Architecture taken seriously

Questioning the ideology of transparency

Zumthor's hairy paradise

Helen Mallinson

Every year since the beginning of the new century, the Serpentine Gallery in London has commissioned a summer pavilion from a famous architect. This summer, a new book *Ten Years Serpentine Gallery Pavilions* was published by Taschen Verlag to coincide with the opening of the eleventh annual pavilion, designed by Peter Zumthor. Helen Mallinson reviews Zumthor's pavilion here, in the context of the decade-old pavilion programme.

gardens that I have seen, that I believe I have seen, that I long to see

Peter Zumthor

Elephants are grey, I know, but if they were really black then their skin would be a bit like Zumthor's slightly hairy black box parked somewhat gracelessly on the lawn in front of the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park in the summer just gone. You can tell the surface of the box is meant to read as a skin; it is rendered with a layer of slightly hairy scrim, brushed and brushed again with viscous matt black paint called 'Idenden'. If Zumthor's black box were dark, shiny and at all heavy looking it would read more like a memorial to the recent dead; if it were dark, glossy and transparent it would resemble a cheap showroom trying to look elegant. As it is Zumthor's box looks more amateur dramatics than architecture; a theatrical black box with a whimsy of stage lights strung across the front. All this does nothing to undermine Peter Zumthor's reputation as a serious architect.

The jury citation for the Pritzker Architecture Prize, awarded to Zumthor in 2009, began with the notion that he was a 'master architect' but one that had entirely disassociated himself from the professional and cultural mainstream. What the prize honoured was the



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purity with which Zumthor pursues architecture as a true vocation, uncompromised and uncompromising. He does not do bread and butter work, or even high profile work. The jury used words like 'untouched', 'affinity', 'devotion', 'humility'. We seem close to beatification here, Pritzker Prize as blessing. But where would architecture be if it did not recognise those who take the architecture in architecture seriously?

There are two aspects to Zumthor's work that might be regarded under the rubric of serious. On the one hand, there is the work itself and the effects that it achieves – is it really that good? – on the other hand, there is what he, or it, stands for. Visitors to Zumthor's pavilion this summer might remember previous pavilions. His is the eleventh in a series that started life as the brainchild of the director of the Serpentine Gallery, Julia Peyton-Jones. The idea was to commission famous architects that had never been given the opportunity to build in Britain a chance to construct a temporary pavilion. The series is not likely to run out of contenders any time soon. All the chosen architects need to do is showcase an idea of architecture and host a public. Mies's 1929 Barcelona Pavilion springs to mind as the obvious precedent. Though made of the most expensive and durable materials, it was never intended as other than temporary and was on show for less than a year. In 1986, the City administration in Barcelona completed a meticulous reconstruction of the Pavilion, endowing it to posterity. All the Serpentine pavilions, at the end of their season, are offered up for sale to help with funding. As Zumthor observes, the Serpentine pavilions cannot be context pieces for this reason. He calls his a 'frame' and a 'type' because of the possibility it will move home. Does that make Zumthor's pavilion non-site specific, and what about the previous ten pavilions? Indeed, in what way was the Barcelona Pavilion site specific, given its German brief and exhibition setting?

Site and symbiosis

One contingent of support for Zumthor's way of doing architecture has built up around his devotion to the site and the idea of a symbiotic relationship between the building and its landscape. This can present itself through his singular use of really local materials, like the mountain of locally quarried Valser quartzite he used in his Therme Vals (1996). But is this kind of materiality crucial to his architecture? The question is raised not so much by the hairy black box that is made of ubiquitous plywood – sliced white bread in architectural terms, comprising a very different architectural statement to the forest of square cut timbers he used for the Swiss Pavilion, Expo 2000 – but by what is inside. The box is not conceived as a building but a three-dimensional frame. And what it frames is a garden, a proper paradise garden.

Zumthor's charisma is partly based on his obsessive devotion to detail. As the Pritzker jury relate, he only takes on projects when he feels an 'affinity for the programme' then, once the project is adopted, 'his devotion is complete, overseeing the project's completion to the very last detail'. In this case, however, Zumthor handed over the heart of the project, the garden, to another designer, Piet Oudolf, and left him to it. Oudolf is known for his work planting the new public park on the old elevated freight line, the High Line in New York. The railway was opened in 1934 to carry goods right through the middle of the industrial zone on the west side of Manhattan and opened as a public park, the first section in 2009 and

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the second section in June 2011, a month before the Serpentine pavilion. Oudolf has a strong ethos and a consistent body of work so Zumthor must have known roughly what he was getting. Nevertheless, the idea of the garden as the object of Zumthor's pavilion raises interesting questions over context and authorship. The point behind a garden is that it is not wild nature but nature improved or perfected. So who is the author: the person who builds the enclosure, the person who plants the seeds, the nature that designs the plants, or the person who designs the nature?

