

Graubünden's new generation of architects comes of age

The Swiss alpine canton of Graubünden is fast becoming a treasure trove of new and exciting architecture thanks to a crop of local practices that are emerging from the shadow of earlier, much-lauded, practitioners from the area, not least of which is Peter Zumthor

Sowmya Thuniki, March 3, 2014 | *Words Oliver Lowenstein*

You are a foreign architect recently arrived in Zurich. You travel, by car or possibly by train and bus east, towards a modern architectural shrine, the thermal baths in the upland valley village of Vals. You spend time in this modern wonder, a virtuoso performance in materiality and atmosphere half-dug into the steep hillside by its world-famous architect, Peter Zumthor. After having paid appropriate due homage, you speed back to the country's largest city. And as you do so, you miss the entire wider tableau that is around you: Graubünden's remarkable and much wider architectural culture. Zumthor is surely a central part, but only a part nonetheless.

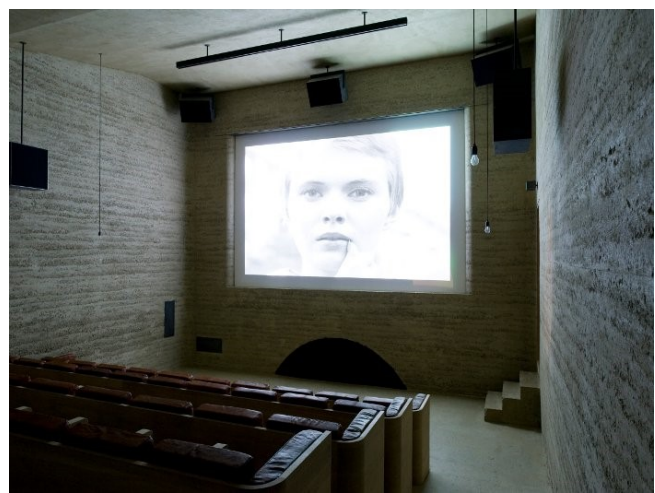


If the emphasis here is on Zumthor's international stature, and specifically Vals, which the critic Edwin Heathcote recently suggested is 'oddly emerging as a one of the world centres of architecture', some at least of these destination art-architecture tourists will likely be aware of the generation and work of architects of which Zumthor is the most visible: Bearth & Deplazes, Valerio Olgiati, Gion Caminada, and engineer Jürg Conzett are all recognised figures.

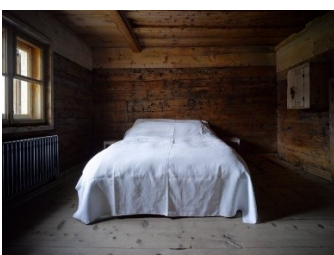
What is less known is that the Graubünden story doesn't end there. Indeed, this is graphically illustrated by the emergence of a new generation of Graubündener architects, heirs to the older 60-something generation; architects and practices such as Corinna Menn, Capaul & Blumenthal, Iseppi/Kurath and Raphael Zuber (along with at least two dozen young practices) are making their presence increasingly felt across the Swiss canton with work that is beginning to be recognised. Five years ago when I wrote about this generation in a Graubünden edition of the occasional cultural review I run, *Fourth Door Review*, a key issue and complaint was about getting work and winning commissions over the dominant established practices. This is no longer such an issue, as many of this thirty-/forty-something generation can now point to a variety of completed projects, and are themselves well established and competing successfully for commissions.



‘The younger generation is more visible and getting projects, even if they’re not officially recognised that much,’ says Daniel Walser, a young architectural historian teaching at the University of Applied Arts HTW Chur. Walser should know, as the generation’s unofficial chief documenter and all-round promoter, most recently in an ongoing overview exhibition of the generation’s work, which opened in Chur before continuing to ETH Zurich. What is also clear is that an intergenerational tension, balancing continuity with change, and the finding of feet and identity in the shadow of elders, much like children of overachieving parents, is continuing to be played out.



