

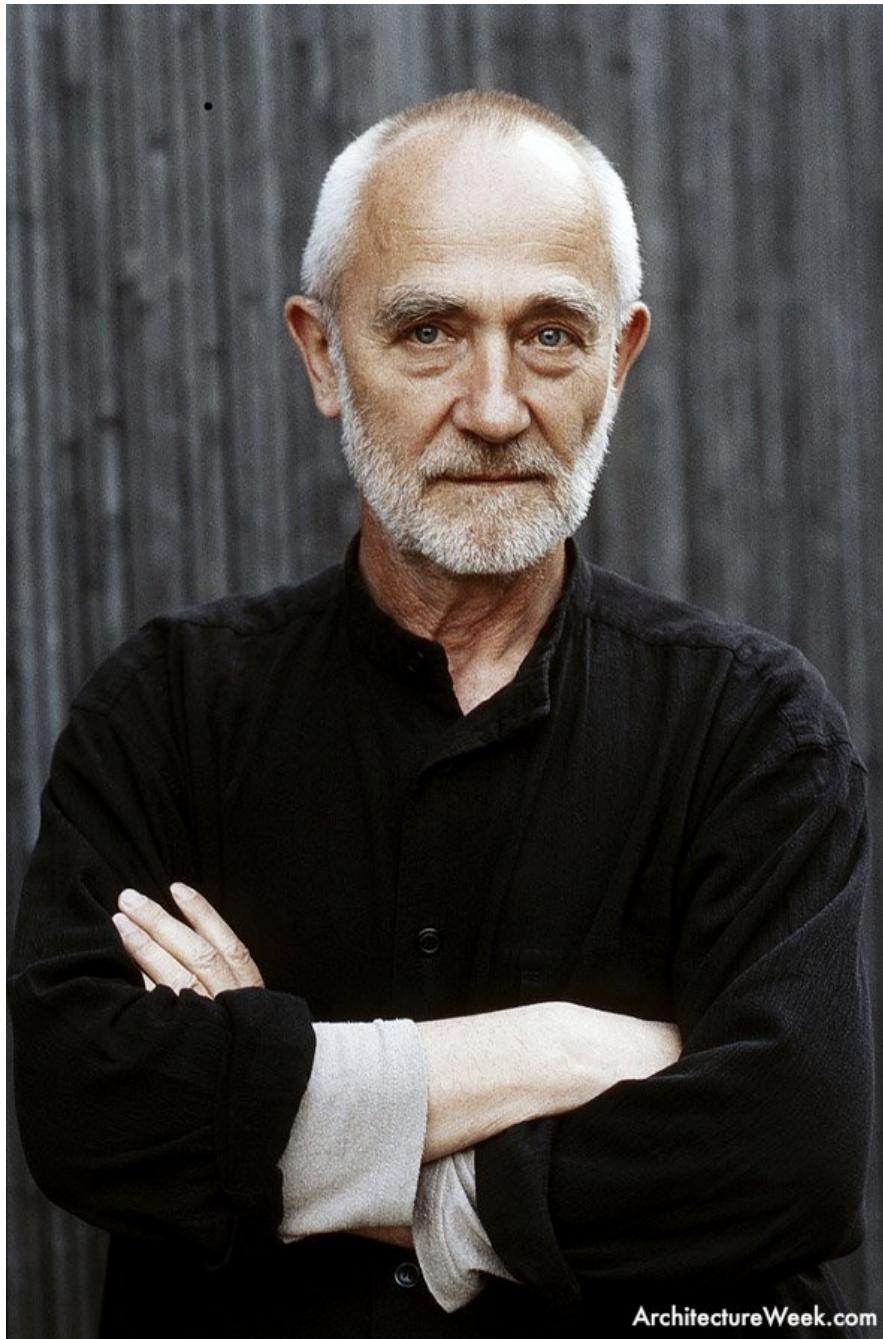
## RIBA Gold Medal to Peter Zumthor

2012-09-28



*Peter Zumthor designed the crisp modern [Kolumba Art Museum](#) (2007), which incorporates the remnants of the late-gothic St. Columba church. Photo: © farbanalyse*

Swiss architect [Peter Zumthor](#) has been named the recipient of the 2013 Royal Gold Medal for architecture by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). The 69-year-old architect, whose work is not well-known outside the architectural community, has received recent professional acclaim for his body of work, including the [2009 Pritzker Prize](#).

