Resonant with an elemental materiality and full of myriad therapeutic delights, Peter Zumthor’s thermal baths at Vals are conceived as a cavernous, labyrinthine haven devoted to sensual pleasure.

Vals lies an hour away from Chur by car, deep in a valley dotted with shepherd huts and enlivened by the sound of cowbells. Above the village, a tributary cascades down to meet the upper Rhine. It’s a peripheral spot, dependent upon agriculture and tourism. A century ago, hot natural springs were first diverted for therapeutic bathing and in the early 1960s a vaguely glamorous hotel was erected to profit more intensely from the spa. However, as a result of financial failure in the 1980s, the small municipality of Vals took over the business and initiated an architectural competition to re-establish thermal bathing as an attraction for a wider clientele. The winner was Peter Zumthor, who has as usual worked in intense contact with the project and its site.

From above, the new building is almost invisible. The hillside meadow slopes down to spread horizontally out onto a terrace which will soon read as a carpet of blue flowers. In this field are fissures of translucent glass and a square bed of downlighters, a little like mechanical sunflowers. The roof is protected from the ‘meagre meadow’, and from the hotel complex to the north, by a simple railing but then erodes towards the south to reveal a swimming pool and sunbathers on flat slabs of rock. From the road below, the building appears as an embankment, a monolith of compressed stone with large circular openings. Not so much a building as an earthenwork, Zumthor’s design is about digging and mounding up; it’s archaic and primary. It’s also extremely sensuous.

Access to the Baths is along a curving tunnel from the hotel. The subterranean nature of this connection is crucial as it dislocates the individual from the world outside. There follows a knight’s move through 90 degrees to clear a tubular turnstile and through another 90 degrees again to align yourself with a long, shadowy corridor from which you can hear the trickle of several faucets. This brings you to the upper level of a tiered section. To the left, a gap offers a peripheral glimpse down onto the main internal pool and out one of the big openings to the valley below. The wall to the right is homogeneous concrete, indented only with some square fountain heads dripping into a continuous gap between wall and floor. The vertical surface towards the pool becomes a flank of horizontally-laid stone broken in five identical places. These are the changing booths, screened in curtains of black leather.

Behind these drapes, each volume for undressing has flush walls of lockers and a single leather banquet. Diverging from Zumthor’s basic palette of concrete and stone, they are panelled in highly polished red mahogany, exquisite cabinets waiting to be touched by the bathers’ naked skin. Stepping out, you find yourself standing on a terrace above the principal indoor pool. There is a wing off to the right containing showers and lavatories and, beyond that, steam rooms, but attention is focused ahead onto the surface of the water, at the play of light, and the slowly descending stepped ramp down which every able body must proceed. The ramp is clearly ceremonial, slowing down even the most ardent bather in a ritual of shifting geometries. A linear gap in the roof above admits a bright strip of daylight. Then, across the lower stone