

# Buildings that belong

Swiss architect Peter Zumthor explains his award-winning approach to Oliver Lowenstein

When the Japan Art Association awarded its much-coveted Praemium Imperiale prize to Swiss architect Peter Zumthor last month, the judges cited the "spirituality" of his designs for cultural, religious and commercial projects. He "earnestly examines the location and purpose of a building and spares no effort in selecting the most suitable materials for it," they wrote, referring specifically to his sensual, sandstone Kolumba modern art museum in Cologne, Germany, which opened last year, but also obliquely to his two most famous, highly atmospheric works – the Kunsthau Bregenz, with its clouded glass façade and stark concrete interiors, and the celebrated Thérme Vals spa – both in Switzerland.

Yet the judges also noted Zumthor's modest grounding. "He still has a studio in the small village of Haldenstein," they noted. And, even as the big international commissions and accolades flood in, he has continued to take on smaller, residential projects in Graubünden, the mountainous eastern Swiss canton he calls home.

One of these projects, completed in 2003, was Haus Luz in the village of Jenaz, a large timber chalet for a family of six living on three floors above a basement they rent out. "Crazy plan," an architect friend commented on seeing the design, which defies chalet convention by putting the utility closets and bathrooms into a central shaft surrounded by living spaces that are open to the outside via *fenêtre windows*.

Some locals were opposed to "this new philosophy," says Johannes Flurry, director of the local high school, who was initially among the sceptical but now lives in the lower flat. "But my wife persuaded me to move from one of the village's oldest houses [into Haus Luz] and there is a great, great difference, with a lot of sun coming in, while before it was rather dark and narrow," he says. "Here the rooms are high, so you can breathe."

Zumthor has not completely abandoned tradition either. The walls are panelled in fir, with oiled larch on the floors and around the windows, recreating the warm, woody atmosphere of older chalets. There is also an extraordinary bathtub hollowed out from well-seasoned oak by a travelling carpentry apprentice.

The architect says he was inspired by "the domestic intimacy" in the traditional Alpine *strickbau* (log house) joining system but wanted to update the design and bring in contemporary elements, including internal staircases that seem to disappear.

Flurry says village members now like the idea. "Of course they are proud," he says. "It can be mixed with a sense of 'thank God we don't have to live in one of these houses' but more and more are open to this new formulation. In a way it feels like the beginning of a new era."

Indeed, Haus Luz's weathered cladding might a few decades look as if it has been there among the older chalets all along.

Another impressive Zumthor residence is in Chour, Graubünden's principal settlement, a few miles from Haldenstein. Commissioned by Brigitta Schwarz, who runs a chemist in the town, it began in 2000 as a conversion but eventually turned into an entirely new four-room building on which she and the architect collaborated quite closely. "When [he] asked me how I wanted or would make some aspect or another, I couldn't at first say anything. But by the end I felt as if I'd had a practical apprenticeship in architecture," she says. "To look and see the materials, it was such a really rich and fulfilling experience."



**Hollatic** Peter Zumthor, far right; his Haus Luz, top, above and middle; and Kunsthau Bregenz, right  
Walter Meier/  
Mico Kurzweil/  
Alamy



Completed in 2006, the house has doors in different woods, including Canadian maple and local pine. "It's very calming and meditative," Schwarz says. And "it gets more beautiful to live in, particularly as I bring new furniture into it."

Zumthor says he enjoys working on private residences but chooses his clients carefully. "They want something quite specific but they don't have a preconceived idea of the form otherwise they wouldn't come to an architect," he explains in a soft voice. "The people have to be open. I have to have a good feeling. [But] they don't have to become my friends. I have to feel [that] what they want makes sense, which includes the issue of the site. And [the project] has to be something serious. At the beginning I start to establish a dia-

logue and a kind of relationship. It doesn't take so much time to find out whether [we'll] get along."

He has found it easier to satisfy these requirements in Switzerland. "If a farmer comes to me and says 'I don't have any money' or someone comes from my own culture it's easier for me to tell how serious this guy is [compared with] others who let me work but then say 'I've changed my mind. I want this kind of house,'" he explains. But "I don't think you have to build in places you grew up in. You [just] have to develop some understanding of the place and the culture and, if it is a private home, what this means to the people."

