

(c) Zaha Hadid Office

Portrait

Phaeno Wissenschaftszentrum 2000-2005 Wolfsburg

Zaha Hadid – Pritzker Architecture Prize Winner 2004

Sally Arnold

For the first time in the history of the coveted Pritzker Architecture Prize, an architect of the feminine gender takes centre stage. Donated yearly since 1979 by the Pritzker family of Hyatt Hotel fame, it has with predictable regularity been awarded to members of the star male architects' fraternity.

Not so in the year 2004. Thomas J. Pritzker, president of the Hyatt Foundation, makes the following statement about Zaha Hadid: „Although her body of work is relatively small, she has achieved great acclaim and her energy and ideas show even greater promise for the future“. Winning a \$100,000 grant, a certificate and a bronze medal, Ms Hadid will be awarded the ultimate in architectural prizes at a festive ceremony to be held on May 31 at the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. An imposing figure, given to dressing in Issey Miyake's pleated robes and wearing diamond rings, Zaha Hadid creates a sensation whenever she appears on campus to lecture aspiring students.

The energetic Ms Hadid was born in Baghdad, Iraq, and raised in Lebanon during the Fifties. Her subsequent move to London enabled her to begin her studies at the Architectural Association in 1972, lecture there alongside Rem Koolhaas (in whose office she subsequently worked) and become a British citizen. Now 53 – the youngest ever prize-winner –, with several acclaimed new buildings to her credit and guest professorships at Columbia and Harvard Universities, she stands at a cutting edge in more ways than one.

Zaha Hadid, of whom Lord Rothschild, the Pritzker Prize jury chairman says: „she has shifted the geometry of buildings“ has assiduously cultivated a style of drawing (in conceptualising constructed space) which sets her apart. Fluid, sweeping, as dynamic as a scythe-

stroke – these are just some of the words one might use to describe her dramatic approach.

Calligraphy or the art of drawing

It is very much her own handwriting, and a comparison with her native calligraphic style of Arabic script (from right to left) is not entirely out of place.

An acclaimed painter with several high-profile shows at major international venues to her credit, Zaha Hadid is capable of hyper-futuristic building designs which modulate space in an „accelerated“ way. Her work experiments with spatial quality.

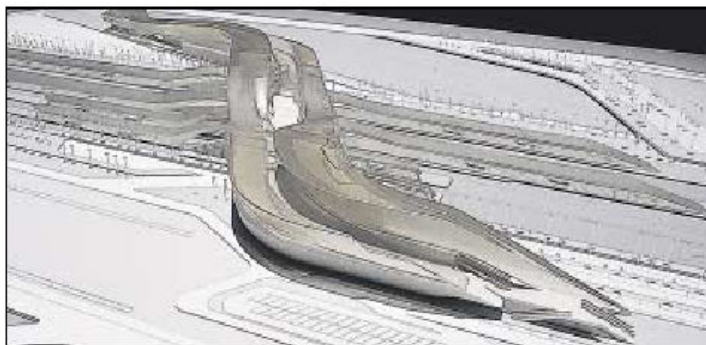
The most common label attached to Hadid's work has been „Deconstructivism“. In fact, ever since 1977, she has taken pains to present herself as a rebel. In the eyes of her admirers, she is an unyielding champion of uncompromising, knives-out modernism. And yet the links to her cultural background by way of its calligraphy cannot be overlooked.

For the recently completed *Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art* in Cincin-

nati (1997-2003), the circulation system was organized as an „urban carpet“, flowing and wrapping itself around the core of the structure, which (outwardly) appears as a rather regular jigsaw puzzle – is, however, composed of polished and undulating surfaces.

Hadid's office describes each project with a mix of pragmatic and sci-fi conceptual language: a banal parking area, for example, is perceived as a grid of „magnetic fields“. This architectural speak characterizes her many years spent researching academic concerns, a period during which very few of her concepts were actually realized. It is noticeable that specifically in Britain, no buildings of permanence have been constructed.

The breakthrough came in 1983, with a winning entry for *The Peak Club*, Hong Kong. Parallel to her theoretical and academic work, Zaha Hadid had opened her own practice in 1977 – at the age of twenty-seven – in London. „Zaha Hadid Architects“ has thus far been best known for the *Vitra Fire Station* in Weil am Rhein (1988-89) – her only finished building until five years ago – and the *Tram Station* in Strasbourg.



