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ZAHA HADID

THE LEGACY OF AN ICON

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A TOWERING FIGURE

WITH THE DEATH OF ZAHA HADID AT THE AGE OF 65, BRITISH ARCHITECTURE HAS LOST BOTH ONE OF ITS BIGGEST TALENTS AND BIGGEST PERSONALITIES. BUILDING LOOKS BACK ON THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF AN ICON

WORDS / IKE IJEH

There are few architects who are household names. Zaha Hadid was one of them. Were this the only achievement of her sensational career this would deserve accolade enough. But the added combination of her branded public image, her international prestige and her distinctive architectural style means that her tragic and unexpected passing is a totemic event, both within and beyond the world of architecture.

There is no doubt Hadid was a divisive figure with a career dogged by controversies that would have felled less robust public figures. In her adopted Britain her stock was checked by the doomed Cardiff Bay Opera House and the much-derided wings on the London Aquatics Centre. Internationally the situation was often graver, with showpiece projects in Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia earning her a reputation for ill-judged flirtations with dictatorial regimes.

But buildings last longer than controversies and it would be churlish to cite Hadid's prolonged association with dispute as of greater lasting significance than her extraordinary body of work.

For the past two decades her buildings have defined an uncompromising form of contemporary architecture that was conceptual, dynamic and aggressively emotive. With its trademark curves, swooping forms and kinetic sculptural violence, Hadid's architecture did not do consensus and deliberately sought to provoke.

Her supporters, among them a generation of vociferous if impressionable students, worshipped her as a visionary pioneer of futuristic design. Her detractors were equally effusive, chiding her buildings for their alleged egotistical contrivance, contextual arrogance and subservience to object and form.

While the architecture divides opinion and will

continue to do so, her spectacular list of achievements does not. She was the first woman to win the renowned Pritzker prize, the first woman to receive a RIBA Gold Medal, the recipient of two consecutive Stirling prizes and four RIBA European Awards, and is one of only a handful of architects to have been made a dame.

Hadid combined her accolades and her architecture with commercial success; a triple whammy architects rarely achieve. Much of this success was outside but related to the world of architecture and she was one of the few architects, possibly along with Frank Gehry, to transform her stock into an aspirational design brand familiar to the general public. Famously designing sets for the Pet Shop Boys' world tour in 1999, she was also involved in film, exhibitions, lighting, fashion and furniture, with her Zaha Hadid Design Gallery capitalising on her persona and architectural style for commercial gain.

But the very persona on which these ventures were partially built could be problematic. History is careful to separate personal character from professional achievement; Caravaggio committing murder has hardly soured his artistic reputation. But, at least during her life, Hadid was widely perceived as being acerbic, aloof and imperious with a famed propensity for not suffering fools lightly. Does any of this matter when her architectural achievements were so pronounced? Well, yes, but not for the most obvious reason. It matters because with her flowing dark robes, grave countenance and (allegedly) short temper, Hadid gave architecture a personality within the public imagination. Her image may have played to the stereotype of the architect as an elevated eccentric dispensing instruction from above. But it was a powerful

image nonetheless and provided a rare human conduit through which the public could relate to the profession.

And while Hadid's public image might have been something of a caricature, it shields a character that must have been bristling with steely determination and resolve. The Britain in which she opened her practice in 1979 was a less inclusive, consensual and tolerant place than it is today and her incredible success not only maps the evolution of her career but of our society. Not only was she a woman but she was a Catholic-educated Arab Muslim who hailed from Baghdad, thereby neatly encapsulating a blaze of minorities not commonly associated with international architectural success.

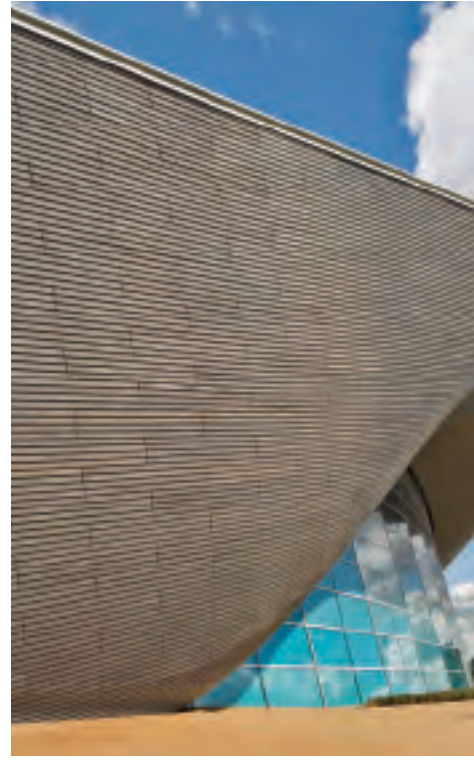
While Hadid was hardly reticent with occasionally citing prejudice as an obstacle in various instances, she was equally, and rightly, careful not to set herself up as a minority trailblazer who defined her achievements through the prism of oppression. What is beyond question is that, in achieving success, Hadid broke barriers most of us can only ever dream of and for that she deserves unqualified praise.

Ultimately it is not architects who are best placed to judge the legacy of other architects but cities and people. But Hadid's provocative architecture exposed some of the central challenges of the profession today. Is architecture an art or a business? Is it about soul or service? Her tragic death leaves these questions as unresolved as her life did. But it is the enquiry that is important and Hadid conducted hers with passion and conviction. »

For a longer version of this article go to www.building.co.uk

SIX DEFINITIVE ZAHA HADID PROJECTS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: HEYDAR ALIYEV CENTER (2012); LONDON AQUATICS CENTRE (2012); EVELYN GRACE ACADEMY (2010); BMW CENTRAL BUILDING (2005); SKY SOHO BEIJING (2012); MAXXI ROME (2009) [FOR PAST REVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON ZAHA HADID'S PROJECTS, GO TO WWW.BUILDING.CO.UK](http://www.building.co.uk)



TRIBUTES TO ZAHA HADID

LORD FOSTER, ARCHITECT

"I am devastated by the news of the loss of Zaha Hadid and cannot comprehend the enormity of her passing away. I became close to her as a friend and colleague in parallel with my deep respect for her as an architect of immense stature and global significance. It was Zaha's triumph to go beyond the beautiful graphic visions of her sculptural approach to architecture into reality that so upset some of her critics. She was an individual of great courage, conviction and tenacity. It is rare to find these qualities tied to a free creative spirit. That is why her loss is so profound and her example so inspirational. And, besides, she was my dear friend."

LORD ROGERS, ARCHITECT

"She was a great architect, a wonderful woman and wonderful person. Among architects emerging in the last few decades, no one had more impact than she did. She fought her way through as a woman - the first woman to win the Pritzker prize."

JANE DUNCAN, RIBA PRESIDENT

"Dame Zaha Hadid was an inspirational woman, and the kind of architect one can only dream of being. Visionary and highly experimental, her legacy despite her young age, is formidable. She leaves behind a body of work from buildings to furniture, footwear and cars, that delight and astound people all around the world. It was only last month that I had the enviable task of awarding Zaha the 2016 Royal Gold Medal for architecture - she was delighted to receive the recognition and adds the medal to an amazing collection of awards, not least winning the RIBA Stirling prize two years running. The world of architecture has lost a star."

SIR JOHN ARMITT, FORMER ODA CHAIR

"Great architecture is an essential element of a successful society. It can lift the spirit, create a sense of wonder and enjoyment. In Zaha Hadid, Britain had an architect who brought such pleasure not only to her own country but to many others around the world. I was on occasion questioned as to why the Aquatics centre was expensive; my answer was that great cities need iconic buildings, that they cost more but provide a lasting legacy. Zaha Hadid's design does just that. Like many great people she was determined and demanding, reluctant to lose the purity of a design to cost-cutting challenges. That purity was hidden during the Games by the temporary wings but has been released in legacy. We are all in her debt."

HANIF KARA, STRUCTURAL ENGINEER

"Her body of work, over four decades, pushed technology, design culture and construction to unprecedented levels globally. What I witnessed was her mesmerising charm, confident imagination as a designer, mischievousness, undivided generosity and ability to deliver, resulting in many clients becoming life-long friends and patrons of design that benefitted the industry as a whole, often giving new meanings to architecture and space. Zaha was ahead of her time when she first put pencil to paper and left us ahead of her time but leaving architecture and pride in our industry in a better place than she found it. RIP Zaha and thank you."

JACK PRINGLE, FORMER RIBA PRESIDENT

"She was never ordinary - she was great 'straight out of the box'. She was never going to start a practice doing extensions, she was always going to start right at the top but it took 20 years before she was recognised, during which time she never lost faith in her own ability. In the past 15 years she has designed a career's worth of buildings. A most extraordinary achievement. We will never see her like again, more's the pity."

'She was way **ahead of her time**; always ahead of her time'

Bob Sheil, director, The Bartlett School of Architecture

'An incredible character - brilliant, **fearless**, and irreplaceable'

John McAslan, architect

'She was an extraordinary role model for women. She was a trailblazer - her work was **brave and radical**'

Amanda Levete, architect

'She will be sadly missed as an **iconic** leader in architecture'

Angela Brady, former RIBA president

'Her contribution to architecture as a **pioneer and visionary** cannot be overstated'

Julia Peyton-Jones and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Serpentine Gallery co-directors

'So bad to lose Zaha so early. I hope her **spirit** lives on'

Will Alsop, architect

