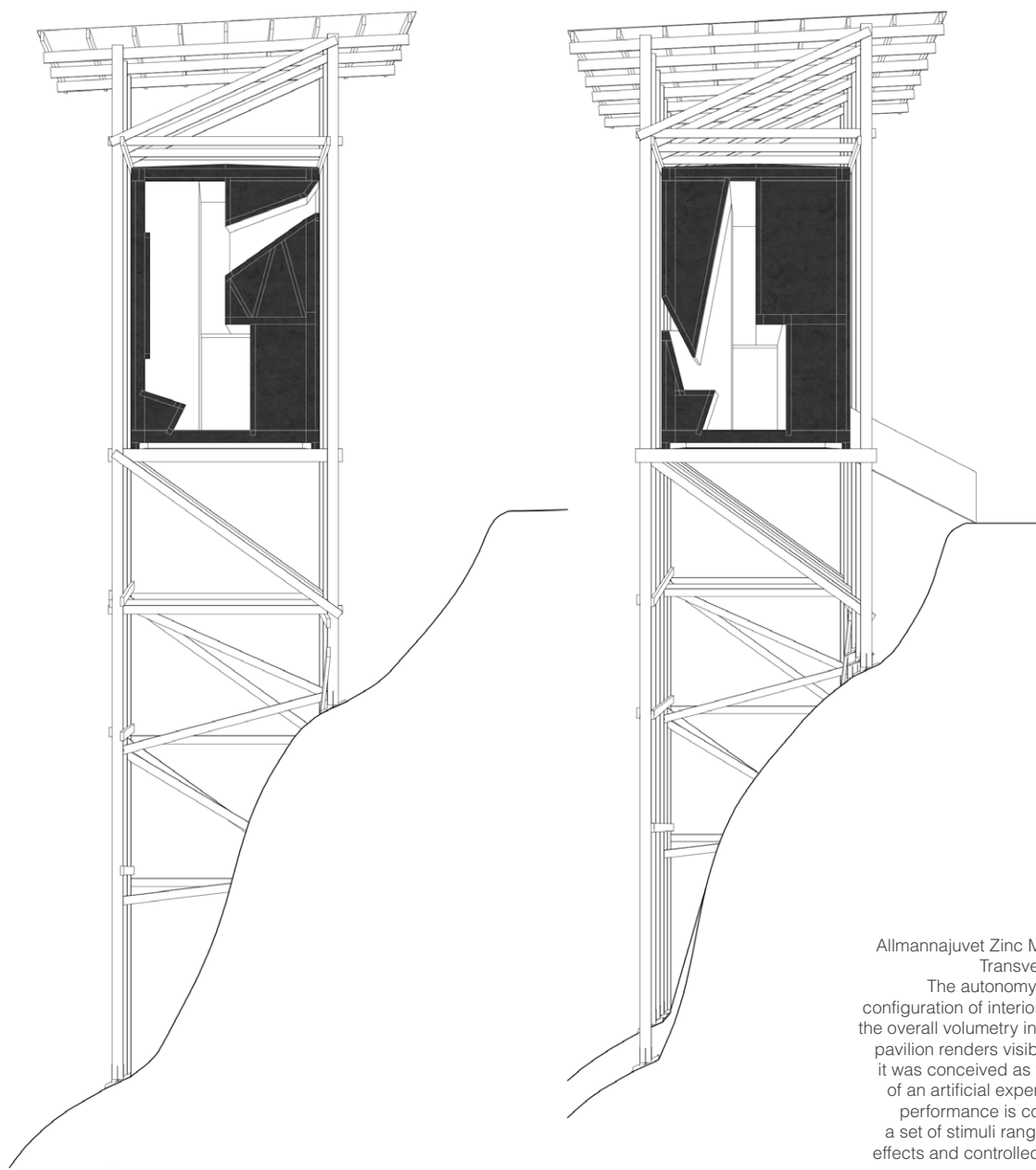


Fig. 33  
Allmannajuvet Zinc Mine Museum  
Transversal sections  
The autonomy between the  
configuration of interior spaces and  
the overall volumetry in the museum  
pavilion renders visible how much  
it was conceived as the container  
of an artificial experience whose  
performance is conditioned by  
a set of stimuli ranging from light  
effects and controlled views to the  
landscape.

interpretative drawing: RL

Looking back at Vals, the building's composition in plan, based on the opposition between "the meandering, interconnected space between the blocks and the introverted rooms within the blocks themselves"<sup>26</sup> could be ultimately read as the architectural score of a never-ending collective performance. A simultaneous gaze into the content of all the *Steins*, would reveal the image of a building conducting an orchestration of choreographed activities.

## 7.2 Buildings as performers:

If Zumthor's search for a performative condition in architecture can be summarized as the basic intention of lending an interactive quality to his buildings - and therefore enhancing their communicative potential - an interesting variation of the same principle seems to occur when the buildings themselves acquire the condition of temporal performances. This notion relates to a sort of exacerbation of the idea of architecture as the static container of meaningful action, consequently transferring the dynamic component to its own physical constitution. That means that in many of his buildings, it is possible to observe how architecture's materiality is also subject to continuous transformation, becoming the active player of a performance on a larger scale.

Examples of this condition can be found in subtle details, as in the fact that in the Kunsthaus Bregez artworks are directly nailed on the concrete walls, which in turn become an ever-changing element containing the traces of past exhibitions. Material transformations are so explored by Zumthor as a strategy to remove architecture's timelessness, be it through the conscious use of ageing process in natural materials - as in the case of the wooden shingles of the Sogn Benedetg Chapel - be it through the conception of unique materialities whose identity stems from a constructive process - as for example in the almost ritualistic erection of the Bruder Klaus Chapel. In this last case, architecture stands as the direct outcome of a bodily, collective ritual.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> P. Zumthor, in: *Therme Vals*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2007, p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> The chapel was built directly by local farmers. The basic constructive method consisted in pouring thin layers of concrete around a mould made of tree trunks which were later burned. Such a rudimentary technology extracts meaning precisely from its primitiveness.



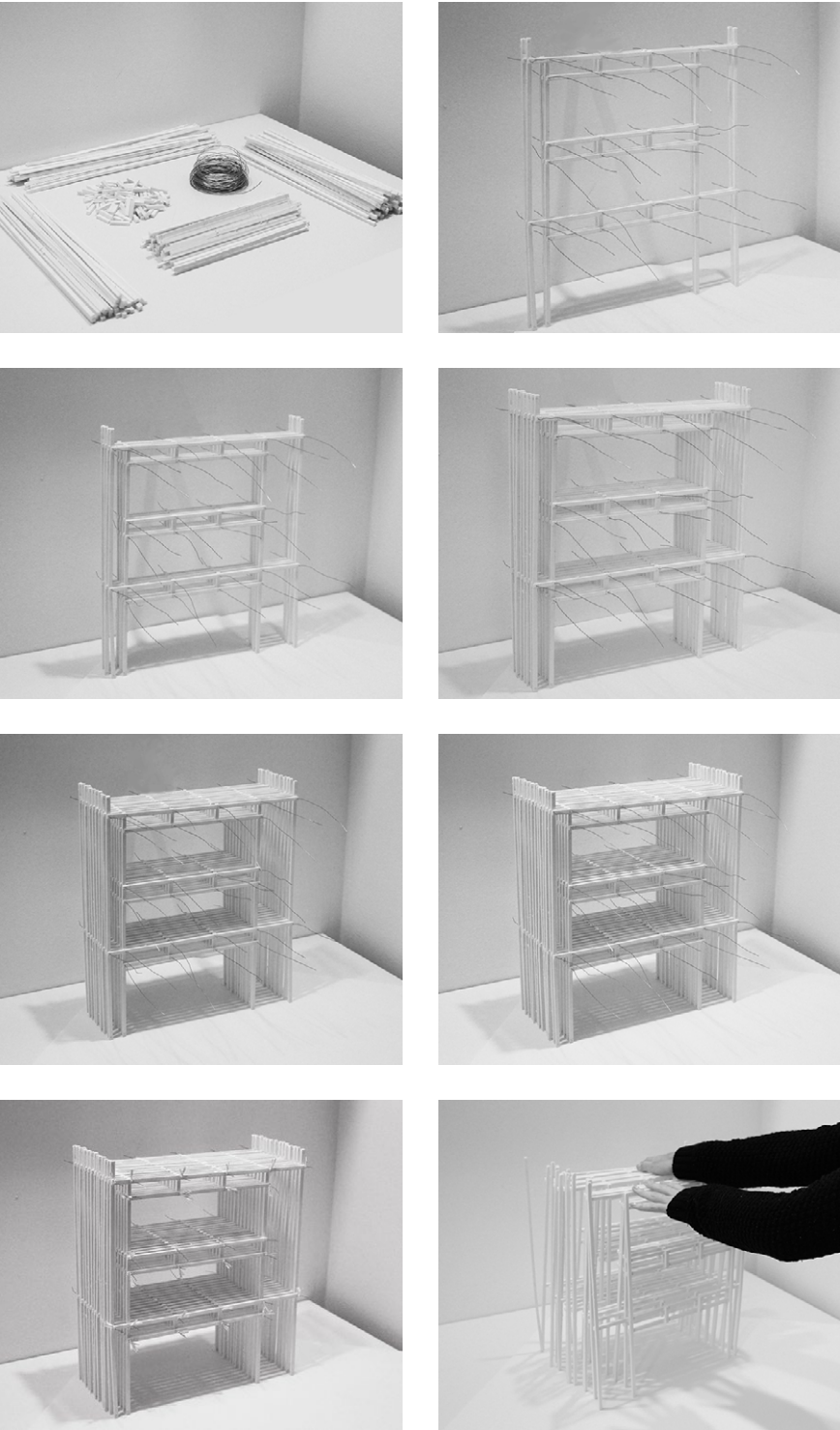


Fig. 34-41  
Topography of Terror  
Analysis of assembly system  
The building's physical presence  
stands as the effective result of a  
constructive performance whose  
temporality is intrinsic to the  
project's narrative

Next page:  
Fig. 42  
The constructive principle basing  
the assembly system holds  
the potential to be indefinitely  
reproduced - extending the  
building's construction over  
the Topography - or even to be  
reversed to disassembly, allowing  
the building to disappear as if in a  
site-specific performance

model and drawing: RL

In this sense, his project for the Topography of Terror is certainly one of the most radical examples of a building whose construction assumes a dynamic condition. The remarkable elementarity of the overall structure seems to search for the active and ephemeral qualities of an intervention - in many ways alluding to the image of the exhibition's original pavilions. In that sense, its unique assemblage method, based on the replication of a simple constructive principle, can be seen as a large-scale site-specific performance. Potentially, the act of construction could be expanded indefinitely, and the building could be imagined as extending to the places where the terror theoretically conceived in Berlin was effectively executed. The abstraction level of its constitutive principle lends to the Topography's architecture an eminently temporal dimension. Certainly, just as much as an assemblage, the dynamic could be reversed to a disassemblage, and the building's construction could perform a second act through disappearing - and leaving the site's memories untouched once again.

In December 2004, such a dystopian image became reality, as the abandonment of Zumthor's design was consolidated by the demolition of the three circulation towers erected in 1999 - which along with the foundations and the assembling crane were the only elements of the project to be ever built.<sup>28</sup> The violence and the symbolism of the act - theatrically recorded in photographs - are the concluding elements of a chapter belonging to the wider debate on the question of memory in contemporary Germany. Officially, the project's failure is told as the inevitable result of a troubled process generated from ever-increasing costs and doubts on its technical feasibility.<sup>29</sup>

Actually, the core of the question was much deeper, related to the resistance offered by many sectors of Berlin's political, social and cultural environment to the radicality of Zumthor's approach to a place of perpetration. In that sense, differently from the Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum (1998-01) and Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered

28 Topography of Terror, *Gestapo, SS and Reichssicherheitshauptamt on the Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain: A Documentation*, Ed. by Reinhard Rürup, Verlag Arenhövel, Berlin 2006 (1989),p. 222.

29 Topography of Terror, *Site Tour*, Stiftung Topographie des Terrors, Berlin 2010, p. 95.

Jews of Europe (1998-05), which were designed to commemorate victims, the Topography of Terror represented a much indigestible reality - one that speaks of the criminals themselves.<sup>30</sup> The resistance to deal with such an uncomfortable reminder seems to have found in the technical challenges posed by Zumthor's experimental construction a convenient alibi to trigger a long process of quarreling that accompanied the project's development and led to events like the unwarned cleaning of the rubble mounds from the site during the first construction phase - removing much of the design's formal consistency. Ultimately, the definitive abandonment of Zumthor's concept and the demolition of what had been already built - consuming something around 15 million euros - represented a political rejection of the 'open wound' approach to the Nazi past, one that considered necessary to the process of healing the maintenance the trauma's traces.<sup>31</sup>

The building today standing as the foundation headquarters - result of a competition held in 2005 - is a squared and one-storey volume designed by Ursula Wilms and Heinz Hallmann, inaugurated in 2010. Its relation to the site - which altered much of the ground's consistency - the anonymity of its formal and material presence, as well as the neutrality of its highly-mediated expography, stand in many ways as a contradiction to the original spirit of the movement that gave birth to the Foundation and condensed the image of the Topography of Terror in the collective act of digging. The performatic component of Zumthor's design, one that pushes the borders of architecture as a discipline, is precisely the quality whose absence is most evidently felt.

30 A thorough analysis of the political process leading to the abandonment of Zumthor's project is presented by Anna Bernardi: *Architettura e politiche della memoria. Louis I. Kahn e Peter Zumthor: due progetti non realizzati*, (to be published) Mendrisio Academy Press, Mendrisio fall 2021.

31 C. Leoni, *Peter Zumthor's 'Topography of Terror'*, Architectural Research Quarterly, 18, Cambridge 2014, p. 120

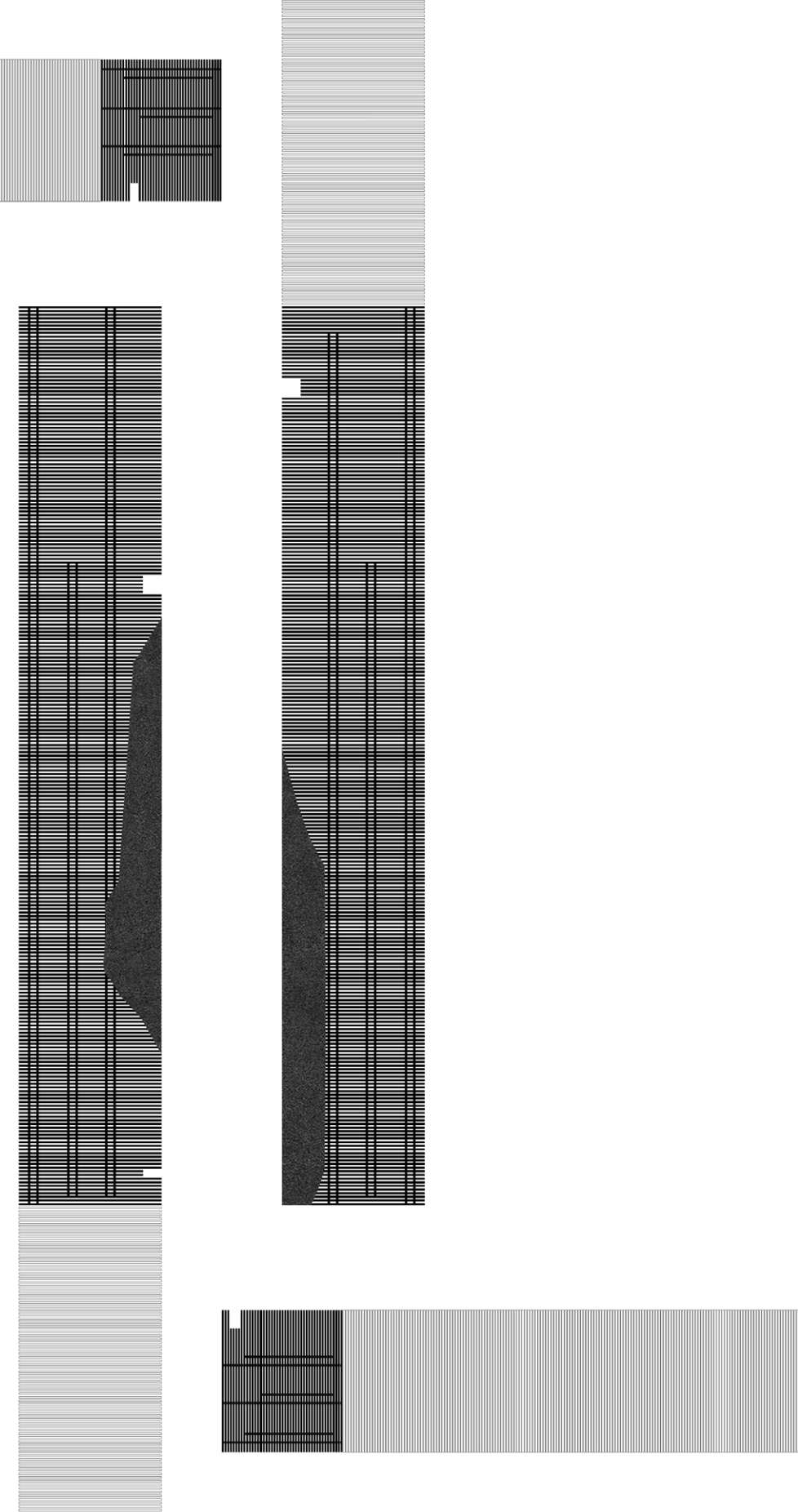






Fig. 43  
Topography of Terror  
Demolition of circulation towers by the Berlin government in 2004  
*Atelier Peter Zumthor*

## 8. Reverberations:

*“Childhood, youth, old age in every human being, are nothing else than secondary situations when compared to his ‘figure’, which doesn’t begin in birth and doesn’t finish in death. The ‘figure’ of our atelier will be that of each one of us.*

*The nobleman is a person who forbids himself of things that are not forbidden to others; that are not forbidden either by religion, or by law, or by habit. Everyday, with every act, we build the temper of the school.*

*That this personality irradiates beyond us is our privilege and duty. You don’t come to the academy, you are the academy.*

*Good work.<sup>1</sup>”*

*Peter Zumthor, 1997*

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Zumthor, *Message to students of Atelier Zumthor*. Mendrisio, February 20, 1997.

