and quartz in the stone. Around the main pools, where illumination comes from above, the stone below water level appears dark and viscous, pale and desaturated above. But in the pools lit from below, the opposite occurs. Hot and cold rooms are lined in terracotta (terracotta pink and baby blue respectively) so that the bathers’ attention is initially focused on the water and only subsequently on the surrounding surface. A third chamber, with drinking fountain and a mysterious well, is so dimly lit that its sides of smooth flags are barely perceptible. A fourth – the darkest, or least reflective – is a kind of introverted speaker with leather beds and a body-activated loop of music composed literally by playing with stones.

If Zumthor’s section is a fixed one – water, after all, finds a single level – his plan manoeuvres to find a myriad possibilities. Visitors certainly seem to enjoy discovering and experiencing the Baths’ nooks and crannies. As the principal floor extends around the outdoor pool with its three jets of water, the stone rises to form flat decks for lounging in the mountain air. Small cabins help screen this rather sybaritic scene from the village below. All these blocks along the high-easterly elevation contain massage or relaxation rooms (there are more, beneath, for mud treatments and physiotherapy). Their square windows, within slim steel boxes, sit at chaise longue height for comfortable viewing. Although never mechanical or institutional, the Baths retain a clinical aspect.

There is one further material. Doors, handrails, grips, suspended and applied signage, the discs of pendant lights, and the tubular contraptions at entry and about the drinking well are all made of bronze. Even the sipping cups and their attachment chains are made of this wonderful substance. Its occasional roundness and dull metallic glow contrast splendidly with the grey homogeneity of the cavernous setting. The bronze of the linear balustrade and handrails interacts with the slits of descending natural light, doors meld into their openings as immaculate frameless surfaces.

Through the rigour of his craft, Peter Zumthor has realised an extraordinary building full of sensory richness. From the earlier projects in Chur, and from the church of Sogn Benedikt west of Vals (AR January 1991). Zumthor has now developed an architecture of complex spatial interpenetration. At Vals, he has created a building concerned not simply with style, image or beautiful materiality, but resonant with atavistic memories of weight, contiguity and enclosure, of sound and enticing illumination. To use the Baths is an intense, almost primal pleasure.