

39.

The Alpine Chalet Deconstructed

TEXT by PORTER FOX



Deep in the clefts of the European Alps, before there were highways or skiers or funiculars or discos, people believed the high alpine was inhabited by evil

Therme Vals (Vals, Switzerland)



ERIK OLSSON



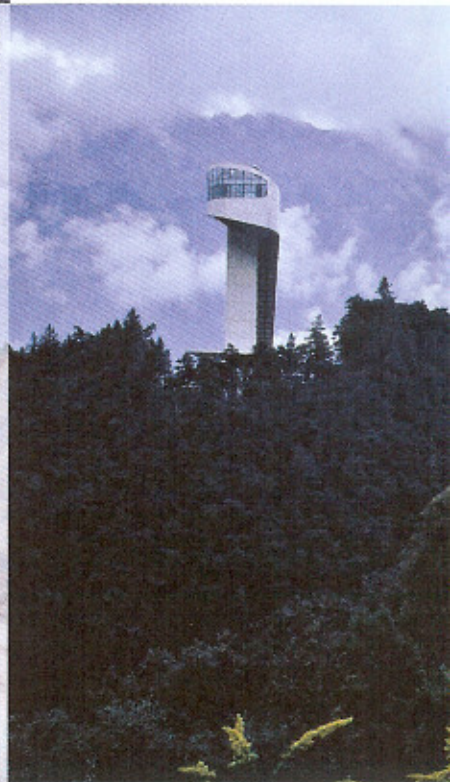
spirits. The Raetians and Lepontic Gauls of the Roman period depicted demons in the summits in their epigraphs. Later, the Alemanni of the 7th century and scribes of the Habsburg empire embossed images of icy fiends hiding in the peaks on leather book jackets. ¶ The mountains were a place

Bergseilseilbahn (Innsbruck, Austria)

