

# The Ascension of Peter Zumthor

Over lunch in Los Angeles some months ago, with the actor [Tobey Maguire](#) and his wife, Jennifer Meyer, [Peter Zumthor](#) was imperious, charming and a little reserved, as usual. The Swiss architect was in town to discuss a new design for the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), and Maguire and Meyer had invited him out to persuade him to build a house for them. Having long avoided commissions for houses for the rich and famous, Zumthor, now 67, lately concluded that it might be nice to put aside a little nest egg. Besides, he could imagine leaving a mark on a city where plenty of other great architects had worked. So when coffee arrived, he promised to take a look at the property but asked that Maguire and Meyer make a tour of his work in Europe and afterward visit him at his studio in Haldenstein to talk about what they saw. Then he would decide if he could design their house — whether, in effect, they could be his clients.

“We’ll leave right now,” Maguire volunteered, half rising from the banquette as if prepared to drive at that moment to the airport and hop the first flight for Zurich.

Zumthor can inspire that sort of reaction. A couple of years ago, when he won the [Pritzker Prize](#), architecture’s Nobel, the press declared him a “prophet.” “Skyscrapers are being shortened or stopped entirely due to lack of money, and luxury construction sites from Dubai and Abu Dhabi to Moscow and Peking are lying fallow,” a writer in *Die Welt* noted. Zumthor represented a changed ethos. Zumthor himself, a little wishfully, perhaps, told me not long ago that he regarded the prize as reflecting “a new orientation, back to the earth, back to the real thing, architecture in the traditional sense of making things. I think this awareness is coming back.”

Maybe. In any case, as the designer of some of the subtlest and most

admired buildings of the last quarter-century, Zumthor has hardly been toiling in obscurity. But he has eschewed the flamboyant, billboard-on-the-skyline, globe-trotting celebrity persona, setting himself apart from, and in his own mind clearly somewhat above, some of his more famous colleagues. His works, even from the most superficial perspective, differ from [Frank Gehry's](#) or [Zaha Hadid's](#) or [Jean Nouvel's](#) or [Norman Foster's](#), for starters, because they are not flashy: they often don't grab you at all at first glance, being conceived from the inside out, usually over many painstaking years. Moreover, because Zumthor runs a small office and doesn't often delegate even the choice of a door handle, he hasn't taken on many projects, and most of the ones he has completed aren't very big.

As Peter Rüedi, a Swiss critic, wrote recently in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, what results might lead people to mistake Zumthor at first for "an ascetic." But "he is the opposite," Rüedi rightly noted. He is "an essentialist of the sensual."

**When we met** at his studio, Zumthor materialized half an hour late, clearly a little skeptical, as if he wanted me to know that he had little interest in being written about, or at least wanted to appear as if he did. He cuts a striking figure, with a strong nose, close-cropped gray hair and beard, bushy eyebrows and gray blue eyes, and a hawkish gaze he exploits to intimidate or seduce, depending on his audience. "Normally architects render a service," he began, skipping the usual pleasantries. "They implement what other people want. This is not what I do. I like to develop the use of the building together with the client, in a process, so that as we go along we become more intelligent."

Not just Maguire and Meyer have been asked to make the pilgrimage to Haldenstein, a speck on the Swiss map. It is sometimes said that Zumthor lives and works there because he's a recluse. But he lives

and works there because he can. His studio is split between a pair of buildings, one wood, the other a quasi-monastic glass-and-concrete retreat, on a low terrace above the Rhine at the base of a huge slope, facing pretty snowcapped mountains. It's an anomaly among the quaintly gabled houses with children's plastic slides and bird feeders cluttering the backyards. Associates toil in rapt, somewhat doleful silence, Zumthor brooding on the opposite side of an interior garden, from which occasionally drifts music by [Sonny Rollins](#) or Iannis Xenakis. Downstairs and in the other building, architects slave over models for his often-eccentric projects, among them a memorial devoted to witches in the northernmost part of Norway and a 48-room hotel in the high desert in Chile, 1.5 miles above sea level, miles from any human habitation. Zumthor's plan for the hotel resembles a squashed doughnut, which I would recall one evening when he remarked over drinks that while his work "is close to [Le Corbusier](#) because we share the same culture," he wished to "make a design on the scale of Oscar Niemeyer."

