



5-1-2017

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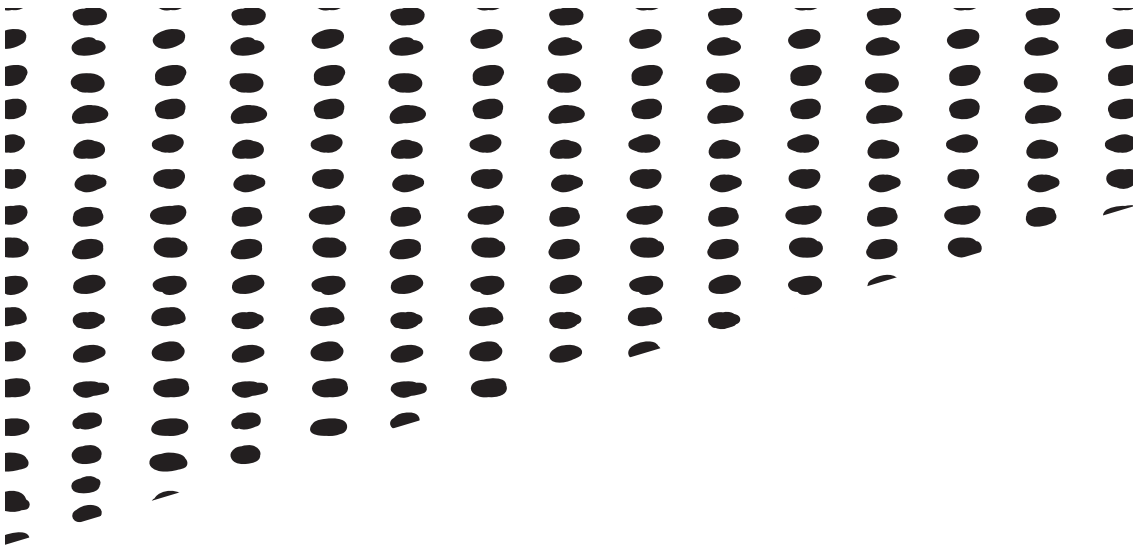


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Recommended Citation

Foster, Allison (2017) "Dame Zaha Hadid, Architect: Her history, style, and how they uniquely qualified her to design the Guangzhou Opera House," *AWE (A Woman's Experience)*: Vol. 4 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe/vol4/iss1/22>

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief background on the accolades of Dame Zaha Hadid, architect, and expresses the significance of her international acclaim in light of being a woman architect. Hadid's experiences developing into a successful, professional architect, despite existing gender and cultural minority biases working against her, are compared to the city of Guangzhou's economic success, despite a history of foreign occupation. Hadid's personal experiences of working and living in areas with strong multicultural influences relate to Guangzhou's multicultural population, as it exists as a hub for immigration and trade into mainland China. Hadid's personal style, as inspired by her visit to her homeland's ancient beginnings in Sumer, Iraq, focuses on connecting a building to its geographical location and its people and culture. Because of the aforementioned connections to the city, Hadid was uniquely qualified to design the Guangzhou Opera House. Because of her exemplary status, the architectural society lacks sound judgment when undermining or discouraging minority architects purely because of their minority status.

Dame Zaha Hadid, Architect: Her history, style, and how they uniquely qualified her to design the Guangzhou Opera House

Allison Foster

Dame Zaha Hadid (1950–2016) was awarded the title Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for services to architecture by Queen Elizabeth II of England on June 18, 2012. She is the first female recipient of the Pritzker Prize (sometimes referred to as the Nobel of Architecture) and winner of many other international awards and competitions. Hadid is best known for sweeping building designs that seem to defy gravity, bringing to light a new understanding of the conventional use of geometry in architecture. Only three years after completing graduate school at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, Hadid began her own firm. Hadid's work was often admired but always rejected as being too avant-garde. The continued rejection earned her the title of a “paper architect” among her peers, which is to say she was a designer who could not get her concepts off the paper and into actual construction. Now known as the “Queen of Curve,” Hadid and her buildings have achieved international acclaim. Some of her best known works include the MAXXI National Museum of the Twenty-first Century Arts in Rome, Italy; the 2012 Olympic Games Aquatics Center in London, England; and the Guangzhou Opera House in Guangzhou, China. Hadid tragically passed away of a heart attack on March 31, 2016, in Miami, Florida, before her designs for buildings in her native Iraq were fully constructed. Even though she was never able to see completed structures from her designs for buildings in her homeland, Hadid had the opportunity to draw upon her life and cultural experiences to create architectural wonders in foreign lands. Her ability to work abroad so successfully is significant because architecture, when intended to represent a city and its culture, requires an architect who is familiar with the location or, just as well, can personally relate to the history of it. In the case of Hadid and the Guangzhou Opera House, the latter qualification applied.