ERIK OLSSON

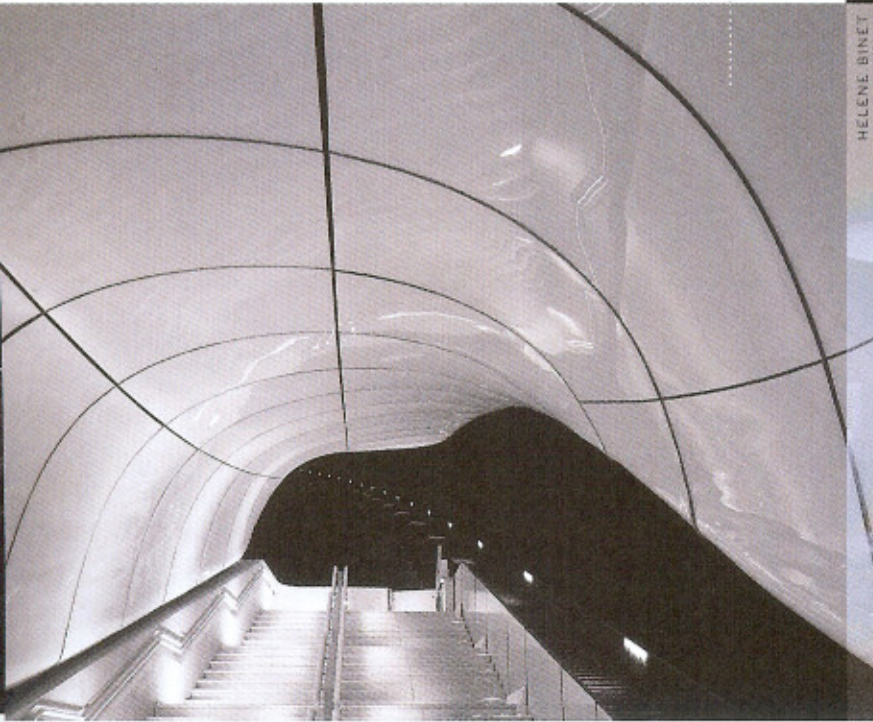


HELENE BINET

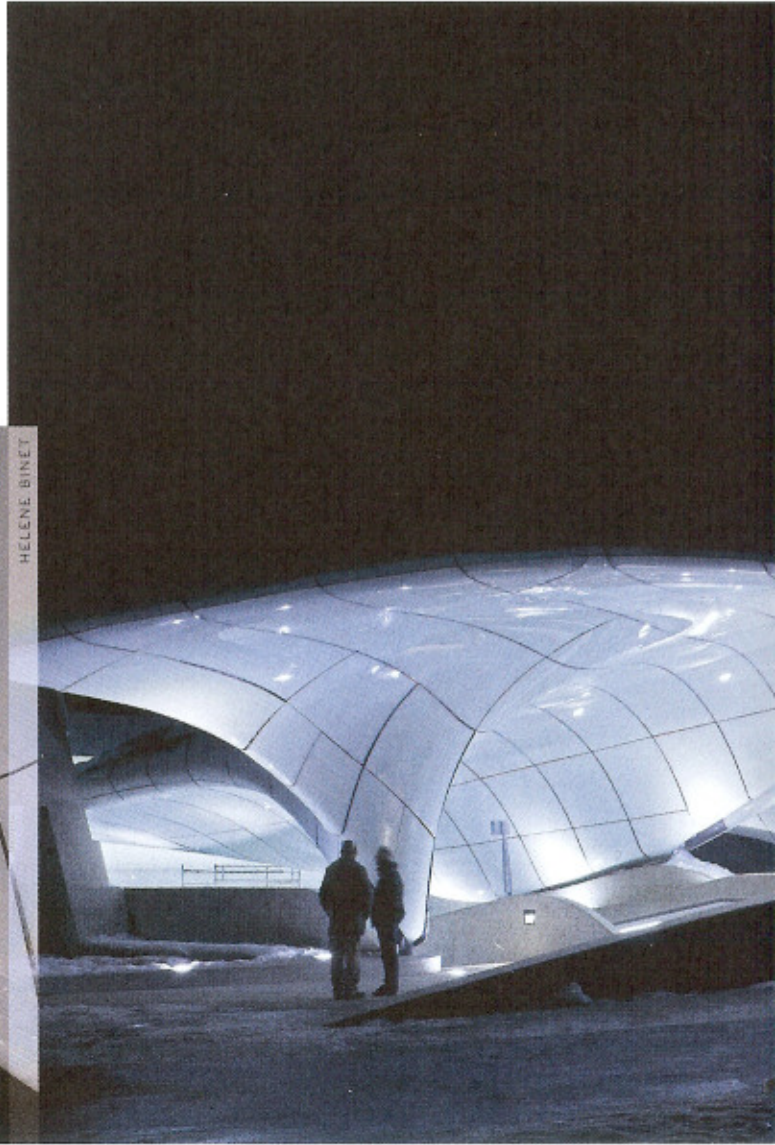


to die, not live or work or lounge about in an iridescent Bogner suit, sipping a martini. The great massifs of Europe were impassive killers that could take out an entire village with an avalanche without warning. So when intrepid farmers began migrating higher and higher up the range's flanks to

Nordkettenbahn (Innsbruck, Austria)



HELENE BINET



graze their flocks and ultimately settle the first villages of the Alps, they built their homes as sanctuaries to withstand the treacherous wind, cold, snow and, yes, diabolical phantasms of the mountains. ¶ In the seven Ladin valleys of the Italian Dolomites, farmers organized their homes in *viles*,

Tignes (France)

HELENE BINET
MONICA DELMASSO



co-operatives with shared wells and bread ovens. Each home was constructed with almost exactly the same footprint: two sides facing south to maximize solar heat, the corner forming the living room, the backside of the kitchen oven also heating the living area. The hayloft was set on the



ERIK OLSSON

first floor and sided with larch, the animals there helping to heat the house above. ¶ Over the last 400 years the houses around Cortina, Corvara and Alta Badia, have hardly changed. Their simple geometric shapes mimic the blocky granite spires of Mount Tofana and appear as though they



WANG DONG



themselves tumbled off the peaks. As with most high alpine settlements across the Alps, the structures have become part of the unique valley culture—integral to the language and heritage of the seven Ladin valleys where craftsmen once shaped skis for Napoleon's army and girls still

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will be the future themes in the skiing world," he says. Buy stocks now.

