

## On the foundations of composition: Peter Zumthor's *primo anno* course at the Academy of Mendrisio

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*“As expressed at the beginning of the Academy’s activity, it is our intention to develop a three years first phase of ‘primo anno’ teaching in architecture projects. These three first years have been conceived and are developed as a continuous didactical structure. It will leave a complete and specific documentation of its activity, results and, hopefully, conclusions.”*<sup>1</sup>

Peter Zumthor, 1997

In 1996, the newly founded Academy of Architecture of Mendrisio invited Peter Zumthor to be the professor in charge of one of the school’s first three design studios. What took form from that was a unique educational experience, conducted by him as a didactic project spanning a three-year period - 1996-97, 1997-98 and 1998-99 - and comprehending a sequence of 19 exercises designed to teach students the *foundations of composition*. The present essay is structured around this event, exploring the activity of Atelier Zumthor’s *primo anno* course at Mendrisio through the analysis of unpublished material kept in the Academy’s archives and investigating how the principles contained in didactics may be read as an interpretation of his architecture.

The interest in Zumthor’s activity in Mendrisio arises from two particularities. First is the disruptive nature of the atelier itself, designed as a project whose essence, as put by Aurelio Galfetti, was to *intentionally forget conventional methods*<sup>2</sup>. Assuming an experimental attitude, the course explored the *ground zero* condition of first-year students to propose what can be read as an epistemological research on the fundamentals of the discipline. The second, and perhaps more intriguing, is the fact that such an ambitious project remained mostly unclaimed by the author. With few exceptions<sup>3</sup>, Zumthor has not explored his *primo anno* course as a relevant part of his oeuvre - a contradiction to the evident creative effort contained in it.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Zumthor, *Proposal for an Atelier verticale in the second cycle (Atelier Zumthor II) of the Academy of Architecture*, 1997, AAM Archives.

<sup>2</sup> A. Galfetti, talking about the Academy’s first year in: *La Regione Ticino*, May 29 1997.

<sup>3</sup> As the essay *Teaching Architecture, Learning Architecture*, written in 1996 and later published in: P. Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture*, 3rd ed., Birkhäuser, Basel 2017.

Eventually, his silence reflected the fate of the atelier's archive, which was partially erased and remained untouched for the last 25 years<sup>4</sup>. This study therefore emerges also as a reaction to the rediscovery of this archival corpora, which contains the traces of an event whose reverberations are still in motion.



Fig. 1: Zumthor at work in the atelier in 1999. AAM Archives

### **A school in Mendrisio**

A proper reading of Zumthor's teaching requires the consideration of the environment it emerged from. In fact, if the image of the *foundation* represents the atelier's ambition for fundamental knowledge, it also addresses the unique moment of a school's birth - one that granted both freedom for experimentation and necessity for affirmation. The Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio is the result of a long political process marked by ticinese claims for the creation of an Italian-speaking university in Switzerland. Officially created in 1995, the Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI) found a central element in the faculty of architecture since the debate around its creation emerged, including a preliminary project developed by Mario Botta in 1992. This move not only set the basis for the forthcoming school, but indicated how much the legitimacy of a new university was attached to a perception of excellence regarding local constructive traditions.

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<sup>4</sup> All physical remnants of Atelier Zumthor, including models, were discarded and eventually disappeared from the AAM archives. What remained, however, is a comprehensive documentation including teaching journals, letters and over 4.000 slides with photographs of student's works.

In this context, Botta's leadership demonstrates the cultural relevance assumed by a generation of local architects known as *School of Ticino*, whose work drew international attention in the 1960's and 70's as a significant expression of *critical regionalism*<sup>5</sup>. Presented as a collective phenomenon in the 1975 exhibition *Tendenzen*<sup>6</sup>, the architecture of Rino Tami, Luigi Snozzi and Livio Vacchini - to mention a few - became the common ground from which the Academy ultimately emerged as a continuation. Such correspondence is visible in Botta's preliminary study, responsible for defining the school's identity around the figure of the *generalist architect*<sup>7</sup> - taken as a strategy to oppose the contemporary trend of specialization, while at the same time reacting to the consolidated Polytechnic schools of Zurich and Lausanne. Transdisciplinarity and innovation became so the central features of the new Academy, designed to operate globally while firmly grounded in a Mediterranean humanistic tradition.