When trying to elaborate a synthesis on the work developed along this research, it seems evident how the unpredicted rediscovery of Atelier Zumthor's archives triggered a dynamic that not only provided a potential hypothesis for the study but also indicated a number of valid collateral subjects. Among these offsprings are the question of architectural education, the epic narrative of the Academy's foundation and even the reconstruction of the fascinating events orbiting all instances of Zumthor's teaching in Mendrisio. Considering the relevance and the potential of all these themes, it was not always easy to avoid dispersion and keep the focus on the research's original purpose. The instrument I tried to use for that was to always center the analysis of different arguments in architecture itself. As I mentioned in the introduction, the naive gaze of an architect that is also a student was the basic approach to the interpretation of both Zumthor's teaching and architecture.

The interrelation between these two realms became more evident along an investigation that sought to reconstruct their respective objects, namely the atelier's exercises and the design for the Topography of Terror. It was only through this assimilation process that the ideas contained in each of these projects became visible. In that sense, the analysis of Zumthor's didactics operated as an irreplaceable guideline to the reading of his architecture, offering a clear vision on its effective conceptual basis that would not be possible to achieve through the often vague contemporary appraisal of his work. This bottom-up perspective also reveals Zumthor's condition as an author deeply connected to many collective instances of his environment, not really the isolated figure as usually depicted. The suggested principles of *memory*, *construction* and *performance*, identified as concepts at the core of his architecture, are thus expected to offer a contribution to the understanding of his work as something potentially transmissible.

Looking back to the research's initial premise - the recognition of a specific quality in his architecture, identified as the ability to assume a highly communicative condition - it seems revealing that the three conceptual references emerging from this research contain a clear meaning-transfer component. The typological potential of personal experiences, the symbolic content of material transformations and the



Fig. 1  
Zumthor at work in the atelier in 1999  
AMM Archives



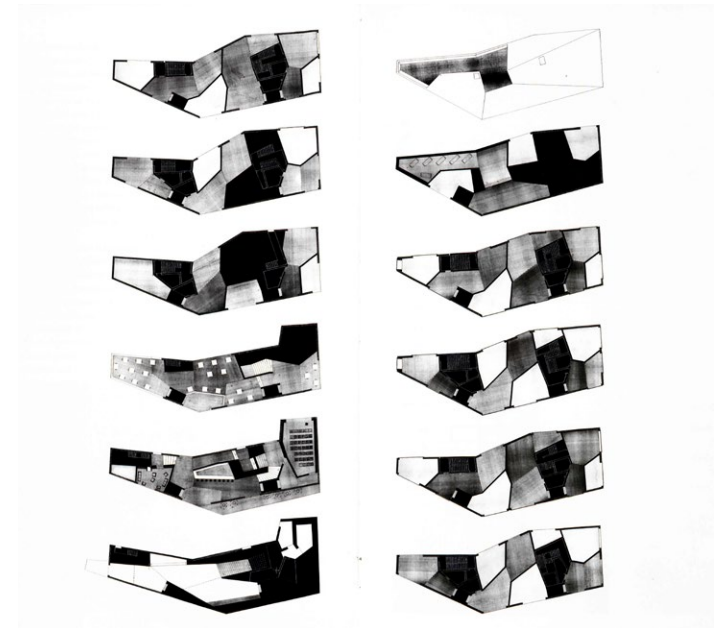
interactive dimension of the architectural space stand as the foundations of a composition whose ultimate objective is to establish a meaningful relationship with man. Their effectiveness stems precisely from their capacity of being perceived as something recognizable in the confused frame of contemporary life. In times when architecture tends to be increasingly produced and lived as an instantaneous image, the *concreteness* of Zumthor's lesson is an ever-renewed reminder of the timeliness of both his teaching and his buildings.

### 8.1 The teacher:

Besides the importance it assumed as the research's main object of study, Zumthor's atelier in Mendrisio eventually became an event whose reverberations operated at different levels. The first one belongs to the figure of the teacher. The suggested relations between teaching and practice inevitably bring the question on what transformations the first might have brought to the second. To trace such parallels is something naturally risky, considering the two realms' different conditions. In the specific case of Zumthor, the absence of his own voice represents an additional difficulty. However, in spite of all acknowledged constraints, it seems fair to suggest that such an intense experience as that of his first-year course gave him the opportunity to learn as much as to teach - especially considering the experimental nature of his methodology.

The eventual influence exerted by Mendrisio in Zumthor's architecture is hard to be traced in terms of direct parallels between his buildings and the atelier work. Nevertheless, it seems possible to identify some relations that indicate a simultaneous contamination of the two realities, registered in the temporal proximity between his teaching and some transformations of his architectural vocabulary. As mentioned earlier, by the time Zumthor sets his atelier, the imminent completion of the projects in Bregenz and Vals would sign the consolidation of a language characterized by a high level of formal abstraction and the predominant use of simple geometries - what in many ways represented an amplification of the regional thematic of his early works.

Fig. 2-3  
Mountain Hotel Tschlin (1999-02)  
Sequence of plans and model  
displayed at the Biennale in 2018  
Atelier Zumthor  
photo: RL



By the late 1990's, however, some of his designs registered a further shift towards an exploration of massive volumes and more complex formal compositions based on plastic operations. One of the most representative examples of such transformation is the project for the Mountain Hotel in Tschlin (1999-02). Its volumetry - an irregular multifaceted shape which seems to be obtained through slicing operations over a primary rectangular block - would stand as a sculptural form itself, with no evident relation between its outer envelope and the tectonics of its construction. When observing the configuration of the building's inner spaces, where each room assumes a singular geometry both in plan and section it is evident how the overall composition stems not from an abstract order, but from a sort of modelling process determining the morphology of each element as the effective outcome of a unrepeatable generative action.

Another project which seems to be of importance in this experimentation context is that designed by Zumthor for an initiative called the Poetic Landscape (1998-99). In the region around Bad Salzufen, a number of places were identified, and for each a writer was invited to compose a piece of literature inspired by that specific landscape. In the same way, Zumthor was invited to design an intervention reacting to each of the selected places.<sup>2</sup> This function-free commission was translated into a sequence of structures sharing the basic principle of a monolithic volume containing an independently-shaped void. The project can be seen as an exercise on the principle of designing by extraction, generating an interesting variation of interior spaces whose form tended to assume a formal contrast with the solid container.

Around the same period, some other projects derived the thematic of mass-subtraction into what could be called an exacerbation of formal components, which assumed a more expressive plastic configuration. That is the case, for example, of the Pingus Winery (Valbuena de Duero, 2001-05) in Spain - whose volumetry evidently resembles an organic body - and of Zumthor's design for the New City Gate of Isny im Allgäu (2009-12), in southern Germany. The second, meant to replace a long-gone fortification tower, was the protagonist of an intense debate around its construction, ultimately leading to the project's rejection by popular vote. Zumthor's design was conceived as a tripod-like roundish body - entirely made out of glass bricks - on top of which a spheric element would contain a small concert hall. Even if the reasons for the project's rejection were justified mainly in economic terms, there is little doubt that the building's unusual shape played a central role in the process.

This group of *organic* architectures that appears in his production from the late 1990's on is revealing of a composition whose attention shifts from the *typical* to the *archetypal*, leading the studio's working method to acquire a fundamental protagonism. That is precisely the point where a parallel with his teaching activity in Mendrisio can be traced.

<sup>2</sup> The Poetic Landscape project is presented in detail in the publication: B. Labs-Ehlert, P. Zumthor, *Poetische Landschaft - Park Neuen Typs*, Regionale Heilgarten, Bad Salzufen 1998.

Fig. 4-5  
Poetic Landscape (1998-99)  
Fig. 6-7  
Pingus Winery (2001-05)  
Fig. 8-9  
New City Gate Isny (2009-12)  
Atelier Zumthor  
complete works, 2014





If, as suggested in this study, Zumthor's architecture is characterized by a formal composition in strong relation with construction, here what emerges is not the replication of a constructive principle - as in the case of the Topography of Terror's assemblage method - but form as an expression of the manual, bodily manipulation of materials in the scale of models. Considering the expressiveness of those projects sharing such an organic vocabulary, it is evident how their morphology is less the outcome of an intellectual abstraction, and more the final stage of a concrete process taking place directly on matter itself.

In that sense, it is possible to identify a potential relation between the transformations verified in Zumthor's language and the working methodology explored in Mendrisio. The experimental use of models was certainly the most characteristic feature of his atelier, something that transcended the instrumental dimension of practice and acquired the value of a conceptual manifesto. Around this fascination, a set of specific techniques was created along the years of his presence in the school, resulting in models of all scales made of concrete, earth, wax and even cast bronze.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it seems legitimate to suggest that the environment of Mendrisio in some way reverberated in the work of the studio in Haldenstein - or at least that both realms were contemporarily interrelated.

In that sense, it seems important to register the testimony of Valentin Bearth, who collaborated in Zumthor's studio in the early 1980's. In his interview, he mentioned how the nature of physical models in the studio may have reflected the experimentation that took place in the Academy, especially through the incorporation of techniques and materials whose execution was made possible by the school's specific environment. The identification of the atelier as an opportunity for instrumental investigation is shared by Manuel Aires Mateus, who observed how architectural representation became the central locus of design process in Atelier Zumthor.

<sup>3</sup> A bronze model of the city of Pavia was built by Atelier Zumthor as part of an exhibition presenting students' works in 2000/01. Today, the model is on display at the entry hall of Palazzo Canavée, in Mendrisio. For the same event, Zumthor designed the metallic easels which became the official tool for displaying models in Mendrisio.



Fig. 10  
Zumthor's models displayed in the exhibition 'Dreams and Promises', during the 2018 Biennale di Venezia  
Atelier Zumthor  
photo: RL

The expressiveness of models produced today in Haldenstein - some of which displayed in the 2018 edition of the Biennale di Architettura di Venezia<sup>4</sup> - also register an intensification of their own value as artistic objects. In a certain way, they seem to twist the traditional scale between model and building, in such a way these objects - which can be defined as *models of realities*<sup>5</sup> - become holders of a quality of which the building may be even seen as a reduction.

<sup>4</sup> *Dreams and Promises - Models of Atelier Peter Zumthor*, exhibition staged in the Central Pavilion during the 16th International Architecture Exhibition - *Freespace*, curated by Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara.

<sup>5</sup> An analysis on the role played by physical models in Zumthor's work is presented in: R. Lorentz, *Modelli di realtà: Peter Zumthor e l'autenticità in architettura*, Officina 24, Rivista trimestrale di Tecnologia, Architettura e Ambiente, gennaio-marzo 2019, pp. 64-67.

## 8.2 The school:

When it comes to the Academy of Mendrisio, the effects produced by Zumthor's teaching seem to be more clearly identifiable. A short walk through Palazzo Canavée - the building housing most of the school's design classes - is enough to recognize some parallels between the work being done by students today and the work produced during the eleven years of Atelier Zumthor. Also here, it is mainly through the definition of a *praxis* that Zumthor's influence found continuation. This is visible, for instance, in the intense use of physical models, present in all ateliers as a central design interface. Analogous to those originally produced by Zumthor's students, these are explored as concrete objects seeking a higher level of material expression. Besides models themselves, the overall diffusion of some representation techniques based on photographic collages - which in Mendrisio seem to be subtly favoured over digital renderings - represents a further evidence of his contribution to the definition of what can be seen today as a *way of working* specific to the school.

Naturally, the simple use of similar techniques does not imply an automatic continuity of teaching methods. As stressed by Pia Durisch, the essence of Zumthor's didactic consisted in tracing a coherent line between the qualities of the initial image and the concrete outcome of the design process. In the same way, the different modes in which the referred instrumentality is applied reflect the autonomy the ateliers in Mendrisio tend to keep as extensions of personal practices. However, the fact that an environment like today's Academy - containing a relevant number of teachers from different origins and formations - tends to find a common ground in the instrumental dimension of teaching, is indicative of how much the institution has built its own identity around the component of practice. This seems to be directly linked to the influence brought by Zumthor's atelier. In that sense, it is also interesting to observe how the arrival of new teachers - as in the case of those invited to hold annual courses - immediately registers their efforts in searching their own language within this consolidated workframe.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A wide variety of explorations on models as design tools is visible when observing the

That means that the architects coming to teach in Mendrisio - usually with a production of recognized quality - are inevitably encouraged to engage in experimentation as a means of reacting to the environment. Considering the broader landscape of architectural training, it is also evident how the school has explored this instrumental condition as a differentiation strategy along the years, assuming the close connection between teaching and practicing as one of its main mottos. In the case of Zumthor's teaching, the presence of clay, earth, wax, sand and concrete among the everyday materials manipulated by students in the school today, stands as further evidence of how much his presence has influenced the construction of a characteristic working tradition.

It seems also important to observe the conditions in which such reverberations take place. On the one hand, it is clear that the school's identity stems directly from the impact generated by its three founding ateliers - Botta, Galfetti and Zumthor. As much as Zumthor's *real models*, one can identify Galfetti's territorial approach and Botta's humanistic vision as forces constantly informing the school's approach to architectural education. On the other hand, it seems that their different inputs and personalities have been also absorbed differently. As for Botta, what struck me the most in the conversation we had for this research was the clarity of his vision on the Academy as an institution aimed at "bringing man back to its centrality." He seemed somewhat suspicious about the potential influences of the first ateliers in the school today, and I had the feeling that this was not so important from his perspective. Botta's vision, I believe, operates on a wider scale. He sees the school as an educational project belonging to a much longer temporality - and therefore his presence acquires an institutional character.

In that sense, it seems that Zumthor's influence - conscious or not - managed to operate closer to the realm of practice and hence to become a more evident element in the characterization of the newborn school. That means that his approach tended to be more directly incor-

school's collective production, as in the occasion of the *MAD8 exhibition*, which gathers the works produced by students of all ateliers during the spring semester of 2020.





Fig. 11-14  
MAD8 exhibition staged at Teatro  
dell'Architettura in Mendrisio, 2020  
Works by Atelier Angonese,  
Atelier Collomb, Atelier Grafton  
and Atelier Aires Mateus  
photos: RL

porated to the ateliers' practice. Certainly, a great contribution to that was found in the attention drawn by the newness of his methodology, as well as the fascination stirred by his personality. A further aspect to be taken into account is that his projection to the condition of *starchitect* took place precisely during the years of his presence in Mendrisio - a process whose apex was the Pritzker Prize of 2009. The presence of such a prominent character in such a contained space like Mendrisio, seems to have provided both a referential figure for students - and colleagues - and a unique opportunity to the school's international projection as an emerging institution of excellence.

