

## Iraqitect: Zaha Hadid commands the Guggenheim, but remembers her roots.

Text © Hugh Pearman. A fuller version of the interview published in The Sunday Times Magazine, 4 June 2006. Images courtesy of Zaha Hadid Architects: portrait of Zaha by Steve Double, photo of Vitra fire station by Helene Binet.



Whatever you think an architect looks like, whatever you think an architect does, wherever you think an architect comes from, disabuse yourselves of those notions. And consider instead Zaha Hadid, the most extraordinary success story that this notoriously volatile profession has ever produced.

Women traditionally don't rise to the top in architecture - not on an international level. Not in the stratosphere where Zaha now exotically moves, where a handful of global superstar architects is constantly airborne like some design equivalent of a nuclear deterrent. Women don't get invited into that club. And as for a notoriously short-fused, allegedly tyrannical, hugely imaginative and sometimes sweetly charming woman from Baghdad of all places - no, that script would be turned down by Hollywood as just too inherently implausible. Besides, no actor on earth could play the mercurial Zaha.

And yet here I am, talking to the world's most famous female architect, a British citizen now 55 but effectively ageless, in the converted school in Clerkenwell that has been her studio for years. She is wearing one of her trademark black tunic tops, narrow shiny trousers, Prada sandals - all black. She lounges on a pink S-curved Verner Panton chair at her huge meeting-table with its blue Perspex top, slashed and layered into a million indentations. Books and magazines line the room. Occasionally she barks orders to underlings in her rich, American-accented drawl. When Zaha barks, her staff jump to it. And I mean literally jump. They spring to their feet and hurtle forward as if catapulted. They have to. Working for Zaha is not like working for other people. It's like coping with an earthquake.



As one of her former assistants told me:

"It's never dull, but she's a complete nutcase. You're dealing with a screaming harpie most of the time. In a way it's quite sad. I think she may be unhappy with herself. She's chaotic."

When the word goes round that Zaha is about to arrive in the office, there is much feverish tidying of desks. Even so, the story goes that on a bad day she can be inclined to do a bit of extra cleaning herself: a sweep of her arm can send your stuff flying across the room. Once, I'm told, Zaha managed to hurl a computer monitor to the floor so violently that it spectacularly exploded. I notice that they've all got flat screens these days.

This is all part of the Zaha legend, of which she herself is well aware. Anyone who joins her enterprise knows they are in for a scary ride. Still, scores do. When I first met her here, she had one room, a few assistants, no professional income to speak of, and was somewhat awkward and tongue-tied in interview. Now her office has taken over most of this big old school. Every former high-ceilinged classroom you glance into, there are more young, earnest, black-clad architects, jammed together at row upon row of computer screens running state-of-the-art modelling programs, their eyes swivelling nervously in case it's the boss breezing in. There are 136 of them here, and others in Italy, Germany and China. The firm has doubled in size in a year. Zaha owns all of it. And she is no longer ill at ease. She may play hard to get, but she loves the media attention.

Now we have a big exhibition of Zaha's work in one of art and architecture's holiest shrines: the spiralling galleries of Frank Lloyd Wright's original Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan. The museum's director, Thomas Krens, collects architects as much as art. He knows when people hit critical mass. That moment, for Zaha, is now.

