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A Hard and Lifeless Matter: Notes on Zaha Hadid at the Guggenheim

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A Hard and Lifeless Matter: Notes on Zaha Hadid at the Guggenheim

Perhaps the immobility of the things that surround us is forced upon them by . . . the immobility of our conception of them.

– Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

An architectural exhibition is always already an abyss. The effect of the reflexive encounter between the architectural content and the architectural container – of representing something inside another version of itself – can supercede almost any curatorial intent. Why risk such mutual accentuation? Staging a retrospective of an architect's production inside an art museum is one way to bring the seeming obscurity of architectural practice into the seeming obviousness (or mere comprehensibility) of surveying an artist's complete body of work at one place and time. So when a Zaha Hadid retrospective shows up in an art museum designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, as in the recent career-long survey at the New York Guggenheim (June 3 – October 25, 2006), things get interesting. The convergence of content and setting highlights certain tendencies that emerge at the point where architectural discourse enters general culture, and offers clues about what the world seems to want from architecture (or from mere buildings), and how architecture may be failing to provide it. It reveals how architects are asked, and try, and fail, to render the obscure obvious, and the obvious obscure. Since Vasari, perhaps, one way to make an architect's work seem less obscure has been to reframe the architect as a painter. Painterliness allows us to apply familiar art-historical narratives, and therefore even more apparent comprehensibility, to the complex development of an architectural practice: from constructivism to cubism, from mannerism to expressionism and back. Furthermore, paintings that depict or suggest suspended motion, or permanently arrested gesture – still life – and how those qualities are emphasized by a painting's objective stillness and bordered



ZAHA HADID, *THE PEAK*, HONG KONG, 1982–83. LEFT: *BLUE SLABS* (DETAIL); RIGHT: *BLUE SLABS (NIGHT)*, SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART. COURTESY THE ARCHITECT.

field of operation, enables us to access a great obsession at the confluence of popular and architectural imaginations: the representation of movement.

At the Hadid retrospective, first up along Wright's relentless ramp (itself a furlong of glossy white epoxy) were the 1982 acrylic-on-paper paintings on which the Hadid story rests. These unusual images famously won Hadid the unrealized commission for *The Peak*, a resort and club intended for the hills above Hong Kong's harbor. Hadid's legendary submission included these scintillating paintings, in which a visual and textural continuity crackles across physical and spatial disjunctions. In the essential images, *Blue Slabs* and *Blue Slabs (Night)*, tall, blue-gray elevations of Hong Kong, a tessellated and fragmented geometry shifts and flickers across the surface of the paintings, accommodating and resolving the skyscrapers below, the geological forms of the hillsides above, and at the top, the shooting form of *The Peak*.

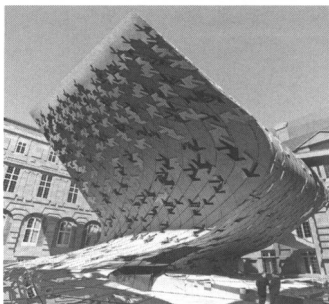
In a manner recalling an idiosyncratic riff on analytical cubism (as much as the contemporary suprematism to which

Hadid's paintings – or their titles – encourage comparison), *Blue Slabs* and *Blue Slabs (Night)* feature a localized isometry in which the conventions of orthographic projection are applied to different elements in suggestively unstable ways. The implicit spatial fissures that result are resolved by the overlap of little rectangular shapes in the buildings and geological quivering in the mountain terrain. What emerges is a surprising conception of multiple viewpoints in which a stable image conveys something of the effect and affect of movement, either of the viewing subject, or of the depicted object.

While it began with this famous early project, the sequence of works in the exhibition were syncopated chronologically: first, a great line of paintings, in which projects from the 1980s to today were rendered in an increasingly stylized incarnation of the *Blue Slabs* method; then, those same projects were rendered in low-relief paper models and lightweight drawings; then, in an assortment of primarily Plexiglas and plaster models; and finally, in photographs and video sequences. The result was the assertion of an instantly mature project: tactics and aesthetics that, virtually complete from day one, only awaited clients. Yet, in the exhibition, suppression became the emphasis: the shuffled arrangement glossed over, even as it repeated and repeated, the main emergent pattern in the 30-year development of Hadid's formal vocabulary. Zigzags are replaced by wiggles. Lines by curves. Scores by squish. Breaks by ripples. Hardness by softness.

