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ZUMTHOR'S DOOR



In the heart of Grimm country, five hours and four train rides away from the nearest city of Cologne, Germany, is a house for a man named Axel Bruchhäuser. Back in Cologne, three hundred kilometers and a two hour drive in the opposite direction stands another object, a chapel to honor the patron saint of Switzerland, Bruder Klaus. There is in actuality no legitimate point of comparison between these two objects other than the fact that I encountered both in quick succession one weekend in March and was, by both to a greater extent, affected. Not only by the singularity of each encounter with the buildings themselves but through a sense that distinct acquaintances were being made, a far cry from the pervading sense of academic detachment I have often felt whilst passing through various other 'architectures'. Or more acutely, looking at them. Indeed the only knowledge I had of the Bruder Klaus chapel prior to that day was of one image, its approachable, photogenic flank that appeared sometime in 2007, and without further thought did not endeavor to seek more. I imagine I felt not unlike the Hollywood actor and his wife who, it was reported¹, were asked by Peter Zumthor whether they had actually been to visit any of his buildings before requesting if he would design them a house (they hadn't), trusting wholeheartedly that they had seen and heard that the architect had designed some fantastic ones and that ultimately, a building was a building.

To assess the merits of an architecture from its image-shape is certainly not a new phenomenon, its current incarnation a modernist legacy somewhat rooted in Le Corbusier's faked images² for *L'Esprit Nouveau*, before tracking west to America to find commercial enterprise in the form of the Case Study House program and its publication. To consider this legacy is to consider also the idea of architecture-as-lifestyle and the explicit and complicit role of the photographer in the selling of this, an indisputably far cry from Zumthor's own beliefs, that of building-as-envelope and 'background for life'³, integral to the landscape and not as a commodity symbolic and synonymous with aspirational acquisition. It seems somewhat incongruous therefore that the architect has agreed to accept this project for this private residence in the very heartland of the American dream.

The chapel at Wachendorf was commissioned for and resides on private farmland. It stands in a field that can be publicly accessed via a meandering ten minute path, which starts from a car-park that occupies the remains of a building site at one end of the village street. From this distance the chapel is visible only as a rectangular tower - a silhouetted, ambiguous form almost indistinguishable from the haystacks in earlier fields. A curiosity that seeks investigation. The anticipation of this encounter brings to mind the lengthy approach through the landscape of the folly at the end of the valley in Stourhead, thrilling from a distance on account of its size and against the expansiveness of the valley frame. But unlike the tower at Stourhead, which loses all of its anticipatory excitement once proximity has form resolved, the pilgrimage up the path to the chapel forbids a direct sight until the very final turn, which when it occurs, is orientated at the very apex of that one ubiquitous view. A seduction through anticipation. This anticipatory delay is perhaps also the great appeal of the Shard, a contentious skyscraper that, on account of its size, is either so far away to be a glinting, monolithic curio or towering directly above, such that seeing it as a fully resolved entity requires an almost unobtainable positioning and thus this building is, against all expectation, entirely able to retain the enigma of the unresolved.

But the form of the chapel at Wachendorf *is* resolved and on this final approach it materializes into what is resolutely not a rectangle but a tower of five irregular extruded facets, the foremost of which hosts the door, the physical barrier separating the chapel's geometric exterior and its wholly other interior.

If I am to try and resolve in writing what it feels like to enter the interior of this chapel then I cannot do more than defer to Junichiro Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*⁴, a book whose passages vibrate like the very

walls themselves, with deep levels of oscillating ambiguity and lucidity, that ring with the clarity of acute calm. The door opens into a dark passage to a cave that opens up into an interior that is such a complete and utter break with its exterior that the thrill and delight of discovery is spectacular. But the seduction of Zumthor's work is not in the short-lived enchantment from this burst of spectacle but rather, with a resonance that sounds long after familiarity's boredom has taken its toll.

