

THE CONTROVERSY AROUND ZAHA

© Amira Osman, 04.2016

This article is written for a blog on www.uj-unit2.co.za. While I represented the Scientific Committee for UIA 2014 Durban, the below are my reflections on the process and represent my own personal opinions.

I have never really felt strongly about Zaha Hadid, or her work – either way. I was of course aware of the powerful imagery that her buildings created and marveled at the daring structural acrobatics. Having been reprimanded in a crit many years ago by my then lecturer, the late Prof. Omar Al Agra, at the University of Khartoum, that I was “obsessed with geometry”, I did make an effort later in my studies and career to try and understand, at a deeper level, the idea of forms and how they related to site, city and society. I am also influenced greatly by a quote I came across many years ago (I cannot recall the author though I use it often), that all “forms are value-laden” as design cannot be neutral. I do not claim to have ever understood Zaha’s work at a deeper level – nor was I inspired enough to check it out.

UIA 2014 DURBAN – THE COMPLEX PROCESS OF NOMINATING KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

I however went through an experience that made me become intensely aware of the fact that sentiments around Zaha and her work are never neutral. As the UIA 2014 Durban General Reporter I was tasked with heading the Scientific Committee. We had to manage the content of the Congress in terms of sub-themes, speakers and programme – with an intention to align everything with the Congress title, ARCHITECTURE OTHERWHERE, and the key themes of Resilience, Ecology and Values.

I embarked on the task rather naively – I very quickly learnt that this was a very serious process and could not be taken lightly. The people involved felt strongly that the event was a reflection of our professional values, what we believe about education, practice and how we view life in general. I learnt that we could never achieve consensus in a room full of architects. I also learnt that my role demanded that I try to be as fair and accurate as possible in understanding and reflecting the intentions of a very diverse group of people. I therefore learnt to moderate my own views.

While I felt very strongly that the Congress needed to add value, be relevant and influence the profession in powerful ways, I would not have minded a “Zaha” type of personality here or there in the programme – as long as it didn't dominate or detract from the main content of the Congress. Hmmm... Naïve? Yes!

Firstly, the “Zaha” phenomena would have certainly been powerful. I don't think her presence or her work could have been a “gentle” intervention in a 3-day intensive programme. It would have dominated and it would have had a massive response from the audience and the media. Secondly, on reflection, as the event loomed closer and the themes and intentions became more evident, there were a number of people that we invited that I was hoping would decline or not respond. These people included Zaha Hadid, Liz Diller, Bjarke Engles and Richard Rogers. The people that did decline but disappointed me were Arundhati Roy, Luiz Inacio (Lula) da Silva, Mumbai Studio, Tatiana Bilbao, Ai Wei Wei and the “man that stopped the desert”, Yacouba Sawadogo. I can just imagine skeptical architects with “eyes rolling”. My reasons are simple – some of the people that were initially nominated but ultimately didn't come would simply not have fitted into the general theme and sentiment of the event. It is amazing how sometimes things just “fall into place”.

This was an evolving process that required coordination between a large scientific committee including national members as well as representatives of 5 world regions. The very diverse views became more and more aligned as the event drew closer and intentions became more apparent. Nominations for the following speakers were presented with much passion and strong motivations: Glenn Murcutt, Mo Ibrahim, Mayassa Al Thani, Nnamdi Elleh, Desmond Tutu, Graca Machel, Nabeel Hamdi, Peter Buchanan, Wole Soyinka, Rem Koolhaas, Allan De Botton, Renzo Piano, Amin Maalouf and Brad Pitt.

Some people felt so strongly about their nominations that they even tried to bypass the democratic procedures followed by the committee: “... just to test the waters with you... would be possible at all... or does it need to go through a lengthy process with the scientific committee.” Some felt that the inclusion of star architects “...would most certainly assist in padding the programme and entice delegates to come...” Others stated emphatically: “we do not want the star architects and their bodyguards on our stage”. Some were worried about universal representation, at one point stating, “I count 2 Asians, 3 Americans, 3 Africans and not a single European...” The issue of women architects not being well represented was also a valid criticism that made its way onto social media a few days before the event.

At a presentation prior to the event, without disclosing the names, I shared with colleagues some of the complexities that I faced in trying to reconcile the diverse opinions on speakers – with emails such as: “X is unique in that he has an ethical way of

running the office which is really singular... a man of the highest principles apart from a great architect, a modest, pleasant person and runs a team office of the highest standard... So I was looking at the slot [in the draft programme], currently held by Y... I rest my case..." X was Richard Rogers, and Y in this case was no other than Zaha Hadid, without a doubt one of the most famous living architects at the time of developing the UIA 2014 Durban programme.

It is not only Zaha that got harsh criticism from her peers. Richard Rogers, highly praised by some, is critiqued by others as not living up to his principles. Rowan Moore writes: "Lord Rogers (formerly Richard Rogers), had the ear of ministers to an extent matched by few of his profession... "the best in the world it was often said"... Rogers, however, acted according to the dictum of the nineteenth-century American architect H. H. Richardson, that the first principle of architecture is to get the job. He argued, charmed and cajoled..." (Rowan Moore, 2012, *Why we build*, Picador).

