

TRAVEL ► SPAS

Matteo Thun carves a masterful thermal retreat into the Canadian Rockies

Basin Glacial Waters, a project two decades in the making, finally surfaces at Lake Louise, blurring the boundaries between architecture and terrain



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(Image credit: Courtesy of Fairmont)

Twenty years in the making, Basin Glacial Waters has finally arrived at the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, on the shores of the storied Canadian lake. The wait has been worth it. What Italian architect Matteo Thun has created here is a thermal bathing destination that feels less like a building and more like a natural phenomenon sculpted into the Canadian Rockies.

‘The building appears as a carved incision in the landscape, embraced by nature on three sides and from above,’ Thun explains. ‘This deliberate cut opens up a complete, uninterrupted view of the magnificent Lake Louise and its glacier. The concept is to extract a portion of the terrain to form a protected space.’

Basin Glacial Waters



(Image credit: Courtesy of Fairmont)

The entrance sequence establishes an immediate shift in consciousness. The reception sits elevated above the main bathing floor, creating what Thun describes as ‘a journey of descent.’ As guests move down the gently curving pathway, a narrow channel runs alongside, water flowing over smooth lake pebbles. The effect is both sensory and psychological, compressing space before releasing visitors into the facility’s soaring main volume. Here, dramatic windows command attention while serving a deeper purpose.



(Image credit: Courtesy of Fairmont)

‘The arched windows are a homage to the original Chateau building,’ Thun says, pointing to the historic Fairmont’s Painter’s Wing. ‘Our building is designed to feel as though it truly belongs; we chose an architectural language that respects both the natural and built context. Loud, attention-seeking architecture belongs to the past; we believe in an architecture that harmonises and blends in.’

These carefully proportioned openings flood the interior with natural light while creating powerful visual connections to the glacier-fed lake and surrounding peaks.



(Image credit: Courtesy of Fairmont)

This philosophy of restraint and longevity is reflected in the material choices. Cedar and fir provides warmth against the stark alpine landscape, complemented by stones, pebbles and lime plaster that echo the surrounding terrain. Thun’s palette also features the use of porcelain tiles, which he says is ‘the most sustainable and thoughtful alternative to natural stone’ and a pragmatic choice for environments exposed to constant water and temperature extremes.



(Image credit: Courtesy of Fairmont)

The spatial organisation follows what Thun calls a 'box within a box' strategy: 'Inside the larger container, we've placed smaller boxes that house the primary functions, such as saunas, steam rooms and changing rooms. The spaces surrounding these inner boxes define the circulation routes, the more open zones, the water areas, and the places for connection. It's an urban design approach translated to an interior scale.'

This strategy creates a natural flow between moments of solitude and social connection, allowing guests to move between the intimate Silent Salt Relax room and the communal energy of the pools.



(Image credit: Courtesy of Fairmont)

Rather than treating interior and exterior as separate realms, Thun created fluid transitions that shift with Lake Louise's dramatic seasonal changes. The Infinity Pool extends seamlessly onto an expansive terrace, while the outdoor Aufguss sauna maintains visual connections to interior spaces, forming what feels like one continuous, breathing environment. Positioned to capture uninterrupted glacier views, the reflexology pool transforms functional bathing into a contemplative ritual, while varying water temperatures create microclimates within the larger architectural envelope.



(Image credit: Courtesy of Fairmont)

When asked about bringing Nordic wellness traditions to the Canadian Rockies, Thun emphasises their universal appeal. 'We found an incredibly receptive context to propose something indeed very European. When you move away from trends and distill directly the essence of wellness experiences, I feel the whole world can easily speak the same language.'



(Image credit: Courtesy of Fairmont)

As part of Fairmont's broader wellness portfolio, Basin establishes new precedents for how contemporary architecture can honour both cultural wellness traditions and specific geographical contexts, creating spaces that feel transformative rather than merely accommodating.

Basin Glacial Waters is located at 111 Lake Louise Dr, Lake Louise, AB T0L 1E0, Canada. ✱