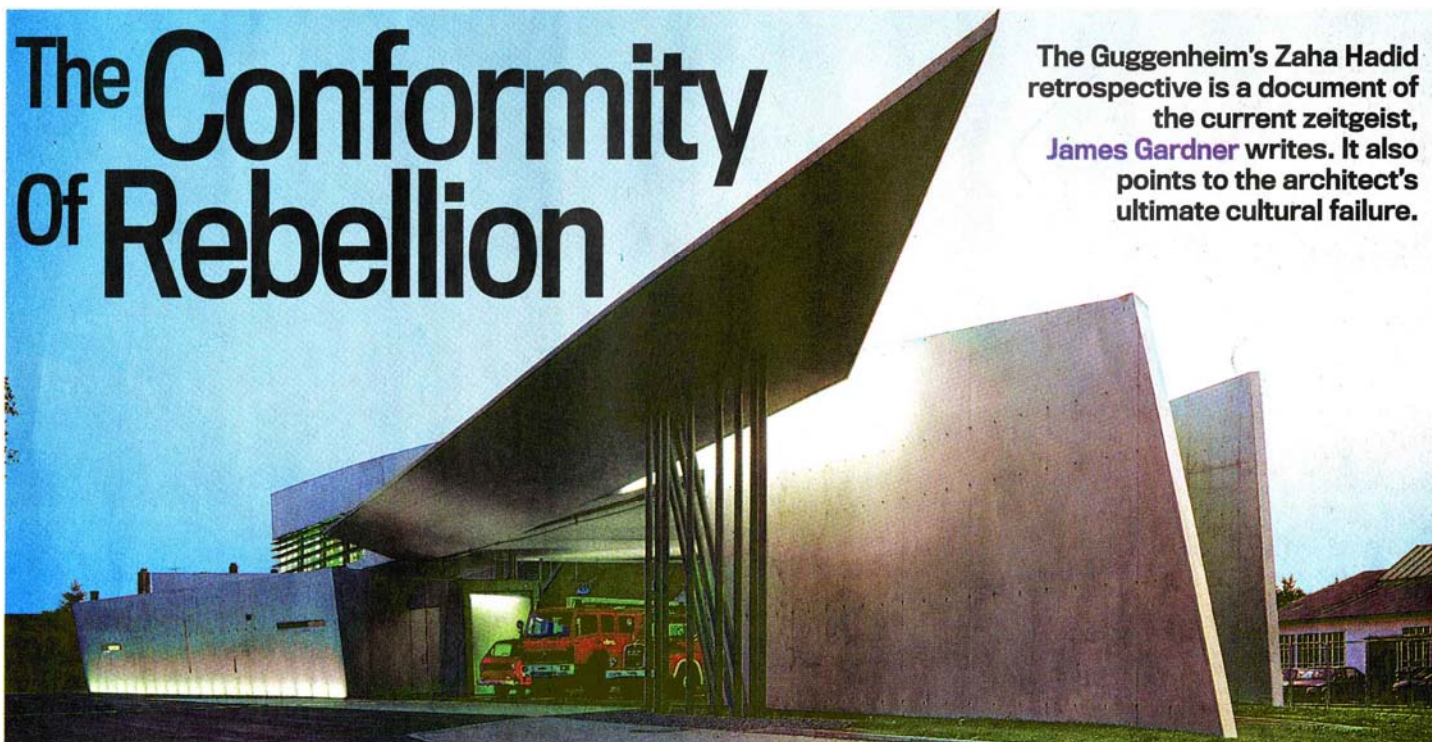


ARTS+

The Conformity Of Rebellion

The Guggenheim's Zaha Hadid retrospective is a document of the current zeitgeist, **James Gardner** writes. It also points to the architect's ultimate cultural failure.



n criticism, as in most other provinces of human endeavor, there are protocols.

Writing about the prize-winning architect Zaha Hadid, polite and obedient critics are expected to intone one message through a diversity of adjectives and verbs that all amount to the same blessed thing. Thus, in the catalog accompanying an upcoming exhibition dedicated to Ms. Hadid at the Guggenheim, Germano Celant informs us that this architect “disturbs the linearity and volumetrics of the city ... dislocating and dearticulating the parts. ... Hadid’s architectural process explodes all unilaterally constructive and cognitive procedures.” According to Joseph Giovannini, Ms. Hadid represents “seeing released from convention.” For Detlef Mertins, “like life itself, Hadid’s modernity is constitutively unfinished and always surprising.”

