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A GLIMPSE BEHIND THE FAÇADE OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE





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Prefalz



Hotel des Alpes, Courmayeur

The newest hotel in Courmayeur, a small village at the base of Mont Blanc, seamlessly incorporates its awe-inspiring natural surroundings. For inspiration Architect Domenico Mazza, who grew up in Courmayeur, just had to look around—and found it in the snow-covered rooftops.

About the project:

Project name: Hotel des Alpes
Country: Italy
Object, location: Hotel des Alpes, Courmayeur
Construction site type: New construction
Architects: Studio di Architettura Domenico Mazza

Installer: Gualandris S.r.l.
Roof type: Prefalz
Roof colour: P.10 prefawhite, P.10 anthracite
Façade type: Prefalz
Façade colour: P.10 prefawhite, P.10 anthracite



Photo: Noris Chiara

»The white mountain«

It's white. It's powerful. It stands at the foot of Mont Blanc and waits for all who come to marvel at or conquer the mountain—Courmayeur has a new hotel, that not only leaves a mark aesthetically.

What role did Mont Blanc play in your concept for the brand new TH Hotel?

Domenico Mazza: The hotel is located right at the base of Mont Blanc. It was essential to keep this imposing natural backdrop in mind. The structure, however, is not only inspired by impressions of snow collected atop homes in winter, but also by the colours, shapes and brightness of the massif, which stands majestically.

Is it a challenge or an honour to design an object of this size in your home community?

DM: Yes to both. It was a challenge as the project was so large and I was to design something within this context. It was an honour to be able to create a contemporary piece of mountain architecture in this incredible area and as I grew up in the village it was also something I took a great deal of pride in.

What is the concept?

DM: I was tasked with creating a huge object in these surroundings. I immediately ruled out a concept based on traditional architecture. On projects of this scale, I tend to be against an interpretation of "neuroticism." It's not credible. It lacks tradition. I wanted to make the structure's lines as soft as possible and immediately came up with the shape snow takes when collecting on rooftops and the curved path it takes when melting and sliding down. For this reason, I suggested several bodies and not a single structure. The lines are thus as supple as possible and, whenever feasible, take the surrounding landscape into consideration and pay homage to it. That was made possible by integrating traditional materials like wood and stone into the shape of cyclopes. It was also important to incorporate elements of the surrounding foliage and trees and thus frame the white in as much green as possible.



Why did you decide on a combination of materials instead of using purely traditional materials?

DM: The size of the building is not compatible with the use of traditional architecture. In the mountains, the old buildings do not have seven or eight storeys. Therefore, we decided on a contemporary material like aluminium to "protect" wood. Stone was used in two different respects: as a building shell, occasionally as the foundation for the building and as a cyclopean boulder, which was used to provide the building with a natural context. This choice made it easy to create a modern mix that did not seem too cold and one that placed the focus firmly on the architectonic quality.

Why did you use aluminium?

DM: Weil Aluminium im Hinblick auf die Parameter Qualität und Preis sehr wettbewerbsfähig ist, gleichzeitig formbar und vor allem temperaturbeständig.

When you build a hotel, are you building for the community or for the future guests?

DM: A hotel is obviously built for guests, but you need to keep in mind that it will be a part of the village's panorama. Its appearance influences the overall atmosphere and perhaps even the village's spirit.

What were the biggest challenges with this object?

DM: The biggest challenges were to limit the impact of an object of such size and to present a modern structure that would be new to most.

How did you become an architect? Had that always been a dream of yours? If so, why?

DM: I was born and raised in the mountains and was therefore always attracted to mountain architecture. At first in high school, then as a qualified surveyor, I was fortunate enough to work with experts who performed their craft with passion—but I felt confined. After a few years, I decided to follow my heart and to dive deeper into the details, to further educate myself. I got my university degree—not without making sacrifices—as I spent my time between school and work. I continued that path until I became an architect.

What is your connection to the mountains?

DM: The relationship I have with the mountains is one of absolute respect. The mountain is my home. I grew up at the foot of Mont Blanc, with its image in front of my eyes every day—and that provides me with a strong connection to the mountains.



What is your dream structure that you would like to make?

DM: There is no specific structure that comes to mind: I like working in my humble way, avoiding excessive trivialisation and incorporating modern sensibilities and my own personal style. However, I occasionally dream of creating a skyscraper. That would be a magnificent and complex challenge, which would enable me to separate myself completely from "traditional" mountain architecture and to develop a new view of architecture.

How do you view the role of the architect?

DM: If an architect creates structures, surroundings, shapes, landscapes, paths and cities and impacts the modes of social behaviour and the habits for people, then architects play a greater role than we might first assume. According to Frank Lloyd Wright, architects are not only like poets, an interpreter of his generation, his days and his age, but they must also be aware of the fact that their work will fundamentally and continually impact the behaviour, experience and vision of all who directly or indirectly experience their creation.