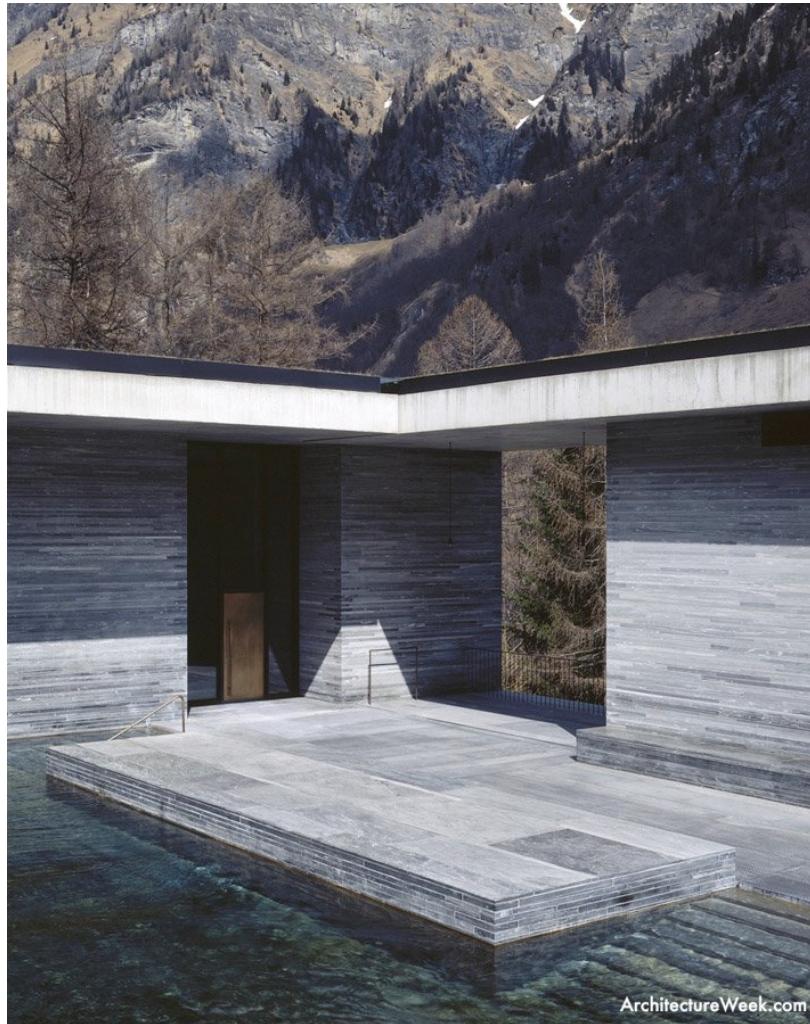


*The 2013 RIBA Gold Medal Prize will be awarded to Swiss architect Peter Zumthor. Photo: Gary Ebner*  
Shortly after he was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 2009, ArchitectureWeek contributing editor Michael Crosbie [summarized Zumthor](#) and his work.

*"There is little doubt that Zumthor has become in some sense a "starchitect" — the term attached to those major architects who command media acclaim — yet his following is limited mostly to the academy.*

*"Among those who know of Zumthor, he is hailed for just a handful of buildings.*

"Perhaps his most celebrated is the [Therme Vals](#) spa (1996), in his native Switzerland – a congeries of cavelike spaces rendered in steam, shadow, and watery reflections.



ArchitectureWeek.com

Peter Zumthor designed the [Therme Vals](#) spa in Vals, Switzerland. Photo: Hélène Binet

"Many of his buildings have a spiritual quality, and some of his better-known works have been religious structures: the [St. Benedict Chapel](#) in the village of Sumvitg, Switzerland, completed in 1988, and the [Bruder Klaus Field Chapel](#) near tiny Wachendorf, Germany, constructed in 2007. Zumthor has even designed a museum built on the ruins of a church: the [Kolumba Art Museum](#) in Cologne, Germany.