We all dream about our opposites, but on second thought, Zumthor and Niemeyer, the great Brazilian Modernist of fantastical, futuristic extravagance, maybe aren't all that far apart. They share a separatist's mentality and a profound debt to local culture, sticking mainly to their own necks of the woods, and a deep sensual sensibility. They also have in common an aesthetic faith in engineering. Annika Staudt, who leads Zumthor's model-making crew, recalled, as we drove one afternoon from Austria to the studio, Zumthor's pavilion for Switzerland at Expo 2000 in Hannover, Germany, which she encountered as a teenager. "I went with my school, and everything else there looked fake, but in his pavilion you could actually feel the wood, you could smell it, and you could see the steel in between, and it was all very mysterious but real," she said. "So after that I read what he had written. And the way he described things seemed totally familiar, as if I had known what he was saying but never said it myself — about the

noises things make, the experience of touching things, walking through them.”

A good place to sense what Staudt means is Zumthor’s Bruder Klaus chapel, in western Germany. It rises from a modest ridge above the farming village of Wachendorf. In winter, a few deer gambol through crunching snow from the surrounding forest, sniff then retreat. The uphill trek from the nearest road, across an empty field, acts like a natural decompression chamber before the first glimpse of the building: an abrupt concrete block with an odd triangular door on one end.

Inside, pitched walls lead to a sort of cave or teepee with a high, teardrop oculus, open to the sky. A handful of people fit comfortably in the space, but ideally it’s made for one or two. Bruder Klaus was a hermit. There are no windows; there is no electricity or running water. Where a central altar might be, there’s a shallow pool of water, formed of rain and snow falling through the oculus. Small bottle-glass portholes add points of light, and undulating walls bear the imprints of 112 spruce trees, chopped down from Zumthor’s clients’ farm, then slowly burned, leaving blackened traces in the thick concrete.

“A small space to be quiet” is how Zumthor described the chapel to me. For the few solitary minutes I spent inside it, it seemed like the most peaceful and secret spot on earth.

The story goes that a family of devout farmers wrote to Zumthor, out of the blue, having hardly a clue of who he was, knowing only that the archbishop in nearby Cologne had hired him to plan a museum, and they asked him to build a field chapel for them — and Zumthor agreed, as long as they could wait a decade. I visited the family at their home. They turned out not to be yokels but prosperous and sophisticated, and they were perfectly aware of who he was. Zumthor, who waived his fee because he found the project intriguing, and who

devoted years, as it turned out, to devising the chapel with a construction method that would allow villagers to build it themselves, house-raising-style, now grumbles about how much the chapel ultimately cost him, and how his clients kept trying to cut corners, although he said they ultimately acceded to everything.

Still, the original story has a kernel of truth, because with Zumthor a client is entering, firstly, into a relationship that entails Talmudic discussions and Job-like patience. Ask for an appointment with him, and you may get no response for days or weeks. He employs no publicist, dedicates no aide to media relations. Zumthor has long done what he wants and only what he wants. This has been his virtue and burden, inviting comparison with the late American genius [Louis Kahn](#), another proud perfectionist who built just a few buildings, making the most of a coterie of committed clients to leave behind a handful of masterpieces.

Zumthor has often said that the biggest disappointment of his professional career — an even bigger loss for Berlin, as it turned out — was the abandonment several years ago of his plan for a museum on the site of the former Gestapo headquarters. Battling for more than a decade with a shifting, indifferent roster of midlevel government bureaucrats, he found he “had no partner,” as he put it. Building finally stalled when German political will faded after the opening of a Jewish museum and Holocaust memorial in the city made the project seem less pressing.

“In the end it helped me, because people said I didn’t compromise,” Zumthor rationalized. “But it was an emotional catastrophe at the time.”

Assuming Zumthor does find a sympathetic partner, though, what gets built will have invariably emerged from a long and complicated

gestation process. In Bregenz, Austria, Rudolf Sagmeister, the curator of Zumthor's celebrated Kunsthaus there, which opened in 1997, described how Zumthor parried with locals for ages to get what he wanted.

"It is the dream of architects, especially the ones who hate their lives, to do just a few things but perfectly, each thing a milestone, so architects envy him," Sagmeister said. We were seated in a cafe beside the museum, facing a small square, which Zumthor also designed, where a pair of toddlers played in a patch of cold winter sunlight.

Sagmeister went on: "He's the symbol of what architecture can still be, that is, a labor of love, and of how to work, with a dozen or so assistants from around the world, not huge teams of people, but associates who stay for years and work in a quiet office built around a garden — an idyll, where you talk about art, architecture and living. He listens to what you want. He poses clever questions and asks a lot. He wants to know about the surrounding area, he wants to know whether the clients have time, whether they're willing to wait, to go through a process of discovery. Investors aren't interested in this sort of thing. They need a schedule. They're buying a kind of product. That's not what they get with Peter. And it's not what he wants in a client."

