

High style in the Alps

TheObserver Escape

The Observer Sunday May 13 2007

<http://travel.guardian.co.uk/article/2007/may/13/escape.architecture>

High style in the Alps

Heidi wouldn't recognise the place - today even Alpine supermarkets are at the cutting edge of design, writes Tom Robbins.



Pool runnings ... the Aquadome spa in Langenfeld

Brooding ominously by the Thames, Tate Modern is a key symbol of London as a centre of art, architecture and design. So where did its creators turn to find architects capable of transforming an old power station into this beacon of modern Britishness? To Switzerland, of course, and the award-winning practice of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron.

For while many people still associate alpine design with cosy wooden chalets, cuckoo clocks and red and white check curtains, those in the design world know that the alpine nations are at the very cutting edge of modern architecture. 'Having scoured the globe,' wrote the design magazine *Wallpaper* as early as autumn 2000, 'we are unanimous in our decision to name Vorarlberg as the most progressive part of the planet when it comes to new architecture.' The Vorarlberg, in case this hotbed of style has still escaped your notice, is a sparsely-populated mountainous region in the far west of Austria.

Since then, the reputation of the alpine architects has grown still further and countless audacious buildings have recently opened. Some are glamorous hotels and spas, but such is the demand for high style that others are small village chapels or even supermarkets. Here's our pick of the best.

Top Mountain Star Restaurant

Obergurgl, Austria

Open for only five months, this has to be one of the world's most dramatic restaurant locations - the building is perched 3,080m up on a rocky ridge with vertical drops on either side, and the village of Obergurgl far below. The name is awkward, but the circular building itself lives up to its location, with glass walls all round to make the most of the views. From below, the steel rafters extending out from the round roof really do make it look like a star.

It's open on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays over the summer, but you may want to book to avoid a wasted trek - it's four hours uphill to get to it. Those who don't need to work up an appetite can pay €19 for a return on the cable car, which runs all summer.

• See www.oetztal.com for details

Chesa Futura Apartments

St Moritz, Switzerland

Not to be outdone by Swiss architects in London, Norman Foster has designed two key buildings in the most prestigious Swiss resort of all, St Moritz. His Chesa Futura apartments, finished in 2004, look something like a giant unshelled peanut rising above the traditional chalets and church spires of the village. Clad in 250,000 larch wood tiles, the building contains nine apartments (including ones owned by Foster, himself, and reportedly by Wallpaper-founder Tyler Brulee). Unfortunately none is open to the public, but the exterior merits a visit and after that you can go down the road and inside Foster's next project, the Murezzan - a mixed-use residential and public building, completed last year and containing the super-slick Post Haus cafe and restaurant.

Not to be outdone by Swiss architects in London, Norman Foster has designed two key buildings in the most prestigious Swiss resort of all, St Moritz. His Chesa Futura apartments, finished in 2004, look something like a giant unshelled peanut rising above the traditional chalets and church spires of the village. Clad in 250,000 larch wood tiles, the building contains nine apartments (including ones owned by Foster, himself, and reportedly by Wallpaper-founder Tyler Brulee). Unfortunately none is open to the public, but the exterior merits a visit and after that you can go down the road and inside Foster's next project, the Murezzan - a mixed-use residential and public building, completed last year and containing the super-slick Post Haus cafe and restaurant.

www.post-haus.com; www.stmoritz.ch

Women's Museum

Hittisau, Austria

In a mountain village with fewer than 2,000 residents, Austria's Women's Museum is a startlingly modern sight. A large cube, with clinical straight edges, the building is softened by being constructed of the local timber, the silver fir. It's definitely 'mixed use' too - the basement is the village fire station, ground floor is a music hall, and first floor is the Women's Museum - but despite this, inside it feels like some eastern zen temple. Long, empty rooms with floors, walls and ceilings lined in smooth, light wood end in glass walls, which let light stream in and reveal the forest outside, the green leaves a startling contrast to the monochrome interior.

