Thermal baths, Vals, Switzerland

Architect

Peter Zumthor

The massive stone walls consist of locally quarried granite, meticulously layered and polished, the constituent rice and quartz in the stone.

The ceremonial stepped ramp leading down to the main bathing area. To the left are spacious-like entrances to shower areas and changing cubicles.

A generous hall at the bottom of the ramp marks the entrance to the labyrinth of hot and cold water pools.

floor, you descend - again, slowly - into the warmavel-high waters of the main pool.

This is a buried, almost labyrinthine world of solid and void within which the spa water is retained. The main pool is a rotational space, to which the bather always returns. All around are massive stone shafts with streaks of sunlight from above and vertical planes of light beyond. Directly above are 16 small bright blue glasslights, the underside of the light fittings in the 'meagre meadow'. If the big move at Vals is to reform the hillside so that the Alpine topography becomes inhabited (a kind of pavilion), Zumthor's next tactic is to make generous interlocked spaces from these pinwheeling blocks of stone. The blocks, which are in turn revealed to contain small orthogonal rooms, might be thought of as having been carved from the mountain, but are built up by the architect as volumetric structure.

Although devoted to the truth of materials, Zumthor is rather coy in his explanations of structure. The Baths are in fact a composite of in situ concrete and load-bearing gneiss from a local quarry. None of the stacked stone is, in Zumthor's world, inspired by being merely applied. Seen from the hillside, the mass of his building is split by thin fissures of glass, so that the entire form seems to break into geological outcrops. From within the Baths, the fissures (topped with several layers of glass) mark at least one edge of each stone shaft about the central pool. This results in certain flanks being washed in zenithal light, but also divides up the ceiling plan so that each shaft, housing supplementary structure, supports its portion of roof. Like structural lily pads, these concrete slabs interlock as a canopy above a floor, itself composed of rectangular panels of stone.

The gaps between these lower panels form thresholds and channels for excess water. They delineate the inhabited shafts - each with its tiny specific chamber - from the general pool precinct. Inside one apparently solid shaft is a chilly 10 degrees Celsius plunge pool, inside another an aromatic 30 degrees C bath with petals; both are entered at right angles and surround the bather immediately in stone.

You step down directly into the hottest pool at 42 degrees C, then rest on submerged shelves as small waves drop noisely into a deep perimeter trough. The 35 degress C pool is beneath the point of entry, but turns back through a small archway to reposition the more adventurous bather in a high chamber lit from below. Across the plan, another body of water moves out against a tall external window; in summer, the lower panel falls away to allow swimmers direct connection into the big outdoor pool.

The gneiss is meticulously laid in bands of varying depths with visually neutral mortar. Different levels of polished smoothnesses bring out the sparkle of the constituent mica