

ZAHA HADID/2

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TWO WORKS, ONE MASTERPIECE

In 1988 at MoMA in New York the exhibit *Deconstructivist Architecture* is inaugurated. The operation, ably sponsored by Philip Johnson, has a high dose of ambiguity that guarantees its success. It launches, in fact, in a panorama full of novelty, of numerous trends. And at the same time it liquidates, in name of the passing of trends, historicist and post-modern nostalgia through the recovery of the modern tradition. Finally, to fill the operation with meaning, the problematic name suggests the link between the new architecture and the French post-structuralist philosophies, in particular, Derridian deconstruction, avidly followed by the New York intelligentsia.

The architects called to exhibit (Behnisch, Tschumi, Libeskind, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Koolhaas, Eisenman, Hadid, Gehry) in reality have nothing in common, if not the fact that all were busy searching, through decompositions, disciplinary hybrids and recompositions, new directions for architectural research. And so little does Hadid have in common with the rest of the group, if one excludes Koolhaas, who however follows a very personal research. Hadid, above all, at thirty-eight years old, is the youngest and, like Libeskind, has no meaningful built works, since the IBA building is still in progress at the time (it would be complete only in 1993).

The Deconstructivist Architecture exhibit, due to the prestige of the organizing institution, gives Hadid an enormous notoriety, ratifying her international stature. And it contributes to her obtaining two commissions: the *Moonsoon Restaurant* in Sapporo, Japan and the *Vitra Fire Station* in Weil am Rhein, Germany. She is commissioned for the *Moonsoon Restaurant* in 1989 by Michihiro Kuzawa of JASMAC, the contractor who has, in the same period, given Aldo Rossi the project for the Palace Hotel in Kyushu. The project consists of the interior design of a bar-restaurant that occupies two floors of the *Kita Club*, a night club in the Susukino district of the Sapporo waterfront.

The project may be interpreted according to two different readings. The first is metaphorical. The restaurant represents the contrast between cold and hot, between fire and ice. The interior design on the first floor is clear and sharp like crystal while the second floor is warm and soft. The reference is also to Sapporo's fame as a winter site for ice statues carved outdoors, while the fire is a reference to the fire-places of the interior spaces.

The second reading is formal. It is based on the technique that Zaha Hadid learned at the Architectural Association from Rem Koolhaas, that she often uses in her project. The play of opposites, taking them from the reflection upon a few selected primary concepts (cold and hot but also solid and void, opaque and transparent, light and heavy, spiral and box) that serve to avoid the minute rules of formal development in architectural composition. It lets one find a territory sufficiently free

from disciplinary constraints and constrictions from which it is possible to reorganize, starting from zero, the design of space. Furthermore, in the case of Hadid, the reuse of the contrast between the sharpness of cold and the softness of heat permits her to make them flow together in a unique work, two previous directions of her research, until now separate: the penetrating experimental geometry of *Hong Kong Peak* and the carefully calibrated enclosures in the reconstruction project for the flat at *24 Cathcart Road*.

The Moonsoon Restaurant raises the voices some critics who judge it to be Baroque. On the whole, the work is perplexing. And particularly disconcerting is the fiberglass object-sculpture that connects the two floor in the form of a spiral (which for Hadid is an Orange Peel, resembling a cut peel that winds around itself). In reality, this spiral is truly the heart of the composition because it inserts, within the rigid bipartition of the floors, a strongly sculptural and chromatic effect that mediates between the sharpness of the lower floor and the softness of the upper floor. At the same time, it creates an ascendant effect that allows the metaphor of cold and hot to be created in a single design.

If the Sapporo restaurant stirs up perplexity, the fire station of the Vitra Campus (1990-93) is enthusiastically received. The building has modest dimensions: 800 square meters on two floors to accommodate five garages and a maximum of 24 firemen on duty to protect the production facilities and buildings of Vitra, which are highly flammable.

Objective: to create a building of high architectural value that would have been next to the building designed by Grimshaw and the museum of F.O. Gehry, already in construction at the time (the building by Siza and Ando were to follow). Executed in reinforced concrete, the station was compared to starfighter airplanes, motorboats, to a bridge about to collapse, and to a spaceship about to explode. But the most convincing image is suggested by Hadid: it is a structure that vibrates like a fire alarm bell at the moment when it begins to ring. Completely different from the *Moonsoon*, so much so as to seem designed by a different hand, the Vitra station, in reality presents a similar theatrical sensibility, even if this time projected towards the organisation of the exterior spaces. In fact, the building acts as an enclosure towards the exterior and as a stage wing with respect to the internal circulation that spatially reorganizes according to curves, slants and changes in perspective. There is, furthermore, a similar compositional logic based on showing the meeting-collision of opposing principles.

