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ARCHITECTURE

THE FUTURE IS HOW? ARCHITECTS HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO BE OPTIMISTS. A CONVERSATION WITH ZAHA HADID.

BY GARY INDIANA

TWO DAYS BEFORE Zaha Hadid's Guggenheim retrospective opens, I show up for our meeting expecting a Dragon Lady—a profile in the *London Times* described her as “notoriously short-fused” (she once “managed to hurl a computer monitor to the floor so violently that it spectacularly exploded”)—and, despite my theatrical background, hoping nothing too spectacular occurs. Instead, I encounter an easygoing, amiable woman swathed in layers of black shawlery, with shoulder-length, blondish-auburn hair framing the faintly drooping features of the chronically jet-lagged.

Despite the frenzy a huge museum installation generates, Hadid seems preternaturally relaxed, with everything under control—or, more likely, she's been around the block enough to know you can't control everything. Since her work style has been politely described as “staccato,” I assume this applies to the last-minute details of her retrospective as well.

She has, as they say, her own glamour, accented by a Lauren Hutton-like gap tooth and a notable glint of amusement in her eyes. She's just been in Miami, a city she likes, though she deplores the demolition of the old Art Deco hotels and finds much of the architecture going up there hideous.

I confess my inability to parse the difference between deconstructivist architecture, tectonics, biomorphism, and other current architecture jargon.

“These things aren't really important,” Hadid assures me.

Her CV would be the envy of any architect: graduate of the Architectural Association School in London; former partner in Rem Koolhaas's OMA; winner of innumerable competitions and awards, including the 2004 Pritzker—the architectural equivalent of the Nobel. Yet until little more than a decade ago, Hadid, now 55, remained a “paper architect”—garnering professorships and prizes without ever getting to build anything.

This changed in 1993, with the realization of the Vitra Fire Station in Weil am Rhein, Germany, an almost airborne-looking structure of tilted planes and transparent walls, a building that echoed the colors as well as the velocity of the fire engines it contained. Other commissions followed, but not—let's be honest—as rapidly as a male architect might have expected as a matter of course. These included the Cyclopean tower of the Bergisel Ski Jump in Innsbruck, the Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, and the BMW Central Building in Leipzig. Models of her finished buildings and proposals, along with furniture, cooking islands, chandeliers, and drawings, can be seen at the Guggenheim.

Hadid's architecture owes some of its formal audacity to her early fascination with Tatlin and Malevich's Soviet Constructivism. Her approach is a fusion of utopianism and practicality. A strong example is the BMW building: “We decided to plug the office building into the assembly line,” she says. “The conveyor belt that takes the cars from one production facility to another goes through the building. Everyone flows through the front entrance—the workers, CEOs, everybody.”

Some of her buildings suggest agitated liquids frozen into whorls and waves, and their unfamiliar beauty, I think, could usefully replace any number of mediocre structures here. She hasn't built anything in New York. Neither, as far as I'm concerned, has any worthwhile architect in the past 40 years, though a few, like Jean Nouvel, have projects in progress now.

And so I'm primarily interested in her thinking about New York and also her idea of the future: Architects tend to look at the built environment as a fixable mess that will never stop growing, a necessary optimism I don't generally share. “If you could build anything you wanted in this city,” I ask, “what do you think New York needs?”

“There needs to be some kind of master-planning idea—not similar to the kind in the

thirties. What's similar between Britain and America is the lack of good-quality civic buildings. So I'd do something with infrastructure. We tried for the competition for the High Line. But it would also be interesting to do housing. We're working now on some high-rises [in Dubai and Marseilles]. It would be challenging to do a tower here. I don't know where.”

I point out her own written criticism of tower structures: static, essentially continuous reproduction of the same forms, stacked vertically. And that in recent years, New York has sprouted awful horizontal grid slabs replacing whole blocks and resembling towers knocked onto their sides.

“Well, the United Nations building is a slab. It's an interesting typology. The waterfronts could have slabs.”

Hadid has a more sanguine view of things than I do. The slabs in my neighborhood, the East Village, resemble the kind of Soviet-built hotels one finds in Estonia.

“There are two issues with towers,” she says. Once the public space “was underground, now it's above. The XYZ Towers on Sixth Avenue, Rockefeller Center, even more recent ones like Citicorp, had some sort of public intervention underground. But you can't extend the public space [above] because of the grid.”

I ask if anyone raised with her the possibility of projects to rebuild New Orleans.

Nobody, she responds, as if this had surprised even more than disappointed her. “That would be fantastic.” The three tactics so far, she says, have been “to do it in a very vernacular way or as a new urbanist or in a very commercial way. I think there are other ways you can organize the city.”

