

ZAHA HADID/1

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BEGINNINGS

1983. The spotlights turn to three architects educated at the Architectural Association of London. They are Bernard Tschumi, Zaha Hadid, and Rem Koolhaas, who propose, with a brusque and sudden change of course, to unblock the creative impasse provoked by the still dominant post-modern climate. Bernard Tschumi, not even forty years old, born in Switzerland but French by adoption, wins the competition for the realisation of the Parc de la Villette in Paris with a project liberally inspired by a Kandinskian logic of points, lines, and surfaces. For the same La Villette competition, the 39-year-old Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas designs a project based on the opposition between precision and chance, being inspired by the additive logic of computer layers. With a proposal for long and narrow buildings precariously assembled along the slope of a hill, the 30-year-old Iraqi Zaha Hadid wins a competition for the construction of a residential and recreational complex overlooking the city of Victoria at Hong Kong Peak.

Zaha Hadid, being still quite young, becomes famous as a child prodigy. She graduates from the American University in Beirut with a degree in mathematics. Then, she moves to London and registers at the Architectural Association (AA), forge of the avant garde during the seventies, where Smithson and Archigram taught. Here she meet Elia Zenghelis, who taught there since 1965, and Rem Koolhaas, professor there since 1976. With both she will collaborate, after graduation, at the Office for Metropolitan Architecture. But she will soon leave due to the objective difficulty of getting along with the strong character of Rem Koolhaas. But, more importantly, at the AA she will connect with the director, Alvin Boiarski, an extraordinary manager of university education, who will coopt her into the teaching staff of the school and, later, will write two publications dedicated to her: *The elegance of the Plan e Furniture and Other Domestic Projects*.

Like many AA students, Zaha Hadid is fascinated by the fluid space of Mies and his ascetic reductivism. She will study it in the Barcelona Pavilion but also in the 1934 patio house with garage, a design in which Mies, next to rectilinear lines and planes, introduces curved panels that bend the space communicating tensions of vital intensity. Hadid will discover these tensions again in the sensual elegance of Oscar Niemeyer's houses and, in particular, in the house he built for himself in Canoa, Rio de Janeiro in 1953. The liquid spatiality of Kandinsky completes the education of the young student, made of primary forms that meet one another and collide along compositional lines that these same figures help to create. And finally, she shares the fascination for the aesthetic of movement – which one can practically breathe in the air of the university where the influence of Archigram and Reyner Banham was strong: in essence, Futurism, Constructivism, and Suprematism.

In 1976, Hadid proposes a project for a bridge over the Thames for her thesis, based upon the model of a structure such as the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, upon which is built a covered structure that, in this case however, is articulated on 14 levels. The work is inspired by Suprematist models. It alludes, by its title – *Malevich's Tektonik*– with an explicit reference to the key protagonist, Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935), to the theory of pure form and sculptural sensibility elaborated by him between 1910 and 1914. She reuses of the term tectonic, but it is a bit sui generis since the attention is moved from the container to the contents, from the external shell to the existential space. Thus, more than a grammar of forms that finds expression in solids -as a rigorous tectonics should be- it is a logical organisation of voids, where the structural tensions are transformed into pure spatial facts. The constructive limitations acquire a profound intensity by becoming space: "turning," as Hadid would say, "all conceivable constraints into new possibilities for space." And the compositional lines of the matter are transformed into energy, not pure decorative facts, reduced to the role of simple projections upon the walls or partitions.

If we examine the project *Malevich's Tektonik*, considering the problematic of the first half of the 1970s, which we recall as the years in which the historicist influence is strong (*The Language of Post-Modernism* by Charles Jencks comes out in 1977), we will see that the messages promoted by Hadid are at least four.

FIRST. To rediscover, through Malevich, the abstract surge upon which the Bauhaus drew, Dutch Neo-plasticism, and finally, Mies. It is the refusal to deny the modern and decisive opposition towards the classical tradition, as had been repropounded in those years by Graves, Rossi, Krier, and Stirling.

SECOND. To work with agile, intense and dynamic geometries. In short, a return to a fluid space marked by points, lines, and surfaces. It also recovers not only the neo-plastic of Mondrian and Van Doesburg but also the more fluid one of Kandinsky, with whom Malevich was frequently in touch. Also here a return to the sources, this time to the origins of the abstract when two lines, the rigidly geometric of neo-plasticism and the intensely emotional of the Russians, were no longer separate.

THIRD. To declare a real disinterest in every dispute of a semantic nature. The 1970s are anguished by the problem of language, by the attempt to recover meaning from architecture, often through iconic values or the reference to signs and symbols codified by tradition. Bringing up again the Suprematist aesthetic, Hadid affirms that the goal of architecture is not linguistic but expressive: it is the research of formal values, that is, of a new sculptural sensibility.

