

Arts

ARCHITECTURE

A modern marvel

Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid's blueprints for the future are on display at the Guggenheim

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When the Guggenheim Museum lavishes its platinum-and-pomp treatment on an architect, you can bet that person lives by the credo, "Give the client anything I want." Zaha Hadid, the current object of the museum's encomiums, was born in Baghdad, Iraq, and educated in London, where she spent years as a famous fantasist before anyone would risk constructing her ideas.

Today, armed with a clutch of actual buildings, a Pritzker Prize and a pile of big commissions (as well as the Guggenheim show), 56-year-old Hadid has joined the select society of designers charged with keeping the future up-to-date. Her architecture is so impeccably modern - so virtuously free of reference to Greek temples or Gothic cathedrals - that it appears to belong to a time the rest of us haven't experienced yet.

The illusions proliferate. Her seamless, molded furniture looks as though it had been squeezed out of a tube. The forms of her buildings give the impression that gravity is negotiable and that concrete is lithe. Her creations lean into the wind, as if ready to burst out of the starting blocks.

Not for Hadid the right angle, the flat plane or the ordinary box. Her complicated geometries are based on the rippled dune, the boomerang and the scything curves of an elevated highway: architecture for a fast and fluid world.

Her early projects were dedicated to literal bursts of speed. The Vitra Fire Station in Weil-am-Rhein, Germany (1990-94), consists of a bundle of flying concrete wedges, which meet at an opening that spits out the screaming fire engines. At the Bergisel Ski Jump in Innsbruck, Austria (1999-2002), spectators sit in a levitating restaurant and look down as athletes hurtle along the ramp's calligraphic swoop. The platform answers the skiers' descent with its own lift, as if the building were being hurled by a catapult, leaving the ramp as its contrail.

For many years, Hadid had to content herself with making large gestures out of small projects. She won competition after competition, living off her colleagues' plaudits. In the early '80s, she designed The Peaks, an unbuilt mountaintop sports complex in Hong Kong that looked like a pile of driftwood left after the Great Flood. She reimagined Berlin and remapped New York, but she had so few commissions, it's hard to fathom how she paid her employees.

Grooving on mystification

Hadid made a virtue of frustration, elaborating architecture on paper with stunning virtuosity. Impatient with

stolid techniques for rendering in two dimensions - all those tired old plans and elevations - she invented the multi-perspective painting, which, like Picasso's still lifes, offers views of the same object from various angles, at assorted points of development. These documents are thoroughly confusing, but no matter: Her few clients grooved on the mystique of mystification.

The grandest of these mural-sized visions show cityscapes twisting, morphing, exploding into their component parts and reassembling themselves in different forms. She has buffed the visual presentation of her ideas to a high gloss, and if it doesn't necessarily lead to a construction site, at least we can watch her think.

The Guggenheim has devoted more than half its ramp to these explorations on canvas, which resemble holdovers from the Italian Futurist movement of a century ago. Like Hadid, Futurist guru Umberto Boccioni was fascinated by speed and painted wind-whipped cities. There is something grimly obsessional about Hadid's revelations, seen in such abstraction and plenty. The long journey through the show begins as a slog toward the bright ether of the upper floors where her three-dimensional models are on display.

Snapshots of her career

Hadid is a brilliant sculptor of space, and the places she makes are dazzling if rather comfortless. I say this having never seen any of her works in material form. Not that many people have - compared, say, to the crowds that converge on every new Frank Gehry project. Her reputation is based principally on photographs of institutional buildings in provincial towns: a BMW factory in an industrial zone of Leipzig; a science museum in the Saxon city of Wolfsburg, and a contemporary-arts center in Cincinnati.

Each does its job, which is to take our breath away. The Phaeno Science Center in Saxony is a great floating slab, punctured by dots and dashes of glass, as if its inhabitants were sending mayday signals by punching through the walls. The building toggles between raw structure and sleek membrane, brawn and grace balancing on inverted cones.

The Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, her only American work, is staid by comparison, a pile of variegated boxes held in precarious balance by a surface that flows upward from the sidewalk to the ceilings in one unbroken ribbon.

The BMW plant's central building is her most radical statement of pervasive activity. Unfinished cars lurch along an elevated assembly line above the white-collar workers' desks and the cafeteria where all employees break bread. Hadid has turned the highway inside out, evicted people from their steel cocoons and sent vehicles along one lane and people down another.

I would not want to work there. Citizens of developed countries spend enough of their time at full throttle; architecture for and about thrust can feel oppressive.

Hadid's style has absorbed the thoroughly modern conditions of disorientation and uncertainty. Seen from above, the future contemporary art center in Rome called MAXXI will resemble a railyard's tangle of tracks - or, to get digital, a motherboard's impenetrable weave of circuitry. The low-slung complex hurries along to nowhere, beautifully. This is rationality gone berserk.

Suddenly renowned, Hadid is worrisomely in demand as an urban planner. Her answer to fitful, unfocused sprawl is a planned, distorted street grid and buildings whose roof heights form undulating planes, like a canopy of trees. In principle, these are good ideas, and her master plans allow other architects to play with the details.

But Hadid is a utopian at heart. Like some SimCity emperor, she has designed societies and individual lives from urban horizons to kitchen countertops. Artists should not be given the power to realize their unified visions of everything. They will act as if people possessed the bland pliability of pigment, stone and steel.