The reverberation of Zumthor's teaching in the school seems to have also benefited from the practical fact that his conceptual approach shared a common background with many of the architects that became professors along the years. As earlier mentioned, a significant number of prominent Swiss practices from the 1980's and the 1990's were particularly influenced by the architectural theories emanating from the ETH in Zurich during the 1970's. Architects like Valentin Bearth - who graduated in 1983 with Dolf Schnebli - Valerio Olgiati, and Quintus Miller - former students of the *Analogue Architektur* studio - were later incorporated to the growing process of the Academy, progressively establishing their own ateliers in Mendrisio. This gave shape to an intellectual environment where notions such as the value of biographical memories, the importance of a contextual approach towards the city and the communicative potential of atmospheres, can be found as components of a shared architectural culture.

During the development of my research, a question that inevitably arose concerns the effects of Atelier Zumthor over its students' later work. One should not forget, after all, that besides the suggested relations with Zumthor's architecture and with the school's structure, the fundamental purpose of this experience was educational. Also, considering the atelier's ambition in teaching the *foundations of composition* an important instance of its reverberation belongs to the architectural production of its former students. To trace a complete panorama of such relation, however, is something that would exceed the possibilities of this study and, in some ways, digress from its objectives. Surely,



it would be misleading to look for resemblances between the work of the different architects who attended Atelier Zumthor in terms of formal expression - and an even greater deviation to expect similarities with Zumthor's own work. As already seen, one of the key concepts of the atelier was the idea that each student should find its personal approach to architecture - and each one must also have found different conditions along the road.

Nevertheless, when observing the architecture produced today by some of Zumthor's former students - even if in a reduced number - it is possible to suggest the existence of shared characteristics specifically related to the atelier. One of them is the tendency in applying a similar language for architectural representation, based on models and photographic collages - in many cases, the expressiveness of these analogical means seems to be intentionally transferred also to digital renderings. This technical constant is the visible part of a design process built around the valorization of aspects such as the atmospheric quality of spaces and the concrete dimension of embodied perception. It is not by chance that the characteristic transversally found in the production of these architects is the sensitive use of materials, usually applied in such a way they convey a specific quality inherent to their physical presence. However, it is also true that, in spite of the conceptual proximity, many of these practices explore materiality without the same level of abstraction achieved by Zumthor through the close interrelation of construction and formal composition. As a consequence, materials' expressive qualities are very often applied by his former students in a more symbolic, almost decorative way.

There is no doubt that the educational experience of Atelier Zumthor produced a lasting impact both in students and in the school. It also questioned, through its innovativeness, the contemporary methods of architectural training. An image that seems to fit well as a concluding metaphor on the reverberations of Zumthor's teaching was accidentally conceived by Marc Collomb - who has been a professor in Mendrisio since 1998 and director from 2013 to 2016. In a short and informal conversation about Zumthor's legacy, he said that along the years the school had to progressively reinforce its foundations, alluding to the



Fig. 15  
Students at work before final critics in the court of Palazzo Canavée, spring semester 2018-19  
photo: Alberto Canepa



ever-growing scale and weight of Zumthor's models and their pressure over the building's structure. Collomb's spirituous comment, I think, contained an accurate vision in which the word *foundation* translates both Zumthor's contribution in the creation of a new school and his ambition to inquire the fundamental components of architecture as a craft. His presence in the Academy of Mendrisio today is found precisely on its foundations.

## 9. Interviews:

If Atelier Zumthor's archive represented the central documentation from which the research eventually evolved, the collection of its witnesses' testimonies proved to be an instrument of equal importance. The reconstruction of the atelier's experience is therefore based on these two complementary pillars. The decision to publish the interviews integrally in a specific chapter comes from the richness that emerged from these conversations and the evident value they acquired as primary objects of study.

As will be seen along the text, the interviews were made at different points between September 2019 and March 2021, registering different stages of the research itself. Initially, I focused on hearing the voices of former students in a moment when the archive was still unknown. In fact, it was precisely from the first talks in Mendrisio that some clues suggested the existence of some remaining materials still kept in the school. That's why, in the interviews with Stefanie Hitz, Davide Scardua and Nicolas Polli, it is possible to notice how the dynamic of exercises is not quite clear yet, as I try to understand them exclusively from their mental recollection. Also, as the research was still not structured around Zumthor's teaching at that time, some questions may even seem rather digressive. Nonetheless, the contribution of Hitz, Scardua and Polli was fundamental, as they shared not only the initial experience of Atelier Zumthor's *Primo Anno*, but have also been involved in teaching activities in the Academy for many years. This combination of perspectives lends a critical accuracy to their reports, something highly valuable for this research.

After students, Zumthor's assistants became the focus of the interviews, aiming to deepen the understanding of the atelier dynamic and reasons in a moment when the archive's documentation had already become a case-study itself. As I mentioned earlier, it was not possible to reach neither Miguel Kreisler - who didn't reply to any contacts - nor Thomas Durisch - who told me he had collaborated only briefly with the atelier in Mendrisio. This is the reason why only Miguela Tamo and Pia Durisch were heard. In that sense, I'm grateful for their openness and the interest they showed in the research, bringing a priceless contribution to the understanding of Atelier Zumthor from the perspective of its conception.

A further group of interviews were made with what could be called 'privileged witnesses' of Zumthor's teaching. In the case of Mario Botta, my main interest was to understand why Zumthor was invited to set one of the Academy's initial ateliers and how this interaction with him and Galfetti took place. His answers, however, tended to push towards a wider vision of the school as an institution, something that relates directly to his *founder* figure, and that I admire greatly. As for Valentin Bearth, the value of his contribution comes from the unique synthesis he is able to trace between the realms of Zumthor's practice and teaching, since he has worked with him in the early years of the studio in Haldenstein, and not only has been teaching in Mendrisio for over twenty years as started in the school by sharing Zumthor's atelier in 1990-00. This proximity, which is as much intellectual as geographical - Bearth's studio is based in Chur - lends to his interview a particular transparency.

The chapter's closing conversation was held with Manuel Aires Mateus, who has also been a professor in the Academy for almost two decades and whose atelier presents one of the most visible relations with the instrumentality developed by Zumthor. Considering the relevance acquired by his work at international level in the last decades, it is particularly interesting to observe the importance given by Aires Mateus to the impact of Zumthor's teaching on him, something that stresses the seminal value of the atelier as well as renders visible the instances of its dissemination throughout the school's environment.

Together, the interviews documented in the following pages offer a manifold depiction of Atelier Zumthor. Their eventual contradictions represent the vivacity of the memories they translate, as well as the different assimilation processes of interviewees. With the exception of Aires Mateus, to whom I talked directly in Portuguese, all conversations were held in Italian and later translated into English. Their transcriptions try to keep the original dynamic of informality, avoiding excessive editing even in the sometimes long answers. To all who have dedicated some time and attention to the development of this research, I am deeply grateful for their priceless contribution.



## Interview with Stefanie Hitz

Mendrisio, 06.09.2019

### On which occasion did you study with Peter Zumthor in Mendrisio?

I was part of Atelier Zumthor in the first year of the Academy, from October 1996 until June 1997. That was the school's very first year, and I didn't really know Peter Zumthor, because he was not so well-known at the time. I came from Zurich, where I studied at the *liceo artistico*, so I already had an education that was humanistic and also Italian - the *liceo* was a partnership between Italy and the canton of Zurich. So, when the Academy of Architecture opened, when finally Ticino had a university of Italian language, I decided to come to Mendrisio. Before the Academy and the other faculties that opened in Lugano, there was no university-level school of Italian language in the country, so that was something very discussed and advertised at the time. Then there was this Academy with a strong humanistic profile, intended as a contrast to the technical nature of the great polytechnic schools. When I heard about that, I came to Mendrisio, I liked the environment and said to myself: let's try! After that, I ended up in Atelier Zumthor by chance. They made a draw on the first day at Villa Argentina, with all students of the first year. There were three ateliers - Zumthor, Botta and Galfetti - and we were maybe a hundred students. There was also the atelier of Panos Koulermos, but his was a horizontal atelier dealing with representation and was transversal to all the vertical ateliers. So, I got into Atelier Zumthor and his assistant was Miguel Kreisler. Also Miguel's wife, Myriam Sterling was very present, even though she was not one of the assistants at first. I think that Miguel was a key-person within the atelier. Peter did not come from an academic reality, his formation we all know - first as a cabinet maker, later in the heritage department in the Grisons, etc. He is practically a self-taught architect. Miguel, on the other hand, did have an academic experience. There was a strong synergy between them, something like an intellectual marriage. So, Miguel was certainly a fundamental element, not only to the atelier's management but also in the intellectual work. The other assistants were Miguela Tamo, who was an artist from Chur - her contribution was also very important because of her background - and Pia Durisch, from the Lugano-based studio Durisch+Nolli. That was the team in the beginning.

### For students, the atelier was their first experience of architecture.

Yes, the first exercise was a fundamental experience for me, very formative. It really gave me the imprint on a specific way of thinking architecture. There was a very conceptual approach, driven by intuition, a method that was *non-academic*, very intuitive and sensuous. For instance, this first exercise was a block with 18x18x36cm, made of a material that should be related to some personal experience of ours. Someone built a block made of asphalt. I made a block made of bamboo sticks, because earlier I did some trips to Asia, and then I took as a starting point a period when I lived in some bamboo huts in the middle of the jungle. So this block should tell that experience, and how that materiality influenced the experience, what it had created. For example, in the case of my hut, that was a situation in which you are a little outside and a little inside, you don't actually live inside. There is only a thin protection, almost a tent. In the other case, for instance, the colleague who made the asphalt block was telling about the experience of the smell one feels when walking on asphalt on a hot day. The second exercise was a lamp, there was the whole theme of light. You must imagine that Palazzo Turconi was a working site when we were in our first year, they have just removed the curtains of the old hospital. The building was being dismantled and transformed, and in one part of it - a dark space in the basement where the walls hadn't yet been painted and there was earth everywhere - we made our installations using aluminium sheets. Each one of us got a neon lamp, and we should make a light installation. There were always drawings to be made first, all by hand, there was no computer. Later, in the second semester we did something more territorial, we also did some exercises with photography... I remember there was also an exercise about scent, 'The aroma and fragrance street'. There were fragrance shops for which we built niches, and each student should design a shop for a product with a particular scent. There was a hot chestnut shop, a fish shop, a honey shop - a thousand things - and you needed to draw, to find the materials and actually to stage that small space, then to take pictures and so on. The entire design process was very concrete, very physical. We also worked with sound, we made a tunnel - I think it should connect a louder place to a quieter one - and an expert came to teach us the fundamentals of acoustics. Then each one designed a tunnel that was translated into a model, big concrete blocks with spaces inside shaped in such a way they would reflect the sound in different ways. There were tunnels made of lead, made of wool, made of wood, and each one described how he imagined the sound inside such spaces.

**There was clearly a narrative dimension in such exercises, it seems like if one should always tell something...**

...a story, exactly. For example, when Zumthor described the spaces he imagined, he was telling a story: I imagine a space that is not concrete yet, that is dark and the light reflects in a particular way... and from that he would begin a research on the material that could bring the effect that he intended to achieve. I mean, he was not saying: I think of a space covered in black plaster.

**The genesis was thus the conception of an image carrying biographical content.**

Also biographical. He talked very much about starting from our personal experiences, these are the repertoire that each one of us has. Naturally, later I had other teachers that would maybe say that one should start from the territory, for example. Actually, also Zumthor talked about territory, as for instance in the exercises that we made during the second semester. Along with other colleagues, I worked on an area located behind the highway, where today you find the exit to Mendrisio. There was a site which was very steep, almost a triangle between the woods, the river and an artisanal zone. They told us: make something. Make an installation, show how you love this territory. So we did a thousand analysis on the highway, on the traffic speed, we spent 24 hours on the site gathering information, recording sounds, scents, how many people went by... It is something really interesting to spend 24 hours on the site. After that, we designed our work. You know that, on top of Monte Generoso, there is a small sighting facility from which you can see the entire territory of Mendrisio. The site was very steep, and we made a heart using a flexible light tube. You must have in mind the principle of Dürer, that if you make the projection of a two-dimension image over a twisted surface, only from a given standpoint you can recognize the real form. So this thing, that from the field was something unrecognizable, was seen as a heart only from the tower upon the mountain. The final presentation was like a small party. Each group made an installation on the territory. We did that, others took the courtyard of the *Oratorio* in the Old Town and replaced the gravel with little plastic crumbs. There is a company here that produces plastic elements and these crumbs in a very strong blue color. So the courtyard became blue, and in each place something to eat and to drink was offered. It was like a walk on the territory through these installations.

**At this initial moment of the school, was there a dialogue with the ateliers of Botta and Galfetti?**

Galfetti we used to call him *Galfapapà*, because he was also the school director and he was really something like a father for us all. He knew exactly what was going on in our atelier, and also Botta would appear regularly to see what we were doing - he used to come to us and shout: Here's the atelier of the crazy ones! You are mad! - but I think they had full confidence in one another. The Academy took a courageous step in bringing Zumthor to be part of the team at that moment.

**Speaking of Zumthor's teaching method, do you think it was fully understood by students? Could it be taken by some of them as too vague?**

It was naturally not a scientific method, neither a checklist that you must do and then your project works. Actually, it was an extremely intuitive approach, very sensuous. In that sense, Zumthor has a very particular way of making things. As a person, he is very particular, very concrete, very observative of what is happening around him, and I believe he can very often be misunderstood. Who doesn't have the education of a specific sensibility, who has a more technical formation perhaps, could be even disturbed by that. Because not everyone feels comfortable when speaking about their personal intuition in front of fifty strangers - and we were questioned at a very personal level in many moments. In some critics, there were nearly a hundred people around, and he used to make them really sharp. We had to be very brave in this sense. At the beginning, he was very tough, and over the years he eventually became softer. After all, I believe he had to learn the job as well. Also Miguel was very intense, very present, he required full dedication from us. He was here day and night, many times working until midnight. When Zumthor came to Mendrisio, he used to stay at Miguel's, they had developed a relationship of close collaboration. The whole thing was very intense. I can speak for myself. After the atelier's first year, I went to work in Zumthor's studio in Haldenstein, and after that, I decided to take a little distance, to see other things.

**Of this experience in Atelier Zumthor, what do you carry with you the most?**

The approach to the world. The conceptual approach, an approach with eyes wide open. This conceptuality when building an idea, a method that says that first I must gather my impressions, ideas, facts, and just then I begin, little by little, to bring them together. An approach that is also a back and forth process, a slow process that is not always easy. The models made by Zumthor, for instance, require a huge structure, an enormous amount of work. It seems to me that this is a very strong influence of Zumthor in the Academy today, this great attention to models. That is clearly a *zum-*



*thorian* contribution, to work with great intensity through models and very often to build models even before the drawings. I must say, however, that even if today everybody is working with models, Zumthor was even more intense with his 1:1 models, the research for materialities, everything was very concrete. So, the use of models that is seen in the school today, comes very much from him. His models were very conceptuals, they were not just a representation of space, but always a concept. They expressed the intrinsic content of a design intuition. It could be a piece of rock, a marble slab cut in a specific way, things that were already a project, contained the intrinsic truth of a project. Of course, after that one could make other models with other intentions, to take photos and so on - we used images that didn't have the precision of a rendering. It was really about not being afraid of expressing feelings, because architecture is also made of that. Certainly there are also other rules, but what we live through architecture is its atmosphere, its sound, its light, a material that is smooth or cold - even if you touch a table, every wood has a different warmth. I think these are things he learned mainly from his experience as a craftsman, the value of materiality.

**We are talking about a way of making architecture not based on an abstract discourse, but on concrete reality.**

Exactly. It is a constant research, and I respect him very much for that. Because very often it happens to an architect to reproduce himself. And that seems not to have happened with Zumthor.

## Interview with Davide Scardua

Lugano, 13.09.2019

### How was your experience as a student in Atelier Zumthor?

My knowledge of Zumthor began actually before the Academy. I attended the technical school in Lugano - which is now called SUPSI - where you can get a degree of architect or engineer. Within that education, there were naturally many technical disciplines, and until the moment when the Academy appeared, this was the only path to become an architect here in Ticino. Who wanted to study in a university, had to go either to the other cantons of Switzerland or abroad. Many took that direction, as Rino Tami, Aurelio Galfetti, Mario Botta, etc. So the school here had a very technical profile, in the design studio our projects reached a constructive level very close to the reality of execution. At a certain point, I felt a bit tight inside this school, and decided to stop. I needed to understand if that was really what I wanted to do. So I went to work in an architecture studio for a year, at the studio of Luigi Snozzi's daughter. There I had the opportunity to experience another vision, one that came from a cultural dimension clearly connected to the figure of Snozzi. An architecture that was sensitive to the territory in the way I felt it should be. It was not only about technique, there were things that I couldn't find in the technical school. Then I decided to leave it and take a step further, I wanted to keep on studying. Looking around, I tried to figure out where that would be possible, and then I heard that in the next year a university would be starting at Mendrisio. Reading the program, I found the names of many great professionals like Kenneth Frampton, Francesco Dal Co, Leonardo Benevolo, great figures. Also great architects, like Mario Botta and Aurelio Galfetti - who we all knew - and there was this man called Peter Zumthor. To me, it all happened within a week. I went to the library at the technical school and, looking at some things related to wood construction, I stumbled on a publication featuring a project by an architect from the Grisons - a shelter for some Roman ruins in Chur - and I was surprised. Surprised and intrigued. That feeling, I must admit, made me choose to go to the Academy in Mendrisio, because I knew that Peter Zumthor would be there.