ZAHA HADID

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

I hope you were paying attention, because these words are immensely important — though not, perhaps, in the sense intended by their authors. The catalog, like the show it accompanies and the architecture it enshrines, is a document of the current zeitgeist: This is the way people thought they thought and felt they felt in the year of grace 2006.

Of course, the contributors to the catalog, like the architecture it enshrines, presume to rise above this age, to resist it, to destabilize it, and so on. Yet all that talk of disturbing, exploding, and releasing from convention is the boilerplate prose not only of the deconstructivist architecture that Ms. Hadid practices, but also of the our culture at large. Every age has its conformity, and this rebelliousness, paradoxically, is ours. That fact has never been more predictably evident than in the spate of recent exhibits and writings on Ms. Hadid, who somehow provokes even more of this sort of talk than Frank Gehry or Rem Koolhaas, with whom she apprenticed.

Ms. Hadid’s latest apotheosis, which takes up most of the Guggenheim, is one of the oddest exhibitions I have ever seen. First of all, it takes courage to mount a summer blockbuster around a Baghdad-born, 55-year-old London architect of whom many visitors will never have heard. Second, the show includes renderings in two and three dimensions of buildings, along with the occasional piece of furniture: You could view this show as a painting exhibition and find it quite pleasant, actually.

Beginning in the early 1980s, Ms. Hadid was quite taken with the Suprematist style of the Russian avant-garde master Kasimir Malevich, specifically his work from around 1915; Malevich’s frantic geometric abstractions inform most of the paintings that were the initial vectors of Ms. Hadid’s fame. In her exploded axonometric rendering for the Dutch Parliament from 1978 or her “Tektonic” (1992), Ms. Hadid favors a hard-edged, needle-sharp line that gives life to a chaos of forms saturated in dazzling colors. In some of her pen-and-ink drawings, such as those for her Vitra Fire Station (1990–94) in Weil am Rhein, Germany, she adopts a much freer and more calligraphic line that is clearly a tribute to the anarchic riot of Cy Twombly. These are fine drawings, even if, like the paintings, they are somewhat derivative.

And yet, the problem with the show, part of its oddity, is that we are not supposed to view these works as yet another Guggenheim display of non-objective art. Rather we are to see them as architecture, in which case they are far less satisfying.

Ms. Hadid has a reputation for being an architect among architects, but the exhibition does a poor job of explaining what those theories are. I suspect that this is because, ultimately, the content of her theory is irrelevant. It is the idea of having a theory, the glamour of being “theoretical,” that is the sum total of the theory itself.

Hadid seeks to drive movement into the very heart of static things. She can accomplish that in her paintings, but no one can achieve any such thing in architecture.

At the heart of Ms. Hadid's architecture appears to be a fundamental sadness with existence itself. She seeks to drive movement into the very heart of static things, like buildings and furniture. She can accomplish that in her paintings, through the riotous career of her lines, but neither she nor anyone else can achieve any such thing in architecture.

Surely she can laboriously construct a looping form in the Bergisel Ski Jump in Austria, but this ploy refers to movement without effectively conveying it in visual form. That inability to create what we might call architectural movement, visual movement within a context of physical stasis, is the consistent ingredient of Ms. Hadid's ultimate cultural failure.