Rowan Moore was not any kinder to Zaha: "A handbag is placed on the table in front of me, white and gold and tsarist, Fabergé in its intensity of ornament, but also futurist. By this I know that Zaha Hadid... is arriving. The bag carrying assistant melts away." As Moore goes on to describe in a few pages, and in great detail, his rather nightmarish, and failed, experience of trying to get a Zaha building off the ground, he also tries to philosophise his ordeal: "The beautiful building that strains its clients is an old phenomenon". He explains how "great work" requires immense sacrifice but also "does a disservice to the many architects who achieve much with less violence to budget and function."

Once we nominated Zaha, getting hold of her proved to be incredibly complicated. We were not even given the name of her PA, her office stating: "this is our policy". Our nomination of Zaha led to a flurry of emails, sms's and phone calls. I would not be exaggerating if I say that there was a sense of outrage amongst the South African architects I interact with. I received a communication: "I find... Zaha almost incoherent..." Others told me that she would probably not show up. Another communication I received as a response to the nominated speakers said (I think it referenced a quote): "...the finest architects are not the most famous, rather... most often the famous are the biggest b*****."

MAY THE DAY OF YOUR PRAISE NEVER COME

(Insha Allah yom shukraak maa yaji) (a Sudanese saying: the "day of your praise" meaning the "day of your death")

Dame Zaha Hadid, as I quickly learnt when trying to figure out how various people needed to be addressed in my communications, was a much-decorated architect, RIBA royal gold medalist (the first time awarded to a woman), one of Time's "most influential people" in 2010, and many more: "It's a bit of a fool's errand to argue who, historically, is the greatest architect, but strictly in terms of awards, how does Hadid stack up? A head-to-head between Hadid and Foster gets tougher, making it harder to declare who comes out on top. Both have been given royal recognition (Dame Hadid and Lord Foster)... Hadid has often been the subject of unfair criticism compared to many of her peers... impact and influence go beyond just trophies and medals, both can lay claim to an impressive amount of recognition."

<http://www.curbed.com/2015/9/24/9918080/zaha-hadid-RIBA-gold-medal>.

She was: "... a woman in a field dominated by men. An Iraqi-born, secular Muslim who made her home in clubby Protestant England. A flamboyant, cape-wearing figure... Most important, she was an architect who pushed the field forward, toward ever more complex, organic shapes that seemed to take their inspiration from the webbed patterns of biological tissue and the globular shapes of cells... She was far more interested in pushing the boundaries of design than of society."

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-zaha-hadid-women-in-architecture-20160331-column.html>).

She also stated that: "... I do work which is not normative, which is not what they expect."

Zaha established her studio in London in 1980 and for almost 14 years built nothing – but still became famous during this time: "Hadid's first real building emerged in 1993... a tiny fire station in a Swiss-German furniture factory whose shrieking concrete angles and disruptive interiors photographed very well and were dutifully recorded in the magazines, but were not much liked by the firemen. It was decommissioned and is now an exhibition centre." (<http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/08/the-heckler-architecture-would-be-better-off-without-zaha-hadid/>). The fact that the building didn't serve its initial purpose for which Zaha was commissioned didn't damage her professional reputation. On the contrary, it became a mecca for architects and propelled her career in the direction that it took. (<http://www.archdaily.com/112681/ad-classics-vitra-fire-station-zaha-hadid>).

A CRITIQUE OF THE PROFESSION AND THE VERY INSTITUTIONS CONFERRING THE AWARDS

I, like many others, was completely shocked by the passing of Zaha. It was unexpected and she seemed to be at the height of her career, "larger than life" and much was still to be expected from her. She was without a doubt an incredible architect. But where

are those voices of criticism that we so evident a few years ago? Is this a case of “the day of praise”? Is it wrong to voice an alternative opinion on Zaha and her work now that she has passed? Or is it wrong to criticise her because she was the only woman to achieve such status in a male-dominated profession? Or is it wrong because she is an Arab? Are we not permitted to continue to critique her work on ethical grounds – as we would do with any other male and European architect?

As a woman myself, architect and African/Arab, I would like to say that I am somewhat offended by article titles such as “For female architects the loss of Zaha Hadid is personal.” (<https://theconversation.com/for-female-architects-the-loss-of-zaha-hadid-is-personal-57474>) (Many north Sudanese claim to be descendents of the prophet Mohamed in the Arabian peninsula – however, genetic testing at the Origins Centre at WITS, Johannesburg, says I have strong links with the Fang in the Congo and the Tauariq of the Saharah Desert – either way I lay claim to both Africa and Arabia!). The assumption that I would aspire to break the “glass ceilings” in the kind of environment that she operated in is something of an insult. As a woman architect, I aspire to change the profession completely so that young woman architects are inspired to question this particular interpretation of what architecture is – and what the “rise to the top” means.

