

# Place, authorship and the concrete: three conversations with Peter Zumthor

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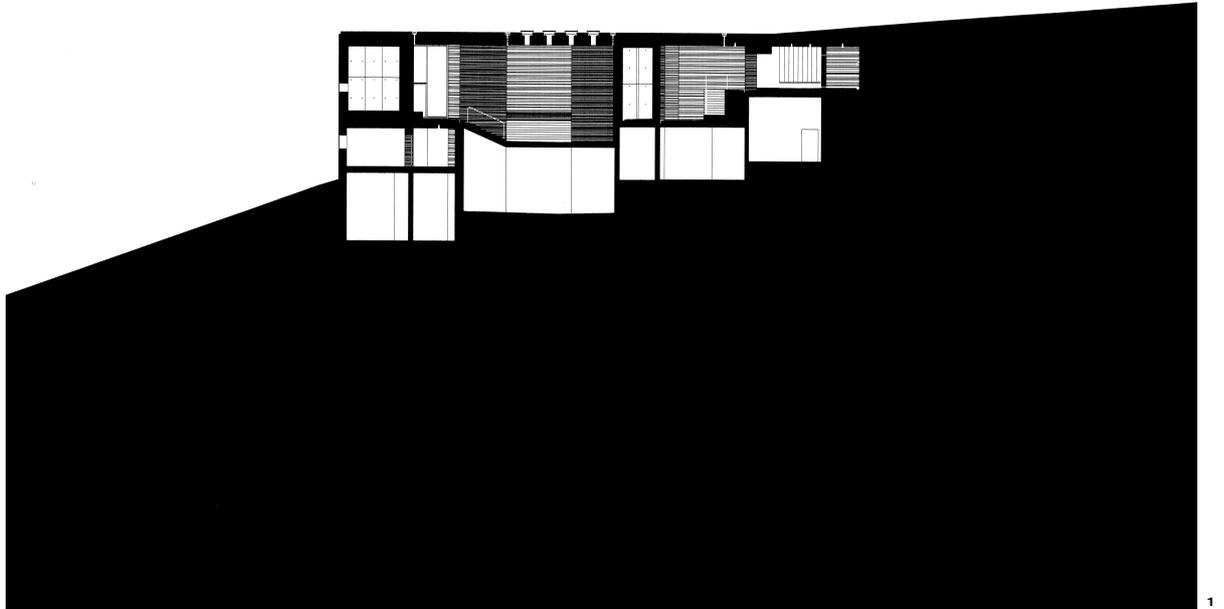
Wishing to write about his work, I approached Peter Zumthor in February 1996. We agreed to do something substantial but still accessible, and eventually settled on the format of a long interview. We then chose three of his buildings that would raise different issues – the now famous Thermal Baths in Vals, the Wohnsiedlung Spittelhof and Topography of Terror in Berlin.

The interviews were held in English on 22 July 1997 over the course of the day in his studio in Haldenstein. They are published in the order in which they were held. We edited them together in August 2000, resisting the desire to amend them.

I first learnt of his work in 1988 when he was a visiting professor at the Southern California Institute of Architecture in Santa Monica where he first delivered the lecture later published as 'A Way of Looking at Things'. I would like to thank him for agreeing to share his thoughts on architecture, and for the often difficult and unfashionable reminder that to do things well takes time.

*Steven Spier*

*Readers unfamiliar with these three buildings will find them comprehensively described and illustrated in the superb Peter Zumthor Works: buildings and projects 1979–97 with text by Peter Zumthor and photographs by H el ene Binet, published by Lars M uller Publishers, Baden, 1998, ISBN 3-907044-58-4. This and the related Thinking Architecture by Peter Zumthor were the subject of an extended review in arq 3/1.*



### Thermal Baths, Vals, Graubünden

SS *When we spoke last August (1997) you were very enthusiastic about the baths, then under construction; you could hardly wait until they were filled with water. You also said that the two most important things about the baths were: one, that it belongs to the village, that it is their stone; and, two, that it looks like it is simply there (einfach da sein). Could you elaborate on that second comment?*

PZ All my buildings are sort of in a critical dialogue (*eine Auseinandersetzung*) with the site, with the place. And maybe, ultimately, if you have a good result, then it's a nice metaphor to say that the building looks as if it has always been there because then, maybe then, you have reached some kind of rapport between the place and the building. At Vals this has also to do with hot springs and water, mountains and stone, things millions of years old. Stone and water, these images are close by.

*Your original competition entry had a stone plinth and a timber-clad structure on top, which as you then yourself pointed out is precisely the typology of the buildings in the valley. Did you abandon this idea because the hotel was dropped from the programme, or was there some other thinking?*

We did only have to build the bath, but actually it had as much to do with thinking more about what the bath could be. It started out as this nice, cool kind of bath in a hotel, and this is not the case any more. As soon as we finished the competition we said, yeah, this is nice, but there are more possibilities. And then came this idea that if you do a bath there you have to dig deep, although that's obvious. At the beginning maybe we obeyed a little the programme of a hotel swimming bath. What you see up there now is my not believing in any given programmes, but rather in



developing it in the process of designing, in maintaining the freedom to develop the new content and form of a known building type, like a classical architect.

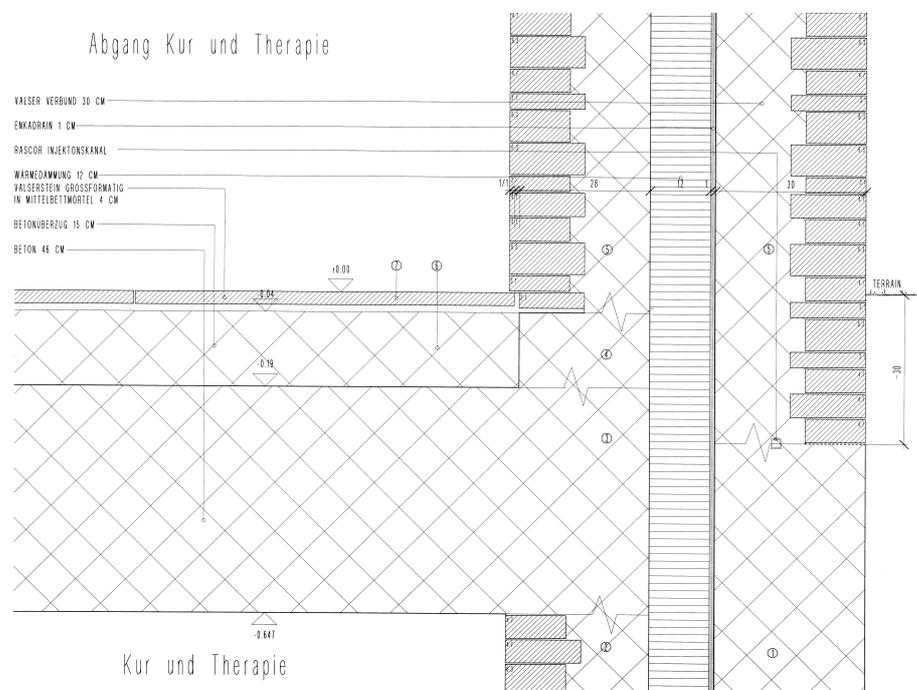
*The gaps between the roof slabs certainly add a complexity to the building since it cannot be understood simply as being hollowed-out from within the mountain.*

Carving into the mountains is the original image of this building. You can make a system of caverns in the mountain and they'll remain blocks or plinths or something. You can do this horizontally as we did, and the caverns are hollowed out to the open, to the slope side of the mountain. But nobody can prevent you taking your chisel and also making a hole upward [Fig. 1]. If you have the idea to make a cavern system a bath, then there is the danger – because the whole thing's stone and in the mountains – that it would be heavy and sinister, and then you'd lack elements, surprising elements like tension, huge

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2 'All of a sudden it becomes a huge artificial stone block set into the mountain ... Then the baths has an elevation, but the elevation shows the process as it comes from inside'

3 'There were some parts where we wanted the surface to be stone, so for these parts ... we invented this composite of concrete and stone which forms a structural unity'



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windows, light, and so on. So there it starts. If you want to show that it's dark in the mountains you need, as everybody knows, a small opening where the light filters in, these table tops resting on these pillars. And there, all of a sudden, you see a construction which is completely modern, with really big spans, and it has nothing to do any more with being in the mountains and being underground. We always do this. You have to work dialectically always. I mean, if you want to do something heavy you have to think about lightness, and if you want to design something dark you have to do something light as well. Otherwise you won't have any resonance or whatever, you don't have a chance to develop its soul, it would be too one-dimensional. And a building with a soul probably has a lot of dimensions.

