

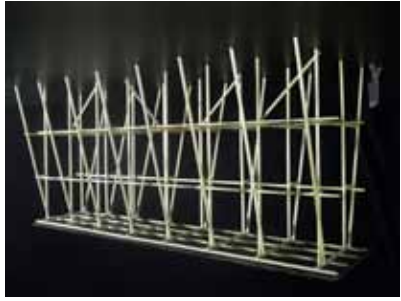
# Sense of Place

*The sculptor in Zumthor*

Architects, like all specialists, each seem to have their own set of rules as to how best to perform their function. This, in turn, is reflected in the level of magnificence of the realisation, especially after the result of the endeavour has been experienced. Peter Zumthor is someone who prefers to thoroughly comprehend the surroundings in which he places an edifice. The local culture and the materials are two paramount elements that feature in his approach. Having designed buildings across the globe, the proof of the pudding has definitely shown itself to be very much in the eating.

SANDRA HOFMEISTER

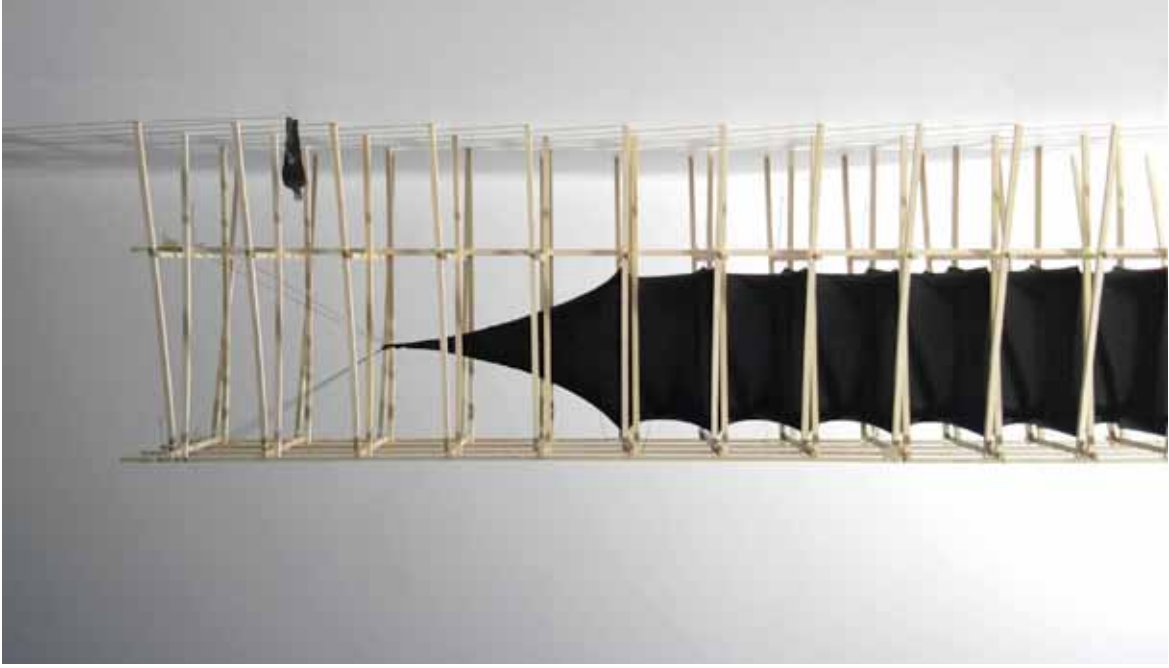




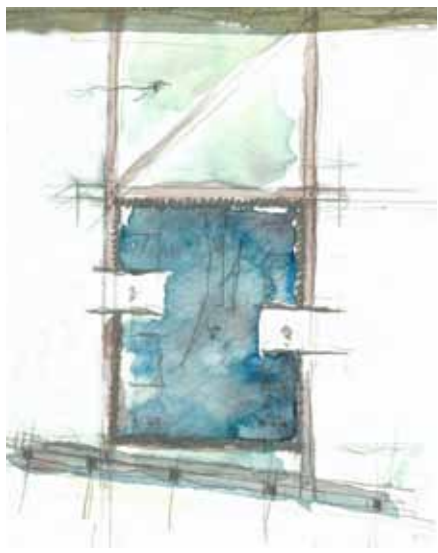
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THE STEINSET MEMORIAL FOR  
IN VARDØ, NORWAY

STUDY MODEL VARDØ (1)  
© Atelier Peter Zumthor & Partner

MODELL VRD 2 (1)  
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FISH DRYING RACKS (3)  
Photo © Eileen Ane Krog Eggen

VRD MEMORY HALL (4/5)  
Project sketches by Peter Zumthor  
Cross-section (detail)  
Cross-section + elevation  
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*This year, winter has come early in Haldenstein. The mountains, meadows, and forests are covered in snow almost to the bottom of the valley. Peter Zumthor's studio and home are situated in a village near Chur in the Swiss canton of Grisons. High above the village, a ruined castle looks out over the hillsides across the Rhine valley. Haldenstein is a quiet retreat surrounded by high mountain peaks and cliffs. Together with his some 30-strong team, the architect and Pritzker laureate designs projects for locations ranging from Andelsbuch (Austria) to Los Angeles and further afield to Perm in Russia.*

DAMN°: You have projects in places that are all very different – the Bregenz Forest, California, and the far north of Europe. In terms of design, how is it possible to grasp their essence?

