

## Look what I built

Zaha Hadid was labelled a 'paper architect'. But now her first major building is finished - to great acclaim. By Patrick Wright

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Patrick Wright  
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Tilted planes and urban carpet: the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati by Zaha Hadid. Photo: Helene Binet

Just the day before, Zaha Hadid was in Barcelona, receiving the European Union Mies van der Rohe prize for contemporary architecture. But this afternoon, here she is walking along a half-dead street in downtown Cincinnati.

Clad in a great swirl of black designer wear, she's wearing a ring you probably couldn't board a plane with nowadays and seriously high-heeled shoes, secured, as the Cincinnati Enquirer duly notes on its front page, with "lime green Day-Glo straps". Hadid comes to a halt on the street corner, arrested by a clutch of reporters and photographers who promptly fall to their knees.

The reporters are respectful, too: prepared, given current geopolitical sensitivities, to identify Hadid as "Baghdad-born" rather than "Iraqi". A few may already have been puzzled by her golden handbag, a bulbous yet tight-skinned object that bears a disconcerting resemblance to a human backside.

Yet the really brilliant attraction stands across the street behind her. The Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art is Hadid's first large building. It is also the first American museum to be designed by a woman, and, so the New York Times will shortly declare, "the most important new building in America since the cold war".

Looming up on a street corner that, as Hadid tells the journalists and photographers, once housed a hat shop and Hustler magazine, the new Center of Contemporary Art is both a practical building and an unmistakable product of her radical aesthetic. It consists of a series of cantilevered "volumes" that do indeed seem to defy gravity, and even to float in and out of each other, as one walks past them.

Hadid has often talked of extending the public life of the city, and here she draws the street right into her building with the help of a simple but effective device. Starting with the pavement outside, her concrete "urban carpet" becomes the floor of the transparent foyer and then curves upwards, in a dramatic tribute to the skateboarder's ramp, to form the back of a central well in which a huge steel staircase (made, as Hadid is pleased to point out, by a local manufacturer of roller coasters) rises to provide access to six floors of gallery and office space.

There must be some right angles, yet the building feels like an assembly of strangely tilted planes, which Hadid has enhanced by means of lighting and contrasting textures. The result is mildly disorientating, but here too there is a deeper method at work.

The planes converge on a vanishing point somewhere behind the inside corner of the site, and this enigmatic geometry has the effect of drawing visitors into a series of spaces of far greater variety than the narrow rectangular plot might be expected to allow. Hadid has produced a virtuoso building that finds many different ways of presenting the art that will be exhibited here.

Hadid is indeed a rare phenomenon, and not only because she is a woman architect breaking through at the very top of her profession. Some years ago, a journal described her as the "diva of contemporary architecture". Her answer has recently appeared as a slogan on T-shirts: "Would they call me a diva if I was a guy?"

Zaha Hadid knows how to play the celebrity, but there are other aspects to her work, as I saw during an earlier visit to her studio in an old school in London's Clerkenwell. Her architect Patrik Schumacher was showing me a computer image of yet another triumph at an exhibition that is currently drawing large crowds at the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna.

Entitled Ice Storm, it consisted of a curious glacier-like thing that extrudes examples of Hadid's range of lounge furniture as it flows through the gallery in the characteristically liquid movement that Hadid's friend and fellow architect Amanda Levete finds so suggestive of Arabic script.

Zaha looks at the screen, and notices some pictures hung on the wall behind the Ice Storm. Turning to another of her staff, Woody Yao, she wanted to know what this "rubbish" was doing on the wall. Within seconds she was suggesting he should "get on a flight" and remove them at once. As for any thought that she might be hard to contact, "What do you think you have a mobile phone for?"

This was all pretty excruciating. I found myself looking at the carpet (pitch black, of course) and wondering how long it would be before Schumacher and Yao threw up their hands in horror and headed for the door. But it soon emerges that all this is completely normal. The point is confirmed by colleagues. Zaha may indeed rage and storm, but you can't make great buildings, let alone the "new architecture" that is increasingly claimed for Hadid, out of nice smiles and polite consensus.

