

matt jones

Interview – The Architect, Zaha Hadid

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Spaces are her final frontier

*Her design for Cardiff Bay Opera House was accepted twice, but ultimately rejected. Yet Zaha Hadid, in Dubai for Forum '97, would willingly go through it all again. **Matt Jones** reports.*

Iraqi-born architect Zaha Hadid, the London-based diva of design, has courted the world of architecture – and controversy – with work that she hopes will “challenge ideas of occupation of spaces and how we interpret them.”

Her 1994 “crystal necklace” design for Cardiff Bay Opera House, in Wales, beat 268 other international entries in one of the first architectural competitions of its kind in Britain. But it was dropped after public criticism of the proposed new home of the Welsh National Opera and has become the cause celebre of the architectural brotherhood that finds in its midst a fiercely individual sister.

Despite Hadid’s victory, Cardiff Bay Opera House Trust appeared reluctant to formerly commission the building and four months later, in January 1995, announced that there would be a run-off between it and three other designs that had been eliminated previously.

Hadid won again, but the controversy ensured that it missed out on vital public money generated by the National Lottery and distributed by the British Government’s Millennium Commission – money that is now going to an alternative monument to the year 2000 and beyond, a rugby stadium.

“I still think it’s a scandal,” says Hadid, in Dubai for Forum '97, a conference on New Architectural Trends in Glass Technology, at Dubai World Trade Centre. “It should not have been allowed to happen in this way. It did not serve Cardiff well.

“In hindsight, I think it was because it was one of the first Millennium competitions. If it had been a year later, it would have been very different. There was no tradition of competitions in the UK, unlike France and Germany, where kindergartens, schools and offices go through them.

(more)

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“Nobody would tell me what went wrong, but it was a very unfortunate episode that has done tremendous harm to all Millennium projects in the UK. It could have opened the door for projects outside London by architects who are successful not because of networking, but because of sheer hard work.”

Hadid admits that she “never had a happy visit to Cardiff”, but won’t say a bad word against the ordinary people who opposed her design in the local press. “The problem of invention is that anything that is new, people criticize,” she says, diplomatically. “It’s very intentional that a design makes you rethink the way you occupy space and look at architecture in a different way. I found the people in Wales very, very friendly and some seemed genuinely upset for me. You could see it in their faces. The press had a lot to answer for in Wales. Something went wrong – I don’t know where. It’s a very complex story and no doubt somebody will write the ultimate book about it. It’s already become a case study for courses on ethics and architecture.”

Although unwilling to criticise the public, a suggestion by 47-year-old Hadid that architecture should be taught at school hints that a degree of ignorance scuppered the £43 million (Dhs258 million) project. “Architecture has to become more accessible to the public,” she says. “It should be entered on the curriculum. If people don’t know much about something, they are shy and say they don’t like it. It should be taught, like music, history and geography.”

Hadid may be Arabic by birth, but here as in Wales, she has yet to see one of her famously avant-garde buildings rise to fruition. However, she denies there is more to her first stay in Dubai than participation in the conference. “I’ve never been to the Gulf states, although I’m an Arab,” she says. “It’s an exploration. Interest was shown in my work and I thought it was a good opportunity. There is no other agenda. I was invited by friends who felt that as an Arab I should have a presence here – whether temporary or permanent is up for discussion. If ever I’m invited to do something here I would like it. If something comes of it, fine. If not, it’s nice to be here.”

Hadid, who was educated at London’s radical Architectural Association (described by the traditionalist Prince of Wales as a “Frankenstein Academy”), explains the philosophy of her approach to architecture – one that’s wholly at odds with Prince Charles’.

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“I believe that the way forward is to look forward,” she says. “That’s an instrumental incentive for me – to prove that we can progress. I believe it’s incorrect to move forward by looking backward. The demands of world culture are such that we should interpret things in a modern way. Going back to a conservative way of expanding cities prevents us from developing ideas that will enhance life in the city.”

If we look to tradition at all, says Hadid, we must do so “in a way which is new and progressive.”

Her job, she says, is “much like research into occupying spaces – how we interpret public and living spaces. Space has impact on the way we live – it needs to be reconsidered. It’s like writing a script. What script do you write to make it possible for us to occupy that ground and use space fluidly?”

According to Hadid, architecture is increasingly “generic”, with an overlap of styles. Similar designs can be realised in disparate locations, as the American influence on Dubai and Abu Dhabi proves. But, says Hadid, the way buildings and space are interpreted can vary.

“We’re fundamentally all the same,” she explains. “We have similar ways, we use the same phones, eat similar food, but the way people use space is sometimes different. Climate has an impact.

“The most important thing is to make it accessible for others to understand and interpret these things; to discuss the central ideas, generate a new urbanity, new spaces.”

(ends)