

Anecdote as Evidence: Zaha's World

My most persistent memory of doing improvisation, stand up, is of my mouth being in the present, and my mind being in the future.

– Steve Martin¹

Zaha Hadid's most important early masterpiece is a six-by-seven-foot improvisational acrylic painting titled *The World* (89 Degrees), which she made for her first solo exhibition at the Architectural Association, November 18 to December 16, 1983. I first met and began working with Zaha the following year, while I was still a student. She introduced herself to me, as she had to everyone else in 1983, by means of this picture, which had been painted, titled, and displayed as anecdotal evidence of her simultaneous discovery and exhibition of a new architectural universe.

What's very sad is that thousands of years of perfecting drawing disappeared in the past twenty years.

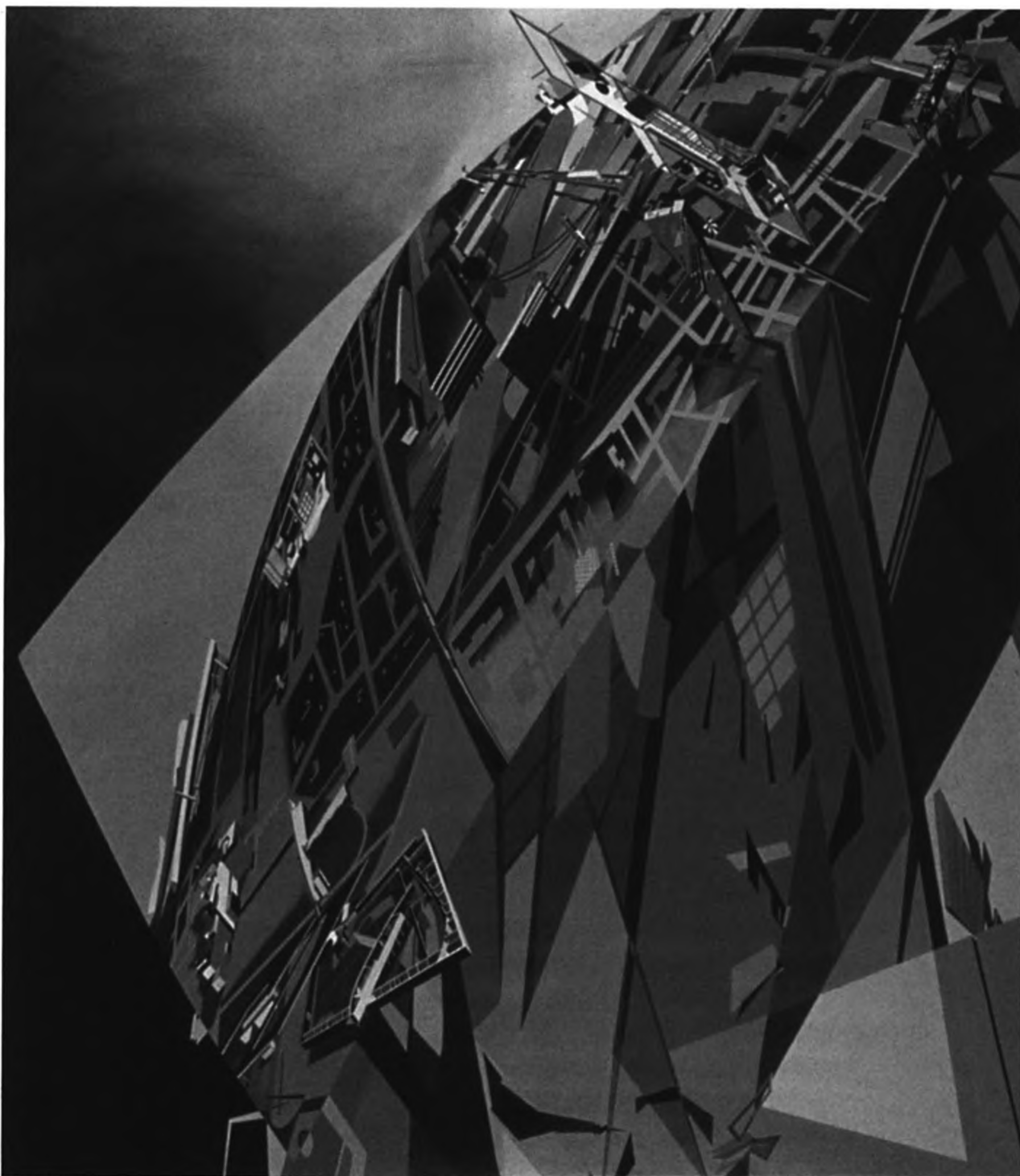
– Zaha Hadid, 2010²

1. *Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life* (London: Pocket, 2008), 1.

2. Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist, in *Zaha Hadid and Suprematism*, ed. Galerie Gmurzynska (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 45.

3. The large-format painting barely fit into the tiny room where it was produced, the "barrel vault" on the third floor of the Architectural Association. The mixing of acrylic paints required a steady supply of water, which was brought to the studio in Perrier bottles refilled at the AA Bar downstairs. Some in the school, noticing the endless stream of green bottles, mistakenly thought the painters were using the fizzy water instead of the tap-water refills, which, as Zaha noted in a lecture years later, might be why painting with Perrier became a brief fad in the school. Zaha Hadid, "Remarks on Alvin Boyarsky," at "Ideal Practice: Architecture and Education" (symposium, Architectural Association, London, June 20, 1996).

The World is one of the most startling architectural images of the 20th century, conceived at a moment when architects were moving away from long-established drawing conventions and the mental baggage that accompanied those graphic habits and toward new, unknown, even alien (some would soon use the then-arcane term *digital*) techniques. For Zaha, the purpose of making this painting was more immediate and urgent. *The World* was the 20th-century image architecture needed in order to begin work on the one thing she cared about most: building the 21st century. That so much of its suprematist stylistic energy is derived from the then-faded nomenclature of Kazimir Malevich, Ivan Leonidov, and El Lissitzky, that it was hand-painted in acrylics mixed with what even some assistants thought was Perrier and applied with tiny, eyeliner-sized brushes for weeks on end,³ and that it was deliberately conceived as a projective *oeuvre complète*



Zaha Hadid, *The World (89 Degrees)*,
1983. Acrylic on canvas, 189 × 220 cm.
Image courtesy Zaha Hadid Architects.

before her career had even begun are but three of the painting's many graphic paradoxes.

My drawings are not the building. They are drawings about the building. They are not an illustration of a final product. You have to look at them like a text – they are a language.

– Zaha Hadid, 1995⁴

4. Zaha Hadid, GA Document Extra 3 (Tokyo: ADA Edita, 1995), 17.

5. The title of the painting has been mistranslated in German monographs as *Das Erde* (The Earth) – ironic for the groundbreaking it portrays.

6. Interview by Alvin Boyarsky, in Zaha Hadid, *Planetary Architecture Two*, Folio 2 (London: Architectural Association Publications, 1983).

The painting, which Zaha and her collaborators forever after simply called “her world,” was just that: hers and hers alone.⁵ It depicts an aerial view of the earth, or somewhere like it, as if seen by an untethered astronaut floating away, thus recalling the advertising poster for Ridley Scott’s 1979 sci-fi masterpiece *Alien*, which declared, “In space no one can hear you scream.” Zaha reminds architects of something even more unsettling: that, thanks to zero gravity, there’s no longer any way to tell which way is up, let alone out, or, judging by the picture’s many vanishing points, right or wrong. This is a picture made by an aerial architect of the rarest kind: one entirely comfortable with her own body tumbling through space, who nonetheless is able to envision what future worlds look like before their arrival. In defying the more pedestrian architectural habit of simply trying to map a route or write a theory about how one might safely get there, this work silently screams its (alienating) effect by putting architects *within* its strange surroundings. One of the oddest effects of the door-height painting, always hung close to the gallery floor, is that it dares you to step across its threshold.

I think that through a set of drawings one discovers certain things which would not have otherwise been possible.

