

From: *Museums for a New Millenium. Concepts Projects Buildings*, curated by V. Magnago Lampugnani, A. Sachs, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 30 May - 26 August 2001), Prestel, Monaco-Londra-New York 2001, pp. 116-122.

***Peter Zumthor***  
***Museum of Fine Arts***  
***Bregenz, 1990-1997***

**Friedrich Achleitner**

***Conditioning Perception***

Peter Zumthor's Museum of Fine Arts is not specifically a museum building, although it obviously delivers an essential thematic contribution. What seems new to me in this regard is the role of the architecture, which neither makes itself the object nor the content of the building, nor disavows itself apposite the art. Zumthor has succeeded in a considerable balancing act of coexistence, indeed one of mutual, oscillating influence: a building as art exclusively for art.

***The Place***

Without exception, Zumthor's works a reinvestigations of concrete places. That this can become fruitful only via a universal concept of place, through the densification of countless memories and experiences and the greatest possible distance from the givens at hand, belongs to those "truisms" that are the only way to reach the exceptional. The ensemble between Kornmarktstrasse/Kornmarktplatz and See-Strasse has a singular character. It seems as if the city had only moved toward the lake with caution. There is no closed edge, but rather individual elements put in place since Baroque times (Nepomuk Chapel). It is also not a case here of a "Gründerzeit" building (which in any case had exercised strong influence with solitary objects) but rather of a spatial construct that had grown slowly and was provided with sensitive points of contact.

Peter Zumthor's "intervention" is just as decisive as it is sensitive. The emphasis brought by the glass tower focuses this modest "skyline," making us conscious of it and really visible for the first time.

At the same time a further place is created by setting the lower administration and service building perpendicular to the Kornmarktstrasse. This not only enormously enhances the communication between the two new structures, it also refers to the dialogue with the street space while structurally completing the ensemble. Because of the old building (the Forsterhaus, which originally was to be saved and renovated) that had stood parallel to the street, the area behind it was akin to fallow urban land. With only a few measures, the space has been transformed into a highly valuable urban zone, indeed becoming the center of Bregenz. The same goes for the green, tree-lined square with the monument to Dr. Anton Schneider. On the one hand it is open, while on the other hand it keeps its remote dreaminess, now solidly established. For such a minimal intervention, an optimal urban effect has been reached. Nobody should claim here that the modern movement is not capable of creating urban spaces.

***The Staggered Enfilade***

By removing the secondary and service functions, such as administration, library, museum shop,

café, bookstore, etc. (there are, however, spaces in the lower level for museum educational programs, workshops, and storage), it became possible to conceive of the museum as a pure and flexible museum and exhibition building. This had the effect, however, of having to take leave from the classic enfilade with skylit exhibition halls - meaning a horizontal row of exhibition spaces for the sake of a stack of exhibition spaces - because of the narrow building site.

Zumthor wouldn't be Zumthor had he not made a virtue out of the characteristic constriction of the site. A vertical chain grew out of a linear sequence of spaces, and the principle of "walking through" remained intact. The spiral-like line of movement does not connect the exhibition spaces axially, but rather tangentially or centrifugally. One has an overview of the space with but one glance. Through the location of the structural panes, there arises a slight clockwise turning motion oriented toward the line of movement. Whoever happens to search for the shortest path along the "stair pane" moves for a short distance "against the current." This spatial concept of a "static made dynamic" (as if Zumthor wanted to emphasize the ceremonial quietude of his spaces with a small movement) corresponds to the spirit of a museum of art to a particularly high degree. To a certain extent, the space prescribes the rhythm and the tempo, both of which correspond to the contemplative movement through an art collection.

What corresponds to the changes in the size of the exhibition spaces or direction in a conventional museum is expressed here in the treatment of the walls and in the height of the exhibition spaces. The big entrance story (with its own special character and light) is followed by two nearly identical exhibition spaces, whose repetition is terminated by the "finale" of a higher space. In poetical terms one would characterize this subtle sequence as "a b b c."

