

Herzog & de Meuron and Peter Zumthor: the dilemma of authenticity in recent German Swiss architecture

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It is ten years since Kenneth Frampton, with an essay entitled "Minimal Moralia," went beneath the polished surface of recent German Swiss architecture to examine its inherent contradictions and limitations.¹ There was indeed something provocative about the proposition: an architecture that, through the promises of perfectly constructed simplicity and a multi-layered involvement with its context, sought to re-connect with an authentic essence, otherwise obscured in a complex and bewildering modernity.

In articulating the differences underlying a collection of works so far deemed unitary (though mainly on account of its formal austerity), Frampton was tacitly acknowledging its emerging role in the global discourse. This explains his choice to illustrate the argument with two practices which, arguably, give a truly international dimension to a production otherwise devoted to addressing local – or at least specifically European – cultural concerns.

In one corner, as presented by Frampton, stood the architect-craftsman Peter Zumthor, distinguished through his training as a cabinet-maker and practical experience as a heritage conservation architect. These credentials served him well in giving the necessary conceptual weight to a work of "ontological focus" such as the mountain-carved Thermal Baths in Vals (1996), which combined a gentle concern for the life of the building with a sensuality grounded in correct tectonic expression. His counterparts, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron (Hd&M), sought to exercise architecture as art, thus denying the characteristic dimensions of human dwelling and putting into question the "emotive charge" of materials themselves (as demonstrated by the occasional yet repeated effort to enhance their effect through the application of figurative imagery).

As suggested in the title of the critique, the charges levelled at Hd&M were attached to a kind of moral indictment against a certain minimalist aesthetic. While formal simplicity in itself didn't preclude the potential, as was the case with Zumthor, of integrating an artistic vision with respect to tradition, Frampton was noticeably provoked by what appeared as a-tectonic in Hd&M's work. The merits of the Ricola warehouse in Laufen (1987) and the copper-wrapped Signal Box outside Basel (1993) were acknowledged on grounds of a direct, effective use of material, yet other projects characterised by the "dandified impulse" to engrave the surface graphically were sharply criticised.

Through his reading of the a-tectonic as a mark of cynicism, Frampton tacitly adopted the moral stance of a heroic modernism, advocating the truthful expression of materials and construction. And yet Zumthor's preoccupation with the intense, immediate experience of material surface – an

¹ Kenneth Frampton, "Minimal Moralia: Reflections on Recent Swiss German Production," *Scroope Cambridge Architecture Journal*, no. 9 (1996): 11.

approach generally known in the theoretical discourse as phenomenological – gained approval, while the constructional fact that the resulting simplicity concealed a less aesthetically pleasing 'truth' of complex structural devices and services was disregarded. Thus on one hand, Frampton's critique hardly attempted to go much further than the surface of things, whose worship by HdeM he so disapproved.

On the other hand, his criticism penetrated much deeper on account of the way the buildings' everyday use was conceived by the architect; or, rather, how the Heideggerian notion of 'dwelling' was taken into consideration. For Frampton Vals evoked "an elemental 'thingness of things,' [which] compels one to re-experience the nature of one's 'being in the world'."² While Zumthor made buildings appear as self-evident structures providing actual but also metaphorical shelter, HdeM aligned their work with the highly sophisticated yet strangely deficient concerns of contemporary consumer culture, threatening to degenerate "into an intellectual somnambulance where everything seems to appear for the aestheticised best in the best of all commodified worlds."³

One encounters here a marked disagreement between the architects' position and the critic's interpretation of it. As early as 1988, Herzog and de Meuron had defined their position precisely as an act of "aesthetic political resistance to simple consumerism, to the dizzying speed with which [...] consumer behaviour has to be maintained by new picture material." Poignantly, in the same paragraph they were admitting their "fear of being pulled into the current ourselves."⁴ So what had happened? Had HdeM's position changed so dramatically within a decade, or was Frampton misreading the evidence? I believe the answer lies, firstly, with the existence of a mismatch between the initial ethos of 1980s Swiss architecture and the way it was understood from the outside and, secondly, with its own internal development throughout the 1990s.

Frampton's identification of Swiss architecture with its penchant for reductive, abstract formalism aligned with the academic consensus which, during the early 1990s, read this production primarily as 'minimalist.' Since then, the increasingly distinctive approaches of Swiss figureheads have cancelled the possibility of general labels. Seen from the inside, moreover, this formal restraint stood from the beginning for the recognition of a shared cultural situation. As Marcel Meili explained:

If at all, the connection is likely to be found in the underlying, tacit hypothesis that, [...] in a diffusive culture such as ours, there are only a few devices available that can hold form together. In their subdued, nearly mute fashion, they speak to the last vestiges of a collective sensibility, as hopes for finding a common basis for active comprehension fail.⁵

² Ibid.: 21.

³ Ibid.: 25.

⁴ Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, "The Hidden Geometry of Nature," in *Herzog & De Meuron*, ed. Wilfried Wang (Zurich, Munich, London: Artemis, 1992), 144.