– Zaha Hadid, 1983⁶

The World literally rotates the architect’s vantage (note the precise degree specified in the title, a nod toward the “zero degree” sensibility of Malevich and his avant-garde conspirators) in an attempt to rattle loose architecture’s modernist underpinnings. It turns many of architecture’s rational, Euclidean conventions inside out, which I intend here less as an analogy than as a reminder of the trajectory of the career that this painting prefigures, already leading architecture swiftly away from geometry – stable form, figure, and dimension – and toward topology as a means for generating form. Topology, unlike geometry, uses complex mathematics to array variables by which space, structure, and form are

described within a fundamentally malleable, elastic framework. Topological thinking would become commonplace soon after this painting thanks in part to software platforms that Zaha's studio would bring to prominence in architecture. The key to *The World* is its premonition of this shift, evident in its simultaneous portrayal of broken and deformed figures and grounds set in motion by the angular momentum of an astronaut-architect released from any fixed position, now just glancing sideways at this newly unsteady architectural space.

What I think was extraordinary was that drawing technique became design technique. And that then became building technique.

– Zaha Hadid, 2010⁷

7. Zaha Hadid, "Rendering Speculations" (symposium, Architectural Association, London, May 7, 2010).

8. Interview by Boyarsky, *Planetary Architecture Two*. AA director Alvin Boyarsky's oft-quoted proclamation that the school "fought English mediocrity with the drawings on the wall" also comes to mind here.

9. Zaha's own commentary on the making of the painting is limited. According to a short text accompanying the painting in her archive: "This painting represents the culmination of a seven-year exploration into architecture's uncharted territories." In the summary she notes "technology's rapid development" and "exhilarating new lifestyles" as the backdrop of her exploration at the time, which she said was not intended to "resurrect" aborted, untested, or unfinished modern experiments, so much as to "unveil new forms of building." My thanks here to Manon Mollard at Zaha Hadid Architects Archive for sharing this description.

10. "Remarks on Alvin Boyarsky."

That the imagery of this reordered architectural universe of skewed views and slanted objects is as precise and calculated as it is effortlessly improvised and immersive (there were, in fact, very few preliminary sketches for the painting; it emerged nearly fully formed as a large-format drawing prior to being transferred to canvas for the painters' application of light and color in the late summer of 1983) reminds us that the study of mathematics in Beirut is what led a young Zaha to London. As she frequently noted, it was not a straightforward journey to building at the scale or speed she eventually achieved.

My second year was disastrous. . . . There was a very English situation – landscape, Milton Keynes, etc. I was seen as a wealthy Arab lady, waltzing in and out.

– Zaha Hadid, 1983⁸

At the time of its making, *The World* provided a comprehensive record of Zaha's early career and interests, and it shattered, in one youthful, zealous, expressionist rant, the architectural habits of old-fashioned, genteel, Eurocentric modernism, including the politely nostalgic analytic and representational conventions she instinctively rejected.⁹ She also occasionally rejected her tutors at the AA, a school then immersed more in a narrow refinement than a reassessment of postwar British architecture. From the outset, her disciplinary interests went far beyond observing or tweaking her adopted homeland's modernist heritage.

Observation is not a project. History is not a project. These are layers of a project.

– Zaha Hadid, 1996¹⁰

In making *The World*, Zaha took aim at three of modernism's crutches: geometry, function, and reason. The enduring presence of this imaginary tripartite structure had allowed the belief systems and representational techniques of postwar architecture to appear coherent and stable – even *upstanding* – for so long. This went out the window, like the architect's own disinterested gaze, with *The World*, which followed few of the rules of mechanical drawing, descriptive geometry, or orthographic projection. *The World* was sketched, laid out, drawn, traced, copied, and enlarged in highly contingent ways, with the completion of one part of the drawing leading to the making of another, then another, like a quilt of distinct episodes. The final work was drawn using pieces of overlapping tracing paper taped to a tabletop, filled in with hundreds of small ink lines following the edges of handheld transparent plastic rulers and curves. Scalpel blades were used to “sharpen” the intersections of the ink lines, which were traced a last time onto a frosted acetate film that was used to make the final drawing. The technique demanded crisp corners for terminating the various vectors, which in turn described the boundaries of the shapes filling the final picture. All of this was then transferred by hand to a large prepared canvas by tracing over a one-to-one print of the drawing laid on carbon-backed paper. This marking of the canvas established the map for its eventual colorization as a painting. As was the case with many of her early paintings, Zaha painted more than one version of *The World*, including a largely monochrome edition with occasional cobalt-blue fields and figures, which was eventually shown in another exhibition. These drawing techniques and the ways in which they created their own logics for assembly, arrangement, and construction became Zaha's first vehicles for thinking about the construction of buildings, her frame of reference that of canvases, film, and paper.