www.frauenmuseum.com

The View House

Zermatt, Switzerland

Zermatt is the classic mountain village - pictures of its huddled wooden chalets with the Matterhorn looming above have adorned countless million chocolate boxes. But it's also home to avant-garde artist and architect Heinz Julen, who is single-handedly turning it into the site of some incredible modern design. His first hit was the Vernissage, in the village centre, a cinema/gallery/nightclub with the boho-chic feel of a New York loft. Two years later came the View House, a unique building housing four apartments, all of which you can rent. It looks like a traditional chalet crossed with an industrial greenhouse - lots of timber and vast windows with panoramic views. The price is surprisingly reasonable: each sleeps four and costs from £165 a night.

Julen's Zermatt design revolution shows no sign of slowing. His hotel, the Omnia, opened late last year on a hill above town, accessed by an lift through the rock face. But his most ambitious project to date is about to take shape - a 117m pyramid of glass and steel, housing restaurant and rooms, on top of the 3,883m Klein Matterhorn.

www.viewhouse.ch; www.heinzjulen.com

Aquadome Spa

Langenfeld, Austria

Modern alpine design is probably easiest to appreciate from the warmth of an infinity pool while admiring the mountain views at one of the incredible spas that have opened in the last couple of years. The Aquadome, surrounded by peaks and just down the valley from Obergurgl, has three outdoor pools suspended above the ground in vast concrete bowls - the idea, say the creators, being to 'increase the feeling of weightlessness'. One contains salt water and underwater music, one has massaging water jets, the other turns into a huge whirlpool.

www.aqua-dome.at

Vigilius Mountain Resort

Lana, Italy

Accessed by its own cable car, the Vigilius guarantees an escape from roads, traffic and noise. Views are of the Dolomites and the air is scented by the larch forest that surrounds the hotel and spa. The building (the work of star architect Matteo Thun) is designed to blend into the forest, thus promoting quiet 'observation'. The low-slung structure is clad in long horizontal strips of pale wood, behind which glass walls let in the warmth. It has its own biomass power plant and is carbon neutral. Little surprise then, that this mountain retreat is one of legendary climber Reinhold Messner's favourite hotels. Doubles from £210.

www.vigilius.it

Bergisel Ski Jump

Innsbruck, Austria

Iraqi-born, London-based superarchitect Zaha Hadid is making her mark on Innsbruck, capital of the Austrian Tirol. First came the Bergisel ski jump, which opened in 2002 and rises out of woods on a hill above the city like a huge, concrete cobra. The good news is that it's not just ski jumpers who get to appreciate it. At the top of the jump, 40m in the air, is a cafe and viewing platform giving views of the city and the mountains all around. Hadid's latest work,

due for completion this year, is three avant-garde stations for a funicular railway starting in the historic city centre and heading up into the mountains.

www.innsbruck-tourism.at

Church of St John the Baptist

Switzerland

Just as Lord Foster and a handful of big name designers have shaped the face of modern Britain, so the Alps has its own band of superstar architects. One such is Mario Botta, whose reputation was assured when he rebuilt the 17th-century chapel in the village of Mogno after it was destroyed by an avalanche. Instead of copying what was there before, and to the initial fury of some locals, he created a futuristic tube, made with alternating strips of local grey granite and white marble. From the austere interior visitors' eyes are drawn upwards to the heavens by the light streaming through the sloping glass roof. Touring Switzerland to see other Botta creations could make a great trip - don't miss his Tour de Moron (like a futuristic tower of Pisa) in the Jura, and Santa Maria degli Angeli on Mount Tamaro, near Lugano.

www.botta.ch

MPREIS Supermarket

Wenns, Austria

Forget identikit out-of-town warehouses, in Austria, even the supermarkets are cool. MPREIS bills itself as 'the seriously sexy supermarket'. This has nothing to do with its products, but is because each of the 130 stores are designed by up and coming architects, and are even becoming tourist attractions. Most famous is the shop perched half-way up a mountain outside the small town of Wenns, but you'll see them throughout the Austrian Alps.

