



HIGH STYLE

Mark C O’Flaherty reports on the current swathe of daring architecture sweeping the Alps, doing away with the Tyrolean twee and chocolate-box clichés in favour of a contemporary restraint born of the city – slick and flowing spaces that blend seamlessly into the widescreen landscape. Within the freshest air in Europe, these are some of the cleanest lines in the world

The road from Zurich to the South Tyrol is a travelogue of idyllic green valleys, ornate sloping-roofed pine chalets and onion-domed church towers. Even if you miss the Austrian border entirely, the earworm of *Edelweiss* is always just around the corner. The area is also home to some of the most progressive and sophisticated architecture in the world. It’s a powerful, sexy update of true modernism with all of the photogenic pull of the most serene Maldivian infinity pools. Stripped bare of decorous flourishes, these are buildings that put the emphasis on the balance of interiors and exterior landscapes. They use daylight and shadow as decoration; they are serious, yet playful. Inner volumes have an elegant flow, enhanced by expanses of glass and warmed by wood construction.

The new wave of Alpine architecture began to gain momentum in 1996 when Swiss architect Peter Zumthor – responsible for the radical ‘garden within a garden’ 2011 Summer Pavilion at the Serpentine in London – unveiled his dark, linear, monochrome Therme Vals. This revolutionary spa design would go on to appear as a backdrop in countless fashion editorials and become a place of pilgrimage for design students as much as those looking to ‘take the waters’.

Even Aston Martin CEO Dr Ulrich Bez is doing his bit for the Alps’ quiet architectural revolution. The Brixental in Tyrol and the Wildschoenau are still places where new houses are built incorporating new technology but in the traditional style. In Grafenweg however, Dr Bez is driving simplicity, craftsmanship and modern technology with a high-tech timber house built with local Vorarlberg company Holzbau Saurer. The landscape from Scheffauer Kaiser to Hohe Salve, Westendorf Zillertaler is an integrated part of the concept, as the house is essentially a wooden ‘block’ that opens to the east and south, with ‘cuts’ allowing the view and light to flood in, whilst offering shade in the summer. The interior flooring is stone, which to the surprise of visitors, gives a warm tone but cool atmosphere.

A mere 150km away, the Therme Meran – which opened in 2005 – takes a different approach but is still boldly, architecturally apposite. If Therme Vals embraces the dynamic of a subterranean minimalist cave, Therme Meran is more of a giant, surface-level glass cube. Far removed from the world of municipal swimming baths and children’s tacky water parks, Therme Meran is a slick and inviting place to immerse yourself in spring water while the adjoining hotel – designed by Italian architect Matteo Thun – has a deeply glamorous, modular appeal.

Thun is the peerless starchitect of the Tyrol. Somewhat surprisingly, he rose to fame as part of the arch 1980s design phenomenon, Memphis. His early ceramic works, and collaborations with fellow Memphis founder Ettore Sottsass, gel perfectly with that post-modern, hot-pink, grey-flecked decade. In contrast, his architecture today may have the impact of the flashiest landmark skyscraper, but comes coupled with the sensitivity and introspection of the most humble of hillside cottages. His Vigilius Mountain Resort, reached by cable car from Lana, may be the most beautiful hotel in the world. Pictures of it – resembling a sleek James Bond villain’s lair as much as a ‘tree that has fallen’ (Thun’s initial concept) – have kept room occupancy sky-high since it opened seven years ago. His next project, ‘KlimaHotel’, is similarly subtle yet big on impact: rooms are set almost imperceptibly into the side of a hill, beneath a set of nine rippling roofs rising from the earth like waking eyelids. Thun describes his work in the Alps as ‘Archilandscapes’. ‘Above all, we respect nature,’ he says. ‘The projects don’t interfere with their surroundings but melt into it. We only use material from the region of the building, we study the winds, landscape, culture and colours of a location.’



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PREVIOUS PAGE & OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE: ‘Maybe the most beautiful hotel in the world,’ Matteo Thun’s five-star Vigilius Mountain Resort in Lana, Italy.

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW: What kickstarted it all, Peter Zumthor’s 1996 Therme Vals in Vals, Switzerland.

THIS PAGE RIGHT: Thun’s all-wood Pergola Residence hotel, close to Vigilius, is a smaller interpretation of his environmentally sensitive philosophy.

THIS PAGE BELOW: The first of Thun’s KlimaHotel concepts in Bozen, Italy, whose three pillars of sustainability are the concepts ‘Nature’ (ecology), ‘Life’ (socio-cultural aspects) and ‘Transparency’ (economy).



Thun’s all-wood Pergola Residence hotel, close to Vigilius, is a smaller interpretation of the philosophy. It’s the kind of place that would make the perfect writer’s retreat – the visitor feels immediately absorbed by the landscape while the interiors are prosaic, with a warmth that distances the spaces from the chill of minimalism, but a boldness of line and a starkness that is as modern as can be. It’s a matter of materials: the aforementioned Zumthor’s next project is a set of treehouses to be built at the rustic Pension Briol in the Isarco Valley. If built in glass and steel, they’d be at home in the Hollywood Hills, but as planned in wood, they blend artfully with their environment.