In this context, Zumthor's presence among its first teachers can be read as an audacious move. On the one hand, it represented an integrative gesture towards Switzerland - counterpointing the *ticinese* ateliers of Botta and Galfetti. On the other, it explored Zumthor's personality as a necessary contribution to the challenge of starting an Academy in Mendrisio<sup>8</sup> - a geography described by Valentin Bearth as *nowhere land*<sup>9</sup>. However, it is important to observe that Zumthor's relevance at that moment was rather limited to the Swiss audience. By the mid-1990's, his image was mostly defined by the 1988 exhibition *Partituren und Bilder*<sup>10</sup>, which displayed his three major works so far: his studio (Haldenstein, 1985-86), the *Schutzbauten* (Chur, 1985-86) and the Sogn Benedetg Chapel (Sumvitg, 1985-88). Together, these finely-crafted wooden buildings based a general interpretation of his work as belonging strictly to the context of Alpine regionalism<sup>11</sup>. The romantic figure of the architect-craftsman would only be amplified with the conclusions of the Thermal Baths in Vals (1996) and the Kunsthaus Bregenz (1997), whose international ovation reflected Zumthor's ability to address a wider range of

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<sup>5</sup> K. Frampton, *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Renaissance* (1983), in: *Labour Work and Architecture: Collected Essays on Architecture and Design*, Phaidon, New York 2004.

<sup>6</sup> M. Steimann, T. Boga, *Tendenzen - neuere Architektur im Tessin*, ETH gta, Zurich 1977.

<sup>7</sup> C. Frank, B. Pedretti (ed), *L'architetto generalista*, Mendrisio Academy Press, Mendrisio 2013.

<sup>8</sup> According to Botta, the school needed the contribution of *strong figures*. Interview in Mendrisio, 22.10.2020.

<sup>9</sup> He stressed how the Academy emerged with a clear peripheral condition. Interview in Chur, 18.11.2020.

<sup>10</sup> P. Zumthor, *Partituren und Bilder: Arbeit aus dem Atelier Peter Zumthor 1985 - 1988*, Architekturgalerie, Luzern 1988.

<sup>11</sup> The role played by Hans Danuser pictures - produced for the exhibition - in the dissemination of Zumthor's work is explored by Ursprung in: K. Gantenbein, P. Ursprung, *Zumthor Sehen*, Hochparterre und Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2009.

contemporary issues. In this sense, the creation of his *primo anno* course represented an opportunity to expose his architectural thinking in a moment of personal affirmation.

### ***Primo anno***

*“The course teaches the foundations of composition. The point of departure was the perception of the world through the five senses, which was practically and directly related to architectural themes. Primary situations were identified and analyzed by means of practical exercises which taught the student to handle such elementary architectural situations from a design standpoint.”*<sup>12</sup>

Atelier Zumthor AAM, 1996

Teaching is inevitably a selective action containing both the identification of the knowledge to be transmitted and the definition of its assimilation process. When analyzing Zumthor’s *primo anno* course, the radical condition of its methodology can be found in the rejection of any sort of abstract theory as a legitimation strategy. Consequently, *concreteness* was taken as the fundamental quality on which to base design processes, opposing its self-evident *factuality* to the not-reliable artificiality of *abstract* instances such as formalism or functionalism. The notion of *concrete* stands therefore as the cornerstone of his didactics, defining a phenomenological approach in which sensory perception is the main interface for assessing architecture’s effective qualities - those belonging to our experience of the world.

Such conceptual background was translated into a teaching whose main instrument was the proposition of an exercise series. Mostly conceived as short tasks, the exercises developed by the atelier represent its most disruptive feature, exploring an instrumentality evidently unusual to traditional architectural training. Their own value as creative projects stresses also the importance of Zumthor’s assistants - initially three architects and one artist<sup>13</sup> - in the conception of the atelier’s intellectual program. Ultimately, the series can be read as a sequence of unrepeatable events collectively designed over the course’s three years. However, despite the uniqueness of each exercise, it is possible to identify a shared structure in the sequence, evolving from fundamental instances of perception in the first semester to a more elaborate design action in the second.

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<sup>12</sup> Atelier Zumthor, description of first-year course, AAM Archives.

<sup>13</sup> First group of assistants was formed by architects Miguel Kreisler, Pia Durisch and Thomas Durisch, and sculptress Miguela Tamo.



