

# Space Invader

## A retrospective at the Guggenheim of Zaha Hadid's 30-year career marks the end of her 'nasty period'.

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Zaha Hadid may be a woman as well as an architect, and the first woman to win the highest honour in her field, but this accident of biology fails to define her. Yes, she dresses fashionably, wears a tawny dusting of eye shadow, highlights her mahogany hair and has a long-standing shoe fetish, but there is nothing identifiably 'female' about Hadid's work:

not her explosion of the fabric of space, not the hard geometries, not the domination of materials (accreting layers of wood only to sand them away, stacking thin plastic sheets until they gain a leaden weight), not even a recent voluptuousness that feels more biological than sentimental. Hadid's unladylike response to space is to disassemble it, cast it about and reassemble it into unusual forms. 'She translates her ideas into sculpture on a massive scale, essentially creating a new vocabulary,' says former Guggenheim director Tom Krens. In his review of Zaha Hadid, whose

30-year retrospective is currently on show at the Guggenheim, *The New York Times* critic Nicolai Ouroussoff goes further: Hadid's work, he writes, 'is the closest thing we have to a manifesto for the future'. Indeed.

Zaha Hadid is a chronological exhibition designed by the architect herself. Curators Monica Ramirez-Montagut and Germano Celant trace Hadid's career through painting and digital painting, animation, scale models, tabletop objects, furniture and photos, demonstrating ways in which she challenges established notions of space, site, urbanism and typology. 'We feel that she's unique,' says Ramirez-Montagut, 'and that in the future her work will be what defines 21st-century architecture.'



Hadid's initial proposal for the Guggenheim exhibition failed to make it past the design phase.

From the foot of the Guggenheim rotunda to its crown, Hadid's prolific experimentation is apparent.

Unlike Frank Gehry, who had one of only two other architecture shows at the museum in recent years, Hadid clearly elaborates on more than a single family of forms. Dark paintings, metallic canvases and untethered silhouettes suggest the variety of her research. Although Hadid has said unequivocally that she is not a painter, in this show the curators have cultivated some confusion around what is architecture and what is art. The uninitiated won't know what's built, what isn't and what won't ever be, but a potentially challenging show is instead exhilarating

for its originality and its (at least visceral) accessibility.

On the lower ramps of the museum, Hadid's obsession with drawing and painting is conspicuous. Large canvases offer multiple perspectives on a single subject and fracture buildings into their surroundings. 'I am trying to locate the building in a simultaneously existing and changed context,' Hadid says. Influenced by constructivism, she abstracts rather than clarifies (or abstracts *in order to* clarify), but her goals are both concrete and pragmatic: the paintings are neither an artistic lark nor a mere presentation tool, but a way to conduct research and generate ideas. The show doesn't articulate this aspect well, because the curators chose to cluster work not by project but by medium, even though the architect's paintings, drawings and plans did inform one another during the design process. 'The drawing and discussion about the design go hand in hand,' says Hadid. 'It would have been interesting to show one drawing and how many layers it took to actually create it.' Instead of process-orientated clustering of media, however, it is the product that gives viewers the opportunity to enjoy Hadid's work at an intellectual or aesthetic level, or both. The sophistication of the work as a whole makes it clear that no matter how beautiful her drawings are, Hadid is, emphatically, a designer of space.

Two types of artefacts give visitors glimpses of Hadid's design process while standing alone as exquisite objects. The fiercely dark *Shostakovich Series* are

Silver paintings show Hadid's most recent work. Here: Nordkettenbahn, a cable railway in Innsbruck.



Paintings featuring geometric forms on a black background are actually site studies.