*The baths as almost primeval but also of its time, also modern, brings me to the elevation. I walked to the other side of the valley, and even though the baths is tucked away among other buildings and the main entrance is actually through the hotel, it has a proper facade which spares it being naturalistic. I suppose it asserts that while the idea of hollowing out a mountain is an elemental act, the act of architecture is a cultural one.*

If you start with these 'naive images' at the beginning, you always know in some way that they're naive; like opening up a quarry in this case. This is professional naiveté, right, because you know at the end this will be a piece of architecture. This is really important in the work process: that you leave these steps behind in order to make a whole, and the whole is something artificial, a piece of architecture. It's a building. It's not a cavern and it's not a mountain [Fig. 2]. This is maybe what students don't understand. You start out with a piece of a mountain, yes, that's nice, but that's not it. In the end it's a building like a chair is a chair

and a bath is a bath. We didn't think about the elevation. But in the office I had to say that now we transform this into architecture. Because sometimes my young architects say, 'but this doesn't', or 'according to the first idea this cannot', and I say, hey listen: Now we turn. We turn this around and then all of a sudden they come up with new definitions, you have to make new definitions, and then it's not a cavern system in the mountain.

All of a sudden it becomes a huge block, a huge artificial stone block set into the mountain, carved out in this way, into swimming pools and so on. Then the baths has an elevation, but the elevation shows the process and comes from the inside. It has no big considerations about it, no more than it's a big block set into the slope, sort of dovetailed in the back, into the mountain. Ah, another consideration was important here, that grass would grow on top, on this big artificial block. But all the rest came from the inside. A Finnish friend told me that in Finland people would look much more to the elevation, and would think it somehow strange that it doesn't have an elevation. I don't think so, but I know what she means. There's of course a tradition that you make an elevation which makes a reference to other people and the surroundings, which is friendly, which probably is really what my Finnish friend means. You used to make a facade which was the house.

*A kind of good neighbour.*

Yeah, that you make a nice facade to be a good neighbour. But this, maybe that's another thing, this will be read by the people up there. They'll recognize that this building doesn't have a facade, that something could look so primary, elemental, because they know buildings like that on their Alps, for the sheep and the cattle, which have this atmosphere, where nobody cares about being a good



4 'It's like a granite but a little softer, and the finishes range from polished ... to sawn, chiselled, and the way it comes out of the quarry – split. This was the idea, to use it in all these ways'

5 'You can have a lot of sexy things with stone ... the feel of it when you walk barefoot, and how it feels if you go over it with your hands'

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neighbour. It's just simply building and surviving. They're the things you have to do.

*Again about the elevation. The small windows on the exterior are flush with the outside. I know that this gives the depth of the wall to the interior, but it is also strikingly contemporary looking, as are the window frames. Are you purposely mixing a traditional agenda of mass and depth with contemporary concerns of surface and thinness?*

Yeah, it could be that. I mean, I am a contemporary person so everything which exists is at my disposal, as at everybody else's. The idea there was to insert translucent stones, because these windows only have to provide light for the smaller rooms. This was the diagrammatic idea, or conceptual idea, and this is actually the best we could do. The idea, or the knowledge that the glass is actually made out of stone perhaps helps a little bit. This is the closest you can get. It's actually not an issue, to be contemporary or old fashioned.

*Let's talk briefly about the distinction between the structure and the surface, which in the baths is complicated because it's a stone building in the experience of it. And yet when you look at the drawings it's obvious a large part of the building is concrete. And while the stone is not quite a veneer, one could talk about it as a surface.*

Of course it does have a surface, like everything has a surface, but it's not a skin. And it's entirely structural. The way I have to think about this building is that concrete and natural stone are not so different. If you make a natural stone wall you need stones and you need some kind of plaster or cement for the joints. Or, you have stone and cement poured into a form. There were some parts where we wanted the surface to be stone, so for these parts, not all the walls, we invented this composite of concrete and stone which forms a structural unity [Fig. 3]. If you look at the

drawings you will see that these stones at the back are staggered to form a composite. It's a structural, load-bearing wall. That was the design, but we then had to determine where to use this compound construction and where to use just stone, or just concrete. So this is the repertoire. If you go through the building I think you are able to see how the rules work. For instance, whenever the building faces the mountain it is completely made out of concrete; we would say poured stone. And as soon as these cliffs start, which are free standing, they become this compound. This building is obviously made up of, 50% of what you see is concrete. You don't have to look at the drawings to see this. Think of all the ceilings that are concrete. And I think you can feel that these compound walls must be load bearing. I feel it.

*Could you elaborate on how you chose where to use exposed concrete and where to use exposed stone?*

All the interiors of the small, enclosed baths are in integrally coloured concrete, most of them black, with two exceptions: the red and the blue. And we all kind of expect that the red concrete is the hot bath and the blue one is the cold one. They are separated from each other in a ritual of hot and cold. All the insides of the baths are made of concrete. There are only two baths which on the inside are made of stone. One is the drinking fountain where you have the original water source coming out, but the stones are stacked on top of each other on these brass pieces so that you can see that they're sort of artificial or just stuck there. The other one is where you have to swim around to get inside it, where they sing, the humming space, where you have a broken surface of stone. This is conceived in a different way, as if it had been carved out, as with a cavern.

*Were you surprised by any qualities of the stone as you worked on the building or when it was finished? Were you*



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*surprised, for example, that light falling on the walls picks up the joints even though they are flush? Were there cases of unexpected effects, pleasant or otherwise?*

No, no. Luckily, when you work a long time on the construction and with the material it always comes out right. You try to bring them somehow to right. It's loving the material, loving the atmosphere, the radiance it has, and then, if you work a long time with these materials, a set of materials, all of a sudden you get it. I go there and things look better than I thought they would, even. You do have sort of surprises which I think has to do with the material itself. Material is stronger than an idea, it's stronger than an image because it's really there, and it's there in its own right. And all of a sudden it's there in a public role. I experienced this at Bregenz also [Kunsthhaus Bregenz opened in August 1997]. This is more beautiful than I ever imagined it could be, and we were always really crazy about this facade, how the light comes in, but it's much much better because now it's a real phenomenon.

*But are there times when you're disappointed in the built reality?*

Not too much. A small detail here and there, but I'm going through my buildings now. Not really. There is a prevailing feeling that the things are really more beautiful than I thought, that they do have this atmospheric quality I'm looking for. I'm not looking for formal or aesthetic qualities – to please the eye or something. I am looking for this *milieu*. Like sitting here, in this space, and I think it's really nice, the birds, the light, the temperature.

*Is part of your satisfaction with your work because you keep a rein on the size of the office, don't do too many projects and take your time with each one?*

I can only say one thing: I need this time. Even if the clients are suffering – and in Berlin (site of Topography of Terror and subject of the third interview) they have started to call me crazy or nuts or something, that I don't know anything about building or timetables when the opposite is true. I insist on knowing something they have long forgotten or have never known: that to do something well you need time. Of course you have to put up with systems and undergo pressures. But every architect knows how much time is needed for this kind of careful, thorough work. I mean, I need it because otherwise I cannot create an atmosphere, so what good would it do me to do a building which wouldn't have this atmosphere. I have to do it this way. I have this obsession because I can feel that the windows are important, and the doors, door hinges might be important, or all these things. So I have to be careful about these things otherwise I won't have this atmosphere and the whole objective of my work, the whole goal of my work somehow would be gone. That's the way I work.

*To get back to materials. Does the building's reduced, even traditional palette of materials, concrete, stone, brass, and glass, provide a discipline which you find useful?*

No, but it is a method. You need working methods, and one of them is the good old discipline of reduction.

*What is the name of the stone, and could you list the different finishes you have used?*

It's a gneiss. It's like a granite but a little bit softer, and the finishes range from polished, sandpaper grading 550, to sawn, chiselled, and the way it comes out of the quarry – split. This was the idea, to use it in all these ways [Fig. 4]. Another finish is called *gestockt*, which is made with this hammer which has a special pattern.

*It reminds me of Richard Serra's Verb List [1967–68].*

How does that go?

*To roll, to crease, to fold, to store ...*

Yeah, it's something like that, sort of this repertoire. You take one material and then you develop the repertoire.

*What was the logic that dictated where you used what finish?*

First of all there are practical reasons in a bath, and the practical reasons are also essential reasons, I think especially with stone. You can have a lot of sexy things with stone, stone and naked skin: the feel of it when you walk barefoot, and how it feels if you go over it with your hands. So practical also means pleasant, and in the end, more classically, also pleasant to the eye. But maybe pleasant for the body comes first [Fig. 5].



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6 'I always like to do the kind of things that may be armatures of a building at the end ... the fittings, because they are the small shiny parts ... otherwise it's only this one thing, this stone. It warms it up somehow'

*Why did you cover the tie holes in the concrete with brass?*

I wasn't interested in the process of making the concrete, in showing that this is concrete. I was more interested in its monolithic appearance, but again not in showing that it's monolithic, but that it does have this silk-like surface when you touch it. When I cover the tie holes it creates an air of luxury. And this is what I really like, that you can take this poor material and with this small invention it becomes a luxurious kind of thing. And bathing, this ritual kind of bathing, has something to do with that, with a pleasing atmosphere for the body.

