



Sebastian Böttcher / Zaha Hadid Architects

APPRECIATION

Architect remade perceptions

By Charles Desmarais

I am still trying to understand my reaction to the death of Zaha Hadid, the extraordinary woman who seemed in her too-short career to take command of the all-male architecture preserve and, in the process, discard a lot of supposed principles of architectonics. She remade my

Zaha Hadid, the first woman to win the Pritzker Prize, died March 31. She was the architect of Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center.

world as well, demonstrating irrefutably to an art museum director that “there is no such thing as neutral space.”

We worked together, intermittently, for five years — me as impresario and barker for an impossible effort to build an avant-garde museum at the very heart of traditionally con-

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servative Cincinnati, she as the genius who turned that absurd dream into what the New York Times hailed as “the most important American building to be completed since the end of the Cold War.”

Almost all of my memories from the times we spent together relate to her power — untamable, unfathomable (to me, at least), seemingly unlimited. She was born on Halloween and she embodied all the mystery and, truth be told, even something of the look of a storybook witch. At her most charming she spoke with a growl; when she was displeased, she barked.

Just after I hired her, with the blessing of my bedazzled trustees, she came to Cincinnati for our first planning meeting. The day of her arrival happened to be my birthday, so we arranged to meet for a small dinner party at a local restaurant, two blocks from her hotel. Three or four friends and I waited ... and waited. Two hours after our appointed time, with the restaurant staff announcing that the kitchen would close shortly, we saw Zaha and a couple of her acolytes sauntering down the street. I met her at the door, lamely saying something about the lateness of the hour. “I will not live by your fascist rules!” she shouted. “We can end this right now!”

We traveled together a fair amount in the early months of design. She was famous among academics for her electrifying drawings and for the compact and intensely powerful firehouse she had built in Germany; she filled a soccer stadium in Portugal with adoring students for a lecture; but she was far from the widely popular figure she would become 20 years later. Yet walking with her through an airport or a public square, the air would fill with electricity.

Crowds parted and people’s heads turned: I would not have been surprised to see them bow and curtsy as we walked in procession, me escorting my royal companion.

She thought nothing of handing her purse to my col-



Roland Halbe / Zaha Hadid Architects

league — a man who is now the head of a major American museum — to carry for her, as she set off, keeping him five paces back. (It was a black leather handbag, by the way, shaped like a large woman’s behind.) She wore black Issey Miyake almost exclusively in those years, sometimes choosing to wear the jacket upside down. I saw her more than once dramatically sweep all the work off an assistant’s desk onto the floor. A queen vexed.

She didn’t share credit easily and, from where I stood, it appeared that she showed her respect for co-workers by mercilessly taunting them. (As a client, I would have been hands-off; I knew I was a friend when she began mocking me publicly.) But if, as I

was told by her employees, she avoided handing out promotions, in another sense her office was the ultimate meritocracy. It was the most internationally and ethnically diverse workplace I have ever seen, and it was common to learn that kids apparently in their 20s were running major projects, or components of projects. If you could do the work, you got the job.

And she was faithful. She would never have thought of leaving her staff behind when it came time for the final unveiling of a building on which they had worked. So a posse of assistants and interns would be transported across the globe and included at the fancy cocktail parties.

The Contemporary Arts

The Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, designed by Zaha Hadid, was hailed by the New York Times as “the most important American building since the Cold War.” It opened in 2003 and helped win the Iraqi British architect the Pritzker Prize in 2004.

Center on which we partnered was her first American commission, and the first project she got to build in the 10 long years following the opening of that German firehouse. The CAC opened in 2003. Even before that, Zaha invited me to a dinner to celebrate her first big British exhibition, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London; she introduced me to the room of English luminaries, ignoring the host institution and instead thanking my museum for giving her the chance to build again.

When she was awarded architecture’s highest honor, the Pritzker Prize — largely on the basis of her work in Cincinnati — she made sure that my wife and I were in St. Pe-

tersburg, Russia, to see it happen. And over the years, as her fame grew and major contracts poured in, all of them at a scale and with budgets many multiples of ours, she invited us to every single opening celebration around the world.

I have pondered the deeply visceral impact of Zaha’s death. She became a celebrity who fascinated people around the world, the most internationally recognized (and, not without cause, criticized) woman in art and architecture in her lifetime. But the personal lesson for me of knowing her had little to do with her fame, per se. It was the experience of an awesome power that transcended an underlying emotional frailty — a superhuman quality she herself seemed not to understand.

Years after the opening of the CAC, when I was living in New York, Zaha phoned to say she was in town. We met late in the evening at a Soho bar (I never saw her drink, but she encouraged others to). We were chatting aimlessly as I nursed my bourbon, when suddenly she pointed to a figure in the shadows. “Is that Catherine Deneuve?” she whispered. I couldn’t tell, and we resumed the conversation. Then, almost desperately: “I think that might be Catherine Deneuve! What do we do? Oh, I adore her!” A few more minutes of me talking, her fidgeting, then: “Do we dare go and speak to her? What would I say? Is it even her?” I finally calmed her down. At which point, the woman stood up and walked slowly into the light. She approached our table tentatively and came close to Zaha. Of course, it was Deneuve. Those famous eyes, opening wider, focused only on Zaha.

Urgently, almost pleading, she breathed: “Are you the Architect?”

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