“There's no public-housing theory of investment” in the United States,” she adds. “Germany, Spain, Switzerland—Holland, [they do] a lot. The

funkiest housing in Holland is for low-income, and I think that's very nice.”

In New York, the funkier housing skews toward another tax bracket. I mention my personal *bête noire*: an architect's glass erection that's gone up not far from my apartment. It has no organic relationship to the neighborhood.

“In New York, you'd expect a much better quality of building,” Hadid admits. “But part of it is dynamic investment, and the development is totally corporate and has to do with square footage. Which is fair enough. But what happened in Spain, for example—because the state put so much money into doing buildings for

BACKSTORY

Architects are **fussy control freaks by nature**, yet notoriously demanding men like Daniel Libeskind are rarely tagged with the D-word that inevitably accompanies articles about the Baghdad-born, London-based Hadid. How does she feel about the label anyway? “**There is a certain bias**,” Hadid told us. “We had an exhibition at the MAK [in Vienna] a few years ago—they made T-shirts for everyone in the office

that said “**Would they still call me a diva if I was a man?**” I think not.”





*Below and near right:
The exterior and interior of the BMW
building. "A lot of light gets in," says Hadid.
"It's not like working in a dark place."*

*Far right:
The Vitra Fire Station (now a museum).
Hadid, a firm believer in the power of
computer-aided design, likes to mix curves and
slices of sharply pointed geometric shapes.*



everything, from the Olympics to Bilbao—not everything's fantastic, but the standard has risen. And that's what needs to happen here. I think it's good if areas get upgraded and gentrified, as long as the people who always lived there can stay. But they get pushed out to some place."

Again, I feel she cares; again, I feel the reality of life on the ground is not any pressing preoccupation of architects, however visionary or socially conscious.

"Here," I tell her, "people were pushed to Brooklyn, then that got colonized by big money, then it was Jersey City. I feel if buildings could be better integrated into sites . . . It makes no sense to me that rich people can't live next to poor people."

"In London, that used to occur," she notes, "but now everything has become expensive. Even when they offer the housing to be bought by people living in public housing, they're being pushed out."

"Does anyone consider the people who actually live in a place instead of who's going to live there in ten years?" I ask. "NYU," I say with rote indignation, basically "tore down Edgar Allan Poe's house."

"Shocking."

But how does one resolve all this?

"That means a bigger picture," she says.

"When somebody comes to somebody and says, 'Do this project,' if there's been a study of that area, they know what kind of

envelope they should have. But there doesn't seem to be much study at all here. On one hand, it's kind of refreshing in New York that every plan is autonomous and just goes up; on the other hand, you have a lot of ad hoc stuff that isn't perfect."

"People have tremendously emotional feelings about cities like Paris because it never changes," I say. "I know Paris probably needs as many things as anywhere else, but a city like that, a completely beautiful place for centuries, why do anything there?"

"I think it's a problem if we don't change," she says. "It's beautiful, but it has no energy. Like Venice—it's beautiful when you have the film festival or the Biennale, and it's beautiful in winter. But it can't grow. Paris is very even. But otherwise, it's quite dull."

As I can't agree, I drop it. I would rather live in a dull, beautiful place than a place where things "happen." My own utopian ideas involve population control and scaling down the human presence on the planet. Architects think in terms of endless capitalist expansion, endless growth, endless everything; yet I feel certain we are coming to the end of endlessness. Still, Zaha Hadid is probably the only architect I've met who seems conscious of this, without necessarily acknowledging it. She has to build, so she needs to be positive. I have to write and have the luxury of skepticism.

We discuss the recent fracas over air rights and plot mergers, particularly in the West Village. "One could say it's terrible," she says. "But in Hong Kong, they used to do illegal extensions, and sometimes they were nice. But I understand the problem, if you have something and it disappears. I used to come to New York a lot; my brother had a flat in midtown with the most fantastic view. And he thought he had the air rights to the next-door building. Then they decided to make a tower, and it wasn't illegal, and suddenly it was like a blank wall in front of our faces. It's a tragedy, but it was part of life in New York, I guess."

I feel that we are on the same page but reading a slightly different language.

"Planning large-scale projects, to what extent do you act as your own futurologist, in terms of possible scarcity of oil and water?" I ask. "Do you factor those things in?"

"We are always interested in site analysis. It was a big topic ten years ago, but most people don't look at it anymore. But I always factor in all these potential changes. I think that the training of architects allows you to see what will happen ten years ahead of time, or twenty. It's not guessing, it's not intuitive, it's based on research—and we may be wrong. And then, sometimes, when you visit these projects twenty years later, you think, 'Oh, my goodness, this is really irritating.'" ■