At a personal level, I felt an attraction, even if I couldn't really explain. That building - afterwards I discovered some other projects by him - made me feel a certain closeness. I felt myself close to that way of doing architecture, and wanted to know more about it. This was how I got to know about Zumthor, and I was lucky enough to have him not only as a teacher in my first year, but to be part of his atelier during all the way until my *diploma*. So, six years of work with him in the atelier, and it was a wonderful experience. Also the construction of Zumthor's atelier along these six years - the Academy's first cycle - was a project. He meant it just like that, what shows much of his way of doing things. That is, to lead a group of students through a project that, even if defined by a theme in each year, was developed by the same people for six years. It happened like that because he was able to recognize in each person a specific quality - that I found very important and genuine in him. The first instrument of each one was his memories, what one remembers, his experiences. That was what he wanted, to bring each one of us to the intimate knowledge of our experiences. He would pose only a few questions during the critics, and these were always the same: Where does your image come from? What experience did you have in this place? What is the thing you would never let go from this memory? That was meant to access the core from which the project could emerge. To get to the substance that could define an idea, the foundation of a design. Because you really need just one, one principle, one concept. That is how I understand his work as well, to be founded on one image, one experience that is not only subjective. It is subjective of course, but possible to be translated into an image of a space, of an architecture, of a scent, of a texture. Everything should be translated in a few lines, sometimes through referential images, sometimes through writing, but everyone should be able to get it. So, we built our education at the Academy with our own experiences. That is very important for me. The way in which Zumthor interacted with us was very intimate, because it was linked to the concrete facts of a person's life, to the memory of an individual. The hard core of every design was this extremely personal component. I remember one time when a colleague, not knowing how to express herself properly, said: Maybe my project should be more *zumthorian*. He immediately answered: I'm Peter Zumthor, you are someone else, you should be more of yourself. What I can offer to you is the reference of a process, the elaboration is made with your memories, your concrete experiences. This was foundational: concrete.

**I have heard the word 'concrete' very often during my research. The etymology, as I learned, refers not to the physical presence of matter - as one could think at first - but to the perception of one's experience in the world.**

Exactly, and it touches so many dimensions. That's why the kind of knowledge that Zumthor tried to explore was a true research and opened many other possibilities. If we talk about experience, then we talk about sound, perception, etc. Perception is an idea that seems ethereal, but is very concrete. There is no mystery at all. Also Zumthor - who sometimes is taken as a mysterious character when he talks about atmospheres - is really talking about this, concrete things. In his teaching he always referred to things, the phenomena and their effects. This was the way to reach quality. What is an atmosphere, after all? It is the quality I want to embed a space with, the quality of a moment I live. The core is that: always to address life. The work proceeds from within, from the definition of the quality of a moment of life. The elements of architecture are not many. There is light, the senses... geometry, for instance, is not a value in itself. Actions, on the other hand, are - and so are gestures. We could also talk about the gestures of doing, of building, transforming a site. What distinguishes Zumthor's work is precisely that, to recognize the genuine value of such gestures. Another important thing is to understand that this method applies not only to architecture. Here we are not talking strictly about architecture, we are talking about processes in which man acts to transform a place, to transform matter into an artistic object. The process is the same. I remember once when Zumthor told us that his intention was to teach a process that later each one should mature, and it would make no difference if after the school we choose to be a cook, an architect, a musician or anything else. If you want to cook, the process is just the same.

**The exercises in the first year were quite unusual to the environment of an architecture school. The first one, for example, 'The personal construction module'...**

Yes, a block measuring 18x18x36cm, a material - and more than that the assembling of that material - which should come from a personal experience of ours. At the beginning, he said: you might use a good memory or a bad memory, but I would recommend choosing a good one. This was an exercise in which selection was important. Which is the experience that you like to recall and to share - so it's a personal moment of selection. What is the foundational element to tell this experience. We could choose only one, just one material. Then we presented the module and the experience to the colleagues. Then Zumthor said whether, in his view, the material was able to convey that experience. After that, there was a general debate, discussing whether the material and the memory matched. That is, to find a principle, a pleasure, in order to remove every superficial element from it, and then to bring it into a project that conveys a character understandable to everyone.



Curiously though, all good projects were able to convey other images to the audience. We worked really hard with the assistants in order to identify that single element, and also to understand how to assemble it. Because after all, the block should be built. It should have stability, should be transported, keep those specific dimensions, should be presented... it was important to understand the transformation of that element into a construction material. This first exercise, when I look back, contained so much. I still remember my material. I built a block made of field grass. It was made of so many *estelle* - this green field grass - assembled with a tiny metallic thread, in such a way they would create, when looking at the block perpendicularly, a dense weave of vertical branches. In my case, it was also important that the block could convey the scent of that particular grass. It could not be dry, so I had to design a process to ensure that it would arrive well at the presentation. I could not cut the grass two days before, I had to get it at the last moment, and build the block in a limited amount of time. The scent was important in my experience. I come from a region close to Bellinzona, where there is a valley in the Magadino plain, which is an agricultural zone. Beneath our house, during spring, the farmers grow this grass to make hay to the animals. When I was little, I used to walk down the field - the grass was maybe 80cm high, I was smaller - and got into this dense forest. I pressed the grass around me, in such a way a circular space was created, and inside that circle I felt really good. I felt I was in my place. Looking around, I could see only the top of the mountains beyond the *estelle*, I was isolated from the house and everything else. So, what I presented was precisely the portion of the *estelle* that I could see. I could not see the higher part, neither could I see the roots. I saw only this central portion where some small flowers appeared. And of course, this stratification of infinite branches that formed something like a wall around me. This was my experience, and it was clearly linked to that scent. That was a foundational exercise, I think it also gathers much of Zumthor's approach to architecture.

#### And how was the work in the advanced years?

There were the natural differences between a first-year course and the more mature reality of the superior years. As I said, however, I see all the six years as a continuous education. The principles were the same. One example was the final work, the *diploma*. When I did mine with him, he asked us to present a theme. Now, at the university, a theme is given to all students and only then, within that general subject, each professor chooses what to develop. When I did it - luckily - Zumthor asked the student what he would like to develop as a theme for his *diploma*. You should write a brief text and

present it to him. He would make some questions, then he would choose whether to work alongside you or not. It was meant like that, the project was yours. If you take that as an example, it is something very personal and concrete. It is revealing of his personality and his way of doing and thinking. The simple selection implies a strong gesture. During critics, very often he would talk about a project only by asking: Which questions have you posed to yourself? If you pose a good question, you have already defined a field where your future gestures will move.

To ask questions first was something very didactic, and I think in that sense he was very close to the lessons of Aldo Rossi and the Analoge Architektur. If earlier we were saying that many times Zumthor's idea of atmosphere is read superficially, the same happened to Aldo Rossi. When he suggested this concept of analogy, many students started to mimic Rossi, but what he built was intimately connected to his experiences. Others understood that they should work with their own experiences. I think that among those you can find this Swiss generation that was really influenced by Rossi's teaching in Zurich, and later by the contributions of Fabio Reinhard and Miroslav Sik - who informed much of what we today know as contemporary architecture. They share this attitude of approaching a place in an original way, without preconceived ideas in your mind. If we look at Zumthor as an architect, there is always a process of observation first. Observing the phenomena is the base of his design action. One instrument in this process is the use of models, which he brought to his teaching. He believed - and I agree - that the use of big models allows you to observe what you are doing as if you were looking into a mirror. When you are inside this object, you ask yourself: is really that what I want to make? Is this the atmosphere? Should the light enter from this point? Is this idea appropriate for this project, or maybe for another one? So you are always selecting. In such a way, we can design an original project. Not because it is extravagant, but because the choices are subordinated to a foundational principle. In his atelier, we were always put inside this process. We never learned a formula, everything was always brought back to zero. You can see this in his architecture, which every time provides unique answers. Sometimes, looking from the outside, they even surprise us. Because maybe you see a detail that was used in a certain way for the first time, a wall whose materiality makes you think of another artform... Architecture can reach different forms of expression. He is really a curious person. We were talking before about the input that can generate a musical composition, an artistic performance... We are not talking about form, we are talking about the process, the relationship between an idea and its execution.

**I must say that I was surprised to find a strong performatic component in his architecture. I mean, an architecture that is not limited to the building, but seems to deal also with the actions taking place in it, the choreography of space...**

Correct. Because architecture is an experience. If we think about: what are the things we remember? They are things that were printed by unique moments, moments that contain so many meanings. I have my own experience, but if I speak with someone coming from the other side of the globe, within that experience we can find the same values. How can we recognize beauty, or something good, in a small Japanese object, if we know nothing about Japanese culture? We recognize these small gestures which contain something that transcends time. It seems like a philosophical discourse, but it is all about gestures.

**Do you think this discourse was fully understood by students at that time?**

Well, I'm speaking now after already reflecting on that experience. I must say though, for me it was quite clear. Perhaps I couldn't get the message with all the nuances we are talking about now, but there was a strong feeling of it. Zumthor required from us a great commitment, especially when looking at a model or a drawing, he always questioned us about how much that gesture contained the atmosphere we wanted to create. So we had also to develop the means that he wanted to use, models with different scales and materials... It was never like reading a book, it was an extremely practical experience. Personally, I find it an excellent teaching. There was always a confrontation with matter, with an object, not really a theory. However, many of these nuances I found later, rethinking.

**What do you think remains of him in Mendrisio?**

I worked at the Academy as an assistant until two years ago. The school has really changed. When I lived it, it was a very special moment. There was nothing, everything had to be built. So, also the teachers were building their didactic year after year, observing our feedback. Now it is not like that. The education - also due to the Bologna agreement - is more programmatic. Even though, I think one can sense that Zumthor has already been there. In a practical sense, some things remained. On the one hand, there are teachers now who were originally invited by him to come to the school. It was because of Zumthor that Valerio Olgiati was invited, also Valentin Bearth. So there is a network of people sharing a certain way of doing things.

When I collaborated with Valentin Bearth, in our atelier we worked with students in a similar way, respecting each one as someone with a specific background, a specific sensibility, we talked about *stimmung* and so on. Also Quintus Miller works a lot with those instruments. Thinking about it now, Zumthor brought many contributions to the school.

**The work culture in Mendrisio seems to be somehow rooted in the activity of Atelier Zumthor. There is a valorization of the act of making and of the body dimension that seems important in an increasingly abstract world.**

Yes, and I find myself very close to that. If I look back to the experience I had there while teaching, I must say that I saw new generations of students who have an even greater need to deal with these instruments. Because in all fields the reality around us is increasingly ethereal, linked only to the most superficial layer of image. The image is simply the outcome of a process which allows you to identify the character of a space, of a place, of a moment. I think that was somehow misunderstood, some people become too connected to referential images, without questioning what is the real idea contained in that reference. You must always be a good observer, that I learned from Zumthor.



## Interview with Nicolas Polli

Lugano, 13.09.2019

### In which period did you study with Zumthor in Mendrisio?

I did the first year with Zumthor, which was also the school's first year. Then, in the second year he wasn't teaching, he was working only with the first-year atelier. In our case, there were two ateliers in charge of the second year - Panos Koulermos and Kenneth Frampton. After that, the third year was the time for us to leave and have a working experience. Then there were the fourth and fifth years, which I did all with Zumthor. So, I studied with him for three years in the Academy, plus the final year of *diploma*. The courses were organized in the long run. I mean, he formulated a program with the objectives for each semester and that would be later added to the following years. The thing was, let's say, evolutive, it didn't repeat itself. Zumthor began in the first year, I remember that the first exercise was this rectangular block of a material that should remind our childhood. I was coming from a school here in Lugano, the technical school that at the time was called STS - *Scuola Tecnica Superiore*. I had already graduated as an architect, but since I was very young and wanted to continue my studies, I chose to come to the Academy. And to be honest, I couldn't understand what I was supposed to do at first. I mean, a material that reminded me of my childhood... There everything started. If I remember well, there was the block, then the 'Fragrance street'... but before the 'street' there was '100 steps for a blind', and after the 'street' came 'A lamp' - we had to build a lamp with the material they gave us. So, these were the exercises in the first year. They were brief, usually each would last a month or something like that. There was a body of assistants working with Zumthor, Miguel Kreisler, Miguela Tamo and Pia Durisch. But maybe I should make a short premise. I chose the Academy because in this school I attended first, there was a teacher - the architect Roni Roduner - who one day said to the class: Look guys, there is this architect from the Grisons who is very good, he works very well with wood and so on. By that time, Zumthor had built the chapel, I think, and the extension of that farmhouse on the Alps. This is the way everything started. I must also say that the assistants were important in the atelier. They were very present, very active. For me, the didactic of the first year was quite surprising. Coming from a school where I had already designed a few things, the idea of making a block confused me, and I couldn't really understand

it in the beginning. But then I started to become aware of my senses - since the course was really based on that. Even before memory and atmosphere, it was focused on our senses. First, there was this exercise about memory - which was very personal - then came hearing, scent, and finally sight with the 'lamp'. So, the most important thing was to realize that we have our own bodies, and those are the channels to receive the world. I wasn't really aware of that before the course.

### How was this exercise '100 steps for a blind'?

They said: there is a town, a mountain, and on the other side there is another town. You must design a tunnel to connect these two towns, and this tunnel should be walked by a blind person. So, you have to work with sound, reverberation, everything concerning acoustics. Then, of course, there were different solutions. Each of us tried to give answers that were really concrete, because it should work, after all. It was not enough to present just an interpretation, it had to work.

### A teaching based so much on the senses and bodily perception was unique to Zumthor or was it shared by other ateliers?

It was exclusive to him. I think he was the first to work like that, at least I never heard of anyone teaching architecture like that before. A huge number of possibilities unfolded through Zumthor's teaching. Things that were made possible because you became aware of the world through your senses, and that makes you aware of yourself. Of course, this is a rather individual work. I remember there were some students that began the first year and after a few weeks decided to leave the atelier, because it was too hard for them. In the critics of the first exercise, for instance, he made questions that were meant to check whether you were coherent with the sincerity of your memory, or you were presenting the reflection of some other idea. It was like being naked somehow, and that can be very uncomfortable for some students. However, now I remember that these four exercises were actually in the first semester. In the second semester we worked on the territory. We were divided in groups and made an exercise in which we had to act on the territory with installations that should render visible a particular feature of a given place. This was a very artistic-conceptual work. Indeed, Zumthor brought much of this art culture to the school. Personally, I learned about land art, conceptual art, a whole network of cultural connections that I didn't know before and that are related to our profession. They all deal with sensibility, with phenomena working with human beings or with nature.

**After your practice year in Madrid, did you have the chance to work with Zumthor?**

Yes, before my diploma I worked with him for about eight months. A very different place from the atelier in Mendrisio, and it is normal to be like that. Teaching is a privileged space where there is no external pressure, it is really a place of experimentation. The studio had a different dynamic.

**Hearing your description of the exercises, it seems like this was a knowledge transmitted not through theory, but through practical action.**

There were some brief texts, more like thoughts, similar to those that Zumthor later published in 'Thinking Architecture'. The core was a didactic designed to lead the student to the understanding of certain things independently. This way of teaching was intuitive, there were not too many explanations. We talked about memory, but there were no specific instruments to approach it. Some of those things I have rediscovered many years later, when I came to the Academy to be an assistant.

**I have already heard some people refer to Zumthor's teaching as 'esoteric'...**

There was a certain *ambiance*. Some might say it was esoteric, for me it was not. I found it simply fascinating. It was part of the teaching strategy, to create some atmospheres to catch the attention of the students. These were Zumthor's instruments. I remember when he did a public lecture at the hall surrounded by wood, and then the spot light was only on him, and there was a particular *ambiance* which captured all our attention.

**It is interesting that Zumthor came to be a professor in Mendrisio and not in Zurich...**

I think this was the intuition of Mario Botta, who brought these architects together. And the combination started to work. In fact, it worked very well. As far as I'm concerned, I can only be grateful.