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A quick note regarding phenomenology; I could talk about the weather or the time of day or the softness of the ground or my disposition at that particular moment and the inevitable effect it all lent to the experience of that singular encounter but really, that would be to disengage wholeheartedly with the very nature of the building itself- an entity so far removed from its phenomenological landscape and yet utterly present, superseding it and yet ultimately tethered. My point here is that this building is out of time and out of place but *not* out of space (more on this later) and for all talk of 'atmospheres'⁵, despite the agreement that yes, Zumthor's building innately possesses them and its allowance through the oculus for the elements to affect, such effects cannot be reverse engineered. In other words, all pretensions to design-by- should probably be dismissed as delusion absolute.

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But all this regarding material effects and atmosphere has been said. What I have not heard much speak of however, is the door.

The chapel is made from rammed concrete, its structure constructed by local farmers who poured twenty four layers of cement-aggregate mix over twenty-four days throughout the course of a year, around a formwork comprised of a teepee of birch trees and contained by wooden shuttering. Once complete the trees were set alight and left to smolder, leaving behind nothing other than the charred, corrugated interior. The chapel is therefore anchored to and of the ground, with gravel and sand from the river and trees from the immediate forest, labour from the village and a poured lead floor by a local craftsman. The concrete plinth upon which it all rests is also of the ground, and allows for the luxury of walking or climbing on one part of the exterior of the building to absorb, from body to chapel to earth, the warmth of the sun. Everything about this chapel is rooted firmly and resolutely in the earth.

Everything apart from the door.

What the door *is* - its materiality, dimensions, tactility (heavy steel, three meter isosceles, smooth) appeared to me at the time as what I can only express as an acute and highly engineered signifier for what it is supposed to *be*, or rather, a legible nod to the architect's intent that this is not a mere marker for outside/inside or even a separation for the entry to a space of spiritual ambition but rather, the entrance to a world.

The door is not attached to the chapel. There are no visible connections and its heavy prow moves without friction, without gravity and without contact other than to the hand that grasps the handle. I can't remember if I was required to twist my body in order to enter the passage behind but I do remember a definite awkwardness, an experience akin to climbing into a hatch or cockpit. Once inside, it was possible to shut the door so that the outside was utterly and completely cut off, from light, from everything, without any apparent physical connection to the chapel itself. An independent hatch resolutely sealed.

I would like to say my first impression was that of climbing into a spaceship or, more specifically, through the Stargate, but of course it is somewhat preposterous and entirely postmodern to analogize this particular encounter with a distorted idea of a concept featured in a science fiction franchise from the nineties. However, post-rationalizing momentarily, if Greg Lynn's 'blobitecture'⁶ is resolutely apart from its postmodern contemporaries, attempting to retain an utterly ambiguous dynamism obtained through value-ascribed, discrete contextual forces that restrain and constrain the site conditions used to form it, and if the intended destination for this type of architecture is the transcending of petrified time and place, then this form of west-coast parametrics is not, as is often mistaken, bad science, but rather an attempt at retaining those trembling ambiguities that end up becoming dumbly and literally manifest, crystalized as built form. I have always been convinced that these projects, motivated though and by the desire to create architectures of reactive fiction, belonged only to the realm of the phantom, the never built (or never should-have-been built) and the unresolved. But now I have seen Zumthor's door.

Alongside the architect's admission that those very ambiguities or rather, 'desired vagueness'⁷ that lie at the aspirational apex of his architecture are refined by precision and a pedantic attention to detail, the real brilliance of *this* particular detail becomes apparent. The connecting mechanism of the door in relation to the structure of the chapel is a shaft plunged directly into the earth, utterly detached from the rest of the building, its separation no more than a thin veil of space - a few molecules. Even handling the door, entering and exiting, there is no physical connection with the material form of the chapel itself, only with the cold steel and the soft ground. So these two mutually affirming entities form a singular character that allow the chapel to be at once intimate yet monumentally detached, firmly rooted in the landscape yet transcending its place, at odds with a style, unaffected by personality and disengaged from a time. The door acts as a singular portal - rather like a door always closed to the entrance to a familiar building is unexpectedly, inexplicably ajar.

