

# ABSTRACT AND CONCRETE

**IN THE SWISS MOUNTAIN VILLAGE OF VNÄ, FUHRIMANN AND HÄCHLER ARCHITECTS HAVE BUILT A HOLIDAY HOUSE FOR A ZÜRICH GALLERIST. THE VILLAGERS STILL HAVE TO GET USED TO THE RESULT.**

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PHOTOS VALENTIN JECK



THE SOLID CONCRETE WALLS REFER TO THE THICK STONE WALLS OF THE HOUSES IN VNÄ.



**F**OR DECADES, NOTHING  
HAS CHANGED IN  
THE COMMUNITY OF  
SEVENTY PEOPLE

THE SCULPTURAL FORM OF THE PRESENHUBER HOUSE REFERS TO THE ALMOST-BUT-NOT-QUITE REGULAR CONTOURS OF THE BUILDINGS IN THE VICINITY.



THE BAY WINDOWS AT THE CORNERS OF THE HOUSE OFFER A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE COUNTRYSIDE.

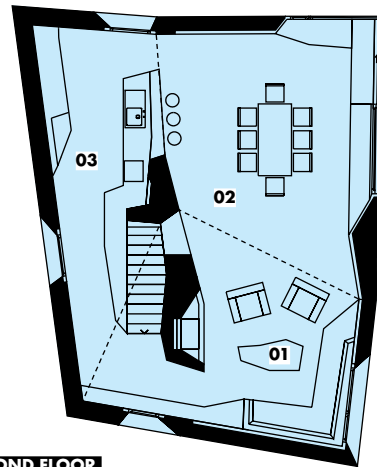
AT THE END OF A CURVY MOUNTAIN road, on a sunny terrace at 1,700 m, lies the Swiss village of Vnà. The peaceful, grand view of the Lower Engadine's mountain backdrop is far removed from mass tourism and the circus of skiers. With its well-preserved farmhouses, the village image is intact: the community doesn't fray at the edges, as is often the case with many over-touristed places. For decades, nothing has changed in the community of 70 people. On the contrary – the village is confronted with an exodus of the young population and a slow dying out. So it's no wonder that discussions arose on the beautiful day when Zurich gallerist Eva Presenhuber bought an empty lot in the village's heart and decided to have a holiday house built by Zurich architects Fuhrmann and Hächler.

An enormous amount of work was involved to convince the villagers of the new project. 'It took a year to close the lot's sale,' says architect Andreas Fuhrmann. Opposition increased when the project began to take form and it became clear that the new building would not be an 'overromanticized' pseudonym of traditional construction. The building expands on the typology of the Engadine region's architecture, yet executes it in a contemporary language. Fuhrmann speaks of it as a research project in which 'we explored how one can typologize the traditional Engadine house.'

A solid construction was chosen for the Presenhuber House, in reference to the thick

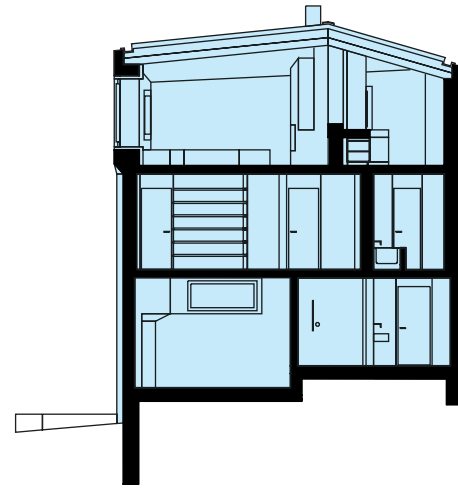
stone walls of the Engadine building typology. With two-sided exposed concrete surfaces, the exterior walls of homogenous insulating concrete have enormous wall strength. Additional traditional elements – like the façade's corbels and pockets, the slanted window soffits and the traditional bays – are interpreted in contemporary form. The slight rotation of the three-storey building forms the structure and creates a different polygonal floor plan on each storey. The foundation is primarily closed and is solidly executed, modelled on the economical structures typically found on the area's farms. On the other hand, windows running around corners in the upper storeys echo traditional corner bays. The windows lie either deep in the façade with typically slanted window soffits, or are constructed flush to the façade as seated niches. The roof can be read as an extension of the complex geometry. The four façades run together in three roof slants. The roof, with its old snow catchers, also refers to the Engadine building style.

The concept continues in the interior. The large entrance room can be understood as a distant relative of the Engadine *sulërs* – a multifunctional storage and workroom. In the Presenhuber House it serves as a reception space and will be used for the owner's smaller contemporary art exhibitions. The interior walls are done in conventional concrete, but are just as unfinished as the exterior walls. To underscore the association to the exposed quarry stone – as they are in

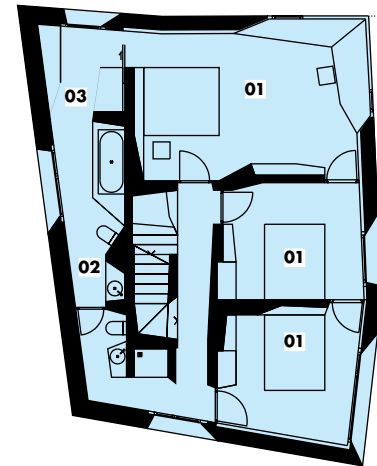


SECOND FLOOR.

- 01 LIVING
- 02 DINING
- 03 KITCHEN

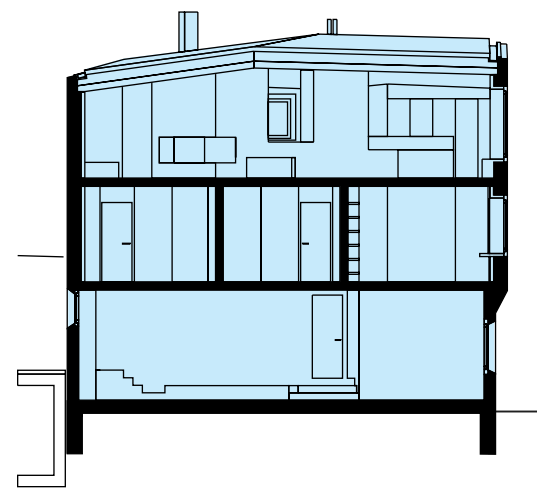


CROSS SECTION.

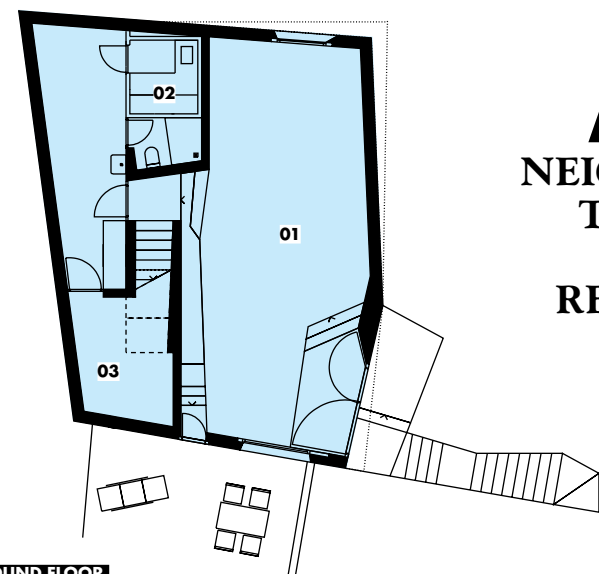


FIRST FLOOR.

- 01 BEDROOM
- 02 BATHROOM
- 03 DRESSING



LONG SECTION.



GROUND FLOOR.

- 01 GALLERY
- 02 SAUNA
- 03 STORAGE

**A**N OUTRAGED  
NEIGHBOUR COMPLAINED  
THAT THE BUILDING  
WOULD BE  
REASON TO MOVE



THE GALLERY ON THE GROUND FLOOR  
CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS A DISTANT  
RELATIVE OF THE ENGADINE SULÈRS:  
A MULTIFUNCTIONAL STORAGE AND  
WORKROOM.

# 'PSEUDO-IMITATION DESTROYS CULTURE'

CHRISTOPH RÖSCH



THE LIVING AND BEDROOMS ARE CLAD IN INDUSTRIAL DOUGLAS PLYWOOD FOR A COSY FEEL.



THE BATHROOM IS A SCULPTURE IN CONCRETE.



THE BEDS ARE MADE OF THE SAME WOOD THAT THE WALLS ARE CLAD IN.

traditional buildings – the master builder purposely provoked rock pockets in the concrete and did not ceil them. The living and bedrooms are clad in industrial Douglas plywood for a cosy feel, but also as a cross-reference to the panelling found in a classical study. Even the large entry door is in plywood, but this time in larch, the most prevalent pine in Engadine. The doors, perforated with vertical gills, play with the idea of the decorated doors on the region's farmhouses.

Historically, implanting a foreign language here is nothing new. 'There was always disruption through foreign influences,' explains Fuhrmann. Even farmers returning from the mercenary wars brought architectural elements from other European countries with them. These cultural influences are legible on many houses in Vnà. Yet it's always difficult for a village that has lived for a long time without change to confront the new and different. An outraged neighbour complained that the building would be reason to move. 'In this case, approved,' quipped Vnà's good-natured community president. The villagers are still in the throes of a learning process. Construction manager Christoph Rösch even speaks in this context of 'developmental aid': 'The people here have to become aware of the village's quality in that they ask, 'Why is someone like Presenhuber, a gallerist from Zurich, moving to Vnà?' Because qualities exist here that can be found nowhere else in the world. The natives should learn to understand that their own quali-

ties, which are influenced by the past, can't be replaced through a poor copy of traditional architecture,' Rösch explains. 'It has to be made clear that pseudo-imitation has nothing to do with developed culture, but on the contrary, destroys this culture. Progress and new things shouldn't be categorized as negative per se, but first simply understood.'

'This learning process is also enhanced in that we're consciously trying to have local craftsmen build with us,' adds Fuhrmann. 'At the beginning, opinions were very split, but suddenly the animosity is shifting to pride.' The concrete's rawness is something many have to get used to, but every material acquires its patina in time. And the architects have determined that 'In Switzerland, concrete isn't as connected to bunker constructions as it is in Germany. And buildings from the 1970s haven't produced any comparatively negative examples.'

The building resembles a sculpture. An array of art objects from Eva Presenhuber's contemporary collection are exhibited in the spaces. Contact to the gallerist occurred through the architects' strong involvement in the Swiss art scene. 'Trust grew through the experience of various gallery renovations,' says Fuhrmann, 'and through our knowledge of the contemporary art scene, which has grown in recent years because of those renovations.'

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