



HIDE AND SEEK

VOMSATTEL WAGNER ARCHITECTS
PLAYHOUSES
VISPERTERMINEN / SWITZERLAND

VOMSATTEL WAGNER ARCHITECTS AND A PAIR OF ARTISTS, PASCAL SEILER AND CARLO SCHMIDT, TRANSFORM EMPTY FARM BUILDINGS INTO A CHILD'S DREAM.

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PHOTOS PASCAL SEILER

What happens to stalls and sheds when they're no longer needed for agricultural purposes? This is a pressing question in the Swiss canton of Valais, and particularly in the village of Visperterminen, where two-thirds of the buildings have agrarian roots. Architects Vomsattel Wagner and artists Pascal Seiler and Carlo Schmidt have turned some of these vacant properties into Chinderwält (Children's World), a forward-looking project with a highly desirable knock-on effect. Like many mountain communities in Switzerland, Visperterminen is struggling to stem the exodus of its younger generation and to deal with streets filled with tourists only during the high season. The creation of a playtime project has brought new life to old farm buildings at the heart of the village. The small scale of these typically Valaisian structures, which rest on short stilts, proved perfect for a child-friendly conversion.

Sensory experiment is the name of the game in spaces dubbed 'Carousel' and 'Labyrinth'.

The former is a box in a box lined with reflective chrome-plated steel. As the mirrored carousel at the centre of the space spins round, endless reflections completely confuse one's sense of orientation. Children entering the Labyrinth experience a variety of tactile, visual and acoustic sensations. Large forms in brightly contrasting colours cover walls, ceilings and floors; reflective, bumpy or fabric-covered hemispheres protrude from flat surfaces; and small cameras film the children and relay the images to a monitor elsewhere. Discoveries can be made on both a small scale, through a microscope trained on items hidden in niches, and a large scale, through a window equipped with 'perspectival' strips that allow the children to measure objects and distances outside the building.

'Our main aim was to remain as abstract as possible,' says Pascal Seiler, who is sure that kids will come up with challenges of their own. And they can let off as much steam as they like in the process – on a huge bouncy cushion. The finances are already in place for the construction of a further five playhouses this year.

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