Sagmeister recalled how Zumthor resisted calls for a big lakeside window and a restaurant at the top of the Kunsthaus, then stood up to contractors who insisted it would be impossible to achieve the quality of concrete he demanded. "Some people questioned the glass facade and said that the terrazzo floors would crack. But Peter knew he was right, because he had tested everything himself. So he persisted, and now people here are very proud and we have had no problems and even all these years later, thousands of people come to Bregenz just to see the building."



**Not long ago**, Zumthor and I set out from Haldenstein to see his most celebrated work, a town-owned spa connected to a hotel in the mountain village of Vals. Gradually, warily, as we drove, he warmed and gave me a little of his life story. Born into a large Catholic family outside Basel, he was brought up to follow in his father's footsteps as a master cabinetmaker. He remembered his father, not altogether un-fondly, as a martinet who taught him "how to be exacting and uncompromising," as he put it, and how to work with his hands. Zumthor attended a Swiss school for applied arts, modeled after the Bauhaus, with teachers from the Bauhaus, from whom he learned "all the basics of design, the craftsmanship of drawing and looking, of mixing colors, white space and negative space — form, line and surface." He then studied industrial design in New York at Pratt, but never earned an architecture degree, which now seems to be a point of pride. He loves to complain that young architects, having come to rely on computers, "don't know how things are constructed" and have "lost a sense of scale." His studio is famous for producing the most extravagant models in wax, lead, aluminum and clay, sometimes even full-scale ones, installed so clients can walk through them and so that Zumthor can see how a design holds up after months or years. "It's all talk these days," he complained in the car. "[Mies van der Rohe](#) and Le Corbusier came from a tradition in which architects still knew how things were made, how to make things well. We should force universities to train carpenters and woodworkers and leather workers. Architects all want to be philosophers or artists now. I'm lucky to have had my education, because in the States, especially, you've lost contact with the real business of building."

I've heard Zumthor's detractors respond to this sort of argument by saying he's a Swiss clockmaker. They stress that he thrives in a small pond but that the rough-and-tumble of global-scaled 21st-century projects demands a more flexible and grander vision. It is true that his

projects are not enormous; there is an intimacy to his work. At places like Bregenz or the Bruder Klaus chapel, visitors respond not just to how his buildings look but also to their sounds, smells, to the light as it changes around them, even to the feel of the walls and floors — to what Zumthor has described as the “beautiful silence that I associate with attributes such as composure, self-evidence, durability, presence and integrity, and with warmth and sensuousness as well.”

As we drove, I came to realize we were going through something of an accelerated version of the process he goes through with clients. The farmers in Wachendorf had told me: “He causes people to want to give their best. People see it in Zumthor, and see it is a unique situation working with him, a rare opportunity in life.” I asked about influences on him, and he talked about artists he first encountered in the '60s and '70s — Americans like [Richard Serra](#), Walter De Maria and Michael Heizer, sculptors who adapted Minimalism toward massive projects that extended into the landscape. He also extolled the mercurial German artist Joseph Beuys, the Luftwaffe pilot turned artist-shaman, who endowed eccentric materials, including wax and felt, with all sorts of private and historical allusions, and whose life itself became a kind of performance. “With Beuys,” Zumthor explained, “my interest has had to do with the mythology and sensuousness of his materials, the importance of his personal life in his art. He was looking at objects with history, with a past.”

Zumthor was at that moment steering through spectacular landscape. “My first real job,” he pointed out, “was in this canton, surveying traditional building types and settlements, cataloguing the ancient economic systems, the system of the farmstead, studying every old house, inside and out. I tried to find out why things here look the way they do, what makes them beautiful, aesthetic. For me as an architect it turned out to be about overcoming architectural Modernism, in which everything had to be new and nothing was supposed to have



history. The Bauhaus seems to me now very limited in that respect, and this survey work helped me overcome that limitation.”

We arrived at the Vals spa, where his wife, Annalisa, met us in the hotel bar. An attractive, poised woman, she seemed a forbearing partner for a man whom associates describe, not altogether unsympathetically, as demanding and self-critical. The hotel was a sleek but nondescript Modernist box, which Zumthor distilled to its '60s essence, and to which he added his spa, like the Baths of Caracalla to a Days Inn. Built into the mountainside as a maze of lofty, exquisitely proportioned volumes, with heavy, bespoke walls made of finely cut slabs of local stone fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle, the spa invests ordinary leisure-time bathing with a sacramental gravity. It lends existential weight to even the simplest, most banal rituals — walking from room to room, looking out a window, reclining on a bench, gazing up at the sky or hearing the splash of water and the echo of footsteps. Bathers move like supplicants through wet stone chapels.