This is not a news bulletin. The formal language of Hadid's contemporaries has developed in similar ways since they were provocatively grouped in the theoretically epochal 1988 "Deconstructivist Architecture" show at the Museum of Modern Art. Since then, the work has gone soft. The mundane explanation for this softness is software: ever more fluent digital translations between drawing and building have enabled ever more formal fluidity and inspired graphically striking systems of swoop and sway, bulge and bubble. The more theoretical explanation for this development, if one were applicable, could be that the surficial complexity of the work indicated a form of Derridian *différance* in which the implication of continuing geometrical transformation over time substituted for the superimposition of contradictory geometrical systems.

The geometrical transformations embodied in Hadid's recent buildings, which do not themselves physically transform, encourage the notion that they might. At the near-hydrodynamic 1999 Phaeno Science Center in Wolfsburg, Germany, and the melting-marshmallow-like 2005 proposal



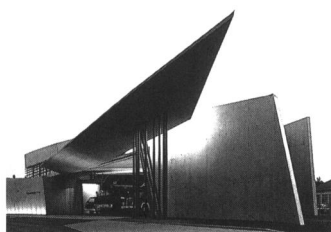
ZAHA HADID, LOUVRE MUSEUM,
DEPARTMENT OF ISLAMIC ART, PARIS.
2005. DIGITAL RENDERING.

for an Islamic Gallery at the Louvre, for example, we find ambitious cantilevers and counterpoints and attenuated curves all suggesting objects that are moving, that retain plasticity, that might flow or ooze or puddle along interesting trajectories. This is a form of movement, or movement of form, distinct from the movement latent at the beginning, in *Blue Slabs*.

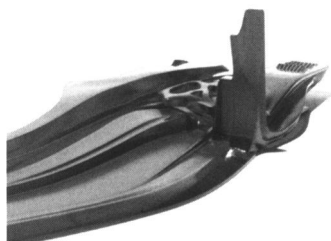
What are these two different manifestations of interpolated movement? What is the nature of this recursive and reflexive encounter between our own haptic and optic movements and the movement that we perceive in our environment? We find ourselves at a delicate confluence of actual object, elusive moment, subjective perception, transformed recollection, and speculative interpolation. In other words, it's time to read Proust. More familiar as a shorthand source for the operations of memory, Proust, a generational contemporary of Malevich and Wright, seems also to have dwelled for a moment on the perception of buildings, on the movement of eye and body through them, and on buildings' own imagined movement.

Proust recalls the village church of Combray: "There was one [window] which was a tall panel composed of a hundred little rectangular panes, of blue principally, like an enormous pack of cards . . . but either because a ray of sunlight had gleamed through it or because my own shifting glance had sent shooting across the window . . . a rare and flickering fire, [it] quivered and rippled. . . . A moment later the little lozenge panes had taken on . . . the unbreakable hardness of sapphires."¹ Thus, as in *Blue Slabs*, an impression of flicker, fracture, and crackling edge, inspired by a movement of the viewer's own eye, and a real or perceived parallax shift between objects within the visual field. But elsewhere, Proust contemplates an idea of architectural movement more characteristic of late Hadid: "The old porch by which we entered, black, was worn out of shape and deeply furrowed at the sides just as if the gentle friction of the cloaks of peasant women coming into church, and of their fingers . . . had managed by age-long repetition to acquire a destructive force, to impress itself on the stone, to carve grooves in it." Those seemingly soft cloaks, acquiring by repeated gesture the force of hardness, have instead carved their own image into the black, hard stone surface of the building. Elsewhere in the church, paving stones "were themselves no longer a hard and lifeless matter, for time had softened them and made them flow like honey beyond their proper margins, here oozing out in a golden stream, and

1. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Volume 1, Swann's Way*, C. K. Scott Moncrieff, trans. (1928; New York: Modern Library, 1992). All subsequent citations refer to this edition.



