



Facing page: Central core with underheated seating niche (photo, Lucia Degonda). Below: Core model study viewed from four sides.

Driving south on the main road along the slope of the upper Rhine Valley, one first becomes aware of Disentis via the dominating eighteenth-century monastery that sits at the top of the village. This is the institution that runs the Maedchen Internat school and which commissioned Swiss architect Gion Caminada to design the new girls' dormitory.

Due to the village's steep slope, houses and buildings crowd the main road, creating a narrow streetscape typical of the region. The site for the new dormitory is almost precisely in the centre of town. Unlike its neighbours, this building is set back several metres, cutting deep into the terrain and opening up the village's dense fabric to create a set of differentiated exterior conditions around the building: public on the street side, semi-public at the back and intimate as well as private on the sides. This stepping back from the street also gives the main façade a heightened prominence, expressing its status as an important institution in town. A small public square mediates between the street and building.

The masonry walls are finished in a muted grey plaster, giving them a solid, reserved appearance. The building would be a cube were it not for a slight skew in the plan, which produces a subtle, strangely softening effect and echoes the irregular-grid arrangement of the village. This organised irregularity is repeated in

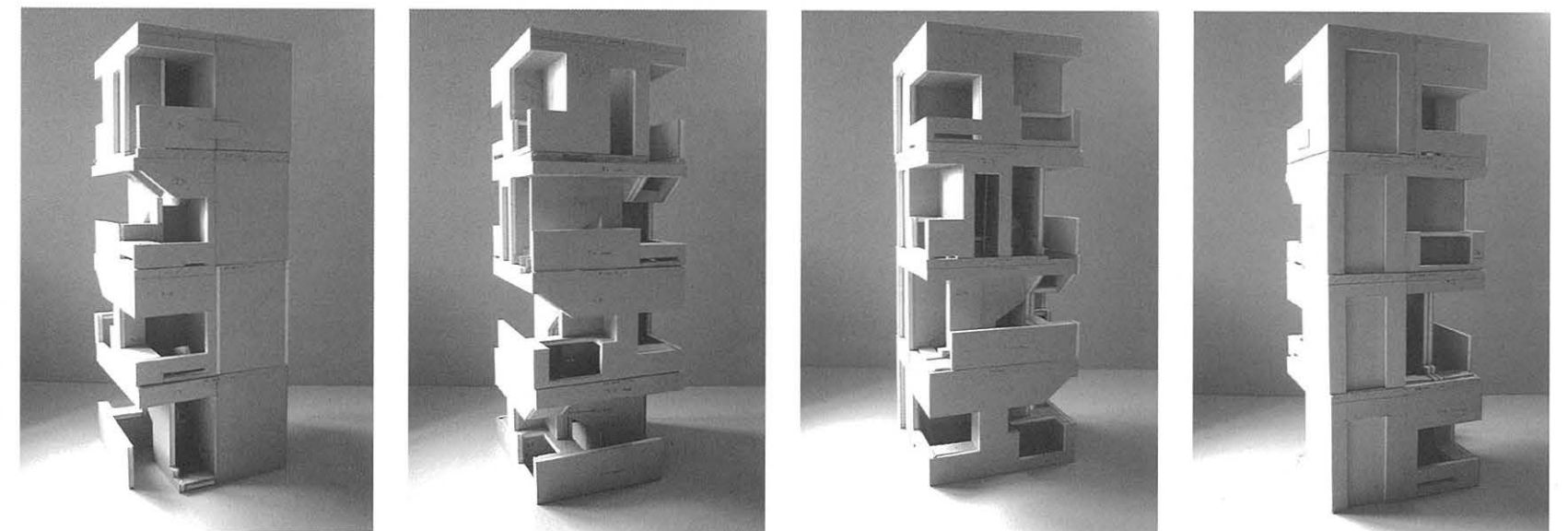
the windows, whose right- and left-hand panes alternate in size and depth. The effect is playful, and contradicts the severity and regularity of their arrangement on the façade. A bright colour scheme for curtains begins to hint at the youthful goings-on inside.

'We attempted to put ourselves in the position of these young girls and ask, what do I need? What will make me comfortable in this place?' says Caminada in response to questions about how he approached the design. This concern is the central principle informing the project's siting, organisation, materiality and atmosphere.