**Looking back, how do you think this experience transformed you?**

I remember that Zumthor used to say that architecture is not taught, it is transmitted. It's like the passion for each profession is passed on to others. Being aware of the sensitive aspects of being human was a fundamental lesson for me as an architect.

## Interview with Miguela Tamo

Basel, 24.09.2020

**In the academic year of 1996-97, the first of Atelier Zumthor in Mendrisio, the original group of assistants was formed by three architects - Miguel Kreisler, Thomas Durisch and Pia Durisch Nolli - and one artist - Miguela Tamo. This formation would remain substantially constant during the three years of the *primo anno* course. How did you become part of the atelier? Was there any previous collaboration between you and Zumthor?**

I had my studio in Chur and exhibited many times there, and Zumthor was obviously a well-known figure, so it happened that we would eventually meet - it is not that big a city. But in fact, I first knew Annalisa, a poetess, Peter's wife. We worked together on an art project and in 1994 she wrote a marvelous poetic text connected to sculptures in an exhibition of mine in Chur. We had then also some other common friends, and when Peter Zumthor learned that he would be teaching in Mendrisio he thought - at least he told me so - that he would like to invite also an artist to be an assistant, not only architects. He was interested in things that were not, let's say, exclusively linked to architecture. It was more like a conceptual approach, how one sets up the work, be it a piece of music, literature, artwork or architecture. There are some things that are common to different types of expression. During the *primo anno* course, Peter invited also other artists, poets and musicians to bring punctual contributions. Obviously, in architecture there is a great part that has to do with construction, technique. For me, it was an adventure. I didn't know what would expect me there as a job, since I had no experience in architectural design. Naturally, he said from the beginning that this would not be necessary, also because the other assistants were architects. And later, from the exercises we made, I immediately understood that I could very well offer my contribution, actually that it would be very interesting. I never felt out of place, even without any training in architecture.

**The experience of Atelier Zumthor's *primo anno* course was quite particular. It was a project designed to exist in a limited amount of time - three years - and from the beginning there was the conscious intention to observe and document it, as in an experiment. That was something very peculiar in the context of architectural training. Where did this format come from? What was the intention in conceiving a time-limited course?**



I cannot really answer that. I believe that was a discussion that took place with Zumthor, Galfetti and Botta. Looking back, I don't know exactly. I remember that there was this idea of making three times a first year. I believe it was Peter's intention to do so, because I think he considered very important the student's first approach to architecture. It is harder to take students in a third, fourth year and present them notions that are foundational to architecture. If one was already shaped in a completely different way... I think it is always fantastic - even if you are a school teacher - it is fantastic to take the kids in the first year. I find it a most important moment, when after all the mandatory education, you are finally in the position to do what you want, to study what you want. It is a moment of fantastic energy. So, to provide these students the right input, to teach architecture in the best way, to make them aware of certain things, I think this was Zumthor's idea, something he imagined as an experimentation: Let's see in these three years how it goes.

**I saw that in the archives there is always an indication of the student's place of origin under the names.**

Not that this was relevant for us, but in some exercises students should begin from something biographical and so the place of origin was naturally part of it.

**Regarding the course's radicality, it seems like the atelier was not designed in such a way because of the fundamental nature of a first-year course, but took this as an opportunity to develop an investigative project. How much do you think the atelier in Mendrisio reflects a personal research of Zumthor himself? Did you find in it the occasion for a personal reflection on your own work?**

Concerning Zumthor, he did what he believed in, what he thought was the right thing to do and this with great intuition as well. About that, I think that many things came from his experience of what he saw missing in the young architects that went to work in his studio, who he firstly had to teach a certain approach, so they could collaborate properly in his projects. Obviously, one does not necessarily have to attend a school like that, one can very well get there by his own. But certainly, many architecture schools work in a different way, as you mentioned before. I think he simply developed this course with those he believed were the best, most important things a first-year student could learn. To raise a sensibility for materials, for light, for space, for volumes, for the many things that are part of thinking architecture. For Peter Zumthor, architecture is something that touches all the senses. It is always about architecture, but it is necessary to think also about acoustics, about light and shadow, material's

tactility and so on. In the end, those things create the atmosphere of a place, of architecture. He wanted students to begin thinking architecture not as surfaces of a white cube - an immaterial abstraction - but from the very beginning as something real.

**Was the atelier a space of personal investigation for you?**

Certainly, how could it not be? From the beginning I understood that I could learn a lot from this work also for my work, and it was really like that. And this was very satisfying.

**Focusing on the exercises, their innovative nature is certainly the most striking aspect of the course. Titles such as the Personal construction module, Prototype of a door handle, or A window for my friends, to read by the light of the lake, are sufficient to reveal both their newness and their value as creative projects themselves. Today, we find them in the archives presented as a sequence, named from A to S. How did the conception of the exercises take place? Were they originally conceived as an entire sequence?**

They were conceived more or less one at a time. It was always Zumthor who suggested the first idea, the initial proposition. Maybe he had in mind a given sequence, but they were actually gradually developed. It was not like we said: Let's do this number of exercises, this is the first, this is the second... On the contrary, I think the idea was also to observe, it was something new for all of us. To see what the outcome of a first exercise would be, the reaction, the students' works, and based on that how to go on. Perhaps we thought, maybe we knew of a second exercise while we were still working on a first. And maybe after a year we noticed, for example, that it was always important to have an exercise asking the student to do something biographical. As for instance the film they did before the *In situ* project, the one called *Personal landscape*. The student always had to explain also with words what was the link to his biography, to himself, to his life, to his memory. So, from one year some things were born and became important, and later we proposed them in the form of new exercises in the following years. We did in the first year the *100 steps for a blind* and in the second year the project in the silver mine - they are similar in a certain way. If you see projects such as the one in Laveno or the *In situ*, these already deal with a wider landscape, a bit more challenging. They are really about coming out, looking at spaces, the existing architecture, in order to conceive a project for that space. These were already wider exercises, placed by the end of the first year. There is a line in the end, connecting one exercise to another and one year to another. This is based, however, on the experience we did and on what Zumthor considered important to convey in the first year of an architecture course. It was something that he always

discussed with us - what do you think, how could we do, do you have an idea - and this was a very creative and intriguing way of working. It was an adventure because none of us, not even him, had made this experience before. For example, at a certain point we realized that students didn't know how to draw. We discussed it, in theory it should be taught in the horizontal atelier, but we realized they had not learned exactly what we wanted them to know. So, we decided to do a sort of a short drawing course, showing them how Zumthor draws when he designs. I mean, in the times I saw him working, he didn't use a sharpened pen. He would instead use colored charcoal, transparent paper, and freely draw a sketch. You may recall some of his published drawings of Vals or Bregenz. We wanted to teach them to work like that, the drawing of a first idea should already express the atmosphere of the architecture you think of. This is the first approach to design. We also showed the students how to draw facades and sections that expressed the first idea more in a conceptional than in a technical way, so from the very beginning it was important to think in three dimensions. Later comes the elaboration, the detail and so on. We realized we had to show them a set of possibilities.

**Another component of the atelier didactic that stands out is the focus on authoriality as a means of legitimization. There were no exemplary projects that students should refer to and in many exercises the final assessment was based on their relation with a deep personal dimension, as in the case of memories. Such an approach is not very common in architectural training, actually many schools are deliberately focused on the contrary, fearing it could lead to a loss of critical sense. Why was authoriality such an important condition for the architectural training in the atelier? How do you think it would positively inform the students' future work as architects?**

It was always important to start from a lived 1:1 experience. I mean, as a child, before knowing the word architecture, I already start to perceive it. Basically, it was about starting from those things, the sensations I had, the experiences I had. To start from the own experiences of the young students was something also meant to avoid sophisticated artificialities. One can realize the importance of the sound produced by a material, because he may remember his grandmother strolling with a pan in her wooden house kitchen. Those are ordinary things, but they have a quality that belongs to architecture: to produce pleasant sounds, beautiful light, nice smells, etc. If I have not experienced one thing, I can look everywhere, but in the end, I'm not really qualified to manage it. I think memory is very important, because it gives you a distance from something you lived, and therefore to extract a content you can later work with. And obviously it helps to generate free, authentic design. This is actually what creates poetry in architecture, what can provide quality also in art. Don't you agree?

**I agree completely. It seems to me very interesting how the personal dimension was such an important component of the course. Many students told me this is probably what struck them the most. It is also interesting to compare to the traditional methodology of a first-year course, which very often deals with exemplary projects as references. Botta's atelier in Mendrisio, for example, asked students to redraw a stair, first isolated, then the stair of a famous building and the final task was to design a stair.**

Yes, I remember this was a nice first year project of Atelier Botta, we would just start the other way around, asking the students to remember a stair of their childhood that touched them. Why did it touch them? That is interesting, because when we search in ourselves, we become aware of a quality. A quality we may use to design. For someone young, that is not simple. When you are young, you live in the present with a look to the future. But to remember which effect something had on you, something that you remember perhaps as a child: a tactile impression, a scent, a view... We wanted to avoid something that is born merely from abstract thinking and drawing. It must be thought from the beginning in terms of material. Materiality is something with so many sensual qualities, and this stands right in the beginning. I won't say our approach was right or better than the one of the other first-year ateliers. It was just different, and in the end managing different points of view makes studying and teaching a richer challenge. It is also important to say that there was this great freedom. I remember Peter saying that he was very grateful to Galfetti and Botta for giving him the possibility to do this experience.

**One of the intentions of our research is to identify compositional principles that could be extracted from the course's didactic. A first element that seems fundamental in the atelier is the use of autobiographical memories. Students were asked to consult their personal memories as a source of images that would then be used as the content to be communicated through design.**

Yes, because each one is skilled in his own memory. That is a competence that you can use when working with students. Only himself is skilled in his memory, and from that he can extract so many things. For example, in this spatial image in which they should build models with 3+1 materials, and then you looked through an oculus and it was about seeing if the student was able to find coherence between his memory and the outcome. That was the final assessment and it was interesting, through these exercises, to learn together to be coherent in how we see things, how we talk and write about them, how we transmit and build them. Are they coherent to our first idea, to the image we had? We wanted our students to be very precise in this matter.



**How was the content of personal memories meant to address the collective dimension of architecture? Would it be possible to say that a personal memory acquires a collective value?**

I think so, because the memory of a lived experience puts me in relation to the world. Obviously, if I talk for example about wood, it is not something only mine. There are generations, whole civilizations that have lived and built with wood. Perhaps they have experiences similar to mine. Of course, it may also have a much personal component, but this is not so important, it is more important how one perceives the world around him in general. Many experiences that are mine may belong also to others, because they are not things connected to feelings. It's about the perception of things. Here we are not talking about feelings or sentimentalism. That is not something that may acquire a personal color because it is seen through my filter, but it is something that others can share, something we can talk about.

**Looking at the objects produced by students, it seems evident that the physical dimension of the work was a fundamental component of the course. The use of real-sized models and real materials as primary design tools reveal not only the definition of an instrumental frame, but were many times explored in a sort of manifesto-attitude. That is visible for example in the student's conception of new materialities, in exercises conceived as 1:1 interventions and also in the technical challenge that seemed to be inherent to the atelier's activities. Perhaps we have already talked about that, but what was the importance of the construction process in the course's didactic?**

Good examples of 1:1 exercises were the *lamp* and the *door handle*. Students had to build real functioning objects struggling with materials, construction tools and technical requirements, they had to contact craftsmen for advice and foundries for casting. In the final presentation, the door handles were put on a real door, so everybody could test them. The lamps were all connected to electricity and everybody could check the result. All could be seen and touched, a precise verification of the objects quality could be done with nothing hypothetical left.

**What struck me is how construction was not used just as learning how to use a given material, but as a creative process towards a new material. The development of a constructive strategy to communicate a content, as the memory contained in a materiality.**

Right, that in the case of the *module* - the very first exercise. But it was also a limited exercise, quite closed in itself. You cannot adopt it to build architecture, in that sense it is somehow limited. However, if you take the *100 steps for a blind*, students already had to imagine what would happen in terms of acoustics in relation to real construc-

tion materials. I remember they explored rhythms using different materials, so the blind could find an orientation. The models were built with construction materials such as concrete, stone, wood and metal. There was this project in which under the blind's feet there were empty spaces, small spaces that became bigger, like a resonance box. You could verify the sound knocking on it like on a musical instrument. This was an exercise conceived not just to design a passage for a blind from the city to the park, but precisely to raise awareness in students about the acoustic dimension.

I believe it was quite successful, we invited a professional acoustic technician who delivered a lesson. It was something that maybe if you hear once in a first year of architecture, it will remain throughout your career. Somewhere in your head that will always be present. The *passage for a blind* is a classic in that sense, you could not do it on cardboard. I must make a form in a given material in order to see if it works, what impact and what atmosphere it creates. In a model I can already verify a real materiality, verify many aspects of what could be a construction later on. We all have ears, nose, hands, we are not digital bodies. At least not yet. To speak about architecture, we must speak of real things, and if we speak of real things we are competent in a certain way, don't you think?

**As long as we are real too.**

Yes, I believe Peter always wanted this direct confrontation with the real. Because that is easier to verify. It either works or not. It is about raising awareness in students for many things, in order to have good architects, to make good architecture, to improve the lives of us all. I think also on the *Tableau vivant for Laveno*. It was about conceiving a garden that would be seen from different points, like a picture that would change throughout the seasons. That, in the end, was meant to make them understand, if one day they should build a house on a hill, that one must think from the start on how it would be seen. To think also on the seasons: what does it mean when the grass is high, how the house is inserted in the whole, if there are trees around. These things are not architecture themselves, but architecture reacts to all of them.

**The course's radicality, as well as its innovative nature, seemed to require from students a sort of deconstruction of many notions linked to their vision of architecture as a profession. I talked to some students that recall not being able to feel at ease within the atelier. Do you think that students were able to fully apprehend the didactic and relate it to their practical work?**

I would say that 70% of students understood. There are naturally those who began the course with an idea already fixed in their heads. Maybe they knew someone who worked as an architect, had studied in the technical school, and so they thought that in a first year you should maybe learn more technical stuff. After all, the course was a zeroing of these expectations, in order to start from something primordial that according to Zumthor - and to us all - should be the base of a formation. Because after these things, when I imagine a real architecture with all these instances, I can very well make an abstract technical drawing. But I must have clearly in my head the quality of my real project. Indeed, we had students - when I look at my notes - that came to the atelier just from time to time, or that hardly participated. That's for sure, but those were an exception. Otherwise it would become a problem.

It was surely very demanding. In order to participate, you must unlock yourself as well. If you are closed to yourself you just can't do it. Also for someone young, digging in your own memory is quite an effort. I think that doing the exercises was not simple either. The students were quite free, even if for each exercise we gave them a strict set of rules to follow, we advised them, did critics and so on. I mean, they had to be really creative. To be an architect is something that requires creativity, you must liberate it. If you don't have it when you are 18, when would it come? Sure, you can study architecture and then work in a cantonal commission. But all the same, you must devise what is quality in architecture to choose which project is going to be built. It is very important. The world is plenty of architectural ugliness... Now, since I haven't had any contact with our former students, I'm really not sure which effect it had in their work, in their way of doing and thinking architecture. I cannot imagine it would not have had any impact. That, only they could tell you. It would be interesting to ask.

#### To avoid formalisms...

Exactly. Like when you have to teach a kid to draw. It is very hard. You should never show them how to do it. How is an elephant meant to be done? Let them do it! I mean, you must provide them the instruments in a way they will later know how to do by themselves.

#### I saw no presentation of Zumthor's projects as models to be followed, for example.

No, that no. He never showed his architecture. That was a very separate thing.

