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THE AVANT-GARDE OF PERIPHERIES

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of contemporary avant-garde in architecture on the example of selected, relatively “peripheral” mountain areas of Europe: Vorarlberg and Graubünden, where modern architecture has attracted attention of the world over the last 40 years. The assumed goal is to find the answer on how the avant-garde concept has changed and what role peripheral regions play in it today. Analysis based on the literature search and case studies proves that the 20th century division into avant-garde centre and arrière-garde periphery is not valid today anymore; alike avant-garde faithful to the idea of progress. The modern alpine architecture captivated the world’s attention with its sensuality, rationalism and natural simplicity – its return to elementary values and the idea of “building simply”.

Keywords: avant-garde, alpine architecture, idea of “building simply”, peripheries

Streszczenie:

Artykuł eksploruje koncepcję współczesnej awangardy na przykładzie architektury wybranych obszarów górskich Europy: Vorarlbergu i Gryzonii, których architektura na przestrzeni ostatnich 40 lat zwróciła na siebie uwagę świata. Celem jest odpowiedź na pytanie, jak zmieniła się koncepcja awangardy i jaką rolę w niej pełnią współcześnie rejony peryferyjne. Analiza oparta na badaniach źródłowych oraz studium przypadków wykazała, że XX-wieczny podział na awangardowe centrum i peryferie współcześnie nie istnieje; podobnie jak awangarda, która bezkrytycznie wierząc w idee postępu zrywa z tradycją. Współczesna alpejska architektura urzekła świat swą zmysłowością, racjonalizmem i naturalną prostotą – powrotem do elementarnych wartości oraz idei „prostego budowania”.

Słowa kluczowe: awangarda, architektura alpejska, idea „prostego budowania”, peryferie

What is needed most in architecture today is the very thing that is most needed in life – Integrity. Just as it is in a human being, so integrity is the deepest quality in a building; but it is a quality not much demanded of any buildings since very ancient times when it was natural.

Frank Lloyd Wright, *Integrity: in a house as in individual*, 1954¹

1. INTRODUCTION

While rivers have always served as natural routes fostering settlement development, mountain ranges used to play role of natural borders and have long remained on the periphery of European civilization. Before the development of roads and railways when the Alps began to function

¹ F.L. Wright, *The Natural house*, Pitman, London 1971, p. 129.

in European culture as a “meeting place” (initially for the intellectual elite and over time as a destination for mass tourism), it had been long perceived as a peripheral area, a border zone – a defensive “wall” protecting against the others. The definition of the Alps as “a wall” built by nature to separate Italy from France and Germany could still be found in Johan Heinrich Zadler Encyclopaedia published in the mid-18th century. Therefore, though the settlement in the alpine valleys developed along the main trade routes since the earliest times, other mountain areas remained for a long time undeveloped and wild “mountain wastelands” covered by primeval forest till the early Middle Ages.

The sublime and wild mountain peripheries finally “discovered” in the 18th century were soon framed in the romantic regional picturesqueness and recognized as ramparts of national values. They later became a field of avant-garde activities in the architecture of the 19th and 20th centuries which took place mostly in local centres and growing mountain resorts. Then, in the second half of the 20th century, in response to overwhelming globalization and the crisis of avant-garde in its liberating progressive form, the architecture of peripheral regions has been noticed with its potential “to cultivate a resistant, identity-giving culture while at the same time having discreet recourse to universal technique”² and could act as “a bridge” over which the humanist architecture of the future could cross³.

The concept of *critical regionalism* coined by Greek architects has become one of the key ones in contemporary architecture. It has been popularized mainly thanks to Kenneth Frampton, who presented it in the opposition to the concept of an avant-garde, i.e. as critical *arrière-garde*, *architecture of resistance*. *The bridge* has taken the form of a military rampart in Frampton’s theory.

Over the time, the mountain areas perceived as peripheral have yet become not only the development accelerator for the new timber technologies, but also an inspiration for the contemporary architecture all over the world. Giving example of architecture, which is simple, functional, sensual, contextual and integral.

To this day, many mountain areas located in the very centre of Europe, which had been bypassed by large investments, are still perceived as local peripheries, i.e. *Alpine fallows, zones of decline and slow exhaustion*⁴. A large part of the Swiss canton of Grisons is still seen as such, and until recently the same referred also to the mountainous areas of the Austrian land of Vorarlberg⁵. At present, both these mountain regions, open and well communicated, has become famous for their high-quality contemporary architecture that sets global trends. These examples prove that at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the very concept of the centre and the periphery has changed. The avant-garde can since then develop anywhere today. Open toward the global world peripheries continue local traditions and at the same time become places of creative growth. Their meaning goes far beyond local development as a carrier of contemporary values that nurture local identity and favour human dwelling.

² K. Frampton’s quote concerns the concept of an *arrière-garde* in architecture. K. Frampton, *Towards critical regionalism. Six Points of Resistance Architecture*, “Autoportrait” 2017, n. 2, pp. 11–21.

³ L. Lefaivre, A. Tzonis, *The Grid and the Pathway. An Introduction to the Work of Dimitris and Susana Antonakakis*, “Architecture in Greece” 1981, n. 15, p. 178, after: K. Frampton, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁴ Five types of Swiss landscape have been distinguished in the publication by ETH Studio Basel: metropolitan regions, urban networks, silent zones, alpine resorts and alpine wastelands (Ger. *Alpine Brachen*). See: R. Diener, J. Herzog, M. Meili, P. de Meuron, Ch. Schmid, *Die Schweiz: Ein städtebauliches Portrait*, ETH Studio Basel, Basel 2006.

⁵ In both regions there are also highly urbanized zones located i.a. along the Rhine as well as famous mountain resorts such as St. Moritz or Davos.

2. NATURALLY SELF-EVIDENT CONSTRUCTION

Simple and compact forms of traditional mountain constructions, shaped in response to the harsh conditions, blended harmoniously with the landscape, matching the local composition of forms and colours (Ill. 1–4). The role of these first shelters, huts and houses was to separate an inhabited friendly shelter from the vast and dangerous mountain space.