The five-storey building's street-level entrance leads to the matron's apartment and a large communal room for informal activities, including cooking and eating, as well as more organised affairs. The stairs and elevator form a sculptural core, rendered in tinted, waxed concrete, which penetrates the entire building as a continuous formal element and acts as a spatial anchor. Incorporated into the core where it connects with a meeting space on each of the four student floors is a basic kitchen counter as well as a heated recess filled with large cushions, a space reminiscent of the old wood-burning stone-slab stoves once used for heating. The meeting spaces have a single exposure and different orientation on each floor, allowing unique views of the town and landscape to become decisive factors in defining the atmosphere of each space. This principle of rotation is further explored to give each level a direct entrance from the exterior, either at the point where it meets the steeply sloping ground or, in the case of the top floor, from an adjoining building. With its distinct views and separate

Gion Caminada: Girls' Dormitory, Disentis

Alex Hurst



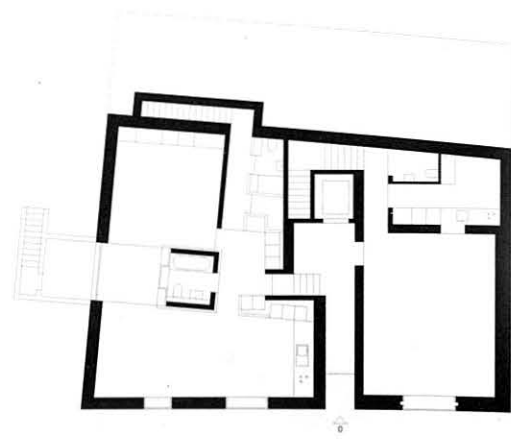
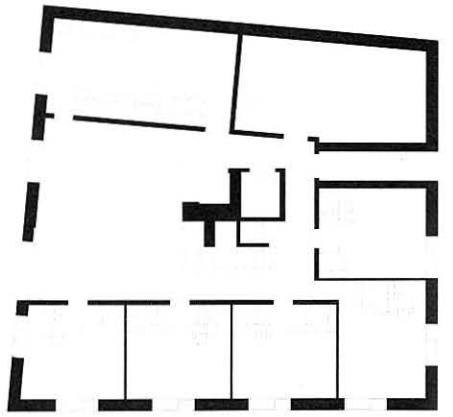
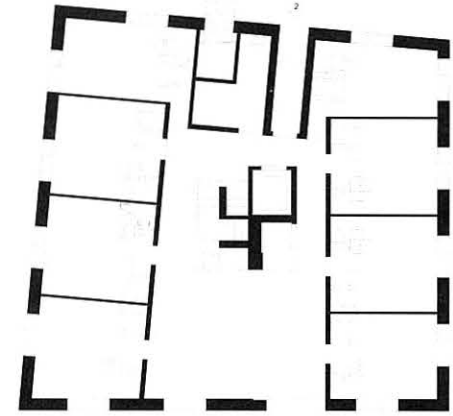
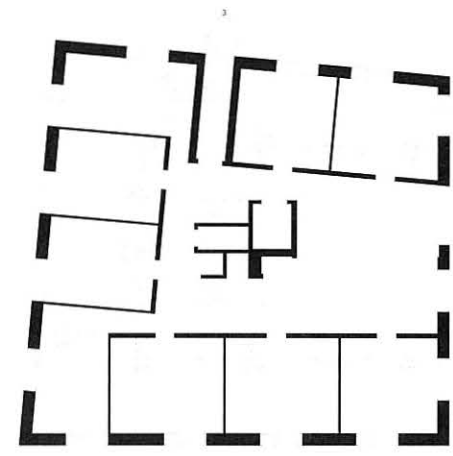
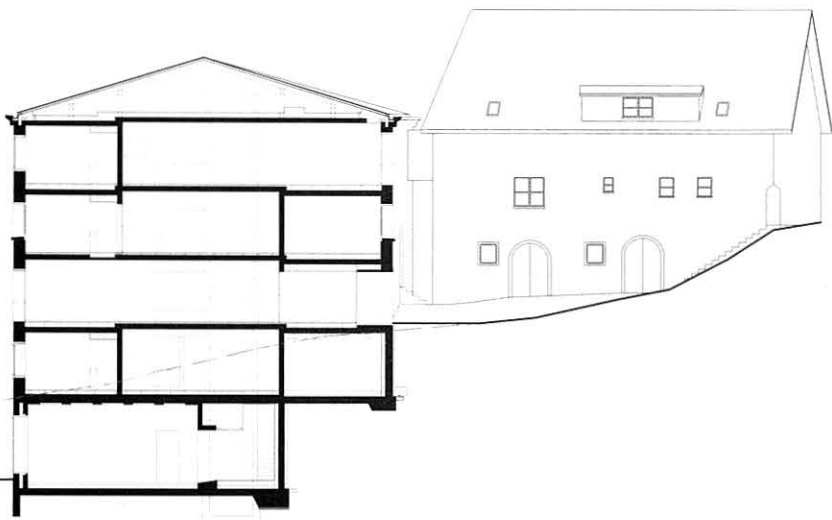
Anticlockwise from below:
Exterior view from southwest,
with monastery in background
(photo, Lucia Degonda);
section; ground-to-third-floor
plans, showing rotation