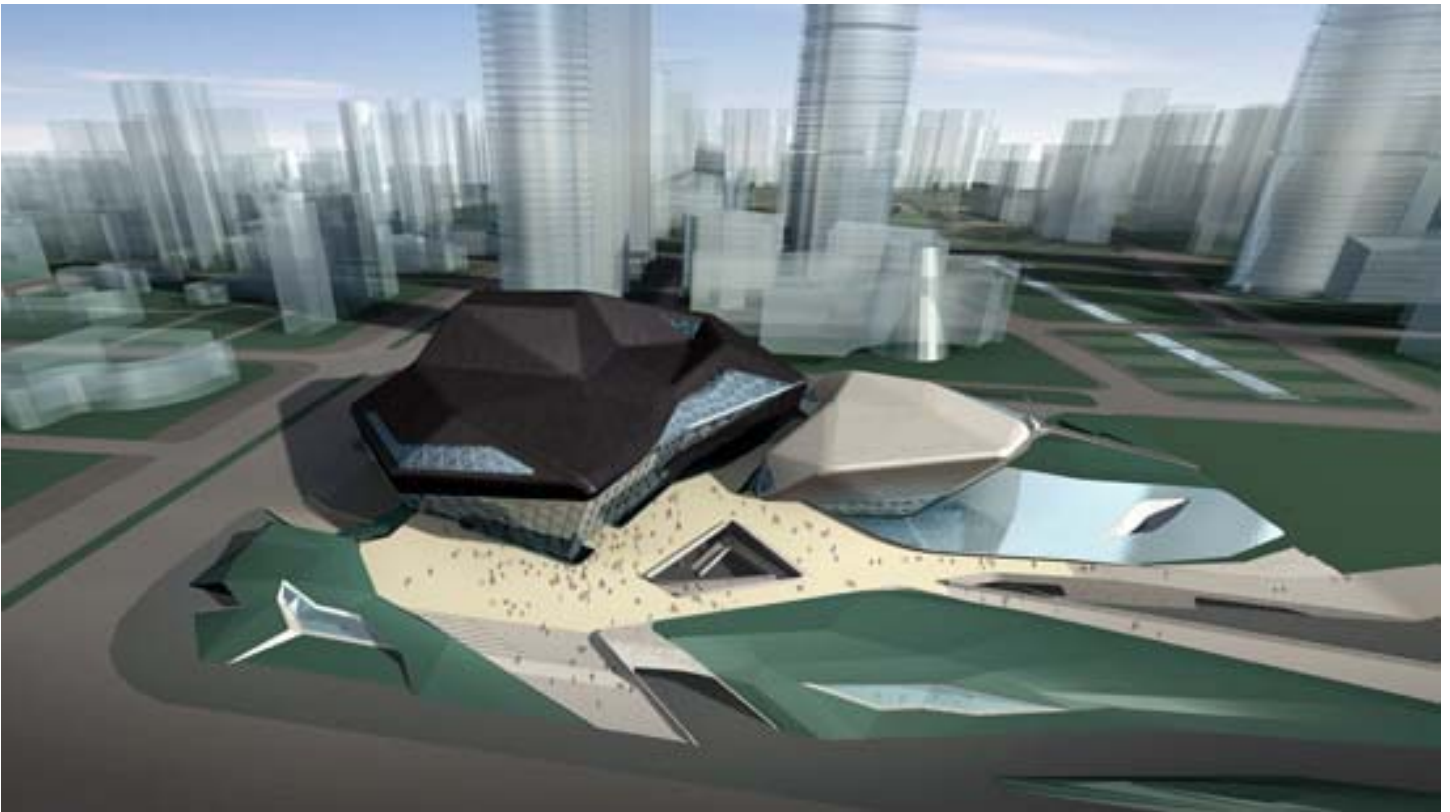
"The world of architecture has changed incredibly - it's really remarkable," she says. "In our case, perseverance paid off." Ah, but there's more to it than that. Why is it that there are no other women in her exalted position? Her notoriously demanding nature (bruised ex-staff like to swap stories of her habitually being late, rude, stamping on unsatisfactory models in the office, smashing computers, making hotel managers' lives hell) inevitably means that she gets described as a diva. Her male rivals who behave much the same - though usually with less style - don't get that label. In truth we kind of want Zaha to act like Mariah Carey, and she does not disappoint.





But away from that stereotype, it's all about working in a man's world. Architecture and family life don't mix well for women. She's single, and her private life remains private. "There are plenty of female doctors and lawyers, and they work crazy hours. But one of the problems with architecture is that you can't stop and start. There needs to be continuity in the progress of the work, whether you're male or female. But let's put it this way. No matter how much progress has been made, there is still a world that women are prohibited from entering. Not because men don't want you there. But there's still a kind of taboo. Men go to get clients, they go golfing, canoeing, yachting, doing sport together ...."

She laughs, no doubt thinking as I am of the sheer impossibility of ultra-metropolitan Zaha bonding with a client while, say, paintballing or white-water rafting. So she operates differently. She gets her work through talent, graft, and force of personality. Oh, and she can flirt with the best of them.



