Cologne must have one of the highest ratios of museums to population of any city in the world. From the brilliant Roman-Germanic museum (which celebrates the life of the colony founded by emperor Claudius) to the museum of chocolate (which celebrates elegant gluttony), from the collection devoted to German sport to the one about eau de Cologne, there can scarcely be an aspect of human culture not examined. The latest, the Diocesan, displays the magnificent art collections Germany’s richest bishopric has built up over 1000 years.

Peter Zumthor won the competition for the new building in 1997. He was faced with a delicate and complex site, the ruins of a great church. At the end of the War, the medieval heart of Cologne was bombed flat, leaving the greatest cathedral in Germany towering over rubble. With immense determination, the city rebuilt its centre largely following the medieval street pattern, though with added urban motorways and twentieth-century buildings. Many shattered monuments were restored, but the greatest and richest medieval church, St Kolumba’s, remained a fragmented shell enclosing a peaceful garden. In the 1950s, Gottfried Böhm built a small chapel on the site to house a statue of the Virgin that had miraculously survived amid wholesale destruction. It was not one of Böhm’s most memorable efforts – an octagonal Basil Spenceah, Gothic-Modernish affair, lacking the amazing expressionist invention of the architect’s 1960s buildings like Bensberg town hall and Nevisge Pilgrimage Church. The Cologne chapel was liked but excavations in the 70s revealed the origins of the Gothic church, yet destroyed the garden.

Zumthor’s task was to display the excavated ruins and preserve the Böhm chapel, yet to cram enough gallery accommodation onto the site to display the extensive diocesan collections. At the same time, all historic elements had to be preserved and, where possible, enhanced. He responded by throwing a high concrete ceiling over the excavated ruins and the chapel, then arranging gallery accommodation above and around it, an obvious strategy perhaps, but fraught with problems. Many people objected to the chapel being ceiling over (including Böhm, even though at one point he had suggested a similar strategy). The ruins were to be disturbed as little as possible, so the ravelled multi-level warren of history had to be analysed in great detail to determine where supports could be located. To preserve the excavated remains, they had to be kept at outdoor temperature and humidity while the works in the collections had to be kept within very strict curatorial limits.

So great was the pressure for space that fragments of Gothic walls had to be incorporated into the perimeter, causing complicated structural problems. As in most of Zumthor’s buildings, the exterior reveals little. At ground level, it is pierced only twice: with the glazed entrance to the foyer of the main building and the separate opening for the chapel. Massive and fortress-like, the walls are made of the longest and thinnest bricks I have ever seen in a modern building; they are all some 36mm thick but vary greatly in length. Specially made in Denmark, they were burnt in charcoal kilns to produce gentle variations on honey-coloured pale grey. Craftsmanship is immaculate, with mortar of nearly the same colour as the bricks and very thick horizontal joints like Roman masonry. Pointing is almost but not quite flush, with the mortar very slightly recessed, producing a soft, almost textile-like surface that demands to be stroked – strange in massive load-bearing structures 600mm thick.

At first floor level, the nature of the brickwork changes, with large passages patterned by random perforations. The impervious texture of the lower wall is transformed burka-like into a veil of the same material. Above, the masonry’s impervious texture continues, now alleviated by the great panes of the top floor windows. These have slightly projecting metal frames, like those on the red brick walls of Lewerentz’s Kippen church, a masterpiece of masonry, light and shadow that is recalled more than once by the diocesan museum. The museum’s roof-line follows the

DIOCESAN DIALOGUE

Peter Zumthor orchestrates an angelic conversation between old and new.