**Another interesting aspect of the atelier is found in what could be said a performatic dimension of teaching. It relates to the physical, bodily participation of students in exercises that seemed to acquire the condition of events. In some cases, as in the Blue reflections, the exercise was an event itself and required students to engage in the design of several layers of action. In others, as in the In Situ interventions, a sort of theatrical performance was complementary to the object's physical constitution. How much was this performatic element a conscious part of the didactic program?**

I don't remember if we discussed that, but I think it was something Peter wanted consciously to do, not something that came out by chance. He used to say that you must always think about the people who live in a space you conceive. Then if you do something performatic, like this project for the theater in Chiasso, you as a student, as a body, you are present as a person there, exposed to the light. If you participate in an experiment like this, you realize we managed to create quite a lot with ordinary things: light effects, white tablecloths and so on. They were created as a theatrical scene. Later in life, if you build a house or a building, this is the theatrical scene for life, you live in it. So, you must always think about the people, about the atmospheres that render life beautiful. If you can experience such things physically in 1:1, it's great. It is part of the formation, I believe. I'm not sure if students were aware of that at the time. For example, in this *In situ* exercise there was this luminous heart at night. That was like looking at the stars. I mean, you become aware of distance, the space that is not only from here to the door, but also the universe. It is the space between the mountain and the plain. We had to climb up to a certain point in the hill to see that heart. So, you had to think in which effect an intervention of yours would have when seen from up there, how it would be seen in relation to the surroundings. With that, students were meant to analyze those places, to live them, to take a picture for every hour, to record a sound for every hour. I imagine that Zumthor, when doing a project like the Sogn Benedetg Chapel, would really go many times to the place, to understand, perceive the atmosphere, the topography. All those things that are part of an analysis not only intellectual. Also, to perceive the place with the senses, find the intuition of which volume, which material is required exactly for that place. That was the intention of this exercise. They didn't have to build a house afterwards, you could not ask that to a first-year student, but to make a real 1:1 intervention. It is the kind of experience that allows you to learn something for your future work. Also, to raise awareness of the surroundings, to understand what change an intervention can bring to all the things around it. So, this performatic level was part of our idea of having all exercises in 1:1 scale. Those were really 1:1, you as a physical body are part of it.



Since the beginning of the primo anno course in the fall of 1996, almost 25 years have gone by. Some transformations in the profession that were probably sensed at the time are now consolidated, as for example the omnipresent digitalization and the ever-growing standardization. The profession's progressive loss of relevance in the current economic and cultural context shows that a radical debate on its foundations is even more necessary. How would you assess the validity of Atelier Zumthor's program today? What would you say was the most important component to remain from this didactic?

I think, precisely because we live today in this era when digitalization is omnipresent, that it is the confrontation with the real, physical world.

When going through the archives, one cannot help to sense a diffuse enthusiasm emerging from the records of the atelier's activities. It seems like the feeling of taking part in something new generated a level of involvement that was much deeper than that of an ordinary school. From a personal perspective, what contribution would you say the collaboration as assistant had in your formation and work?

This was really one of the most interesting experiences of my life. I myself was able to learn from Zumthor a lot, but also from the whole, from this experience we did together, from the collective work. This was simply great. I mean, things like the sun rising on the top of Monte Generoso. One thing is to go up there alone, a different thing is to go with all students, to have together an experience about which one could ask: But what relation does it have with architecture? This is such a spatial experience, so intense and interesting when you see how the light changes, in the beginning everything is dark and then suddenly the forms start to stand out more clearly... things begin slowly to acquire color when the sun rises... It is a fundamental experience, even if it is not necessary to put it this way. You need to do it, it is enough to do it. That's why I say that those were very interesting experiences which were done together with this community of students that had a great energy. Obviously, nothing would have worked if we didn't have students with such a great desire for making. They, just like us, worked so much, they had a great enthusiasm. It was a beautiful experience. From all the experiences of these years, I learned to think and work with more coherence. It is about not taking shortcuts, about following a straight line.

## Interview with Pia Durisch

Massagno, 22.10.2020

In the academic year of 1996-97, the first of Peter Zumthor in Mendrisio, the group of assistants was formed by three architects - Miguel Kreisler, Thomas Durisch and you - and one artist - Miguela Tamo. This basic formation would remain through the first years of his Primo Anno course. How did you become part of the atelier?

In the summer, before the activities of the Academy began, there were some calls in Ticino and it was possible to apply for a position as assistant in this new school. I applied, even if I didn't know who the professors would be. One day, Peter Zumthor called me to say that he would like me to be one of his assistants. I said yes, and so my collaboration with the Academy began. Zumthor was someone I knew because of his work, but I had never collaborated before with him or with the other assistants. I knew only Thomas Durisch, because he had studied with me at the ETH Zurich, and casually we have the same last name. So, we knew each other and he had worked for many years in Zumthor's studio. Actually, Peter chose the assistants himself, he chose those he thought would be appropriate for that job.

The experience of Zumthor's first-year course was something very particular. It was designed with a specific temporality - three years - and from the beginning there was the intention to observe and document it, just like in an experiment. Where did this format come from?

Honestly, I can't remember whether the idea to make two, three or four years was something consciously decided. At the beginning, there was a huge enthusiasm and everything was created from scratch. So, we started with the exercises. Peter had this very strong concept to encourage students at the first year to look inside themselves and to develop themes that sought to reach a degree of essentiality. Each student responded to that in a personal way. It started like that. I can't tell if there was this idea of making a given number of years. Probably Zumthor knew that he would do that

for some time and then he would go to advanced years. What I can tell though, is that in the two years in which I was part of it, the concept was similar. I mean, Peter tried precisely to make students understand that a project is linked, before anything else, to our own personal experiences. And also that, when there is a theme, we must search for the concept's essentiality, bringing to it something that Peter considered important - and I agree - that is the sensoriality, the perception through all senses. From that we drew exercises that dealt precisely with the senses, and there were specific themes for each one of them. Later, in the second semester, there would be a project on a larger scale, addressing the territory. This connection with students' memory, with the senses, aims to stress that architecture is something concrete. It is not theoretical, and this was a fundamental element that we tried to convey. This is very important.

**Regarding the atelier's radicality, it seems like it was not designed that way only as an answer to the foundational nature of a first-year, but instead that it explored this condition to develop a research on architecture's basis as a discipline. Do you believe this educational project might reflect a personal research of Zumthor?**

Yes, I think so. Peter tried to teach students - and this often happens when you teach at the Academy - his own approach to architecture. I experienced that in the six years I taught at the Academy as well. In Peter's case, I think he wanted to teach students how each one should look for his own architecture and his own way to find the answers. This is also Peter's personal approach, I believe. A specific way to reflect, to pose questions. In the atelier, something important was the discussion, our work as assistants was to make questions. That is, we wanted each student to have his own personal way of expressing himself, of making architecture, and we should drive them to be coherent to their initial ideal. Therefore, to find the initial idea and offer them a process to be coherent to that idea was a very strong part of teaching.

**Did you find in the atelier an occasion for your research as an architect?**

I must say that I find myself much in tune with Zumthor's approach. He is probably more personal, but didn't have any trouble. It was very pleasant, I learned a lot. At that time I was also very young, and in those two years as an assistant I could understand how important it is to reflect well when you design. I mean, it is not like seeing an image, taking a part of it and making a copy. This sort of thing had nothing to do with Atelier Zumthor. It was really about approaching the project in a very intense way, very personal. It was very interesting.

**Talking about the exercises, their originality is certainly what draws the most attention. Titles like The personal construction module, or Prototype for a door handle, reveal their own value as creative designs. Today in the archives, they are catalogued from A-S in a continuous sequence. How were they conceived?**

First of all, we used to get together and everyone would give their contribution. Always, however, following Peter's basic idea of creating simple exercises linked to the senses. The first block, for instance, was a very material approach, with images and personal memories. The door handle had to do with touch, then there was the tunnel for the blind... So, all these themes were dealing with materiality and with one of our senses. This is what I experienced in my two years. Afterwards, as I mentioned, the spring semester had themes dealing with an intervention on the territory. There was a true physical landscape on which they needed to operate a transformation. About the sequence, I don't remember very well. I think the exercises needed to be named for organizational reasons, and probably Miguel Kreisler catalogued them chronologically. I can't tell really, but they were not a closed sequence created earlier. There were themes that were suggested by us and then evolved into these exercises.

**Another component of this teaching that seems important is the value of authoriality as a means of legitimation. Such an approach is not very diffuse in architecture schools. Actually, many of them tend to assume an opposed direction, believing that an excessively personal approach might lead to a loss of critical sense. Why was this authorial component so important?**

On the one hand, it was the first year. Students get to the first year not knowing what architecture really is. So Peter didn't want to pollute them with certain preconceptions. That's why he worked so much on this primitive-sensorial aspect. This is something nice to do in a first year, a research where each student finds his own path. However, behind that there was a huge discipline necessary in order to design a coherent project. Coherence is something important. So, a project was successful if it was coherent and if the theme was understood in the right way. That's it. Our task was to offer students the right tools, the right questions, so they could get themselves to the final project in the most coherent way to their initial idea. This is the work we did. So, yes, it was personal, but coherent to the theme. The theme comes first. The coherence and the personal way are a means to reach a result able to capture the theme's essence. This was Peter's very particular approach, and I understand why he did it in the first year. Also, it was not like we didn't study actual projects. There were lessons in which Peter showed their buildings or other architectures, but always trying to explain what was at the base of those projects.



**One of the intentions of my research is to identify compositional principles that might be extracted from the course. A first element that seems fundamental is the use of autobiographical memories. Why was it so important to begin from personal memories when designing a project?**

Because that's how we live. We are stimulated by all this, not only in architecture. One carries a reservoir of personal experiences. In addition, there is also the experience of the present, one is also linked to a place where there are historical memories. All that becomes a personal content, from all these layers a project evolves. At least, this is also my way of making architecture. I don't believe you can make an architecture that is pulled out from the drawer, only because something is pretty I use it somewhere else. With Peter, there is an ever greater personal dimension, because someone in a first year must understand that every project you make carries a part of yourself. That's making good architecture, not a copy-paste. For that we must fight against a certain way of making architecture, one that is easier, and in the end we see so much ugliness on the landscape. Instead, this quite intense process, as we tried to teach students, takes a lot more effort, and it is always research. We must fight to make it, because there is an ever growing mentality that gives no value to this way of operating, and in the end it leads to results that have nothing to do with architecture, only with speculation.

**Looking at the objects produced by students, it seems evident that the physical dimension of the work was quite important. What was the importance given to construction in the atelier?**

The material dimension was very important. It was an element that had to do with touching. Also small models were connected to a certain material, if it was glossy, dull... This was very important. I mean, by doing the project the student should conceive it in such a way it would stand. There was statics, construction, all fundamental elements required to understand that when you are doing architecture you must face a material, which is not something theoretical. On the contrary, the more you know a material the more you react in the right way.

**The atelier's radicality seems to have required from students a deconstruction of many things that maybe they already knew about architecture as a profession. Some former students remember to feel uncomfortable in the atelier. Do you believe they were able to apprehend the content of this teaching and to see a connection with their future work?**

I can certainly understand that some of them didn't feel comfortable. Maybe some of them didn't even become architects in the end. That's precisely because the course addressed a personal dimension. Because we really questioned ourselves and posed personal questions: why did you choose this idea, what happened from that, tell me, what did you like from that... It was a continuous reasoning, confronting ourselves with past memories. Probably, not everyone could perform such an inquiring process.

**An aspect that struck me is what could be called a performatic dimension of teaching. It relates to the bodily participation of students in exercises that often looked like true events. In Intervention on place in 1:1 scale (G), for instance, the interventions had a theatrical performance as a complement to physical objects. How much of this performative condition was a conscious part of the didactic program?**

Well, I see that in another way, even if it is certainly something transversal, since a project is a performance after all. It was like that, in spring exercises there was the theme of place, while first works were more abstract, they had themes which were not placed inside a context. In spring exercises - like the *In situ* - there were places, we created groups and students should design a project for that specific place. We didn't tell them what to do, they should understand by themselves the essence of a place and then design the project. This was made at different scales, in different ways. I remember that at the Saceba, for example - which was a cement plant, a beautiful space - we did a concert. So, an event, because architecture is not something that is conceived and remains on paper, it must be lived by people. This is how I see this dimension of performance. The way in which it is more felt or less felt, more pleasant or less pleasant, also makes architecture's success. All the interventions were fantastic. I remember *Chiesa Rossa*, where students made a path, there was music coming from inside the church - which was a beautiful space - and they offered cherries and strawberries - if I recall it right. Later, there was another intervention in a cellar with wine tasting... and everything was linked to teaching. In the case of the wine, for instance, we wanted to understand how it is made and so on. We used to invite professors who were experts in different fields. The most important, I would say, was this understanding that a project is not abstract, not something hanging on a wall, but something that must be lived by everyone.

**From the beginning of the first-year course, in the fall of 1996, 25 years have gone by. Some transformations in the profession that might be just felt at that time, eventually became strong conditionings, like digitalization and the increasing standardization. How would you assess the validity of Atelier Zumthor's teaching today? What do you think was its most important element?**

Absolutely valid! I don't know exactly how the structure of the first year at the Academy is today, but I would always agree to have an atelier like that of Zumthor. For me, it was a global project, it is hard to identify a single component. However, it remains very relevant as a first year.

**Going through the archives, it is inevitable to feel the enthusiasm emerging from the documentation. It seems like the perception of being part of something absolutely new generated a much stronger level of involvement than the ordinary for a school. From a personal standpoint, which contribution do you believe to have brought to your work from this experience?**

Precisely this enthusiasm, I must say. Those first years were a beautiful time. There were professors - not only those in design studios, but also theoretical classes - who were enlightening figures. All that thanks to Mario Botta, to Peter Zumthor and Aurelio Galfetti, who went to look for these eminences in all fields. In that sense, we must thank Mario immensely, he did a fantastic job. So, this enthusiasm has followed me in my profession. What I learned from the experience with Peter - even if somehow it was already part of me - brought me more confidence that this was the right direction, and so I keep on going.

## Interview with Mario Botta

Mendrisio, 22.10.2020

**The Academy of Architecture of Mendrisio begins in 1996 as the visible part of a project deeply bounded with the reality of Ticino; this is something present in its relationship with the territory, in the definition of its strategic position between North and South, and also in the legitimacy it found in the Ticinese architectural culture – of which your work is a protagonist. Considering this context, what was the intention in inviting Peter Zumthor to be part of the school's first ateliers?**

When the idea of the Academy was born, speaking through the last months with Lio Galfetti, we thought that it was important to connote it right from the beginning – and especially in the beginning – with profiles of strong identity. To me, it seemed important to start from the Ticino, and so in the first moment we called several persons like Carloni, Snozzi, Vacchini... We did a list of names to understand who might be interested in this adventure. For different reasons, only Galfetti remained, who was later pointed by the Scientific Council to the direction. And so, we began. But Lio as a director in that moment was something meant to be provisory, the first meetings he did actually as a director *in pectore*, since he had not been nominated but only indicated as representative of the Council. So, we started working and called Peter, who we obviously knew but only in a somewhat distant manner, and we went then to Chur, where he lives. There was me, my wife, Lio, a small delegation, and we told him that this academy of architecture was being born, and that we would be pleased to have him. He thought a little about it, and later he called us and said: ok, I'm with you. The idea of a new school being born. The curious, and also interesting thing, is that we not only began from zero, there was zero indeed. We did not even have the letter paper. We had a provisory headquarter, did the meetings in my studio in Lugano, and then little by little, in 1995 the Grand Council voted on the new university law, and in 1996 we got started. We were three, me, Lio and Peter Zumthor, and we found ourselves with the duty of beginning the school. So, we decided to divide the first year among us, a third of students for each one. Later, in the following years it was easier, because we started to call other people to the second, third year and so on. But in the beginning, there was no division in the vertical ateliers. And how did it take place? Each one of us made the course as we thought was the best. There was no *diktat*, there was a very clear and



direct relationship of trust between the three characters. Honestly, I don't even know how Peter Zumthor did his atelier, because I was occupied with mine. The others I would only see during final critics. Later, I saw more of him, when he was teaching in the advanced years. In the beginning each one taught as we thought was best.

**A school's foundation moment is always an opportunity to set its identity. In the case of the Academy, it seems to me that the work of these first ateliers - yours, Galfetti's and Zumthor's - defined much of what the school is today. How do you see the reverberations of the first ateliers in the school's identity today?**

Yes, on the one hand that is true. And on the other, it has been an adventure that hasn't followed any rules. We began and then the initial inertia took six years, because the first year was done twice. In the second year, students went to do their stage, then they returned and did the second, third, fourth and fifth years. So, it took a period of six years to have the school complete. On that point, it is true that the school absorbed the impact of the first three ateliers, which with time would become four. I myself have taught for twenty years only with these four ateliers, with a quite simple idea, which was to do an introduction to architecture. So, the first year is not a project year. The student must learn the tools, that means to draw - so we called Arduino Cantafora - to know materials - we called Alfredo Pini - to know mathematics - we called Sergio Albeverio. But all that with a very precise vision - and in the beginning perhaps even stronger than today - that in order to address the complexity of modern culture, the architect is more in need of humanistic disciplines than of those exclusively technical. So, we had, in part, a great *naïveté*, we didn't quite know how to do the whole thing. There were requirements from European programs that had to be followed... But at the same time, we knew that the old teaching tended to deform the vision of architecture students. To us, it was important that every subject had a humanistic component, which means to bring man back to his centrality. The relation between man and his territory, between man and the environment, between man and the climate, between man and the urban fabric. I mean, the context was part of architecture, which was much different from the self-referential architecture that was made in Zurich or in Germany, where the building is just a building, you must build it well, no water should get in through windows, and that's it. No. We assumed from the very beginning, and it is the ideology of this academy, that architecture must build a part of the city. Every building. Within that, each one of us found his own freedom. Galfetti did it more connected to the landscape, Zumthor more aware of the nature and emotions of materials, me trying to find a scale where also the detail would speak to the city. So, also

different schools. I came from Venice, my references were the Venetian school, Carlo Scarpa, Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn. Galfetti came from the Zurich school, where he had a different formation, and Peter Zumthor was above all a self-taught man. From these three very different components we wanted - and there the strength was - that every student could feel encouraged to take architecture as a humanistic discipline. Speaking of Zumthor again, he had never taught before as well. So, this was also a first year for him. Later, as he went on, he understood, began to work like he worked in his studio - as any one of us works in our own studio - and found his way with these big models, with materials, etc.