The world's best buildings are decided by competition among the architectural A-list and for the past few years, Zaha and her team have been winning swathes of them. An art gallery or museum here. A library or factory there. Strangely contorted office towers in Milan. A spiralling arrangement of university and conference buildings in Barcelona. An opera house like some poised Stealth spacecraft in Guangzhou, China. A cable-car station. A ski jump. A concert hall. A rippling wave of a building for London's 2012 Olympics. Complete masterplans for districts of Istanbul and Singapore. There are many more, here, there, and everywhere. You start to wonder: how can she keep up this pace?

So hot is Zaha right now that a prototype table she designed for the modishly-named new English furniture company Established and Sons sold at auction in New York at the turn of the year for an astonishing \$296,000 dollars. OK, so the fluid, ghostly "Aqua" table with its blue silica-gel top is a tour-de force, a piece of advanced architecture in miniature. But what's so valuable about her name? When she won the \$100,000 Pritzker Prize in 2004 - the first female ever to win America's most prestigious architecture award - the judges said she would have been famous if she'd never built a thing. "The sources of her originality seem endless," remarked the citation. But by then she had managed to build at last, not least a rather successful art gallery in Cincinnati. A real, working building. In America's conservative Midwest. Yee-hah!

One of the Pritzker judges, the veteran American architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, said that Hadid "has changed the way we see and experience space." That is one big claim. How many architects can do that? Very few. Most just dress it up a bit, make it nice if you're lucky. Zaha is rather more physical. She takes space in her hands and kneads it like dough, or slices it up like freshly prepared vegetables. Floors swoop, walls lean, ceilings fly away, outside and inside get all mixed up. Your expectations are confounded. "It's about seamlessness, porosity," she remarks. But it took her a hell of a long time, some crushing disappointments, and some serious tantrums in the office, before she got to this happy position of moving in the world of movers and shakers and dancing dollar signs.

A few years ago, Zaha was, career-wise, on the ropes in Britain. Always promising, she looked doomed to be forever a "paper architect" - an artist or academic, not someone to be trusted with the complex and messy business of real building. She had made a stir at London's best architecture school, the Architectural Association where she had arrived in 1971. Frustrated by how little she was being taught, she got to set up her own department in an empty Covent Garden warehouse, and had the pick of the country's experts on tap. Hadid was always impatient to build. But it was decades before she could. So she became an architecture teacher. The world needed to catch up a little first.

"We all went to nun school, and the boys went to Jesuit school" she says. "Both my parents believed completely in education, because education gives you independence. It was a very liberal household." This was secularised Baghdad in the 1950s and 60s, where many a wealthy middle-class family - Moslem, Jewish or Christian - took up the Catholic school option. This caused the five-year-old Zaha some confusion. "They tried to get me to cross my heart and pray," she chuckles. "But my parents didn't do that. I thought, what am I doing, going to chapel when it's freezing cold in winter? But I have very pleasant memories of that school. The nuns got these brilliant professors from the university to teach us. At that time in Iraq there was a belief in progress." Despite the political uncertainty of those army-controlled, pre-Saddam days it was a fine city, she remembers slightly wistfully, with some beautiful garden suburbs. Given the extended family system, she could have combined work there as an architect with children, no problem, she says. She had professional women friends who did just that. And the urge to design came early.

"I wanted to be an architect since I was 11. My father's best friend had a son who did architecture, and he used to come and see us all the time. They asked him to do my aunt's house, in the north. So there was this architectural model in our house. I was very young, and I was very intrigued by this thing. I might have thought it was a doll's house. But also - my mother had great taste, we got this new furniture - Italian, late fifties, fantastic furniture. I was very intrigued by all this. I was beginning to see things that were different."

Her father Mohammed, a leading businessman and social democrat, was involved in industrialising Iraq during the period when oil revenues were pouring into the country's coffers. After the rise of Saddam and the Iran-Iraq war, most of the professional classes, including her family, quit the country. Though she still has some relatives in the north. So would she consider taking on a project there, as she has in previously war-torn Beirut? "Of course I would love to do something there. It would be great to combine a way to rescue that place with architecture. Iraq now needs everything from scratch. There's nothing much left. There's such a wounded society that has to be rectified first. But then with housing and hospitals and educational buildings one can start to draw architecture into it."

