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Zaha Hadid

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PERSPECTA 37 YOU ARE PERHAPS ONE OF THE FEW ARCHITECTS IN THE WORLD WHOSE FAME HAS BEEN ABLE TO CROSS OVER FROM ARCHITECTURE INTO POPULAR CULTURE. WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS, AND WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF THAT FAME?

Zaha Hadid I have no idea. Years ago, after I won the Peak competition in 1983, someone asked a friend of mine, "So has Zaha changed since she became famous?" and he said, "Well, you know, when nobody thought she was famous she thought she was famous, so no, she has not changed."

It's very difficult to think of myself as a well-known person. It always surprises me that people think of me as famous. So I have no idea—I don't put myself in that situation. I have personally never taken it very seriously, the whole fame issue, because I've watched so many people either become hooked to it or desire it so much that it distracts from the real ambition of actually doing good work. Because that's ultimately what it's all about.

But it's easier said than done. People always assume that fame is very glamorous, but it's not always, because the real trade of architecture is very hard work, and it's not fun. It was fun for me twenty years ago when I could sit in my room and do drawings. Today, there are still moments of great pleasure, but it's generally very, very tough. Being well known, actually, it has more disadvantages than advantages, personally. I mean, it's nice that people recognize you.

Cardiff Bay Opera House, Wales, 1994–96



But for a long time, it actually worked against me, because I was known for not building or not being able to build. So it became a real hazard. That's all that people would talk about, how it was not possible for me to do it, so it was actually worse for me.

Everybody in England and Wales knew me from the Cardiff Bay Opera House project (1994–96), for example, but with a negative tone. I think that there were three problems. First was being seen as a kind of crazy architect doing wild things. I think that there was also no female stereotypes to which they could relate. Finally, being an Iraqi after the Gulf War didn't help at all, either. There was so much attention directed towards my personality and behavior as well. You know, sometimes I do things spontaneously, and I'm not always thinking about if I should make a scene or not. It's not to say that I'm never strategic, but why should I worry about what you think of me, that I'm wearing funny clothes or saying strange things? Of course, all of the media attention gives you a good reason to start thinking about it. But on the other hand, you can't waste your time worrying about these nonsensical things that are not part of your picture.

SO YOU WOULD CLAIM THAT YOU DON'T ACTIVELY CULTIVATE AN IMAGE TO GO ALONG WITH YOUR WORK?

I don't. From when I was ten, I wore funny clothes. I said strange things. It wasn't as if I deliberately tried

to be outrageous—I *was* outrageous. But I think that people focused on that too much, even when I was a student. Instead of focusing on my work, people focused so much on how I behaved, what I said, and what I wore to this or that event. The one thing which was good about all of that, on the other hand, was that they focused so much on all that stuff that I was given tremendous freedom to do what I wanted in terms of the work and in terms of teaching. They didn't know how to handle me.

I really did not, deliberately or not, decide to conform to what people thought was acceptable. And if you don't conform, there is always prejudice and punishment, because everybody wants to put you between brackets. They want you to be made out of the same mold, mass production. And it's the same thing with building. They want everything to be the same. And if you decide not to be the same, then you are crucified. And if you don't even care about that... I mean, we had this whole mess in Cardiff, and I carried on. And people said that I must be thick-skinned. I'm not, but what am I going to do? Am I going to give it up? Because of one incident, which was a very traumatic, terrible experience, the worst experience anyone should go through? I did not allow it to stop me. Not because I'm just bloody-minded, but because I really thought that it was worth taking this work further, and that it was possible to do it. If they didn't do it in Cardiff, they could do it elsewhere.

Vitra Fire Station, Weil am Rhein, 1991–93



But the bottom line was that I couldn't care about it too much. It would upset me if there were still the same amount of resistance and prejudice as there was twenty years ago, but today, the clients and officials have become much nicer. I think it's not only because I'm more well known, but also because I'm older. Because when you're younger they're thinking, what is that little thing?

SO IN THE PAST, THE WHOLE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE WHERE PEOPLE WOULDN'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT WORKED AGAINST YOU FOR A LONG TIME. WHAT HAS CHANGED TODAY?

I think that surprise was seen, for a long time, as a negative thing. One has to go back, because in the earlier part of the last century there was an incredible amount of optimism and belief in new ideas and new ways of doing things. And then in the architecture world, in certain places because of industrialization, they believed in newness. Even in the 1960s in Britain, there was a tremendous revolution in ideas.

I think that a major break happened later in the 1970s, when historicist ideas came into play. In terms of discourse and education, the tradition of modernity and newness and invention disappeared. So when we appeared on the scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s with new ideas, it was kind of a shock. People did not think that what we proposed was in the realm of possibility—people just didn't inhabit

these kinds of things. They thought there would be problems with cost or engineering. I think that they had forgotten that these kinds of investigations and realities had existed before, because for ten years people had only indulged in conservative values and historical pastiche.

Today, I think the scene has changed. Look at the whole Bilbao effect, which has really changed the practice and changed big clients' views about how they can achieve these new ideas.