This is most obvious with Corinna Menn who, as niece of one of Switzerland’s most eminent engineers, Christian Menn, had perhaps particular reason to search for an architectural identity of her own. Menn, like many of her peers, benefited from the wider horizons available compared to the previous generation. After the semi-mandatory first years at ETHZ, she studied in the late Nineties first in Berlin and then Harvard Graduate School of Design, before returning to Graubünden with a characteristically Nineties’ interest in urbanism. This has fed through into Menn setting her sights on working in cities and other urban contexts, as well as Graubünden, impossible in the overwhelmingly rural canton. Menn runs through a series of ongoing and recent projects, such as a children’s hospital extension in the northern Swiss city of St Gallen, a lakeside housing block in Zurich, and a car-parking project, urban in type albeit in the small village of Soglio.



All of these required the urbanist's mindset. 'What I've realised is that I'm not only connected to Graubünden as a source of my identity and of projects. My field of work has expanded,' she says. Menn had an early start with winning two projects – a viewing platform above the dramatic Ruinaulta gorges of the Vorderrhein and a home for disabled children in the village of Scharans – before she was 35. 'I felt a bit alone, while now there are several architects who are getting work and recognition. There are different backgrounds and different positions, and Daniel Walser's exhibition was very important to gather these positions together, to meet and talk and be connected, as that can be difficult in Graubünden,' she recounts.



Menn's last observation becomes clearer when you take in Graubünden's size, a mite smaller than Wales, (and a population only 10,000 more than Swansea – 180,000) as well as equally challenging accessibility through the overwhelmingly dramatic, mountainous splendour. If the majority of practices are clustered around Chur, the valley-head entrance to the Alpine fastnesses and passes, another characteristic is that a significant number are in the small towns dotting the canton, an antithesis of sorts to architecture's metropolitan identity. Of these, it is Iseppi/Kurath, which has taken a similar fully fledged urbanist interests and integrated it with a participatory agenda the furthest.



Stefan Kurath, like Menn, studied abroad, this time in Delft, Holland, and was exposed to the then-prevailing SuperDutch urbanism, particularly participatory urbanist thinking. Working from the small town of Thusis, Kurath and his partner Ivano Iseppi have sought to integrate participation into their practice, most

recently in a timber-yard building. Working with the owner, a simple yet smart timber frame system was arrived at, helping to lighten the shed's inside. And as Mani Holzbau's carpenter-owner tells it, the M truss system reminds him of his name, a design extra that has sparked the interest of rival carpentry companies. Says Kurath: 'It's totally changed people's ideas about buildings round here. It's important to make architecture that is a negotiation, although I have to be happy with the result.'

While other architects may not engage with participation's social dimension, the majority, regardless of generation, see context – site, topography and environment – as a given in their architectural thinking, particularly highlighted by the undeniable, overwhelming presence of mountains. Menn's rural projects, including a Swiss Alpine Club hostel and what looks like a sensitive, painstaking reconstruction of a 16th-century house in the Engadin village of Samedan, are equally important for her, amid the canton's overwhelmingly rural, mountain-embedded backdrop. Yet on the other side of this critical fault line there is a definite, if small and controversial, counter-tendency, influenced and aligned with two major Swiss architecture outsiders: Valerio Olgiati and, in Zurich, Christian Kerez, and their manifestos for new, total architectural languages that exist beyond any appeal to context, which we will return to.



For a persuasive and poetic illustration of the contextual sensibility, go to the small junction town of Ilanz, where those heading for Vals need to join the small valley road to the village. It's in this town that Capaul & Blumenthal completed the first-ever rammed-earth cinema, influenced both by Zumthor and Gion Caminada. Caminda is the village architect with an international reputation, whose buildings are on the doorstep of his village home, Vrin, and include farm sheds, the school and numerous strickbau (log house) chalets sit at the end of a mountain road less travelled, just a few miles above Vals. Blumenthal worked at the Zumthor studio in the Nineties, while Capaul grew up in Vrin's neighbouring village of Valle, so that the ancient-modern mix of craft, tradition and vernacular integrated into the contemporary world isn't completely surprising.



Cinema sil Piazza, a community-run venue, was completed in 2010 (both architects are active members). Enter the rebuilt theatre auditorium and – at least, when it's not in use – you may well be (as I was) stopped in your tracks by its stillness, atmosphere and silence. This cave-like space has an almost reverential

ambience. ‘It was a very low-budget project,’ says Capaul, ‘with members working on the construction.’ Begun in 2008, the pair approached the Vorarlberg rammed-earth master, Martin Rauch. After a visit he readily agreed to be involved. One of Rauch’s team visited and led four local volunteers for four months before the cinema club opened the doors and attracted the attention of the mittel-Europa community and a string of awards.