⁵ Peter Meili, "A Few Remarks Concerning German Swiss Architecture," *a+u (Architecture and Urbanism)*, no. 6 (309), June (1996): 24.

According to Meili, the common ethos of German Swiss architecture during the late 1980s and 1990s should be understood as a conscious withdrawal from formal expression – and re-interpretation of type - in the attempt to articulate a more general but also more profound attitude, characterised by “stronger responsibility to collective culture than to the ideal of individual creativity.”⁶ It is precisely this idea of Swiss architecture as a specific cultural construct, as a collective programme rather than collection of formal artefacts, which demands attention. While its perception as ‘brand’ is an inevitable development in our market culture, the work was originally grounded exactly in an attempt to resist this prevailing force. The only available alternative to the noise of various theoretical and aesthetic propositions was to propose a moment of silence, a pause to reconnect with one’s existential condition. Not unlike the search for ‘stasis’ encountered in the sketches and writings of Aldo Rossi, the adoptive master of Swiss architecture in the 1980s, this process of editing acquired a contemplative dimension grounded in the intense observation of the existing conditions. This important dimension was, covertly or overtly, common to the initial positions of both H&M and Zumthor.

If Swiss architecture sought legitimacy in the withdrawal from individual expression and a connection to various themes of collective culture, its later fragmentation was already incipient in this very variety, with explorations ranging from everyday ordinariness to a timeless archaism, local vernacular, the nostalgic exoneration of tradition and the redeeming promise of art. In addition, during the mid to late 1990s, Swiss architecture joined the international mainstream and began to transcend the specific cultural conditions it had addressed initially, thus opening itself to primarily stylistic or morphological interpretations. On one hand, Frampton’s critique suggests that these works became vulnerable to different readings than those determined by their concrete circumstances; but also, for those beginning to operate abroad - such as H&M - the projects were claiming an increasingly formal autonomy from the less understood dictates of the host cultures.

Through his assessment of Zumthor and H&M’s work, Frampton articulated an interpretative model for German Swiss production based on two opposing tendencies. These could be rephrased as the conflict between the absolute values of timeless authenticity and the relativism of contemporary culture. In hindsight, the main contention to this argument lies with issue that these tendencies often co-exist in the same project. Thus, his clear distinction between two opposing categories (‘ontological – tectonic’ vs. ‘superficial – graphic’) is rendered rather more ambiguous.⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Already in 1998, Hans Frei reversed this reading to see Zumthor as ‘exactly the phenomenon which Frampton attacks so vehemently, namely the artist-architect, who merely produces theatrically his exhausted passions with conventional architectonic methods, while Herzog & de Meuron are using artistic methods to put forward a new type of architecture.’ Hans Frei, “Birth of the Cool. In Memoriam For “Swiss-German Architecture”,” *SD*, no. 2 (401) (1998): 68.

Zumthor's designs, anchored into a chthonic archaism, point to a nostalgic worldview just as carefully edited as HdeM's eclectic sophistication, but rather more prescriptive in its consistency.

Zumthor's entire oeuvre constitutes an "appeal for a kind of architecture of common sense based on the fundamentals that we still know, understand, and feel."⁸ Time and again in his writings emerge, in riposte to "an architecture based on disharmony and fragmentation,"⁹ the concern with "an ancient, elemental knowledge about man's use of materials,"¹⁰ with the "quiet presence of the work."¹¹

The search for common – even essential - values inevitably leads to the same few niches of a reality still available for contemplation, which are preserved or indeed conceived anew in isolation from the rush of the modern world. It is then not surprising that, for Zumthor,

Beauty always appears [...] in settings, in *clearly delimited pieces of reality, object-like or in the manner of a still life* or like a self-contained scene, composed to perfection without the least trace of effort or artificiality. Everything is as it should be, everything is in its place. [...] The experience is unintentional. What I see is the thing itself.¹² [my emphasis]

It is debatable whether the experience is indeed "unintentional" and contains no "overstated arrangement," as Zumthor suggests. The clear delimitation of reality means that the undeniable realities of casual use, of dirt and expediency, of aesthetic or cultural conflict are carefully edited in most projects, just as those elements that give the Thermal Baths its serviceability and stability are removed from view. This uncompromising vision doesn't allow much leeway for artistic growth, and indeed there is little in Zumthor's later projects that isn't already at work in the profound and modest beauty of the archaeological enclosure in Chur or the architect's studio in Haldenstein, both built in 1986.

Whilst Zumthor favours "primordial" materials like timber or stone, their interpretation is not traditional but attuned to formal articulation, according to abstract principles such as surface texture, rhythm etc. The frequent references to the "self-evident" beauty of things "which are what they are" and not "mere vehicles for an artistic presence" suggest his need for an anchor against the contemporary current. His quest for localisation of meanings in the perfected architectural object arises from the fear of a deeper cultural disorientation. When, however, it is deemed possible to offer salvation from meaninglessness through artefact-worship, we are in a domain similar to the romantic concept of monument: a perfected, self-sufficient entity removed from the flow of history and the life of the city.

⁸ Peter Zumthor, "A Way of Looking at Things," in *Thinking Architecture* (Basel Boston Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2006), 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 76.

