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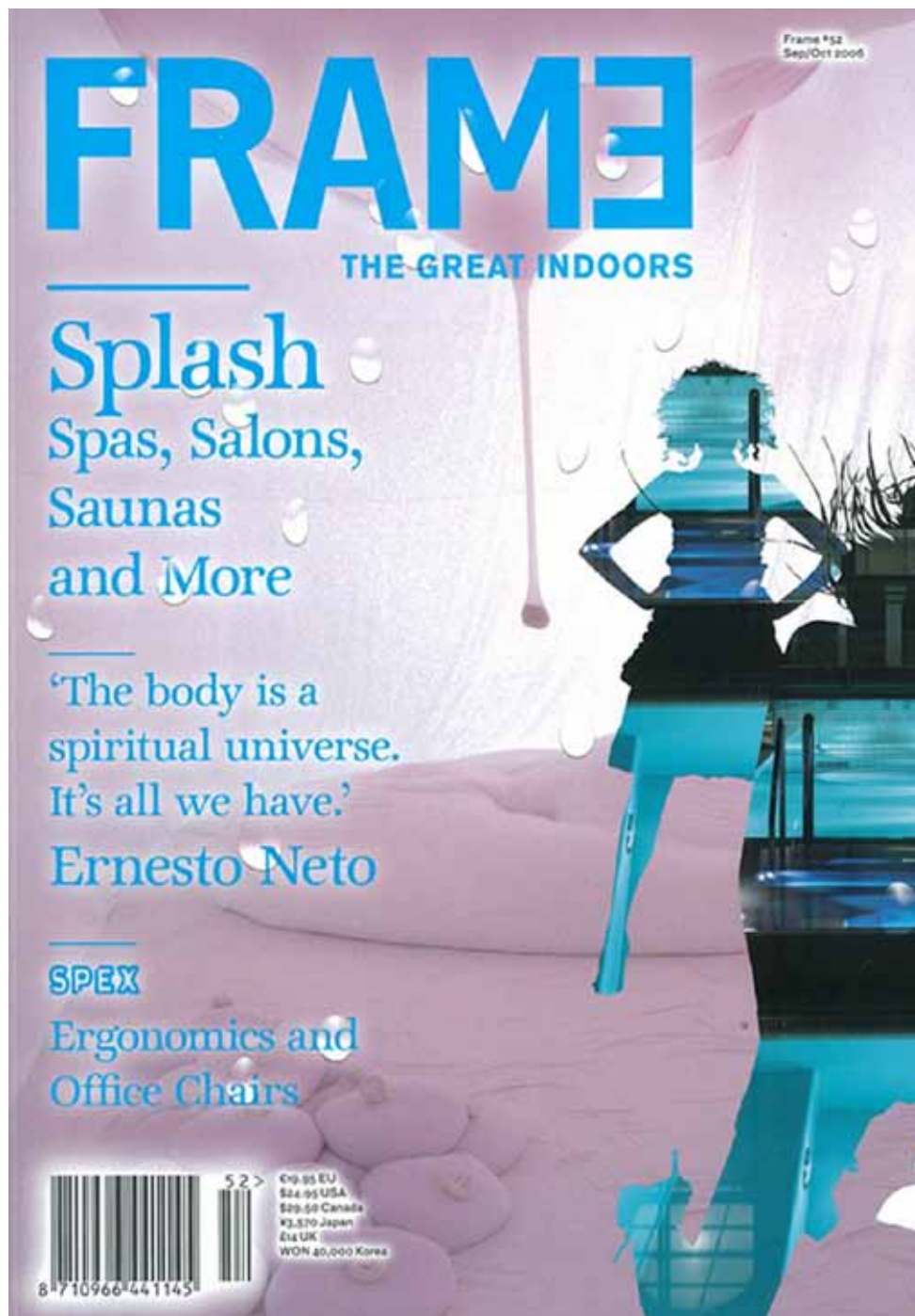
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Matteo Thun  
Bathhouse  
Merano

Frame #52  
2006

BATH  
HOUSE

MERANO

# Life's Little Pleasures

Terme Merano by  
Matteo Thun rekindles the  
Tyrolean bathhouse tradition  
of hedonism for all.

*Text by Jane Barrett and Emmanuel Gallina*

MATTEO  
THUN



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In 1870 Princess Sissi of Austria began visiting a spa in the alpine village of Merano, Italy, with her young daughter, Valerie. There she indulged in traditional Tyrolean whey-and-grape cures and, in the process, encouraged generations of visitors to follow her example. In 2001 Milan-based architect Matteo Thun took over the controversial Terme Merano project and presented a precious gift to the historic town: 7650 m<sup>2</sup> of unadulterated wellbeing. A principal design concept was the synthesis of architecture and surroundings. Thun calls his building 'a transparent dialogue between interior and exterior' and 'a connection between mountains and water'. The complex – consisting of 13 indoor and 12 outdoor pools, eight saunas and a 26-room spa – is quite an asset for an almost forgotten town with a bit of dust on its shoulders.