His great talent lies in creating highly atmospheric spaces through his mastery of light and selection of materials. Zumthor's buildings are an experience for all the senses, with every detail reinforcing the essence of the building and its surroundings. Crosbie went on to write:

"Zumthor's handling of materials and details has been compared to that of [Mies van der Rohe](#) and [Louis Kahn](#), but the phenomenological character of his ideas about how architecture is memorable and meaningful, how we interact with it through our bodies in four dimensions, and experience it with all our senses, ties him closer to the architectural ideas of [Christopher Alexander](#), [Charles Moore](#), and [Kent Bloomer](#).

"Two of Zumthor's projects that seem to best capture these architectural ideas are the [Therme Vals](#)

*in Vals, Switzerland, and his little chapel in a remote field in western Germany.*



ArchitectureWeek.com

*The green roof of Peter Zumthor's [Therme Vals](#) spa in Switzerland blends into the montane landscape. Photo: P.C. & P.L.*

*"At Vals, the architecture appears to grow from the landscape, a seamless merger of mountain and architecture. Zumthor describes this project as a discovery of the sensory qualities of bodies in water, surrounded by mist and light, reflections of the water's surface on the stones below and the ceiling and walls above, the sounds of water lapping against stone and echoed through the spa's halls of Valser gneiss.*



ArchitectureWeek.com

*The baths at [Therme Vals](#) are supplied by hot springs in the mountainside just behind the building. Photo: P.C. & P.L.*

*"The 60,000 pieces of stone are cut to the thickness of Roman bricks, giving the material an ancient atmosphere, laid up to suggest the striations of an incision through thousands of years of earth*

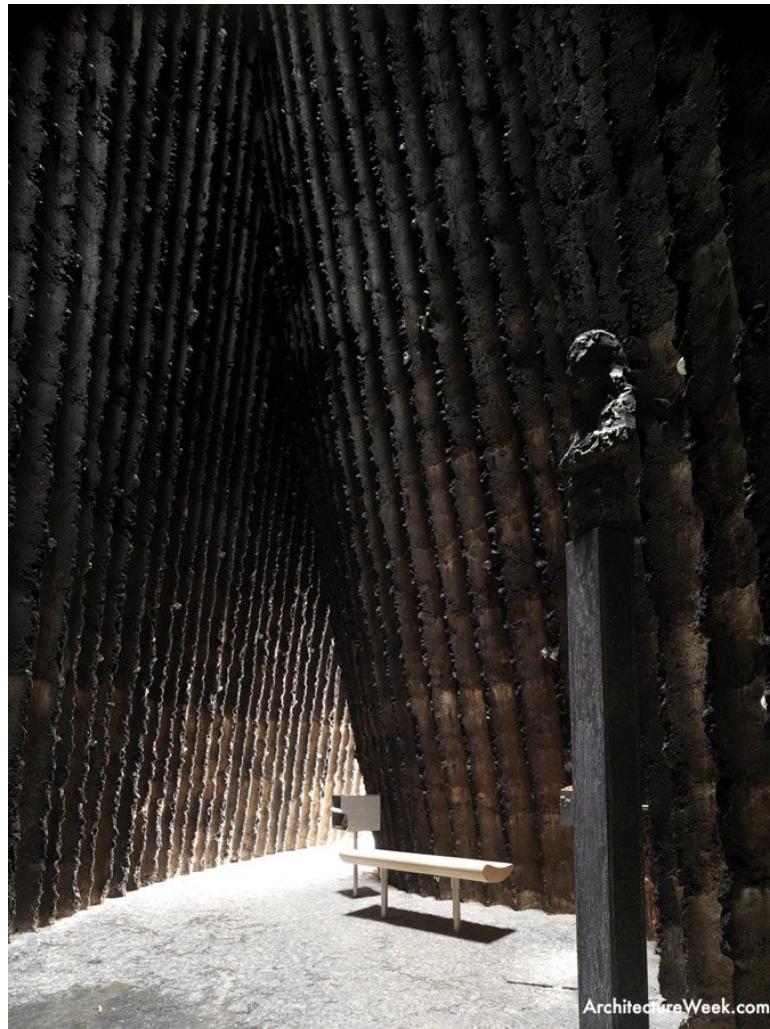
*strata — as if the spa were chiseled from an antediluvian grotto. Slits in the ceilings appear as crevices in a deep cave, pouring white light down the textured walls. The dominant colors are gray and blue, as if the building were fabricated from the ground below and the sky above."*