entrances, each floor has its own identity as a small, familial cluster.

The bedrooms are arranged in a U-shape around the meeting spaces, onto which they open. Each bedroom has its own toilet, sink and shower, thus partially de-institutionalising the experience and rituals of the inhabitants by removing some of the communal facilities typical of dormitories. This programme also gives the bedrooms' tight spaces a complex, interesting, yet remarkably fluid feeling. The windows are conceptualised as a response to the individual and her relation to the outside world. The openings in the thick masonry walls are divided into two unequal, vertically organised window panes constructed from untreated wood. Only the smaller pane, lying flush with the interior of the wall, opens, to create a small exterior recess that has been detailed with a pre-cast concrete sill. One can imagine this as a place for keeping ashtrays, storing fruit or growing flowers and herbs. The larger almost-square pane is fixed and sits flush with the exterior surface of the wall, creating a niche just large enough for one person to sit in, out at the very edge of the building. The untreated-wood sill/seat also strategically accommodates the radiator below to provide comforting warmth in the long winter months.

Though Caminada realises the impossibility of truly putting himself inside the heads of these students, he has created a dormitory that is remarkably responsive to its dwellers, offering a series of carefully defined spaces that frame and support the various daily activities on all scales. From the individual to the group, from the town to the institution, the building asserts its position and identity while providing enough ambiguity and open-endedness for the lives of these students to unfold freely and contribute to the continuously changing expression of this new house.



Clockwise from top left:
Shower/sink/toilet module;
ground-floor communal room;
central core with view of seating
niche and common area
(all photos, Lucia Degonda)



As part of the First Year curriculum, Unit 4 students travelled to Vrin, a remote village in the eastern region of Switzerland. During our visit we had the good fortune to meet with Gion Caminada, a local architect whose modest projects have had a major impact on questions regarding regional and local identity. His work, mostly executed in and around the village of Vrin, has begun to receive international attention, casting its influence far beyond the Lugnez Valley. The following discussion is an extension of a conversation begun with Caminada and the students of the AA on a bitterly cold winter morning, while walking through the streets of Vrin.

In Conversation with Gion Caminada

Valentin Bontjes van Beek & Alex Hurst



VIA Reading about your projects, one comes across two predominant views. On one side are the people who say that the architecture you practise in Vrin is a conscious development of the Strickbau typology [literally 'knot-building', the log construction typical of the region]. Others say it is simply a reflection of the surroundings in which you were raised. How do you position yourself and how would you describe your role as an architect?

GC People who look only at the construction typology are quick to say, 'Ah, you're local, for you it was easy. You're just continuing a tradition.' Many fail to recognise the other aspects. I'm interested not only in typology but in getting to the core of an overriding idea. The challenge is always how to formulate the problem. Then I ask, how stable, how flexible, should the idea be? How can I transform it? How much of it can I let go? How fragile must it be to become strong again? In the architectural scene, you often see this process taken

in the opposite direction, where a topic is developed to excess and everything becomes very tight and boring. In the end a part of it needs to be dismantled, so that it can stay ambiguous and allow for something beyond the initial idea. This, for me, is a beautiful way to create.

