

ip - a - tone
... an interview with
aha Hadid

Zaha Hadid nous livre dans cet entrevue les différents aspects de sa formation et de sa pratique professionnelle qui ont contribué à élaborer effectivement sa vision particulière de l'architecture.

Last spring, Zaha Hadid was interviewed by Nicholas Holman and Paul Lalonde, both students in architecture at McGill University. The night before the interview, Ms. Hadid spoke at the Alcan lecture series on her work.

TFC: You started off in *mathematics*. Did you have any idea of going into something else later on?

ZH: I always wanted to do architecture, so math was... I don't know why I did math... I just liked it as a subject, so I thought I would do it for a short period of time. I was never intending to just devote my entire career to *mathematics*.

TFC: Would you say that the mathematical education has influenced your work?

ZH: It does because, first of all, it abstracts your thinking. It also gives you a system which I think for architecture is very appropriate. I mean it depends on the person; for me it was very useful.

TFC: Before you encountered **Malevitch**, in your fourth year at the AA, what kind of design philosophy were you following?

ZH: Well, I mean, in third year, what design philosophy do you have? At the AA, you choose units which you have a certain affinity to, to go to places where you think you can explore ideas which otherwise are not possible. So my work in third year was quite different, but I was still interested in very similar kind of ideas.

TFC: And now you've gone beyond that, you've diverged from it?

ZH: I think so. I think it was an important starting point, but...



it's not my Bible sort of thing.

TFC: What's happening now in Berlin? What's the stage with these various buildings?

ZH: Well, Berlin, you know... is a very strange place where things take off, and sleep for a while, and then they move on... I was complaining in Germany recently and they said that, you know, things take a long time here. Seven years is the normal thing; it's only been a year. With the IBA it will dribble on, and will eventually get built, and most probably will not be recognizable because they'll mess about with it so much. But I think that the Japanese projects, although they were started a year later, will happen quicker.

TFC: It seems like a very *curious situation in England* where you have all these people with incredible ideas, and yet the attitude of the population in general seems to be very negative.

ZH: Well, four or five years ago there was a turning point in British architecture. The Brits resisted **Post-Modernism** for a long time, and there was a moment when they could have really geared towards Modernism again. There was a whole debate which was about the Mies van der Rohe tower in London. It was kind of an issue of principles and many people knew that, if they rejected it, it would mean the end, for a period of time, to any Modern work in Britain. Had they accepted it, it would have really enabled a lot of people to do a lot of work in England. It put a lot of people in a very difficult position where they knew that maybe they couldn't support a project totally, because it wasn't really Mies' best work, and yet they knew it was a political issue.

I think it's a shame that it didn't happen. First, I don't think it's a bad building. It's not his best, but it's not bad, considering what they do in London. It made architecture really very superficial and posed certain people onto the political scene who had no idea what they were talking about. I mean, Prince Charles had a lot of leeway because of this situation. England is very funny because it acts as a kind of incubator for ideas and people come from all over the world to study there and to develop ideas. But they all leave England eventually, and that's the sad thing.

There has never been an English Modern tradition. The English don't like change. The English accept people who do

funny things because they accept eccentrics, but when push comes to shove they don't really support them. And that's what happens to a lot of designers: textile designers, I already said fashion designers... They all leave. Some very strong people had to get out of there. The music scene is the same, although there's a lot of money in it. And you take also all their top architects... If you look at Rodgers, Stirling and Foster, Foster has built his main building in Hong Kong. He's built in England but not in London. Stirling, after I don't know how many years - he's sixty years old - he's just opened the Tate Gallery extension last year in London; after all he done, he's never been able to build in London. Rodgers was in an unfortunate situation where he had to do Pompidou before he did Lloyd's. And there are many other examples: you look at Peter Cook, at Cedric Price, and a whole bunch of people who really did very, very interesting work in the sixties. They could have never done it anywhere else - but they always were seen as kind of nuts, you know... It's a very strange situation now, because there is a lot of work in England, but it's really schlocky, it's really bad stuff.

TFC: So do you foresee staying in England?

ZH: I really don't know. I mean, I'm there right now. I quite like London because it's central. And I think what is exciting for me about London is that it has all these services which are otherwise unavailable in any place. It has very good engineering firms, very good specialists, who all work all over the place, but they are based in London. There are a lot of people based in London but they don't do work in England.

TFC: How do you find dealing with the engineers in your projects?

ZH: Well, I deal with Peter Rice, of Ove Arup's, and they have a kind of group which is Creative Engineering, and they are far more flexible than anybody else.

So they get a project from you, and they're interested to see whether they can deal with it. For the Berlin project, they actually volunteered to do the work. Peter Rice heard that we needed help and he just volunteered. So we work with him very closely now. Really, he's fantastic. And his group is very good, and of extreme help to us. And they never see a problem. I mean, basically, they deal with it.