The scattering of buildings between mountain pastures and valleys corresponded with migratory, pastoral lifestyle. Simplicity, austerity and modesty were most fully expressed in pastoral architecture, which was devoid of any representative role. The cyclical change of the dwelling place explained certain primitiveness of construction, as well as extreme economics of the means used. The durability of pastoral structures, which had to withstand the harsh conditions throughout the year, was astonishing.



Ill. 1. Lampertschalp in Valsertal, Graubünden, author's photo.

All those forms of highlander architecture resulted from local building culture created by generations who worked with local building materials: mainly stone and wood supplemented with organic materials such as mosses or lichens. They were characterized by precise and specific use of those materials, its optimization in terms of economy and durability, while taking into account their natural properties and aging process. The building materials were reused many times. They were selected according to the function: the main living space was built of wood, the foundation, the basement and the stove were brick-built (often also the kitchen and the hallway in a stone-wooden *Gotthard* type house).



III. 2. Stone huts at the Lampertschalp, Valsertal, Graubünden, author's photo.



III. 3. Log construction buildings in the valley, Graubünden, author's photo.



Ill. 4. The old barn in Valsertal, Graubünden, author's photo.

In a highlander construction, both in the valley houses and in the pastoral huts, utility has always been harmoniously related to aesthetics on the level of form, structure and detail alike. Even in the most ornate highlander houses, attention was drawn to the functionality of the details, which pointed the structural elements. The aesthetic form resulted directly from the adopted structure and functionality, emphasizing the unity and integrity of the whole. The building structure was visible on the outside. Its characteristic simple plan was usually shaped according to the principle of additivity with individual parts, structurally independent of each other, covered with one roof. These primary spaces were focused on the inner life and organized around the fire – a symbol of home life, which defined the house's "sacred" internal space. The domestic, intimate living space of the Alpine *Stube* (Ger.) was always enveloped by warm, fragrant, living wood.

This traditional architecture was extremely pragmatic, logical and obvious. This was evidenced, e.g. by the house orientation with small windows directed towards the south, spacious attic collecting warm air, enclosure with additional chambers (or even layered with firewood) from the side of the dominant winds. Efforts were made to achieve the highest possible comfort with the minimal use of resources. The beauty of these forms was, in a way, "hidden" it resulted from the harmonious integrity, the natural sense of proportion and the natural, inherent ability to create useful and beautiful things.

Beauty, picturesqueness, have become categories assigned by people from the city. The intimate and authentic relationship of the highlanders to their homes, marked by harsh nature just like themselves, followed the path of tradition understood as an inner truth. The tradition of highlander architecture, which fascinated newcomers from the city, turned out to be a difficult path to follow, where the inner truth was soon replaced with slogans about vernacular style⁶.

⁶ Reference to A. Loos essay "Heimatkunst" from 1912, translated into English as "Vernacular Art": *Instead of following deceitful catchphrases such as "Heimatkunst", if one could in the end return*

3. BETWEEN THE ARRIÈRE-GARDE AND THE AVANT-GARDE – SHAPING THE IDEA OF MOUNTAIN ARCHITECTURE

The way we perceive today the mountains and mountain architecture has been significantly influenced by Romanticism. Until the mid-18th century the mountain realm, studied only by close scientific elite, were rarely considered as a main subject for any art creation. The change in perception of the mountains in Europe have come with a pre-romantic fascination with wild nature, hence also with sublime, wild mountains and highlander's culture of free people living in harmony with nature. This perspective was first expressed in the poem by Albrecht von Haller *The Alps* (1732) and later in the novel by Jean Jacques Rousseau *Julie, or The New Heloise* (1761). Whereas in Poland, the mountain theme was brought into focus in the mid-19th century in works of Seweryn Goszczyński, Stanisław Witkiewicz and others.

Since then, the mountains began to be perceived through the prism of the highlander culture “through the eyes of the people who inhabited them”⁷. By the beginning of the 19th century, the beauty of the mountain landscape became favourite painting and literary theme. The “outsider” perspective has become dominant. Over time, the very concept of “beauty” itself has also changed, encompassing what is sublime and majestic, fearful and fascinating, eternal and unlimited, mysterious and strange, amorphous and contradictory, and finally, also picturesque. Traveling to the mountains became highly fashionable among the European elite blinded by the Alps, and in particular by Switzerland in the first place – considered the most romantic region of the world.

The wild mountains of Europe, “discovered” by the Romantic writers began to play a culture-creating role. They were transformed into concepts overgrown with cliché images, patterns and myths. On this basis both the Alpine and the Tatra mountains “reinvented traditions” were created, which soon began to take form of a *Swiss chalet* or *Tyrolean house* (Ill. 5–6), and in the Tatras *Zakopane Style villa*. The changes that have taken place with the development of tourism, industrialization and commercialization of mountain areas have given rise to new forms of construction. Gradually, along with the crisis of agricultural pastoral culture and the development of mass tourism, the highlanders' regions have become a tourist attraction manifested in architecture, often in the form of superficial folk stylization. The regional architecture – sentimental and nostalgic, shaped by clichés, has been dominated by an aesthetic form, rich in ornamentation, stereotyped, not necessarily integrated with the building structure and function. Dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, the mass production of the so-called *Swiss chalets* made for tourists (worldwide) is a good example of this process. An interesting publication published in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century can be found on this subject (Ill. 6)⁸. Although some avant-garde tendencies emerged

to the one truth – which I have always proclaimed as tradition. See: Loos A. *Vernacular Art*, in: Safran Y., Wang W. (ed.), *The Architecture of Adolf Loos: An Arts Council Exhibition*. Precision Press, 1985, p. 113, after: E. Branscome, *Giving Voice to a Building: A Critical Analysis of Adolf Loos's Landhaus Khuner*, “ARENA” Journal of Architectural Research, 2020, 5(1): 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ajar.186> (access: 16.06.2022).

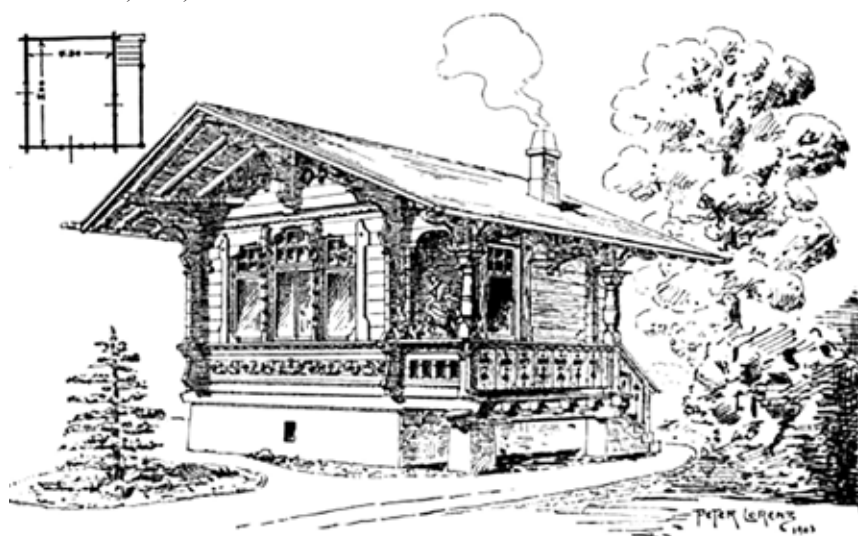
⁷ J.G. Pawlikowski, *Z dziejów poezji Tatrzańskiej*, “Wierchy” 1934, XII, pp. 1–33, after: J. Kolbuszewski, *Tatry i górale w literaturze polskiej*, Zakład Narodowy im Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1992, p. XVII.

⁸ W.S.B. Dana, *The Swiss Chalet Book. An Elegant Guide to Architecture and Design*, The William T. Comstock Co., New York 1913.

within regional architecture – revolutionary work of Witkiewicz and Zakopane avant-garde may serve as an example – regionalism mainly assumed *arrière-garde* position. Over the past two hundred years, regionalism has taken on many different faces: sentimental, romantic, nationalist, critical, or responsive and reflective.



Ill. 5. Picturesqueness – *The Tyrolean house*, from: Seifert E., *Das Echte Haus im Gau Tirol-Vorarlberg*, Innsbruck, 1943, ill. 46.



Ill. 6. *The Swiss Chalet* advertised as the summer house chalet, produced by *Parquet et Châlet Fabrik*, drawing by P. Lorenz (1903), from: Dana W.S.B., *op. cit.*, p. 46.

At the opposite pole to the *Heimatschutz* architecture the idea of vanguard modern mountain architecture (*Alpine architecture*) has emerged in the beginning of the 20th century in line with the forthcoming antithesis between tradition and avant-garde. The first use of this concept is associated with the publication of a utopian, poetic vision by Bruno Taut⁹, created in response to the First World War. The architect referred to the liberating idea of *the glass architecture* – inspired by nature modern forms of crystalline structures designed to complement the mountain landscape and transforming it into an expressionist, fantastic cultural landscape. Taut's utopian vision has marked the new direction, shaping largely the idea of contemporary mountain architecture: the symbiosis of nature and artistic creation.

From the beginning, when these two concepts of regional and avant-garde art were taking shape, people searched for *a bridge* to connect the two opposites. “There is the paradox: how to become modern and at the same time return to sources”¹⁰ – debated Paul Ricoeur (later quoted by Frampton in the 1980s.) However, there have been many attempts to answer the dilemma even before Ricoeur and the 1960s.

One of the first attempts was made by Adolf Loos; initially in the form of a critical polemic with the dominant style of Art Nouveau and Heimatkunst, then forming response in the form of an architectural work completed in 1930. Designed by him villa *Landhaus Khuner* in Payerbach (Ill. 7–8), which despite the use of traditional materials and log construction, turned out to be almost a century ahead of its time and still looks contemporary today.

Similar attempts were made in the Polish mountains in the beginning of the 20th century, to give modernist architecture created in the context of mountain cultural landscape more familiar aspect. Thus, in the spirit of maintaining material unity, traditional materials such as stone and wood were used to give more local and original character to the modernist structures. An example of unique work that was created in Podhale at that time is *Jan Kasprówicz Mausoleum* in Harenda (1927–1933) designed by Karol Stryjeński with the features of Art Deco. In the 1930s, these experiments led to the creation of mountain architecture in the so-called free functionalism or neoregionalism. In the Polish mountains, these attempts were represented i.a. in the project of the cable car station with the meteorological observatory at Kasprowy Wierch summit designed by Anna and Andrzej Kudelscy (1936) or the cable car station at Gubałówka by Władysław Stokowski (1938) with a restaurant designed together with Romanowicz, Szwemin, Hryniewicz, Kotyński and Szparkowski (1938). In the Alpine area, this trend was even more present, e.g. in the works of Carlo Mollino.

4. IDEA OF A “NEW SIMPLICITY” IN BUILDING ON SELECTED ALPINE EXAMPLES

Over the past decades, when contemporary architecture became more and more complex and complicated, there has been developed, especially in the Alpine area, an opposed trend of the “new simplicity” merging both: the roots of architecture and new technologies alike.

⁹ B. Taut, *Alpine Architektur: in 5 Teilen und 30 Zeichnungen*, Folkwang-Verl., Hagen 1919, <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.29958> (access: 21.06.2022).

¹⁰ P. Ricoeur, *Universal Civilization and National Cultures* (1965), in: V.B. Canizaro (ed.) *Architectural Regionalism. Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity, and Tradition*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2007, p. 47.



Ill. 7. Villa *Landhaus Khuner* in Payerbach by Adolf Loos, phot. M. Gerlach, from: Branscome E., *op. cit.*, Ill. 2.



Ill. 8. Villa *Landhaus Khuner* in Payerbach by Adolf Loos, phot. M. Gerlach, from: Branscome E., *op. cit.*, Ill. 3.

In 2013, in Lustenau (Vorarlberg, Austria), an office building called 2226 was built, designed by the Baumshlager & Eberle studio, to serve as its headquarters. The basic idea behind this extraordinary building, which at the same time is meant to be an architectural manifesto, was: to achieve the highest possible level of comfort using the least amount of technology and the lowest level of structure complexity. A brick building with massive walls almost 80 cm thick provides a high level of comfort without the use of heating, air conditioning or mechanical ventilation systems. The constant interior temperature in the range of 22–26°C is maintained thanks to the heat generated by people, equipment and lighting. The sensor system integrated with the windows ventilation panel openings is responsible for maintaining the appropriate temperature and climate in the interior, including the CO₂ level.

Simple and compact, the office building refers to the very core of the architectural tradition of this Alpine region, which signifies architecture proven in harsh conditions: simple, coherent, integral, sensual.

*Naturally obvious*¹¹ (Ger. *Selbstverständlich*) – is the term that Dietmar Eberle, the co-author of this building-manifesto, uses to characterise the old Vorarlberg houses which have been a source of inspiration for him.

This idea of a *simple building* as an alternative to houses filled with artificial intelligence and technology has also been developed for 10 years at the Technical University of Munich in a research group led by an architect Florian Nagler. As a part of the research project three prototype buildings in Bad Aibling were built with massive structure of monolithic brick, concrete and wood construction. Unlike today's composite systems, this simple construction is designed in such a way that the materials can be easily disassembled and segregated, which is essential for a later recycling.

4.1. "VORALBERGER BAUSCHULE"

The previously quoted Austrian architect Dietmar Eberle, in the 1980s, cocreated a small community of young *Vorarlberg builders* (Ger. *Vorarlberger Baukünstler*), operating outside the Austrian Chamber of Architects. It was a group of young graduates who, having returned to their homeland, designed and built modern, simple, economic houses¹².

Alike former inhabitants of this Alpine region, they followed the principle of *simple building* (Ger. *einfach bauen*) i.e. the use of the simplest possible building methods. The choice of wood was not accidental; wood was economical, enabled quick realisation, enabled participation both investors (usually young families) and designers themselves in the construction process (with some support of local carpenters). They leaned on the rich tradition of the local wood-building culture, which despite its long lasting was still seen as controversial at the time¹³. Hence, the works of young architects did not refer to traditional forms and techniques. However, the building material itself determined the continuity of the Alpine wooden building culture. The work of *Vorarlberg builders* has become part of the *new simplicity* (Ger. *Neue Einfachheit*) trend deriving from music.

One of the first realisations designed by four architects from this group (D. Eberle, W. Juen, M. Koch, N. Mittersteiner) was a small multi-family housing estate built in Höchst in 1979 as part of a housing and construction cooperative called *Im Fang*. It was a low-budget architects'

¹¹ D. Eberle, E. Troger, *Baumshlager Eberle Architekten*, Birkhäuser, Basel–Berlin 2021, p. 31.

¹² They referred to the architects of the older generation who had been creating there since the 1960s.

¹³ Due to certain nationalistic meaning given to traditional architecture during the Third Reich.

own investment, which they not only designed but also built themselves based on a wooden structure prepared by a carpenter in just 6 days.

In the early 1990s, thanks to the Viennese exhibition *Einfach bauen – Architektur in Vorarlberg seit 1960*, organized and financed in 1993 by the young *builders* themselves, this peripheral, bottom-up movement gained recognition and attracted attention of international critics¹⁴. Today Vorarlberg region is famous all over the world for its progressive architecture and is seen as one of the regional centres of contemporary architecture in Europe and the world. Realisations designed both by older and younger generations from Vorarlberg, such as: Dietmar Eberle and Carlo Baumschlager, Hermann Kaufmann, Andreas Cukrowicz and Anton Nachbaur-Sturm, Stefan and Bernhard Marte, Jürgen Haller, Gerold Hämmerle and Valentin Tschikof, Elmar Ludescher and Philip Lutz, Bernardo Bader, Juri Troy... and others (Ill. 9–10) attract attention of people all over the world. Certain trends, initiated in Vorarlberg in the last century – such as the fashionable covering of the entire body of the building with a homogeneous coat of traditional shingles (Ger. *Schindeln*) – were first used¹⁵ at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s in local projects by Baumschlager & Eberle Architekten studio. They became an inspiration for architects all over the world and are being repeated all over again, also in the highland of southern Poland, often in the culturally foreign form of Alpine shape shingle (transferred directly from Austrian Alps).

4.2. GRAÜBUNDEN ARCHITECTS – RATIONALISM AND SENSUALISM

Graubünden (Eng. Grisons) is the largest and easternmost canton of Switzerland, bordering Italy, Austria and Liechtenstein. Although Graubünden joined Switzerland only in the 19th century, it contains the oldest Swiss city Chur (Latin Curia), in Roman times located on the route between the cities of northern Italy and Bregenz (Latin Brigantion, now the capital of the federal state of Vorarlberg).

The area of Graubünden is diverse. It covers both the areas of “mountain wastelands” (peripheral valleys such as Val Lumnezia), well-known alpine resorts such as Davos and St. Moritz and more urbanized Rhine valley. The average population density of Graubünden is low, it does not exceed 30 people/km². Paradoxically, this sparsely populated and relatively peripheral Graubünden has become a place where many architectural projects created over the last few decades have attracted the world attention.

Completed in 1996, the new building of *the Thermal Baths* in Vals (Ill. 11) designed by Peter Zumthor (Graubünden resident), made this small Alpine spa town famous. The building set into the slope, made of local slate and concrete, tells the ancient history of this place, which goes back millions of years. The interior of the building becomes like the “interior of the mountain”, in the depths of which the user meanders, following his own path. It is a building that engages, moves, and fosters an intense sensual experience of architecture. The light that seeps through the gaps creates an atmosphere, and the panoramic openings draw users’ attention outside to the beauty of the landscape.

¹⁴ O. Kapfinger, *Architecture in Vorarlberg Since 1980. A Guide to 260 Noteworthy Buildings*, Kunsthau Bregenz, Bregenz 2003.

¹⁵ Concerns buildings other than sacral, which were sometimes traditionally covered with shingles (especially in Polish highlands).



III. 9. The holiday house *Elma Alp*, by H. Kaufmann, Mellau, author's photo.



III. 10. The holiday house *Elma Alp*, by H. Kaufmann, Mellau, author's photo.



III. 11. *The Thermal Bath* in Vals, by P. Zumthor, author's photo.



Ill. 12. *Sogn Benedetg* in Sumvitg chapel by P. Zumthor, detail, author's photo.

Another famous work of this architect, and one of the first realisations that were widely echoed by contemporary architecture critics, was a small chapel *Sogn Benedetg* in Sumvitg, built in 1988. As in the case of the *Thermal Baths*, the chapel was harmoniously placed in the context of a small alpine village. It has a simple and compact form. The formal and sensual aspects are strongly integrated with each other, and the materiality (expressed over the years e.g. through the weathering of wooden shingled wall covering) strengthens the form and vice versa¹⁶ (Ill. 12). The round, lanceolate shape (resulting from the topography of the area threatened by avalanches) gave it the metaphorical meaning of the boat. Although the chapel is almost 40 years old, it seems to have been just recently built. The minimalist simplicity of the form keeps the object up-to-date. It is significant that at the beginning of the 21st century Martin Steinmann used this example of the small Grison chapel to define one of the features of contemporary Swiss architecture, which is to be distinguished by the so-called *Forceful Form* (Fr. *forme forte*)¹⁷ i.e. coherent, integral form, not only internally, but also in relation to the context and landscape.

Among other well-known Zumthor's realizations in Graubünden there are also his contemporary interpretations of the archetype of a wooden alpine house built in a log construction (Ger. *Strickebau*): Haus Luzi in Jenaz (completed in 2002, with active involvement of future residents in the construction process, Ill. 13) and three Zumthor family's own holiday homes in the hamlet of Leis Alp, above Vals (first house built in 2009, Ill. 14). They all represent an interesting example of the continuation of the traditional construction technique by searching for new spatial structures. The living space, which opens to the mountain landscape, is located in between separate, closed box log structures, such as a staircase.

Although the construction technique itself remained essentially the same¹⁸, the logic of the space structure was reversed. A traditional highlander house – a shelter that used to separate closed and safe space from a vast and wild mountain realm, now has panoramic openings to contemplate the mountain landscape from a comfortable, modern interior (Ill. 15).

All the above-mentioned Zumthor's projects, so widely commented on around the world, are located quite peripherally in relatively remote Graubünden valleys, outside the main routes and resorts¹⁹.

An example of even more peripheral architectural interventions are contemporary works by another Graubünden architect, Gion A. Caminada from Vrin, a small town deep in the Val Lumnezia valley, which in the 1980s was threatened with depopulation. Being part of the Pro Vrin Foundation created to save Vrin, in which he was actively involved, Caminada, then a young carpenter and architect, made an attempt to restore the life of the disappearing town. The slogan *Preservation by Design* has become the motto and guideline for all the future ventures.

Starting from 1991, numerous private and public investments (including modernizations and extensions), often in the form of micro-interventions, were implemented within

¹⁶ J. Lucan, M. Steinmann, *Obsessions. Conversation between Jacques Lucan and Martin Steinmann*, in: J. Lucan et al., *A Matter of Art. Contemporary Architecture in Switzerland*, Birkhäuser, Basel 2001, pp. 8–25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* This term, although similar, differs from the concept of “strong form” in Żorawski's theory.

¹⁸ The construction method has been modified to meet modern requirements. An additional layer of thermal insulation is located between the doubled log layers. The wooden elements were prefabricated in the local sawmill and carpentry workshop with the use of numerically controlled machines (CNC).

¹⁹ Only Vals gained a certain popularity thanks to the new Thermal Baths building. The town however retained its intimate character.



Ill. 13. The interiors of the house in Jenaz, by P. Zumthor, author's photo.



Ill. 14. Holiday houses in Leis Alp, Graubünden, by P. Zumthor, author's photo.



Ill. 15. Panoramic opening in the contemporary log construction house in Leis Alp, by P. Zumthor, phot. R. Feiner, from: www.zumthorferienhaeuser.ch.

the existing structure of the village. Residential houses and farm buildings, a communal multi-purpose hall, a mortuary chapel (*Stiva da mort* in Romansh), a sawmill, a slaughterhouse and a butcher's shop were built. The social life of the village revived. The successful revitalization program and the resulting first architectural projects were quickly appreciated and awarded with the prestigious *Wakker Prize*²⁰.

In numerous projects in the last three decades, both in Vrin and in other villages of Val Lumnezia, Caminada usually used a wooden structure, developing and experimenting with the local construction technique (traditional strickebau construction). The use of wood was an obvious solution for the architect in this location, enabling the use of local resources. In the peripheral mountain areas, softwood is still a relatively easily available and cheap material, and the knowledge of craftsmanship is very good. While the export of raw materials exploits local resources, on-site processing and the export of finished products create added value, positively influencing revitalisation processes. Solid wood furniture produced in Vrin, positioned as niche high-quality products, are among others on the equipment of a new boarding school in Disentis (a town located in the nearby Rhine valley).

Perhaps Vrin's population has not doubled over the past three decades, and Vrin may not have regained complete self-sufficiency but is partially supported by government subsidies. Despite this, this bottom-up process of revitalization of a small Alpine village and the projects that arose as a result, became an inspiration for the whole world, proving that peripheral localities are not doomed to marginalization and disappearance. But on the contrary, they can develop and even act as catalysts for changes.

Zumthor and Caminada, both with previous experience in carpentry and heritage protection, are just two representatives of a diverse group of contemporary architects from Graubünden which includes i.a.: Valerio Olgiati, Valentin Bearth and Andrea Deplazes, Marcel and Nicole Caminada, Armando Ruinelli, Andreas and Hans-Jörg Ruch, Mierta and Kurt Lazzarini; and among architects of the younger generation, i.a.: Georg Nickisch and Selena Walder, or Men Duri Arquint. The work of this group is too varied to call it a "school" like e.g. *The Tessin school*. However, some common features still can be noticed in the works of these artists, which, interestingly, also apply to projects located in Graubünden by architects from outside the region, e.g. *Miller & Maranta* studio from Basel, or the young Polish-Swiss studio *Architecture Club* by Paweł Krzemiński and Karolina Sławecka.

The terms *new minimalism*, *new simplicity*, *new sensuality* or *new interiority* all are used to describe contemporary architecture in Graubünden. Its phenomenon was undoubtedly influenced both by the traditions of traditional Alpine building culture (extremely well preserved in the periphery), and by various contemporary trends and tendencies: the continuity of the modernist tradition, Italian and Swiss rationalism and neo-rationalism, *The Tessin school*, brutalism, Swiss minimalism and others.

Contemporary Graubünden architecture, integrated harmoniously in the topography of the Alpine landscape and proven in difficult mountain conditions, stands out internationally for its integrity and minimalism of *Forceful Form*, precise and specific use of traditional materials such as stone and wood (also in their contemporary forms, such as concrete or CLT boards, or when one of the materials is visible only as a trace resulting from the construction

²⁰ In 1998, Vrin received an award from the Swiss Heritage Society for the careful integration of new buildings into the historic structure of the village, maintaining its unique character of the cultural landscape of the Alpine valley.

process, e.g. in the form of a formwork imprint). Typical for this architecture are apparently simple but actually demanding design details made in close contact with local artisans and craftsmen. Just like the old alpine buildings, these modern realizations enchant with their logic and simplicity as well as the sensual quality of the space. Leaning both on the wealth of local tradition and the knowledge of craftsmen, contemporary Graubünden architecture has become that *bridge* that Ricoeur and Frampton were looking for.

4.3. SIMPLE BUILDING IDEA IN THE CONTEMPORARY ALPINE ARCHITECTURE – THE MASSIVE SHELTER ARCHETYPE

Among the noteworthy contemporary Alpine realizations there can be found many references to the archetype of a massive mountain shelter, characterised by homogeneous, massive monolithic construction techniques in stone and wood. At the same time, a clear tendency can be noticed to overcome this archetype, to combine the opposites: the closure and the openness, by introducing panoramic openings and a “new” dominant material – glass. Modern massive structures, both in timber (log construction and CLT) and concrete (considered as “contemporary stone”), fascinate architects with their homogeneity and simplicity (sometimes only superficial), material truth and authenticity, individuality and naturalness expressed in the forming process made visible. The stereotomic nature of a *hollow stone*²¹ or a “wooden sculptured block” lines with the topos of the house as a shelter, referring to the archetypal forms of primitive constructions in mountain areas: grottoes, primitive stone shelters and shepherd’s huts.

The idea of a massive monolith is kept also in interiors that are often made with the same homogeneous material. It gives impression of being in a hollow mass – carved from a large lump of wood, hollowed in rock, or made of a combination of the two²². This idea of monolith, in particular of a building as a rock sculpture, is so attractive to architects that the modern concrete technologies are being realized in areas of traditional wooden building culture, e.g. in Vorarlberg.

It goes without saying that the monolithic solid wood and stone constructions, which once served as structure, insulation and facade covering, no longer meet the current standards. They turn out to be uneconomic and therefore require the search for new solutions. Although the natural characteristics of the materials remain essentially unchanged, the technology and methods of application are changing. Therefore, it is necessary to reinterpret traditional techniques and methods of construction, finding new metaphors for construction elements.

For the new wooden structures, both massive²³ and frame, the idea of a monolith is maintained by simplifying the form and maintaining the material homogeneity on the entire facade (including roof)²⁴ and in the interiors as well (e.g. using massive CLT panels as a visible finish layer).

²¹ The “hollow stone” metaphor for concrete was used by Louis Kahn at the construction site of The Salk Institute (1966).

²² The combination of wood and stone was used in the old wooden shepherd’s shelters sometimes partially made of a standing rock or in the Gotthard type stone – wooden houses or wooden Engadin stiva enclosed with a stone wall alike.

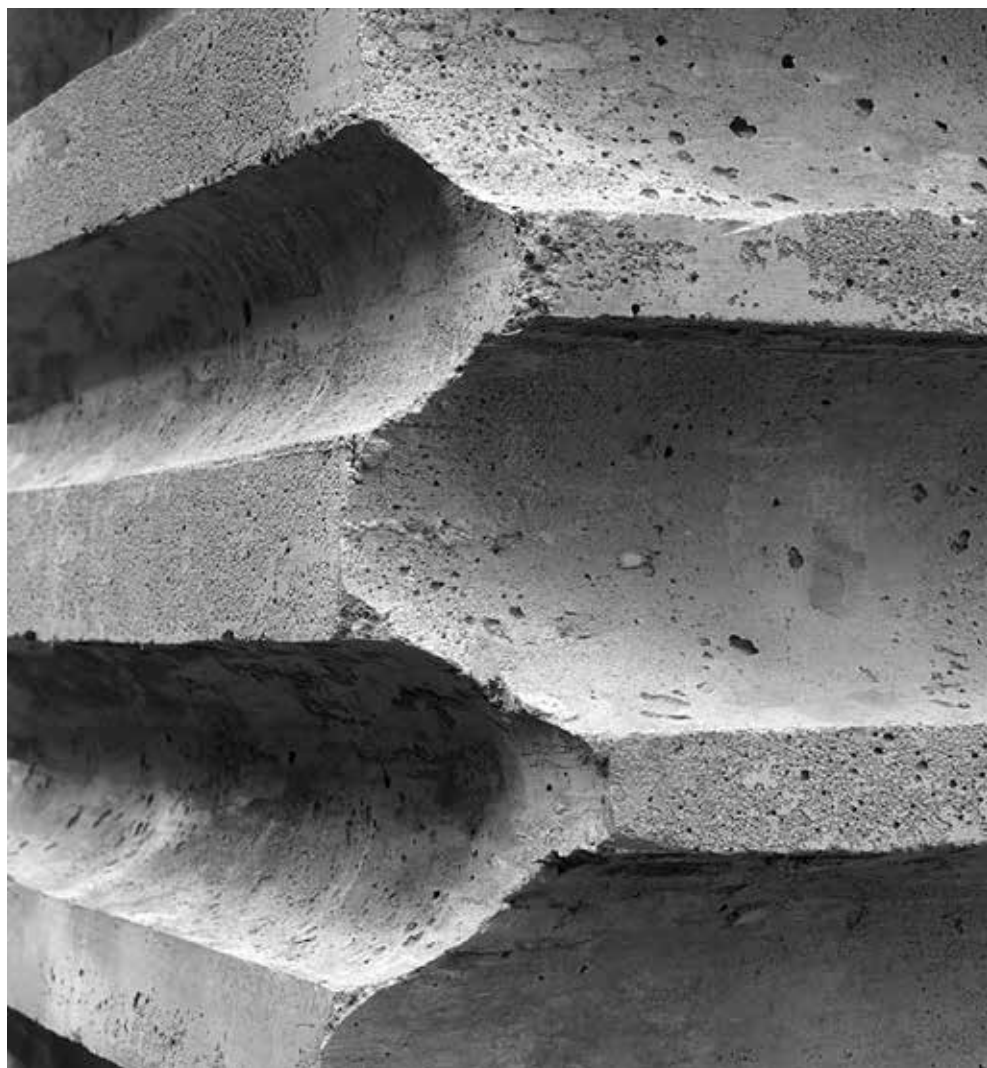
²³ Traditional wooden log structures of today (which usually have three layers with an internal insulation) and modern ones (e.g. using large-format massive CLT boards).

²⁴ Or at least keeping one colour for the whole building’s shell.

In many contemporary projects around the world, this trend is imitated with the use of a more common masonry structure made of various types of blocks hidden inside a wooden “dress”.

Whereas in case of contemporary concrete structures, three basic solutions can be distinguished: a three-layer wall with insulation in between, two-layer wall with internal insulation and a monolithic wall made of lightweight concrete with eventual heating system which can be led under its internal surface giving a pleasant effect of a sun warm-up stone.

This monolithic lightweight concrete wall has been of particular interest among Alpine architects over the past decades. Perhaps due to the materialization of the idea of a monolith, a homogeneous mass that is in accordance with the mountain architecture archetypes.



Ill. 16. Facade detail of the holiday house *Refugi Lieptgas*, Flims, Graubünden, by S. Walder and G. Nickisch, phot. N. Walder, from: Reisch D. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 90

One of the first residential projects in lightweight concrete in Graubünden is the *Meuli House*, located on the edge of the village of Fläsch in the Rhine Valley close to the border with Vorarlberg (2001), designed by Bearth & Deplazes studio.

Monolithic walls made of lightweight concrete without additional insulating layer (but with an integrated heating system) were used in another extremely interesting Grisons project of a small holiday hut in Flims called *Refugi Lieptgas* (2012, Ill. 16), designed by Selina Walder and Georg Nickisch. The wooden log structure of the old hut intended for demolition and demounted after works' completion was used as the formwork for the concrete monolith.

A similar solution of massive, monolithic concrete walls with thickness up to 80 cm without additional insulation was adopted in the multi-family building *Casa da Pégn* (2013, Ill. 17) by Atelier Strut and Peter Kunz, also located in Flims.

This construction of monolithic concrete walls which enables the form sculptural shape refers well to the character of the old Engadin houses with deep-set splayed windows and is therefore often used in the Engadin Valley (located in the southern part of Graubünden), e.g. in the construction of a holiday home in Vnà (2007, Ill. 18) designed by Andreas Fuhrmann and Gabrielle Hächler (AFGH, Zurich).

Although the simplicity of the monolithic structure fascinates architects it has become an economically and functionally unprofitable solution today. It seems that this technology used in the last decades by the Swiss in contemporary residential buildings in mountain areas, is now becoming only a peculiar phenomenon – comments the increase of required thickness of the wall in this technology from 60 to 80 cm and more²⁵.

Nevertheless, the concept of a simple monolithic construction – realization of *the simple building* idea following the old, simple and self-evident archetypal buildings – is still being explored and successfully implemented no further than in neighbouring Vorarlberg and Bavaria at the aforementioned Technical University in Munich.

More common solution used today is a three-layer wall, which in the end gives a similar monolithic effect. In this construction, i.a. the holiday home named *Shelter* (Ger. *Schutzhütte*) in Laterns (2011) in Vorarlberg was made, designed by the Austrian studio Marte.Marte Architekten. The house resembles an abstract monolithic sculpture with a rocky texture of concrete walls.

The same three-layer walls were also used in *The Longhin Hotel* on Maloja Pass in the Engadin Valley designed by Mierla & Kurt Lazzarini Architekten (2014), which takes the form of a huge rock block with a rough texture on the facade made of washed architectural concrete. *The Rifugio Bregaglia* by Ruch & Partner Architekten from St. Moritz is another example of a holiday home (2014, Ill. 19), build in concrete situated on a slope at the edge of Viscosoprano village in the Val Bregaglia (southern Graubünden). Its concrete three-layered walls were made in-situ and contain a mixture of aggregate from the local rocks. The sculptured form and the washed facade surface with a greenish tint typical for the region give the house an appearance of a huge, inhabited boulder.