The word 'paradise' comes from the ancient term *pairidaeza*, from Eastern Iran meaning enclosed garden. It has acquired a cosmogonical charge according to which the original paradise, the Garden of Eden, dates to before the Fall. In eschatological religions, paradise usually refers to the abode of the virtuous dead, as in the ancient Egyptian Field of Reeds, Greek Elysian Fields, or the Christian heaven. According to both these doctrines, any earthly garden can only be a paradise in as far as it *represents* paradise; the mundane garden is essentially time bound in its cycles of change, growth and decay. More simply, it could be argued that every garden is a paradise garden because it is enclosed and separated in some way from wild nature: the degree of separation is enough to warrant the idea. Zumthor calls his pavilion a *hortus conclusus,* a contemplative room, a garden within a garden. He refers to tiny rectangular alpine gardens cut out of vast mountain meadows. Clearly a field under cultivation is not a garden. Take away the garden fence, as William Kent proposed, and what you get is not a garden but a 'landskip'.[1] Following Kent, one might conclude, architects from the eighteenth century onwards abandoned paradise and, apart from sponsoring the odd Gertrude Jekyll figure, have not been back to the garden since. Zumthor's high-walled inward-looking garden is not a modern concept. It is quite unlike SANAA's light as air Serpentine pavilion of 2009, a delectable essay in emancipated architecture *qua* landscape. Zumthor framed his garden in such a way as to make it inaccessible to outside view and impossible to enter except through the mind's eye.

Age and maturity

The garden element set within Zumthor's pavilion is long and narrow. You can easily see across the bed but you can't jump across and it is not wide enough to sustain a path: you have to walk around it. The clearing is fully occupied. On entry you see across the short axis and the view is intimate and frontal, like a sumptuous boudoir painting of tall grasses pixellated with flowers that quiver in every breeze. Wander to the end and look down the long axis and the proportions take on the dimensions of a luminous stained-glass window come to life – the grasses have become very tall. The clever thing about Zumthor's frame is that it really does frame the garden and sky. And it is a very old-fashioned frame, quite unlike the suggestive perspective lines as columns you find in Mies. The wall folds underfoot to make a gallery floor then bends out overhead then back to make a deep overhanging roof, the angle of which has as much to do with the bevel on an old picture frame as it does the idea of roof. When the sun is out, the matt black surface of the back wall and underside of the roof on the shadow side creates a night space that is deeper than any shadow: the light does not seem to penetrate, people disappear into the darkness while the plants shimmer and shine in high contrast. And the building really is just surface: there are no columns. What is strange about the absence of columns is the

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way it de-architecturalises the project. Columns are perhaps the most established of architectural tropes. So, although the garden could be read as a courtyard, and indeed Zumthor draws attention to secreted cultural memories of monasteries and courted interior gardens, the lack of columns, the blackness, the un-stone, the primitive shed-like form, all deny the classical. This garden, the pavilion seems to say, is older than classical; it comes from the order of the cave.

The problem with gardens – the plants, that is – is how you can make them seem old, should you want to. There are, of course, plants that can be old in themselves: trees, for instance, but also vines and lichens that bear the traces of passing centuries. Annuals, in contrast, come and go; perennials come and go and come again; evergreens hang around all winter. Creating the look of maturity in a garden, as you need to for a short project, is a highly synthetic exercise. Mies did not bother in the Barcelona Pavilion. He went with green marble, onyx, travertine, clear and tinted glass, chrome and water. He used the light to calibrate every surface and bring the space to sizzling life. As I write in mid-September, Oudolf's garden looks gloriously mature. Even a couple of months can transform new planting into something that possesses fullness. Like Gertrude Jekyll, Oudolf is a plants-man. He does not just arrange plants in a picturesque pattern but oversees their growth. Oudolf has had his own nursery for years and is an adept at improving species to change their colour, improve their longevity or hardiness or bug resistance.[2] His policy for the High Line public park was to focus on plants that had already learned to subsist on the abandoned railway, although he did not adopt this as a formal constraint; there are plenty of outsiders in evidence, enriching the community.[3]

The Hyde Park setting for Zumthor's pavilion is a re-turfed lawn among specimen trees; there is not even a weed in evidence. Oudolf's design drawing for the garden looks like a design for a carpet except that each tightly packed clump denotes mixtures of grasses and flowers, different colours, textures, heights, designed to unfold in four dimensions, over time as well as in space. The plants themselves come from around the world: Japanese Lavender Mist, Siberian Irises, Himalayan Persicaria, Canadian Sanquisorbae. Zumthor, nevertheless, happily refers to Oudolf's garden as 'wild'. So how does this idea work? The key is in Oudolf's use of grasses, the ubiquitous goldish greenish hair of the earth since time immemorial. Oudolf showcases magnificent clumps of specimen grasses that evoke the savannah, field and meadow, but shimmy like Salome in her dance of the seven veils. The grasses, planted straight in the ground without the plinth of a raised bed, denote timeless 'wild' and tucked in among them are the flowers. The paradigm is a meadow but one so lush you would fear to tread.