### ***The Light***

Without wanting to dabble here in questions of light, the situation presents itself to the uninitiated observer more or less as such: the competition project worked with the coordinated direction of rays of light along the ceiling into the interior of the building. Apparently, no particularly satisfying results were reached with the trials. The built solution works with a fundamentally different quality of light. Scattered light that is doubly filtered through a spatial layer fills out the space almost (put in lay terms) "corporeally," thus reaching a different "physical state," such as with a gas. Thus, while various light zones do arise in the space, there are no shadows. The eye meets upon natural conditions (such as by slight clouds in movement), must "work," and thus has to accommodate. Zumthor is rightly against a sterile, absolutely uniform quality of light that only tires the eye with time and that discharges the quality of physical matter in the space into visual immateriality.

Dealing with the light in a manner that approaches natural conditions (this is not to say that artificial light is not just as much in use) obviously contains an architectonic intention: through its changing consistence, the light remains a constitutive element of the space. The space is not reduced to well-lit surfaces and by no means dissolves into a state of volumelessness.

Peter Zumthor does not even allow the ceiling of light to take on this volumelessness. Mounted with clearly visible joints, the square elements show a structure like a flat solid, with the ceiling also allowing a view into the installation space above. Thus the light space is continued horizontally in the ceiling (with the exception of the ground floor) in which the entire building has been placed.

### ***The Materials***

While the construction, the location of the structural walls, and the corresponding control of the light allow a transformative play despite the conceptual rigor - one perhaps even consciously planned - the selection of materials moves toward quietude and balance. While the "surfaces of light" nonetheless reveal their spatial influence and plasticity, the terrazzo floor remains a large gray

surface area (in various shades of gray depending on the space) without joints, with the concrete retaining its customary velvety gray shade as well. Since the load-bearing concrete walls function as both a heating and a cooling system by virtue of a system of water pipes held at constant temperature, the visual force is supplemented by an additional impulse of physical as well as psychic stability. One can not claim that Zumthor's tendency to push toward the essential and the laws of nature seeks to supplant the technical, the mechanical, and the mechanistic realms. But in this reduction, in the repression of this visible "world," there lies a strong psychological moment, to a certain extent offering an act of liberation toward a deeper view of things.

Because of this, the question arises once again with regard to the complexity of the apparent and presented simplicity. In the concise reduction of space to floor, wall, and ceiling and to a minimal definition of their performance in a kind of universal materiality, there lies an immense "compression," a densification, which in reality strains the perception and distributes it to other impulses. Art does not meet here upon an architecture reduced to zero, but rather a quiet but intense sphere of tension in which it must exist. Thus the visitor's perceptions are conditioned and sensitized, so that one is "forced" to go through the building with awakened senses.

Zumthor's spaces are neither neutral nor communicative. They neither cower in front of the art nor do they thrust themselves as architecture into the foreground. If something is not to be exhibited here then let it be architecture; nonetheless, art must hold its own opposite this architecture.

On the exterior volumes of the art museum and the administration pavilion the two great themes of the modern movement - here just as antagonistic as reconciled - appear once again in the urban room: the frame and the skin. The black, two-story frame structure with its large sliding elements and the narrow front side toward the street quietly announces the antithesis that lies behind and that becomes an architectural event. The prism "shingled" in large glass panes - equally soaring and warehouse like - already indicates by its surface that here is a building that makes light its spacial theme. During the day the building appears as a glass body rising up from the ground while void of any apparent base, reflecting the atmosphere and guiding the eye afar. At night it appears as a body of light, showing a new presence for art in Bregenz.

The comparison is only half true: neither is it an issue of the "skin" with regard to the art museum, nor an issue of skeleton construction for the pavilion. The glass-shingle architecture is a light filter translucent to the air and the weather. It is the outer boundary of a spatial zone that allows the eye to penetrate to various depths while simultaneously marking a boundary from within. The "skeleton" in the administration building is in reality an outwardly readable building structure with strong contours. Thus, it is an issue of two primarily changed principles, which allow memories of an old antagonism, but no more.

The visitor whose concentration is not just directed toward the art will note that Peter Zumthor has blocked the view to the lake. And anyone who has set foot upon the roof of the new landmark knows of the sacrifice that is required here. Zumthor is right. A terrace café would degrade the art museum to a lookout point for tourists, while adding nothing to the omnipresent view of the lake from Bregenz. Thus, nature and the landscape have no business being in the art museum; and that is just fine. If one is to champion something here on this beautiful shore, then it is clearly art. And the Museum of Fine Arts in Bregenz is a building that takes art seriously in its most radical form: it subjugates itself to art's laws.