Born in 1950, Hadid grew up in an Iraq that, despite an admitted susceptibility to coups and political instability, was being praised in Reader's Digest and elsewhere as the Middle East's great success story. Her father was both an industrialist and a politician. Having studied with Harold Laski and others at the London School of Economics, he became a leader of Iraq's National Democratic party, which worked for the formation of a progressive, democratic state. This project was extinguished by the Ba'ath party, which took power in 1963, although the Hadids stayed on for long enough, as her brother remarks, to become the only family in Baghdad that never put a portrait of Saddam Hussein on its walls. Zaha Hadid has not been back to Iraq for 30 years, but when asked where her interest in architecture came from, she talks not just of the intricate woven patterns in the Persian carpets of her childhood, but also of having grown up in a since wrecked culture where she felt no sense of limitation on what a girl might become.

Hadid came to London in 1972 to study at the Architectural Association. Recently disconnected from the British higher education system with its grant-aided students, the AA was then engaged in its own war against the mediocrity of so much postwar architecture and planning. Ignoring the pragmatic "realism" of the job market, the AA encouraged its increasingly international students to engage in "conjectural" schemes in which architecture could be rediscovered, precisely because they would never be built.

For its detractors in the profession, the AA was a weird bubble in which rich kids from overseas dreamed up crazily impractical schemes and tried to justify them with clouds of specious "theory". No doubt there was some of that. But it is indisputable that, under the direction of Alvin Boyarski, the AA became a place of huge charisma and influence. Hadid is among an extraordinary generation of architects who have emerged from this experimental test-bed. Richard Rogers was there, as were Bernhard Tschumi, Daniel Libeskind, Nigel Coates, Leon Krier, Peter Wilson, Will Alsop and Rem Koolhaas, with whom Hadid collaborated in the Office for Metropolitan Architecture.

To this day, Hadid insists that teaching is an important accomplice of architectural practice. She has taught at Columbia, Harvard and the University of Chicago, but she also emphasises that the clash of ideas is vital for producing the "leaps forward" that she is after in her practice. Her studio, which was based at the AA until 1987, still has the atmosphere of an ongoing research seminar, in which design is accompanied by discussion, argument, and a review process similar to the notorious one at the Architectural Association, where students have been confronted with onslaughts that, in more conventional schools, might indeed look like acts of abusive harassment.

Hadid has her own peerless way of fulminating about "retards" and raising her eyes to the heavens in exquisite demonstrations of impatience, but she is also, as her colleagues insist, good with people - getting the best out of them and encouraging independent initiative. To paraphrase one of her architect friends, when you get to know Zaha Hadid, you realise that all the storms are on the outside.

For years, far longer than many others with whom she worked at the AA, Hadid was known for visionary schemes that won competitions but remained unbuilt, even though their influence can be traced in the work of other architects.

The major breakthrough seemed to come in 1994 when her "crystal necklace" scheme won the competition for the Cardiff Opera House, but then, and not for the first time in Hadid's career, everything fell apart. When it came to winning public support, the opera house found itself in competition with a new rugby stadium. The tabloid press, led by the Sun, initiated an onslaught, denouncing Hadid's "living room for the city" as a newfangled and elitist structure for toffs.

This dire argument proved more than the Millennium Commission was prepared to resist. Its failure played into the hands of the sceptics who had always claimed that, give or take a ski-lift and a refurbished flat or two, Hadid would never be more than a "paper architect".

Some of the people involved in the Cardiff decision seem to have taken Hadid for a ditzzy dreamer who wouldn't recognise a budget if she saw one. But, quite apart from doing remarkable things on a highly constraining site, Hadid's building was brought in on budget, for a modest cost total of less than £13m. Its certainly not one of those overrun "signature" buildings (well known to the Millennium Commission) that leave the client organisation more or less bankrupt on day one.

For Hadid, meanwhile, Cardiff and its wounds are a thing of the past. Commissions appear to be piling up at the door, and her already much expanded practice is set to grow again. There is, surely, little chance of it becoming a conventionally consolidated firm. It will never be like a tree, with Hadid sitting at the top and a command-structure reaching down through the branches below.

It is more likely to grow like a rhizome, as theorised by two French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, whose books can probably still be had from the Architectural Association's bookshop. I guess it will be a diversified network of projects and ongoing investigations with Zaha Hadid pervading rather than simply directing it: a human weather system producing thunder and lightning, perplexity and insight, and great gales of laughter too.

• Patrick Wright's profile of Zaha Hadid is on BBC4 on Sunday.