ZAHA HADID, VITRA FIRE STATION,
WEIL AM RHEIN, GERMANY, 1990–94.
COURTESY THE ARCHITECT.



ZAHA HADID, GUGGENHEIM
MUSEUM, TAICHUNG, TAIWAN, 2003.
MID-PHASE PRESENTATION MODEL.
COURTESY THE ARCHITECT.

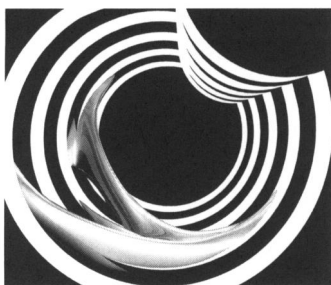
elsewhere reabsorbed into their limits, contracting still further a crabbed Latin inscription, closing together two letters of some word of which the rest were disproportionately distended.” The smooth distension of the surface is resisted and amplified by the sharp inscription into that surface, and even language (or its representation) is both softened and hardened, blunted and sharpened.

The architecture of Zaha Hadid, by contrast, is presoftened and rehardened, precut and restitched. The jagged and flinty formal vocabulary expressed in the celebrated early projects (the unbuilt Peak, the Vitra Fire Station) gives way to more oozy and honeyed forms in her recent larger-scale work (the Taichung Guggenheim project, the Glasgow Museum of Transport). The most photogenic of those recent works (a 2003 project for the Neues Stadt-Casino in Basel, and again, the Phaeno Center and Louvre Museum projects) try to combine both geometries with the inscription of a splintery and intricate surface pattern onto a swoopy, double-curved concrete or tessellated surface. At best, this maneuver allows for surprising and graphically striking encounters between continuous surface patterns and discontinuous forms and volumes, distantly recalling the visual effect of *Blue Slabs*.

But there’s a problem. It may be that the two forms of movement latent in Hadid’s work – one the optic impression of sudden motion by the architectural subject induced by graphic (mis)alignments between fractured forms, the other the notional apprehension of suspended motion by the architectural object implied by curvaceous formal continuities – are moving against each other and undermining each other. As a case study, we might consider three installations proposed by Hadid’s office for Wright’s Guggenheim drum, and the contrast between them.

First was the 1992 Russian avant-garde painting exhibition, for which Hadid built a sequence of red, razor-thin fins that extended inward across Wright’s ramp from the perimeter of the exterior wall. Unlike Wright’s own structural fins, on which Hadid’s were perhaps a commentary, these fins extended at a variable tangency to the perimeter of the drum. As one glided along the ramp, the fins jerked in and out of alignment with one’s gaze, creating a flickering parallax effect: an optic experience that would add startling acceleration, deceleration, and fracture to the optic-haptic experience of traveling that ramp.

Second, and by contrast, consider the unbuilt installation for Hadid’s retrospective, a proposed “site-specific

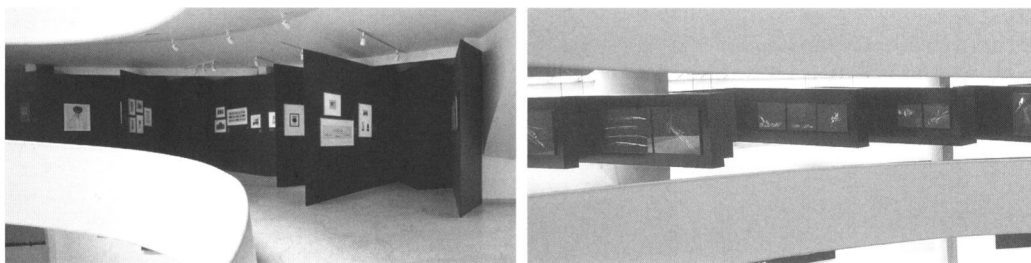


ZAHA HADID, *Z-WAVE*, 2006 (TOP). PROPOSED SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATION FOR THE GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM "ZAHA HADID" RETROSPECTIVE. DIGITAL RENDERING. ABOVE: *ELASTIKA*, 2005. INSTALLATION FOR DESIGN 05 MIAMI. IMAGES COURTESY THE ARCHITECT.