SPEAKING OF BILBAO, WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE TENDENCY IN THE ARCHITECTURAL WORLD FOR ARCHITECTS TO CULTIVATE SIGNATURES? WITH MANY STAR ARCHITECTS, THERE'S AN EXPECTATION THAT THEY WILL CREATE VERY RECOGNIZABLE, EASILY CONSUMABLE IMAGES. HOW HAVE YOU BEEN AFFECTED BY THESE PRESSURES OVER THE COURSE OF YOUR CAREER?

Personally, I don't think it's that significant. I know stories where people have been hired to do something like what they've done before. It's like the story of the Opéra de la Bastille in Paris, where the competition jury thought they picked a design by Richard Meier, but it wasn't. When you build something, people see that you've done something that works, so why can't you do it again? But I also think architecture is like science: If you don't do lab research, you're not going to discover the cures. In terms of research, I think it's a very important point to always expand the bound-

aries. If I had not done all that stuff in the 1980s, I don't think I would have learned how to do anything. Even if I don't do it the same way now, that experience is still there. You learn from your own repertoire, in a sense.

Early on, we did not want to copy ourselves. It's less so nowadays, but at the time every project was different, though not stylistically. Actually, if you look at them closely, they were very connected and there was a lot of consistency. But we focused so much on the connection between program and site, in untraditional ways, that every interpretation brought us something else.

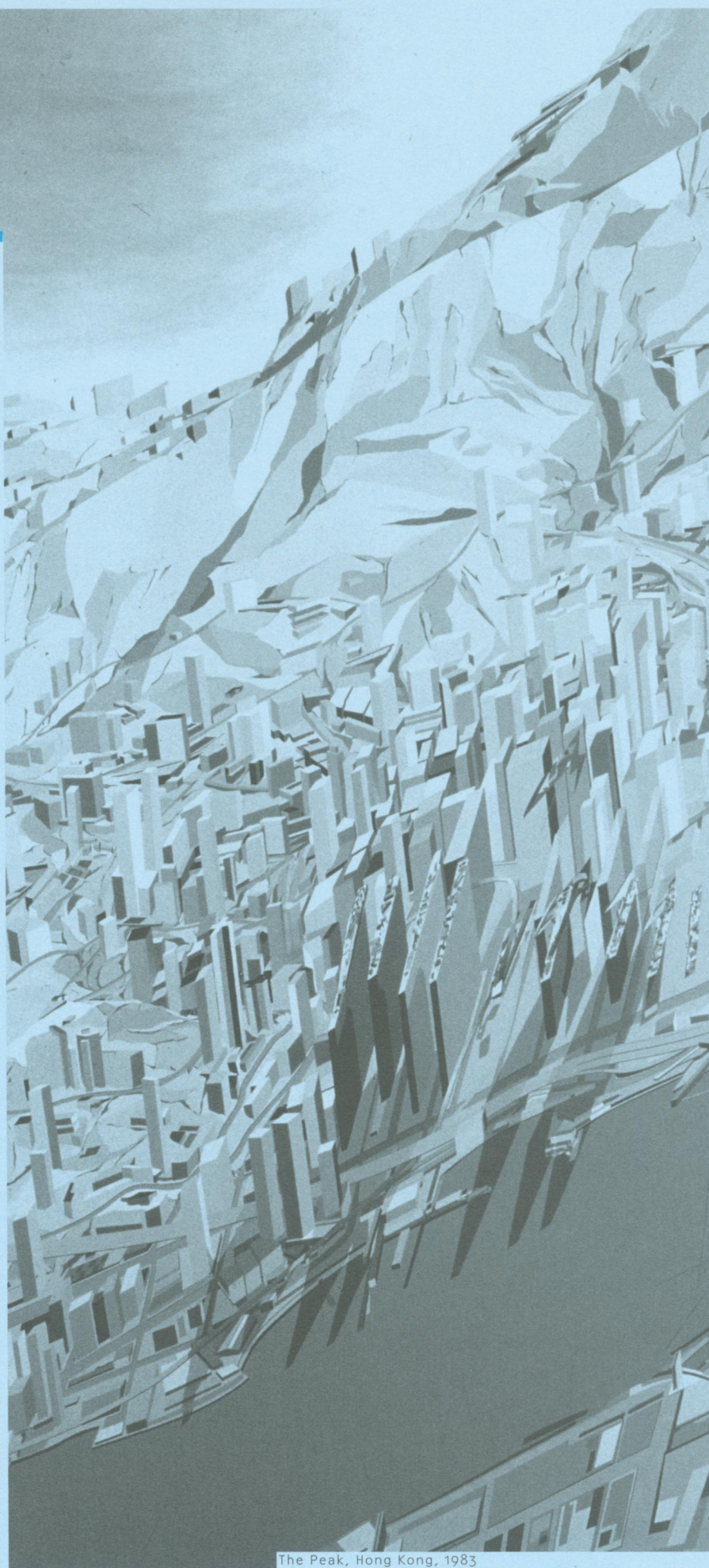
SO IT'S HARDER NOW TO ENSURE THAT EVERY PROJECT IS DIFFERENT? IS IT JUST A MATTER OF SCALE?