In the case of the *Totenstube* [mortuary] project, the initial idea was to find a way of dealing with the dead and to counteract the contemporary tendency towards denial. There was the need, as Aldo Rossi says, to make an architecture that enables something, in which experiences can occur. I wanted to enable a village tradition to continue in a new form and encourage discussion around the theme of dying. The focus was on the grieving process after someone dies. The *Totenstube* belongs to the family of the deceased during the period of mourning, and yet it is also open to the community. A lot of effort went into making the [viewing] room the decisive element, into planning exactly which way the body should be laid out. In the end they arranged it differently, but somehow I didn't mind. One has to try to create a form in which experiences can happen.

VIA You worked on this project for seven years, during which time both your parents died. Did this have any effect on your thinking about the *Totenstube*?

GC My intention was always to make this room communal, but it was interesting to observe what was possible at the time of mourning. The performance of these rooms during that time is what interested me.

VIA Seven years is a long time. Is that how long it takes to convey the idea of performance?

GC In Germany there was a study that said an architect cannot do anything more than translate what other people want. I think if you go along with this you are a bad architect. Most architects are concerned only with aesthetics and form, that's it. My task is to get the client away from his initial ideas, to tell him they were wrong. Once he has been shown that there is the possibility of a totally new direction he will all of a sudden discover entirely new desires.... Of course you have to do this in a gentle way, to allow the client to realise that there are possibilities he was not aware of.

VIA How do you do this when an entire village is your client?

GC I have already built houses for many of them, and they know that my work is not all that bad. A certain base was already established. But I think you need to sense what people are lacking. I try to awaken a feeling in them that this idea could touch their existence in a positive way. I try not to discuss issues of form too early in the process, because otherwise they quickly come to the conclusion that the architect is talking to himself. You have to talk around the problem and also introduce what could be in it for them.

VIA You're currently working on a project that you call *Kloster*, though we hear it's not actually a cloister. Can you tell us more about it?

GC For us the idea of the *Kloster* is an extraordinary one, a world within a world. For years I have dreamed about creating an introverted space set in a beautiful landscape. It would be obvious to be interested in introspection when dealing with an ugly site, but when you deliberately choose a magnificent setting for an introspective project, you are creating a tension. And this is what I find fascinating. A while back I took some students to the Marienberg monastery in South Tyrol. We spent several days there and were so fulfilled by the world of the monastery that we had no desire to go out. Our inner human needs were completely satisfied. We did not even realise it had been snowing. This world within the world is what I see as the essence of the *Kloster*.

VIA The *Kloster* also represents your first engagement with tourism in Vrin. You talk about awakening new desires, sensing what people are lacking, but how is this project addressing either of these needs? Or put another way, how do you imagine that tourism can further local culture and a sense of community?

GC Well, here is a wonderful example of how not to do it. In South Tyrol the locals noticed that the *Alp-Entladung* [the annual cattle drive from high summer pastures back to the valley] was very popular with tourists. For me as a little boy the *Alp-Entladung* was something sensational: beautifully decked-out cows with large bells around their necks coming down from the Alps. There was the strongest cow, the one who gave the most milk.... But once the Tyroleans realised what a draw it was, they began to celebrate it every Saturday. If you think like that, then culture is degraded to pure stupidity.

We used to have these large celebrations here in Vrin too, but it never entered our minds to do something for the tourists. We were too stubborn, we celebrated in a way that was right for us. We no longer celebrate like that either.

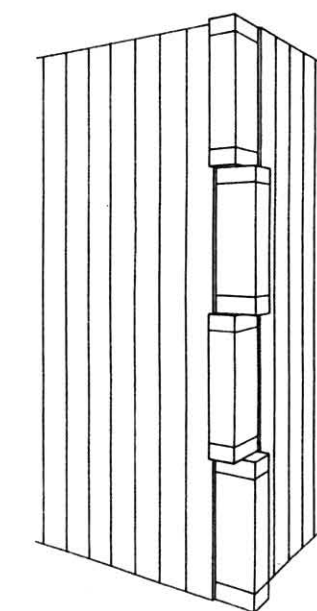
With our *Kloster* project we turn the whole question around and ask: what kind of people do we need to attract to make life in the village better, more interesting and more beautiful?