Fig. 2: *The personal construction module*, works by Davide Scardua, Urs Baumann, Lukas Camponovo, Stefanie Hitz, Laura Perolini and Nicolas Polli. *AAM Archives*

An illustrative example is found in the atelier's inaugural year. The first exercise, called *The personal construction module (A)*, required students to build a block with the dimensions of 18x18x36cm, using a material that should tell the content of a personal experience. The simplicity of the task condensed a deeper process, starting from the selection of a biographical memory to then identify the role played by a specific materiality in its composition. A student recalling the experience of penetrating a grass field, for instance, produced a block built as a dense weave of grass branches. Another one, whose memory was that of walking on a melting sidewalk on a hot summer day, built a block entirely made of asphalt. Important, however, was not the material itself, but the effective experience it could convey to the audience, bringing

characteristics like scent and touch as central components of the constructive challenge. Therefore, the grass block should contain the scent of a spring Alpine morning, just as the second had to smell like melting asphalt. The exercise's fulfillment was assessed in the block's capacity to communicate the content of the experience so that it was understandable by the whole audience.

The importance given to presentation as a moment of verification was transversal to the atelier. In *100 steps for a blind* (B), students were required to design a tunnel connecting a town to a park, imagining how a blind person could find orientation in it. The exercise's final submission consisted of a *resonance body* - a model in 1:20 scale - which was then submitted to a real *sound test*. Projects tended to explore different materials and morphologies, as in the case where a crescent scale of voids was carved beneath a wooden floor inside the tunnel, generating a progressive change in the reverberation of steps guiding the blind walker. In *An indirect-lighting lamp* (C), students had to build a lamp using a given set of materials - 1 aluminium sheet and 1 fluorescent tube - and observing a set of rules such as '*the lamp must not be seen*' and '*use simple forms*'. More important, however, was the fact that the lamp was meant to work effectively, stressing how much the practical challenge was one of the atelier's main mottos. The closing exercise of the first semester was called *The fragrance and aroma street* (D), requiring the construction of a small shop to be inserted into a sequence of niches. Each of them should contain a product characterized by a particular scent, in such a way the design was developed as a aroma-driven strategy. Walking along the street in the final critics, the public could enjoy the fragrances of a fish, a honey or a hot chestnut shop.

Moving on to the spring semester, a transition in complexity reached the scale of the territory. Before any design action, however, a preliminary exercise called *Nature, street, house + 1* (E) intended to increase students' awareness of the instances of place and landscape. During summer holidays, they produced a video documenting what they considered to be their '*personal landscape*' - a collection of ordinary places perceived as familiar or important to their biography. Returning to Mendrisio, the process of reading a place was intensified in the exercise *In Situ* (F), conceived as a sequence of three shorter tasks. Divided into groups, students were given a specific site to work with, representing typical situations of the school surroundings. The *First encounter* (F1), when each student visited the assigned place individually, was followed by *The time of the place* (F2), which required each group to produce a series of 24 documentations of the site - hourly records made with a fixed camera during the period of a day. The final task

was *Remodelling the place* (F3), which summarized the collected information through the construction of a model meant to *express the experience of each place*.



Fig. 3: *An intervention on place in 1:1 scale*, work by Group C. AAM Archives.

*An intervention on place in 1:1 scale* (G) closed Atelier Zumthor's first year asking groups to operate a *concrete* transformation in their sites, in such a way to *render visible or perceivable anything of their particularity*. In what can be read as condensed depiction of the course's didactics, students designed their projects as interventions whose material presence was directly conditioned by a temporal narrative. This is visible in the work produced by group C, working on a peripheral plot near to the highway exit to Mendrisio. Taking advantage of the steep topography, they designed an intervention made of 300m of flexible light tube installed over the slope in the shape of a huge heart. The original form, however, could be seen only from a sighting platform on top of Monte Generoso - from the site itself, the tubes were perceived as the chaotic intertwining of light strokes. The design concept was based precisely on the changing perceptions of the landscape, and executed through the temporal experience of an audience that climbed the mountain by night to behold the glowing heart in the valley below. Such ceremonial condition was visible in all works, which also shared the use of a language intentionally close to that of conceptual art. Together, the five interventions can be seen as a collective performance whose narrative ultimately expanded from the Academy to the city.