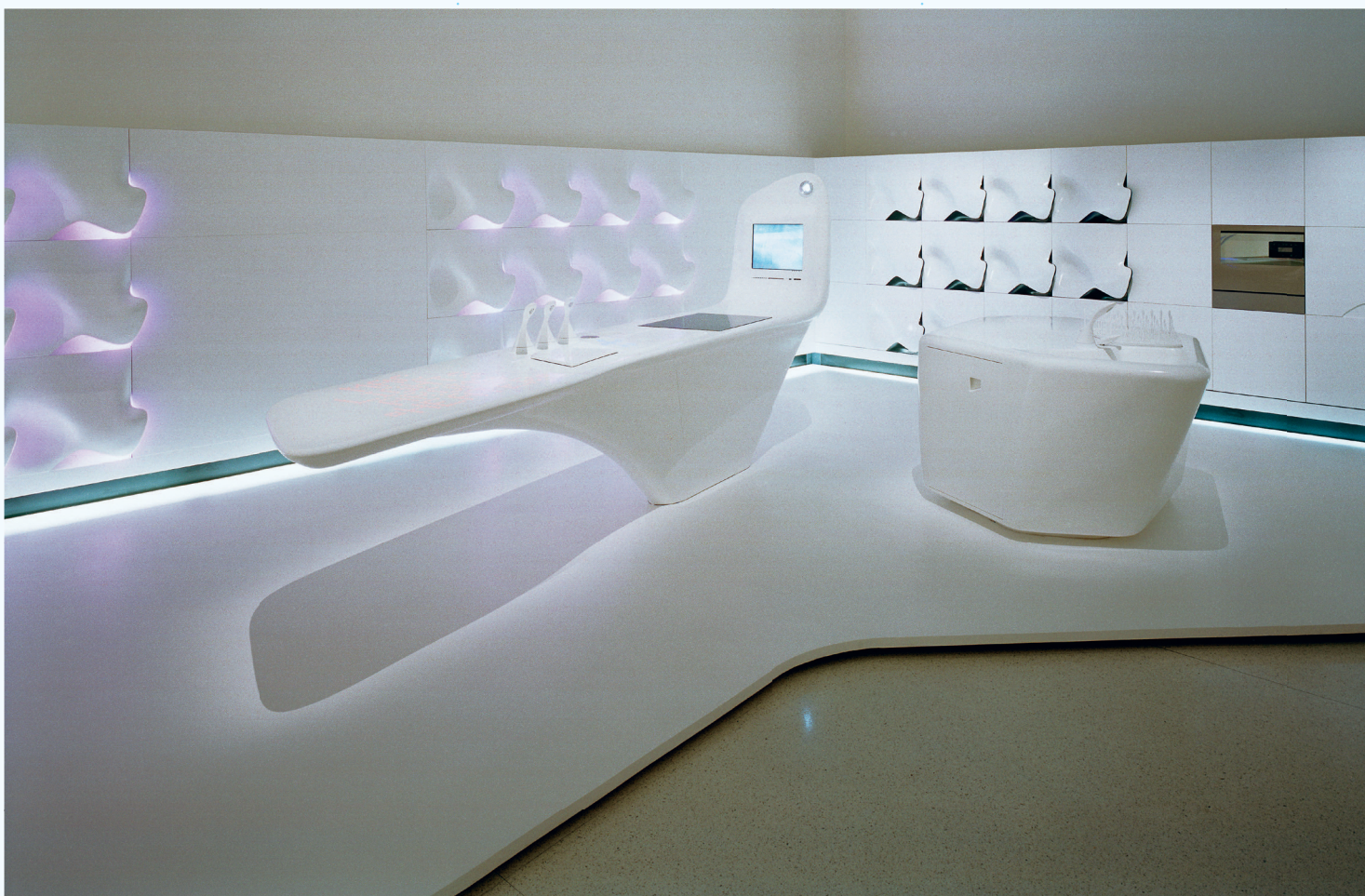
acrylic paintings on cartridge paper, site studies featuring crepuscular geometric forms on a black background. ('It's like seeing things in the dark,' says Hadid.) Behind glass, they are engrossingly difficult to read. 'It was easier for [Hadid] to experiment with how a building would

behave in its context by making the background black,' says Ramirez-Montagut. 'This makes it stand on its own; you acknowledge it. It's not an empty space.' Hadid focuses on the background and on the spaces in between, finding the essential characteristics of the site and foregrounding them in the architecture. She combines the roles of architect and urban planner; structure and landscape become one in her hands. To create the volumes

that will shape the building she extrapolates, based on the 'forces' that shape a site. Along with the black paintings, paper relief models demonstrate how the studio conducts research and experimentation. These have been hung vertically on the walls like paintings, something that Hadid has criticized but that underscores the process by which they are made. The reliefs start as drawings but are 'drawn' with an X-acto knife (cutting instead of inking) in order to generate a volume on a single plane.

No matter how beautiful her drawings are, Hadid is, emphatically, a designer of space

Crowning the Guggenheim's 7th-floor tower gallery is Hadid's sinuous Z. Island Kitchen, a prototype made from Corian and embedded with technology.