TFC: You used computer-designed drawings on the Peak competition, but how are the paintings actually produced? You have, say, an aerial perspective, are they layed out using the

computer?

ZH: No, they're done by hand. They are various projections.

TFC: Do you do any of that?

ZH: I do all of the preliminary sketches, yes. We have a pattern of colours which we mix prior to any of the paintings. It takes a long time to actually build it up, but, it's very funny, we found always at the end that the final image is very close to the preliminary study. The big drawings take a long time.

TFC: At lecture last night, many people seemed to be struck by the **intensity** of the graphics and the originality of the way they're put together. I was wondering why you felt it was necessary to develop such a ...

ZH: We felt that drawing, which is imposed on architects and is basically invented by architects as a method of communication, is rather restricting. And we felt that if the work had to take on a different kind of form, then it had to be seen from a different kind of viewpoint. I think the drawings were a very useful tool, because we **manipulated** the work through them; we felt we had to see the work through projections which were not available otherwise. And I think the projections were really seen as sketches, because the work developed through them. The drawings and paintings were always done simultaneously.

TFC: So the painting's not an after-the-fact thing.

ZH: They're not illustrations. A lot of the time they work almost in parallel to the work at different moments in the project; they're not done at the end.

TFC: I noticed a difference between, say, the earlier black and white drawings and the later colour drawings, especially those which incorporate oblique projections. You get more of a feeling for, say, the textures of the materials that are involved. I'm wondering how this graphic serves to communicate your intentions?

ZH: I mean they're really done for our personal use. They're not done as a way of explaining it. And a lot of the drawings have

a kind of a story line in them: the Peak drawings and the Berlin drawings, for instance. So there is this constant thing where you make the painting as a kind of piece and segment it to understand the pieces in it. Because all these projects really rely on more than one layer. For example, all the interiors of the Peak were always drawn to show the differences between the beams and the fluidity of the space within the various projects. There's always this desire to convey more than one piece of information in a drawing. And in time they become much more **compressed**.

TFC: The reason I ask that question is that there's an obvious parallel between the drawings that are exploded or superimposed, as you say, and the buildings themselves whose plans seem to come *apart*. It came to my mind: what you're proposing is a new vision of the world. I don't know if that's accurate...

ZH: It portrays a different kind of world. I mean, it doesn't have to be so global that it covers everything. The work had always wanted to really be visionary, and in a sense predicting certain things which could occur in the future. There's been an aversion to looking to the future for many years. Of course the future's always unknown, but I think architecture in a way is a field where you have to project ten or fifteen years ahead of time because it takes that time to complete a project. And I think you have to take into consideration the *ever-changing* conditions in cities because nothing is really ever static. You have to be able to actually inject a certain vision - you might change your mind about it in ten years' time, you know, it might not be right - but you have to be able to do that.

I think also that by teaching and studying at the AA for a period of time, it's really a learning exercise where a lot of these ideas could be implemented. It allows you, in a sense, to predict certain things. The projects from the unit we did are being done now in London. It's very curious because we picked up all the sites which now, ten years later, have become available as development sites; at that point they were not. And a lot of the time our predictions were quite accurate, which gives one the confidence that one's analysis of the situation is quite correct; not, obviously, one hundred percent, but...

I think the difficulty is a lot of people are frightened of the idea that you're giving them something which they have not yet experienced. I see the work, even in the office, really like a laboratory.



TFC: This ties back to what you were saying of people being afraid of things they haven't seen before. When I asked about *your* vision of the world, I meant what is *your* vision of the way people can live. Many people look at your plans and say 'you can't live in a building like that'.

ZH: I do not think that people wish anymore to live in a Modern surrounding. They like to have their little toy houses with little gardens, and it's very much kind of cuckoo land, you know. And I think it has to do with a certain upbringing, or rather with a certain political situation which makes the living conditions very conservative. For example, in London, if you're talking about living in lofts - which for them would be kind of a freak - in New York, people have been living in them for a very long time. So what might seem to be conventional in one place is not conventional in another. I just think that there is a different way of looking at things and that has to be tested. I think it's valid.

You know, there's also a tendency now that people don't say anything. There's no declaration of any form. They have no views. There is no opinion. So it's really a mishmash, highly eclectic, and it's very safe. I think that the progress of architecture relies on people taking certain risks.

TFC: Well, that taking of risks and willingness to explore different ways of living is the hallmark of the heroes of Modernism.

ZH: Yes, there was a Modern tradition which has either been killed off deliberately or died off because the participants didn't want to pursue it. I think it was a very valid experiment, and people should try to pursue it. I don't know by what means or to what end, but I just think that we do work in a different way, we do live in a different way than we did a hundred years ago. The way we enjoy public spaces is different. *Our whole vision of movement within the city is very different. Things which change, like restaurants or shops - things that can be regurgitated and done very quickly, and thrown away - if we applied that attitude to housing or landscape, it could have a lasting effect; it might enable people to work and live in a way which they don't know is available.*

People generally don't know what is available. On one hand they're too scared to try something which

is too imposing. On the other hand, I think fundamentally it has to do with the fact that architects lost a great deal of respect and power because they made so many disasters, and they're no longer given the chance to pursue other things.