This exists, above all, between the unity of the composition and the multiplicity of its constitutive elements, each of which is emphasized and treated with specific care. In particular, three longitudinal elements that seem to originate from the vibration detach towards the right, the left, and above from a single linear mass and the shed roof that restores the horizontality of the composition, obstructing upward movement but lifting up entire construction in other directions.

The second opposition is between the volume and the plan. The building, as Hadid notes, "is more than a composition of lines; it is a play of volumes that intersect with each other." But the volumes, if one observes well, are obtained by the folding of planes, that however clamped, torqued, and tormented, never lose their planar characteristics nor their dynamism.

A third opposition is between the rigid fireproof structure particularly connoted from the functional and formal point of view and the flexible spaces for exchange and encounter in the garage when the vehicles are parked outside.

The fourth opposition is between the heaviness of the austere, material, sculpturally reinforced concrete and the lightness of an immaterial energy. It is made possible beginning precisely from the fundamental characteristic of the concrete that eliminates the duplication of structure and cladding. It thus actuates a poetic of subtraction, in which the signs are reduced to their pure essence with a consequent stripping of volumes to pure compositional lines. From this there is a laconic attitude, extrinsic in the essentiality of the sign and the reduction of colors to the gray of cement and the few subtle colors from the interior or, as Hadid states, to "an absence of the particular that is nothing but attention to detail." It is a reduction of the noise to a few privileged sounds according to a design reasoning opposed to what followed, with excessive tactility and color, in the Moonsoon Restaurant. As such it gets closer to the poetics of Mies which, Hadid admits, is joined in common by the love for precision, lightness, light, and finally, from the desire for connections between interior and exterior space, achieved through the decomposition of the volumes into plans.

TWO SPIRITS

The *Music Video Pavilion* in Groningen (1990), like the *Moonsoon Restaurant* and unlike the *Vitra Station*, is a multicolored object, fragmented by a plurality of marks, chaotic to the point of confusion. But it is also this divided between the two halves: one closed, clad in metal and torn off from a window from which oblique bands with triangular figures project; and an open one, resolved with a wire-like structure of slender pilasters and beams within which the sculptural volumes face one another.

It is useless, Hadid suggests, to opt for one or the other limit of the countless pairs of opposites innate in the dynamics of forms; it occurs, instead, to accept their existence, emphasizing their contrasts. This undeniable dualism may be brought to a more private, existential scale. For example, the single-family home, where conventional ideas predominate and radically innovative proposals are scarce. This occurs with the project for the *Hague Villas* (1981), a study for the construction of eight single-family units located near the Dutch capital.

Hadid proposes two types: the "cross house," derived from a linear generating principle and the "spiral house" based on the opposite matrix of a curve. The cross house is characterized by the intersection of two prisms – one negative, the other positive. The first, on the ground floor, is a rectangle subtracted from the volume of the surrounding dwelling: thus a void. The second, on the first floor, is the same rectangle, this time solid, but almost perpendicular to the void below and completely enclosed to accommodate the living room spaces. The result is a dwelling whose ground floor is closed around an internal courtyard while the first floor is open to the landscape: simultaneously introverted and extroverted in a dualism that synthetically expresses contemporary architecture's dilemma always in equilibrium between the "brick house," that is, the house characterized by an inward oriented house with a defensive perimeter wall and the "glass house," in which the glazed surfaces project the interior towards the surrounding nature.

The spiral house originates instead from the opposition between the cube of the envelope and the spiral of the ramp upon which the spaces are developed. From the encounter between the two geometries, surprising internal views and "unexpected channels of communication and interaction" are developed. But it also activates a progression that moves upwards from heavy to light, from closed to transparent.

It isn't difficult, also for these projects, to catch a glimpse of the correspondence with the work of Rem Koolhaas, of which was frequently declared: "my relationship with the Office for Metropolitan Architecture" states Hadid in an interview that appeared in *El Croquis* – is more intense than the one we would have if we worked shoulder to shoulder. There is a sort of invisible dialogue between us..." The theme of the house, both introverted and extroverted at the same time, was studied by Rem Koolhaas in the residential complex *Nexus World* in Fukuoka, Japan (1991) and developed in numerous projects up to the recent villa in Floirac in France (1998), where he combined a patio ground floor and an upper floor glazed and open to the landscape. Meanwhile the theme of contrast between box and spiral has been confronted, in particular, in the *Kunsthal* in Rotterdam.

