

## Designs for an unknown future

By Edwin Heathcote

It seems paradoxical that one of the main reasons architecture exhibitions fail is their stasis. Architecture itself may be static but it is experienced through motion, the way you move between spaces. It is for this reason that this show at New York's Guggenheim Museum is among the most successful and inspirational of recent years: the exhibit captures the restless, dynamic nature of Zaha Hadid's powerful architecture. Of course, it helps that Frank Lloyd Wright's gallery is the most dynamic of all important museums before or since, its spiral ramp and sloping floors presenting a perpetual headache for curators and a delight for visitors. Hadid's office has used the ramp as a race circuit, breaking it up at intervals with chicanes, pit-stops and straights that accelerate your eyes across the surface of the most accomplished and visionary architectural drawings since the 1960s.

Just a few years ago, this exhibition could have been nearly as large yet would have been a solemn affair. Why, it would have asked, do we not see more buildings here? Now the visitor is more likely to be astonished that this practice, headed by an Iraqi-born woman, the first female recipient of architecture's biggest prize, the Pritzker, based in part of a converted Victorian school in London's Clerkenwell, is churning out plans of wonderful complexity and elegance all over the globe. It is as if that experimental energy embodied on paper has pushed its way through the crust of construction and exploded into a lava flow of fluid, brilliant structures.

The show documents Hadid's career from the student work influenced by her teacher Rem Koolhaas, who has since become the king of hyper-modernism, through her infatuation with the utopian and formal fantasies of Russian constructivism and suprematism (the show kickstarts with a vast canvas homage to Malevich's tectonic investigations). Next, tentative (not always successful) first steps into physical realisation, then the explosion of recent structures, some of the most radical and brilliant of the new millennium.

The abstraction of Hadid's early work, the acute angles, motion lines, flashes of colour and unspecific transparent volumes, which always looked as if they would be better on paper than on site, gave way to fluid, flowing forms, sinuous concrete sculpting and undulating landscapes in which it is impossible to determine where the ground ends and the building begins (what Hadid refers to as an "urban carpet"), where the earth is scooped up into the architecture. Last year's Phaeno Centre in the Volkswagen town of Wolfsburg remains the clearest example of how her art has been transformed from the seductive but unproven image to a radically innovative, ongoing spatial and formal experiment, positioned somewhere between what seemed like the dead ends of Russian constructivism, German expressionism and the sculptural modernism of Oscar Niemeyer, architect of Brasilia, one of the few cities to put modernism's visionary aspirations to the test.

If there is one anomaly, it is the lack of theory. The expressionists and constructivists emerged from highly politicised situations, reacting to war, revolution and new social orders. For someone with those radical influences there is a surprising lack of politics and, despite a few claims to the contrary, theory has never been Hadid's strong point. These buildings are generated far more through intuition than through theory, and the power of the images makes lengthy polemic irrelevant. The apolitical approach, however, has also led to a consistency that has not been compromised by building or a reassessment of radical views: the architecture remains recognisably an improved version of that of the early 1980s.

In fact it is in the furniture that this consistency is most visible. Many wonderful pieces are displayed here, not always successfully, their physicality making them an awkward adjunct to the spiral flow. One huge cast seat looks far better at Max Protech's Chelsea Gallery, which is running a small but fine concurrent show that allows your eyes to settle on single pieces for longer.

The only other architect so far awarded the accolade of a Guggenheim retrospective has been Frank Gehry, of the wildly successful Bilbao franchise. Like Hadid's, Gehry's architecture is full of movement, although unlike her he seems to be past his peak, regurgitating a formula that reached its zenith in Bilbao. Both architects have found their respective paths through modernism, to emerge with a unique and recognisable aesthetic that has pushed architecture, and the expectation of what architecture can achieve, on to another plane.

Architecture is, once more, a big subject in Manhattan and this show is one of architecture's rare international blockbusters. It is the symptom of an increasingly serious engagement with the subject that follows in the wake of 9/11, an event that brought the symbolic power of buildings dramatically to the fore. As the debate about Ground Zero grinds on, New Yorkers have become increasingly interested in the power of architecture to transform the city and in how buildings can be integrated with transit, with public space, with how they can embody memory and motion: all these themes find powerful resonance in Hadid's work. A production line for BMW, an interchange in Naples, a chunk of a Chinese city that looks as if it has been worn down by the actions of water and wind: all these schemes encapsulate a flow of space and traffic and embody it in architecture.

If there is a historical parallel it must be more with baroque Rome than with the constructivists frustrated by Stalinist reaction. Those Italian artist-designers conceived a muscular architecture of movement and energy, walls bursting with latent power, buildings that radically reinvented public space as a place of urban theatre and rebelled against the repose of the renaissance. Manhattan's Museum Mile, with its monumental Italianate villas and institutions, attempted to evoke the wealth, taste and self-satisfaction of the renaissance dynasties; Frank Lloyd Wright blew it apart with his iconoclastic Guggenheim spiral, a building 17 hard years in the making and now nearly half a century old. With its naked, raw concrete now exposed beneath a dark web of scaffolding as part of a big restoration, it looks as up-to-date, and as visionary, as ever. It would be hard to think of a more appropriate exhibition and a more successful engagement with its continuing challenge to curators and to art itself than this enjoyable, important and ambitious show.

*'Zaha Hadid' is at New York's Guggenheim Museum, tel +1 212 423 3500, until October 25. Sponsored by Oldcastle Glass & Deutsche Bank*