**As a Brazilian, your bond with the Academy always makes me think about Niemeyer and Brasília. To build a new city from nothing was a historic moment that allowed him to build a nation's capital. That transcends, I believe, his work as an architect. To build a school seems to me to have a similar dimension. How do you see the Academy of Mendrisio in relation to your biography?**

I must say that, as time goes by, I believe to understand it better. In the beginning, until now, I have been really involved in practical problems: to find the money, to find the right people, trying not to make many mistakes... A school is born also from mistakes, no? Sometimes we made bad choices regarding teachers, and to correct them is very difficult later. From a certain distance you understand this phenomenon better. From my standpoint, the strength of the school of Mendrisio is not that much the didactic, because the didactic changes according to people, according to the cultural climate. If there is more ecology it is inevitable that not only students, but also teachers are more aware of sustainability for example. On the contrary, a slower speed is the base we gave to the school, which is strong. I mean, stating that it is necessary to give man his centrality, that a humanistic vision is stronger, more necessary, more indispensable than a scientific one. Do you understand that this means to reverse all the parameters? Zurich has been growing by multiplying the computers, the logics, mathematics... It seemed as if everything in the world was clear. And on the contrary, everything became darker. Our way of addressing problems, giving a human dimension - even to a highway - becomes interesting in the long run. That takes place not directly in the school, but through the school's initiatives. We have chosen a dozen of events to which the most interesting experts were invited, questioning what the man on this planet is today, and those became important elements. Also, field trips. We did this workshop *Wish*, which took our students to many different countries, Brazil, Cuba, Africa... So, it also means to bring the world's problems to the architects' study tables. That is the task of the school. After that, students go to the world.

## Interview with Valentin Bearth

Chur, 18.11.2020

**Your activity as a teacher in Mendrisio began in the spring semester of 2000, sharing with Peter Zumthor the fourth-year design studio<sup>1</sup>. How was the experience of teaching alongside Zumthor in that semester? Was that your first experience as a teacher?**

Well, more than twenty years have gone by... Clearly, at the time I already knew Peter Zumthor quite well, because I had collaborated with him for four years. It was the period from around 1983 to 1988, when his first important projects started to emerge. I was project leader in the Sogn Benedetg Chapel, which was not yet completed due to a delay of one year, and as I left the studio the foundations were being built. This was the period of the project for the Roman ruins in Chur, the period in which we won the Vals competition with a first design very different from what it would later become. Those were the projects I worked on. After I left Zumthor, we started our studio in 1988, and then in 1999 he offered me the opportunity to teach in this arrangement that was almost like a visiting professorship. The chance was naturally taken by me with great pleasure and he, as usual, said: I am going to be away, this is my atelier, *arrange-toi!* It was not the situation in which he presented the premise of a program or something like that, but almost like the first time when I entered his studio and after a month he gave me the project for the renovation of a doctor's office. He would be away for two months and just said to me: the project will be done by you. So, this was also the way in which things happened in Mendrisio. Of course there was already a sort of spirit in there. Zumthor arrived in 1996, in the beginning of everything. It was quite a free atmosphere in what comes to teaching, an atmosphere in which teaching was directly connected to design. The project was at the center, there was no theory. In that sense, he was doing something very concrete, and I had once again *carte-blanche*. This was my beginning in Mendrisio. There was this idea, also in his lessons, of gath-

ering students around a project, bringing the class together to discuss and to reason about a project. Naturally, always with a model, one of the many that were made as part of such discussions. In those moments, Zumthor proceeded always by questioning - this is how he has always done it. He always presented questions. He always tried to establish a dialogue with the student by means of questioning. That in a 1:1 level, I mean, there was no distinction between student and professor - even if there was always a crowd coming to watch his critics. Those were always a sort of event in which he didn't aimed at talking about the measure of a door that is not yet correct in a functional sense, but searched for the content. What do you want to do, which is your idea? That was the point.

**In my research, I'm particularly interested in the analysis of the first three years of Zumthor's atelier in Mendrisio, when he was dealing with the first-year course. I believe it is possible to say that one of the atelier's main characteristics was the use of its instrumental dimension as a means to convey a clear conceptual vision on the basics of architecture. Practice was a fundamental component of it. You collaborated with Zumthor in the early years of his studio, so you know well how he used to work. How do you see the relationship between his teaching in Mendrisio and the work of the studio in Haldenstein? Is it possible to see the last as a consequence of the first?**

Yes, I think so. That is probably true for every architect, from the moment he is not a different person when he designs or when he teaches. Of course, it is possible that the teaching method is not the same as the design method, but generally one tends to teach in the same way he leads an office. In the case of Zumthor, I believe there was no difference between these realms. For him, in the beginning of a project there were always long discussions about the commission, about how to find the appropriate answer, which is the central theme of a given project, how to interpret the program - and not only from a functional standpoint. It must certainly work, but in the beginning you have to find the content, what is your intention with this project. Which is then the impact, in relation to the place and society, of a building that is placed in the world? This was a wide discussion, taking place right in the beginning. The questions were always: what comes to your mind if we have to make a church? Which churches do you know? What comes to your mind if you have to build a hospital? Which experiences do you have? That is an important theme for Zumthor, everyone's memories. The personal memory that each of us has. So his teaching was quite similar, trying to benefit from students' experiences - even if they don't have many when they are 20, they have their own experience of life. This was researched by Zumthor through questions that were meant to guide the design. In the beginning, this is an important moment. In a

<sup>1</sup> In the academic year of 1999-00, Zumthor was a visiting professor at Harvard. During this period, his atelier in Mendrisio was shared with Adam Caruso in the fall semester and with Valentin Bearth in the spring semester.



certain way this kind of brainstorming is the most important thing. Immediately after that, one needs to react with a first drawing, a model, and render things concrete. Architecture is never something abstract, as if I could build an idea like a philosopher and then write it down. No, immediately a sort of confirmation is required. If you talk about that, how do you translate it into architecture?

**When it comes to the models, which have become very characteristic of Zumthor's atelier in Mendrisio, how did he use to work in the first years of the studio?**

Models have always been important. For every project, we have always built models. But I would say that in Mendrisio he began to refine the way of building models, in a certain way because he could use a class with many students, who started to build models made out of cardboard, plasticine, wax, sand etc. This was a sort of development. Certainly he found in the Academy what could be called a laboratory for the thematic of the model. He did his own research, probably just as any teacher 'uses' his students - in the positive sense of the word - to carry on his own research. Just like a team that works and experiments, he guided them as a sort of coach, watching and advising along with his assistants. Those were naturally important in the general coordination of the whole, as for example what are the techniques required to build a model using concrete and so on. Considering this feeling for the process of making, the model was naturally at the center of his teaching, since he is an architect who builds. The transformation of material, its expression, is something at the core of his approach towards architecture. Because of that, the model represents the beginning of something that I wouldn't even call an abstraction, but instead stands as an object that, while still in a completely different scale, conveys a design idea through its physicality. That doesn't mean that a project made of wood must be built with wood from the very beginning. It may even happen, but in the beginning another aspect is probably more important. For example, if a given project will be placed in a forest, then a scale model is much more important, because this project establishes a relation with a territory, with a topography that can belong to a flatland or to a valley. Such spatiality is important at the beginning, and the model, maybe in a scale of 1:500, 1:1000 or perhaps 1:2000, renders visible this idea of the object. It is maybe as if we were talking about Augusto Giacometti, who as a sculptor has always worked with figures in space. With large figures in the beginning, and then with little ones. There was a phase in which his figures had just a few centimeters. That was Zumthor's approach, and the reason why the model has always been central.

However, those were never models built with precision. Instead, they were even a little rough, because a model like that always leaves open the possibility for interpretation. They are never the actual reality, they are not *das Abbild der Realität*, but the transformation of an idea into a model that is still open in its determination. In that sense, they are the contrary of the renderings that are so popular today, which affirm: this is the reality. That is never true, and very often things are being built following such renderings. The model has precisely the task of leaving an open gap for imagination, which in turn prevents the process to be closed too early, allowing the project to be interpreted in different ways. In the end, I believe that is precisely the strength of Zumthor's projects, they never have only a one-way reading. I can read them from different aspects, and that I think is the characteristic of great architecture, the one which allows each one to read what he sees in it. That means to be open, not determining things too soon, and that means naturally a sort of resistance against a process that was already felt when the Academy began, the advancing of renderings, of digital technologies in the studio, and this super determination in the beginning of projects. It doesn't mean that a rendering is worth nothing, this is not the discussion here. Coming back to the question, if the working method in his atelier in Mendrisio was similar to his studio, I would say yes. The principle was similar. Naturally, in the studio we were five or six people, and later he had the possibility to work with a large team. In that sense, the teaching has certainly represented a laboratory for research, for the experimentation and the invention of new ways of expression.

**Looking at the work of your atelier in Mendrisio, it seems possible to identify some parallels with that of Zumthor. In the book 'Microcosmi'<sup>2</sup>, for instance, one can find the thematic of personal memories, sensory perception and also a particular attention to construction. Such similarities should be seen as the result of an influence exerted by Zumthor, or do they belong to a shared vision on architecture in a broader sense?**

I believe this is due to a common vision. Naturally, Zumthor was also a kind of reference figure for me, from whom I have learned a lot. I studied in Zurich and graduated with Dolf Schnebli, an important character in Swiss architecture. He was a very important professor, and I would say that, for me, he was even more important as a teacher than he was as an architect. The things he built with his studio are certainly very consistent, but as a teacher I believe he was even more important. He was the kind of teacher that gathered many people around him, like Herzog & De Meuron,

<sup>2</sup> Published in 2012, the book documents the teaching activity of Atelier Bearth at the Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio: V. Bearth, M. Amariei, A. Galfetti, *Microcosmi*, Mendrisio Academy Press. Mendrisio, 2012.

Meili etc. This whole generation. So when I did my diploma, my work took the form of a book in which I invented the project theme. In those days, it was necessary to have a co-supervisor, an architect from outside the university who follows your work. This was created after 1968, when students started to say that professors were mean and dangerous, and so they needed someone from the outside to come and provide a counterbalance to this dynamic. Then I needed to find someone, and I had read a small book made by Zumthor, the inventory of Castasegna, which I found interesting because I wanted to work with a similar theme. So, I went to talk to Zumthor - this was a time when he had long hair and beard - and asked if he would be willing to be my supervisor. He accepted, and so he went to Zurich, met Dolf Schnebli and vice versa. For me, Dolf Schnebli at the ETH was a reference from whom I have learned a lot. Later, also from Zumthor, who I had met by chance and then happened to work in his studio. From these experiences I learned really a lot, and they are certainly part of my teaching. Clearly, it is not something identical, but the intention is somewhat the same.

In that sense, what is perhaps interesting is that this year, because of the restrictions connected to covid, we are not allowed to make long trips with the atelier. Earlier, we have travelled almost across the entire Mediterranean with our students. This year, we will once again make a semester about the Grisons, something I have not made for a long time - in the beginning I used to do a semester here every three or four years. So we have prepared this semester, and in the last three years we have also deepened the work of a given architect in the atelier. We went to Sweden to study Utzon, to Spain to study Coderch, etc. Now, I was talking to my assistants and saying: well, we are in the Grisons, what can we make? So we were talking about working on Zumthor. At first, I thought that he was too close, but in the end we realized that this new generation doesn't really know Zumthor. So we started to deepen our study on him, and it was interesting for me to rediscover Zumthor now, with a certain distance - even if we meet every now and then. Also, to see how students now are interested in his work, but they don't know it at all. Naturally, they know that he won a Pritzker Prize, but precisely about his work they don't know much. Then I realized that there is a great affinity between my work and his, but I wouldn't even say the work itself, it is more about the spirit behind it. Afterwards, we know that there are many different ways to express something alike. That, I would say, is a sort of *Seelenverwandschaft*, the closeness between spirits. There is an affinity of this nature, I think.

**Your teaching activity in Mendrisio spans more than 20 years. Besides such a long period of work, you were also director of the school from 2007 until 2011. Considering this experience, how do you see the impact of the first years of Zumthor's atelier in the school today?**

Well, I believe that the foundation of the school at Mendrisio, a sort of *nowhere land* placed in the middle of Europe, followed the conception of creating not a faculty or a university, but an academy. This was the first point that the founders cited by Mario Botta established. They made a rightful decision to say: this will be an academy. And what is an academy? The academy exists beyond their teachers. The concept must be elaborated, there is for example the definition made by Galfetti of what is the Academy. But the most important thing was really to bring people, I wouldn't say famous, but certainly interesting. Zumthor arrived in 1996, and this was the beginning of his career, so to speak. The Sogn Benedetg Chapel was built, other large projects were under construction, as for instance the Thermal Baths in Vals, etc. This was the beginning, one could not tell how far he would go. So there was this idea of attracting strong personalities to Mendrisio. And this was the second point: from different lands. Countries from the Latin world - Portugal, Spain, Greece - later also from South America and so on. This was an idea of presenting a counterbalance to the ETH in Zurich, strongly connected to Germany and the North. This is the school of the Mediterranean, in a certain way. Zumthor naturally represented German-speaking Switzerland, but he was much connected to the Latin world because of the studies he did on the valleys.

This was the concept that later each generation has carried on. When I became director, the idea was clear. I tried to rearrange the school following the concept from which it was born, a school of humanistic profile. This was the time when in Europe the Bachelor-Master system began, when it became possible for someone to start his studies in Mendrisio and then to go to Berlin or London and everything should be the same. This was the beginning of a problematic sort of school-standardization. It was important that the school kept a clear profile, but open to new ideas. We returned to those principles, and then I tried to open the school to the Anglo-Saxon world. Serigson arrived, the Graftons arrived, but always in the original spirit of the school, of opening to the world with strong personalities. This is the concept I strongly believe to be the greatest value of this school. It is not a school of *tendenze*, it is clearly a school with a spirit but also with different approaches to architecture. Of course it doesn't mean that *anything is going*, there is a sort of invisible agenda among people. There is respect for what others are doing, as well as a common interest. An advantage is that the school is not so big. It is not the Politecnico di Milano, or the ETH Zurich, which



are huge. This is an advantage of the Academy, which still manages to keep a proper dimension. This has always been the reason for not growing too much, to remain always within 700, 800 students. I think 650 students would be the ideal. This spirit, I would say, is what we try to pursue still today. Naturally, times have changed, we don't have to go back 30 years. The environment changes, students also, their interests and possibilities... But in the end, it is all about the question of what is architecture. You asked before about the particular way in which Zumthor taught and worked. In the end, the important thing is the love for this craft.

**I remember one of the exercises of his atelier was called 'the love for things'...**

Yes, the love for things. And what does it mean? I must address life when I'm making architecture. It is not something abstract. Things are not abstract. In the end, a table, a chair or a house are things, but they are always also the scene of man, who lives with and in those things. This might be precisely the beginning of the discourse. The Sogn Benedetg Chapel, for example. What is this building in this place, where I must rebuild something because of an avalanche etc. What does that mean? This is the beginning, to understand that and later to give it a form. There is also another thing, which for me is also central. Zumthor is a great builder, every drawing passes through his hands, he can draw every detail. But in his teaching he would never go so far that the student would have to make them. He would stop at 1:500, 1:200... Constructive details never had to be submitted, I remember that well. That is a difference from me, I come from the Polytechnic in Zurich, and we have also learned how to draw such details. So that is important for me. I try to work in both realms, even knowing that it might not be possible. But the accurate drawing of construction - which one can find within the *Microcosmi*, for instance - this attitude in the methodology that pushes towards professionalism, is important. Not in the same way as in the Polytechnic, of an engineer that must know how to draw a plan, but the architect who has this fundamental skill to survive in the world - that is also a practical thing. In the end, I must understand the relations, the complexity of a drawing, what it means to build, to put things together. Because if I'm not able to do that, I remain stuck in the desire of doing things without the ability for actually making them. If I don't know how to build with wood, then I may say that I would like to make a house out of wood and later the carpenter or someone else will do it for me somehow... I must have this capacity. Zumthor had it because of the experiences he did. In architecture school, such experiences are naturally limited, you will learn that later, in the practical work.