TFC: Could I ask you about your own house?

ZH: I live in a very small little thing, which is untouched, like a derelict almost.

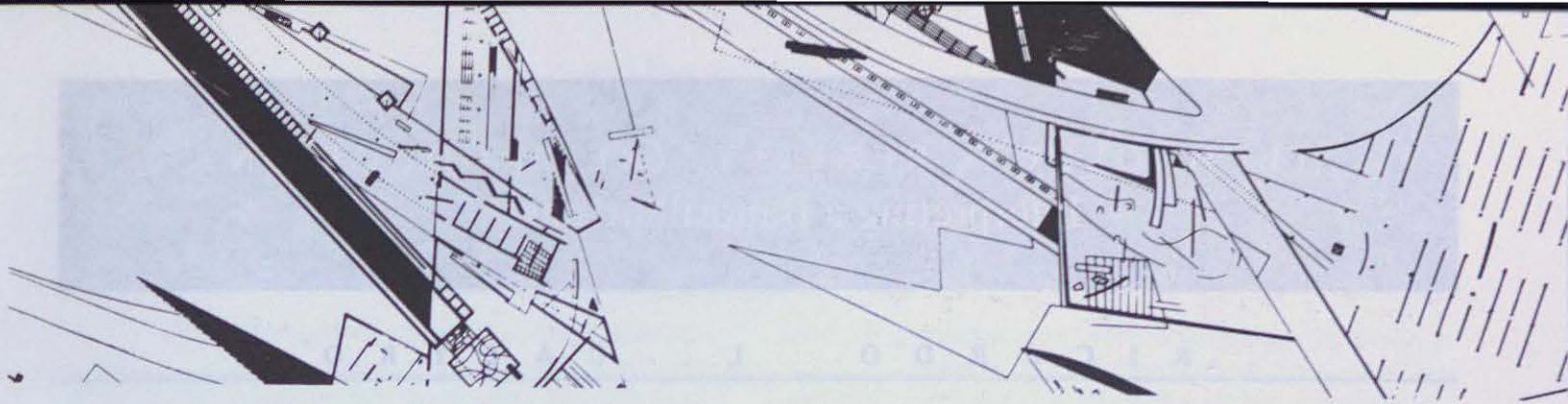
TFC: It's always like that. You have Corb designing these big concrete buildings and working in his little log cabin.

ZH: And I'm not sure I even would like to live in my own thing. I might even think of asking someone else to do it in the end (I don't think so), but I imagine it would be difficult to live in your own place surrounded by all your own objects.

TFC: How do you find working with students, as a teaching experience?

ZH: I used to enjoy teaching for because I thought it was reciprocal. I learned a lot from them and they learned whatever they learned from me. (I stopped teaching this year.) What I enjoyed most about teaching is to really watch people change. I mean, the work is one thing, but the personalities change... The unit I ran at the AA, which was previously run by myself, Elia [Zenghelis] and Rem [Koolhaas], was extremely demanding in terms of inventing programs for cities. They had to find the site, and write a program for it, which was a very taxing exercise but very valid. But ultimately the most important part of this whole experiment was that a lot of the students became very close friends of mine. Also, in time you have a support system. There are people who you can talk to, and who have certain affinities with you.

TFC: And did you find that it helped you break out of the



traditional approach to building? And would the students tend to follow you or would they tend to [rest of question buried by ZH's reply]

ZH: Well, in the beginning they didn't really follow me; I think the more well-known I became, the more it became that they really joined me because I was so-and-so. They expected to do my kind of work, and that's why I stopped teaching. I've had some very good students over the past ten years, and some of them have carried on in [my area of work]... A few of them work for me. The others are all over the world. I think it changed their view of the world, which for me was the most valid experience.

TFC: Many of the people felt after hearing you speak that you exude an incredible optimism. What is your feeling, looking at the future?

ZH: I am optimistic. If I weren't optimistic I wouldn't be able to do this work.

TFC: Many people also seemed disturbed by your apparent dislike of trees.

ZH: It's like an in-house joke. I actually don't like trees. I like them in China because they're willow trees. I like nature in the sense that I like the ruggedness of landscape: like when I went to Australia, the light is very beautiful, the beach is very beautiful, the water's beautiful, and that's nature. I have an aversion to the way architects for a long time used nature to fudge architecture. You take a plan, and someone designs the interior, they put a plant here and there, and they've resolved it. People can't do elevations put a tree in front of it, and the elevation disappears. When they don't know what to do with the section, they draw in people, stuff it with people... and zip-a-tone. That's what I really object to. I think it's camouflaging architecture. Flowers? I don't mind flowers...