FOURTH. To declare inconsistent every disciplinary division between the arts. If art is a pure sculptural sensibility, it no longer makes sense to speak of painting, sculpture, and architecture as distinct activities because they all contribute to a single goal: the construction of a space in which every difference between figural and existential ceases, that is, in which art and life coincide. In 1923 Malevich conceived a project for PLANITA, a house of the future that would have permitted living in a rigorously geometric environment. This house profoundly touched Mondrian and Theo Van Doesburg, who in 1925 had a prototype built. Rietveld was so influenced by it also in his work that it is difficult to determine the borders between painting, interior design and architecture. And Mies himself, who was educated in this cultural environment, had a strongly pictorial vision of architectural space. Up to this point these are innovative aspects of the design. Which is,

nevertheless, a first attempt not without its ingenuity. Above all, for the processes of decomposition adopted that more than to stress the forces at play, emphasizing their intensity and directions, tend to reduce them (the forces) to an unstable system of balances.

EXPLOSIONS

The tension between space and energy will explode in the project for a residential and recreational complex in *Hong Kong Peak* with which, as mentioned, Hadid will win an international competition in 1983.

Seven years have passed since the first attempt of *Malevich's Tekonik*, during which the architect taught at the Architectural Association, collaborated with the Office for Metropolitan Architecture on the project for the expansion of the *Dutch Parliament* (1978-79) and, finally, opened in 1979 her own professional office charged with the preparation of proposals for the residence of the Irish Prime Minister (1979-80), the reconstruction of *59 Eaton Palace* in London (1981-82) and the competition for the *Parc de La Villette*. The project for *Hong Kong Peak* is already a mature work, set free from stylistic citations that weighed more heavily upon *Malevich's Tektonik*.

Hadid avoids making the error of disarticulating the plans of a building whose form is, all told, traditional. Instead, she proposes a fragmentation of its simplest constitutive "layer" elements, mutating a term borrowed from the logic of computers.

There are five layers: the first is composed of fifteen duplex flats; the second is formed by two floors, each with ten flats; the third is a virtual layer characterized by a 13-metre void on whose interior, like freely floating satellites, are the spaces designated for the club -gyms, locker rooms, and rooms for social activities; the fourth is occupied by four penthouse flats while the fifth is reserved as the private dwelling for the developer of the complex. Each layer has a linear configuration. But every one, oriented in its own direction, attacks the hill in a different way. In this way, the building seems to vibrate as if affected by a seismic movement ("a gentle seismic shift on an immovable mass"). Also, thanks to the intermediate void of third layer, the entire construction loses the consistency of a mass in order to be a light, poly-directional structure. It is rendered vibrant by the decision to detach, making it almost hover in the air. The fourth and fifth layers, conceived as long, linear box like structures, are supported upon a very reduced number of pilasters. These are tilted to visualize the precariousness of a fragile equilibrium.

Having to describe the project in terms of landscape, Hadid speaks of an organism that is related to violence with regard to nature but that simultaneously refuses to make it into a tabula rasa ("it defies nature and resists destroying it"). In reality the project is a critique directed at both post-modernism's mimetic contextualism and ecological surrender. She proposes, instead, an aggressive contextualism in which the building itself serves to construct the landscape, to make nature, because it becomes an integral part of it, even its protagonist, and because through its internal spaces views and horizons are revealed that would have otherwise been left unexplored. Its references include works such as the convent of *Sainte-Marie-de-La-Tourette* by Le Corbusier and *Fallingwater* by F.LI Wright that transform their interesting but ordinary natural contexts into environmental masterpieces, beginning with the integrated rewriting of the landscape.

But there is also a cultural obsession typical of the avant garde of the 1950s and 1960s –from the Situationists to radical groups– of the redefinition of the horizon. Opposed to the flat and sclerotic standardized and regularized spatial sequences

that impose a single point of view, Zaha Hadid proposes an architecture that, like a cinematographic sequence, constricts to mutate it continuously, always establishing new relationships –visual but also tactile, acoustic, and olfactory– with natural and artificial spaces that unravel in sequence. From here there is a sort of architectural-path equivalence that has two consequences: the spasmodic attention of the design of layouts intended as a horizontal plan along which the events take place and the preference for linear layouts along which places to pause -it there are any- are kinetically organized.

A NEW PHASE

1983 is an important year for Hadid. Along with her victory in the *Hong Kong Peak* competition comes the retrospective dedicated to her at the Architectural Association. The title: *Planetary Architecture Two*, almost to indicate the intensely spatial and aerial character of her work.

It is time for taking stock, synthesized in a painting entitled *Word (89 degrees)*. The principal projects of seven years of work are represented in the exhibit, which, when brought together, form a disquieting urban landscape due to the stray angle of the point of view chosen. It is proposed on the interior of a missile in the process of a vertical take-off and is high enough to see the curvature of the earth. It could be a metaphorical message that alludes to the closing of one phase and the opening of another. But the painting also responds to the recurring need of Hadid to observe her own work from multiple and unusual points of view.