VIA Why must you ask this question at all?

GC You are forced to think like this when you live under the curse of tourism. You often hear it said that in the mountains tourism is the only alternative to farming, and because the land is no longer capable of sustaining the people, many will move away. If that is true, then we need to think a little more about the possibility of creating new needs for people.



Clockwise from above: Exterior and interior details, *Totenstube*, Vrin; traditional Strickbau; Strickbau as reinterpreted by Caminada





Sketch of Kloster proposal

As it is now, farmers receive government subsidies according to the number of animals they keep. There are also so-called direct payments for people who farm in extreme alpine regions. One could easily give up these locations as far as food production is concerned, but the farmer is taking care of the land, of extremely steep terrain. The steeper the terrain, the more money you get!

In the future the government will be asking for much more initiative from those directly involved; only then will subsidies be distributed. I approve of this change, because presently the system encourages huge laziness. The farmers simply sleep on their beautifully tiled stoves and are not asked to do anything. A new system will lead to a generation of totally new energies.

VIA How do you begin to interest the village in the potential of change?

GC When we introduced the *Kloster* to the villagers, a journalist from a local newspaper turned up. This did not bother us – as a matter of fact I think the people of Vrin are quite fond of being talked about; it is good for their self-esteem. The journalist said that people from other communities were always protesting, or were sceptical of new ideas. But when we presented our project, there was not a sound. They just stood there. Then one of them laughed, saying that it reminded him of a ski-jump; another agreed, and a third thought it was something completely different. I was personally not concerned with the form; I simply made a quick sketch on a site photograph. We could also have made a beautiful model and then collaged it onto a photograph, but that is not what we wanted to do. I just drew a dumb thing.

The day after the presentation the villagers talked about it in the restaurants. They didn't quite understand the whole thing – and this was good. If every-

thing is already clear, then people stop talking about it, and the result is something less intelligent. It remains interesting as long as it is slightly vague. They decided the project should be pursued.

VIA So, once you had persuaded the villagers of Vrin to build this new structure, you were free to begin thinking about programme and form. What is the difference between a conventional tourist facility and what you are proposing?

GC A farm always consists of a house, stables and a garden: these are the three classic elements. A few years ago I made studies of a fourth unit, a small room within a hayloft that could serve as a type of guestroom, like in a B&B. I then came to the conclusion that this was too close to home. The familiar should not exclude the strange, yet a certain distance is necessary.

Most tourist facilities work only with distance. The physical closeness, even if it is situated right in the centre of the village, has nothing in common with real closeness. I would like to create a project that the villagers are attracted to – a place that interests them, where people are doing something interesting – but that maintains a certain distance from their own lives.

If the *Kloster* only draws wealthy tourists, such a situation will not arise. But if for example musicians come, or if there is a library or even something more traditional than what is currently on offer in the village, then it will be a different story. It doesn't have to be high culture; on the contrary, it should be possible for everyone to go there, villagers and visitors alike.

VIA Our students get their milk from the farmer at five in the morning. He shows a great openness towards their exoticism. How does this joy towards the foreigner persist?

GC I think people here enjoy talking with foreigners. They are not tired of it yet. If, however, a foreigner were to come out of every hayloft, then things would start to get uncomfortable. If, on the other hand, this exchange could take place in one specific location, like the location up there on the mountainside, then it could really take on a new quality.

VIA You have said that the *Kloster* should, on the one hand, dominate the village and, on the other, assert an influence beyond the village.

GC Given the building's elevation, and its massiveness, I believe it could be something of a guardian for the village. In a similar way to a church, you get a sense of protection not only from its form but also from its meaning. I think the location is utterly beautiful. I always say that up there you have a view towards the rest of the world, which then suddenly shifts to the village. I think it would be really special to arrive from the back – enter the reception hall, obtain your key, go to your room and see the sky.