(c) Zaha Hadid Office

Hochgeschwindigkeitszug Bahnhof 2003-2005 Neapel-Afragola

Kufah and the parallel pen stroke

Two of Ms Hadid's most recent and groundbreaking edifices amply illustrate their stylistic proximity to early 10th century kufic script: *Herauld Culture and Sports Center*, Montpellier (2002-2007) and *Maxxi: National Center for Contemporary Arts*, Rome (1997-2005). Characteristic of both is a long horizontal baseline with shorter vertical strokes rising just above the upper horizontal surface. The horizontal is often echoed by parallels rising upwards, just as the short verticals may reiterate as parallel pairs.

The fact that Ms Hadid has transformed writing, in itself quite an abstract concept until actually carried out on paper (or, earlier, on rocks or clay tablets) and its specific Middle Eastern articulation into three-dimensional spatial entities speaks volumes for her understanding of the power of symbols. Therein, her perception approaches that of Chinese calligraphy, which uses one and the same character for both „writing“ and „drawing“. A building is thus not only a shelter, a repository, but a „written“ record of the passing of cultures and the art of architecture. In short: these buildings do not only reference the architect's handwriting – they are handwriting. And they continue a heritage begun with the invention of the first recorded scripts from Babylon (Hadid's home ground) around 3100 B.C.

If Zaha Hadid spent decades waiting to see her ideas take shape, the new millennium will give birth to a plethora of new buildings. Work has already begun on a mammoth project, the *Master Plan for the Zorrozaurre Peninsula*, Bilbao. From 2003 onwards, for example, the refurbishment and construction of housing, industrial sites for tertiary usage, urban and new spaces plus new transport connections linking the peninsula with the surrounding areas will see Ms Hadid's office in command of a



Bergisel Scischanze 1999-2002 Innsbruck

vast area comprising 450.000 square metres. *The Price Tower Arts Center*, Bartlesville (2002 – TBC) is also under construction: a study centre with adjoining storage to house a growing collection of works on paper. The already mentioned *Maxxi* in Rome, commissioned by the Italian Ministry of Culture, is destined as a contemporary art and architectural centre. Still in Italy, the *High Speed Train Station*, Naples (2003-2005), conceived as a futuristic bridge over the tracks, snakes its way towards completion. These examples are flanked by as many more international projects.

Female architects: a rare breed

The Pritzker Prize is awarded „to a living architect for lifetime achievement“ by the Pritzker Foundation, which is based in Chicago – birthplace of the skyscraper and home of innovative 20th century works by Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe. The prize is awarded „irre-



Maxxi: Centro Nazionale per l'Arte Contemporanea 1997-2005 Rom

spective of nationality, race, creed or ideology“ – comfortably, since „gender“ is not included, this has meant never having had to look further than the old boys' club.

Susan Deutsche, writing for Columbia Business online, notes under the following heading: Female architects a rare breed, despite advances: „*Going strictly by the numbers, it would seem that something akin to the Bermuda Triangle is causing women with architecture degrees to mysteriously vanish before making it into the professional arena*“. She attributes this phenomenon to professional licensing procedures and the double workload of family and career for women architects.

In conversation with abc.net correspondent Tony Eastley after the Pritzker 2004 announcement, Ms Hadid comments: „*There is kind of a view of the women architect, so it makes it more difficult to deal with and accept. And I hope through this, things might change, because there is so much discussion about the fact that I'm the first woman to get it. So it might open the discussion as to why aren't there enough places for women in architecture.*“

US-Licensing procedures and double workload aside – there have been prominent women architects such as the Italian Gae Aulenti (b.1927), who has created a steady output (e.g. *Musée d'Orsay*, 1980-87) yet has come nowhere near reaching the hallowed halls of Pritzker fame. And when one considers the fact that, for example, in large parts of rural Africa (as extensively documented by Namibian photojournalist Margaret Courtney Clarke's *African Canvas*, Rizzoli 1990) it has traditionally been women who construct complex dwelling and utilitarian structures from mud and other materials, before elaborately painting these with skillful designs which are handed down from mother to daughter, one senses a profound regret at the short-sightedness of the Pritzker nominees list (yearly around 500 candidates).

It has taken a woman of Zaha Hadid's stature to at last correct this glaring imbalance - with verve and sheer audacity. She has not adopted the motto: „if you can't beat them, join them.“ Instead, she has stayed true to her very own, specific drawing skills and her vision of an architecture teased out beyond rigid geometry. That alone ensures her status as a mistress of iconic building. And she has proven to the world (along with women like the Iranians, cineaste Shirin Neshat and Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Peace Prize Winner 2003 – to name but a few) that a woman of Arabian descent can more than hold her own intellectually and professionally in the 21st century.

▷ Info: www.zaha-hadid.com
www.pritzkerprize.com