Peter Zumthor: That is nothing special. I get an initial impression of the place by visiting it; I perceive characteristics and record what I like and what I don't. Then I give my observations a structure so that the formal rules become recognizable. But every architect does that. In my view, what is important is my unlimited joy and curiosity in encountering places. I am always capable of enthusiasm and am thirsty for knowledge. Actually, looking teaches you a great deal. But I believe everyone is like me.

DAMN°: Your projects do not just react to topographical aspects or urban spaces, they also register cultural backgrounds. What brings these together?

PZ: Buildings are parts of places and every place has its own history. Consequently, it is not just a question of the plot of land itself and its immediate visible surroundings, but the way it reaches beyond this into broader cultural spaces. Every building is part of this structure and, depending on which mineral is added to the existing mix, the whole picture reacts accordingly. That is work in the place and for the place. For me, formal analysis is incidental in regard to the cultural and biographical understanding of what you see - moods that you record, layers of meaning that result from this, and much more.

DAMN°: So emotional values are involved in design? PZ: Designing involves emotional aspects first and foremost! In the final analysis, I am interested only in things that move me and only want to work with such things. Being moved is what I am really looking for.

DAMN°: You recently built a monument in Finnmark, the northernmost region of Norway. What is your approach in such extreme places?

DAMN°: You describe your design process as being like that of an alchemist mixing ingredients and assessing the reaction. How can these reactions be exemplified through models?

PZ: Our material models are intended to show the presence of the place and make it perceptible. As a result, a model for Los Angeles, including its construction materials, will be quite different from the model for a Russian city on the Volga. In the final analysis, I want to learn from these models. The more accurate they are, the easier it will be to design. Ultimately, half of all good designs consist of what is already there and not of what is designed.

For example, at my studio and home here in Haldenstein there is a maple garden that continues into the neighbours' garden and beyond into the trees on the mountain slope. Actually, it does not belong to the architecture itself; nevertheless, it is an integral part of it. And that took away a lot of pressure when I was creating the design. I wanted to make something that related to these maple trees and attracted attention to them. The same is true for models. They must be able not only to show architecture but also to engender enthusiasm in the beholder for the environment and culture.

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ture urban skyline and the rivers, and to intensify this enthusiasm. The materials play an essential role in that. This is why I do not work with white plaster models but with various materials specific to the project, such as concrete, wax or wood.

**DAMN°:** So your models are the very opposite of neutral miniatures?

**PZ:** I have little time for abstract models. Architecture itself, as we experience it, is not abstract, but concrete. That is why I try to give my models a precise, concrete presence.

**DAMN°:** The Steilneset Memorial in Norway commemorates the victims of the witch-hunt. How did you come to terms with the history?

**PZ:** In this case, the court records from the 17th century had been preserved. They recount how 91 people, mostly women, were accused and found guilty after only a few days. There is no account of what happened between these two dates. However, it is easy to imagine how the confessions were obtained. For example, I remember well that one woman confessed that she flew through the air as a bird! The most absurd things were confessed by all these women who were burnt at the stake at the site of today's monument. The Church and the Danish secular authorities at the time were responsible for this. In Vardø, I immediately sensed the brutal presence of a belief, a fanatical belief that destroys life. We worked together with a historian, who drew up an extract from the court records. She did this for each of the 91 victims. These documents can be read on a silk



MOCK UP 1:1 IN HALDENSTEIN (1)  
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MEMORIAL AT STEILNESET,  
VARDØ, NORWAY  
Photos © Ejarne Riesto



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2

by the result. However, when I look at the culture of contemporary architecture, I observe that a feeling and a flair for materials cannot manifestly be taken for granted.

**DAMN°:** What is the reason for that?

**PZ:** When people buy a car or clothes, they usually pay great attention to the overall effect. However, in architecture they assume that buildings are simply any old way. They lack sensitivity for buildings.

What needs to be added to the aspects already mentioned in order to make places sparkle?

How can I put it? Let us imagine that 200 years ago a composer wanted to express something and so combined his composition and the sounds in such a way that it ended up sounding the way he wanted. We now listen to the result and maybe appreciate it as a classical or baroque composition. However, there are major differences. A lot of music is relatively banal, but great compositions are inconceivably beautiful. It so happens that yesterday I went to a solo concert given by the viola player Kim Kashkashian in Zurich. She told the audience how she talks to all living and dead composers, except for Bach. She does not want to get to know him at all because he is too great. There exists a capacity to create music and a capacity to create spaces. For some reason, I feel my spaces. I ask them whether or not they are good. Maybe this work can be compared with that of a sculptor. We both deal with materials and their effect, with surfaces, light, and where shadows lurk.

**DAMN°:** Le Corbusier was a painter. Are you?

**PZ:** No, so far I have never tried it. Occasionally, sketches are produced from my work. I did receive artistic training in the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts) in Basel, but now I draw as an architect. My armour is architecture, although some people do like my sometimes very stubborn and severe working sketches. ◀



3

GROUND FLOOR (2)  
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VARDØ, NORWAY (1/3)  
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