As they ascend, visitors are privy to process and material experiments that contribute to the uniqueness of Hadid's forms. A plethora of gorgeously inventive models includes a Hotel Puerta America room in white nylon and a wall-mounted model of Parc de la Villette that layers hundreds of polymer sheets photocopied with drawings, a ream thick. Models for three German projects resemble valises, each of which contains a world in miniature. The environment surrounding the site is drawn in white pencil on black paper lining the suitcase; at its bottom, the model itself is a simple plastic array. The One North Masterplan for Singapore is an undulating black field sown with clear Perspex slices of graduating heights, a 3D topographical map. Over and over again, Hadid suggests that the city is history's latest agricultural product.

**'Hadid's work will be what defines 21st-century architecture.'**

Monica Ramirez-Montagut, curator

On the upper ramps, Hadid's sharpness morphs to sinuousness, but she is still balancing extremes: her buildings appear simultaneously restless and at rest, splintered and all of a piece. Tempered with greater plasticity, they lack hierarchy and symmetry. Hadid gives us a new, protean experience of our buildings, unleashing us from finite focal points: in the recently

On the middle ramp, curators have used a digitally printed billboard wall to feature large-scale photos and animations of Hadid's built work.

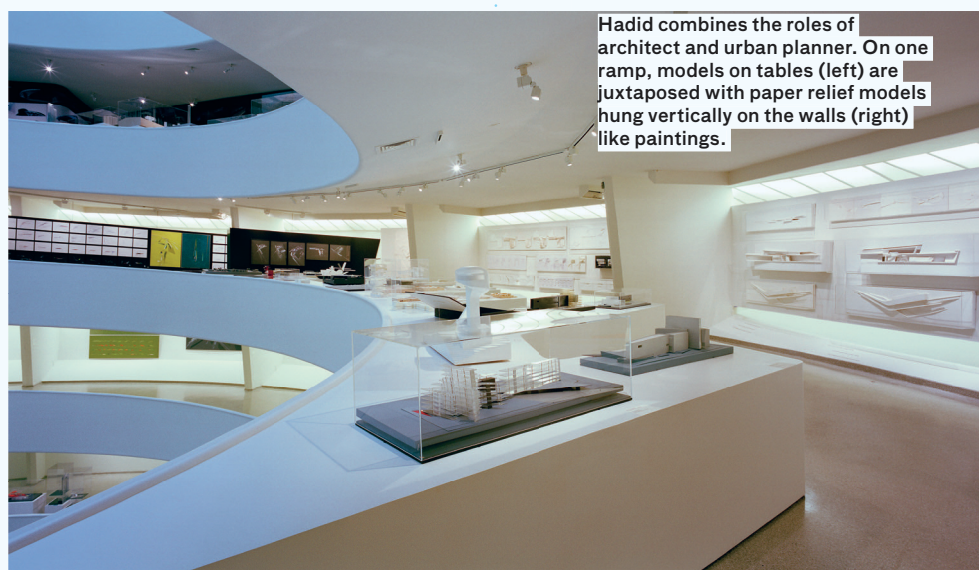
completed Phaeno Science Centre and Leipzig BMW plant, a visitor's experience

changes based on shifts of light through unconventional apertures, varying densities of volumes, open interiors that host multiple activities, and clever circulation patterns.

Gaps in the Guggenheim's circulation plan, where secondary galleries abut the spiral in bays, imply a disconnection between bits of Hadid's work that are actually related. In recent years Hadid has become more interested in continuities than in fragments, a concern that makes the disjunction of the Wright building awkward in this respect. Overall, however, Hadid and Wright work well together. Having designed a 1992 exhibit in the space, Hadid has already had to reconcile content with Wright's architecture. 'She conceives of the museum not as a simple spiral that is fluid and linear,'

says Ramirez-Montagut. 'She makes the diagnosis that this space is more or less alive – it compresses and expands, and is not as continuous or monotonous as one would think – and she either contradicts this or works with it. We can see explicitly how the two of them are in dialogue.' In the tallest, 7th-floor gallery, Hadid's increasing refinement finds its apotheosis. Here, her recent 'silver paintings', large mixed-media canvases of varying opacity, are printed on gelatine and chrome under a sylvan, polyester skin. They hang above the impossibly fluid-looking Z. Island Kitchen in marshmallow-white Corian. Visitors have risen from the industrial era to find themselves in an ether-world, from laboured earthiness into the heavens. From this perspective, Hadid's work becomes a measure of past times and a journey beyond them into a more benign future.

— [www.zaha-hadid.com](http://www.zaha-hadid.com)  
— [www.guggenheim.org](http://www.guggenheim.org)



Hadid combines the roles of architect and urban planner. On one ramp, models on tables (left) are juxtaposed with paper relief models hung vertically on the walls (right) like paintings.