Hadid's life experiences reflect the history of Guangzhou, China, to a point where she became singularly prepared to design a building as culturally significant as the opera house. Today, the Guangzhou Opera

House stands as not only a reflection of the city and culture of Guangzhou but also of Hadid's own unique viewpoint. It was Hadid's multi-cultural perspective, experiences navigating and overcoming the hostile male-oriented world of architecture, and personal design style that uniquely qualified her to design the Guangzhou Opera House.

Important to understanding the professional journey of Hadid and her preparation for designing the Guangzhou Opera House is a brief background on the development of modern female architects in England, where Hadid's firm is based. In the West, women's involvement in any stereotypically male professional field has been slow; where architecture deviates from the norm is the extreme lateness of professional recognition of women in the field. The modern profession of architect began in Elizabethan England in 1563 when John Shute wrote *The First and Chief Groundes of Architecture* and gave himself the title: architect.¹ It took an astonishing 335 years since the birth of the modern architect for women to become involved professionally in England. Ethel Charles was the first female accepted to the Royal Institute of British Architects, sixty years after its founding in 1898. The Architectural Association School of Architecture, also located in England and Hadid's alma mater, was founded a few years after the Royal Institute and did not allow women in their ranks until the turn of the century in 1900.²

Throughout the twentieth century, women attempting to practice the art and profession of architecture faced many challenges. Paramount among them were the contemporary policies in place which relegated women to work strictly in the arena of domestic architecture,³ which involved more interior design and furniture arrangement than they did building creation and large-scale problem-solving. As the long tradition of architecture has been to harken to the past so too, it seems, the profession was reluctant to allow their women to truly move beyond the 1800s cult of domesticity. Even when women were allowed to work in the field, many contemporary architects backed by powerful firms believed that domestic architecture was no more than glorified decorating and should not qualify as true practice of architecture at all. As stated by the popular twentieth-century architect Bruce Goff, "Women are as imaginative

1 Spiro Kostof, *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 180.

2 "Celebrating Women Architects," *Historic England*, accessed December 10, 2016, <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/womens-history/visible-in-stone/women-architects/>.

3 Kostof, *Architect*, 280.

as men; they just have the wrong kind of imagination for architecture.”⁴ Thus, Goff suggests, what work they did produce must not qualify as true architecture. As the number of female students and graduates grew, so did the number of women in architecture firms being dissolved into back corners and forgotten projects. It seemed the only way for women to design public spaces was to be joined in a husband-wife duo and accept that the man would receive recognition and awards, while the woman appeared to simply be his ornament.⁵

In 1955’s *Should You Be an Architect?*, Pietro Belluschi counseled: “I cannot in whole conscience recommend architecture as a profession for girls. It takes an exceptional girl to make a go of it. If she insisted on becoming an architect, I would try to dissuade her. If then she was still determined to . . . she would be that exceptional one.”⁶ The “exceptional one” mentioned by Belluschi is the woman who would break free of her designated restrictive spaces and begin her own practice without a male counterpart. A little under two decades after Belluschi gave his opinion on the matter, Zaha Hadid began her studies at the Architectural Association, and there developed skills and connections to become not only the “exceptional one” and an inspiration to women but also an example to racial minority architects all over the world.

Dealing with issues of sexism common to successful women in various professional fields, Hadid has been heralded as “frightening,”⁷ “a diva,”⁸ and has had her personal clothing, makeup, and hair style decisions discussed more than her work.⁹ In spite of her many international awards and success in competitions, she was listed in reports of museum shows merely as “Zaha Hadid (the only woman)”¹⁰ and so suggesting her sex was the only topic of interest, whereas male architects were described

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 292.

6 Ibid.

7 Qureshi, Interview by Huma, “Zaha Hadid: ‘Being an Arab and a Woman is a Double-Edged Sword,’” *The Guardian*, November 14, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/nov/14/zaha-hadid-woman-arab-double-edged-sword>.

8 Jonathan Glancey, “I Don’t Do Nice,” *The Guardian*, October 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/oct/09/architecture.communities>.

9 Ibid.

10 Indra Kagis McEwen, James Ackerman, Karsten Harries, and David Goldblatt, “Architecture,” *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*.

in terms of their sources of inspiration. In light of these struggles, she says of her undeniable success, “I’ve broken beyond the barrier, but it’s been a very long struggle. It’s made me tougher, more precise—and maybe this is reflected in my architecture. I still experience resistance but I think this keeps you on the go. As a woman in architecture, you need confidence.”¹¹ Hadid’s success in spite of oppression is relatable to Guangzhou’s history. Just as Hadid’s uphill battle was fought to develop herself as an architect while facing sexist biases within the profession, Guangzhou people have fought to maintain their identity through many periods of foreign occupation.