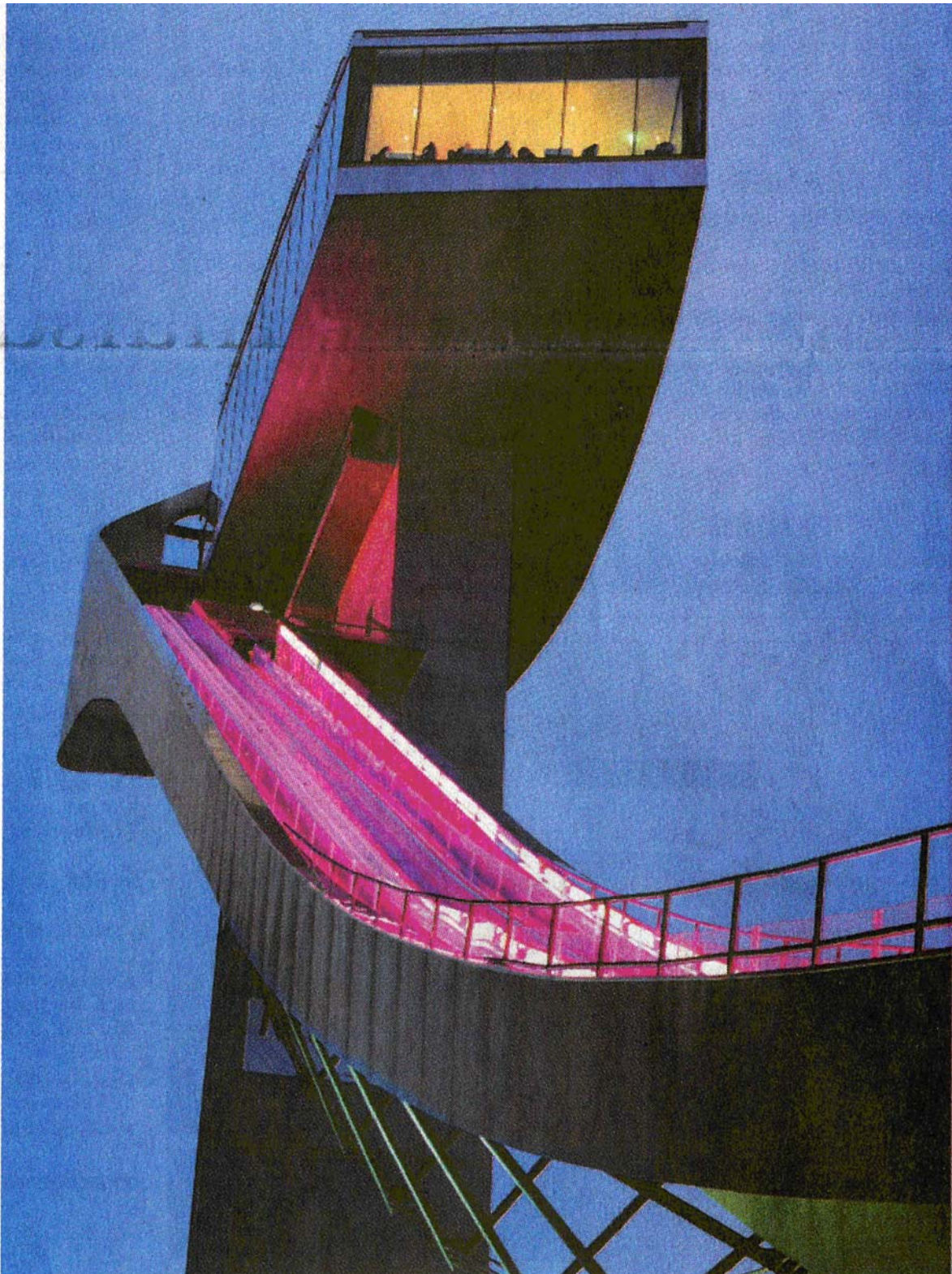
It forces her, as well, into a kind of visual dis-

honesty. The initial designs for her Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati call for a radical "destabilization" of structure. But that is impossible in the present state of physics on our planet, which compels her to adopt the same fatal dishonesty as Frank Gehry, namely to impose a massive, gaudy, and finally irrelevant sculptural carapace upon a drab, unimaginative, and impractical substructure. Pluck this peacock and you are left with a turkey.

The ambiguity over whether this is an exhibition of painting or of architecture points to what is perhaps the overriding failure of Ms. Hadid's career: her misdirected need to imbue architecture, once the most utilitarian of arts, with the formal freedoms of paint on canvas. It is no accident that Ms. Hadid's elaborate plans to alter the interior of the Guggenheim for the duration of her show simply could not be carried out by the well-intentioned staff of the museum. The difficulties, as well as the costs, were insurmountable. Those plans remain as nothing more than a two-dimensional loop fed into a flat-screen panel, all the way up on the seventh floor.

From June 3 until October 25 at the Guggenheim Museum (1071 Fifth Avenue at 89th Street, 212-423-3500). A related show runs until July 29 at Max Protetch Gallery (522 W. 22nd Street, between Tenth and eleventh Avenues, 212-633-6999).





ZAHA HADID ARCHITECTS

ICONIC IMAGES Zaha Hadid's Vitra Fire Station in Weil am Rhein, Germany (1990-94), top; Ms. Hadid's 'Tektonic' (1992), above left, a design made for the Guggenheim Museum's 1992 exhibition 'The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932'; and her Bergisel Ski Jump in Innsbruck, Austria (1999-2002), above.