Himself a cinephile, Capaul talks of the sensibility as ‘archaic’, ancient materials holding cinematic hi-tech and a collapse of categories – a medieval electric cinema. For some, the rammed earth speaks of sustainability, although Capaul points out that the practice is immersed in environmentally sensitive buildings. ‘For us it is normal, living here, looking around, appreciating the existing old buildings, and working out of tradition, to create this atmosphere with craftsmanship; that’s what we’re looking for. You know, when I was studying at ETHZ it wasn’t the architecture that was missing, it was the roots.’ Currently, the practice is involved in a large office in Ilanz, a possible further cinema in Schaffhausen, and, again with Rauch, the remaking of a strickbau Alpine farm home using rammed earth in Capaul’s own village.



Not entirely dissimilar is the already complete strickbau barn interior, recrafted by GujanPally, the first to introduce Rauch’s rammed earth into the region. Marlene Gujan, also an ex- Zumthor hand, and Conrad Pally, who originally trained as a carpenter, are well recognised for a series of dramatically perched mountain hiking hostels in the canton’s Surselva region. The recent strickbau home in Almens was for a client who stipulated an interior of all-natural materials with a pronounced Asian sensibility. The result is an exquisitely designed interior that highlights rammed earth with Pally’s woodworking. In examples like these, one can see how these younger practices have embraced natural, renewable materials and sustainability in a way that the previous generation didn’t.



‘It’s a generational thing,’ says Norbert Mathis, another young architect, whose all-timber fire station and forestry centre in Bonaduz applied an interlocking glueless, timber, wall-jointing system based on vertical log construction, for which the timber was cut when its sap was just right, on a particular full moon! Mathis, with project partners Michael Hemmi and Michele Vassella, completed the less than straight-forward, challenging project. ‘A nightmare!’ exclaims Mathis, although he is now interested in trying another version, perhaps related to the building going on to win a regional timber-building award. Mathis spent nearly a decade in another influential local practice, that of Conradin Clavuot, thinking that one day his employers would turn over a new leaf and embrace sustainability. It didn’t happen and eventually Mathis left, starting up alone and focusing on his main stock-in-trade, sustainable houses. Many use cross-laminated timber, including his own family home, a stone’s throw from one of the early residential projects by BearthDeplazes.



At radical odds with both projects and practices is the small number of young architects aligned with Valerio Olgiati. With a mix of outspoken and seemingly arrogant claims about his abilities, Olgiati cuts a controversial figure in the canton (as he does in Switzerland generally), where he still lives and works. Olgiati’s conviction of an architecture as a pure and physical representation of the intellect, realised so far in a modest number of projects, has led to international acclaim and a cult following among some younger architects. Of these, the best known is Raphael Zuber, whose first completed project, the Grono School, excited critical interest across Europe when it was completed in 2011. The three-storey concrete primary school and kindergarten applies elliptical concrete circles at and above the entrances, the facade concrete both visual motif and key structural elements in the composition. Zuber was on the verge of abandoning architecture when he came upon Olgiati by ‘pure accident.’



‘It was the first time I’d met an architect who used architecture as an expression of the intellect in a very strong, very personal way; not through a text, or in thinking, but in a purely physical way,’ he says. Like Olgiati, Zuber has stirred up the more mainstream Graubünden scene. Corinna Menn states that, after visiting the Grono School on its sloping field site, she could not reconcile Zuber’s rhetoric with what she saw as an undeniable contextual influence. While also underlining how interesting she finds Zuber’s work, this is one of the more diplomatic observations I hear while in Graubünden.



Ranging from the cult of Zumthor to the cult of Olgiati, from Zuber’s uncompromisingly demanding total freedom for his total architecture to the archaic atmospherics of Capaul & Blumenthal, from the urban and contextual work of Menn to Kuruth’s participatory approach, common to all is a certain intensity in architectural passions found among this generation. If you happen to be on the road out of Zurich heading towards Graubünden you would do well to extend the visit beyond Vals, and explore this singular canton and its architecture a while longer.