*Because the bath is so strong in volume and mass, I would think that designing the handrail would be one of the trickier details.*

No, I was looking forward to designing the handrails. Because of the stone and the water, the light, the environment, I was looking forward to introducing things, like jewellery pieces on a black evening dress [Fig. 6]. It's nice that there's a reason to touch them. I always like to do the kind of things that may be armatures of a building at the end. The fittings, because they are the small shiny parts, windows, handles, fixtures, otherwise it's only this one thing, this stone. It warms it up somehow. This image, this model of the evening dress, when you then put on a necklace or something and all of a sudden these two materials, the silk and gold or whatever, it seems as if both materials look more valuable together than if they're apart. And this is what I mean when I say that I have learnt from guys like Beuys and other artists, that two or three materials can charge each other and be more than themselves alone. This is what I always do in my buildings, you usually find a trio of materials, a triad. Sometimes it's just like music, where it's different when you have three notes, three tones sounding rather than two or one. And it doesn't matter then, it is not a question of having to decide, it doesn't matter whether there are two really dominant tones and more subtle ones that enrich the whole.

*Earlier you told me that the building should sound like what it is, and that one evening before it was open or even filled with water you took the Vals yodelling club in there with a flashlight to hear the acoustics and were pleased. I am sure that the acoustical engineer had other ideas about what a public building should sound like.*

Yeah, but I believe that buildings should sound the way they look. But you have to be careful still, you have to be careful about the use, that it doesn't neglect the use of the building, the purpose of the building, in this case a bath. The bath starts to sound terrible when there are more than a 100, 120 people in it and the children start to yell and scream. But this is OK because there should not be that many people in there and so it sounds too crowded. I think it's really beautiful when 20, 30, 50, 70 people are in there. Then it sounds really nice, then you hear all the sounds, you hear the space. Of course the acoustical engineer would say, yeah, but you can't

prevent this overcrowding, you have to build it also for 200 people. But here, well, the building can tell you better what it wants.

*Doesn't the baths also reject the idea that acoustics should be normative, that there is a prescribed decibel range within which every building should be. I would think this holds for the lighting in the baths too, which is more subdued than one is accustomed to in public buildings and yet is perfectly fine. But it does come as a bit of a surprise.*

Well, I start from scratch in trying to develop an idea. I have accumulated a personal body of experience, and out of this I develop the ideas for the buildings I make in these places. I have to get into all the possible qualities which could be brought, which arise within me, out of my memory, experiences, fantasies and images, to generate this building. And this I do maybe without any programmatic ideas in my head. I was brought up to be independent, almost disobedient. As soon as a rule comes to me I get angry, I don't even look at it. The way I have been brought up helps me to start really independently from rules, books, and things, so that I can try to be true to what I feel. Because this, as everybody knows, is the only real truth. I am true to my feelings and I use my head to control them. In order to create architecture you have to use the head, but the substance, in my case, doesn't come from the head but from my gut.

To come back to what you asked. It seems natural to say, OK, start with everything open – dark, light, silence and noise, and so on – that the beginning is open and the building, the design, tells you how these things have to be. Now the world is of course organized, the world of building and construction is organized so that people can have nice vacations, and don't go bankrupt, so they can sleep well at night. They make rules to take responsibility away from themselves. This is true, this is how these building regulations come about. It's a matter of responsibility. You can say, well, my clients and I will take on these responsibilities, all day, during the whole building process, because we want our building. And we will maintain this idea of doing a building and starting from scratch.

*How prescriptive was the programme, and how much of it did you come up with?*

The programme was precisely prescriptive: they wanted a bath like they exist. So there were all the ground rules that the management consultant could think of. But all the special items you find up there except for the indoor and outdoor pool are invented and generated by the architect in the process of design; kicking out things, eliminating other things, developing the building as a form, as a mass, as a body. This is actually what I always do. It's not that I want to change the programme. I just insist on developing my own programme while designing the building, on authorship.

*It sounds like you pushed the client quite far. You have also*

*told me that you had kept the village involved and happy with the building. Could you explain the relationship with the client and the village?*

The client happens to be the village in this case. There's a lot of autonomy in these villages, not just formally but really there. They decide on planning processes and so on. And they paid for the baths, so it was necessary every once in a while, at different phases and stages of the project, to go to a communal meeting and have the project approved. This is one thing, we talked to them. The other thing is that there were these two or three guys from the village who wanted to do something special, not something usual, a bath like everybody has, and they got excited as they found out slowly what we as architects were trying to do. We became this team, where they were open enough and cultivated, culturally minded enough, to get into my world, to participate critically but participate really and then take on the responsibility of doing a lot of things in another way; to say, but we want to do this. This has a lot to do with the sense of independence you can still find sometimes in certain people in these villages, in these places. You can feel this old sense of independence there. They say, we don't care what they do in New York. If we want to do this, we're going to do it.

*To me the building calls attention to the difference between being serious and being earnest. It would be easy to mistake your work as the latter, though there is certainly a lightness of touch too. I am sure you are being humorous, for example,*

*when the solution to getting to the exterior bath is simply to remove the glazing from the frame which descends into the water. Elsewhere you use artifice to achieve a desired effect: the skylights, for example, have blue glass and are lit from the outside with lamps. Are these elements which are always in your work?*

I think life is a playful thing, or can be a playful thing. It's everything: pain and enjoyment and delight. Everything. In the case of architecture I like to be a little bit more careful because jokes age so quickly. So I think you have to be more careful. But with the bath I every once in a while said, hey, this is a bath, you know. This is also a playful and joyful thing. There is also a little bit of, almost a little bit of theatre in some places, for the bathing ritual. My attitude depends on the building. It's never the same. First of all, there is the way that has always existed of reducing your means in order not to become poor but rich. And if you create the kind of atmospheric qualities, or soulful qualities, that I am after, they're of course much deeper or longer lasting, and somehow also more open to life than if you are, as you see in a lot of architecture, too fast. Making something really funny won't hold up too long, like that plaza by Charles Moore in New Orleans [Piazza d'Italia].

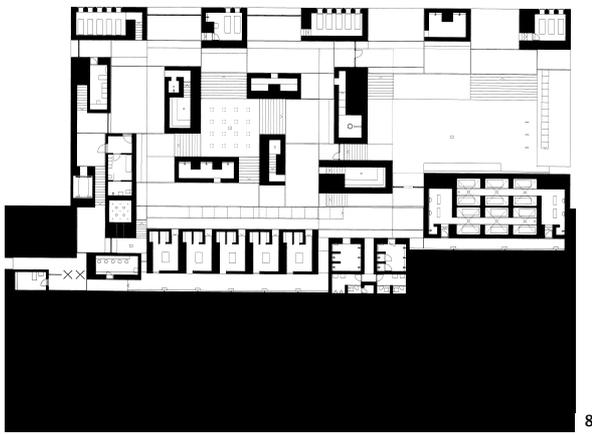
*So where in the baths do you think you're displaying these playful or joyful qualities?*

The basic thing is that I have tried to make spaces that people look really beautiful in, and people who are pale faced and wrinkled look nice there too. It's easy to



7 '... coming down this long, long stair. This is like making your entrance, like in some movies, or in old hotels. Marlene Dietrich coming down a flight of stairs or something'

8 "'the city like some large house, and the house in its turn like some small city.'" – I also think in this way'



make a pool in which only, what's her name, Claudia Schiffer looks good. There was an old woman there who told me, I know exactly why you are doing what you do here; so that people look nice. Ordinary people come in, older people come in and say it's good that I can come in here and it's not this cool atmosphere where I would like to wear a robe going into the water. In the bath there is a little bit of a mythological place, the drinking fountain where the water comes out. It has a red light and is purely an artificial, theatrical piece. It does have a tradition though. The old spas had these marble, shaped drinking fountains, so this is the new version, but it is also a little bit theatrical. Also, coming down this long, long stair [Fig. 7]. This is like making your entrance, like in some movies, or in old hotels. Marlene Dietrich coming down a flight of stairs or something. You make an entrance into the room. Also, the mahogany in the changing rooms looks a little bit sexy, like on an ocean liner, or a little bit like a brothel for a second, perhaps. They are where you change from your ordinary clothes to go into this other atmosphere. The sensual quality is the most important of course, that this architecture has these sensual qualities.

*And the room where you dry your hair before you leave has an urbane feeling.*

Back to life.

*The entry sequence is particularly ritualistic – a corridor lined with spigots, a trough, the stepped ramp. This is not the bathing tradition in Western Europe really. Once one is at the level of the baths themselves, however, the ritual is not prescriptive any more; rather, one is enticed to discover the variety of experiences available. I know that you have returned from your first trip to Japan. Have other traditions, other rituals of bathing informed this design?*

I don't know much about the ritual of bathing. I know something about Turkish bathing, and this has influenced the entrance sequence strongly I think. I was trying to bring people a little bit into this nice mood you get in Turkish bathing, where you come to the first room and then you change and walk around, you come out in this long bathrobe,

and so on. And then you come back to the same place. This is not like a Western sports bath, right, where the name says it all, where you just get in and do your laps.