ECONOMIST OR NOT, you'd be hard-pressed to convince most diehard ski touring types that the quest for bottomless powder is just another blip on the flowchart. Nestled in mountain communities where turns and other core values run deep, skiers devote their entire lives to nurturing creative urges such as what new line to shred or which traverse to link up. In many parts of the world, the options are far beyond the limited slopes of scattered resorts and, more importantly, the snow is deeper. Simply imagine a world where crossing another track is a rare occurrence and you can see why the renaissance is at hand.

There is much art in skiing, but one style remains on permanent display. Carving is so passé. Sculpting huge trapezoids in terrain parks is contrived at best, and forget about brasswork sliding. Even the rabid and artful revolution in graphic design is overrated (topsheets really shouldn't be visible while skiing). For the purest form of artistic expression, strap on a pair of your softest skis and brush your way down an empty white canvas. You may be the only critic to review your work but that's just fine. In the life-long pursuit of perfection, dedication is the key to garnering inspiration and eventually creating a true masterpiece. To attain this, one must paint with relentless fervor.

38. Haute Roof

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...wear silver pins in their hair to indicate if they are married or not.

So what, you might ask, is this glimmering *alien* thing being built on the snowfields of Piz la Ila, high above Corvara? This globe of double acrylic mirrored skin, photovoltaic power plants and vertical wind turbines? How does this space-age bungalow relate to the most well-preserved valleys in all the Alps and why has it plopped down in storied Dolomites of the Sud Tirol?

London-based Ross Lovegrove Studios, designers of the much chatted-up orb, describes it as a portable, self-sufficient "Alpine Capsule." The two-person shell measures nine metres across, is padded in white leather and is equipped with water tanks, a bathroom and a "sleeping-contemplation" area. Electricity is generated from wind and solar power stations stuck in the snow around the capsule. The entire roof and walls are a one-way window, offering 360-degree views of the surrounding peaks and constellations overhead.

One thing the capsule is not, however, is Ladin. It is, in fact, not like anything in the Alps and appears completely out of place on the serene, achromatic snowfields of Piz la Ila. The reality being, the history of these mountains and their quaint villages is so strictly defined—read: stucco and wood cladding, oriels, spindled railings, wood shakes—that anything diverging from that code looks foreign.

The painful juxtaposition of old versus new is playing out across the Alps as an influx of modern structures overshadow, and even outnumber, the classic chalets that many identify with the range.

Where once earth-toned, two-story buildings spanned the winter valleys of resorts like Tignes and Les Arcs, now monstrosities of glass and steel rise like miniature cities of the future. In Tignes' Val Claret alone—where a small metropolis of concrete and 15,000 beds has cropped up—the very idea of alpine community and style has radically changed. The same is true in mega-resorts like La Plagne, L'Alpe D'Huez and Les Deux Alpes, where massive development plans demand 20-story monoliths over two-story hostels and hotels. No longer are the town squares or shared wells and bread ovens that distinguished alpine villages for so long. In the ski towns of the 21st century, mountain living is more concerned with spas, elevators, ski caddies and wireless internet.

To a far less extent, but equally obvious, are works like Lovegrove's capsule. Since the 1980s, the world's leading designers have used the Alps as a canvas for their most ambitious projects. In Graubunden, Switzerland, Peter Zumthor's post-modernist Therme Vals mineral baths and awe-inspiring Saint Benedict Chapel—that re-imagines the avalanche that wiped out the original—appear on the horizon like Rabelaisian memorials to the old world aesthetic. Architectural rock star Zaha Hadid's deconstructionist Bergisel Ski Jump and Nordkettenbahn rail station in Innsbruck, Austria, may as



The much discussed 'skyline' of Tignes, France. Is it an architectural scandal or the beginning of the end for the traditional alp chalet?