## The foundations of composition

Besides the inevitable sense of newness, a critical interpretation of Zumthor's *primo anno* course reveals a set of fundamental ideas contained in its educational project and potentially translated into design principles. The most elemental of them seems to be the concept of *memory*. More evident in exercises such as *A space that looks at the landscape of my youth* (H), or *A Miniature* (O), the use of autobiographical experiences as the source of a project's initial image was transversal to the atelier. This notion, however, is not necessarily connected to a distant past, but aims at exploring the *typical experiences* contained in such images, that is the reference to ordinary situations which even if individually perceived hold the potential of being collectively identified. This compositional principle can thus be described as a process operating by analogy in which *type* is defined through the assumption of shared experiences as a content potentially transmissible.

In Zumthor's architecture, *memory* can be found at the base of a contextual approach that seeks to establish an active relation to the instances of place and history. In that sense, his work belongs to the Swiss generation strongly influenced by the ideas of Aldo Rossi, disseminated through his didactic activity at the ETH Zurich in the 1970's. Rossi's theories, which identified in the city's morphology a cultural content of collective value, provided a sort of shared ground for the architectural production in 1980's and 1990's Switzerland<sup>14</sup> - often characterized by the incorporation of vernacular and symbolic elements of its context. In Zumthor, however, the assimilation of a postmodern formalism in early designs - as in the all-symmetric Haus R ath (Haldenstein, 1982-83) - soon gave place to a more elaborated language, in which memory's content shifted from the realm of *form* to that of *experience*. *History* and *memory* are thus taken as different instances<sup>15</sup>. While the first represents an abstract *intellectual system that works from document to document*<sup>16</sup>, the second addresses the concrete dimension of facts belonging to ordinary life. As a consequence, Zumthor's architecture tends to avoid formal continuation as a means of integration, conceiving the building as a source of typical images reconstructed through non-mediated experience.

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<sup>14</sup> See I. Davidovici, *Forms of practice: German-Swiss architecture 1980-2000*, 2nd. Ed., gt-Verlag, Zurich 2018.

<sup>15</sup> A similar differentiation is made by Maurice Halbwachs in: *On Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992.

<sup>16</sup> M. Lending, P. Zumthor, *A Feeling of History*, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2018, pp. 17-18.

An example is found in his project for the *Schutzbauten* in Chur. Designed to provide protection and access to the city's most relevant Roman archeological site, it assumes a threshold condition where the interpretation of the past is individually conceived through direct contact with historical fragments - taken not as monuments, but as factual evidences of a temporality to be recalled in the present, an approach called by Bruno Reichlin as *trivialization of the historic reference*<sup>17</sup>. Stemming from this concept, the central element of Zumthor's design is a permeable wall following the perimeter of the Roman foundations and virtually recreating the original volumes. The resulting wooden membrane stands as a container of historical ground - kept naked on the inside as an opposition to the domesticated asphalt of the entrance square. With the insertion of a metallic footbridge, the fragmented volumetry is connected in a spatial narrative used as a strategy to create different perceptions of displayed elements. When accessing the excavations level, visitors are put in a sort of in-between temporality, overlapping the presence of the ruins to the sound, light and temperature of the contemporary city penetrating through louvers. Emerging as an alien object in the industrial periphery, the building's barn-like structure represents an ambiguous element, simultaneously containing the allusion to typical images at a collective level and the conditions for the recollection of *memory* as an individual experience.

A second element suggested as one of the atelier's principles is the use of *construction* as the primary means to imbue an object with meaning. Taking the example of the works built by students in exercise A, it is possible to observe how their communicative value relied not in the material itself, but in the transformative action defining its configuration. In the course, the conditions in which an artifact was produced were therefore never taken as a mere circumstantial limit, but employed in its narrative potential as a means to generate the connection to preconceived images. Since any sort of *abstract* justification represented an unreliable reference, students were encouraged to express their concepts through the self-evident qualities of objects, assuming *construction* as a legitimate form-giving process.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ein Wohnhaus aus der Werkstatt - Gespräch mit Marcel Meili, Markus Peter und Bruno Reichlin*, in: *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen*, n. 11, 1993, pp. 16-27.