An interior world

Much is made both by Zumthor and the reviewers of his pavilion about the contrast between the interior experience of the pavilion and the bustling metropolis of London. In fact, the pavilion is set in the middle of Hyde Park and, although the setting is quite close to the road that runs through the park, the real backdrop of the pavilion remains one of London's most luxuriant green spaces. Zumthor, nevertheless, is acutely sensitive to the temporariness of the park in terms of the experience that the park's inhabitants bring with them. The visitors, all of them, come trailing not clouds of glory but clouds of urban combustion. Zumthor uses the park setting as a cool-down room before and after experiencing his more intense spiritual, physical and emotional exercise. You even have to enter his



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garden by zigzagging through a dark passage. A door would not do. The transition from outside to inside has to be effected by a radical change in light level and a noticeable physical movement within the eye. There is a matching acoustic transition, but on a lesser scale: there is nothing sound-wise to match the visual orchestra of the plants that greet you on entry.

Zumthor is happy with Oudolf's garden because it works: it works like a painting, or a piece of music, or a film, a novel, or a play, where the balance of elements adds up to create a coherent whole. The grassy flowerbed complements the un-architectural frame. The composition is clean, precise, modern. Blink, however, and you could miss it. The performance is inherently theatrical. It does not assume the weight of permanent architecture or attempt the literal essay in weight that Zumthor adopted for the Swiss pavilion. Zumthor claims that, in his architecture, he does not want to 'represent meaning', he wants to create a sense of 'just being'. So, given his commitment to site and materials, what prevents the pavilion becoming merely Zumthoresque – a parody rather than the real thing? In itself, the experience offered by the pavilion is complete but relatively slight, requiring neither effort nor concentration, neither discipline nor protocols beyond what you would expect in any gallery or public garden. The atmosphere is respectful but you can still talk out-loud and picnic on cake and caffeine.

Zumthor is renowned for the sensory qualities of his architecture but he stimulates for a purpose. Zumthor calls on memories and the longings they provoke to give depth and meaning to experience. In his more famous works, like Therme Vals, the Bruder Klaus Field Chapel (2007) or the Kolumba Art Museum (2007), Zumthor exaggerates the materiality of materials to create a frisson between sensation and memory by stimulating sensory overload. The aim is to create a feeling, a sense of unity of being, an architecture replete with a 'singular density and mood, this feeling of presence, well-being, harmony, beauty'. In the end he wants a church to feel like a church, for you to remember what it feels like to be in a church – because a church cannot just *look* like a church; it has to *be* a church, even when it is an art museum. What Zumthor weaves-in here is not the necessity of event but a resonance that transmits like wind and weather through the emotional life of a culture. Zumthor thus details an architecture that works through impressions, through building 'atmospheres' (as he calls it in his book of the same name). He does not deal in paradigms that are easily bottled. By going straight to material, form and light, he attempts to bypass the crowds of pasteboard images that usually substitute for memory and particularly cultural memory. Zumthor's eye is the mind's eye, fully cognitive, but his mind is coterminous with a body that remembers and desires.

The word 'spiritual' is often used in reference to Zumthor's works and he is an easy target for churchy descriptors like 'liturgical'. Those resistant to religious connotations can refer instead to Zumthor's phenomenological leanings, or the correspondence between his focus on sensory and emotional feelings and Heidegger's philosophy. Which brings us back to Zumthor's reputation as a serious architect. His intentions may be exemplary when it comes to student projects and getting students to think about materials, but what about architecture at large? There is something deeply subversive about Zumthor's work. His Serpentine pavilion is the architectural equivalent of the back view of a *burqa*. If it were a garment, you would be banned from wearing it in public in France. It makes you realise how deeply rooted the ideology of transparency has become – and more lately its parametric progeny, flux – and how devoid its architecture. It used to be that architecture could employ light and air, the least material of space-makers, as routes to the spiritual or at least a heightened sense of being. These mediums are now clogged and compromised, thick with microwaves and pollution, pumped and sucked, wired and wireless, controlled and controlling. Zumthor is not interested in ideologies, but there is something inherently protective about the way he constructs a space or, in this case, a garden. It is not nature he is trying to keep out.

Notes

1. Horace Walpole attributed the move to William Kent: 'He leaped the fence and saw that all nature was a garden.'
2. <www.oudolf.com/piet-oudolf/partnership www.futureplants.com> [accessed 03.11.11].
3. See High Line webpage for details: <www.thehighline.org> [accessed 03.11.11].

The book documenting the Serpentine pavilion programme was published in May: Philip Jodidio (ed.), Ten Years Serpentine Gallery Pavilions *(Cologne: Taschen, 2011).*

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