In contrast to Zumthor's unremitting focus on essential values, there is no such visible constant in HdeM's overall production. Their rampant creativity fluctuates between excess and thrift, between witticism and solemnity, between a loud engagement with contemporary cultural circumstances and the elemental silence of an artwork understood as "the highest ontological state of material [...] out of its natural context."¹³ The main continuity – as identified by the architects themselves – is their reliance on conceptual approach: "a strategy that gives us the freedom to reinvent architecture with each new project rather than consolidating our style."¹⁴

The clearest manifestation of this creative freedom, maintained at any cost – even that of professional credibility – lies in their decisive abandonment of the neutral form. During the late 1990s, the expressive potential initially wrought out of the material surface came to be increasingly deployed in the overall form. An example of this development is HdeM's frequent use of the felt motif. From an initial brief collaboration with artist Joseph Beuys (1978) in which felt was used for its tactile quality but also symbolic connotations, in their own early building symbolism was abandoned in favour of literalness. On the facades of Studio Frei (1982), the direct use of roofing felt concealed subtle references to the surrounding casual, suburban vernacular, but also to the immanent use of materials in Arte Povera. Later, the material was de-materialised into two-dimensional image with the screen-printing of felt-like insulation on glass at Pfaffenholz Sports centre (1994) and felt-like leaves on polycarbonate at Ricola Mulhouse (1993). Finally, the graphic image of felt as contained chaos recently became the basis for form, as shown by the 'woven' structural elements of the Beijing Stadium (under completion).

Herzog justified in 2001 the gradual turn from a rectangular geometry to sculptural expression as a personal reaction against "the ravages caused by so-called Minimalism in architecture, which was linked with morals and perfection and [...] latent Protestant zeal."¹⁵ If, initially, "the box" had offered the possibility of creating an "architecture without any distinguishable figuration" yet preserving "a hint of memory, of association," of late it had become a "stylistic device" in itself; as such, it had to be renounced.

This turnaround constitutes a significant statement of individuality in relation to the collective cultural programme of German Swiss architecture, and indeed over the years HdeM have tended to disassociate themselves from this narrow cultural and professional context.¹⁶ However, Herzog's double rejection of the polarities of 'morals' and 'style' conceals a contradiction characteristic of the German Swiss phenomenon, whereby the withdrawal from semiotics into the most general form will inevitably become recognisable as a new formal language. It refers back to the fundamental conflict

¹³ Herzog and de Meuron, "H G N," 144.

¹⁴ Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, "The Pritzker Architecture Prize 2001," *A+U (Architecture and Urbanism)*, no. 2 (February) 2002. Special issue Herzog & de Meuron (2002): 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 8.

¹⁶ Alejandro Zaera, "Continuities: Interview with Herzog & De Meuron," *el croquis*, no. 60. Herzog & de Meuron 1993 1997 (1993): 16.

between an ethical “resistance” to, and architecture’s unavoidable dependence on, the prevalent conditions of market culture. It is not accidental that HdeM’s slippage into formal eclecticism – the very “current” they were earlier trying to resist - coincides with the rise in their demand on the international market and their involvement with less familiar contexts. This attachment claims justification on grounds of a consistent conceptual approach and a cosmopolitan sensibility common to most projects.

On one hand, HdeM’s strategy effectively applies itself to a variety of programmes and scales. Their capacity to acknowledge and work with ambivalent conditions (which in themselves may be a source of deep concern) is more contextual in a general sense than is any effort to save us from them through a radical – in fact private - aesthetics. On the other hand, the relation to city conforms here to a perception of context in which the individual can have no greater participation than opportunistic attachment to transitory references. Each building as a whole contains the potential for reference, but not that of becoming an integral part of a civic order.

In spite of their difference of approach, HdeM and Zumthor share a belief in the autonomy of the architectural artefact, supplemented by material references that offer the possibility of reconciliation with any context. Their reluctance to situate architectural representation in the sphere of human activities means that the work doesn’t reach those aspects of our lives that remain constant through theoretical metamorphoses. The interpretation of context as something to be disrupted or edited results in a fundamental dimension of estrangement at the heart of the enterprise, which neither the objectified building, nor the strategy of construction-worship, can redress.

In conclusion, I’d like to hint towards another possible model which emerged from contemporary German Swiss production, and which interprets context in exclusively urban terms. As its observer Martin Steinmann has written, the architecture of Diener and Diener - “based in the city, in conventions and their modification”¹⁷ – avoids the pitfalls of an exclusive reliance on concept or the absolute values of the artefact, concentrating instead on the possibilities of pluralism that exist within the urban fabric. The sobriety and care with which construction is approached testifies to a seriousness of purpose, endowing their works with the dignity of urban decorum. At the same time, these buildings engage with their specific situation to create a new urban order, renouncing the authorial exercise of individual freedom in favour of a “synthetic image” of the European city.

¹⁷ Martin Steinmann, “Notes on the Architecture of Diener & Diener,” in *The House and the City*, ed. Roger Diener (Birkhäuser, 1995).

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