I have no doubt that she was subjected to some unfair treatment. However, the reality is that we are questioning our profession, its practice and relevance. We are questioning the very institutes that confer the awards and the criteria that they use. Referring to Al Jazeera’s series titled Rebel Architects, it is explained how: “... the tone of architecture culture has changed in only a few years. In the heady days of the 2000s, architects were in furious competition to produce “iconic” buildings for a global market. Virtuosi such as Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid and Norman Foster kept the media fed with fabulous images of museums and corporate headquarters, earning the moniker “starchitects”. But after the financial crash of 2008, it became clear that the social value of so much of that starchitecture was nil. And there was a correction, to borrow a stock market term, in the architect’s image.” <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/activist-architects-designing--2014928103659390595.html>

The irony is that the same Euro-centered, male-dominated profession is now entering the arena of poverty, informality and disadvantage with the same kind of “big attitudes” and “big thinking” practiced in the rest of the profession. So we are now having to deal with “celebrity” slums (as someone referred to Kibera in Nairobi) and the celebrity architects that have now made those slums their new playgrounds. But that is another topic for another time.

“THE LOCALITY HADID PREFERS IS THE BACK YARDS OF TYRANTS AND DICTATORS”

I shared the above quote from The Spectator (<http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/08/the-heckler-architecture-would-be-better-off-without-zaha-hadid/>) on Facebook. One response was: “I wonder if this ethical dilemma applies to all entities involved on a project commissioned by a tyrant or being built in a country known for its abuse of international labor laws. Or, is Zaha being singled out?” Indeed, a report by Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde22/3548/2016/en/>) on the “ugly side of the beautiful game” names many involved in the World Cup constructions sites in Qatar: Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy (the body set up by the Government of Qatar to deliver the World Cup), a chain of contractors reporting to the Aspire Zone Foundation, Aspire Logistics, a main contractor for Khalifa Stadium, a joint venture company involving Midmac, a Qatari construction company, and Six Construct (a subsidiary of the Belgian company Besix), Eversendai Qatar, a subsidiary of the Malaysian company, Eversendai, two labour supply companies (Seven Hills and Blue Bay – facilitating the process whereby a sponsor brings a number of migrant workers to Qatar and then hires them out to other companies), Nakheel Landscapes, etc.

Indeed, Zaha seems to have been singled out even before her project was on site. However, her silence on safety on sites, exploitation, unethical recruitment, delayed salaries, forced labour, retention of passports, delayed payment of wages and deceptive recruitment – as listed in the report – is uncomfortable. The architectural profession, the architects employed in these projects and their institutes, are complicit. Zaha is as complicit as others – whether we are referring to Sir Norman Foster, Rem Koolhaas or other star architects. As a woman architect, that is the difference that I would have liked Zaha to bring to the profession.

Seduced by her futuristic designs, we tend to overlook the “less seemly” or “unsavoury” aspects of her career (<http://www.heydar-aliyev-foundation.org/en/content/index/142/>)(<http://designobserver.com/feature/the-poverty-of-starchitecture/26358/>)(<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-zaha-hadid-women-in-architecture-20160331-column.html>). She seemed to deny that there were ethical aspects to her work, as do many other architects.

Another Facebook friend commented: “I think Zaha's interpretation and transformation of space and planes, is yet to be fully comprehended. And gaining success and recognition worldwide, while being a woman and an Arab, is unprecedented and great

by all merits. Architects will always be accused of "trading in" for money, or other gains." But continues: "May there be more prominent and different architects from our part of the world, whose work and impact will be admired and discussed."

The debate has been taken up by many: "Hadid's complex legacy reminds us that genius does not operate in a dustless ether of abstractions. It matters where the buildings are built, as well as who builds them." (<http://europe.newsweek.com/zaha-hadids-complex-legacy-442809?rm=eu>)

THE ART OF SEDUCTION

Architects are easily seduced. Listening to a star architect give a talk many years ago in Zurich, I spoke to the equally bemused person sitting next to me: "Is he trying to hypnotize us?" I was completely unimpressed. The fact that other speakers at the sessions captured the audience with their sincerity, made the "deception" of the architect even more apparent. At UIA 2014 Durban the humanity and humility of speakers such as Wang Shu, Francis Kere and Rahul Mehrotra contrasted sharply with the presentations by Toyo Ito and Cameron Sinclair. Yes – even working in areas of poverty can generate its own kind of stardom.

"Early on, in 1980, with her entry for the Irish Prime Minister's Residence competition, she hit a rectangle with a triangle and generated architecture in the exploding fall-out. An architect can never really design outside her temperament and character, and Zaha, as a person, was not afraid of conflict and the unexpected consequences of collision." (http://www.architectmagazine.com/design/zaha-hadid-friend_o)

The fact that Zaha has managed to generate such controversy, to capture the imagination with her architecture, to be discussed with such emotion is to be acknowledged. This does not mean that it exonerates her work from being critiqued – or the profession that so highly awarded her (and others) from being questioned. It was interesting to see negative sentiments in social media with regards to the awarding of the Pritzker to Alejandro Arevena recently (I shared my thoughts on this here: <http://uj-unit2.co.za/blog/>). I think we need some serious self-reflection as architects, and the ethics and relevance of our profession needs to come to the fore.