In those days it was normal to go overseas to finish your education. She came to London, via Beirut where she first studied mathematics, before deciding that, yes, architecture was unquestionably her thing. Thanks to her family connections, she was never short of a bob or two. I ask if an enduring story about her is true: that her family turned up in Rolls-Royces to her London graduate show. Well yes, she admits, one of her brothers may have. Oh, and so did a friend of hers. "My father would have hated to sit in a Rolls-Royce, he was very puritanical that way. People here thought I was rolling in money, but it wasn't the case. It was difficult to get money out of Iraq. It was a struggle. But, OK, I can't say I'm poor."

Her mentor at the architectural association was the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who is now also a global superstar. ("Rem can sleep on planes," says Zaha enviously. He likes flying. I don't.") Nigel Coates, now professor of architecture at the Royal College of Art, was a student at the same time and remembers Zaha vividly. "Rem was very proud of her. She was his protégée, and he hers," he recalls. "They were very interested in revolutionary modernism. I always had my suspicions that it wasn't what most people thought of as modernism at all."

Zaha, says coates, was every bit as moody then as she is now. "She was always exasperatingly volatile. She always did take you to the limit. That's what we loved about her, and that's why her work has got that confidence about it. I always knew she was special, but I wouldn't have predicted that she would turn out to be as successful as she has. She's outdone the men at their own game."

There are a lot of anti-Zaha mutterings among other architects - partly because they're jealous, partly because there is a bit of a backlash against funny-shaped icon buildings going on. One highly successful British traditionalist architect, Robert Adam, takes the line that what Zaha does is not architecture at all - or even building. "It's abstract sculpture disguised as architecture," he says. "And it's very interesting, but what is the philosophy, the theory, behind it? Is she just doing these

interesting shapes because she can? Once people stop cleaning them, they will start to deteriorate very quickly. In five or ten years they may start to fall to bits and you'll be left with some pretty nasty jagged objects."

However long or short the life of a Zaha building, at least she is building. For a long time this seemed a pipedream. Nobody in the 1970s was going to build the kind of buildings she dreamed up, which were heavily influenced by the revolutionary art and architecture of the early Soviet Union - the Constructivists and Suprematists with their starkly geometric paintings, leaning towers and houses made of intersecting circles. But then came what looked like the big breakthrough: in 1982 she won her first competition.

She was 32, and it looked as if she was on her way, winning an international competition to build a replacement for the Peak Club in Hong Kong. At the time, her jagged, splintery style and neo-Vorticist explanatory paintings mystified people. Was this half-hovering, bundle-of-sticks object buildable? Despite the reassurances of her famous engineers, Arup (they'd made the Sydney Opera House and Paris's Pompidou Centre work) people had their doubts. The scheme was never built. But her name was noted. A couple of small-scale buildings did follow - a bar in Japan and a little company fire station for the Vitra modern furniture company in rural Germany outside Basel.

The fire station was significant: Rolf Fehlbaum, boss of Vitra, was building an industrio-cultural campus of top architectural names. Fehlbaum gave Frank Gehry, later to be famous for the Bilbao Guggenheim museum, his first European building with the Vitra Design Museum. Earlier he had commissioned a factory building from Britain's Nicholas Grimshaw. Then came the Japanese minimalist Tadao Ando, then Zaha. All have become huge internationally: Fehlbaum's place in cultural history is assured. It must have helped her that both he and Gehry were on the 2004 Pritzker Prize jury.



1993 saw the second big opportunity. Zaha won successive rounds of a protracted competition to design the new Cardiff Bay Opera House. Once again, this was to be her first big real-life commission. But the victory turned sour as she found herself caught in a lethal pincer movement. Zaha cut an outré figure in Cardiff and some did not like a Londoner - and a thick-accented, olive-skinned, female Londoner with attitude at that - taking charge of a key Welsh cultural building. A local press campaign was whipped up against her, while simultaneously a whispering campaign got under way at the Millennium Commission in London, which would have forked out half of the money for it.

Zaha was briefed against. One particular Millennium Commissioner made it his personal mission to stop her. He put about the familiar canard that her design was unbuildable. Utter nonsense, of course, and today Zaha's design, a graceful courtyard or "necklace" of buildings, looks positively restrained. But the twin campaigns succeeded. On December 22, 1995, the Millennium Commission axed the project. Scarcely had the dust settled than they got a local architect to build a different opera house. So the whole sorry affair stank to high heaven.