**The fundamental premise of our study is that teaching may represent a space for research, that teaching means also to learn. Has the activity in the Academy transformed your work as an architect?**

It is clearly a laboratory not only to exercise, but to face questions that maybe in everyday work one doesn't have the possibility to find, to open horizons. This is how we work here. Andrea Deplazes is in Zurich and I'm in Mendrisio. We naturally bring to the studio the experiences of our schools. Or the contrary, we carry our personal interests to the school, using the school's machinery, the teams, to research about themes that interest us. As I mentioned before, for me the Mediterranean was one of those themes. Architecture is always the expression of a culture, so by doing a project I'm able to understand a culture. I don't work, for example, in the same way as Valerio Olgiati with his *non-referential architecture*, which declares that there are no references - that, I think, is not true even for Valerio, we are not in an empty world. Of course, this is a conception which aims at putting architecture at the center. But that was already said by Aldo Rossi, that architecture was at the center, not history. Architecture has its autonomous rules. In the end, Rossi without memory, without history, without the experiences he had living between Milan and Venice, would not have become Rossi. Later he was able to filter those things and to declare them, maybe radicalizing some of them. Still speaking of Rossi, that is probably what the Swiss have understood better than Italians themselves. While Italians were students of Rossi in a very formalist way, the Swiss never did it so directly. The intellectual discourse was what interested them the most. Also Schnebli, who was a key-person and brought Rossi to Zurich. Aldo Rossi in Zurich, Schnebli and Zumthor, that is the focus, the flame that is carried from one person to another. That is interesting.

I believe that, in the end, that is the motivation for everyone that teaches: to carry his own experience into a school, to teach what one lives in the office, but also to remain open to this incredible source of students and people coming to Mendrisio from different lands - we have now students from 35 or 40 countries. Every person has his own experience and culture, and this is beautiful in architecture, to express your personality through design. To remain open, to say: look, I never thought about it this way. That is interesting, and brings back what I would say was a lesson from Zumthor, to remain really open for the things arriving from the outside. In that sense, another thing comes to my mind. When we were working on a project in his studio, he would always ask: what would a given architect do? How would an architect solve that different from another? We used to go once a month to Basel to see the brand

new projects by Herzog & De Meuron. If it was a competition, we would study them. When we were working on the project for Vals, there was a phase when all the books about Frank Gehry were brought to the studio. Or, when we were working in the Sogn Benedetg Chapel, all books about Rudolph Schwarz. He also explored the skills of his collaborators. Jürg Conzett, the engineer, worked in his studio for many years, and he naturally explored that. Every collaborator brought something of himself, we do just like that here today. That seems natural to me, to take advantage of talent. Almost as if in a team, it is always about giving and taking. Being open to doing so is certainly one of the greatest qualities that Zumthor has.

## Interview with Manuel Aires Mateus

Lisbon (virtual), 14.03.2021

**Your teaching activity in Mendrisio began in the academic year of 2002-03, with the design studio of fourth and fifth years. This is a moment when the school, even though a young institution, has a rather defined identity. Many of the early years' professors, like Botta and Zumthor, were still teaching. How did your educational project react to this context? How was the relationship with other ateliers?**

My contact with Mendrisio was born through an intern who had just finished his first year with Zumthor and it was, actually, a sort of revelation. The comprehension of the freedom to research and of some principles that for us - since that time and perhaps even earlier, it was around 2000 - were fundamental. One was the idea that one should work with his memory, to work from a personal experience, and not so much from the canons of architectural education. So, the idea of memory was perhaps the one who struck us the most. I mean, it was something that we already suspected, it was in the air, but when Zumthor's atelier appears in the first year, it becomes very clear. He talked about it and presented this idea as something very strong from the very beginning. The other idea was a search through representation, seeking to represent the project in a much broader way than we were used to. To represent the project through models, which is a search for atmospheres, a search for room temperatures, a search for materiality itself. The whole representation was driven by this idea, to depict architecture in a much more comprehensive way, much more free on the one hand, but on the other hand trying to represent much more facets of the very idea of reality. Therefore, these two ideas - which was to operate from a personal experience and not so much from a condition of learning the discipline of architecture, and the idea of searching through representation the essence of design - were completely central to us, even before we joined the school. When we joined it and went for the first time to teach, one of the things we did every time we went to Mendrisio - we were young, in our thirties - always when our class was over, we waited until everybody in Zumthor's class left, and then we would go see the works. The moments when Zumthor came



for the critics were also very important, determinant to that period of the school. The critics were always very prepared, very elaborated by students and by assistants - who prepared them very well - and there was this extraordinary condition of experimentation with models and the discovery of design possibilities on models that were very particular. Therefore I would say that, for us, Zumthor was a sort of revelation. By that time when we were teaching, whenever we were in Mendrisio and that coincided with Zumthor's critics, we would go to watch his classes. There was always - let's tell the truth - discoveries made by the students, conducted by this idea of great freedom of experimentation that was seen in that atelier, something that always impressed me very much. It was not a matter of aestheticization, which is the most extraordinary. It was actually about seeking an essential condition in architecture and a clear concept for each project, most of the time done by the representation through models. For us, that was a moment of transformation and, to be honest, it was completely decisive for us to get to know Zumthor's atelier. We would only meet him in person a few years later, when once he called us, introduced himself and so we started to talk. Before that, we would go to his atelier mostly when he was not there.

**Observing the work produced in your atelier, there are some parallels that can be drawn with many ideas found in Zumthor's teaching. The description of the 2002-03 exercise - a music hall in Estoril - for instance, indicates personal memories and sensory perception as design themes, also mentioning that students should explore their individual ambition.**

Yes, we have always tried to defend this idea of artistic expression or authorial expression - as we may call it - but Zumthor's atelier presented this in a very evident way. There was a dimension of discovery that was fascinating. Students discovered things, they discovered things completely. It is evident that, as time went by, a sort of database was created on what Zumthor was doing, and so students started to repeat more. But in fact, the most interesting thing in Zumthor's atelier is that the projects often corresponded to something completely new - and that happened many times. There were projects which were a complete novelty even within the atelier's idea. This idea of freedom, of freshness at work, was something extraordinary. One of the reasons why I found your thesis' idea so interesting is that I believe that Zumthor experimented a lot with the students. He experimented a lot, had many people working on different tracks, looking for different things and finding out things that I think were decisive, many of them true discoveries. In fact, I believe there is a dimension that allowed Zumthor's own work to benefit from this interplay and this dialogue with so many different approximations. There was also something very interesting - some-

thing I always liked - which is to build a kind of isolation. The school had all ateliers, plus that of Zumthor's - which was a completely different thing. It had different rules, everything had a different dimension, it was really quite particular. That was truly a place of very strong experimentation and research.

**Personally, I must say that what struck me the most was the contrast between his teaching and the education I received as an architect.**

In a general way, there is an idea, a counterpoint in that teaching that is very interesting. It opposes the idea that we can lead to discovery to the idea that we should teach. That means something more than teaching, it means to conduct each one to the possibility of his own discovery. I believe this was much of Zumthor's work with the students and much of his work as a professional, which always contained the idea of a great revelation. I remember a dinner when I got really surprised, because Zumthor was saying that he couldn't understand why people would say that he was obsessive with details. He said that in each design he focused only on a specific detail, and that in that moment he was working with fire. I remember, back then, to be very surprised and to find that idea really strange, but I didn't want to keep asking. Later, we found that wonderful chapel, whose great theme is exactly the presence of fire. So, there was this really strong condition of discovery in the projects, and I think this experimentation, this freedom was fundamental both for his work and his teaching. Zumthor has always had a very clear position, a huge distance from the *academy* - as organization or institution - and a great closeness to the students. He was not close to the academy, he was not interested in the academy, but he was very much interested in the students, and that for me was something really strong.

**One of the fundamental ideas to be explored in our research is the value of didactics as research, that is, how the task of teaching may offer the occasion to critically reflect on practice. Along with the work in the studio, you have been teaching since a very young age, and in Mendrisio you are a professor for almost 20 years already. How do you see the relationship between these two realms - teaching and practice - and how do you think it has reflected in your architecture?**

In my case, there is no doubt that it contributed immensely. I have always taught. Since the day I graduated, I started to teach and I make no distinction between my life as a practicing architect and my life as a professor. For me, it is a matter of investigation, with one difference: when I'm working, the final decision belongs to me, when I'm teaching, it belongs to the students. In the end, however, we are always inside an

idea of research and also of something that I think was very special about Zumthor, which was this great closeness between what is taught and what is practiced. I learn immensely from students, because that is a fast, broader research... I like to compare it with the idea of chess players who practice by playing twenty boards at the same time and, as a result, have a huge possibility to go looking for things. It's a condensed experience, it's very interesting.

**Considering your experience as an architect and as a teacher operating in different countries and realities, what do you think is the main contribution that the school of Mendrisio offers to the education of the contemporary architect?**

I think there is a particular freedom in the school of Mendrisio, for many reasons. The first reason is geographical. We are in a country that has the tradition of a good architectural education, especially when we think about the school of Zurich. There are very good economic and practical conditions, because we are in the center of Europe, in Switzerland, which is a wealthy country, with many possibilities, and therefore a great capacity of organization. There are very well chosen professors and a series of other conditions that are important. Also, there is this tradition of freedom, which I believe gives to Mendrisio a formation that is particularly relevant to the idea of experimentation as a work practice. To experiment, the freedom to try. I think this is maybe the condition that differentiates Mendrisio, even in relation to other Swiss schools. It is more experimental, it is less *academicist* than other universities, and for that reason it carries less a manner of doing and more an ambition to search.

## Appendix:



## **Chronology of Atelier Zumthor AAM**

Academic year 1996-97

Assistants:

Pia Durisch, Thomas Durisch, Miguel Kreisler, Miguela Tamo

Exercises:

- A. The personal construction model
- B. 100 steps for a blind
- C. An indirect-lighting lamp
- D. The fragrance and aroma street
- E. Nature, street, house + 1
- F. *In Situ*
- G. An intervention on place in 1:1 scale

Students:

- 01. Andrey Sabine
- 02. Gamba Francesco
- 03. Baumann Urs
- 04. Berlanda Tomà
- 05. Bersano Alessandra
- 06. Bieler Nathalie
- 07. Boscolo Matteo
- 08. Brügger Lorenzo
- 09. Camata Davide
- 10. Camponovo Lukas
- 11. Carnelli Silvia
- 12. Fornara Rada
- 13. Giudice Alessio
- 14. Göhringer Annette
- 15. Hitz Stefanie
- 16. Kupferschmid Nathalie
- 17. Matteri Amos
- 18. Ostertag Mathias
- 19. Massari Lucia
- 20. Perolini Laura
- 21. Polli Nicolas
- 22. Pontiggia Marcello
- 23. Saricu Elena
- 24. Scardua Davide
- 25. Ricci Morena
- 26. Proserpio Paolo

Academic year 1997-98:

Assistants:

Pia Durisch, Miguel Kreisler, Miguela Tamo

Exercises:

- H. A space that looks at the landscape of my youth
- I. A window for my friends, to read by the lake light
- J. *Blue Reflections*
- K. The typical space
- L. Prototype of a door handle
- M. A *tableau-vivant* in Laveno
- N. Questioning architecture

Students:

- 27. Ballerini Federica
- 28. Belloni Ludovica Martina
- 29. Bich Leonardo
- 30. Burri Reto
- 31. Cavallaro Giovanni
- 32. Conn Marisia
- 33. Ferracina Simone
- 34. Giovanacci Sandra
- 35. Gulino Gustavo
- 36. Huber Andrea
- 37. Lindenmann Tobias
- 38. Ludewig Florian
- 39. Monti Marta
- 40. Morelli Beatrice
- 41. Pasquin Fabrizio
- 42. Poletti Aymone
- 43. Pusterla Gaia
- 44. Salati Maria Elena
- 45. Sciaroni Esmé
- 46. Tazi Mohammed Nabil
- 47. Tempesta Maurizio
- 48. Zoni Norma
- 49. Ferroni Matteo

Academic year 1998-99:

Assistants:

Miguel Kreisler, Miguela Tamo, Gerold Wiederin

Guest professor: Helmut Federle

Exercises:

O. A miniature

D. After work in the silver mine

Q. The love by things, after work in the silver mine

R. Intermediate exercise

S. Monks, refugees, abandoned animals + seven stones

(A retreat for marginalized groups)

Students:

49. Bechtel Nicolaj

50. Boisco Gastone

51. Brenner Matilde

52. Burckhardt Barbara

53. Cavani Andrea

54. Del Corso Chiara

55. Diaz Saravia Maria Victoria

56. Dotti Matteo

57. Ferraris Enrico

59. Gallarini Francesco Maria

60. Gerber Simon

61. Anastasia

62. Herbert Jan Christoph

63. Herrling Jeia

64. Heusser Adrian

65. Kleiber Paul

66. Kugler Jolantine

67. Mengani Simone

68. Nespoli Nicoletta

69. Nocelli Gashi Monica

Academic year 1999-000:

Vertical studio IV

Visiting professors: Adam Caruso and Peter St John (1° semester);

Valentin Bearth (2° semester)

Assistants: Miguel Kreisler, Rolando Zuccolo, Myriam Sterling,

Menga Dolf, Ariane Epars, Ronny Hardliz, Barbara Peterli, Miguela

Tamo, Meritxell Vaquer

Exercises: 1. Hotel; 2. Warehouse; 3. Atlas;

Academic year 2000-01:

Vertical studio V

Assistants: Miguel Kreisler, Myriam Sterling, Massimo Curzi

Exercises: Portrait of the Pavese; Tempered urban planning, warm architecture;

Exhibition: Projects for the landscape of the Pavese.

Pavia, June 2001.

Academic year 2001-02:

Atelier verticale progettazione 4° anno

Assistenti: Miguel Kreisler, Myriam Sterling, Massimo Curzi

Esercizi: 1. Vivere e abitare: nuove proposte di qualità per la gente di Pavia; 2. Centro Mediatico della Radio e Televisione Roman-cia;

Academic year 2002-03:

Vertical studio IV / V

Assistants: Ivan Beer, Riccarda Guidotti, Solveig Scheper

Theme: Make It Typical, Then It Will Become Special!

Academic year 2003-04:

Vertical studio IV

Assistants: Ivan Beer, Barbara Söldner, Anna Ramasco

Theme: Chiasso: soluzioni per la doppia periferia



Academic year 2004-05:

Vertical studio III / IV  
Assistants: Ivan Beer, Barbara Söldner, Gabriele Lelli  
Theme: What do new forms do to my city?  
“Moscow physiognomies”

Academic year 2005-06:

Vertical studio III / IV  
Assistants: Ivan Beer, Barbara Söldner, Gabriele Lelli  
Theme: What do new forms do to my city?  
“Moscow physiognomies”

Academic year 2006 / 2007:

Vertical studio III / IV / V  
Assistants: Ivan Beer, Barbara Söldner, Gabriele Lelli  
Theme: Bauen am Rhein

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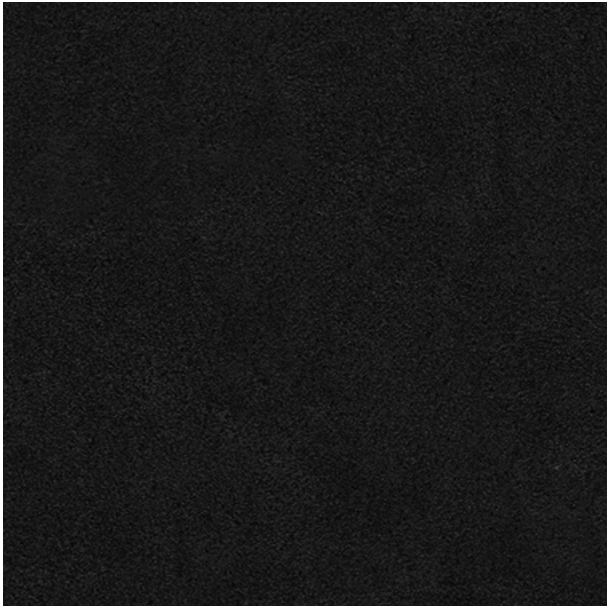
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