“Vals is not about an outside object,” Zumthor wanted to make clear. “It’s not about lap pools and slides and gadgets. It is about what happens inside, the bathing, oriented toward the ritual, as if in the Orient. It’s about water and stone and light and sound and shadow. People in Vals said it was elitist, that our plan would fail. The old hotel manager even quit, and the marketing expert the village hired said we were doomed, that the town would be crazy to follow an architect. But some local guys said, no, we’ll try this. They had become so excited by developing the plan that their conviction was genuine. They had started to feel part of what we were doing, and convinced other people, and finally the rest of the community. We took people seriously, and so the whole process was transparent.”

A local businessman was sipping a beer, listening. “Now it’s our Matterhorn,” he volunteered.

When I tried out the spa myself early the next morning, a few bathers were already soaking in deep contemplation. The baths, all of them different, each came as a surprise, appearing around a corner, or down some steps. Zumthor had talked about the “longing” of spaces to be discovered. In Cologne, the new structure he built for the Kolumba museum, which houses the archdiocese’s art collection, shares its site with the ruins of a Gothic church bombed during World War II and with a chapel, a 1950s period piece by Gottfried Böhm. Zumthor embraced the ruins and the chapel, wrapping a perforated brick facade like a cloak around both, and also around the museum, the discreet entrance to which opens onto galleries that, as with the baths, are all distinct but feel custom-made for the art, just as the art, uplifted by the most sensitive architecture, feels as if it were made for the rooms.

“I think the chance of finding beauty is higher if you don’t work on it directly,” Zumthor has said in describing his philosophy. “Beauty in architecture is driven by practicality. This is what you learn from studying the old townscapes of the Swiss farmers. If you do what you should, then at the end there is something, which you can’t explain maybe, but if you are lucky, it has to do with life.”

Later that morning, we drove to a pair of small wooden houses he recently completed for himself and Annalisa near a peak above Vals. She grew up at these heights. A wood house was her dream. For his part, Zumthor welcomed an excuse to rethink the local log-cabin design. He stuck with classic wood-beam construction, but in place of the old four-walled box structures that produced small, dark rooms, he essentially turned the boxes into towers spanned by broad sheets of glass that allowed for wide-open spaces framing spectacular views.

Working with the traditional wood beams was crucial, he said. “Solid wood has almost disappeared as too expensive, complicated and old-

fashioned,” he explained. “I reintroduced it as a construction method here because it feels good to be with, to be in. You feel a certain way in a glass or concrete or limestone building. It has an effect on your skin — the same with plywood or veneer, or solid timber. Wood doesn’t steal energy from your body the way glass and concrete steal heat. When it’s hot, a wood house feels cooler than a concrete one, and when it’s cold, the other way around. So I preserved the wood-beam construction because of what it can do for your body.”

You can feel exactly what he means if you travel an hour or so away to Sumvitg to see another chapel he designed, nearly a quarter of a century ago. An [avalanche](#) during the mid-1980s destroyed the Baroque chapel there. The village priest held a competition for its replacement. Zumthor’s plan called for a pointed wedge of dark shingled wood clinging to a mountainside, like the mysteriously stranded bow of an ancient ship, with clerestory windows, a modest single door atop simple concrete steps and two bells perched on a slender tower. The interior, light-bathed and exalting, suggests the ship’s galley: a wooden jewel box with a creaky wood floor.

“That was on purpose,” Zumthor told me. “I put a slight warp in the floor to make the creak, which would exist just below your level of consciousness. Call it romantic, I guess. All music needs some kind of container, and this container must be designed. That’s what architecture can do. I always think, ‘What should be the acoustic in a museum, a chapel, your bathroom?’ Architects may not ask clients this question, but people can always tell you what they want.”

He looked around. “It’s so touching to see after all these years,” he decided. “I told the priest, ‘What I can offer you is the memory of the church I had as a boy.’ ” At that moment, he caught sight of a cheap wood cabinet, crammed near the front door, installed without his approval, he said. “But it is O.K.,” he told himself. Then he opened the

front door, listening for the satisfying clunk of the door handle, squinted into the winter sun and crunched back through the snow toward the car.

