

Alpine iconodulia

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## **Tra terra e infinito. Architetture alpine per la spiritualità**

Entre terre et infini. Architecture alpine pour la spiritualité / Zwischen Erde und Unendlichkeit. Alpenarchitektur für Spiritualität / Med zemljo in nebom. Alpske arhitekture in duhovnost / Between earth and infinity. Alpine architecture for spirituality



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## 2. ESPERIENZE CONTEMPORANEE









# Alpine iconodulia

At the end of the Eighties the global recognition of Alpine architecture coincided with a profound shift in architectural media, particularly journalism. Photographic images played an increasing role in the reproduction of architecture in journals. In this overview, the important position of some sacred works is discussed, as they competed for the covers of renowned magazines, ultimately becoming icons of the new Alpine architecture. The article analyses the reasons behind this success by studying three emblematic cases in the Central Alps: the Chapels Sogn Benedetg by Peter Zumthor, St. Nepomuk by Christian Kerez in the Graubünden, and the Salgenreute Chapel by Bernardo Bader in Vorarlberg.

## **Matteo Tempestini**

He is an architect and PhD fellow in the “Architecture. History and Project” program at Politecnico di Torino, where he is researching contemporary building culture in Alpine territories. He is also member of the IAM research centre (Istituto di Architettura Montana).

## **Keywords**

*Contemporary architecture, sacred architecture, professional journals, architectural photography, Alps.*

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**Opening image**

The Salgenreute Chapel (2016) by Bernardo Bader in Krumbach, Vorarlberg (photo Alexander Schidlbauer).

**Fig. 1**

The Sogn Benedetg Chapel (1988) by Peter Zumthor in Sumvitg, Graubünden (photo Matteo Tempestini).

The profound shift in the subjects of architecture journals, debased to “images, news, impressions and names flashing” (Burckhardt, Steiner, 1997) in the Eighties, coincided with a growing number of publications concerning architecture in Alpine territories. The glossy pages of periodicals hosted architecture from the Central Alps, such as those from the Swiss Graubünden or Austrian Vorarlberg. In this overview I will discuss some sacred buildings that played an outstanding role, as they competed for the covers of renowned magazines, and ultimately ended up becoming icons of contemporary Alpine architecture.

The history of the representation of contemporary Alpine architecture began in 1985 with the exhibition *Drei Fotoserien* by the Swiss photographer Hans

Danuser, presented at the Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur. The shots on display, which syntactically break down nuclear power plants and genetic laboratories into photographic fragments (Ursprung, 2017), attracted the attention of a couple of architects, Annalisa and Peter Zumthor. The latter hired the young photographer to capture some of his projects for an exposition held three years later, in October 1988, at the Architekturgalerie in Lucerne. The exhibition, entitled *Partituren und Bilder*, presented the projects of the Shelters of the Roman ruins in Chur, Zumthor’s professional studio in Haldenstein and a small chapel in Sogn Benedetg, a hamlet of the municipality of Sumvitg in the Graubünden Surselva. This last building, thanks to the collaboration between Zumthor and Danuser, who separated the

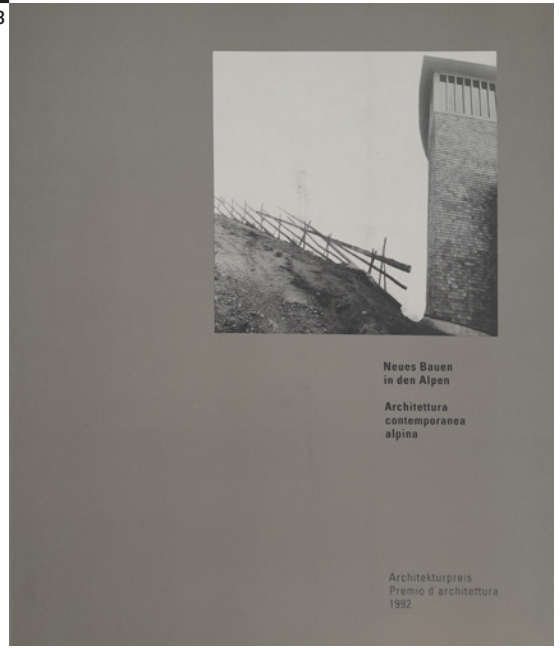






**Fig. 2**  
The cover of *The Architectural Review* issue 1127, 1991, representing Sogn Benedetg Chapel with a photo by Heinrich Helfenstein.

**Fig. 3**  
The cover of the first edition catalogue of the prize *Neues Bauen in den Alpen*, 1992, with a photo by Hans Danuser.



**Fig. 4**  
Interior view of Sogn Benedetg Chapel (photo Matteo Tempestini).

Chapel into smaller elements submerged in a sea of haze with the lens of his camera, became one of the most representative works of both the designer and Swiss architecture at the end of the 20th century. Shortly thereafter, the photos of the Chapel reached

the editorial offices of the most influential professional journals. In November 1989 *Domus* published the project, bolstered by a theoretical text on Zumthor's oeuvre by Martin Steinmann. The photos were taken by Heinrich Helfenstein, who took



“clear images”, a stark contrast to Danuser’s previously published foggy shots. A year later, in December 1990, it was *Ottagono* that next published Danuser’s photos. The following month, in January 1991, the Chapel graced a cover for the first time, once again in a photo by Helfenstein, in a monographic issue of *The Architectural Review* featuring the architecture of northern Switzerland. In the following years the Chapel continued to enjoy success both regionally, winning the *Gute Bauten Graubünden* prize in 1994, and internationally, being included in several international publications: in number 299 of *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* in 1995, and in issue 316 of the Japanese magazine *a+u* in 1997. *a+u* also dedicated a monographic issue to Zumthor in February 1998, and it is here that the Chapel returns to the cover, with a shot from Shigeo Ogawa emulating the misty and esoteric style of Danuser’s images from ten years earlier. The fog, acting as a “spatial figure” (Preston, 2008), is thus inextricably linked to the spirituality and atmosphere of the architecture of Zumthor (2006), considered more an Alpine “shaman” rather than an architect (Davey, 1998).

Meanwhile, the first edition of the *Neues Bauen in den Alpen* award took place in 1992. The South Tyrolean association Sesto Cultura organised the award, which contributed to forming the “cultural construct” of Alpine architecture (Reichlin, 1995). The winner of the first edition was the chapel designed by Zumthor in Sogn Benedetg, completed in 1988. The catalogue’s cover featured a photograph of the cusp that forms the lemniscate form of the small ec-



clesiastical structure, immersed in fog and flanked by a roughly hewn wooden fence. The photo is one of Danuser’s and dates back to the series made for the *Partituren und Bilder* show. Thus, the chapel became an icon of the new Alpine architecture, which, throughout the Nineties and part of the early 21st century, synecdochely coincided with the architectural production of Graubünden, from the point of view of architecture publications. In this regard, number 14 of the Spanish journal *2G*, published in 2000 and entitled *Building in the Mountains*, is entirely consecrated to the architecture of the Swiss region. The cover features a small monolithic construction in reinforced concrete that stands out against the lush mountain landscape. A small cross above a rectangular threshold hole on the main façade reveals its sacred function. Once inside, a crack on the back wall just a few centimetres wide allows light to enter but blocks visitors from gazing out towards the peaks. This is the Chapel of St. Nepomuk in Oberrealta, built in 1992 based on a design by Christian Kerez. Once again, a small sacred Alpine construction conquered the cover of an international magazine. *Building in the mountains* was published when the international recognition of Graubünden architecture reached its peak, also driven by *Neues Bauen in den Alpen*, which hosted its third edition the previous year. This notoriety culminated with Zumthor winning the *Pritzker Prize* in 2009.

In 2010, four years after the definitive end of the *Neues Bauen in den Alpen* award, the institution of a new award dedicated to sustainable construction in the Alps, called *Constructive Alps*, marked a par-

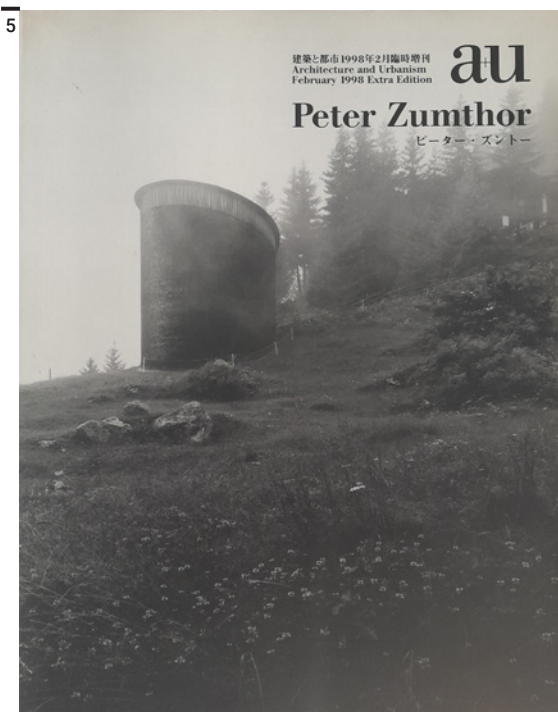
**Fig. 5**  
The cover of the special issue of *a+u*, february 1998, representing Sogn Benedetg Chapel in the fog with a photo by Shigeo Ogawa.

**Fig. 6**  
The cover of *2G* n. 14, published in 2000, representing St. Nepomuk Chapel by Christian Kerez. The photo is taken by himself.