More cost-effective solution (but still an expensive one comparing to popular masonry) is a two-layer wall type with an outer structural wall of concrete and an inner layer of thermal insulation (usually, but not always, covered with plaster). Such a simplified solution was used i.a. in the aforementioned *House Meuli House* in Fläsch and in the building

²⁵ A. Deplazes (ed.), *Constructing Architecture. Materials Processes Structures. A Handbook*, Birkhäuser, Basel 2013, p. 143.



Ill. 17. The multifamily house *Casa da Pégn*, by Atelier Strut and Peter Kunz, Flims, Graubünden, phot. C. Luperto, from: Reisch D. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 74



Ill. 18. The holiday home in Vnà, Graubünden, by Andreas Fuhrmann and Gabrielle Hächler, phot. J. Valentin, from: Reisch D. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 30



Ill. 19. The holiday house *Rifugio Bregaglia*, Graubünden, by Ruch & Partner, phot. F. Simonetti, from: Reisch D. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 69



Ill. 20. The holiday house *Arka* in Brenna, Poland, by Robert Konieczny, author's photo.

of the ETHZ training centre at the Villa Garbald in Castasegna in The Val Bregaglia, designed by the Miller & Maranta (2004), whose washed concrete facade matches the old rough walls of the garden and other nearby houses. In Poland, this technology was used by Robert Konieczny in the design of his own holiday home *Arka* in Brenna (2015, Ill. 20) with a smooth facade of exposed concrete made in-situ from local cement and aggregate.

The mutual relationship between timber and concrete used in these Alpine projects draws the attention. It can have a form of an imprint of wooden formwork on a concrete wall (including the negative form of a non-existent wooden log structure), some structural elements like a self-supporting core²⁶, or more often the interior finishing elements and details. Wooden elements, such as an interior cladding, floor, loggias, doors and windows, create a pleasant contrast with concrete structure, bringing some coziness and comfort. Perhaps the current revival of the raw, brutalist concrete in Alpine residential architecture is partially related to its close relationship with wood, which is so fashionable today.

The above-mentioned examples present various ways of shaping the form and surface of modern alpine architecture: from a simplified archetypal and abstract body with smooth walls to sculptural, cubic or irregular forms with a rough texture resembling enormous inhabited rock boulders. Interestingly, the use of in-situ made concrete with added aggregate from local rocks makes the “contemporary stone” even more local than prefabricated and modified modern wood with elements produced in factories located hundreds of kilometres away from the construction site.

5. CONCLUSION

From today’s perspective, it can certainly be said that these Alpine projects, which have been created since the 1980s, were in the avant-garde world, setting new directions in architecture. Since then, they have also been imitated many times by creators around the world.

These relatively peripheral regions in Europe prove that the 20th-century division into the centre (where the avant-garde takes place) and the periphery (designated to the arrière-garde) no longer exists. Likewise, there is no longer any avant-garde that breaks with tradition due to its uncritical faith in the idea of progress. On the contrary, there is a contemporary avant-garde which seems to draw its strength from the past. “The present blows from the past”²⁷ – writes Elisa Pegorin about contemporary architecture. In the 21st century, avant-garde architecture is often created in the periphery, such as remote alpine villages, which have retained its traditional tissue and structure, such as localities in Val Lumnezia or Val Bregaglia in Graubünden. In these peripheries, the avant-garde has found inspiration in reaching to the roots and elementary foundations of architecture i.e.: sensuality of materials, certain simplicity of solutions associated with traditional construction techniques: monomateriality and the ease of recycling, compactness... and integrity, so much needed today.

The discussed examples of Alpine architecture from Graubünden and Voralberg remind us of the importance of tradition, integrity, authenticity and simplicity in contemporary architecture and the role of multi-sensory experience.

Tradition is understood here as the continuation of the building culture constantly created anew²⁸. Integrity, in turns, signifies the innermost feature of a building, which cannot be put

²⁶ In many wooden structure buildings, the core with a bathroom and a kitchen is made in a reinforced concrete structure e.g. Haus Luzi by Zumthor. Similarly, although less frequently, there happens to be a self-supporting core in a wooden log construction within concrete construction house. e.g. a house in Trin-Mulin by Schneller Caminada Architekten (2016).

²⁷ E. Pegorin, *Dal passato soffia il presente. The Present blows from the Past*, “Officina” 2021, nr 34, p. 84.

²⁸ Reference to P. Ricoeur essay *Universal Civilization and National Cultures* (1965). See: P. Ricoeur, *Universal Civilization and National Cultures*, in: V.B. Canizaro (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 43 –53.

on and taken off like a coat, and therefore can only be changed as a result of transformation originating from within²⁹. Furthermore, the true simplicity (but not plainness) is meant here as “a clean, direct expression of that essential quality of the thing which is in the nature of the thing itself”³⁰.

These values, which contemporary architecture often lacks, give these Alpine projects the features of the contemporary avant-garde. Authentic, natural, organic simplicity, which allows, as in music, to create a symphony out of the simplest sounds, requires nowadays, as in the times of Frank Lloyd-Wright, quite a lot of courage: “It is now valiant to be simple”³¹.

Finally, it should be noted, however, that the projects that are being created today in Graubünden and Vorarlberg are not as economical, pragmatic and simple as they were four decades ago. The seemingly simple houses that are currently built in Vorarlberg are nowadays often technologically advanced intelligent passive houses, and the Grisons projects, enchanting with their simplicity and sensuality of monolithic shelters, are in fact very expensive and luxurious. One can risk a statement that the idea of “simple building” has already become a fashionable trend and aesthetics nowadays, and the real avant-garde, which is stepping in the future, perhaps should be already looked for elsewhere.

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²⁹ F.L. Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 129–130.

³⁰ F.L. Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 187.

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