**Months later**, Zumthor told me that he agreed to take on the house for Maguire and Meyer. Maguire had requested a basketball court, Zumthor said. Zumthor imagined gardens instead, an Alhambra in Hollywood. I said nothing, already knowing who would win that argument.

That this very Swiss architect should be building not just a movie star's house but also rethinking a major public space for this quintessentially American city might seem odd. Zumthor spent time in Los Angeles years ago, it turns out, and like so many Europeans fell for its foreignness. But more than that, Los Angeles, like Zumthor, has cultivated its own idiosyncratic take on Modernism, steeped in locale: in landscape, climate, sunlight, space. Zumthor is, in fact, strangely at home there.

That's certainly how he looked, in white band-collar shirt, loose brown linen jacket and black baggy slacks, arriving at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art one morning, to brainstorm. With a big, open sketch pad, pencil in hand, Zumthor stood in a conference room before a handful of staff members, including Michael Govan, the museum's director. "You're invited to say I'm crazy or whatever," he began, doodling absently in the pad. "I start with the collection, which is the basis of the museum. I think of separate collections, putting them on different floors, and then I have this terrible feeling, like I am in a department store, with shoes and shirts. So then I draw a forest. And in the forest I find jewels. I have to go here, there, to get them. I think of these jewels as parts of the collection, with their own pavilions, and this gives me a new feeling."

Imagine the pavilions as metaphorical trees, he went on, “their volumes up in the branches, up in the air. So then I need a system of ramps. Maybe there is a catwalk system.” He sketched more quickly. “Now we have the opposite feeling from a department store. But I am getting confused, weak. I want the sense of informal freedom. I want to feel I am outside. I want a village, but with an upper level, a lower level.” He was sketching, sketching. “But it must give a feeling of peace. Now I feel it will be right only if the collections have real homes.”

Zumthor was testing his audience. John Bowsher, the museum’s point man for special installations, rose to the bait. Time, he said, unfolds differently in Los Angeles than it does in, say, New York or Switzerland. There is “the evenness of life here, the pace of life lived in cars,” he said. “And so if you give people the same evenness in the museum, then it’s nothing special.”

Zumthor paused. “To say, ‘Let’s build something flexible,’ this doesn’t produce good results,” he said. “I have to give these alienated works of art some energy, something so that people don’t just pass by them and say, ‘Did you see African art?’ ‘I don’t know.’ So now I no longer see a village but a park. I hate a didactical museum. The goal is a highly emotional place, to put someone in a mood to listen or read or feel.”

Govan spoke up. He said the museum had certain treasures, which needed special treatment. How might the collections be reorganized around them? he asked. Might a new layout lead to new ways of telling art history? The conversation slowly devolved into issues of zoning, parking and gas lines and away from time, trees and treasures. After the meeting ended, Zumthor instantly started fretting. He was hired to reconsider just the eastern part of the campus. The western end was a hodgepodge of buildings and parkland, he said, with a

half-baked attempt at classical order. “I don’t understand this axis idea, like for the French king,” he said. “I’m too late.” He consoled himself with the prospect of devising paths and vistas around the campus for outdoor works of art by Heizer, [Jeff Koons](#) and Robert Irwin.

The next day he repeated more or less the same spiel before [Terry Semel](#), co-chairman of the board of trustees and a former chairman of [Warner Brothers](#) and Yahoo. Semel wanted to hear about attracting more families to the museum and linking it to the La Brea tar pits next door. He recalled his own experiences running a theme park, opening new attractions from time to time to keep the public coming back. Staggering the opening of new pavilions might do the same for the museum, he suggested. “Why not make a place the whole family wants to come to a couple of times a year, more, not just once?”

“The museum needs to be in close relation to the park,” is how Zumthor chose to respond. “I also have a vision of kids running around, asking, ‘What’s that golden building back there?’ ”

A golden building? Semel inquired, but Zumthor brushed aside talk of what the buildings would look like. That evening, he told me: “Museum officials always claim they have the greatest collection of this or that, and of course they are always right. And their question for me is: ‘What will it look like?’ Then I have to go back and talk content, function, how a place works, and I tell them I need time before I get to their question.”

On reflection, he decided that the meetings had gone all right and were the start of a long and complicated project, which was the pleasure of architecture for him. His mind turned back to the idea of galleries in treetops. “I believe in the spiritual value of art, as long as it’s not exclusive,” he said. “It is the same with architecture.”



“It’s about elevation,” he added. “Everybody can go up, after all.”

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