Terme Merano – 25 pools, eight saunas and a 26-room spa – is located on the banks of the River Passer in the Alto Adige region of northern Italy. The exterior is clad in pietra di Vicenza limestone. Photography by Arnaldo dal Bosco





# BATH HOUSE

Matteo Thun  
Bathhouse  
Merano



Blood-orange mosaics (Trend Group) and LEDs make for a contemporary take on the Roman caldarium, a hot room with underfloor heating. Photography by Arnaldo dal Bosco.

Merano, population 35,000, is situated in the Alto Adige region of northern Italy. The spot is renowned for its mild alpine climate and extensive network of vineyards. The bathhouse forms the focus of a spa complex that hugs the south bank of the River Passer. The site also includes a park with a health-and-bathing trail, a four-star hotel and, oddly, the city's first piazza.

A massive glazed volume covers the main pool area. Wrapped around the pool on three levels are facilities such as saunas and a day spa. Visitors entering from the Piazza Terme, located on the upper level, are

welcomed in an open lobby overlooking the pools, one level below. Visible in the distance are framed vistas of the landscape. Crèche, fitness centre, day spa and terrace café are located on this level, while pools, saunas and bar are accessed from the lower level. The bathhouse attracts visitors of all sorts. By day, families and older guests dominate; by night, couples and young professionals come to wind down.

‘Terme Merano is a transparent dialogue between interior and exterior, a connection between mountains and water.’

Matteo Thun, architect

The double-skinned glass volume is the work of Berlin-based architecture firm Baumann Zillich (BZ), which won a design competition to gain the commission. Thun was called in to complete the scheme after Baumann Zillich's contract was prematurely terminated. He was forced to deal with an architectural language not of his own choosing. Mechanical and time constraints prompted him to integrate the dense framing and services of the main volume as invisibly as possible (mechanical systems are concealed in the 2.2-m-high void above the roof), ‘leaving the space below to pure experience’. Wholly in line with Thun's ‘high tech by low tech’ approach to design, structural frames were painted brown to harmonize with the landscape. The result is perhaps not as lightweight or transparent as originally intended, and the structure limits the spectacular ‘window’ views that Thun had hoped to achieve.

During the day, natural light floods this volume, and when solar protection is required, the entire façade is lined with rolling blinds. A suspended composition of rotating coloured Plexiglas rings and oversized luminous globes

# Frame #52 2006 MERANO



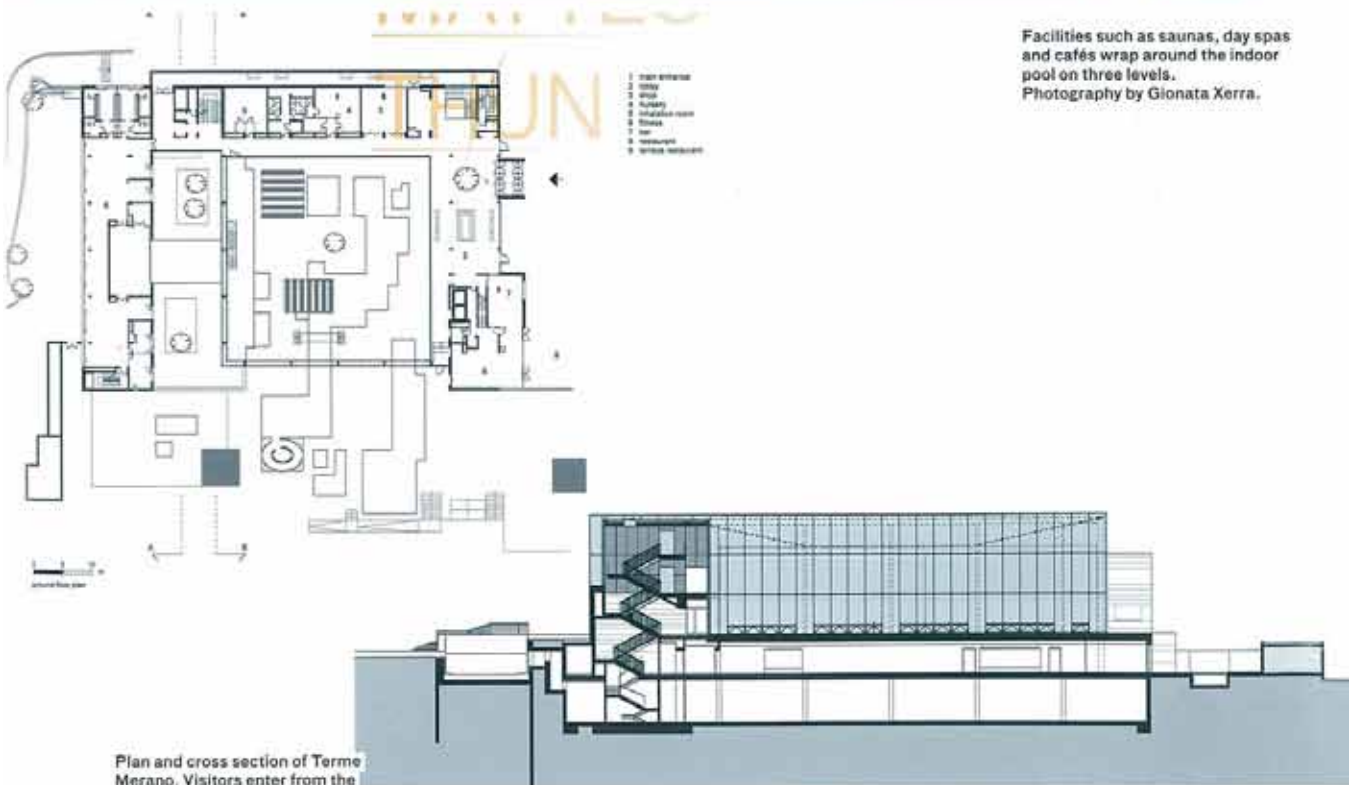
The colour and character of the exterior cladding continue inside, beginning with the granite floor in the entrance area. A variety of local timbers, stone types and mosaics contributes tactility and warmth. Photography by Arnaldo dal Bosco.