*And then you get out.*

Then you get out. There's practically a clock telling you that it's been an hour and you have to go. You change your clothes, and there are these metal doors which have this cheap clang. But if you go to Turkey you find out what a ritual is, how sensual it can be. It's so gentle. This I learned at about the time I made the final judgement on the entrance sequence and designed these changing rooms where people get close, almost get in body contact with each other depending on how many are in there. As opposed to this locker system, where you just stand, get in and then go out on the other side. Here you have this kind of vestibule. This is a bit the Oriental influence, I must say.

*One can't help but get glimpses of people inside them changing.*

Yeah.

*So they are part of the transition towards becoming body conscious.*

Yeah, exactly.

*I have always been struck by the strong figure-ground of the scheme, and how much it reminds me of Alberti: 'the city is like some large house, and the house is in turn like some small city'. Did you work with this idea at all?*

It's hard to say where it comes from. I don't read too many books, architecture books, so it's hard to know where this comes from [Fig. 8]. I know exactly what you mean, and I also think in this way, I feel in this way, but it's not something intellectual I learnt. Somehow it's there, but don't ask me how.

*The baths, because of the programme, really forces the distinction between one's formal understanding of the building through drawings, say, and one's experience of it. One could, for instance, like the space of the cold bath best of all, but one's experience of it is determined by the fact that you can't be in there for more than probably five seconds. My favourite space is when you come down the stairs and make a left. I think you called it the grotto. It always has someone in it.*

The one with people humming.

*Do you have a favourite space in the baths?*

No.

*Is there anything that you would like to add before we move on to the Siedlung?*

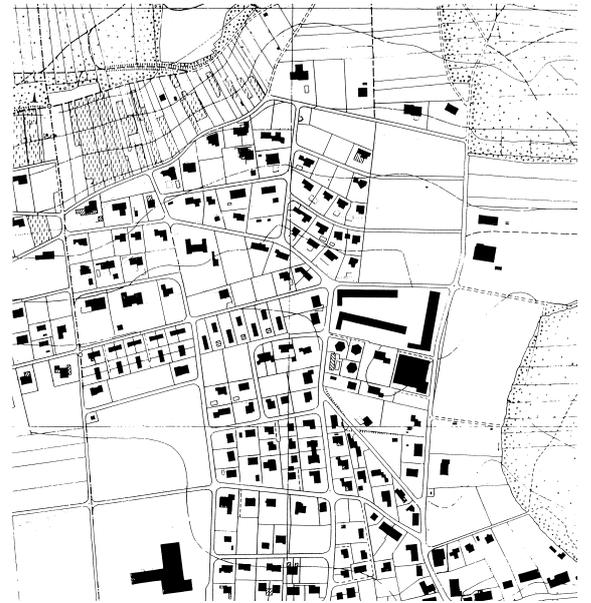
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**Wohnsiedlung Spittelhof, Biel-Benken, Baselland**

SS *If the design for the thermal baths was rich in its potential for metaphor and ritual, what did you see as the possibilities inherent in housing? Which is a way of saying, where did you start?*

PZ In Germany, in Switzerland, maybe in Austria, there's this tradition of making a *Siedlung*.<sup>9</sup> This means that you plan a settlement, that you provide a structure which at the beginning is basic, elemental; then people start to use it, become part of it. I think a *Siedlung* needs something like 10 or 20 years before it's really nice, before a second generation starts to say that we want to stay here. It needs these traces of different uses. As I said earlier, I'm trying to make architecture that is elemental and sort of a background so that life – here how people use the gardens and the balconies, the living rooms and the spaces inside – so that life comes in. This is one thing.

And then these living spaces are grouped in a form called a *Siedlung*, which has many connotations [Fig. 9]. To make a *Siedlung* there is a challenge because it is one of these nice, upper class, single-family home areas and has been so for a long time. It's a nice place for wealthy people to have a single-family home because it's not too far from the city. Now to make a *Siedlung* there, this is for many of these people a problem. For a *Siedlung* is, of course, about making a place. It's a monument in the sense of Aldo Rossi or something. There is this old farm,



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9 '... it is one of those nice, upper class, single-family home areas not too far from the city ... Now to make a *Siedlung* there ... is for many of these people a problem ... for a *Siedlung* is about making a place'

10 'The whole beautiful landscape looking over to the Alsatian sunset and so on, this is what the *Siedlung* reacts to and how it sits in these soft rolling hills'

11 '... you concentrate the building mass in an intelligent way, and then you have the splendour of a huge sort of courtyard in the middle ... This is the ... reward if we would be willing to live in a terrace house'



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Spittelhof, up there, so there is something to react to. Inserting this *Siedlung* there is a little bit of a social and urban surgery. Putting it there physically or topographically is the easier part.

*You grew up in that region of rolling hills by the Rhine, in that specific landscape, and the Swiss place great importance on one's Heimat.<sup>3</sup> Did this affect the specificity that you are after in your work?*

No, I don't think so. I know the area well of course, since I did grow up two or three kilometres north of that place. Yeah, maybe because of this it's tougher than normally it would be. I always had the idea that it had to be a little bit urban, to mark a border, a delicate border between city and country. And the three big bars making this figure-ground, this interior courtyard that opens its perspective to the Spittelhof farm, the urban elements – repetition and so on – add a certain elegance. But in the materials, if you look at the concrete and this black stained wood and the shutters, it's very rural. You can open up all these balconies, all these french windows, and this whole *Siedlung* consists of only verandahs. Everything, bedrooms, living rooms, is a verandah. This is not urban, right. A verandah is countryside. The idea was to have a little bit of both up there.

*But balconies are urban.*

Yeah, it could be urban. But see, if you're really an urban person then you don't hang your underwear on the balcony to the street. That is not city culture. Architects don't know this any more, not even in Europe. It's terrible, we're losing a whole culture. To the street you would make a more representative facade, like hiding a little bit, like wearing a dress or something. So these large verandahs have to do with the countryside. The *Siedlung* reacts to the larger landscape and not to the immediate neighbourhood. Its landscape is seen like a large park in which the building sits. The *Siedlung* says that we are in a park, and that all these single-family houses could just as well be gone. The whole beautiful landscape looking over to the Alsatian sunset and so on, this is actually what the *Siedlung* reacts to and is how it sits in these soft, rolling hills [Fig. 10]. There is a little bit of a protest here against these single-family homes, and that's why it will take some time, 10 years maybe, until this *Siedlung* settles in. This explains the protests against it. There's a little bit of missionary spirit in it. It would be nice to have more *Siedlungen*, more concentration, not to use up everything for single-family homes with fences around them. So all of this you can see in it, I guess.

*Well, yes, it does stand out in that area, which is countryside but has suburban houses sitting in the middle of their plots. Was the decision for a courtyard scheme a conscious reversal of this figure-ground?*



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No, it's not contextual in terms of the buildings around it. It reacts instead to the major topographical elements – the old farm, the edge of the woods, the hills, the sunset, the view, the mountains, the old castle, the old village there, and so on. In itself it goes back to this elemental idea of a *Siedlung*, which is not contextual but has an autonomous form. You can also see on this piece of land, with its three bars and courtyard in the middle, a higher percentage of land used than is typical in the neighbourhood. But it looks somehow less dense because you concentrate the building mass in an intelligent way, and then you have the splendour of a huge sort of courtyard space in the middle. This is what you can learn, that this is how we all could live if we didn't want a fence around our house. This is the space we could get as a reward in turn, if we would be willing to live in a terrace house [Fig. 11].

*Its density doesn't strike one as a problem at all.*

It's the other guys, who actually have lower densities, who look crowded.

*Do you really want to call that central space a courtyard? It's more like a meadow, isn't it?*

No, it's an informal kind of courtyard which interweaves, interlocks with the surroundings. Its biggest opening is toward this old farmstead up there. There is a friendliness to the surroundings which is a friendliness to the landscape. And one of the bars is something of a *bellavista* piece, the one where the flats have separate entrances.

*But formally it's one piece.*

Yeah, but this particular building up there says, look how beautiful these rolling hills on the horizon are. It's a *bellavista* situation, where from one side you can look at the sunset overlooking the whole valley, and from the other that beautiful edge of the woods in the east. The other two pieces of the *Siedlung* are put into the landscape to talk about its softness. Like linen hanging there, this thing following and not disturbing the soft lines of the landscape. One lies a bit higher, and they are at different angles to talk about the softness of the landscape. The *Siedlung* talks very much about elemental landscape elements. Which is also why the courtyard is open to the landscape, offers these views, and in some places has a forced perspective. There's no right angle. The pieces are sort of freely, informally placed. This is friendly to the landscape and the topography.