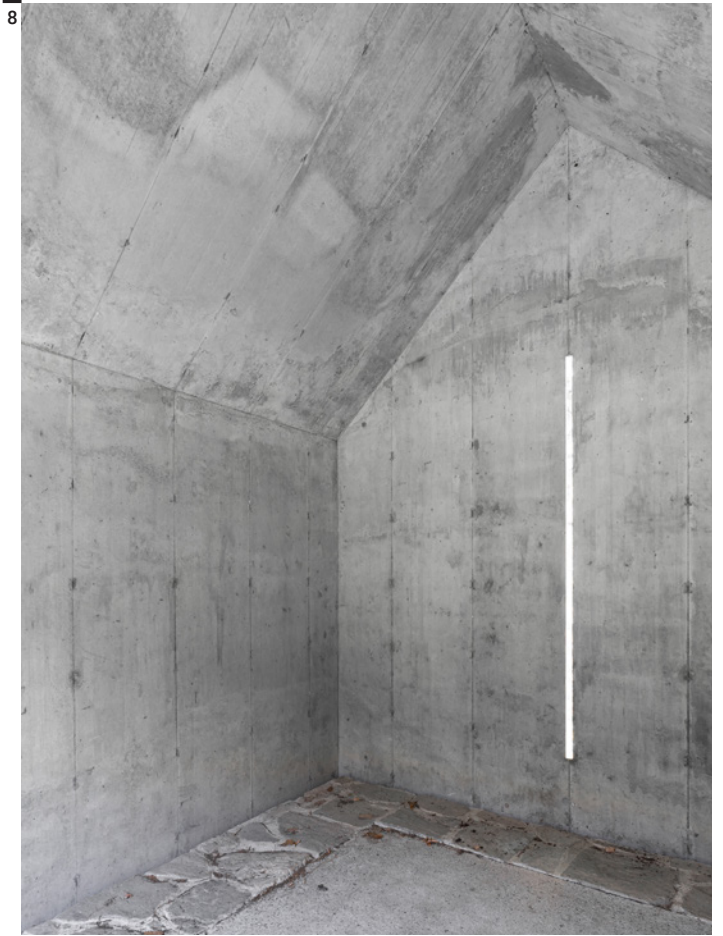
**Fig. 7**  
Detail of the front façade of St. Nepomuk Chapel (photo Alexander Schidlbauer).

**Fig. 8**  
Interior of St. Nepomuk Chapel (photo Alexander Schidlbauer).

**Fig. 9**  
Panoramic view of St. Nepomuk Chapel (photo Alexander Schidlbauer).











**Fig. 10**  
The cover of the monographic issue of *El Croquis*, n. 202 2019, dedicated to Bernardo Bader, representing Salgenreute Chapel with a photo by Jesús Granada.

**Fig. 11**  
The Salgenreute Chapel in the fog (photo Matteo Tempestini).

**Figs. 12-13**  
Interiors of the Salgenreute Chapel (photo Alexander Schidlbauer).

adigm shift: a greater attention to environmental, social and economic issues, far from the autonomy professed by the majority of Graubünden architectural production (Buchanan, 1991). From this date

onwards, a gap emerged between the architecture of the Graubünden and the interest of professional journals. The architecture of the Austrian region of Vorarlberg, the undisputed protagonist of *Constructive Alps*, began to earn space in publications, mainly through the works of architect Bernardo Bader. Issue 202 of the periodical *El Croquis* from 2019, entirely dedicated to Bader, featured the Salgenreute chapel, built in 2016, on the front cover: once again, a sacred construction represented Alpine architecture on the cover of an international architecture magazine. The small chapel wrapped with larch shingles enjoyed great success in German periodicals, being included in the publications *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen, Hochparterre, Deutsche Bauzeitung* and *Detail*, as well as significant international attention. It was published, among others, in *a+u* in the February 2022 monographic issue dedicated to Bader, and in a book by the Kunsthau Bregenz. On the cover of the latter there is a photo by Adolf Bereuter in which the chapel emerges from the fog, a staging that has become a *topos* of sacred Alpine architecture, so much so that Danuser's photographs for *Partituren und Bilder* entered the collection of the MoMA in New York in 2017.

Sacred buildings obtained space on the covers of important architectural periodicals as representations of contemporary Alpine architecture thanks to ca-





nonical photographic representations that emphasise some common characteristics. Firstly, their isolation from inhabited areas facilitates an independent and autonomous framing as an object immersed in alpine nature, guaranteeing the sobriety and innocence necessary for a place of spiritual retreat, and simultaneously enhancing their materiality through contrast. Secondly, the lack of particular functional requirements and complex technical equipment allows a design free from constraints and a setting free of any entropic element. This Alpine iconodulia

was born and fueled by the dynamics of the publishing industry, which, starting from the second half of the 20th century, placed ever more attention on the aesthetic advertising model (Croset, 1988). Photographic representation is promoted as the primary means for reproducing architectural work, transforming it into a consumer object (Colomina, 1996), which must be presented in perfect order and pureness (Baudrillard, 1970). These two characteristics are clearly recognised in the sublime mountain landscape and sacred Alpine architecture. ■

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