

## **Peter Zumthor in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Julia Peyton-Jones**

JPJ: Thank you very much indeed for accepting our commission. What were your first thoughts when we invited you?

PZ: It was an honor to be invited, of course. But what would I do? I started to think about it, and it began to tie into a project that I was working on for gardens and for a park. It's something that's become a theme in my work. And that's how I suddenly got a good feeling, so that I could say, 'Yes, I'll do it.' But I also had to tell you the implications of my idea, because it was clear to me that I couldn't do a bar.

JPJ: Well you could have done a bar but you didn't want to!

PZ: Yes, it didn't go with the theme.

JPJ: Were you inspired by any other gardens in particular, or just gardens in general?

PZ: I was thinking of all the gardens I've ever seen. This happened to me without my realising how important this idea of the garden has become in my work. And now, with this project, I can see that the landscape around the house, and the landscape inside the house, is a fascinating theme. And it's an ancient theme.

HUO: You started your practice in Haldenstein, Switzerland, in 1979, and you still work there today. That's a very unusual decision: to open a practice in a small quiet place rather than a busy city like Basel, where you come from. What impact did this have, and how has the landscape of Haldenstein inspired you?

PZ: It happened by chance. But if my life had happened according to my plans, I wouldn't be as happy as I am now. Things happen in the right way. The main reason was that my wife Annalisa spent time up there, and I got to know the landscape. The first landscape I came to know was the landscape of my youth – the rolling hills of the Alps

on the border, where my grandmother is from. When I go there, I know the sky and I know how it smells there, I know the colour of the rocks and the formation of the rocks. It's become my second home. There was one time when I invited some students from Los Angeles there. I said 'OK, I'll give you an assignment: I'll meet you in the Swiss Alps.' So they were there, doing their work, and I was driving up there. It was a beautiful early autumn day, and in the landscape you could hear cowbells, because the cows were coming slowly down from the Alps, and the whole landscape was making this music – I was moved to tears. I realised it had become my second home. For the first time, I felt that I'd arrived.

JPJ: So it was important to you to be close to nature?

PZ: To be in nature is always good. To be with human beings is also good, but I remember as a boy, such joy, running around in the forest. And in rain or snow, nature always looks good. But maybe now this relationship with nature has become more conscious.

HUO: You wouldn't want to live in the city?

PZ: I wouldn't like to be poor in the city. And I'd certainly have to build something that had a small quiet garden. I think this should become a big thing in housing projects – that you reintroduce gardens very close to where you live. The city is too noisy. People say that the problem with cities in medieval times was that they smelled bad, and I think our problem is the sound. It's so aggressive; it makes people yell in each other's ears, and their music is even louder. It's very dangerous. I think this is the opposite of how it should be.

HUO: When you started professional life in 1967, you were employed as a building and planning consultant with the Department for the Preservation of Monuments in Graubünden. You travelled to all the villages in Graubünden and looked at the historical buildings, like the old farmhouses. What did you learn from Graubünden?

PZ: Well, again, it was an accident. I came back from New York, and I visited a friend up there. I was looking for work, and there was this guy at the Office of Preservation, where nobody wanted to work because architects aren't interested in this sort of thing. But it was fine with me: I love that area and I thought it would be like a vacation to work up there. I was glad that they gave me a paycheck at the end of the month, but really it *was* a vacation, looking at all these beautiful houses all the time – and somebody paid me for it! What I learned about was the mystery of vernacular architecture. The first thing you notice is the historic forms of building decorations you find on all the farmhouses – it's sort of like art history from below. It's like nature, but you can trace where it comes from. But this is just the decorative part. The houses themselves are a different matter. I thought, 'Why the hell do they look as they do?' So I started to do research on this. In the Oberengadin, you'll have a village that's traditional, where they bring the hay with a cart through the house and store it for the cattle in the barn right next to the house. But in the next village, they won't have invented the wheel. They carry it on their backs! Well, not anymore – this was twenty or thirty years ago. But in Bregalia, where Alberto Giacometti came from, up there in those villages, they carried the hay. In the Oberengadin houses, where they bring it in by cart, they have these huge doors. So I looked at this and what I learned was that you can't really trace the way they build all the way back to its origins. I thought that there must be a relationship between the climate or environment and the materials they use. But sometimes there's no wood in the local environment and yet they use wood, and sometimes there is a lot of wood and they don't use it. So then I thought it must have to do with the way they work: the economy of farming, the type of farming, but again you get to a certain point and, all of the sudden you don't understand anything anymore. I was going crazy trying to understand. Finally, I was reading an almost forgotten but brilliant book by Richard Weiss, *Hauser und Landschaften der Schweiz*, who had researched these houses. This field of research had gone completely out of fashion, to study these old farmhouses. So I read this book and at 1 point he simply says "the morphology of the villages reflect the life and work of the people who live in them" and there it was, in one sentence. It reflects the sentiment, it reflects the way they work and live; there you have everything. So that's what I learned.