ArchitectureWeek.com

*The [Bruder Klaus Field Chapel](#) is located in rural western Germany, on the farm of the clients, Hermann-Josef and Trudel Scheidtweiler. Photo: Pietro Savorelli*

*"Similar themes of connecting earth to sky are found in the [Bruder Klaus Field Chapel](#), which Zumthor designed for a farmer, who built it with the help of neighbors. The austere, planar concrete exterior surrounds a sensuous, organic interior that wraps around the visitor."*



ArchitectureWeek.com

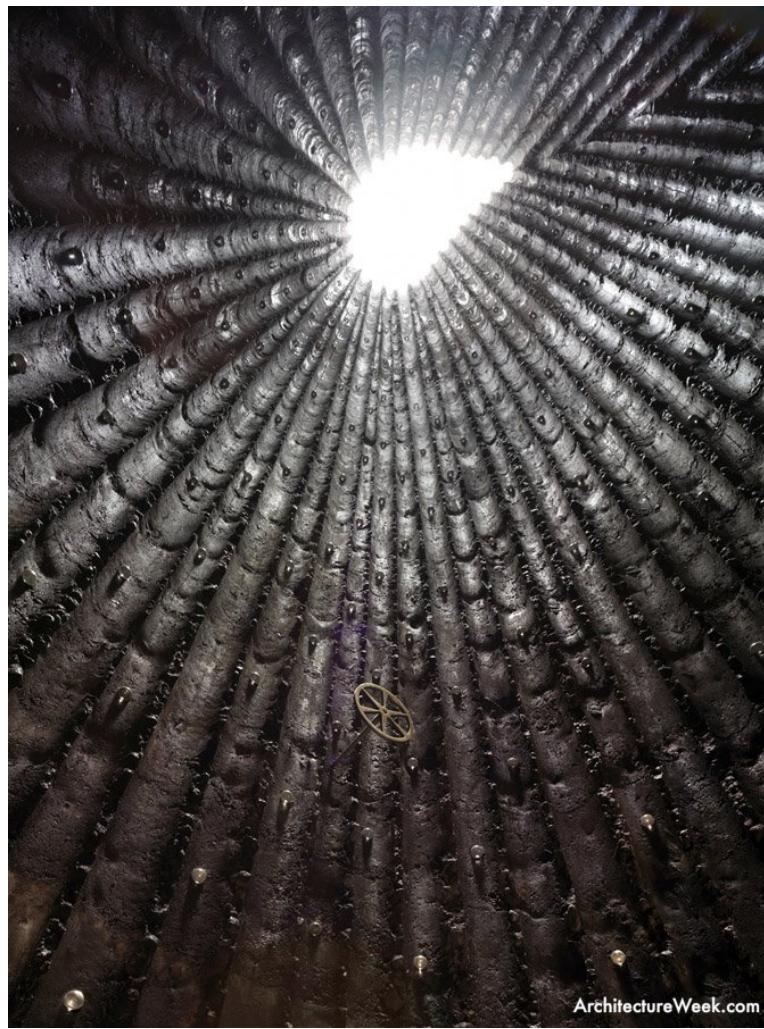
*Built largely by the clients and their friends, the [Bruder Klaus Field Chapel](#) has a floor of lead, poured by hand.*  
Photo: Pietro Savorelli

Peter Zumthor was born in Basel, Switzerland in 1943 and trained as a cabinet maker at his father's shop. From 1963-67, he trained as a designer and architect at the Kunstgewerbeschule Basel and at the Pratt Institute, in New York.

In 1967, he worked for the Swiss Canton of Graubünden as a building and planning consultant and architectural analyst of historical villages, in the Department for the Preservation of Monuments. In 1979, he went on to establish his own practice in Haldenstein, Switzerland, where he still works with an intentionally modest staff of 30.

Zumthor was visiting professor at the University of Southern California Institute of Architecture and SCI-ARC, in Los Angeles, in 1988; at the Technische Universität, Munich, in 1989; and at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, in 1999. From 1996-2008 he was a professor at the Academy of Architecture, Università della Svizzera Italiana, Mendrisio.