installation" called *Z-Wave*. This would have adhered a set of white tensile, curving, colloidal attachments to the balcony perimeter of the drum – similar to Hadid's *Elastika* installation at Design 05 Miami, and to more than a decade of sculptural installations by Anish Kapoor – to suggest a continuation and deflection of the notional trajectory of the ramp itself: round gets rounder, swoopy gets swoopier. The rotunda walls melt and stretch. The suggestion of movement by an element of the building itself, however, would have produced an optic-haptic effect precisely converse to the parallax swing of the 1992 installation: one where the absence of a clear edge or material boundary against which to register motion, and the slow variation in tangency between the curves of the *Z-Wave* and of Wright's rotunda, would have slowed, even stilled, the recursive monotony of movement along Wright's ramp.

Third, the installation of the current exhibition included an element that attempted both effects of the earlier exhibitions but achieved neither. A glossy black armature for the display of drawings occupied about a quarter of the ramp sequence, extending (like the 1992 installation) as a sequence of fins tangent to the outer curve of the drum. Unlike 1992, however, the fins were generally parallel, and therefore at an increasingly shallow tangent to the circular perimeter, and their lengths varied. Also unlike 1992, these fins were fat, and suggestive of plasticity, with a depth perceptible from across the drum. The whole was less than the sum of the parts: the residual flicker of the displayed drawings as they rotated into view was blunted and blurred by the lugubrious mass of the display armature itself. The irregular length of each element induced a visual suppression of its edges and a physical indeterminacy that suggested the armature itself might melt or move. But both sets of effects were stillborn. In combination, the two formal moves – the haptic and the material – that would induce the effect of movement, by the subject in one case, and by the object in the other, tended toward mutual resistance, not sympathetic counterpoint.

Why does this matter? Architects design generally stable objects as the sites for generally unstable events. The hope is that the form (and therefore the spatial configuration of figure and ground, solid and void) of that stable object will both capture and catalyze, represent and choreograph, the liveliness and motion of those events. That's a conceit that goes back to Borromini. It may be that Hadid's work, as embodied in that black armature and its awkward balance between old sharpness and new softness, locates a tipping



ABOVE: RED FINS PUNCTUATED THE GUGGENHEIM RAMP IN HADID'S INSTALLATION DESIGN FOR THE RUSSIAN CONSTRUCTIVIST PAINTING EXHIBITION IN 1992. RIGHT: SUSPENDED BLACK FINS PUNCTUATED THE RAMP IN THE INSTALLATION FOR "ZAHA HADID: THIRTY YEARS IN ARCHITECTURE." PHOTOS: © SRGF, NEW YORK.

2. Zaha Hadid, *Zaha Hadid: The Complete Work* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998). All subsequent citations refer to this edition.

point in design in which the attempt to choreograph the movement of (and its perception by) architectural subjects, and the attempt to represent the movement of (and its registration by) architectural objects becomes increasingly and irreconcilably conflicted.

One's hope for a project like *The Peak*, its critical resonance, is that it is possible for architecture to sample a catalogue of invisible forces and trajectories – in Hong Kong, not only the dramatic geological formation of the landscape, but also the lively scatter and dense shimmer of the population and infrastructure through that landscape – and translate that sample into architecture. ("Picking up and accentuating," as Hadid once described a Berlin project, "the dynamism of the passing cars."²) The hope might be that by enacting actual optic and haptic movement through such a constructed expression, the architectural subject is able to inhabit not only the form of a particular building but also, by some Proustian leap of apprehension, that invisible landscape of force and formation, motion and transformation, that is our true environment. Proust's visible movement past the chapel window inspires and explains his interpretation of the invisible movement of the chapel floor.

Hadid has made something of this claim, for example, for the Vitra Fire Station: "As one walks across the structure, the red fire engines are the central focus of this landscape . . . [R]ed lines appear to be written on the asphalt, so are the rituals of the firemen inside inscribed like choreographic notation. The whole building is frozen motion, suspending the tension of alertness, ready to explode into action at any moment." As in Proust's chapel floor, a combination of attenuated form and inscription suggests a latent and dynamic force; as in Proust's chapel window, there is a shifting tension that is the promise, or threat, of the release of that force.