Considering these undeniable correspondences, there are however two different approaches that we can perhaps ascribe to the difference between the Eastern, feminine Hadid and the Calvinist, masculine Koolhaas. The energetic and sensual in Hadid risks bulimia while the intellectual and cold is nearly anorexic in Koolhaas. For the Iraqi artist, in fact, it is in the richness of the sign and the power of the image that contrasts and tensions find their formal synthesis. While for the theoretical Dutch designer it is only that is only possible to do architecture extending the forms on the operating table of reason in an endless, analytical, and at times apodictic sequence of logical procedures. And it isn't by chance, in the end, that one is inspired by the compositional richness of the Russian avant garde while the other pulls his poetics from the almost null Miesian one, that is, in synthesis, from an ineffable intellectual discipline through which one is driven by a desire for asceticism and the disappearance of form.

A NECKLACE FOR MALEVICH

In 1992 the Guggenheim Museum in New York inaugurates the exhibit *The Great Utopia*, dedicated to the masters of Suprematism and Constructivism. It is the opportunity –Hadid confesses– to verify the three-dimensional force of the abstraction of Malevich and his circle. The exhibition design comes out of this: with the installation of the Tatlin Tower in the center of the museum's atrium and a series of parallel episodes, each dedicated to a spatial theme. What could be the concretized from the opposition between the constructions of the painting Red Square by Malevich and the Corner Relief by Tatlin? From the extrusion through the panels of a Malevich composition traced along the floor? From the representation of a geometric storm that drags the Suprematist paintings into a corner? From the floating in air of the paintings set up along the transparent Plexiglas supports? Or from the gravitating of the Suprematist sculptures along an orbit that emerges from the floor directing itself towards the ceiling?

Although many curators and artists vexed by the strong character of many museum exhibits would prefer, architecture cannot be a neutral space made of walls along which one may display a well ordered sequence of works. It must, on the contrary, involve and suggest interpretations. It must become a text.

It must, in the end, be the result of an autonomous artistic research that, in order to verify its own assumptions, can, in fact must, enter into conflict with the system of expectations.

From here comes the difficult relationship with the client, that has provided Hadid with more than a few disappointments.

This is the case of the *Düsseldorf Art and Media Center*, a construction for offices and spaces designated for technologically advanced activities for which she wins the competition in 1989. In 1991 the first investors are found, in 1992 the designs for the municipal permits are developed. But few take risks on a building of such unusual forms, made of blades that insert themselves according to shortened angles in order to permit unexpected views of the port. The result: the commitments aren't sufficient to begin work and the project is stranded.

The second disappointment is linked to the competition for the *Cardiff Bay Opera*. After the proclamation of Hadid's victory (September 1994), the first reconsiderations are already registered. The project is accused of being too complex, of not responding to the needs of the client, of not being easily operable. *The Cardiff Bay Trust* then commissions two alternative proposals by Norman Foster and Manfredi Nicoletti. Then another project springs forth, prepared by the Japanese Itsuko Hasgawa. The practice, as many note, is shameful. Even the *Royal Institute of British Architects* intervenes, embarrassed by the overturning of the competition results. In the end, hypocritically, it is decided to definitively entrust the work to Hadid. However, the implementation will be torpedoed due to a lack of funding.

The project of the *Cardiff Opera House* is a creative masterpiece and ingenious design. It is an open courtyard, originating from the bending of a longitudinal form, upon which numerous architectural volumes are spliced that partially occupy the

interior space. Hadid compares it to a necklace on which precious jewels are spliced. They are the Opera hall and the rehearsal rooms.

The compositional criteria are two very simple ones: to give air and light to the spaces and link the complex to the city and, in particular, the port.

To obtain the first, Hadid imagines large glazed surfaces that render the building transparent and allow the passers-by to see even from the street the functioning of the opera mechanism and, in particular, the orchestra rehearsals. To connect the building to the city she foresees a slab –which Hadid calls the "bubble"– on the ground floor where the public can experience the place and participate in exhibits, recitals, dance schools and educational programs or simply enjoy the view of the Bay of Cardiff." The same slab, with a roof, becomes an open space upon which pilotis counterbalance the construction above. While strident colors characterize the most important spaces that, almost like sculptural forms, make a counterpoint to the glass walls.

PIXEL FRAGMENTATIONS

In 1995 Hadid, working for *Milstein Properties*, participates in a competition reserved for the rehabilitation of one of the most prized and frequented areas of New York, near Times Square, between 8th Avenue and 42nd Street. The other competing companies are Marriott, who have hired Michael Graves, and the Disney Corporation with the firm Arquitectonica, which ends up winning. For the two blocks Hadid proposes commercial slabs surmounted respectively by 22-story and 45-story skyscrapers. The two towers, both destined for hotel use, have different figurative value. The lower one is characterized by a simple, quite elementary enclosure and inserts itself, like an ordering element, within the urban context. The taller one has, instead, a fragmented form, due to the alternating of glazed and opaque walls upon which luminous screens and the billboards that characterize Times Square could be inserted. The glazed walls characterize the residential functions while the opaque ones call out the service spaces, such as conference rooms, banquet halls, the gym, the pool, that are operable with artificial light.