Peter Zumthor will be presented with the gold medal in a ceremony on February 6, 2013. Recent Royal Gold Medal recipients include [Herman Hertzberger](#) (2012), [David Chipperfield](#) (2011), [I.M. Pei](#) (2010), and [others](#).



ArchitectureWeek.com

*The unfinished concrete interior of the [Bruder Klaus Chapel](#) shows the imprints from the trees that were used to form the concrete. Photo: Pietro Savorelli*

From the RIBA jury citation, Yvonne Farrel of [Grafton Architects](#) wrote of Zumthor:

*Architecture needs warriors.*

*Architecture has to be made.*

*Otherwise how do we keep going?*

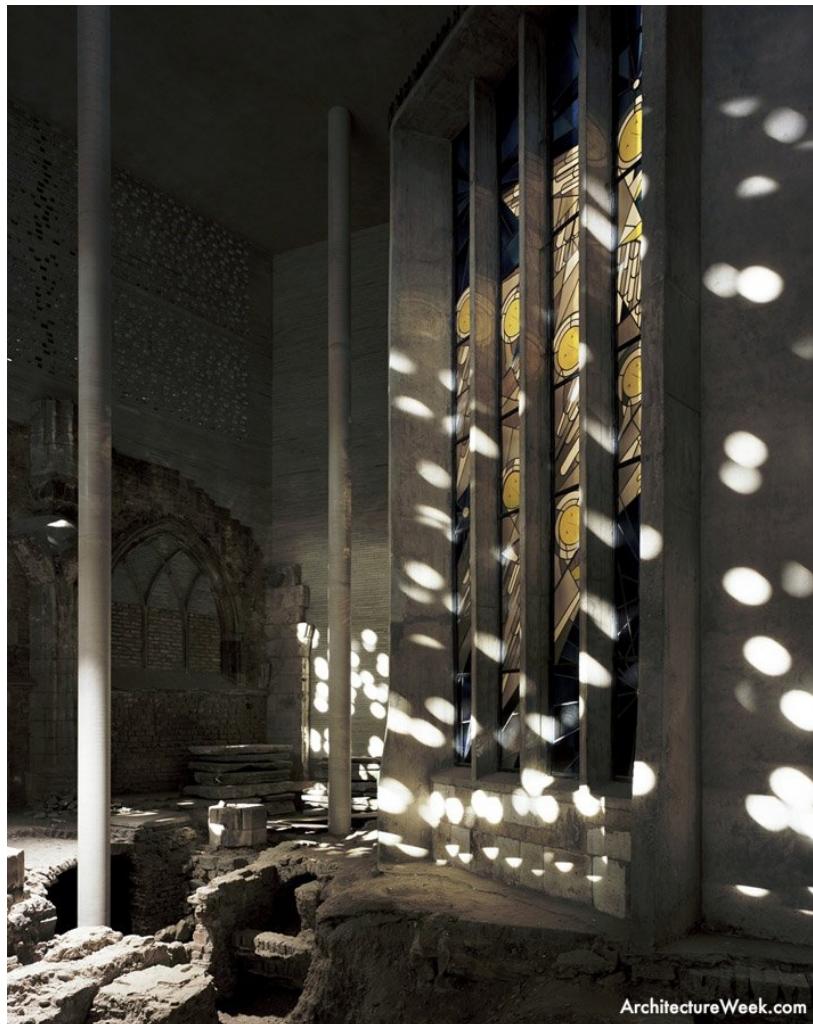
*We need proof.*

*We need proof that architecture exists.*

*We need to spend time in spaces that nourish the soul.*

*Writings contribute, exhibitions explain, film animates life, but in the end architecture is architecture : a cultural vessel that we can hand on to others, proof that it speaks its own spatial language, that is not exclusive but shared, understood physically, intellectually, sensually.*

*Peter Zumthor somehow speaks this language.*



*Contained within the Kolumba Art Museum (2007) are ancient ruins dating back to the Roman Empire, along with the modernist Chapel of Madonna of the Ruins (1950) by Gottfried Böhm. Photo: Hélène Binet*

---

Source: Architecture Week People & Places Blog