The thrill of this, and the transcendence of the mundane suggested thereby, explains why a factory, a museum, a fire station, an opera house, a housing project, could and should look like a plate of noodles, a lock of hair, a pour of honey, despite convincing tectonic, operational, or functional

SPIRALING UP PAST HADID'S INSTALLATION OF PAINTINGS AND MODELS AT THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, ONE CAME ACROSS THE BLACK FINS ON THE FOURTH LEVEL. PHOTO: DAVID M. HEALD, © SRGF, NEW YORK.



considerations to the contrary. It's the reason not to build what Wright called "a square package of containment." But a dilemma arises when formal fluidity coincides with the stability, even torpor, of subjective optic-haptic experience, as with that polished black armature at the Guggenheim. Especially when scale (as in Hadid's cursory 2012 New York City Olympic Housing proposal, her graphic urban plan for Singapore, or her wan Guangzhou opera house) far exceeds what could be perceived at the rate of pedestrian, or even automotive, movement. Such a pictorial effect can be perceived in each project's painting, but the paintings remain insistent assertions, not demonstrations, of these effects.

Wright himself did some thinking about how the immersive subjective experience of buildings could be obscured by their two-dimensional representation. In 1957 he wrote, "Pictures of the buildings of the old two-dimensional school (nineteenth century) are most meaningful because they were seen as pictorial when conceived. But the building living before us now as an organism (twentieth century) may only be seen by experience within the actual structure. The essence of organic building is space, space flowing outward, space flowing inward."³ Here we have three words often ambient in criticism of Hadid's work: living, organic, and flowing.

When we apply such a vocabulary to a building, we apply to it characteristics more fitting of a living geological landscape or a biological body: the tenuous stability, the push and pull of dynamic equilibrium. We think of building materials as, in Proust's phrase, "no longer a hard and lifeless matter." So far in this discussion, we've been considering practices of architectural perception: the apprehension of

3. Frank Lloyd Wright, "The New Architecture: Principles," in *Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings*, Edgar Kaufmann and Ben Raeburn, eds. (New York: Meridian, 1960). All subsequent citations refer to this edition.

painterly representation, the immersive and imaginative occupation of a building. These qualities of experience can be transferred to the materials and structure of buildings themselves. For Wright, the connection was explicit, with a fluidity of spatial experience corresponding directly to an idea of the fluidity, the tensile elasticity, of steel, ferroconcrete, glass, and plastics: “Organic interpretation of steel and glass,” Wright wrote in 1957, “gave rise to a new property: I call it *tenuity*. Tenuity is simply a matter of tension (pull). . . . This pull permits free use of the cantilever, a projectile and tensile at the same time, . . . balancing extended load against opposite extended load. This brought into architecture . . . [what I call] *continuity* – a property which may be seen as a new, elastic, cohesive stability. . . . [Either] push or pull may be integral to building design.” In describing the possible formal and material results, Wright might be describing what Hadid’s work, at its most informatively thrilling, could be like: “Supports may stand isolated, balancing load against load – seen not as walls at all, but as integral pattern; walls may be slender suspension from point to point, in fascinating pendant forms. . . . Glass or light plastics may be used to fill in and make the whole habitable.” The promise of this, and the potential sympathy between the two designers, is partly why Hadid’s breezily graphic proposal for an addition to the base of Wright’s Price Tower in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, so disappoints. The abyss of an architectural exhibition is one in which the mutual accentuation of containing and contained architecture becomes a phenomenon that supercedes both; the unrealized promise of Hadid’s work is perhaps the converse: that the contained architecture, (that is, the architectural object), makes obvious – captures and contemplates, expresses and explains – the otherwise obscure nature of the containing architecture (that is, the landscape, the city, the site). The method of explanation, the condition of reflexive encounter, is movement itself, in which our own movements through the object recapitulate the object’s own formal registration of otherwise imperceptible but fundamental movements throughout the site, the city, the landscape. Proust couldn’t ask for more.

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