Vigilius was conceived as a ‘modern wooden house’. To stay there certainly makes you rethink your own, perhaps less sophisticated, domestic arrangements. All of Vigilius’ flawless five-star hotel elements have an Archilandscaped twist: Chef Mauro Buffo produces muscular nouvelle dishes at the Restaurant 1500 using almost entirely locally sourced ingredients. The swimming pool is indoors, but expanses of glass, and the reflection from the water, diverts attention to the Dolomites in the distance. Thun’s mountain retreat works on long, confident perspectives. The building is effectively a single elongated stroke with an elegant curve at one end, the exterior windows and balconies disappear behind finely articulated unbroken lines of larch and each morning, graphic horizontal shadows are cast into the bedrooms through red curtains. It’s a cinematic, visual flourish within a building that lets light and shadow take the place of traditional wall-hung art. It’s also an impossibly beautiful start to every day.

The wood on Vigilius’ frontage has already started to darken, as intended. The nearby façade of German architect Sebastian Fischer’s Arosee Life Balance Hotel is younger, and only three years into its century-long journey to reach full, weathered potential. Both hotels riff on contemporary style more in common with loft living, but turn it on its head to focus on ecology, nature and the organic.

Much of what makes all of this new Alpine modernism so exciting is that it takes the slickness of urban high design and adapts it for such grandstanding natural situations. Zurich’s Dolder Grand hotel may be just a short, steep, funicular railway ride from the centre of one of Europe’s

most monied capitals, but its view is of diamond-like Alpine snowcaps, not the housing for bank vaults full of gold. When Lord Foster was brought in to mastermind the property’s recent reboot, he brought his full metal Feng Shui approach to a new spa and golf annex, with undulating curves of black metal and floor-to-ceiling glass unfurling next to the imposing 19th-century structure. There are now Takashi Murakami cartoon mushroom sculptures beside the lifts and a black tiled pool that’s neither rectangular nor kidney shaped; instead, the water sits elegantly within a slice of splayed curves leading to a wall of glass and the outside terrace.

Switzerland and its neighbours have considerable pedigree for modernity and everyday attention to detail. The treatment rooms and boutique at the spa at the Dolder Grand are lined with silver-boxed, assuredly lower-case branded La Prairie product, still the most premium spa range in the world. When it launched in 1978, it made a splash with its logo in Helvetica Light 45, a made-to-measure twist on the most celebrated contemporary font of all time. It still looks as fresh and modern as the typography that the Dolder has commissioned for its lift menus: Dolder Frutiger Next Light (an adaptation of the font you’re currently reading). After all, there are few things as sexy in the world of high style as a freshly cut font, whether it’s aligned to a £150 moisturiser, or a £1,500 hotel room. The Swiss don’t sell chocolate as seductively as they sell directional chic.





ABOVE: Aston Martin CEO Dr Ulrich Bez’s new, high-tech Tyrolean house, built with local Vorarlberg company Holzbau Saurer.
BELOW: The new Tamina Therme baths designed by Joseph Smolenicky at the Grand Resort Bad Ragaz in Switzerland has decidedly futurist rather than modernist leanings.

Some of the new Alpine style is a straight-down-the-line modernist update: the Alpina Dolomites ski resort opened in December 2010 and has touches of the classic International style of California and Palm Springs. The interiors are a symphony of warm, sandy Pantone shades, with 21st-century hunting lodge antler chandeliers and backlit digital prints of forests in the bronze-tiled bathrooms. Everything is razor-sharp and meticulous. The adjacent ‘chalet’, housing four suites and a restaurant, is a circular Ken Adam-esque building surrounded by a rhythm of arching wishbone wooden shapes. In contrast, the new Tamina Therme baths, designed by Joseph Smolenicky, at the Grand Resort Bad Ragaz has decidedly futurist rather than modernist leanings.

The Grand Resort Bad Ragaz dominates most of a town that established itself as a health resort shortly after the thermal waters from Pfäfers were first pumped here in 1840. Its two adjoined hotels are a blend of grand styles that run from historic (one wing is in an ancient monastery with original details intact) to a contemporary spa tower with state-of-the-art motor-adjustable beds, via swanky chandelier-drenched 1920s opulence. Guests bathe in whirlpools full of gold leaf, drink champagne full of gold leaf, and get massaged in... gold leaf. Others order egg-white omelettes while recovering from a little light (on-site) cosmetic surgery. Two years ago the blinding white all-wood Tamina Therme landed – a total reinvention of ‘grand hotel’ style. As swimmers cut through the mist rising off the al fresco thermal pool on a cold day, Bad Ragaz resembles the surface of a terraplanned sci-fi leisure planet, many galaxies away.

All of these projects represent the pinnacle of high design, and yet each is sympathetic to its environment to a degree that urban architecture seldom has been. Technological revolutions in architecture have liberated the so-called starchitect, and while every one of these Alpine buildings bears the marks of state-of-the-art computer technology, they prove that there can be a sensitivity in modern architecture far removed from some of the ego-driven works of many architects. In focusing on fashioning a very human sense of wellbeing within settings of extraordinary natural beauty, they’ve developed a distinctively sensitive yet absolutely contemporary style for life in the 21st century. It’s a style that looks good, will last long and travel far.

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Mark C O’Flaherty travelled as a guest of Quintessentially Travel, ‘the masters of travel couture’, who offer a 10-night architour of the Alps from £2,030 per person based on two people sharing, including flights with British Airways and car hire (quintessentiallytravel.com).



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