

Matteo Thun • Building in the Alps

Unlikely Alpine style

Building in the Alps means juggling the necessary transformations required of a cutting-edge tourist industry with civil respect for tradition, and this often involves finding just the right balance between a certain stylistic compliance with a rather unlikely Alpine style and speculative indifference. Both can meet the very same marketing demands in their own ways.

Stereotypical rendering of the picturesque

MT&P attempts to adopt a different approach, capable of combining a fully fledged contemporary style with careful attention to context. A method which makes it possible to avoid both the selfish cry of modernity at all costs and a stereotypical rendering of the picturesque partly deriving from urban lifestyles which, although apparently shelved down at lower altitudes, have actually been translated into clichés, affected expressions and hollow citations.

Rural architecture, stables not houses

So evoking Alpine stylistic features as the basis of a design project actually turns into a search for words and syntax in rural not residential architecture; in architecture designed not for people but for hay and animals. Stables, not houses.

Subtraction and simplification

This brings out the logic of high mountain life with great clarity: its fundamental simplicity as a necessary, non-ideological function, in which everything is perfectly in place in a well-defined balance between people and the environment.

This is what can be learnt from a Walser house: an aesthetic, social and technical-constructional lesson from which we can draw some basic principles for modern-day living:

- **the aesthetics of economising.** A process of subtraction and simplification, in which simplicity does not mean impoverishment but rather refinement or, in other words, the result of constant refining, a way of gradually getting to the essence of the issue: from the chair to the table to construction details, based on an idea of reduction to the minimum, of a survival box.
- **transparency.** The loggias of a Walser house, used for drying hay, are also spaces where people can go about their everyday activities, interstitial places poised between the inside and outside, between the public and private realms. A mountain village is a very closely knit cluster thriving on neighbourly relations and genuine socialising. The loggias give concrete form to bustling community life.
- **climate control.** Walser houses are constructed along the lines of energy saving with exemplary simplicity and efficiency.

Reduction to a minimum

Reduction of energy requirements

Certain design constants in MT&P's work set great store by this idea.

Micro-climatic survey

Energy.

A systematic micro-climatic survey (seasonal changes, south-east and south-west exposures, daytime and night-time winds) allows the place's energy resources to be optimised: this is the primary design concern. Enforcing the necessary guidelines for low-consumption architecture is an approach that fits in with the traditional way of interpreting the means of modernity: from studying the building shell to solar exposition, differentiated façade design and plant-engineering.

Double skin

Language.

The facade is the most distinctive feature: an independent system and interface between the inhabited space and setting, it has its own multiple semantics. In the case of a Walser house, it is a double layer which creates utilizable cavities, between-spaces, blurring the boundary between inside and outside to create transparency and permeability effects. It is always "out of scale", independently of the measurements in play or number of floors, and it dissimulates the building's dimensional impact. Lastly, it enters into figurative relations with local tradition in terms of material, form, texture and figurative patterns, and it becomes a diaphragm in tune with the surrounding landscape.

Out of scale

Local figurative traditions

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Prefabrication

Technology/Economics.

Focusing on “dry” technology and prefabricated wooden elements.

Generally speaking, manufacturing off-site means better control over the building schedule and budget. More specifically, in the mountains this means qualitatively handling the fact that there is a limited amount of building time available, a period of just six months from the thaw until temperatures drop below freezing point again. Building out of wood makes prefabrication an added bonus and not just mere standardisation.

Rural rarefaction

Site-specific features.

Rarefaction, decompression and the dilation of time are the grounding features of building at high altitudes, whose guidelines are the exact opposite of any kind of urbanisation. The rarefaction in mountain cities mixes with site-specific cultural factors peculiar to the setting in which work is being carried out (not globalised culture or a transposition of urban city culture).

The projects currently under way across the Alps have been developed based on this mix, focusing on and relating in each specific case with the Engadin landscape, with the mountain plains of Andermatt, the verticality of Zermatt, the green arena of Davos, the striking setting of Katschberg, the mountain skyline of Cortina, the lakeside of Luino, and the larches and vineyards near Merano...

Local culture