"Some of the Welsh behaved abominably," she says. "There was a group in Cardiff - I never understood what their game was. Perhaps they didn't like foreigners, or women, I don't know. On the other hand there were others who were fantastic. I swear to God, for maybe five years after Cardiff, people would stop me on the street in London, in America, at the airport, and say - we're Welsh, and we're very embarrassed about what happened."

She reckons that the Cardiff debacle set back her progress - her acceptance - some four or five years. She had a wobble moment - should she carry on with architecture, should she jack it in? But there were lots of competitions to enter. She and her faithful sidekick Patrick Schumacher - the calm at the heart of the storm that is Zaha's office - flung themselves into the fray. Without Schumacher, it is said, few Zaha buildings would get built. While she is flying the world selling high concept, Schumacher is back at base camp, organising the troops.





And she has learned from Cardiff's baptism of fire. At the end of 2005 she found herself in a spookily similar position. She'd won yet another competition, for the £75m, 20,000-seat Aquatics Centre in the Lea Valley - to be the home of watersports in the 2012 Olympics. Which was great, until until Tessa Jowell, the Culture and Sport Minister, suggested in a speech that the project had doubled in cost and that Zaha had been sent back to the drawing board. This time, Zaha reached for the phone (and, some say, her lawyers) and got results.

First, an old champion of hers, the highly-placed architect Lord (Richard) Rogers - who had co-chaired the competition jury - wrote to the papers in her defence. Then Zaha received a grovelling written apology from the DCMS. "We are grateful for, and supportive of, the work carried out by your team," it concluded abjectly. Game to Zaha. She isn't going to let herself be the fall girl again when it comes to the politics of public building.

Back in the Cardiff Bay Opera House days, she couldn't exert such leverage. But she did get some payback. Was there a tacit admission of guilt behind the fact that she was soon handed another prime Millennium Commission-funded project to do - the Mind Zone in the Millennium Dome? The Dome was lampooned as a folie de grandeur of Tony Blair and his darkly scheming sidekick Peter Mandelson (though it was hatched by the previous Conservative government, lest we forget) but Zaha's was one of the better parts. She liked doing it.

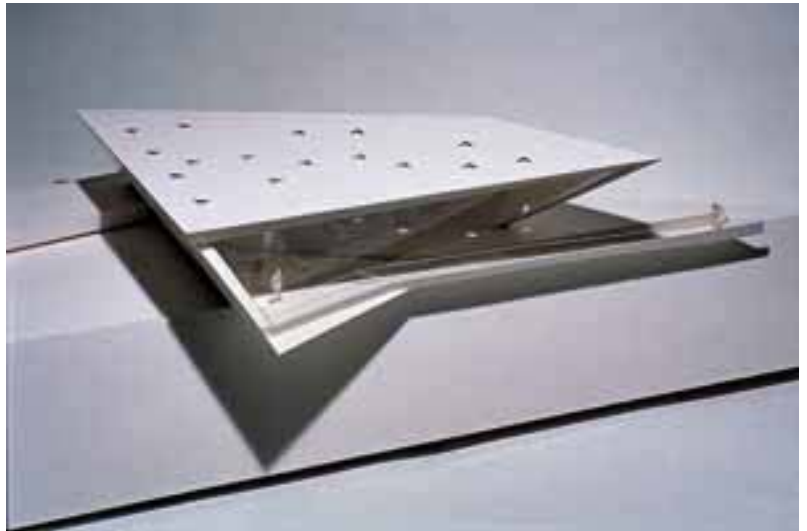
"Everyone's negative about the Dome. But I have to say - the Dome was rather positive for us. It was the first time we earned a proper income. We had a very good experience trying to interpret the content of the Dome as an artistic installation. We could combine art with architecture, we did some interesting research on materials - I think it's a shame they demolished all those things." She pauses for a second. "And in the meantime," she adds softly, we won Cincinnati."