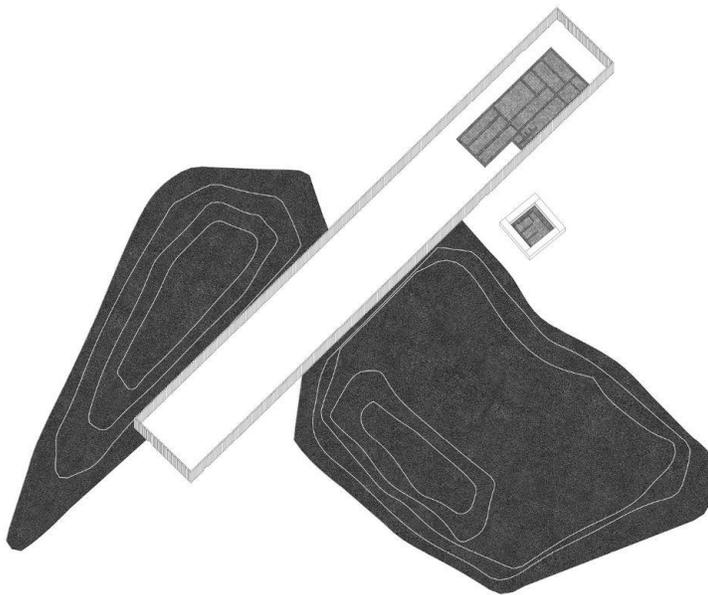
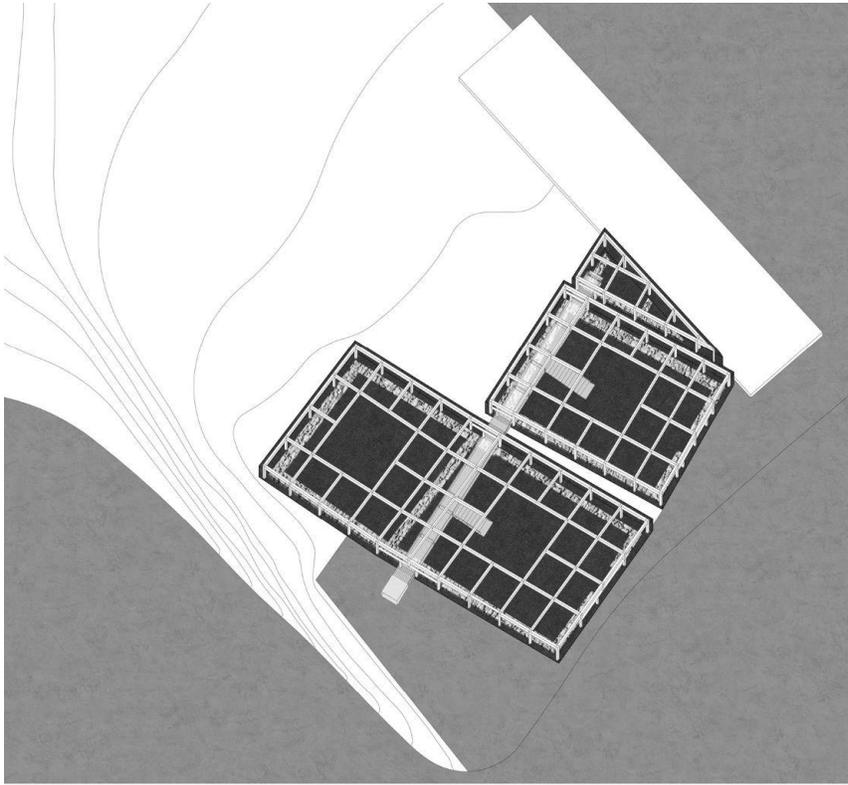


Fig. 4: Schutzbauten (1985-86) and Topography of Terror (1993-04), Compositional diagrams  
*drawings by RL*

Correspondingly, Zumthor's buildings tend to be conceived as factual manifestations of a radical constructive action. The idea of reducing architecture from the condition of a *symbol* to that of a *fact* refers to a wider shift taking place initially in the context of 1960's and 70's conceptual art - particularly visible in the minimalist use of reduction as an intensification strategy. This process represented a further influence on the Swiss production of the 1980's, informing the emergence of what Wilfried Wang defined as *factual architectures*<sup>18</sup>. The term describes an architecture that seeks to assume the non-questionable condition of a *fact* by embracing a design strategy that finds in the building's materiality the more consistent manifestation of its concept. In the case of Zumthor, however, the fundamental role played by the processes of material transformation in the genesis of form seems to explore a symbolic dimension of construction itself. This apparent opposition is pointed by Martin Steinmann, who observes how in his buildings, *form refers to the work that went into its creation: it is a symbol for that work, and moreover, it is intended as such*<sup>19</sup>. Consequently, *construction* acquires an eminent authorial value as a design instance.