With every project we did back then, we used to try and invent new rules. Now we have developed a set of things which we can go back to, a lot of available research we can bounce off. And when you have a bigger office and you have more work, you frankly have less time to spend, but we do. We work long hours. There's tremendous pressure on everybody to really stretch themselves.

Also, the rules change. You have more experience, and you know how to design things better. And you don't have to reinvent the wheel again everyday. If I look at the projects we're doing now, I would still say they're all very different. Of course, the programs are also very different. We have a train station that in no way could be similar to a ferry station or a science museum or a public school or a factory. No similarities in the program. There may be certain things which you can't repeat.

ONE OF THE SIDE EFFECTS OF BECOMING WIDELY KNOWN IS THAT OVERSEAS CLIENTS START TO ASK YOU TO COME AND BUILD FOR THEM. WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH DOING WORK INTERNATIONALLY?

Of course, time is a big issue. Time spent traveling becomes more burdening than anything else. What is interesting is that every place you work in brings up a different set of rules and problems, and you deal with them differently. And I think that it's actually quite exciting. When I went to do the master plan in Singapore, the whole thing was a situation that allowed me to look at things in a very different way. If I were doing a master plan anywhere else, I would have ended up with a different approach.



The Peak, Hong Kong, 1983



Soho City Master Plan, Beijing, 2003–

There is also the whole argument about regionalism, which is another conversation. I really don't know which has higher value—to know everything about a place or to know something about a place. If you are quite well trained, you can actually go in and make a certain observation about the place, which could be good but rather fickle. On the other hand, people in these places have also an ambition to live in a certain way. We may have a romantic idea of how they should live in China, but their idea of how they should live is very different. They want to be living as if they were living in New York. That's their aspiration. It was a real eye-opener when I went to the sales office for the Riken Yamamoto project in Beijing developed by SOHO China. The office was full of people. It was like a nightclub or a restaurant. People were all buying property, and these were young people. And I think that those people had different ambitions and aspirations than what you might assume. Of course, much of the population of China couldn't afford to buy those properties. But I was really amazed.

PEOPLE HAVE SAID THAT AS A PROMINENT FEMALE ARCHITECT, YOU ARE A ROLE MODEL.

I never thought of myself as a role model. But I was told this many years ago by a friend, and while I didn't realize it then, I notice more and more as I go to give lectures that a lot of female architects and students come and talk to me afterward. Because it's shocking how in this modern time, it's still very difficult to be a female working in architecture. At school it's easier—I think that in America, political correctness has created more evenness in the system. In all the times I've taught, some of my best students were women. But outside of their schools, it's very difficult for women. I don't know why. People think I'm successful, and they want to know that it's for real and that they can aspire to actually pursue some ideas. When I first wanted to do architecture, people told me I was crazy. They said that I would never make it, why would I do such a thing?

A lot of women are a part of a team and even if the woman is the lead person, they're always seen as the second fiddle, no matter how good they are. There are many people whose partners or husbands are taken more seriously than they are, almost automatically. It's not the doing of the husband. People automatically refer to the work of the male. I don't want to say names, but there are many. And I'm not saying that

BMW Central Building, Leipzig, 2002–05



every woman should not have a partner and should be on her own. That's not the point. But in the past, if I were to go to a site somewhere with a male assistant, they would talk to him and not to me. And with many women, actually, it's the same thing. I haven't had that experience recently, but years ago I did. And I've talked to other women who have had the same experience. I don't know where the difficulty starts; I think it starts at the office. I'm sure it starts at school as well, but not so much.

AS YOU GO ON WITH YOUR WORK, HOW DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR LEGACY? DO YOU STOP AND THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE ACCOMPLISHED SO FAR IN YOUR CAREER AND WHAT YOU WANT TO DO IN THE FUTURE?

I think the goals are continually changing. I mean, you might have had a goal twenty years ago to build just anything at all. And then you had a goal to build a house. And then you want to do a museum or hotel or whatever. I think that in any competitive or ambitious situation, the whole point is to constantly raise your standards. You always want to do the next project. It may not end up with as good detailing as the one before, but it may allow you to develop and realize some more of your ideas. I think that one can have a continuous kind of freshness of ideas and invention—that's what you want to leave behind. The changes that have occurred in the profession over the course of the last twenty years are phenom-

enal. If one has the opportunity to continue that shift, then I think that one will have achieved something.

ANY FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT FAME AND ARCHITECTURE?
Honestly, it's fun. You can enjoy it.

IT SEEMS LIKE IT CAN BRING YOU MANY OPPORTUNITIES AS WELL.

Well, not at the beginning. At the beginning, you're more scrutinized, and it's not easy at all because you have to watch everything you do. But now that they know you, they want you to do their projects and that's terrific.

Fame is an odd thing. I know some people are very affected by it, extremely so. In a way it destroys their souls. It's worse when they start behaving badly with others. Because it can come and go at any time. It's silly, a really silly thing. But it can be funny and fun, if you know how to use it, like anything else in life.