

PETER ZUMTHOR

1985–1989

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Buildings and Projects
Volume 1

Edited by Thomas Durisch

Scheidegger & Spiess

Concept: Peter Zumthor, Thomas Durisch, Beat Keusch
Design: Beat Keusch Visuelle Kommunikation, Basel – Beat Keusch,
Angelina Köpplin
Artistic advice: Arpaïs Du Bois
Translation: John Hargraves
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Picture Credits

A strip of metal, bent into a loop, offering resistance only until it is soldered. In this, the moment of most extreme resistance, it attains its most relaxed, most natural form, and in the greatest tension, its greatest serenity. And only then.

Ilse Aichinger

For Antunin

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What I Do

The five volumes in this monograph present a record of my work as an architect since 1985. However, prior to that, I had already worked in the field of historical preservation, renovated chapels, and remodeled old buildings. My first new building was erected in Haldenstein in 1976. These early projects are not included here. They come from a time in which I started out working in a more playful and carefree vein, and later increasingly under the influence of role models. From the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, where the present documentation sets in, young architects in German-speaking Switzerland were caught up in something that affected me as well and to which I gradually felt I belonged. I met architects not only at home but in Vorarlberg, Vienna, and Ticino. We talked about the visual quality of architecture, its sensuality, its physicality, its ability to create atmosphere. Aldo Rossi, who was teaching in Zurich at the time, opened my eyes to the history of architecture and the architecture of my biographical memory. The journal *archithese* founded by Stanislaus von Moos addressed such issues as monotony, realism in architecture, and *Learning from Las Vegas*.

It was an extraordinarily exciting time for me. I felt liberated and started designing new buildings in my own way. I think I had acquired enough background knowledge by then to jettison the ideological ballast that had accumulated in the politically oriented years after 1968, freighting notions of design, both mine and those of others. I started to trust in my own ideas again. I remember the wonderful sense of freedom and certainty, a kind of blissful tension. It was a time of awakening. There was something in the air. My personal search had begun.

I had felt that way once before, as a very young cabinetmaker with a diploma in my pocket at what is now known as the University of Art and Design in Basel. We lovingly called it “our trade school” when—having already drawn and built furniture of my own—I started designing furniture and interiors under the guidance of the instructors. That, too, was a time of great freedom for me, despite the restrictions of Classical Modernism, which, as everyone knows, did not have a particularly good relationship to the history of architecture. But that didn’t bother me because it was closely linked to the wonderful feeling that

good design always has to chart new territory. So by the nineteen-eighties, I had come full circle.

And now, many years later, they are all spread out before me, the buildings and projects that have emerged since 1985 out of that initial momentum. I like looking at all the designs again and can still feel the enthusiasm, the hard work, and the passion that went into them. The people and the dreams related to the projects come to mind again, too.

We would love to build that! How often did we say that to ourselves when we felt we had come up with the right form for the task and the site. Great and sobering was the disappointment when, as so often, it did not come about. When I look at the buildings that were not executed, I still have the feeling that they were good buildings and would have been an enrichment for the place and perhaps the client as well. In the case of other designs that never materialized, I think that fate might have been merciful by sparing us something from which we were bound and determined not to be spared. For instance, the building for the Topography of Terror in Berlin met with so many difficulties that, as the years passed, practically no one wanted it anymore, neither client nor users, while the few who still did want it would have preferred to build something much simpler. If we had had to build this extremely demanding building after all, would we have managed to cope? Wouldn't the project have been too difficult without the support of a client who believed in the design? At the same time we were mastering substantial challenges in Cologne. We were at the most intense stage of planning and would soon break ground for the Kolumba Art Museum. There we had a client who appreciated our design and worked on it with us. We had the same stroke of luck with the Therme Vals building committee and with representatives of the Swiss Confederation, with whom we were able to execute the Swiss Pavilion at the Expo 2000 in Hanover. In retrospect, I realize that we were basically always lucky when we were able to build. For that I am grateful.

In the course of planning the Art Museum in Bregenz, the project ran into stormy political waters and we are indebted to a small group of locals, the curators of the museum, and a few construction experts who helped us stay on course. After the museum opened, the problems that had beset the project were soon forgotten and many people were more than willing to take the credit. I cannot deny a certain bitterness in that regard because the prolonged and trying experience in Bregenz, when there were few people left who believed in our design and our ability to construct and build the museum, took its toll on my family. Later, my wife told me that I was so caught up in the situation that I barely took note of her and the children. Now the bitterness has all but vanished and I can appreciate the great challenges in planning and building, faced not only by us architects and contractors, but also by the clients and

users of our buildings—those who had to endure a method that precludes easy compromise. Looking back, I think it is a good thing that difficulties overcome are soon forgotten. Many people are pleased with the outcome, including the former worrywarts and skeptics. The completed building is your best argument, a client once said to me.

On revisiting other designs in these volumes, I still think: what a pity they weren't built! The little hotel tower in the Engadine, the art gallery in Berlin, the winery in Duero Valle in Spain, the Herz Jesu Church in Munich, the Laban Centre in London, the summer restaurant on an island in Lake Zurich, the hotel in the Atacama Desert in Chile. The list is long. I shall cut it short and abandon the path of old disappointments in order to speak instead of a wonderful and comforting discovery. When I look at my unbuilt designs, I realize that once an architectural thought has been conceived and converted into a stringent and coherent form, it does not simply vanish out of sight and out of mind; it reappears in other designs. Certain fundamental ideas keep coming back in new contexts and they seem to acquire ever more depth the more often they rise to the surface.

However, even though single ideas recur, the buildings and projects documented in these volumes are very different from each other. What they share is my wish and belief that, if I devote myself carefully enough to the study of a building's purpose and the place it will occupy and to their reciprocal relationship, an architectural form will emerge almost by itself, as it were. Purpose and place and everything I know generate a tension that in turn generates the design.

I like designing buildings in response to a place. Places fascinate me.

I love devising spaces whose form and atmosphere perfectly match their use.

Long before I became an architect, I was invariably impressed by atmospherically dense spaces.

What is required? What should be built? Where should it be situated? What would work well in the process of use? What would look good and right on the site? I ask myself these questions and look for the coherence that makes for a beautiful and self-evident correlation of form and content. Ideally, the building will match its use, just as a glove fits the hand. Its beauty will be a pleasure for the people who use it and it will have a presence that enriches its surroundings.

To me, finding the right form for a building means thinking over and over about what it is used for and how. As work on the design progresses, our ideas on what the building has to offer and how it is to be used become more and more precise. In cooperation with our clients, we question and examine the specifications of the initial program: we confirm, reject, revise, and add to them. Thanks to this procedure, when we have finished our work on the design,

we know more than we did at the beginning. For instance, we used the original spatial program of Therme Vals as the point of departure for thinking about what a thermal bath might be like in the mountains. The answers that we subsequently found and built actually yielded more and different things than what was required or the client even realized in the original specifications.

As an architect I am an author. I do not want to find forms for content that leaves me no room to do any thinking on my own and that I cannot influence in any way. I want to contribute to working out and formulating the content of my buildings. Every architectural design must be able to question abstract specifications, because one can determine whether abstract preliminary thoughts will work only when they acquire concrete, physical shape. I have to work that way. I design my buildings from the inside out and from the outside in and then once again from inside out until everything is right.