Thus, in a two year project that followed for Trafalgar Square, Hadid represents the plaza hypothesizing this time the observer laying at the pavement level with an image ironically baptized as *Worm's Eye View*. In another design for the same project, she retakes the city view from above and represents it in six or seven images of the work taken from different angles. The effect of this intensely dynamic technique resembles a futurist synchronicity, experimented by Duchamp in the *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) and by Boccioni in *Single Forms in the Continuity of Space* (1913). With the result that it is no longer the object but the trajectory that is privileged, not the form in its synthesis but the components in their reciprocal interrelationships. There is no more obsession therefore for icons or figures in themselves, and for themselves concluded and open to a phenomenology of the mediating space in which the observer, from the start disoriented, regains control of the real only on the condition of reconceptualising in through the comparison between several points of view.

Between 1985 and 1986 Hadid probes three projects that are more like research directions.

24 Cathcart Road is a dwelling in the International Style the interior design for which Hadid proposes a flow of continuous energy. She creates it with a system of sofas, conceived as plans arranged in sequence. At the same time, however, through vibrating curves and folds (she'll call this "the first material display of my Suprematist geology") the flow becomes condensed and relaxed at corner areas in order to construct "parking" spaces and concretize specific functions.

Produced afterwards in a series (1988), the furniture designed for *24 Cathcart Road* is characterized by its combination of materials, for the polychromy that contributes to disarticulating the objects along compositional lines, for the multiplicity of forms with which the same functional elements are resolved, but above all, for the rapport that it has with those who use it. In this way, a sofa may be partly enveloping and partly rigid, accommodate formal but also relaxed behavior. It may direct, through sudden changes of the necessary position, the glances of the user in a plurality of directions: upwards, downwards, towards the interior and the exterior of the room. Exactly as the cinematographic sequences of the spaces in *The Peak* and, also, in

the designs that simultaneously examine the same space from above as a spaceship and from below as a worm.

If with *Cathcart Road* Hadid examines the energy of curved lines and the poetics of vibrations through folds and waves, with the office building for *Kurfürsterdamm 79* in Berlin the object of analysis is the stratification of planes. The design (1986) rises on an almost impossible site of 2.7 x 16 meters. It is developed in 7 stories and follows the edge of the adjacent street in order to gain a minimum acceptable width of 5 meters. Given the necessary position of vertical connections that reenter into the 2.7 metre-wide strip, the building is structured according to a sandwich logic, that is, in a series of successive layers, staircases, structural form, open space, and facade. Thanks to a clever play of variations and excavations, these guarantee a plurality of spatial sequences on the interior that superimpose themselves along the lateral facade, conceived as an multiple but synthetic transversal section, in order to emphasize the interior stratification on the exterior as well. Lastly, the longitudinal facade, curved and more uniform, is marked by peremptory incisions.

Extremely varied while in the limited dimension of the space available, the building in Berlin affirms the centrality of the interior space of the void. At the same time, however, with its exterior, curved on one side and cut at random on the other, it places itself like a plastic knot within the urban context. It is a different direction that gives Hadid, in Germany, the chance to construct her first work.

Theme: dwellings and shops to be built upon a city block that, due to building regulations, has five-story row houses. Taking advantage of the experimental character of the initiative, Hadid imposes a broader interpretation of the regulations and proposes a building of the same density but with a randomly cut profile, formed by a one-story volume of shops surmounted by 11 duplexes arranged in a row and one seven-story tower. Statement: in a context as disorganized as the Berlin periphery, a structure respectful of the heights wouldn't have made sense. It would lack the energy that the outburst of the tower suggests.

The building was notably tampered with during the implementation phase. Developed by a local architect hired by IBA and slowed down by bureaucratic time frames, the construction site dragged along until 1993.

Judging by the designs for the project, the three volumes that constitute the building, which are the shops, the duplexes and the tower, should have been separated from one another and then intersected with greater force. Where the work redeems itself is in the skyline and, in particular, in the tower that slants and overhangs like to prow of a ship with its sharp profile obtained from the combination of the two surfaces. The first, full and heavy, and the wall clad in anodized metal bands that frame and tightly bind the window frames that face them. The second, light and transparent, is formed by a continuous curtain wall, from which the apartments can view the city.

Hadid will consider the Berlin project as a missed opportunity, but will not disown it: the IBA building has been compared to an arrow, a marker that catches one's attention and directs energy. If one observes the typological structure, one notes

that it is organized upon the principle of combining different elements in a sort of programmed disorganization.

The overturning, with respect to the academic exclusiveness of the 1980s, made really by Grassi, Rossi, Krier, and Ungers is held out, instead, by the research for integrity and typological, radical purity. Also because the building of Hadid ignores mimetic contextualism in order to propose a contemporary approach that doesn't hesitate to fish up fragments of the modernist and rationalist tradition. It is demonstrated by the reuse, unusual for the type of building in which it is located, of the theme of the roof garden that is superimposed on the shops and duplexes. Augmenting each other like a final stratum of the "geological" form of the building, it enriches its modalities of uses. At the same time, through the reference to Le Corbusier's transatlantic poetics, it renders the image of a tower-prow concrete, which otherwise would have been resolved in a simple, formal artifice. While the concrete recalls the energy of a child's toy, it justifies the arrow-like form of the entire building that otherwise would have been just a metaphorical representation of an abstract, although generic, urban energy.