Zaha Hadid, architect, the creative mind behind the *Nordkette* aerial tramway and the *Bergisel* ski jump in Innsbruck, Austria.

well be props off the new *Star Trek* movie contrasted with the town's 400-year-old Hofkirche church they hover over. Then there are Atelier 1990s sparse, post-modern chalets around Chamonix, France, and the eerie, space-age tramways and Bauhaus-esque homes designed by Bearth and Deplazes in Chur, Switzerland.

As the new begins to outnumber the old, traditionalists are crying out that the mountains and the unique culture they harbor are being sold off. Developers and designers, on the other hand, point out that where the Alps were once a place to work, they have become a place to get *away* from work. Meaning, where farmers built structures to pen livestock and dry hay, modern alpine entrepreneurs construct buildings to further the new business of the Alps: tourism. And the only thing the two styles have in common, it appears, is that both are built to ward off the forces of nature that still claim lives every year.

THE CHALETs WE THINK OF when we conjure the Alps—from Kitzbühel to Courmayeur—were first designed by migrating Germanic tribes during the 4th century Volkerverwanderung period. Early layouts included a wide corridor that connected the kitchen, bedrooms and living space and in some cases, a barn. Materials depended on what was available in any particular region. Anchored stones on the low-angled roof held snow for added insulation and overhanging eaves allowed runoff to be collected in cisterns.

By the 17th century alpine

homes reflected the ornate details of the Baroque era often associated with chalets: intricately carved beams and balconies, oriel windows and *luftmalerei* paintings around the window frame. It was during this time that other typical characteristics of the Alps chalet were developed as well—flowerboxes hanging from rails; small, shuttered windows; and keyhole cutouts in the furniture.

Because pre-20th century architectural style was dictated by the limitations and characteristics of the regions themselves, not informed, artistic decisions, the very nature of “modern” architecture in the Alps is a contradiction. Even the contemporary buildings that are raising such a stink are purpose-built—albeit to house tourists instead of livestock and hay. In fact, the only modern structures in the range are the *post-modernist* structures of Zumthor, Hadid and others. The problem most see as modernization, is really just the fact that all three styles don't exactly jive.

Nowhere in the Alps are the effects of modernization more obvious than in the five villages serving Tignes resort. After the original town was submerged behind the Barrage de Tignes dam in 1952, a new village was planned for the ski area at Le Lac. The first buildings constructed in the 1950s were meant to reflect traditional chalets with a modern twist—light metal infrastructures, thick roofs, broad picture windows and classic balconies. Through the 1960s the base village at Le Lac expanded by 300 units in a matrix meant to allow guests access to all of its amenities

without needing a car. When Val Claret was laid out in 1968, there was only one developer—who did away completely with the simple geometrical forms of old and created an entirely contemporary, interconnected complex.

An innate flaw with the latter design is the fact that most guests arrive in the Alps expecting to immerse themselves in the classic aesthetic of the region. But as sensibilities catch up with modern building practice, Kennedy Violich architect Dan Bonham says, contemporary complexes are proving their worth.

“Ski areas in the Alps come from two basic typologies,” he says. “One, being from accretion, or a more organic formation. I think that is what Verbier would be—the typical mountain chalets and stone roofs scattered across the hillside. Two, they come about through a large capital investment which results in a modern development: big lodge, pools and trams around a central ‘village’ of shops. In terms of sustainability the latter is by far less impactful on the environment, or at least can be—if facilities are shared rather than dispersed between hundreds of autonomous units.”

The purpose of more artistic renderings of the alpine aesthetic is harder to pin down. (The fact that they are setting trends that commercial designers are starting to follow, though, make them worthy of inclusion.) Ecological themes are the most popular, but more and more avant-garde designers like Zumthor are coming full circle and incorporating local material and building tradition into their designs.