*What social group lives in the Siedlung. Are they private?*

It's about half and half. Half of them are to be sold, those are the terrace houses, and the flats are to be rented. At the moment it's a bad time to be selling houses. But it's not only that. They have had particular problems selling these. The *Siedlung* has been a topic in the newspapers now for half a year. It's really been bad, terrible. I get anonymous letters,

and readers write nasty letters to the newspapers. Right after it was finished I went down there to meet with the community and the village president to give an open, kind of guided tour with the architect. I went there on a Saturday, and there were over two hundred people from all over, a lot of really critical people, there was an uproar. Although there are people living there now who really like it, more intellectuals. They then have to withstand Sunday hikers stopping there, blaming them, swearing at them, cursing the houses with negative remarks. And they answer, what are you doing here, this is my home, don't look into my window. And they say, it's your mistake for living in such a terrible place.<sup>3</sup>

*Really?*

Yeah. Yeah, it's pretty emotional.

*Without you having to defend your critics, have there been criticisms of it that surprised you?*

No, actually not, because it's so clear. Although I didn't expect that what we thought would come back to us so clearly, that we're rejecting suburban sprawl, this individualistic approach of a family home. That this comes back so emotionally and strongly I didn't expect, but now when I think about it, it's obvious. If you look at these single-family homes they say, 'Look at me. We have made it. We're not in a flat any more'. Right? And, 'Look at me. Now I'm an individual. See on this facade I have these three types of windows. And here I have a bay window, and here I have an outdoor fireplace and here I have the half round windows. Now I have made it.'

Now this is in a way understandable and OK. If the Spittelhof *Siedlung* had been done by an average building company they would have put so-called blocks there – cheap, ordinary housing blocks, apartments. And the protest would have been less because this company would have spent a few francs to have some dark-stained wood board. And you'd say, OK, yeah, they tried. And there wouldn't have been so much complaining because everybody would know that this is cheap housing. They might say that this doesn't belong here, why did you put this here. Now the provocation is that they look at this *Siedlung* and they see repetition, they see that this has been made not by a bad architect, but has been made like that on purpose. Now imagine this. These people are there and on purpose have their bay windows and all these pseudo-individualistic things, and there comes someone who does the opposite. And this guy is a famous architect. He is professor at so and so, and they don't understand the world any more. It's a real provocation. It could be that the provocation is too large, but I think it will be accepted.

This is a little bit the history of *Siedlungen*, that there is this provocation because with *Siedlungen* comes this air of, 'We do it better'. And Germany or Switzerland always have the good architects doing the *Siedlungen*, not the bad ones. *Siedlungen* work. It is not just housing, and so this provocation is not new, it's actually really old. In planned housing like a *Siedlung*,



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12 'There are 12 entrances off it ... So they have this double-storey verandah created by a huge cantilevering piece containing only bedrooms looking eastwards onto the woods ... It has nothing to do with the street'

13 'I often see in cheap housing the common stairwell with no real qualities and the entrance called out on the facade ... the Siedlung flats have the comfort of a single-family home with their own entrance and own staircase'



13

and now talking to you for the first time I find out that of course, the fact that I grew up there influenced the design. When people ask me, where do you come from, I say from there, this place, but I never go there any more because I grew up in a farmer's village and now it's suburbia. They have destroyed everything. The only thing that is left is the landscape, in some places. Now look what I do. This is the first time I realize this, exactly the way I feel, that I hate these houses destroying the landscape of my youth. And maybe, most likely, the people can feel this from the *Siedlung*, that I actually despise them somehow. Not personally, but in using up land in this American way, which in America might work, but Europe is, I don't know, too tight or something. We lack the big spaces that they have still; they have all this land.

*Well, there's also a different tradition here, a more urban one. Were you a little bit surprised by the intensity of the reaction? In hindsight you could say that it shows the strength in the work, that the attitude about housing comes across very clearly.*

Yeah, I was surprised. Then I had to do a little bit of thinking, and look at what we did. So this interview has just helped me to find out something else, that I actually do think that this *Siedlung* should react to the landscape, and that's why I explained it has to be

a thing in a park, reacting to the primal elements of the landscape.

*The building on the east side, the one with the flats, really does turn its back to the street. You cut a void from the mass at street level which becomes a verandah, and a common space for all of these flats to use. It's a very generous space.*

There are 12 entrances off it. It reacts not to the street, but to the edge of the forest. And I know that across the street will remain free, there won't be any buildings there. So they have this double-storey verandah created by a huge cantilevering piece containing only bedrooms looking eastwards onto these woods. This is the idea. It has nothing to do with the street [Fig. 12].

*The plan of this eastern bar goes from being single-loaded on the ground floor to double-loaded above. The living rooms always face the view, you avoid corridors, everyone gets to have this big generous verandah as an entry. It's really quite cleverly worked out in the plan and section. Usually discussions about your work focus on the materials. Is that a distortion of your work?*

I don't know how people talk about my work, and I'm not too interested. Housing poses questions of floor plan organization [Fig. 13]. For me what I detest is what I often see in cheap housing: the common



14 '... I am reacting to the landscape... The idea was to build only verandahs ... all the flats have this circulation spine with the verandahs to either side ... the elevation is completely open'

15 'It has this nice quality that these belts between the floors lap. The dark glass and the dark wood are sort of the same during the daytime. This becomes uniform, really quiet in a way ...'

14

stairwell with no real qualities and the entrance called out on the facade. I know there are some architects who claim this can be a strong zone of social contact, but I have always disliked it. So this is one thing, that these flats do have the comfort of a single-family home with their own entrance and their own staircase. Then I have never liked buildings which have a facade and all of a sudden you have this staircase called out. It brings me down when I see such a facade. Maybe it has to do with it feeling like a big block. It has a stale odour or something. So here again I am reacting to the landscape, looking at my *Heimat* as a large park. The idea was to build only verandahs, meaning that all the circulation is in the sanctuary, linearly, that they all have this circulation spine with all the verandahs to either side.

*Well yes, the whole elevation on the side of the long view dissolves. Even where it can't literally open up it still dissolves.*

Yeah, this is completely open [Fig. 14]. And the kitchen reinforces this too. I don't like European kitchens where one looks at a wall. I don't think many Americans would accept such a kitchen. So all these kitchens are laid out not to be deep but to have their length facing this ancient landscape. And then when you are in the rooms you notice that the finish is better than usual. And we worked very carefully to make sure that you can really use them as bedrooms for instance, that you're not missing five centimetres here, that the bed won't obstruct opening the door, that you can have the wardrobe there, and so on. This is of course not talked about. This is something, these qualities, that people will start to appreciate once they move in.

*What is its construction?*

It is a concrete skeleton with a central spine, cantilevering off which are concrete slabs – floors and services and ceilings. The rest is timber framed.

*And the exterior surface?*

This is cheap pine, stained dark with a kind of translucent paint which has a little bit of glimmer to it. Depending on the light you can tell that the material's wood. It will develop a natural patina in 10 years. But if you don't do anything in the beginning with this kind of wood it will look really cheap. So it's pretty dark, and just a little bit urban, a little abstract, a little bit cool. Only on second sight do you see that this is actually just wood. You see the knots and things when you look carefully. So this makes it a little bit delicate.

*But in the same way that the idea of a courtyard is critical of suburban sprawl, the colour of the Siedlung is more than a bit urban, don't you think? If a builder had done it, he certainly wouldn't have made it dark like that. It would have been probably rendered plaster, or if it were wood it would have been painted something cheery.*

It has this nice quality that these belts between the floors lap. The dark glass and the dark wood are sort of the same during the daytime. This becomes uniform, really quiet in a way, and, as you know, if you paint something white it jumps toward the eye; if you make it dark, it recedes [Fig. 15]. It is interesting that ordinary people apparently don't see this. If you would paint the *Siedlung* white, then I think it would be aggressive, that would be the most aggressive. You can see that with this single-family home just around the corner which is completely white and jumps at the eye. It's terrible. Here you have these quiet, dark bars behind it. But I've heard this before, that it is

aggressive. It's the same idea again. It develops its ideas from the landscape. This is highly biographical maybe because I like the landscape and I dislike the use they have made of it. It is the landscape of my youth. But I suppose it's also a political idea.

*One last question on the Siedlung. Why didn't you use, say, Eternit as opposed to this stained pine?*

Eternit. This wood, this is really important. There are a lot of buildings there which use this wood, including barns, and the wood was always stained. It's normally natural grey, or grey-black or even Scandinavian red. And I personally grew up two kilometres from there with a farm nearby with a barn stained red like in Scandinavia. This now is a reference, you see. Maybe it's more biographical than I thought, because I do accept this wood, this old stained wood. Wood belongs to the countryside. But also for another reason: Eternit would have no softness. It would be like the concrete slabs. I would never have used it. This softness is important. As you have seen, the facade has two layers, there's the stained layer, and then it has a more refined layer with natural wood windows which show that there is a warmer coat, or layer inside, which belongs to the building.

*Which is actually what the building will move towards as the exterior gets a patina.*

Yeah, much more into that.

