

## **The latest metamorphosis. Story of an Architect – Zaha Hadid**

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Departing from the exhibition “LiberaHadid” held at the Embrice 2030 gallery on the first anniversary of Zaha Hadid’s death, which featured jewels designed by Italian architect Manuela Laurenti who took her inspiration from existing architectures – including the *Landscape Formation One* realized by the Anglo-Iraqi architect in Germany in 1999 – the author pays tribute to the late reluctant starchitect by going back on her unusual, multifaceted, and at times thorny story.

Hadid was not always a successful, world-renowned architect: for years after graduating she did not realize any of her projects, falling in the unloved category of “paper architects”. On the other hand, she used to draw, and paint, a lot (and this work of hers has been exhibited in the past few years), not to mention her design of sophisticated furniture, jewels, and accessories at a successive stage of her life. The author argues that all these activities and the figure of Hadid herself ultimately conform to the very root of the word “archi-tèkton”, ‘head-maker’, with “tekton” from Sanskrit “taksh”, to build, make, compose, specifically from something that already exists, shaping, moulding materials.

Born in 1950 in a fast-changing Iraq and into a well-to-do family, she received an international education as was the custom in this milieu (see Azar Nafisi’s *Things I’ve Been Silent About* for a very similar biographical account). She then landed in the Architectural Association School of Architecture of London, the most prestigious and oldest independent architecture school of Britain, where she met figures such as Peter Cook, Rem Koolhaas, and Elia Zenghelis. In fact, she went on to collaborate with OMA Studio.

The early years of her career were characterized by failure, rejections, even disavowals (see the scandalous case of the Cardiff Opera House). But then, precisely with the Cincinnati Centre for Contemporary Art (1998), the tide changed and never stopped rising, until she herself did. The wave of success was not immune from other controversies and fights, while her initially demure nature evolved in a fierce, at times eccentric character; plenty of episodes have been told in this regard. Another turning point was 2006, when her work was finally acknowledged in her own adopted country, and the Guggenheim Museum made a retrospective on her. A few other cardinal points in her career spanning the globe are the Vitra Fire Station in Weil am Rhein (1994), the Roca London Gallery (2000), the Sheikh Zayed Bridge in Abu Dhabi (2010), the Galaxy Soho in Beijing (2012); in Italy only there are eight of them, including the MAXXI, Rome, and the posthumous Napoli Afragola High Speed Train Station. This arbitrary list does not include ongoing building sites or famous unbuilt projects, but her London studio/gallery paid a tribute to the latter with a lavish exhibition.

Now helmed by her co-director, the German Patrik Schumacher, Zaha Hadid Architects is based in a ‘normal’ district of London, Clerkenwell; it currently exposes permanent and temporary exhibitions of her works, besides carrying on the late architect’s projects. She lived in a ‘normal’ flat in a new building still in Clerkenwell which she furnished herself with objects of her own design, sometimes earning caustic comments about it; she also received the usual questions a career woman is commonly asked, about her civil status and lack of family. While she made no complaints about this, she did show some temperament in now infamous situations (e.g. the radio incident) and made no mystery that architecture still tended to be a boys’ club. Notwithstanding, she was the first woman to be awarded the RIBA Gold Medal and several other prestigious prizes.

Hadid's thinking was one with her practice, which privileged materials such as concrete ("for me concrete is the most plastic material") and fibreglass in architecture or gold and precious textiles in design, but she didn't mind using perspex too. All of these were functional to the creation of her streamlined, astonishing architectures, most of which still going against common sense and taste – including that of Modernism, rationalism, functionalism. On the other hand, her style owes masters of modernism such as Eero Saarinen and Oscar Niemeyer, especially as regards the curved line, the use of which she took to the extreme. Again, her predilection for the diagonal and intersecting plans is closely connected with a system of ideas in which "structure is very integral to design", and "the landscape analogy became very important to me as a strategy to increase ground permeability and surface continuity while avoiding the empty vastness of Modernist clear grounds. It suggested that ground relief is used as a soft ordering device that is more fluid and open than the dissection of space by walls".

Among her statements, the author also liked to quote, "I started out trying to create buildings that would sparkle like isolated jewels, now I want them to connect, to form a new kind of landscape, to flow together with contemporary cities and the lives of their peoples", which carries manifold references in time: towards the past, with an autobiographical allusion to the oriental landscapes of her childhood; towards her own present, with words that inevitably remind us of LF One; which brings us to the future, our time, and Manuela Laurenti's jewels, made of silver sinuously flowing along a woman's cleavage just as Hadid's building derives its spatial fluidity from the natural formation of landscape.

In fact, one of the last works realized by Dame Hadid, and one of her most controversial, is a voluptuous, white-winged butterfly: the Baku Heydar Aliyev Cultural Centre, an alien object metamorphosing towards unseen forms and kinds.

(with bibliography in ITA post)