Winner of the 2009 Pritzker Prize, Switzerland's Zumthor is the unrivaled champion of contemporary alpine design. His 1996 Therme Vals—a mineral bath house he designed for the bankrupt town of Vals near Graubunden, Switzerland—continues to be a symbol of the *post-post-modern* alpine aesthetic. Zumthor's vision contrasts passive, local quartzite and concrete with flowing mineral pools. The main floor is comprised of several baths of varying temperatures, showers and sweating, drinking or resting spaces. Along one wall are two large windows which frame a stunning view of the Swiss Alps. Wandering into the central bath guests can move into the outdoor bath and finally onto the terrace. Seemingly passive at first glance, the spatial concept of the Therme Vals is in fact completely dynamic, and this duality between the still and kinetic makes the building a place of relaxation through action—a proverbial awakening of senses.

Zumthor's passion for integrating local tradition in his design can be seen in most of his alpine work: the 1988 Saint Benedict Chapel also in Graubünden and his Brother Claus Field Chapel in Mechernich, Germany. In the Brother Claus structure, Zumthor used an age-old "rammed concrete" technique to pour concrete on top of a wooden structure. He then burned the wooden skeleton to leave just the concrete walls, striated with char from the logs and set on top of a poured lead floor.

If Zumthor revived the ancient process of using local materials and blending structures with the moun-

tain environment, Hadid's trademark deconstructionism developed a postmodern approach to adapting classic alpine style. Her iconic 2002 Bergisel Ski Jump on Austria's Bergisel Mountain made waves with its asymmetric, almost animalistic ramp and observation deck. (Jumpers look down into a cemetery.) By virtue of its purpose, the jump was a traditional fixture on the mountain. But Hadid's take on it, she says, was entirely novel.

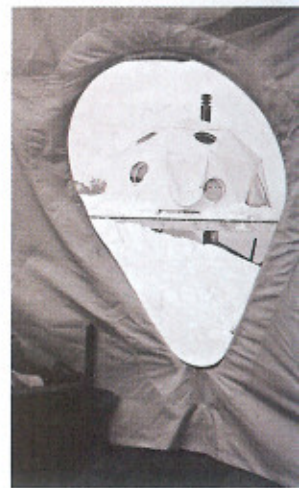
"The ski jump is a concise piece of functional design, an instrument for high performance sport, shaped with mathematical precision," she says. "The challenge here was to integrate a new, initially alien element into a given formula: The café and sundeck. The assemblage of elements was resolved in the manner of nature, developing a seamless hybrid, where parts are smoothly articulated and fused into an organic unity."

Across the valley in Innsbruck, Hadid's Nordkettenbahn aerial tramway offers the most stark juxtaposition between new and old architecture in the Alps today. The 100-year-old mountain railway is now graced with four stops designed by Hadid—amorphous, glowing glass structures that suggest a glacial flow down the mountain—as it winds up to the village of Hungerberg. Open in 2007, Innsbruck's visitors can now chug down *glühwein* among the *lebkuchen* and candle stalls of the Christmas market then enter the futuristic funicular terminus—directly across the street from a 19th-century Tyrolean Landhaus, trimmed with dark wood and ornate eaves.

THERE'S AN OLD SAYING that goes, "Two things never change: women and the mountains." And yet, as civilization and technology advance, the things we put *on* those mountains change drastically. Because the evolution of alpine architecture came all at once—starting when the first Brits vacationed in the St. Mortiz in the early 1900s—modern design had no chance to organically transition. The resulting gap between old and new is, to say the least, dramatic.

Developers and resort administrators are savvy, though, and as of late have come to the realization that bulldozing or eclipsing alpine heritage isn't good for business. So the Zumthor model is trickling down in structures like Le Lagon (Lamy Philippe, 2006) and La Maison de Tignes (Christian Portzamparc, 2000) in Tignes—their use of darker woods, stone exterior, gray slate roofs and graceful profiles far more natural and appealing than the monoliths of Val Claret. In Les Arcs and Trois Vallées, the Association for International Cultural Activities (FACIM) is even offering guided architectural tours this year of the resorts' origins and development, including highlights like scenic corridors and how buildings integrate with regional landscapes.