www.mpreis.at

Therme Vals

Graubunden, Switzerland

The other giant of alpine design is Peter Zumthor, who has been dubbed 'the mystic of the mountains'. The rich from around the world clamour to employ him but he has completed only a handful of buildings in his 40-year career and only started working outside his home canton, Graubunden, in 1997, in his mid-50s. Zumthor's masterpiece is the spa at Vals, where vast clean walls of concrete and quartzite contrast with the alpine meadows outside. Being inside, say architecture critics, is like being in a series of geometric caves. Swimming between them, in the spa's various pools, is, says one, 'a profoundly moving experience'.

www.therme-vals.ch

Kunsthau Bregenz

Bregenz, Austria

If the Vorarlberg is the planet's most progressive area for architecture, the focal point must be the art gallery in the region's capital, Bregenz. Another Zumthor creation, it's a large glass and steel cube standing on the shores of Lake Constance. Zumthor says it resembles a lamp, absorbing and reflecting the changing light of the sky and reflections from the lake. For a guide to the area's other highlights, from a modernist apres-ski hut in Lech, to an office building in Fussach that seems to float in mid-air, see www.vorarlberg-tourism.at.

Esserhof Hotel

Lana, Italy

Many of the new alpine buildings incorporate environmentally friendly features, but the Esserhof takes this to extremes, being almost entirely built of straw, wood and clay. The straw insulation means it uses a tiny amount of electricity, but the eco-values don't get in the way of the chic design. There are three minimalist apartments, each with a glass wall looking out over the terrace and gardens. They sleep up to four, but based on two staying cost from £34 per person per night.

www.esserhof.com

Kirchner Museum

Davos, Switzerland

The artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner lived in Davos from 1917 until his death in 1938, and the town's Kirchner Museum holds the world's largest collection of his work. But although he was a key influence on German expressionism, many visitors seem more interested in the building. Designed by Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer from Zurich, it has become a place of pilgrimage for architecture students and is made up of several cubes, clad in matt or shining plates of glass with varying degrees of transparency. Davos has another star design attraction up its sleeve too - Herzog and de Meuron (of Tate Modern fame) have designed a 105m tower that twists as it rises above the Schatzalp, a mountain shelf above the town.

www.kirchnermuseum.ch

Tschuggen Spa

Arosa, Switzerland

Since his chapel at Mogno, Mario Botta has designed Evry Cathedral in France, the Cymbalista Synagogue in Tel Aviv and the Santo Volto Church in Turin, and he brings something of the sacred to this new spa - the result is closer to a cathedral than a leisure centre. Tall steel and glass skylights project from the roof like the bows of upturned boats, echoing the mountain peaks beyond and looking like arched church windows, particularly at night when the light shines out from them. Inside, Duke White granite from Italy covers walls, floors and the pool. 'The person who visits a spa doesn't go only for a workout or the pool,' says Botta. 'He wants an environment that also nourishes the spirit.'

The spa is closed this summer, but will be open year round from December.

www.tschuggen.ch

Flaine

France

15 While Austria and Switzerland find themselves at design's cutting edge, the French have gone oddly quiet. Perhaps this is a reaction to their unrestrained championing of modern mountain design in the 1960s and 70s. Many of those futuristic ski resorts, such as Tignes and Les Menuires, later became derided for their 'ugly' concrete towers, and many buildings have been demolished or clad in wood to soften the effect. Flaine, though, designed by Marcel Breuer, remains gloriously intact and gives a fascinating glimpse of 1960s futurism. The whole resort is built of concrete and looks more like a space station than an alpine village, while sculptures by Picasso and Dubuffet adorn the ski school meeting area.

www.flaine.fr