*Is there anything about the Siedlung you'd like to add?*

No.

### Topography of Terror<sup>4</sup>

*SS Because this project exists only through drawings and that incredible wooden model, it gives us the opportunity to talk about how you get to the specificity that you have talked about with the other two buildings. You have said elsewhere<sup>5</sup> that when an architect or historian looks at drawings they are like a musician looking at sheet music: they reveal structure, form, the abstracted idea, but they are not music. It's the same when one is designing, isn't it?*

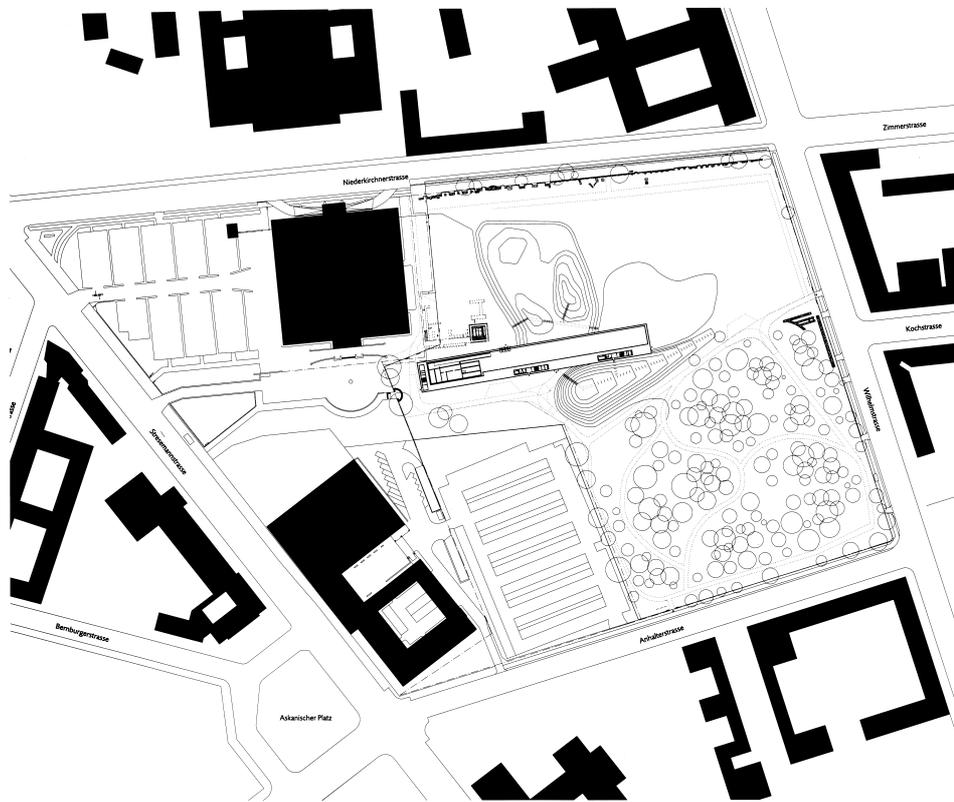
PZ Yes.

*What problems or opportunities face the architect in having to design through drawings and models instead of being able to work with the thing itself? Which is a way of asking you how you work.*

That is not a problem. I always start out with the place, with the use, and maybe some first ideas, and then I start to work. But the ideas, the emotions, have to tell you how to work, so I sometimes have to talk with somebody. Many times I have to talk to somebody to get to it. When I talk about these emotions, I ask, 'Do you know what I mean?', and sometimes I can then listen to what I am saying. When you verbalize something your brain is working. So sometimes I have to talk, and while talking sometimes it is easier just to take a pencil to show somebody what you mean. Then the process of designing moves on. You need working drawings, which are something else again, and detail drawings. Sometimes you have to study things, so you draw, but I don't think you can study too much through drawings. Sometimes you need a model, sometimes you need a scale model, sometimes you need three pieces of material, even if it doesn't matter what size,



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16 '... it's really good that ... right here where it happened – it was the most terrible address in Europe ... Gestapo headquarters ... there will be shown something, the remnants, so that this doesn't get forgotten'

17 '... I right away have to think if I could do a building which would be pure construction ... a building which would be as abstract as possible to resist being typed and all this normalcy'

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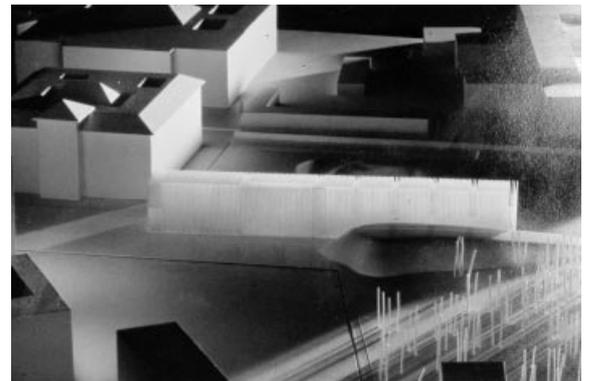
and so on. Actually, if you have a clear image of what you want to do, it tells you how to work, what the problem is now, at the moment, where the problem is. If somebody asks a question from a different level of drawing or a model, how can you proceed? The problem hasn't arrived, it is not yet my problem.

*You said to me once that the drawings of some architects, as beautiful as they might be, show that they have given up on the idea of it being of a building.*

That's right.

*And you have said that it is important to you that all the projects you work on are to be built. Why is that, and does it affect the way you work?*

I have this passion for buildings, nice spaces, beautiful spaces, for independent buildings set into specific places to start a dialogue with the surroundings, the place. It is a feeling that there can never be enough nice spaces, nice objects, in the town or in the landscape. There can never be enough. There then arises the possibility to do something. When I say nice I mean more than nice, to do something that tells something of the place, and fulfils a kind of longing or wish I have within myself. And when I do think like that I can see that other people have these dreams too. It's not so singular what we feel, you know. It's just that my passion is to bring this forth, to bring this out, to do it. You can call this being a professional architect. And other people like drawing maybe, or like to deal with forms maybe. I don't care, it's OK if they are also called



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architects. My sources come more from memory and experience – from reading literature and poetry, from listening to music, going to the movies, travelling, looking at things, than from formal education.

*Let's talk about place and programme in relation to Berlin, where they're both so charged. How did you understand the site and the programme? What were your reactions?*

My first reaction, when I saw the place for the first time, was that it was actually such a terrible thing that had happened there that I couldn't do a building there. The idea that there would be a building with all these ordinary features belonging to a museum or a cultural building or whatever is dreadful, like a Holocaust Museum with window shutters, and air conditioning, and lavatories. It's a

strange idea to have this normality, this type of a building, so it felt like any type of building would be wrong. Then I looked at the existing, small exhibition and thought, the fact that they want a building is OK. It's actually really important. I think it's really good that on this place, right there where it happened – it was the most terrible address in Europe at that time, Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 9, Gestapo headquarters, that in this place there will be shown something, the remnants, so that this doesn't get forgotten [Fig. 16]. Later, when I visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, then you see the difference, right. Berlin is the place, and there is no need like in Washington to reconstruct concentration camp entrances in papier mâché to make people feel it.

But back to the question. So I said, I don't want to build, it's too terrible. Then I thought, actually the purpose is OK. So I didn't reject the programme, but 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 [Centigrade] all year, all the time, was impossible for me there. So there it starts, and then I right away have to think if I could do a building which would be pure construction, only construction, a building which would be as abstract as possible to resist being typed and all this normalcy [Fig. 17]. And it's clear that if we succeed with this building, because it's so empty of pre-existing typological models and forms, it will become a symbol. I mean, you resist symbols and then they'll come in. And this is, I think, OK. Because the building is then genuinely unique, in this intense relationship with the place and the way it's made; and to be all this there and always to see the place wherever you are in this building.

*So even after its construction the building is going to be abstract, and therefore close to the drawings, isn't it?*

No, not at all. This building could be like the drawings if you look at it from two hundred metres away or something, but I don't even think then, because it's transparent and you will see the life inside the building. Probably not only at night, certainly at night, but also at day you somehow will feel it. And then there is the weathering which will effect this building very soon. And then the problem of the production of these concrete posts is not even resolved yet. So I think it will look pretty abstract, but not as abstract as you might think from the drawings. It will look material, that you've seen something like that. Then, as you approach and get closer it will, it's what we are working on now, this building will turn into architecture. It will have glass, and it will have doors with handles. It will have certain things. And it will have small scale details, the necessary ones. So then it will be architecture and not an abstraction. It will be concrete and material. And if I succeed, if we succeed, it will be once more better even than we thought. I have to develop the qualities that go beyond imagination and drawings, and they can only come out of

thorough work on all the issues and functions of the buildings, to find out what it wants to be.