Cincinnati was her passport out of hidebound Britain, the art gallery commission that turned out to be the first of an unbelievable - and so far virtually uninterrupted - run of good fortune. Soon she was doing a tram terminus in Strasbourg, then the Ordrupgaard Museum of Impressionist art in Copenhagen, then an arts complex in Rome - and by then the jobs were coming so thick and fast it got hard to keep up. Zaha had always looked and acted like an international celebrity. Now she really was.



So does she feel as British as her passport these days? "I feel very much a Londoner," she replies. "It's always hit me how British I can feel in other countries. But with some other things - music, say - I'm an Arab. And I'm an Iraqi. It's not about being patriotic or nationalist. I can't erase those years I spent in Iraq. And I do like the country a lot. I had a very nice childhood. There was that wealth, those incredible human resources. Reading the papers now..." (she searches for the right word) "...it's unbelievable."

Having been mucked about by public-sector jobsworths in the past, she has now leapfrogged them too. June 14 is a date to treasure: Zaha, Miss Exotic, meets Mr. Prudence - Treasury boss (and supposedly next Prime Minister) Gordon Brown. She's building the latest in the line of signature-architect Maggie's Centres, the pioneering care buildings for people affected by cancer. Gehry has done one, Rogers is doing one. Hers is in Brown's parliamentary constituency in Fife, Scotland: the project is being launched at his Government stronghold, 11 Downing Street. The project, the patron and the venue all tell you one thing: now she's welcome here, too. It's typical of us Brits to test out our best architects overseas first. One day, maybe we'll give our talent an easier ride.



Hanif Kara, a rising-star structural engineer who has recently been compared in talent and ambition to Brunel, works with Zaha, helping to bring her exotic dreams into reality. He knows just how much she is worth, in all kinds of ways. "Across the world, I find she's the most saleable commodity in architecture, apart from Norman (Foster)" he says. "I'm one of the believers. She's been disproportionately good for us. In terms of shifting technological boundaries, she's pushing them hard. Ten or 15 years ago, it would have been impossible to build some of these buildings."



Why? Because back then, says Kara, there weren't the tools available to design her most ambitious structures. The Cardiff opera house would have been relatively straightforward, but a building such as her recent Phaeno science centre in Wolfsburg, Germany - a marching concrete sauropod of a building with a floor like a cratered moonscape - demanded a new level of computing power, and got it. Just as Gehry only got into his stride when computers got clever enough to scan his extraordinary hand-made 3D models, so Zaha has reaped the benefits of new technology. Her splintery early designs, radical though they were, were still made of conventional straight lines. These days her buildings are becoming more fluid, more rounded. That's computer modelling for you. Typically of Zaha, she's apt to complain that she and Schumacher are the only people in her youthful office who can still draw by hand.

So she is getting more ambitious, not less. Not everything she designs these days makes it - we should mourn the loss of her proposed Department of Islamic Art at the Louvre, a bold experiment in modern surface decoration clearly influenced by traditional Islamic decorative techniques but taken in a radical new direction, a tower skewed like a fish about to leap right out of its cultural pond. That was just too much for the guardians of the French patrimony. Still, she's got more than enough to be getting on with.



If Hadid's Iraqi childhood is the history of a lost world, and her slow rise to fame in Britain an object lesson in triumphing against the odds, then how would she characterise her roost-ruling position today?

"Someone on Lebanese TV asked me how I got to where I am," she muses. "Is it fate, or is it luck, they asked?" She leans forward and stabs a victorious finger in the air. "Neither! It's hard work!"

There was one question I was, I admit, too chicken to put to Zaha face to face. So I texted her later. What about that office-tyrant reputation, then, I asked? All that raging and smashing stuff up? Did she recognise that and did she think it mattered?

Gingerly I put the phone down and watched it. Seconds later, it chirruped. The screen read:

"I am actually too kind...its best if you ask the others no one talks abt that. Does anyone write abt the male tyrants. It's very understandable - and it's such a cliché. ZAHA is difficult. To whom exactly."

Er..thanks, I replied. The phone chirruped again.

"Trying to push ideas is very tough on all counts. Thanx for the effort see you soon ZAHA"

And off she flew to Manhattan. That's ZAHA - a life lived in capital letters. Very tough on all counts. Thanx for what effort, I wondered? Trying to get beneath her guard a little? Pushing ideas is, in the end, what she lives for. I think she punishes herself as much as those around her.