recalls a sense of playful movement similar to Alexander Calder's mobiles. Custom-designed by Thun, this installation diffuses a soft though stimulating light in the evening.

The indoor and outdoor pools cover an area of 2000 m<sup>2</sup> and differ in temperature, depth and type of water. (Future plans include the supply of sulphuric thermal water from a new well that sinks to a depth of 2350 m.) The indoor pool area is composed of a series of architectural and aquatic volumes, islands and platforms that combine to create an experiential *parcours*. The largest pool penetrates the glass envelope, allowing visitors a seamless aquatic passage from interior to exterior. Materials were determined by Thun's notion of ‘high touch’ and a balance of aesthetics and function. Monolithic slabs of untreated Vicenza stone border the pools to create a tactile, non-slip edge. Glass mosaics that line the pools shift colour beautifully as the light changes, while grout lines provide grip. Two teak-battened boxes house a relaxation lounge and a separate pool for aquatic fitness. Poolside privacy is at a premium, with tightly packed custom-designed chaise longues separated by skimpy 10-cm intervals. Bathing – given the numbers of visitors, many of them children, and the noise – is at times contrary to the idea of relaxation.

The saunas, a mix of heated and freezing environments, attract a more adult crowd. In contrast to the pools, here an introverted ambience is expressed through a themed series of rooms. From Finnish saunas to the ‘snow’ room (a giant freezer with periodic artificial snowfalls), the experience traverses the traditional to the extreme. To articulate each space, Thun employed predominantly dark colours and materials. Charcoal-grey ceramic floor tiles contrast with strong accents such as blood-orange mosaics in the caldarium. Colour-changing, floor-recessed LEDs and wall graphics provide clear visual signage. Those wanting a sauna break can retreat to a club-like indoor bar or to the terraces.

A discreet escape from pools and saunas is the day spa, an eclectic mix of 26 treatment rooms characterized by subtle lighting effects and a distinct sense of introspection. The day spa is a celebration of South Tyrolean spa culture: sheep's-wool and mountain-hay baths are complemented by wine- and whey-based treatments. Thun continues the cultural connotations with furniture and finishes from the







Matteo Thun  
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region. In addition to playful interpretations of traditional Tyrolean rooms with deep pine tubs, he has even included a Sissi-style 'imperial' room that contains a majestic copper Kaiser bath and golden mosaics.

With the recent opening of the park, the bathhouse can accommodate up to 2500 people. An efficient circulation system through service spaces (lockers, showers and toilets) allows for the careful channelling of these growing numbers around the complex. Visitors wearing innovative 'chipped' watches can navigate freely through the bathhouse: one touch opens a locker, pays for drinks and unfastens access barriers. User-friendly changing rooms are a surprising feature: glass locker fronts provide vertical colour accents that contrast neatly with floors and walls clad in textured grey tiles.

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The spa is a celebration of South Tyrolean spa culture: sheep's-wool and mountain-hay baths complemented by wine- and whey-based treatments

Terme Merano is not Thun's first spa. An earlier project in Alto Adige, the Vigilius spa resort, opened in 2003. The complex in Merano, however, is the first of its kind to challenge the widespread belief that facilities of this quality are the preserve of the affluent. This one is public and offers full public access. New designs on Thun's drawing board include urban community projects such as the White&Green complex in central Milan. In response to the architect's efforts to make design more accessible, we suggest that Thun and his team throw off their clothes and enjoy a *bel tuffò* (Italian for 'beautiful dive') into collective relaxation.