And after ten years, after I'd seen about 4,000 houses [laughs] I decided I wanted to become an architect. And I took part in my first competition, a competition for schoolhouses, and there I tried to introduce a lot of considerations for maintenance and how to respect the old traditions and so on. But they eliminated my project in the first round. So I went to look at the other entries, and suddenly, I was so ashamed. They were right: mine looked terrible. It was really bad. That was the moment when I went to design school, the Kunstgewerbeschule Basel,

JPJ: It sounds as though it was an extraordinary experience that took place over a decade or more. At what point did you feel comfortable calling yourself an architect?

PZ: This was actually a political decision. I belonged to the '68 generation. In the German part of Switzerland, we didn't want to have anything to do with design or *Gestaltung*, which is kind of neo-Marxist approach. We all believed in this [opposition to industrial design?], but the late 1970s was a very important moment in the German part of Switzerland, because we got to know the work of the Neo-Communists, and they came to the opposite conclusion. We said, 'We've made a new Neo-Communist party and we're not going to leave our profession due to speculators.' So we stayed away from it, but they went right into it, and they became famous, as we all know. This was one element. The other element was Aldo Rossi, who'd been given a teaching position at the ETH in Zurich. This was a big excitement, that this guy had come there. He reintroduced history into contemporary architecture, which modernism had kicked out as something really bad – like, 'Don't look at this old bullshit.' You can see how, even today, a modern architect doesn't respect the old buildings: a modern architect has to make a contrast. So Aldo Rossi was great. You know his books? Above all his scientific autobiography is a beautiful, beautiful book, where he writes about all the things that were important to him in his childhood, growing up in this area. And I remember, when I was asked to be a diploma external examiner at the ETH, a student would show us a project with square windows, with the cross, as they always did, and Rossi would say 'Wait, I know where you come from, I've been there, and I know your houses there don't look like that. You

should look at your area.’ It was a great moment; a lot of things were happening. The Arte Povera Movement, Rossi, the influence of the old settlements, and the influence of American art of the 1960s. It was all about Conceptual art and Minimalism for the more elemental abstraction, and then Joseph Beuys in Germany for the mythological aspect.

HUO: What would you say was the first work in your catalogue raisonné, the first project that you felt comfortable calling a piece?

PZ: There were three things at once: my atelier [Zumthor Studio, Haldenstein, 1986], the Protective Housing for the Roman Archaeological Excavations in Chur [1986], and a wooden chapel [Song Benedetg Chapel, Sumvitg, 1988]. I worked on them all at the same time. But before this, I’d had another terrible moment that changed my attitude – the first one, I’ve already told you about. I won a competition, and then I built this schoolhouse, and while it was under construction, at one point I looked at the models – and the ones for the Roman Shelter, which was under construction at the same time – and all of a sudden I felt so ashamed again! When I did a small house, with the interior, I could say, ‘This is me.’ So, since then, I’ve been doing my own thing.

HUO: In 1996 you realised the Thermal Baths in Vals. Can you tell us how you invented Vals?

PZ: It’s about going into the task, going to the place. This was a time when thermal baths were like sports centres, with slides and things. We were looking around and asking, ‘What is this place?’ The place is stone and the place is water, and there’s a hot spring. And over the years, I’d started to trust stone. There came a moment at Vals when I kicked out everything else. I said, ‘Only this local stone.’ We trusted the stone. We polished it, we cut it and so on, and we brought it together with water. There’s a longstanding relationship between stone and water: the stone likes the water and the water likes stone. This is one level, the material level, but the other thing was that there’s something mythological about bathing, and you think of the Orient. When I was designing this project, I went to Budapest and Turkey for the first time. And then we started to say, ‘We

don't need anything, we just need the water in different temperatures and the stone in different treatments.' And then there was a play of freedom and seduction that I invented, where you sort of stroll around and find things; you discover things, like being in a forest.

HUO: And the forest brings us back to the garden. You mentioned your own atelier, where the garden is the focal-point.

PZ: Yes. My first wooden atelier has a garden, but this is a little bit more like a postmodern garden, because it sits like a rectangle in front. It's not classic. And, fifteen years later, when I did my own house, I said, 'Should this be an empty space, with nothing in it?' And then, via many talks with other people, it became clear that nature has to be part of it. It shouldn't be a pavement or a concrete slab or whatever; it should be nature. And then I thought it should be really intense, like a jungle. And then, that the building should be a closed facade wrapped around this jungle, so that you'd actually walk around a tree, with the volume inside. So that's what we have.

JPJ: Indeed. The Hortus Conclusus. The Hortus Conclusus works so well here at the Serpentine. The original concept was that it would be built out of brick, but this wasn't possible and now it's made out of wood. With the benefit of hindsight, do you think wood actually turned out better than brick?