Another important facet of Hadid’s history preparing her for work on the Guangzhou Opera House is her multicultural awareness, which was mainly developed through her educational opportunities. Born in 1950 to wealthy parents in Baghdad, Iraq, Zaha Hadid grew up as the youngest child of an artistic mother and a progressive, businessman father involved in westernizing politics. Growing up, she attended religiously diverse primary schools run by French-speaking Catholic nuns¹² in Baghdad and later in Switzerland,¹³ as well as an English boarding school in London.¹⁴ After studying mathematics at the American University in Beirut, Lebanon, Hadid moved permanently to London, England, at the age of twenty-two. She was accepted at the Architecture Association and began her studies to become an architect,¹⁵ and later attained British citizenship.¹⁶ These experiences provided multicultural opportunities to interact with different cities and individuals, thereby giving Hadid’s architecture a greater breadth of the world to draw upon for inspiration. This preparation was necessary for understanding how to represent Guangzhou accurately as it is a major center for immigration into China¹⁷

11 Qureshi, “Zaha Hadid,” *The Guardian*.

12 “Zaha Hadid Biography,” *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.eri.lib.byu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T036026?q=Zaha+Hadid&search=quick&pos=2&start=1#firsthit>.

13 Kathryn B. Hiesinger, Zaha Hadid, and Patrik Schumacher, *Zaha Hadid: Form in Motion*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012): 58.

14 Qureshi, “Zaha Hadid,” *The Guardian*.

15 John Zukowsky, “Dame Zaha Hadid,” *Britannica*, March 31, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zaha-Hadid>.

16 “Zaha Hadid Biography,” *Encyclopedia of World Biography*.

17 “Guangzhou,” *New World Encyclopedia*, January 21, 2014, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Guangzhou>.

and therefore a hub of interaction between people of many cultures. This theme of interaction between different peoples is expertly displayed in the building design of the Guangzhou Opera House, which could not have been achieved without Hadid's unique life experiences.

Also significant to Hadid's work on the opera house is the story of Hadid's initial draw to architecture and the development of her personal inspiration and style. She recalls feeling her first inclination to building design at the young age of six when she saw the building model for and some drawings of her aunt's new home. The architect on the project was a friend of her father's and would bring the designs when visiting the Hadid home. Seeing the plans and the model in the living room, Hadid said something was "triggered" in her, initiating a desire to learn more about architecture.¹⁸ This desire led to a childhood of reading books and examining inspiring pictures of the remains of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Sumer, taken by the explorer Wilfred Thesiger (a personal friend of her father). Hadid was able to explore this site as a teenager when her family took a trip to the area. While exploring these sites of early architecture, Hadid's appetite for architectural design was truly whetted. The ancient cities provided long lasting inspiration for her which allowed her to relate the sense of tradition felt in this birthplace of civilization to a similarly important site in ancient Chinese civilization: Guangzhou, China.

In Guangzhou, Hadid created the Opera House in her signature style of melding her structures with the landscapes and people to create a flow of interaction between the architecture and its physical and metaphysical surroundings.¹⁹ Hadid describes the experience of creating this flow as finding the "geometry of the context" so that all of the lines and shifts of the building both expose and are continuations of the locations natural and manmade landscape.²⁰ Because of her unique ability to capture a location and expose it in architecture, she has even been called a "great cinematographer" by the esteemed architecture critic Aaron Betsky:

She sees like a camera. She perceives the city in slow motion, in pans, swoops and close-ups, in jump-cuts and narrative rhythms. As she draws the world around her, she draws out its unconscious spaces . . . she subjects her environment to the surgical explosion of architecture

18 Qureshi, "Zaha Hadid," *The Guardian*.

19 Glancey, "I Don't Do Nice," *The Guardian*.

20 Zaha Hadid and Philip Jodidio, *Hadid Complete Works, 1979–2013* (Köln: Tasschen, 2013): 12.

as a form of representation. She builds the explosion of a tenth of a second.²¹

It is this cubist-like style of presenting different angles of a distinct image, gleaned from her training in western art, paired with her personal history, that made Hadid so uniquely qualified to design the Guangzhou Opera House.

Opera houses have always been created for a greater purpose than the functionality of putting on a good show. They serve to ennoble a city and show off a propagated, lofty, high class image. Historically this has been done by copying imagery of European, particularly Parisian, opera houses.²² Hadid both accepts and rejects this purpose. In the avant-garde design of the Guangzhou Opera House we see that she did more than create a space with acoustics and seating arrangements that allow for a quality performance. She designed a space that met those requirements in a visually pleasing way, thus fulfilling a standard for opera house construction. Instead of visually harkening back to a culture that is not local to the users and owners of the architectural space (i.e., Parisian aesthetics), Hadid used her unique experiences and style to design this opera house to specifically represent its contextual geometry and geography, which is the movement and culture of Guangzhou.