Nicola Dettorino

Nicola Dettorino – TH Courmayeur

TH is a hotel chain steeped in tradition, with a total of 28 resorts across Italy. Nicola Dettorino knows all about the hotelier business. And knows what TH Resorts stand for. For this purpose, he was dispatched to the new hotel at the foot of Mont Blanc to help it gain solid footing—both with tourists and with the locals from the Aosta Valley community. "I am actually from Cagliari-fornia," says Nicola Dettorino. In his home, the splendid Mediterranean island of Sardinia, he has already successfully managed a hotel for the TH group. In Courmayeur, his job is to adapt and insert his expertise into the new lodging. "People who hail from the islands are very similar to those from the mountains. First off, they are somewhat withdrawn, but once you get to know them, they are very open, available and friendly," says Dettorino. The connection to the locals is an essential factor in a hotel's success. The TH Group places a great deal of importance on locality, authenticity and focuses on regional cuisine, products from farmers and dishes native to the Aosta Valley.

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*You take your time, so that
you do the job right.*

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You take your time, so that you do the job right. "We had a very long, drawn out opening," says Dettorino. All summer long, it has been a "test run," the first guests arrived and the team got used to working together. Tourists have changed a lot in the past decade. It's no longer about just booking a room. People live in the hotel and the hotel is frequently used. Guests expect more. For example, the demands on the kitchen have grown, something Dettorino is well aware of: "With all of the cooking shows and Instagram videos, today almost everyone can cook." TH Courmayeur focuses on local cuisine, products from local farmers and dishes that are indigenous to the Aosta Valley. Locality also played a huge role with the building itself. The architect, Domenico Mazza, is from Courmayeur, and local stone and timber factored heavily into the design. The white aluminium facade, that stretches into the roof, provides the modern accent.

Acceptance through character

Initially, there was a significant amount of criticism, but it has all died down over time. "It is now accepted," says Dettorino. "Maybe a few people here and there don't like it. But it has character," he says with a grin and emphasises that in addition to the appearance, the building's sustainability is essential. "The hotel is environmentally-friendly. That is fundamental," says the hotel director. Success has several factors; acceptance is certainly one of them.



Mauro Gualandris

Melding tradition and innovation

Craftsman Mauro Gualandris covered a hotel in the shadow of the Alps' highest peak with white aluminium.

"Mont Blanc is the undisputed king," says Mauro Gualandris, passionate craftsman and director of Gualandris S.r.l. He and his team outfitted the TH Courmayeur hotel deep in the Aosta Valley, right at the foot of Mont Blanc in white aluminium. Not your average everyday job. In fact, the job was incredibly challenging—and just as rewarding. When you look at Mauro Gualandris you can see the passion he has for his job. No matter that his father chose this career path for him. He was to co-run a tinsmith business with his brother. And yet, his father's demand has become a dream job for the man from the Aosta Valley. Mauro manages the office, his brother is the technical director. Today, they employ 20 staff members in the company which has made a name for itself far beyond the valley and is known for large-scale projects. "We have extensive experience with big job sites," says Mauro Gualandris. "Initially, we were simple tinsmiths, then we began melding tradition with innovation and carved out our own area of specialization," says the craftsman. Since the house combines traditional elements like wood and stone with aluminium on the roof and walls, we were the perfect partner for the project.

A compromise

The Aosta Valley is world renowned for its stone roofs, which until very recently, were supported by local institutions. Since the end of the financial support, Courmayeur has become home to a wide array of roofs. For Gualandris, the change is justifiable. "We have to evolve further as a community. These projects bring work to the area and simultaneously create a new image. It's a compromise," says the craftsman.

The workshop in the restaurant

The massive project has been the focus of his company for just about a year. With a team of up to 20, Gualandris was at the job site. They also worked throughout the winter, in freezing temperatures and with little to no light. What is now the restaurant was then the workshop. They had to lay a total of 6000 m² worth of Prefalz in Prefa white. "The job site was massive," recalls the tinsmith. I had to coordinate up to 150 people from different contractors at the site.

Sharp slopes and round edges

From a technical point of view, there were several challenges that had to be mastered: The roof has a sharp slope and rounded edges making it appear to flow into the façade. The roof gutters were integrated into the roof. But Mauro Gualandris loves a challenge. "I relish every one of them," he says. Large-scale projects are the greatest challenge. "We don't just perform the work, but oftentimes—as was the case with this project—we involve ourselves in the technical discussions. The interplay between architect, construction company and tinsmith was essential," says Gualandris, who views that as the key to the project's success.