We used drawing technique to match ideas in a project. Superimposition in drawings became a way to test superimposition in the projects and buildings.

– Zaha Hadid, 2010¹¹

11. “Rendering Speculations.”

The painting was executed by a team of student assistants and painters with minimal prior instruction. Her studio forbade the use of parallel rulers or T squares (Zaha hated them more than some of her assistants did), 90-degree triangles, and the use of scale measurements, preferring instead simple eyesight

for gauging how best to shape or complete a figure or angle. For her, the relentless displacement of conventional drawing habits was a way to shake up familiar architectural problems like orderly figure-ground relationships, the truthiness of perspectival space, and a presumed realism and consistency of rendering, all of which Zaha disassembled, rewired into entirely new formal repertoires, and set in motion.

The most exciting thing about the Russians is not that their graphics are interesting; it's that their experiment was never finished. There was no conclusion.

– Zaha Hadid, 1983¹²

12. *Planetary Architecture Two*.

13. Anaïs Nin, *Henry and June: From the Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 354.

14. “The Design of the Phaeno Centre, Wolfsburg” (lecture, Architectural Association, London, February 28, 2006).

The World, made when Zaha was only 33 years old, records a sweeping rejection of the architectural worlds around her and their replacement with her own imagined one. It's a declaration of a late (or as she called it, “unfinished”) modernist upheaval accompanied by a renewed plea for the enduring necessity of *antirealism* in order to move architecture forward. Zaha's skepticism of the prevailing depictions of reality recalls Anaïs Nin's mantra on the ultimate intent of her writing: “The monster I kill every day is the monster of realism.”¹³ Looking back at Zaha's painting now, we see one of the most unexpected acts of architectural conservation imaginable in the 1980s: a return to manifestos delivered in the form of a single, coherent architectural image. That such an effort was made, one brushstroke at a time, in London, the epicenter of that decade's postmodern historicism (this was the year of Prince Charles's “carbuncle” attack on modern architects), makes the effort even more remarkable for its audacity and outright contrariness.

These drawings are a kind of graphic research.

– Zaha Hadid, 2006¹⁴

One reason it is worth looking at this painting carefully again, only a year after its maker's passing, is that now it can tell us more about the architectural world she sought to build, and not simply represent. The painting is in portrait format, not the landscape view common in most architectural drawings (even hers). *The World* was meant as a conversation with its viewers. It was composed to allow the viewer to assume the painter's vantage point, looking across a frozen moment at a planet that spreads toward a distant, curving horizon. A fractured, twisted, bent landscape fades from primary colors



Hadid, *The World (89 Degrees)*. Details.

to grays and back again. Across the expanse are occasional muted-green patches, suggesting pieces of a cultivated, artificial landscape (“I hate nature” was something one occasionally heard from Zaha, whose time outdoors rarely strayed far from a swimming pool’s edge). Across the surface of this alternative earth we see planes, shadows, blocks, and what appears to be a river (likely the Thames, here drawn as a wide perfectly straight blue line shooting out of the upper right corner of the canvas). There’s even a swimming pool or two, inexplicably appearing to float (like many other things in the picture) above the vast constructed ground, like miniaturized oceans hewn into perfectly rectilinear shapes.

It was 1972 when I joined the AA . . . a time when the school was antidrawing, antidesign, antiarchitecture. It was about other things. . . . Some of us protested and decided we wanted to design and learn buildings.

15. “Remarks on Alvin Boyarsky.”