The site is in some ways similar to the Marienberg monastery, which is also situated on an incline. It is prominently positioned and yet somehow withdrawn. It makes a strange kind of movement. I think that all interesting buildings are not positioned too precisely – somehow you get the feeling that the thing sits a bit askew. Therein lies an incredible tension. Marienberg is placed exactly in such a way. You get the impression that it turns itself around as it pleases, at times towards the steep incline, then towards the Reschen Pass. I imagine something like that for here, too.

VIA You asked a curious question during your visit to the AA last year: have you ever touched a dead person? How is this related to architecture?

GC Wilhelm Schmid, a philosopher in Berlin, has written about seeing the world from the outside. Now that we can fly around our planet and see it from afar, we have noticed how vulnerable it is – and how threatening this is for us.

At Braunwald [in the eastern canton Glarus], for example, the whole village is very close to sliding down the mountain. In order to save it, we are proposing to move its core 200 metres up the slope, but we have to ask ourselves whether the inhabitants are willing to resettle. It seems to me that they really don't know how vulnerable their world is. Such forced moves used to happen here in Switzerland, mainly where dams and reservoirs were being built, but I seriously question whether people today are prepared to make such an effort. On the other hand I think that when you are fully aware of your own mortality, you can generate totally new strengths. If the people in Braunwald realised that things are transient, they would dare to create something new.

VIA Besides requiring a monumental effort on the part of the people, proposing the relocation of an entire village suggests a huge intervention into the natural landscape. Were you hesitant to undertake this?

GC During the last few years ecology has become fashionable. Now, because of this whole environmental uncertainty, people no longer dare do anything, everything has to be protected. I agree that we have to respect nature, but we also need to have the courage to build something new.

In Braunwald we did a preparatory exercise for a room in which we experimented with only one window. What happens at the point of transition, what is the relationship to the landscape? More and more I try to use nature for the feeling of the room, but not simply by saying, 'Let's make a hole here and look out into the landscape'. I ask what happens with the inside of the room when I cut a specific segment out of the wall towards the landscape.



Parish hall, Vrin, original building and Caminada extension

In other words, what happens from the outside towards the inside? I find this question much more interesting. In our time and especially in our region people have started to cut away whole walls. The boundary to the landscape is supposed to be minimised. But we've noticed that when we go out into the landscape when the weather is really wild – the way it has been for the last few days here in the valley – then you get the feeling that a good room has no relationship at all to the landscape.

VIA Sometimes these types of opening become filters, distancing the person from the experience of the landscape.

GC I have the feeling that these 'filters' are expanding and not minimising these boundaries. I think when you are really aware of the landscape, then you don't seek it out anymore. I know, for example, an old man who has always lived up here, and as far as he's concerned, everything happens in a very small circle. If the weather comes from that side, this will happen; if it comes from the other, then something else will happen. For this man, who has always lived in the same landscape, it is simultaneously a matter of closeness and distance. He is close to his landscape, and because of that he is separated from it – he doesn't need to know it

in any conscious way. In contrast, scientists today want to learn about everything, and it is precisely this intensive pursuit of knowledge that reduces the possibility of a direct connection.

VIA In Vrin alone you have built a telephone booth, the Totenstube, the butcher's shop, haylofts and some houses. You are giving quite a strong character to the village. Is there a point of saturation? At what point might it be too much?

GC Well, this is a question of identification. People can identify with everything that has a certain significance for them, a value they can recognise. As long as the value increases and has meaning for the individual, as long as they still identify with it, then I don't believe you can have 'too much', as you put it.

The other question might be whether I will ever get to the point where I've had enough. The ordinariness of the place still fascinates me. Peter Zumthor's buildings were initially also quite ordinary; only as time went by did his work become more spectacular. I think if I remain within the context, my work will stay non-spectacular. You could say that the *Totenstube* is spectacular, but it has more to do with the topic of one's relationship to death and dying than with the actual building. I like it when it becomes sensational in that way, when people gnaw on it.

VIA What is your understanding of regionalism?

GC In Switzerland you have to distinguish between regional building and regionalism. Regional building is what happens in the village, with all its demands and restrictions, its materials, the skills of its craftsmen. But even in this closed tradition, foreign elements have always been incorporated, particularly when the local people find something which is significantly better than what was there before. This stands in contrast to regionalism, where one takes on the quotations of the locality, appropriates them, exaggerates the form and over-emphasises the significance. Of course you might say that, with the *Totenstube*, I simply blew up a hayloft to immense proportions and declared it a room for the dead....

VIA Early in his career, Mario Botta said that an architect can only be effective if he acts locally or regionally, though in your case locality and regional thinking don't seem to be reduced to formal issues. How do you see your further development?

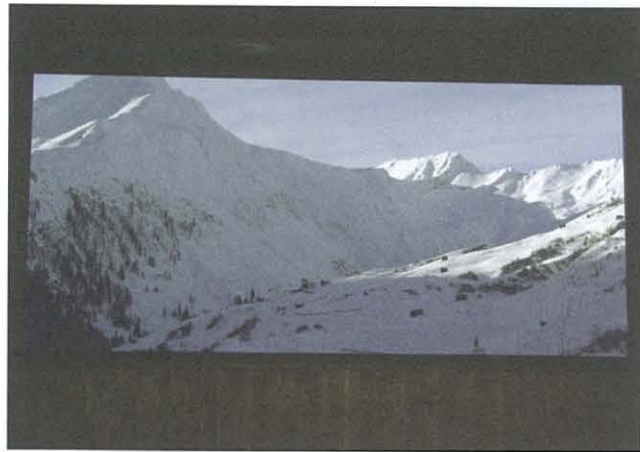
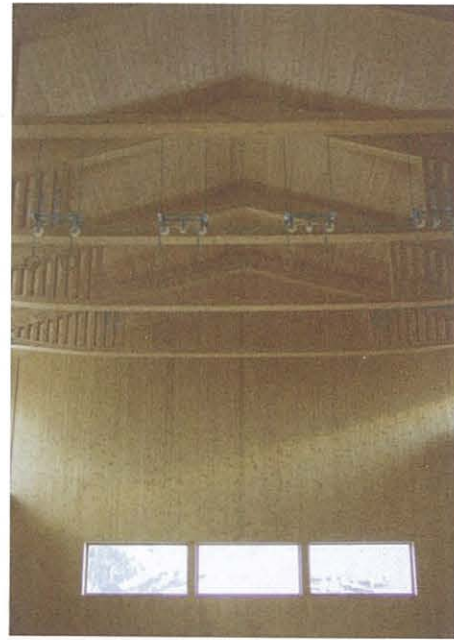
GC Currently I am building a house in the Appenzell [a rural canton in northeast Switzerland]. Whether that will turn into regionalism, I don't know, but it does interest me. Is it possible to build a house in the style of Appenzell that remains authentic? More and more of my commissions are coming from regions outside the valley.

Clockwise from top left (all in Vrin): Barns, new and old; barn with wall truss system derived from *Strickbau*; butcher's shop; parish hall; barn



Communal room window, Girls' Dormitory, Disentis; traditional window, Vrin





Community hall, Vrin, whose exposed wood truss system employs nailed boards as tensile members

VIA *If a person from Zurich were to ask you to build him a house in the style of the Strickbau, would that hold your interest?*

GC No. But there was a man from Lucerne who wanted me to build such a house for him here in Vrin. It was very interesting to observe how he approached the village. He became part of it, and started to identify with the villagers. I appreciated that. I don't think you should exclude the possibility that a newcomer can build a house in Vrin. You need to stay open and prepared, as with the idea of the *Kloster*. You need to be able to answer certain questions, such as, why is he coming to Vrin?

On the other hand, I met a man from Zurich who told me, over the course of a conversation, that his reasons for building a house in Braunwald were that he had too much money and didn't want to keep it all in the bank. I think this is a terrible reason for building, and want to rule out such a possibility here – although I'm not sure how we would do that. If someone wants to build here, then we would find a place for him to do so, but I am generally against the idea of zoning. If you start zoning vast amounts of land for building, you are inviting a curse. People get the idea that it represents capital, even though it has no more value than the adjacent land which is worked by the farmer. But all of a sudden the owner gets the feeling that he has to do something with this dormant capital; he has to speculate, he has to build.