PZ: In a Hortus Conclusus, the plants have to react to a material: it can't be an abstract box. I wondered. 'Is it brick, is it steel, or is it wood?', back and forth, back and forth. I wondered what would resonate, and how it would resonate. It's easy to imagine that a brick building would resonate in a very classical way: you'd understand it immediately as a walled garden. But all of this slowly developed into what we have now. Accidents can help – an accident like somebody coming and saying, 'This brick is impossible, it's too expensive' or whatever, or that we don't have time to build it. And there was a moment when even if the top manager from English Brick had called us and said, 'This is fantastic, let's do this', I'd already changed my mind. I saw the possibility to make it more temporary. All of a sudden I was confident, envisioning the materials I'd use –

sand, roofing felt, zinc-covered metal, like a watering can, a hose with a yellow zig-zag on it, and rubber. All these things were among the vocabulary of materials I work with. It would have been beautiful to do it with the roofing felt, with this shimmering sand on it – I see this all over the place now, in Russia, in Holland, in Norway – but it wasn't possible here. But now I think it's better. This is what happens. Otherwise, I wouldn't do it. There's persistence, but then there's letting go, and allowing things to come in again, and so forth. In this case, all of this Hessian arrives and somebody comes up with this paint, which was developed for ventilation ducts, and it becomes this poor-quality thing, and we start to paint, like on canvas, and all of a sudden it's Arte Povera.

JPJ: The colour of this Pavilion is black. It's like the oil sticks that Richard Serra uses. But black in the landscape is often thought to be counterintuitive, because nature is all about softness of colour and colours merging from one into another. So what's your thinking behind that?

PZ: Well, you have to prepare the people for this colour. What I did was two layers; so you have one layer when you come in, and then you have those sidelines, where you have to make a little bit of a curve, and you go into the dark. And then you're prepared. I originally had a much more extreme beginning, with only one entrance and a long walk, but I loosened it up so that it wouldn't feel restrained or forced. It should have the effect that you're prepared for the black.

JPJ: And this kind of black box could be seen as opposed to our classical building from 1934. Did the Serpentine building play any part in your thinking, in terms of the design?

PZ: I wanted to be nice to the building. So I think with this seemingly 'black box' – which is actually not a black box, as you find out when you go close enough [laughs] but I know what you mean – I think it creates two new spaces: a space in between the pavilion, and the space in front. So we have a frontal space and this one. I think it works, and it doesn't oppress the old building. It's a nice relationship, these two buildings. This is what architecture can do – create new situations. And I'm glad, of course, that you

didn't do the coffee shop and bar building. This is a perfect decision you've made. It wasn't easy to do away with it, but now it's perfect.

JPJ: It's interesting that time plays such an important part in each pavilion project: shortage of time, or more positively, the immediacy of the drawing taking physical form. Have you enjoyed the intensity of this process?

PZ: Very much. But the project is actually not so complex. It's a beautiful exercise for an architect, because, since it's not so complex, you can easily oversee the whole thing. With this kind of intensity, I was able to develop something in a way I haven't been able to before. When you go through this process, you can't sit in an airplane, make a sketch, give it to a talented architect in your office and say, 'Do something with this.' It would take too long. This process only works by being on it all the time, being there, having problems with certain things and navigating through them.

HUO: You've just opened another pavilion in Vardø, Norway, on the Varanger Peninsula: the Steilneset pavilion that you designed with the artist Louise Bourgeois. It's interesting that these two projects opened in the same week. And it was the last thing that Bourgeois did before she died. She told us about it and was so fond of it. With her recent death, it appears like a memorial for her, but it's actually a memorial for the people who were burned as witches in Norway. Can you tell us about this Varanger project?

PZ: I'll tell you the story of how it happened. I was invited by the National Tourist Routes project to collaborate with Bourgeois, and I said yes. I'd expected to be asked to do something around some kind of installation of hers, but she said, 'No, you go and have a look, and you do something first.' She asked me to go and see the site and to bring back information, because she couldn't go there herself. So I went and looked at it, and the curator Svein Ronning and I walked around the site, and after about two hours I asked him to leave me alone for half an hour and then I came back and told him what I wanted to do: a long building with ninety-one windows and ninety-one lights in the windows, for the ninety-one victims of the witch trials. And exactly where it would be constructed was



clear because it's the site where they were actually burned at the stake. When I first came to the village, it was dark, it was cold, and I could see a light in the windows where people lived. This really made an impression on me. And then I walked around and I saw this long rack for drying fish. And this inspired the structure. The people in the village said, 'Wow, look, this has something to do with our village!' So this is what I did, with the ninety-one biographies of the victims printed on silk and placed inside each window and lit by a solitary bulb. And they're really well done, these texts, because the historian had used the transcripts of the trials of every woman, and a few men too, who was killed, and she did a really good job. They're very powerful. You feel the person and you feel what she said: she was accused, she confessed but she .... Many people cry when they come out.

HUO: We first saw this model in your studio, and it was clear even then that it was incredibly poignant.

PZ: OK, so back to Louise. So I went home and I made a watercolour and sent it over to Louise, and right away it came back: 'Beautiful.' Very flattering. Her assistant Jerry Gorovoy told me the other day that for a week she looked at it and said: 'This is already complete, I can't do anything with this.' But this she didn't tell me at the time. She only said, 'Beautiful.' After two weeks a sketch of her artwork [*The Damned, The Possessed and The Beloved*] arrived – everybody thinks it's Louise's sketch, but I know it's Jerry's sketch [laughs] but she explained to him what she wanted: a chair emanating jets of fire surrounded by mirrors. But now I had a problem about where it should go, since it wouldn't work within the building. Well, what should I do? Should I make a niche or something, an extension of my building? So I offered to cancel my part and do a new thing for her. And as soon as I suggested that, she came back, 'No! Don't change it.' [Laughs] So then it became clear that it was going to be two things. She wanted this. She said, 'Yours has to stay, and I'll do this.' She realized that the lights in the windows were a very emotional kind of approach to the lives of these women, and she reacted with the aggressive part – a representation of the aggression. So that's what we have now, with her work in a separate cube space.

HUO: You said you made a watercolour, and your books, with all the wooden buildings, are full of gorgeous watercolours and drawings.

PZ: By doing the first drawing myself, I can control the building, so that I don't have to stand next to the computer and say, 'Like this, like this', and print out kilometers of paper. Instead, I get to have this moment of concentration at my table. This is the best! It doesn't get any better – the life of an architect, making a drawing at one's table. It's a beautiful concentration. My hands are involved, and I can't do a watercolour without thinking about what's next – what colors to use. I do this to explore what I want.

JPJ: So what's important is the feeling that things are handmade, that they have your hand on them?

PZ: Yes. I'm looking for architecture space, and architecture space, as we know, is a void. It's a mysterious void, and we can only influence it. We can shape this void, and we can influence it through its materiality. It's like membranes that you can stretch and pull. So that's what I want – I want to control it ... that's not the right word ... I want to design something that doesn't exist. It doesn't exist, so I have to do it. There are many types of processes. One process is the watercolours, another one is making lots of models. Another is talking, speaking out in the office, again and again, leading the discussion. I pose the questions in the right order, and people have to learn that they can't give me academic answers, because we're not at university. I'm not interested in any kind of reasoning. If somebody were to say, 'I don't like this', and you were to say, 'But you should like this!', I'd shut you up, because that's his opinion, and I'm interested in his opinion. I want him to tell me what gives him that bad feeling. This is my method of designing. I want to hear what people say.

JPJ: David Sylvester had the same quality. When he was installing an exhibition here at the Serpentine, he would always ask everyone what they thought – not indiscriminately, but he'd ask Mike Gaughan, the gallery manager, for example, what he thought. He

asked, because he wanted to hear. It wasn't politeness, it was about seeing things in a different way, through the words of other people. That's a very generous thing to do, and it's also an intelligent thing to do, because it's a way of re-looking.

PZ: I'm exploiting people, see! [Laughs] But some people really like it – being part of this intense chemical process. I think this is what I can do: I can bring things out. But not through having a stupid academic discussion about it. When it's about words, I'll stop it, because we're not talking about words. That's really important, because architecture in the end will be used by people without an explanation, so it's like preconceiving emotional reactions to something.

HUO: So many people have been moved by your Pavilion. And with all of your buildings you create an emotional response. In a lecture you said that there are lots of aspects to evoking this emotion – there's the body, the anatomy of the building, the material compatibility, the sound of the space, the temperature of the space, the surrounding objects, the relationship between composure and seduction ...

PZ: You read my atmosphere lecture!

HUO: Yes I read it. It's a great lecture. So can you tell us a little bit more? What's the recipe?

PZ: The recipe? I don't know. I think it starts out with the intention to create emotional space. This is what I want to do. I don't set out to do a beautiful object that you look at from the outside. I like that too, but it's not the real core of what I'm aiming for. It's always the emotional space, but with the correct emotion for that work. I want to make it so my mother, for example, could understand it: if she saw the Pavilion she'd say, 'Sure. It's a garden.' So it starts out like this, and maybe you need some talent to do this. Certain people bring materials together that just give you the creeps. So it's obviously subjective, and different for different people. I'm persistent though, like I was here with the Pavilion, from the brick to the roofing felts, to bringing all these things together – you

have to be persistent. I'm persistent because this is the core, because I want to achieve emotional spaces. This is something I can do.

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