*That's a difficult task though, to design a building that strips out references and typologies. But it is a difficult programme and a difficult site which you said you felt particularly challenged by.*

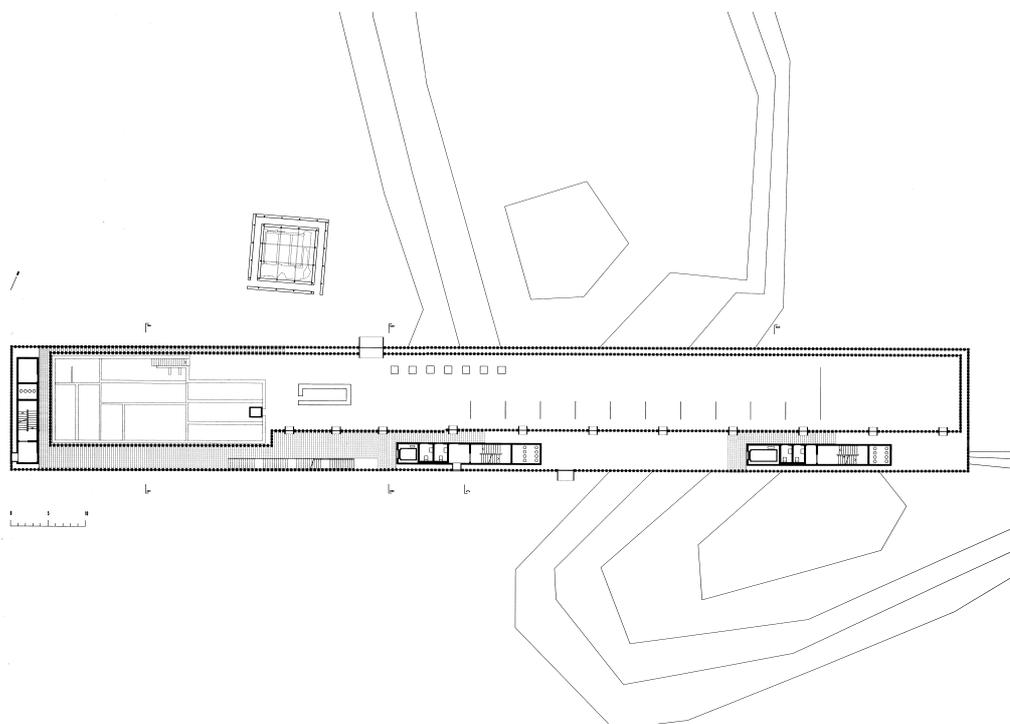
It's not more difficult than any other building. It's not more of a challenge than any other building. This idea of how to approach it came really easily. We did the competition in three weeks, not even. I went there. I trust my first intuition, the first ideas that I have. I always work like that. I try to keep them protected during the long process of constructing the building. No, I would say it was easy. All good projects somehow have this easy part which is joyful, where I say, yeah, this will be nice. Also with this. This is not going to be a tough building, you know. This is going to be a soft building. The light will make it soft. It will have really nice, calm, soft spaces.

Many people think, and you could make this mistake from looking at the drawings, that this is going to be some really stark and tough kind of thing. I'm not working towards that. The idea is strong enough. We are working on turning that into architecture. All of a sudden it will have details, and we are working on these details. There's concrete, glass, and stainless steel. Where is the glass, where is the concrete, the stainless steel? And there's another layer of metal that's not stainless steel but a dark paint with a metallic shine [*Eisenglimmer*]. It still has a metallic shine. And yet it's a coat, a paint that is another layer that we can play with. We can say, here is this shiny stainless steel surface, and here it recedes where it's not so important. So we establish hierarchies.

The building will have some Japanese-like parts – light and rhythm, and should be meditative in the most part. And we are working with the shiny edges of the glass, where you polish the edge, the shiny part where the glass is green, that this gives this reflection, a fine, luminous line that relates to the shine of the stainless steel which might be a frame, or maybe in a door. So the building is not dreary and dull.

How do I explain this? It's good that the building is there, you see. It's an important building. It should not be dreary. It should be a meditative building. It should be simple and beautiful for this function. It's not going to be all black or rusty iron, or sad because of concentration camps. It should not reflect cruelty and terror. This doesn't work for me. The actual place and the documents the building houses will do that instead. This is always the same, this is what's most interesting for me. It's the most interesting, the nice thing to do now, to think of this building, to know more and more about its appearance inside and outside, and to bring all of this into balance through a trial-and-error process.

And you go and do and try, and your feeling can steer you usually. The feeling comes first, telling you yes, which you must notice. Sometimes only afterwards you find that you say why, why do I feel



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good now? Something seems to be right. As for the theme of abstraction, for me it is actually the opposite. I said that I have to look for the most abstract building possible, but soon I stopped saying this because what I mean is reducing the form and other aspects, and letting the form come out of the functions and the construction and things which seem matter of course. Then this whole thing develops a sort of poetry and is sensual and concrete and not abstract. So abstract, I think now, is probably the wrong word.

*Why, or how, did you choose to have a trabeated structure?*

I would like to have a building which could solve its problems, most of its problems, by being a pure structure, and this building is a pure structure. In this structure we cannot subtract a single post. We fight with the engineer sometimes to take a post out somewhere, but he needs them all. You cannot take anything away. He goes, no, the door cannot be larger, and so on. The construction is made like this and allows 50% of the surface, of that space to be glass. The other thing is the way the building touches the ground. You can describe this building as a big fence [Fig. 18]. And within this, which defines a long rectangular shape, within this fence is another fence which houses the excavation. Then you have the interstitial space in plan and section and that's it. This brings the presence of the place into the building from every single point, from wherever you stand.

There is always the place coming in. And in addition to that, it's always only there when you are standing at the correct angle to the facade. When the gaze goes off obliquely you don't see out any more. So you always have this one specific kind of view as you

go through the 130 metre length of it. That's pretty nice. And we take care that you have this also in the offices and so on. And as you know there are these hills, these mounds, mementos from the war which will create shadows in there. So the presence, again, the presence of the place is in the building. Also because of the gravel floor which is inside and outside. And it will get a bit cold.

*Berlin gets very cold.*

I mean in the exhibition, because we won't heat it really. We have hung something into the framework of the structure, compartments upstairs for the people who work there, but not for the visitors at ground level. The rest of the building has a more modest temperature which varies with the weather.

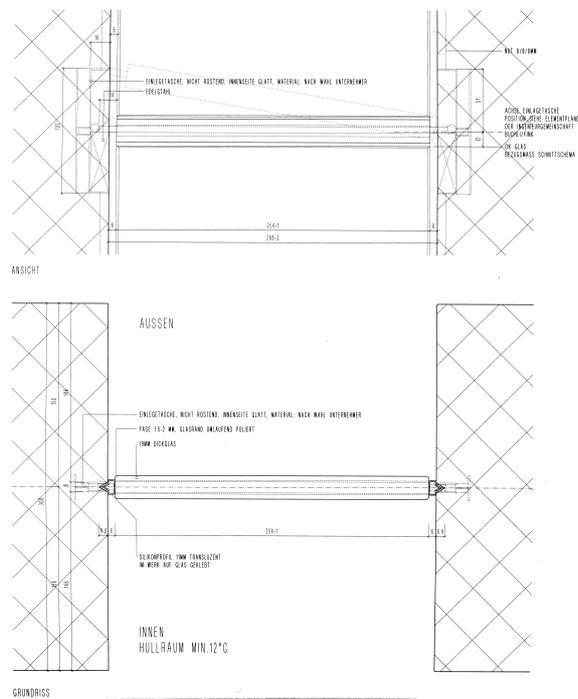
*Is the main space heated at all?*

No, though it does profit from waste heat. There will be a little bit of warm air. It will be blown into the gaps in front of the window panes – they're just ordinary glass, just one 19mm thick glass, so that you don't have condensation. This whole energy system allows for a completely exposed superstructure, inside and outside. There won't be any cladding or anything, and it still will work, it will have to work energy wise. This is going to be a challenge this time, because in other buildings, like Vals or the Kunsthau Bregenz, we incorporated a lot of things into the sculptural mass of the poured concrete. But this time it is all additive. To the framework of the structure we add layers – floors, glass, and so on, but always clearly added and open. But at the same time we are trying to keep everything simple and not decorative, trying to avoid the high-tech look.

18 'You can describe this building as a big fence. And within this, which defines a long rectangular shape, within this fence is another fence which houses the excavation'

19 'And then there are a few things the glass needs to be. A few details come from the glass which fills in between the gaps'

20 'You have reflections. The closer you come, the more it turns into architecture, the more transparent it gets until finally you are in ... body contact with the building'



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Why concrete, and was it concrete from early on?

It was always concrete. I wouldn't know what other material to use for this. No tree is large enough. And if you did take an oak tree, if there was one 20 metres tall, which there isn't, it would give the wrong connotations; German oak and its mythical connotations.

Steel?

Yes. If you take steel then it needs to be painted and it starts looking like a factory. I think of concrete as artificial stone or something. It's the most ordinary

material you can use for something like this, which is a good starting point.