VIA *I would like to go back to your vision as an architect. On the one hand you say that you are no different from the baker: his task is to bake bread, yours is to build buildings. But in fact you are now presenting a larger vision, one which extends beyond your valley. One of your first commissions outside Vrin was the Girls' Dormitory at Disentis. How did you approach it? What questions did you ask?*

GC Oh, I think this is merely a different topic, but the principle is the same as our approach to death and dying. Here the question is, how does a young girl feel? I don't know if we as men can really perceive that. But by asking further questions about certain things, you can come closer to the issue at hand. In principle it is no different to what we have talked about before. The challenge is how to formulate the problem.

The problem in the boarding school is that one has to leave home. So how do I build a space where you can feel at home despite the fact that you are now living as a group, with your schoolmates? As with the *Kloster*, the topic is the world within the world.

We are currently participating in an ideas competition to find uses for the old schoolhouse in the village of Vignon. This is a general problem in villages where schools are merged as the population shrinks. The people of Vignon want to use the empty school-

house as rooms for seminars and workshops. The problem is that there are already many places offering this. We are contemplating how this project could benefit the village, the community: what its unique selling point could be. A schoolhouse is always a part of the community that people identify with, just like the church. In farming villages these are the two most important buildings; they are also practically the only official buildings. We want to prevent estrangement, avoid something purely touristy.

Our idea is to build a sensationally good room, the most beautiful room in the valley of Lugnez. A reading room, a gallery for 50 or 60 people, a room where music can be played. Such a room does not yet exist in the Lugnez, so maybe here pure architecture can have an effect. Maybe people will hear about it and say, 'We have to go there'. Whether we can pull this off is another matter.

VIA *In a sense this is a reversal of the idea you discussed before, that aesthetics is a limitation. When writing about regionalism, Friedrich Achleitner talks about being; of the real and of its image. In the case of such a community hall, aesthetics enters not as image but as spatiality, and allows for an opening.*

GC That may be, yes. It's certainly the situation with the thermal baths in Vals. Peter Zumthor uses the local stone in an altogether different way. The material is actually the only thing related to the locale. The rooms he has built have no relationship to the village, nor does the building seen from the outside; it is an extremely foreign body. He has reduced it to the idea of the stone: what am I going to do with the local stone? The effect arises out of the aesthetics of architecture. It has an incredible force.

VIA *Is there also a connection between aesthetics and the position Switzerland holds – set apart from the EU, specialised, regional, known for high quality? The architecture is direct, associated to a large degree with craftsmanship. Maybe Switzerland has always been this way, and the rest of the world has changed. Do you see yourself as a Swiss architect when you come to London to speak about your work?*

GC I don't think I identify with Switzerland. I don't see myself as a Swiss architect!

VIA *The ideas that you are developing are not necessarily local. They come out of your values, are connected with your life. And maybe in the end you are not even an architect anymore.*

GC Exactly, it has little to do with a specific place. The local conditions are responsible for the rendition. I think in principle it has nothing to do with the locality itself. You could probably even use this way of operating in America or in London.

VIA *This is an impulse that surpasses borders. If this is the role of the architect, how far do you go?*

GC I have never perceived borders. I simply think the way I do, and say, 'Here I am and this is how I operate'. Maybe a book like *Swiss Made* [Thames & Hudson, 2003] does erect borders, but that was never a topic for me. I'm concerned with things beyond regional issues. After all, there is something we all share: a desire to live well. I am doing it in this place in this way, but in theory it has nothing to do with the region. I have not staked it out – it is simply staked out, topographically, geographically.

VIA *Does it bother you that you're identified as part of this Swiss Made movement?*

GC No, but I'm aware of the risks. I think this is also a danger of the ETH. I return home quickly. My wife tells me not to become part of this whole scene, and she's right. When the party is over, then you have to leave and not linger on. There is a danger that if you stay too long you'll start to slide in.

VIA *And what if the party comes to you?*

GC [Laughs] The party is already here – it's a good party. You have to be able to enjoy yourself, that's important.



Vrin

TRANSCRIBED AND TRANSLATED BY Christina Hurst-Prager

We would like to thank Gion Caminada and his staff, in particular Michael von Arx, and the people of Vrin for their openness and generosity towards us during our visits in January 2003 and 2004.