Zumthor's own home, built in 2004, is Haus Z, two parallel concrete blocks – one a new studio suite, the other his private living space – with a glass *intermezzo* linking the public and private. There is also a courtyard, surrounded by six maple trees. "Living and working, family, children – for me this all belongs together," he has said.

An exhibition highlighting this house, Haus Luz and other projects, which was first displayed at the Kunsthau last year, is now in Lisbon at the LX Factory. It starts with remarkable and vast scale models, continues with copious watercolour, pencil and charcoal sketches and plans and is rounded off with several beautifully recorded, real-time installations by Austrian video artists Nicole Six and Paul Petrich.

It's easy to forget about the residential projects amid the bigger buildings. But Zumthor does not. "I spend such a large amount of time on private homes, almost the same as much larger projects, because it all occurs in the same way to a big project," he says. "I'm reluctant to give this up."

Peter Zumthor, *Buildings and Projects 1888–2007*, until November 2, LX Factory, Lisbon, tel: +351 21 314 3383, [www.lxfactory.com](http://www.lxfactory.com)

Oliver Lowenstein runs *Fourth Door Review* and is co-creator of *Building Biographies*, an exhibition on architectural regionalism featuring work from Graubünden, which runs at *The Lighthouse, Glasgow* until January 11, 2009, tel: +44 141 221 6262, [www.thelighthouse.co.uk](http://www.thelighthouse.co.uk)

## ARCHITECTURAL HONOURS

### New talent springs from emerging markets

Peter Zumthor is not yet a "starchitect" at the level of Norman Foster, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas or Frank Gehry. But, thanks to glossy travel magazine features on his Vals spa, he has become quite well-known. Is the same possible for architects without sexy consumer-facing projects to celebrate and for those based in the developing world? The World Building of the Year awards – a new competition sponsored by the World Architectural Festival – aims to give them a chance.

The contest has attracted 722 entries from 63 countries, 224 of which have been short-listed. Crucially, only completed projects are eligible and there will be winners announced in 17 categories – from "homes" to "nature" to "shopping".

Starchitects have not been banned so names such as Foster and Hadid are still in the running. But the contest is primarily "a chance for the less well-known to shine," says Paul Finch, editor of *Architectural Review* and programme director of the festival.

"There are huge numbers of very talented architects doing good work who are relatively uncelebrated."

Take Colombia's Simon Velaz. He has pioneered some of the most significant advances in "bamboo architecture", designing houses, pavilions and hotels, including an award-winning eco-lodge in China. But "bamboo is still associated with the poor, so many fellow architects shun me," he says. "These days everyone wants cement,

steel, glass and concrete and buildings that look like something from *Wallpaper\** magazine." He is not competing in this year's contest but architects with similar sympathies are.

Gianni Botsford, whose practice is based in Padua and London, has been nominated for his timber-and-concrete writer's retreat in Costa Rica, which was built using traditional methods and local labour. The structural beams, which measure up to 10 metres, interiors and decking are all Costa Rican hardwoods – laurel, cacha and surá – while the external cladding is inexpensive corrugated steel sheeting, as used on many low-cost dwellings in the area.

Finch thinks that such projects are due to get

more attention. One reason is that practitioners, developers and media outlets are increasingly focused on sustainable materials and techniques that have long been used out of necessity in emerging markets. "We're starting to see attitudes to design that



**Retreat** By Gianni Botsford

are being generated in developing countries in respect of climate and so on," he says. "Local vernacular is being used in modern construction – going back to basics."

The blending of inside and out is another important theme that should boost the profiles of architects working in South America, Africa and Asia, he says. "In those countries where luxuriant nature plays a part – likely to be developing countries – one starts to see buildings, including homes and housing, that have been placed into landscapes rather than buildings that then have landscapes around them," he says. He cites Malaysian architect Ken Yeang, one of the judges for the awards, who is gaining fame for his "bioclimatic

buildings" – skyscrapers bursting with vegetation in "vertical landscaping".

Aesthetics will also play a role, according to Finch. He points to British Ghanaian architect David Adjaye, who has found success through buildings that take a "West African approach to colour" but also due to television presenting. "There are probably people with similar sensibilities in Accra right now and the only thing that stops them becoming famous is that the Accra media and consumer scene is just not as developed as it is in Paris or London," Finch says.

**Paul Miles**

*World Architecture Festival, Barcelona, October 22-24*  
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