You've spoken very clearly about bringing the outside in. But what about the perception of the building from the outside, as an object, in this site?

You won't be reminded of any other buildings you have seen before, which is what I want for this building in that place, this kind of appearance. Maybe if we succeed this will be amazing enough, somehow in all its simplicity to show the negative, and today positive, importance of the place, to manifest this. I hope so. Positive today



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21 'It's going to be impressively tall and full of light ... It will be like the inside of a Zeppelin ... but it will have nice light ... with a lot of articulation of light and shadow'

22 'But I have the feeling that it could be something you've never seen before. Maybe pretty crazy. You enter these concrete towers which have stainless steel doors but which are not unfriendly' (construction view, spring 2000)

because I think it's necessary to deal with this history.

*Where in the walls is the glass going to be set?*

Always in the middle.

*So it's going to be a very articulated surface in reality.*

You'll see the construction. You'll see the floors, and you'll always see in. I can see it. It has these small irregularities, where you read floors and voids. Suddenly you see this. And then there are a few things the glass needs to be. A few details come from the glass which fills in between the gaps. [Figs. 19, 20] The doors. You have reflections. The closer you come, the more it turns into architecture, the more transparent it gets until finally you are in one to one contact, body contact with this building.

*What will the entry sequence be like as you cross the exhibition hall, into these other shells with free-standing lifts and stairwell?*

It's going to be really impressively tall and full of light, and you'll see the shafts of the circulation towers rising [Fig. 21]. It will be like the inside of a Zeppelin, or of some kind of maybe industrial thing, but it will have nice light, 50% is glazed, with a lot of articulation of light and shadow. And then you'll see, you can look up and see this, yeah, these compartments, where you have somebody in there working. You want to go up there, and we invite you to just walk upstairs. I can imagine it and I get excited. All architects have that. But I have the feeling that it could be something you've never seen before, somehow. Maybe pretty crazy. You enter these concrete towers which have stainless steel doors but which are not unfriendly [Fig. 22]. Upstairs in the

upper shell you have a lot of glass again, but insulated glass, thicker thermo-glass. And there the gaps are widened because we play with the structure. Upstairs we don't need all the posts, maybe a third are structural, so we take these away to create a more open atmosphere for working. The outer fence always stays, is always the same.

*How do you see the smaller, louvred building that's over the excavated detention cells and that stands opposite the entrance. What will it be made out of?*

I don't know exactly. I think it will be coated with black tar to have an organic quality. It has to have something to do with the excavation there, and to protect it. Because this is actually a monument. It's more important historically than the excavation inside the building itself. These detention cells are more important. They get something more biological, more organic as a casement. This was the idea. And it stands as a somehow more organic, softer object in front of this light mineral-like background of the main building and marks the entrance.

*And it's much, much smaller ...*

Yes, much smaller.

*How did you see the relationship between these two?*

Both volumes mark the found remnants.

*Did the idea that the area should be covered by a plain shed come from the director, or from you?*

I sort of resented how they wrote the programme. This one Berlin architectural theoretician who was on the jury said it should be an undecorated shed or something. But this was not important because I don't pay much attention to these things. But maybe he meant something like my solution, because I heard that when he saw this project he said that this is it, this is our undecorated shed, the one that we are looking for.

*You have said that you wanted the exhibition hall, this huge space, to induce a mood of contemplation, or an atmosphere of quiet. How are you going to achieve that?*

These two layers of light filters, this double fence, will I think do this. I imagine it as a long perspective with a lot of light and shadow, and no view outside except, as I said, for the immediate view where you are standing. I think this should work. Right now, it's important how the floor and the exhibition are made. I have the idea that the exhibition and the documents they show there should all be on tables, on ordinary tables, 500 tables, under glass of course, which are lit up, like glowing table tops. These rows of tables contain the documents in their original size, so that the encounter with them will be an intimate one. Most of them are A4, DIN [Deutsche Industrie Norm(en)].A4. I picture the exhibition being like a big book there, lying in the space. The didactic

element should be reduced to pure necessity, and, like in a good newspaper, the comments, the exhibitions, these tables, should be made in a way that the comments of the historians are clearly separate from the original documents, so that these comments, didactic captions or whatever, are separated.

Basically you will have two parts to the exhibition. You will have the lower region with its excavation, the basement piece. There they will have vertical panels showing, I think one should show and they want to show, the history of the house and of the jail there. Then on the other side of this foyer area, there I think should be these tables, and a long passageway which enables you to go to these rows of tables, or just cut across the space lengthwise, just reading, looking at maybe an introductory chapter for instance. And now this is important: that nothing hangs from the ceiling, nothing is connected to the building. All that is shown, this is the idea with the tables of course, is on the ground, on the historical ground, and the historical ground will be some kind of hardened gravel or something, the same gravel which covers the whole historical area outside the area of Topography of Terror. This enters and actually becomes the flooring, the simple flooring of the whole exhibition, of the whole place, the whole *parcours*. Then comes very clearly this fence, this double fence-like building, sort of like a hold, like something carefully placed over these documents. This vision is very clear. When I first thought about the exhibition half a year ago, or a year ago, they said that nothing can touch the ground, that everything should hang.

*That the ground is sacred.*

Yeah. But as soon as you start to think about it the opposite is true: everything has to be connected to the place and the ground. The building should have nothing to do with what you show there, with these documents. It should be pure structure, a protective structure around this ground. To me this idea is so convincing that it must be right. It seems so clear, so clear to me. It belongs to its place. The place is now historic.

*When you describe documents on tables like that, you're talking about providing the visitor with an almost unmediated experience, one that is not themed. But how would you design a banner, for instance?*

Yeah, I know.

*And it's quite a contrary position to take, Peter, that you don't have to theme the exhibition, that you don't have to mediate this for people.*

Contrary to what?

*Well, to contemporary museum design.*

Yeah, true. I'm for the original. I'm not for mock ups. I don't like that too much. If somebody puts one of

these letters of former prisoners in Gestapo headquarters there on site in front of me, and just says when it was written and so on, I get the information. It doesn't need to be reduced or blown up, with a gold frame around it. I want to deal with reality and not with something didactically prepared. This is the place, the place is reality, and I want to see the documents one to one. But some historians want to mediate everything.<sup>6</sup> Nothing which is, is OK. You have to treat it, do all kinds of things to it, theme it in order to bring it to people. But people are not stupid. And if you are lazy and want everything prepared for you in this way, you might find out that you never experience reality. I mean you have to present the things, so there does exist the problem of how to do this. Do I present it standing on the flat ground, do I present it on tables horizontally, do I present it one to one? If I present it my way, you look 80 metres deep in space with a lot of tables and a lot of documents. So I'm not exactly saying that this is not mediating something.

What I like about my idea is that you can go down one of these aisles, or two of them, or another one, and look at documents. You don't have to go and look at all of them. But having this overview of how many there are gives you a consciousness of course of

what they did there. You can't cop out of mediating things. I have to expose them and I want to expose them, but in a more, almost art historical way.

*It would be fair to say that in such a space you're invited to contemplate. You can read those documents or not, but you're not going to be able to mistake the scale of what happened there. Libeskind in the Jewish Museum in Berlin insists upon the importance of silence too, but a silence which is so polemical that it becomes rather loud, in a way. The silence that you're talking about, the silence that you're demanding from this building, is different. Isn't it?*

That is for you to say because I don't know the Libeskind project.

*Are there different kinds of silence, then?*

For me, as an architect, there must be many kinds of silence.

*I think that's all my questions. Do you have anything you want to add about this building or about anything else?*

No. You asked the questions and I tried to concentrate.

#### Notes

1. Typically translated as housing estate, though *Siedlung* does not carry negative connotations as it does in Britain. The verb form *siedeln* means to settle.
2. Means both home and hometown. In Switzerland it also means where you were born and has lifelong bureaucratic importance.
3. Since the interviews, the *Siedlung* has already grown in popularity and acceptance and is settling into a normal existence.
4. Peter Zumthor won an international competition in 1993 to convert the exhibition spaces over the ruined cellars of the former headquarters of the Nazi secret police into a building devoted to the study and documentation of Nazi terror: the

Foundation Topography of Terror. Construction began in 1997 and has been interrupted several times because of politics and shortage of money. It will be completed in 2003.

5. See Zumthor, P. (1998). *Thinking Architecture*, Lars Müller Publishers, Baden, Switzerland.
6. At the moment Peter Zumthor is still struggling for the unity of approach to both building and exhibition.

#### Illustration credits

Architektbüro Peter Zumthor, 1, 3, 8, 9, 13, 16-21, 23-28  
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Steven Spier is a professor in architecture at the University of Strathclyde. He has been a lecturer at South Bank University London, ETH-Zurich, and SCI-Arc Vico Morcote. He has practised architecture in Los Angeles and Berlin. He has a masters degree from SCI-Arc Los Angeles and a first degree in philosophy.

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