This is the secret that allows the building simply to *be*.

So perhaps then, against Los Angeles' miscellany of modernist luminaries and postmodern concoctions, Peter Zumthor's Alhambra in Hollywood⁸ will glint, equivocally, alongside.

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A momentary digression: it is perhaps worth an aside to consider the elite position this particular project by Zumthor stands in relation to the other contexts, those invisible but for the most part all pervading forces that never seem to get mentioned in the discussion of built work; restrictions of site, regulation, politics, client and of course, cash. The denominations of our age! For a work of art perhaps, quite irrelevant. For Zumthor's chapel, immeasurably removed. But another architecture, another building? Is it possible to consider the architecture of a building, especially in such a contextually laden setting such as a city, without the consideration of these ultimately saturating forces? Apparently an understanding of architecture used to be taught in schools in England through the consideration and dissection of great building details. Now it would seem that this is a far from relevant education since the supposed luxury of being able to take the time and money to craft a building through custom detailing is not one that clients are willing to afford. But without the understanding of what constitutes, on a molecular level, the built fabric of a great architecture, how then to understand and steal and copy and learn from the experience of visiting a building? Is there any viable point to it than purely for the spectacle? Peter Zumthor winning the Pritzker Prize serves only to demonstrate the increasing irrelevance and detachment of the architectural establishment in this country. But despite this, the deep, slow craft of the two buildings of his that I have

now visited have served to demonstrate to me for the first time that there *is* poetry, and relief, and vitality in some corner of whatever it is that architecture-as-building is supposed to be.

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Back now to Grimm country, five hundred kilometers east of Cologne to the house owned by Axel Bruchhäuser, the single owner and founder of the TECTA factory nearby. Unlike the chapel I had not seen any photographs of the *Hexenhaus* prior, only drawings - the delicate and somewhat romantic pencil axonometries of Alison Smithson detailing the design of the various amendments and extensions that were grafted onto the house over a period of twenty odd years. They gave the impression of a lightness of sensibility that is quite at odds with the brutish, unrefined vernacular styles of the rest of the houses in the village of Bad Karlshafen and as such, I was prepared for the element of the fantastical that the house is known for - 'the witch's house'.

The *Hexenhaus* is hidden from a distance and from close. Indeed, even standing underneath I was hard-pressed to resolve a comprehensible segment in its entirety, the surrounding trees providing a more than adequate cover. The entrance is accessed via a short path up the hill but I was transported on a contraption fashioned by Axel to carry his beer, a cart made from discarded Prouvé legs pulled up tracks using a custom TECTA pulley system. Like the man himself, ingenious and charming. The house is a fairytale concoction, each of its formally vernacular openings now blown open and replaced with glass and timber faceted, hexagonal window boxes or 'lookouts', which from the outside resemble some kind of protuberant prosthetics but once inside, fill the open-plan interior with light and air and most importantly, present strategic and unparalleled views across the valley and down to the road. Each lookout incorporates a seat or body positioning that best exposes the most strategic of these views, some of which give the house a ceiling, others a floor, others a plinth on which it stands against the hillside and all in the same intense acknowledgement of the outside, which wraps itself protectively around the exterior skin and serves only to exemplify the cosseted interiority of the house.

The details of the house, from the array of chairs manufactured at TECTA (suitably of the Bauhaus school), to the additions and interior furnishings by Axel, to the architectural amendments first by Stefan Wewerka and later the Smithsons, were all custom designed and tailor made to suit the preferences of their owner. Everything is in its place and beautiful. The obsessive arrangement and gathering of collected minutiae, often valuable relics from countless collaborations with architects and designers over the course of Axel's long career, occupy custom nooks in the folds of the walls and reminded me somewhat of Colomina's description of the archive of the Eames, a legacy containing every physical record left by its owners, obsessively tagged and filed away. "Eames chairs belong to the occupants, not to the building. Mies chairs are especially of the building and not of the occupant."⁹ Each object in the *Hexenhaus* is of the building, and each object belongs to its owner. Initially exhilarating, after several hours I begin to feel the vertiginous effects of the archive.