One of the clearest examples of that is found in his project for the Topography of Terror in Berlin (1993-04). Assuming the impossibility of representing the traumatic memories of Nazi horror, it was conceived as *an abstract building shell which is pure structure, which speaks no other language than that of its materials, its construction and its specific use*<sup>20</sup>. The concept's radicality is translated into an object belonging to no known typology, which draws its physical constitution from the literal replication of a constructive principle. Assuming the shape of a long parallelepiped running over two rubble mounds, it was designed as a porous envelope defining a space of non-mediated contact between visitors and ruins - the same solution of Chur. The volume's permeability is achieved through the association of vertical and horizontal pieces, generating a constant positive-negative rhythm along the building's length. The complexity of the operation is realized when considering that its overall volume would contain an impressive amount of 5116 elements designed to be laterally assembled. The evident fragility of the whole required the creation of a specific solution based on the transversal insertion of steel cables. Its

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<sup>18</sup> W. Wang, *Instances of Factual Architecture*, in: M. Steinmann, M. Gilbert, *Construction intention detail: five projects from five Swiss architects*, Artemis, Zurich 1994, p. 26-31.

<sup>19</sup> M. Steinmann, *The Presence of Things: Comments on Recent Architecture in Northern Switzerland*, in: *Construction intention detail: five projects from five Swiss architects*, Artemis, Zurich 1994, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Senatsverwaltung für Bau- und Wohnungswesen, *Ergebnisprotokoll Realisierungs- und Ideenwettbewerb Ausstellungshalle Besucher- und Dokumentationszentrum Internationales Begegnungszentrum Topographie des Terrors*, Berlin, März 1993, p. 25.

originality testifies how *construction* is taken by Zumthor not as an instance of functionalist abstraction, but as a process generated by concrete action.

Looking back at the atelier, a further characteristic is found in a sort of theatrical component, better described around the notion of *performance* as design principle. It is visible in the importance played by action and gestures as an inherent part of exercises, ultimately conceived as something that had to be *played*. Some of them consisted of true events, as in the case of the *Blue reflections* (J), in which students staged the Jazz Festival in Chiasso. Their task, however, was not limited to the production of scenographies, including the design and execution of ceremonial items such as music and drinks<sup>21</sup>. Throughout the course, it is possible to observe how experience tended to be interpreted not just as the interface to apprehend an object's concept, but as an indissociable manifestation of its design. Therefore, architecture's scope is extended from the instances of material fabrication to the writing of a script to be *performed*.

While *construction* is suggested as a principle linked to materiality, *performance* addresses the temporal dimension of Zumthor's work. Conceived as a scenographic sequence of sensory stimuli, the experience of his buildings tends to be transformed into a ritualistic narrative made of choreographed gestures. At the same time, architecture's own temporality seems to be explored on a broader scale, leaving the static condition of a *building* to assume the interactivity of an *intervention*. In that sense, it is important to observe how his so praised contextualism is often characterized by an approach based on the opposition between familiarity and strangeness. That is, the conception of a new object whose ambiguity contains the desire to be perceived as a natural component of place and to produce a rupture by belonging to a temporality other than the present. Suggested by Philip Ursprung as a further influence of the works by artists such as Joseph Beuys and Robert Smithson - which shared the perception of history as *discontinuous and fragmentary rather than as a linear evolution*<sup>22</sup> - such temporal experimentation is found in Zumthor's conception of architecture as a continuous event performed through time.

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<sup>21</sup> "We will care about the background of all human acts happening during the 5 nights of the Jazz Festival. [...] An unforgettable night event for some 400 people. Please, look at the photos, listen to the tapes." Atelier Zumthor, *Exercise J report*, AAM Archives.

<sup>22</sup> P. Ursprung, *Earthworks: The Architecture of Peter Zumthor*, on the occasion of the announcement of Peter Zumthor as the 2009 Pritzker Prize laureate.

