

Generation Grey Zone

With all eyes on Peter Zumthor, and many aware of the respected older architects, such as Valerio Olgiati and Gion Caminada, what people don't know is that a new Graubünden architectural generation is stirring

Many across the European architectural community know something of the Graubünden scene. Bearth & Deplazes, Olgiati, Caminada are almost 'household' names within the profession and they as well as a host of other fifty-somethings, are published in continental architectural media with intermittent though reliable regularity. The scene may be small, but it is preceded by its reputation. But what of a younger generation? Here knowledge is replaced by quizzical questioning – is there a new generation?

The answer is yes, very definitely, but still coalescing and only semi-visible. Compared to Vorarlberg, where a third generation took on the challenge set by the Vorarlberger Baukünstler some years ago, winning both competitions and awards, (and with, a fourth generation taking shape,) the outsider is hard-pressed to stumble across anything like what has been happening in Vorarlberg for over a decade in Graubünden. Rather there are a group of young architects, who in terms of their age at least – all from the 1990's student generation – can be identified as constituting this new generation. Still, they're difficult to spot. Daniel Walser, who teaches at the University of Applied Sciences HTW in Chur and Chur Institute of Architecture, uncovered this theme in a piece of research that he and his graduate students, carried out from autumn 2007 through to spring 2008 and it seems to have caught him by surprise. 'It wasn't something I expected at all, it's been a process of research.'¹ He estimates there are between ten to fifteen significant architectural practices, and around 50 younger architects in all, some in Chur, others scattered across Graubünden. If anything, what this current generation share – and this is similar to Vorarlberg – has been the psychological need to put clear blue water between themselves and their immediate elders, developing and staking out their own identity. 'Anything but like the older generation,' he says.

This has played out, Walser adds, in a far more expressive, international, and urban-orientated architectural interest. Beyond this, the generation's internationalism is different to Vorarlberg. Several of the Graubünden architects studied abroad, either as post-graduate or in single year gaps, particularly those who travelled down to Zurich and its famous Technical College, ETH. Christoph Sauter, Raphael Zuber, Corinna Menn, Marisa Feuerstein, Jon Ritter, Maurus Frei and Ramon Capaul all made the journey, studying at ETH, and then travelled abroad, Sauter, Menn and

Feuerstein, in the USA, the first two at Harvard, the last at Cornell. Others went to the AA, Holland and Berlin. For those who did get away, it was, explains Walser, a heady, and intoxicating experience, an exposure to completely new ideas which they seem to have had only scant awareness of existing. They returned with their eyes opened, primarily to new urbanism, and at least in the case of Stefan Kurath to its Superdutch strand. Walser also recalls how that if you didn't get to the States or the AA, Berlin was the place to be. At the time, the mid-nineties, Hans Kollhoff, the German architect central to the remaking of Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, taught several of the young would-be architects at ETH Zurich. And for those who weren't at Zurich, they travelled to Berlin anyway. From those exhilarating times, some who've returned are able to build Menn; Feuerstein, and Maurus Frei have all been building, the latter extensively.

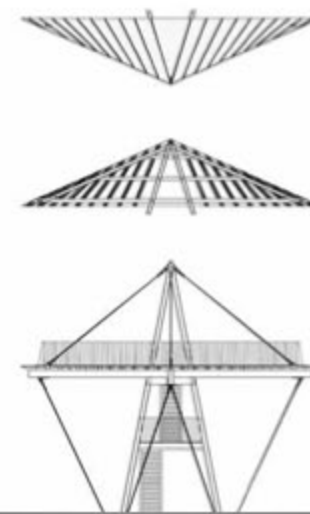
What they appeared to have shared, albeit without too much shared discussion – Walser suggesting they are not a close, interlinking and networking group – was a desire to forge new paths different to both the reigning Swiss-German orthodoxy found in Zurich's city practices and also to the Graubünden school, known as 'analogous' architecture of the older generation. This had begun within ETH Zurich's architecture department through Fabio Reinhard and Miroslav Sik's teaching and continues, with Andrea Deplazes, previously an assistant professor in 97 becoming Dean from 2005 to 07. In architect Corinna Menn's words, 'analogous architecture' was about 'trying to develop a sensibility where all interpretations of typologies are drawn together. This is related to an understanding of making a home fit into an environment. For my generation there is also a freer way to think and work.' That aspiration for freedom also left them under-impressed by the Zurich and Swiss-German architectural scene. 'Completely stuck,' says Walser, who is a contemporary of the new generation, though also living in the big city. Where a few have looked and found a path on from both these rejected trails, has been in Valerio Olgiati's work. Raphael Zuber, who nearly abandoned his studies has found his way back into architecture through working with Olgiati. Buro O, another practice which includes Olgiati's wife, Tamarra Olgiati, are also pursuing the Olgiati sensibility. And then there are those, who've worked at the Zumthor atelier in the small village of Haldenstein, outside Chur, who make up

another grouping, in effect the current day equivalents of the analogous architects, for these times, rather than the past.

Quite a few are building, but in a limited building culture. The analogous generation were fortunate to hit their youthful design stride just when a sizeable set of public buildings, were being put out to tender, through a series of local competitions across the canton. These young practices then went on to – in the main – win, so consolidating the perception that the then new generation had arrived and would define the architectural character of the region through the next years. Today it's much harder, the wave of nineties public buildings are completed, the competitions are gone and the options both more restricted and tougher. Add to this that the funding pie isn't that large and the established and now older generation of architects continue to compete for what work there is, including the relatively few competitions that are run. There's also nothing comparable to the Vorarlberg Architecture Association in Graubünden, with a partial job-description to pro-

mote new, lesser-known faces. Menn confidently states that 'there will be change,' though when exactly isn't completely clear. Köbi Gantenbein, editor of Zurich's design and architecture magazine, *Hochparterre*, and Graubünden resident, believes the changeover will be in eight to ten years time when the current generation hang up their shoes and begin to retire.

Of the new generation, Menn, and her young, thirty-something three women bureau, is one of those who've managed to get the furthest. In 2005 she won a competition to design an observation tower high in the Graubünden Ruin Aulta Park. A year later, in 2006, her bureau was commissioned to design a home for severely disabled adults in Scharans, the same village as Olgiati's Bardil house. Post-ETH she worked as an intern in Berlin and from there spent a year as an exchange student at Harvard Architecture School. She returned to Graubünden after a stint at Herzog and de Meuron's Basel practice, which, taken together, conveys the feel of the international outlook of her age group. Walser says she was one of the architects who most



Corinna Menn's birdlike Aulta Park observatory tower and right, interior of the Scharans home for disabled adults