In 1985, eight years before the end of her life, Alison Smithson presented a text on the 'energising cell'¹⁰, a thesis expounding the details and virtues of the study of St. Jerome. In her text she talks of the inviolable space - an enclave in a 'protected territory' containing 'a fragment of space' necessary for the execution of creative activity. Her relationship with Axel had by this point resulted in several of the lookouts being completed with more in the works, and I got the distinct impression that the house had ended up comprising not one but *many* of these cells, each new project intersecting and fusing with the last in order to form an all consuming, labyrinthine whole. Even the interior walls had various openings cut into them

allowing for what in ordinary circumstances would have provoked the thrill of voyeurism, except for the fact that this was a house for one. These holes, like the lookouts, I found at once protective and yet with a hint of the uncanny - a cacophonous form of acute domesticity resolutely curated by its owner and exhibited by its house.

Suffice to say, the encounter with the house as a whole was a prolonged and ever deepening engagement with the man I had met for the first time that very morning, and it began to take its toll as I experienced a concentrated instance of this discordance in the final extension to the house, the *Hexenbesenraum* ('the refuge of the witch's broom'), a fragile timber cabin resting atop twelve meter stilts which was drawn up by Alison and presented as a gift to Axel shortly before her death. Constructed posthumously, the *Hexenbesenraum* is only accessible via a narrow bridge that connects Axel's bathroom with the path on the upper slope at the back of the house, wide enough for a single person at most. Each component of this structure was cut by a local craftsman on site, the necessity of proximity down to the distinct dimensions of each piece, custom built down to the final, slender ceiling-work. The details of the craft were exhausting and I, an outsider, incapable of hearing it sing, felt the intense pressure that comes with the prolonged invasion of a personal space. The capsule swayed. We were at sea. Not in the cabin of a familiar boat, but claustrophobic in an escape pod for one.

The *Hexenhaus* supposedly exemplifies the Smithson's notion of conglomerate ordering, 'the arrangement of a number of different and distinct things'¹¹. In this particular work however, the different and distinct things are none other than extensions of a very real whole and singular personality - that of Axel Bruchhäuser.

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To consider the buildings discussed here as architecture is also to consider them in their ability to operate across a spectrum of longevity. The *Hexenhaus* will span the lifetime of one man, its unique character so intimately tied with its owner. At the opposite end of the temporal and personal spectrum, Zumthor's *Bader Klaus Kapelle* will span until the time it falls. Both buildings exist at opposite ends, but they meet, somewhere, full circle in the realm of the craftsman, through an obsessive care over detail and the time taken for their completion - Zumthor's chapel took ten years. Time, it seems, to have incubated the development of two quite distinctly affective personalities.

COVER IMAGE: Still from FILM: Carax, Leos. *Holy Motors*. 2012

¹ Kimmelman, Michael. *The Ascension of Peter Zumthor*. New York Times, March 2011

² Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity*, p.12. MIT Press, 1996

³ Zumthor, Peter. *Thinking Architecture*, p.13. Lars Muller Publishers, 1998

⁴ Tanizaki, Junichiro. *In Praise of Shadows*. Leete's Island Books, 1997

⁵ Zumthor, Peter. *Atmospheres*. Birkhauser, 2006

⁶ Vidler, Anthony. *Warped Space*, p. 230. MIT Press, 2001

⁷ Zumthor, Peter. *Thinking Architecture*, p.28. Lars Muller Publishers, 1998

⁸ Kimmelman, Michael. *The Ascension of Peter Zumthor*. New York Times, March 2011

⁹ Colomina, Beatriz. *Couplings*. First published in 'Rearrangements, A Smithsons Celebration'. CASE no. 51, June 1999, p. 22-23

¹⁰ Smithson, Alison. *Hieronymus*. TECTA, 1990

¹¹ Scimemi, Maddalena. *An Open Work by the Smithsons at Bad Karlshafen*. First Published in 'Casabella' 726, October 2004, p. 99-101