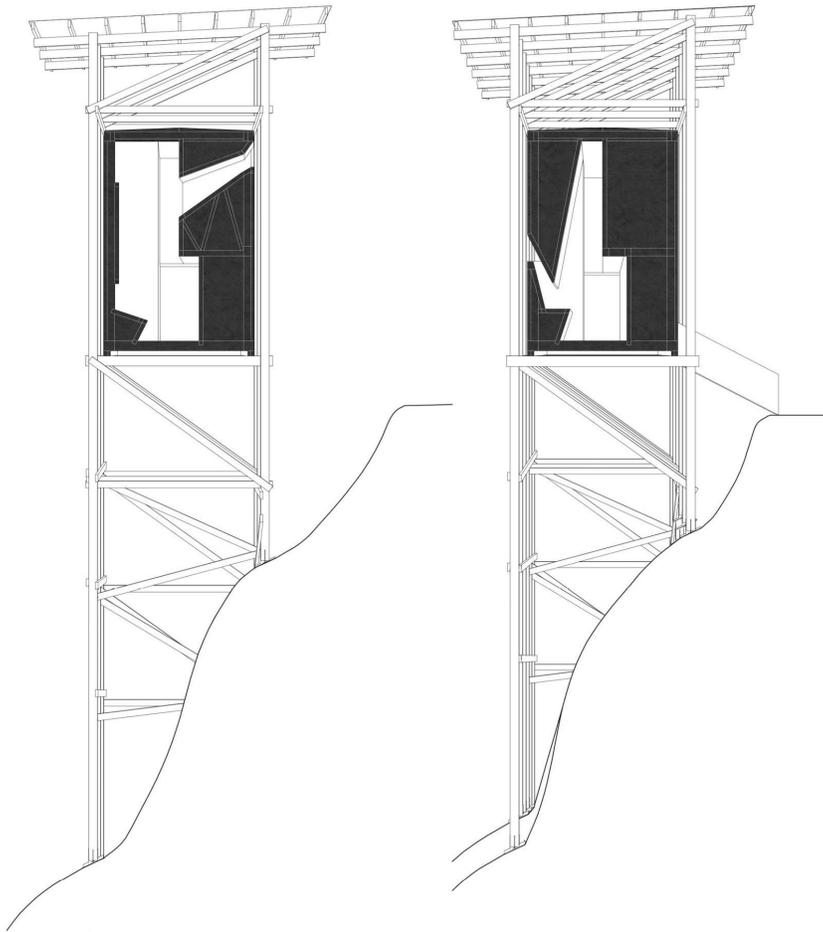


Fig. 5: Allmannajuvet Zinc Mine Museum, Transversal sections of the museum building  
*drawing by RL*

In his project for the Allmannajuvet Zinc Mine Museum (Sauda, 2003-16), for instance, the central element is not found in any of the four structures added to the cliffy landscape, but in the narrative intertwining new objects to the traces of the abandoned mine. The site's original trail - incorporated as the project's connective element - becomes thus the protagonist of a museum whose presence is ultimately perceived in the experience of the place. That is stressed by the relation of material differentiation established between the new buildings and the topography. Designed to barely touch the ground, the floating pavilions containing the cafe and the museum stand as highly artificial artifacts whose scenographic dimension is evident in the autonomy between their spatial configuration and formal consistency. The fragility of the new objects

seems to seek an ephemeral condition, used to activate the project's narrative. In that sense, it is possible to draw a parallel between Allmannajuvet and the final exercise of the atelier's first year, both staged as large-scale interventions collectively *performed* across the territory.

### **Reverberations**

Although Zumthor's presence in the Academy would last a decade, his *primo anno* course remains as the most consistent manifestation of his thinking. More than that, it assumed the condition of a seminal event whose reverberations unfold at different levels. Looking at the teacher himself, it seems possible to identify a relation between some transformations in Zumthor's architecture and the experimentation that characterized the atelier. That relates to the emergence of projects assuming an expressive language of organic morphologies, evidently based on plastic operations over massive volumetries. Designs like the Hotel in Tschlin (1999-02) and the New City Gate in Isny (2009-12) belong to a design process where physical models play a fundamental role, sharing thus an instrumental dimension clearly central to the atelier. In that sense, the school seems to have provided a unique opportunity for him to develop a research that brought new discoveries to Haldenstein as much as to Mendrisio.

The definition of a working culture is indeed his clearest influence on the Academy. A short walk through Palazzo Canavée - where design studios are located - is enough to recognize parallels between the work of students today and the techniques developed in his course. However, since any praxis carries a theory, the transversality of methods represents a contribution to the permanence of the concepts of his teaching, translated in the particular attention to instances of embodied perception and material expression. More than a lasting presence, the *foundations of the composition* contain an ever renewed research for an architecture whose relevance rests on its communicative potential. Zumthor's teaching, therefore, remains valid as a poignant reaction to the contemporary erosion of a discipline progressively threatened by standardization and omnipresent digitalization.

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