Back in Cortina, locals will tell you that Italian architect Luigi Vietti pioneered the merger long ago. Vietti cut his teeth in the 1930s as a member of Mussolini's famed urbanization program. He built the Ponte Andrea Doria maritime station in Genoa, among others, but discovered his distinctive, organic style in the Ladin valleys. Vietti



Whitepod, Monthey, Switzerland.
Everything but your average alpine chalet.



Burqa; an enveloping outer garment worn by women in some Islamic traditions. It is worn over the daily clothing and removed when the woman returns to the sanctuary of the household.

lived in Cortina before and after WWII and saw the sudden change that ski resorts brought to alpine communities firsthand.

Vietti's designs do away with the tiny rooms and corridors of traditional Ladin homes. His interiors are spacious and open, yet at the same time manage to maintain an air of tradition. Wood interiors are of local spruce and larch. The curtains are white lace, and giant picture windows always look out on the rimed massifs around Mount Tofana.

The conflation of style is vital in Cortina where workmen, skiers and artists still gather at the Enoteca wine cellar to tell stories and put the day's work behind them. The bar has existed for 40 years, but the building, and most of the bar's patrons, are much older. Gerry, the bartender, has worked at the Enoteca for 37 years and recites the six page wine list by heart. At night he pours vintages from Sicily and Sardinia and during the day he skis: Tofana in the morning and Forcella in the afternoon.

One night while visiting the bar, I stood beside a middle-aged man who installed floors in classic homes. In most towns it would be a blue collar job, but the man was revered for his work, Gerry said. "He is an artist," he said and poured him a drink. Then the two went on to tell me how pleased they were that a moratorium had been put on building in Cortina. "Only the old buildings from now on," Gerry said.

So Lovegrove's "capsule" is an exception to the rule, an exhibition of sorts on Piz la Ila. The classifi-

cation is fitting, seeing as the capsule is available for one-night stays only. Still, Lovegrove says, it is a hallmark of the future of alpine architecture: different lines, different materials, a different way of communing with the peaks.

"There are two ways to approach alpine architecture," he says. "The first is to remain contextual in the way that materials blend with the landscape in terms of traditional structures and organic local materials. The second, however, is to employ state of the art technology to create architecture which dematerializes as a force of optical camouflage. It's like being in a car rather than a horse and cart. Two very different experiences. Maybe there's a need for both!"

58. Lessons of the High Atlas

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THE MAIN CHAIRLIFT was only open one day during the week I visited Oukaïmeden, in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. It was a beautiful day, with views to proud peaks and never-ending plains. It was also a day of lessons, a reminder of how mountains have their own reality.

The Atlas massif is impressive—2,400 kilometres of peaks and hills stretching from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean across the north-west corner of Africa, keeping the

Sahara Desert at bay. The king of the Atlas—more precisely the High Atlas—is 4,167-metre Jbel Toubkal. Two drainages over from mighty Toubkal sits the tiny ski resort of Oukaïmeden.

It's tricky to find a snow report for Oukaïmeden—there's no official website and no snow phone. But if, after a bit of detective work you managed to find the phone number of a local ski shop, something like this might lure you there: "*Yes, there is snow. How much? Very much for skiing. Very good winter.*"

AN HOUR-AND-A-HALF DRIVE from the busy streets of Marrakech, I found Oukaïmeden spread over a plateau at 2,600 metres, surrounded by rugged peaks. It had been snowing for three days and the hotels and restaurants were all covered with cold, glistening powder—a classic, winter landscape. The wind was blowing hard, however, throwing plumes across the ridges, spoiling the soft snow below and decreasing its stability.

At Club Alpin Français (CAF), a rustic, dorm-style building, the dining room was in chaos with some 60 Moroccan children on winter holiday having a boisterous dinner. Most of them were probably seeing snow for the first time, an exhilarating experience; their excitement was understandable and contagious. The teachers took turns standing on chairs trying to stare them into silence. The effect was... largely ineffective.

Michelle Minet, an energetic French woman in her 60s, runs the CAF.

"Life here is never easy—always