Made of steel beams and glass, covered in areas by locally quarried granite, the structure of the opera house reflects both modern industry as well as ancient connections to the land in a manner only one of Zaha Hadid's unique background could create. Reminiscent of a symphony, no part in the design is arbitrary. Hadid takes the concept of the opera house reflecting the location's culture to such a point that it can be argued as microcosm of the city of Guangzhou. The glass walls and ceilings are beautiful and create a synthesis between the interior and exterior design.²³ This reflects the city's separation from and unity with the rest of China. Guangzhou natives, though part of the mainland, generally speak Cantonese rather than the typically spoken Mandarin. Hadid related to this incorporated-yet-other scenario as

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- 21 Zaha Hadid and Aaron Betsky, *Zaha Hadid: Complete Works* (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, 2009): 6.
 - 22 Benedito Lima de Toledo and Elza B. De Oliveira Marques, "Opera Houses," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* no. 21 (1995): 44.
 - 23 Hadid and Jodidio, *Hadid Complete Works*, 285.

a woman architect surrounded by men. The complex and interactive design of the opera house was accomplished using highly advanced computer-aided design technology, which shows an up-to-date or even futuristic mentality that China prides itself in,²⁴ and that Hadid incorporated into her designs. The layout of the opera house's surrounding grounds provide multiple entrances and exits on different levels which creates a non-planimetric orientation, meaning there is no definitive front, back, or main floor to the building.²⁵ This design represents the city's multiple ports of entry. Via air, land, underground rail systems, or sea, there are major arteries providing incoming and outgoing flows of people in Guangzhou daily. Importantly, the city performs as an anchor or hub of interaction between cultures, as it is the economic center of one of China's leading commercial regions and so draws traders and immigrants alike.²⁶

Likewise, the opera house was placed in the cultural development area of the city where it will draw people to and through it. Like Guangzhou, the opera house is not an exclusive place. Rather, it is a location that brings people together. The interior continues the theme of connectivity. Practice rooms for performers are carefully incorporated and planned into the overall design of the building which connects them to their audience and performing structure. Public spaces around the main performance hall are open, creating the sense that the audience is now on a stage connecting them to the performers. Periphery spaces contain shops and businesses which unifies the visitors with the theater goers. This element of unity is a hallmark of Hadid's architecture, perhaps derived from synthesizing design with surrounding context and having experienced the feeling of closed doors and unattainable spaces derived from sexist encounters in the business of architecture. Now the spaces she creates are open and attainable.

Hadid's design for the opera house not only personifies the Guangzhou of today and the future but also represents its heritage. Guangzhou was once a major port of trade along the maritime Silk Road. People from around the world came to trade for silk, porcelain, and other fine oriental goods. Now, the acoustics of the opera house are so precisely designed that they beckon world-class performers to come and

24 Joseph Giovannini, Joseph, "Guangzhou Opera House, Guangzhou, China," *Architect* 100, no. 5 (2011): 217.

25 Ibid., 218.

26 "Zaha Hadid Biography," *Encyclopedia of World Biography*.

partake of its sound.²⁷ As mentioned above, the local granite material used unifies the building with the land. It also furthers the design plan of two river-worn boulders or pebbles pulled from the Pearl River,²⁸ on the banks of which the structure resides. The stone theme connotes durability and permanency, along with the erosion of time and flow of people through the city. Just as the force of the water makes stones polished and beautiful, so too the force of people and culture on the city makes it unique and beautiful. As noted earlier, this is a concept that Hadid had been surrounded by from a young age, and she developed an appreciation and awareness of learning from multicultural environments as a consequence. Additionally, she felt the effects of others' opinions and sometimes forceful abrasiveness throughout her life, which worked to polish her and her work into the products they are today.

As a woman in a patriarchal world who rejected stereotypes and insisted on the avant-garde, and as an ethnic minority in her field of work, Hadid must have related to Guangzhou's mixed cultures and resilience. Instead of recycling motifs of traditional opera houses that represented other cities, histories, and societies, Hadid used her ability to create a visual narrative of the geographical and social context of the area around the building to form the design of the Guangzhou Opera House. This design ability and emotional empathy from Hadid's history allows the Opera House to propagate not a foreign high class or culture, but rather the distinctively unique class and culture of Guangzhou, China. The example that Hadid has set in personalizing architecture in such a successful manner is inspirational in its own right; but even more, her example can embolden women because of her success despite her near failure at the hands of gender biases within the profession. Despite continuing discrimination within the field of architecture, Dame Zaha Hadid's successful career empowers women and minorities by setting a new precedent that discourages underestimating and underutilizing architects because of their minority status. ♦

27 Rob Gregory, "A Rock and a High Place: British Architects Complete Major Projects in China's Third City [Guangzhou]," *Architectural Review* 229, no. 1367 (2011): 17–18.

28 *Ibid.*, 17.

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