The building's fragmentation into blocks, beyond permitting the alternation of glass and publicity billboards, is reflected in the vertiginous full-height internal atrium. This is faced by a controlled disorder, with the private and public spaces recreating in this the flowing vitality of people and activities on the interior that characterizes the urban New York environment on the exterior.

The same strategy of decomposition of the single, elementary form recomposed into a new typologically innovative organism adopted for the *42nd Street Hotel*, is applied next in the project for the *Boilerhouse Extension* of the *Victoria and Albert Museum* (1996) and then in the project for the *Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati* (1998, in preparation for construction). The difference is that in these works the elementary units start to resemble pixels, the minute fragments of light that compose and recombine themselves to permit the television screen to produce an uninterrupted flow of images. The idea of generating a "fluid, adaptable and flexible is rendered possible by extremely light modular components" through alternating minimal units has old roots. It goes back again to the experimentation of Cedric Price and Archigram during the 1970s. It is a tradition that often intersects with the teaching at the Architectural Association, that passes through the theories of Reyner Banham and the projects of the High Tech school: from Rogers to Foster. But Zaha Hadid resumes the thread with particular attention to the value of architectural space, characterized by three additional formal inventions: the flexible and wide covered plaza that welcomes visitors ("urban carpet"), the variety of exhibition spaces suspended in air, so as to offer, with their strange grooves, unusual perspectives ("jigsaw puzzle") and a double system of facades that create a cushioned layer between the interior and exterior that can together have the quality of a membrane, an interface, but also an autonomous form in itself ("skin/sculpture").

FLAWS

If the projects that we have just examined investigate the problem of decomposition and successive recomposition, other works refuse the decompositional phase to reach directly for a synthesis. They are the bridge projects, the *Landesgartenschau 1999* in Weil am Rhein and the *Center for Contemporary Art in Rome*. The *Habitable Bridge* on the Thames in London (1996) transforms the bridge typology for a double system of compositional lines, concretized from clusters of long, linear elements set on two watersheds of the river. These, hosting commercial and cultural activities, generate an intense attraction between them that physically and ideally connects the two otherwise separated parts of the city. At the same time the paths, arranged at various levels and oriented according to mutual directions, offer new openings to the natural space and the artificial skyline.

Similar activities of interconnection, this time between separated university buildings by street arteries, are developed for the *University of North London Holloway Road Bridge* characterized by walkways equipped with electronic communication systems to supply the students with information, video and audio, on campus life. Here, however, the flows are concretized in a wall mass, becoming in themselves a kind of architecture as with the *Landesgartenschau 1999* in Weil am Rhein, a building created to host events and exhibits related to the gardening show of 1999.

The constructed spaces, in fact, emerge from the geometry of the system of pedestrian paths in the park. And three of these intersect in order to form the building.

The lines of the *Landesgartenschau 1999* recall the fluid lines found in nature. And the work again feels the influence of recent Eisenman work and of the morphogenesis theories elaborated by the critic Charles Jencks.

It is a route that will soon be abandoned by the Iraqi architect who, like Koolhaas, is more fascinated by the metropolis than by nature, by abstract reasoning than by organic empathy. The opportunity is provided by the competition for the *Center of Contemporary Art in Rome*. Theme: a cultural machine located on a 3-hectare site within the Flaminio neighborhood, which will contain museum structures and temporary exhibits, experimental multimedia spaces, an educational sector and independent and extra-institutional activities. Hadid proposes "an almost urban field, a world in which to dive rather than a building as a signed object." The field is navigated by visitors attracted by the diverse distributions of densities that are registered on the building's interior. The vertical and oblique circulation elements are located in points of confluence, interference, and turbulence. Architectural practice is side by side with the contemporary artistic one through the reduction of the object to a multiplicity of directions where an uninterrupted flow of energy runs. And it evokes the line of research "that distances itself from the object and its correlated sanctification, towards multiple fields of association, anticipators of the necessity for change." The recent work of Toyo Ito comes to mind which, through fluid images, seeks to give form to an increasingly immaterial electronic society. But observing the work of Hadid, in which the same views are by now considered superfluous, the forewarning words of Peter Cook come to mind. This key

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personality of Archigram, who in 1966 proposed to think of the city not "as a series of buildings, but as a plot of occurrences that intertwine into infinity."