– Zaha Hadid, 1996¹⁵

Only by looking carefully at *The World* can we fully notice half a dozen or so deformed, exploded buildings. They are hard to count; figuring out where they stop and the surrounding landscapes start isn’t at all straightforward, thanks

to subtle coloring and surface subdividing. Some of these structures are cut into the ground, while others appear to be slipping, sliding, or breaking away. One resembles the extension for the Dutch Parliament (1978) that Zaha designed with Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis, her former tutors and, briefly, her partners at OMA. Another looks remarkably like Zaha's competition-winning Peak Leisure Club (1982–83), although some of its slabs and stilts have been rearranged and the structure itself appears to be falling off the flattened edge of a faraway horizon in direct contradiction to its original position carved into a mountainside above Hong Kong. In some buildings, arcing surfaces or curving pathways seem to just touch the ground next to volumetric primitives that resemble little more than monotone placeholders awaiting their own future genesis. By contrast, it has carefully drawn stairs, a grid of windows and doors, bundles of columns, and other features, all shown with more detail than most architects' working drawings. Other buildings only faintly register, and a few appear to levitate above the scene, as if waiting for approval from their architect to land. Shadows, like the picture's multiple vanishing points, go every which way, less suggestive of three dimensions than of several fractal two-and-a-half dimensions. As was the case with so many of her early paintings, what is shown here is the architect's ability to bend space itself as well as the strange structures and surfaces that inhabit this elastic space-time construct.

There is this amazing flow between the land and the water and the wildlife that extends to incorporate the buildings and the people. I think that perhaps what I am trying to do is capture that kind of seamlessness and flow in an urban architectural context for the contemporary city and its users.

— Zaha Hadid, 2011¹⁶

16. "Gli anni di Baghdad," *Abitare* 511 (April 2011): 71.

At the time of the painting's debut, only the most knowledgeable of Zaha's early followers would have been able to work out that the irregular buildings in *The World* were actually depictions of her *oeuvre complète* as of 1983; the painting includes every project she had designed to date, going back to her student days. Coincidentally, this projective retrospective reached the broader architectural world only 15 years after the posthumous publication of the eighth and final volume of Le Corbusier's *Oeuvre complète* in 1969. What we see in Zaha's painting is the opposite of modern architecture's serial, editorial approach to the manifesto, which Le Corbusier had delivered in the form of a

printed monograph. Instead we get a topological inversion of the modern architect's (editorial) conceit, from its reverse-chronological relationship with its author's career (the bulk of which it preempts) to its colorful singularity (a one-off, original painting) and even its format (a door-sized canvas).

I actually think things changed a lot with the arrival of computing. Something was lost, maybe related to scale, but something was also gained by letting architects see space as more complex.

– Zaha Hadid, 2012¹⁷

17. "Recent and Ongoing Work" (lecture, Architectural Association, London, November 6, 2012).

18. *Zaha Hadid*, GA Document Extra 3, 18.

Looking at the painting again now, I find my attention drawn to a single point in its frame: the apex of a tilted yellowy-amber plane heading "off-world" – to borrow a term from Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner* – and gently kissing the midpoint of the picture's left edge. This figure is carefully calibrated, in both its shape and position, to appear as a continent-sized wedge (perhaps recalling Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, a 1919 propaganda poster that Zaha knew well). The yellow element itself completes a three-part primary color scheme already filled with blues and reds and suggests an illuminating searchlight shining onto the surface of a newly discovered extraterrestrial world. Under this wedge, we see nothing but darkness, like deep space – the world gone almost completely inky black and silent. Clearly hers was an architectural world in which not all kinds of space were the same. Above the wedge, outer space gradually gives way to medium and then the lightest of atmospheric grays, suggesting an overcast, London-like wintry afternoon sky of the kind routinely seen by her assistants when looking up from their drawing boards and out one of the high windows in the Victorian schoolhouse her office still inhabits today.

I think if you look at all the work of this period, which led to Vitra and Dusseldorf, you can see that it became more about layers of volumes as opposed to layers of planes. I think that this was an important transformation.

