

Zaha Hadid's Permanent Journey

It is no secret that Zaha Hadid dreams with opened eyes, as I have known for a few decades since I came across a Japanese magazine dedicated to her architectural project designs. I thought to myself, 'These are dreams on paper of constructions to come – or never to come.'

I thought: 'This is a world born out of the Russian Revolution, from those early 20th century revolutionary artists who, like the Presocratics 2,500 years ago, changed the world.' What comes to mind of course is Suprematism as thought, best exemplified by Malevich's drawings and writings.

Zaha Hadid's first buildings seemed imbued with sheer madness: large rectangles seemed to glide, then to stand erect while falling over other geometrical shapes, like a game orchestrated by a world-creating djinn.

Because Zaha Hadid does not build homes or offices. She creates worlds that appear strange to us because we are not our own contemporaries.

Since her earliest projects, she has been an important actor on the international stage. People are now surprised to see that the gigantic toys birthed by her imagination are actually marvellously functional – as well as charged with thoughts and mystery.

But what are the structural lines of contemporaneity? It goes without saying that they are manifold, but some may be stressed more than others: our today is ruled more than ever by the concept of energy. Thanks to the energy that animates both humankind and its creations, we are also in a position to envisage conquering the cosmos itself.

The cosmos is already being conquered: we have photos of remote planets, of the sun: the Babylonians' and Egyptians' god is photographed, measured, its moments of wrath and eruptions studied, its age has been determined and its death is predicted as a certainty!

Another aspect of contemporaneity is what we call globalisation (in the media, this translates as simultaneity); in other words, we have the reality and the image of Earth as a whole, i.e. of humanity presented as a whole. Zaha Hadid's architecture perfectly addresses these two criteria: it exudes energy since it is not static; this means that her constructions are fluid, with neither front nor rear, and are meant to be viewed from every angle possible. In that sense, they have no centre and appear to be caught in a constant movement.

This architecture is also cosmopolitan, international. Wherever they are, her constructions are suddenly at home, because the world itself, like Zaha's creations, no longer has a unique centre and because any point on Earth highlighted by an event or a work of art immediately becomes central in the process, like everything else.

What I like about the work she did for the esplanade at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris is its essential ambiguity and its richness of evocation.

My first impression, as it was still being built, was that I had found a shipwreck: the angle I saw it from was incredibly powerful. There lay a steel bow, in the heart of Paris, at the end of a turbulent journey. It took my breath away.

Going round the structure in progress, I thought: 'This is a huge doughnut, a shape that has sprung forth out of itself, under the effects of fire and barely controlled forces!' The result of an alchemy.

The very act of looking at this large 'object' became a journey towards the discovery of the mental operations that had brought it into the world.

I went in. The interior space was architecture too. It all longed to rise up, to leave. Because this functional yet atypical construction, which defies all preconceived function, is truly a spaceship. The dream that some artists have of building homes for the extra-planetary era we are experiencing has found its expression here. For the world of today, this is a structure of today; for a radically new world, this is a radically new thought.

Once inside, you are truly in the apparently limited space of spaceships, a space that is not necessarily limited but rather perfectly economical: the work in question seems to constitute a centripetal space, a space meant to

protect everything that lies within its perimeter, resembling the insides of sea creatures and seashells... This work in particular is a success of cosmic as well as organic architecture: these vigorous curves are precisely what gives us that feeling of perfection that we experience when we find crabs or cuttlefish, or other living organisms enveloped in the laws of nature, on the beach.

Zaha Hadid's genius lies in knowing better than anyone how to blend the feeling of openness with that of closeness within one space. This gives her spaces a double identity, as if they expanded and shrank at their own will. Furthermore, thanks to the dynamic shapes she knows how to create, the technological and the organic become, as in Malevich's wildest dream almost a century ago, each other's reversible face. By thus solving what seems to have always been a fundamental antinomy between the material and the living, she enables us to reach a spirituality that results from the gliding of the eye over the hyperbolic curves, a never-ending yet ever-enticing gliding... Seen from the outside, this structure stretches and tightens; it undulates as if built by waves, following the serendipitous laws of the sea; it seems to float, to travel... It is strong yet as smooth as an egg's surface, and delightfully defies all surrounding buildings, however much higher they are, which are no longer obstacles and which have now become companions in an astonishing experience, not of gravity but of a journey.

Talking of journeys, I truly believe that Zaha Hadid's entire work is an invitation to take a journey. Baudelaire's *L'Invitation au Voyage* may come to mind; also written in Paris, at a time when empires coveted the Indies, it invited us to discover exotic sunsets and scents. Zaha Hadid makes poetry with shapes and from the materials that embody them; these shapes deserve to be admired both up-close and from afar, to discover in this woman, who conceives hard elements on hard ground, a permanent nostalgia for departure: everything she creates seems to be at the eve of a departure, a permanent invitation to imagine, to daydream. It is never simply about a home to live in, because you are wrapped in these constructions as if by music; I would say that this is rather about living in what liberates your soul by shaking it out of its lethargy, allowing it to transcend its own gravity.

I would now like to add that what most surprised me in this piece of architecture was its unexpected intimate character, which felt like a counterweight: Zaha Hadid is a woman and, in cases such as this one, she creates a place you want to enter. First, from the outside, it is a place that is

not only visual but also tactile: you want to touch it, caress it; you can feel that it connects very spontaneously with all your senses, those that have a name and those that do not.

Once inside, you are inside a secret, a thing to discover, a temptation, the promise of an adventure. You are inside a highly and cleverly seductive piece of architecture.

The prototype for this adventurous construction was a mobile creation, a structure that you could take apart and install wherever you wished, be it a roof, a terrace, an area of wasteland or a field. The construction has certainly happened, placed on a roof, then dismantled and taken elsewhere. These are definitely the early days of moveable architecture (floating homes or homes launched into space?); it is a revolution in the concept of an art that is historically considered as the height of permanence, of stability; but it is also a reminder of nomadic camps and tents.

There is therefore something both magical and perfectly fitting about the Institut du Monde Arabe being home to Zaha Hadid's first work in Paris, not only because she is Iraqi, but because of the thought that generated this structure.

The Arab world has some of the oldest cities in the world, yet its cultures are essentially nomadic. And this architecture is becoming 'nomadic', in her mind initially, then gradually in physical reality. The 'object' that you see could as easily be a shell that waves will soon take away and leave elsewhere as an altered tent or a vessel, as discussed earlier.

I have always thought that contemporaneity, i.e. an element that necessarily imposes itself on recently created works of art in the world, is the value that we increasingly give to impermanence. And impermanence is the essence of nomadism.

Please note, however, that I am not saying that this fantastic construction will, by waving a magic wand, erupt from the *Thousand and One Nights*, take off and disappear! It is made of steel, as I saw before it was clad with its dream-like cover. It will last. But it is of such poetry and spirituality, that as it gives us shelter, it lets us dream and – not least – travel. When inside, we clearly feel that what we call solid ground is no more than a ball thrown out into the universe. The Earth we inhabit is an unceasingly adventurous planet

that has no fixed abode of its own either, and on this cosmic ground Zaha Hadid sets up her tents, that is, works that, although seemingly static, are cosmic, thrust in the adventure of Being so that the essentially nomadic creature in us never forgets that immobility is only one state of mobility, that we are all part of a collective journey to a destination forever unknown.

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