THERMAL BATH VALS

Architect: Peter Zumthor  
Location: Vals, Switzerland  
Program Type: Thermal bath/spa  
Completion Date: 1994  
Approx. Size: 4000sm (35000sf)

The thermal bath in Vals, Switzerland exists as part of an existing 1960s hotel and spa complex. The project is located in an isolated area in the Alps near Chur, Switzerland. The location of Vals (1200 m above sea level) provides an idealic landscape in both summer and winter (Thermal 138.)

The main conceptual idea of Zumthor focuses on the geology of Vals. He treats the bath complex as a volume of rock that is hollowed out of the mountain. Conceptual ideas about light, texture, and structure follow this notion (Thermal 141).

The adjoining hotel building is quite vertical and airy. The two level Zumthor project is recessed into the landscape—contrasting with the existing.


Zumthor's project appeals to the human senses. The entry to the bath complex occurs from the existing hotel. Bathers leave a cave-like reception area and pass down a dark, misty hallway to the changing rooms. After leaving the changing area, one enters the main bathing area from a raised platform.

One then walks down long stone steps that brings the bather to the main bathing level. The large main space encourages the bather to wander and explore the various spaces.

The main space consists of a combination of baths and large, hollow stone blocks. These blocks contain various bathing functions and are named accordingly.

1. entrance/exit
2. utility
3. make-up room
4. hall w/fountains
5. changing rooms
6. showers
7. rest rooms
8. sweat stone
9. indoor bath 32 deg.C
10. outdoor bath 36 deg.C
11. island of stone
12. stone terrace
13. spring grotto 35 deg.C
14. fire bath 42 deg.C
15. cold bath 14 deg.C
16. shower stone
17. drinking stone
18. sounding stone
19. flower bath 30 deg.C
20. rest space 1
21. outdoor shower stone
22. rest space 2
23. massage
24. rest space 3
(Zumthor 143, 145)
Therapy occurs on the lower level. The layout of the space is utilitarian and comprised of many private rooms that are arranged in a linear manner.

The architect's choice of material continues the idea of the monolithic layering. The stone used for the project was quarried from near the site. The tactile nature reinforces the conceptual idea of a solid mass with voids.

Zumthor designed walls reminiscent of old retaining walls. The walls also house the equipment necessary to run the thermal baths. In addition, the material rises and folds-creating benches and circulation elements(Three 12,13.)

The site drives all of the decisions. Zumthor stated, "Mountain, stone, water, building in stone, building with stone, building into the mountain, building out of the mountain... (Three 11)."

The only other material visible is brass. The handrails, signage and pipes discharging water are carefully detailed and placed (Three 13.)
The Peter Zumthor sketch of the fountain grotto to the left exemplifies a special spatial condition.

The space occurs at the end of a small bath that begins at the end of the main stair. The volume of the grotto itself appears as if it shifted away from the bar of changing rooms.

To enter the square, vertical space, one must swim through a narrow passage that is cut into the stone block. The space inside has an approximate wide to height ratio of one to two and a half.

The depth of the water in the grotto makes it necessary to hold on to and hang from the brass griprails. As one enters into the space he/she joins others that line the edge of the space. The center of the space as a result remains open. A few jets propel water into the space—making a dynamic rhythm of water circulation.

Another significant attribute of the space is its acoustics. Noise in the space resonances. This characteristic encourages group or individual chanting.

The space itself remains isolated from the other spaces. Its location is near the main space, but still set away. The method of entry into the space contributes to this spatial isolation.
Light as well as water play an integral part in the spatial condition of the Thermal Bath Vals. Both also contribute to the rejuvenative qualities of the space.

Zumthor again used a method of carving to incorporate light into the project. The main indoor bath is indirectly lit with small, square cutouts above. Light also enters the mass through narrow, linear slits in the ceiling (Three 13).

These slits bring in natural light whereas simple fixtures add an artificial glow. The light is subtle—creating a soothing, natural atmosphere.

The light plays in the humid environment. It reflects in the air and refracts in the water.

In addition, the light changes as one moves from the entrance to the emerging exterior facade. The most interior and most private spaces are darker. The light is sufficient for the function of the space as in the case of the changing rooms.

The light gets stronger as one progresses through the space. It is strongest at the points where the building opens to the exterior. Here large sections of glass punctuate the facade and break up the bar of program on both levels.