– Zaha Hadid, 1995¹⁸

Anyone who knew her well knew that Zaha loved making up all kinds of things, including the nicknames she gave collaborators and friends (I was called "Bletzsky" for so long and with such regularity that a collector in New York once asked me if I was Russian). "You are *Mies*-taken," Zaha once snapped jokingly during a dinner in New York when a mutual

friend confused my surname with “glass” – glass and steel having become the ultimate Miesian cliché of modern architecture. Her office once spent an entire year calling everyone only by their reverse names – she was “Didah Ahaz,” and at the forefront of the routine. In tutorials and talks she happily rewrote historical affiliations as conspiracy theories, shuffling the connections between one famous building or figure and another. Rolling the I Ching was a regular event in the studio’s early years whenever things got a little too quiet and she grew bored with the late-night routine. She made up odd words to name parts of her drawings (“tictics” were small x-shaped crosses on her drawings; she was a master of “the whoosh”) and gave strange names to projects and their parts: “confetti” programs, “slabettes,” and things like “sperm” tables were the norm. People who walked into discussions of the work were left, I suspect, deliberately confounded; this was by design very much a private architectural language before it was a public architectural project. The resulting world was one in which every architectural fact converged, *Alice in Wonderland*–like, with what seemed to be an equal number of alternative realities – unexpected forms of fiction. The effect was to reinforce the architect’s ability, like that of any gifted novelist, to convert even the most ordinary, anecdotal, and ephemeral details of experience into a form of evidence able to prove the reality of an entirely new, uncharted world.¹⁹

19. One of my favorite examples is a habit from the early days of the studio, which briefly became part of both office routine and legend. As large-format pencil-and-ink drawings were finished, before they were rolled up for shipping, Zaha would spray each sheet with a sealant to fix the ink. But instead of a dedicated commercial fixative, she used a can of hair spray, giving the drawings an invisible aromatic signature.
 20. “Rendering Speculations.”
 21. Hadid, “Recent and Ongoing Work.”

Some drawings weren’t about graphic presentation; they were about a story line – objects floating in space, walls falling flat, like plans.
 – Zaha Hadid, 2010²⁰

Late in 1997, nearly 15 years after making the painting, Zaha returned to the AA for an evening lecture devoted to her recent work. Somewhat surprisingly, she began with a slide of *The World* and offered what seemed then, even to her, a late realization of discoveries it afforded beyond those it was originally intended to express:

I made this painting to have a record of what I was thinking at the time. That’s why I decided to call it The World, because that’s what it was for me – a world of projects I had designed by 1983. I originally thought that the subject of the painting was the buildings it showed. It shows my early buildings. The strange thing is, looking back now much later, I realize that it’s actually the surface of the ground, everything between those buildings, the shaping and building and manipulation of the ground itself as a continuous surface, that became for me such a big project in the years since.²¹

Worlds are like that. Sometimes they even pull their own maker into them, with consequences their architect might not fully comprehend at the moment of their genesis.

Zaha's most consistent quality was her architectural confidence, not in herself so much as in her capacity for improvisational invention, discovery, and learning by returning to and reading into something not recognized the first time around. This is no small feat in an episodic discipline like architecture, obsessed as it is with planning every detail of the future worlds architects are charged with creating. "Almost to a fault," Koolhaas said to me during a 2005 interview, "architects are obsessed with the future, in the same way that they are dependent upon it." An obsession, I suspect, that goes some way toward explaining why architects are such poor predictors (let alone renderers) of its eventual features. For Zaha, the production of architectural knowledge was something more worldly, if not off-worldly, which is one reason her architectural objects have such an ambiguous relationship to the ground, and even to gravity itself. She believed architectural learning was iterative and recursive, open to invention, intervention, and reinvention. Projects were never really finished, let alone their lessons ever over. This was an architect who had hardly worked in another architectural office, who never stopped teaching (so that she could continue, she once told me, to learn from her students as much as the other way around), who never passed up an opportunity to enter a competition (even when her own successful career, with innumerable contractual building obligations, made finding time for other drawings and models exponentially more costly and nearly impossible), and who routinely redrew and re-rendered even her own completed buildings and projects to try to unlock ideas not previously seen.

This unshakable, worldly belief in an architect's self-determination and self-meaning is the legacy of *The World (89 Degrees)*. It is proof to us today, just as it was to its author at the time of its making, that architectural worlds are only ever learned when they are imagined. One project – one architectural world – at a time.

Brett Steele is the director of the Architectural Association School of Architecture, a former project architect at Zaha Hadid Architects, and the dean designate at the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture.