Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum
East Lansing, MI
The designs of Iraqi-born British architect Zaha Hadid (born 1950) are daring and visionary experiments with space and with the relationships of buildings to their urban surroundings.

She was often named as the most prominent contemporary female architect, or singled out for notice because of her Iraqi Arab background, Hadid was significant beyond these accidents of birth for her intellectual toughness, her refusal to compromise on her ideas even when very few of them were being realized in concrete and steel. For many years, her designs filled the pages of architecture periodicals but were dismissed as impractical or as too radical, and Hadid even thought about giving up architecture after she suffered a major rejection in her adopted homeland of Britain in 1995. Her star began to rise internationally when her design for Cincinnati, Ohio’s new Center for Contemporary Art was selected and built, earning worldwide acclaim.

By the mid-2000s Hadid employed nearly 150 people in her London office and was working hard to keep up with new commissions that were coming in, offering her a chance to help reshape the world architectural landscape.

Born in Baghdad, Iraq, on October 31, 1950, Zaha M. Hadid grew up in a well-educated Islamic family oriented toward Western multiculturalism. Her father was an executive and, for a time, the leader of a liberal Iraqi political party. The drawing ability that would later attract attention in art museums was first absorbed from her mother. Hadid’s interest in architecture had roots in a trip her family took to the ancient Sumer region in southern Iraq, the site of one of the world’s oldest civilizations, when she was a teenager. “My father took us to see the Sumerian cities,” she told Jonathan Glancey of London’s Guardian newspaper. “Then we went by boat, and then on a smaller one made of reeds, to visit villages in the marshes. The beauty of the landscape—where sand, water, reeds, birds, buildings, and people all somehow flowed together—has never left me. I’m trying to discover—invent, I suppose—an architecture, and forms of urban planning, that do something of the same thing in a contemporary way.”

Hadid attended a Catholic school where French was spoken and nuns served as instructors, but which was religiously diverse. As Hadid told Newsweek’s Cathleen McGuigan, “the Muslim and Jewish girls could go out to play when the other girls went to chapel.” Hadid’s family expected her to pursue a professional career, and she studied math at the American University in Beirut, Lebanon. Her family left Iraq after the rise of dictator Saddam Hussein and the outbreak of war with neighboring Iran, but she retained ties to both Iraq and Lebanon and at times had difficulty talking to interviewers about the ongoing violence in her home region.

In 1972 Hadid moved to London (later becoming a British citizen) and enrolled at the Architectural Association School of Architecture. She never married nor had children. “If [architecture] doesn’t kill you, then you’re no good,” she explained to Glancey. “I mean, really—you have to go at it full time. You can’t afford to dip in and out.”
By 1977 Hadid had received her degree, along with a special Diploma Prize, and she began working for a London firm, the Office of Metropolitan Architecture, founded by one of her key teachers, the similarly daring Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. One of her student projects was a design for a hotel built atop the span of London's Hungerford Bridge.

Hadid opened an office of her own in 1980, but at first her ideas were more in demand than her actual designs. Hadid taught courses at the Architectural Association and filled notebooks with one-of-a-kind ideas, some of which were published in architecture magazines or exhibited in galleries. Hadid began to enter design competitions, some research-oriented and others for buildings intended for construction. Her design for The Peak, intended for construction. Her design for The Peak, Hong Kong, won the top prize in the institution's competition, but the building was never constructed.

Hadid’s competition entries in the 1980s and early 1990s were little known to the public at large but stirred up interest among her fellow architects, and even after she became famous, her website continued to list her competition prizes before focusing on her actual building projects.

Designed Fire Station

After several small projects, including one for the interior of the Moonsoon Restaurant in Sapporo, Japan, Hadid’s first major building was constructed in 1993 and 1994: it was a small fire station, with numerous irregular angles (Hadid has been widely quoted as saying that since there are 360 degrees, she sees no reason to restrict herself to just one), on the grounds of the Vitra Furniture Company in Weil am Rhein, Germany. In 1994 Hadid seemed to be on the verge of a breakthrough: her design for the new Cardiff Bay Opera House in Britain’s Wales region was selected for construction. It was to be an unorthodox building, with sharp angles and interior spaces that ran into and through one another rather than falling neatly into separate areas, but it was also planned to be inviting to the user, with an auditorium surrounded by glassed-in spaces that gave views of nearby Cardiff Bay.

With Hadid an unknown quantity and Britain’s Prince Charles in the midst of a widely publicized campaign in favor of neo-traditional architecture in Britain, the design ran into trouble almost immediately. The design competition was reopened, and Hadid’s design was once again named the winner, but the project’s funder, Britain’s National Lottery, eventually withdrew its commitment. Hadid was devastated. “It was such a depressing time,” she recalled to Rowan Moore of the London Evening Standard. “I didn’t look very depressed maybe but it was really dire. I made a conscious decision not to stop, but it could have gone the other way.”

At the same time, Hadid began to amass a solid core of admirers among her staff, among architecture experts, and among ordinary observers. At the same time the Cardiff project was going down in flames, Hadid designed a temporary pavilion to house an exhibit for the architecture magazine Blueprint at a builders’ convention. She had to present the structure, described by Moore as “a thing of flying steel,” to a gathering of the magazine’s advertisers, most of whom greeted it initially with silence. But an executive from a firm that made portable toilets stood up and said “I think it’s bloody marvelous” (according to Moore), and began applauding. The other advertisers joined in, and Hadid gained a moment in the building trade spotlight.

As clients became more and more fascinated with Hadid’s plans, some of the plans advanced from theory to reality. She designed the unique Bergisel Ski Jump on a mountain near Innsbruck, Austria, and a parking garage and transit station in suburban Strasbourg, France, that later won the Mies van der Rohe Award from the European Union. In 1998 came the biggest commission yet: the Lois and Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, popularly known as the Contemporary Arts Center.

Sidewalk Incorporated into Structure

The new building had to fit the confines of a narrow street corner lot in downtown Cincinnati, but Hadid made a virtue of necessity by linking the museum’s internal and external environments: the outdoor sidewalk continued into the building, where it propelled visitors toward a sleek black central staircase that melded dramatically into the structure’s back wall. As viewers ascended the staircase they looked into galleries that completely overturned the usual neutral conception of museum display spaces—the galleries had different shapes and sizes, and each one seemed to present something new to those approaching. “Not many people voluntarily walk up six stories anywhere,” noted Joseph Giovannini of Art in America, “but Hadid’s space so intrigues visitors that few think of bypassing the experience by hitching a ride on the elevator: they sense they would miss chapters.” A bonus in Hadid’s design was its economy: the building used only common materials, and construction costs came in at a reasonable $230 per square foot. Hadid’s creative fulfillment of a plum commission raised her international profile considerably. Where Hadid had sometimes been considered abrasive and difficult to work with, now she was hailed as a pioneer who had stuck to her vision even while facing difficult obstacles. At times, Hadid ascribed the resistance her ideas encountered to her gender and ethnicity. She also conceded that her work and personality were challenging. “I am eccentric, I admit it,” she told Moore, “but I am not a nutcase.”

Hadid’s next major American commission came from Bartlesville, Oklahoma, site of the Price Tower designed by legendary American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Hadid was hired to design a museum adjoining the Wright building—a choice that made sense, for Hadid was sometimes compared to Wright for her futuristic designs and her visionary rethinking of the relationships between

3 Zaha Hadid

Sidewalk Incorporated into Structure

Zaha Hadid 4
humans and buildings. In 2006 it was one of Wright’s most famous structures, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, that played host to a major retrospective of Hadid’s work.

Indeed, the links between building and environment, and between building and user, loomed larger in Hadid’s thinking as her fame grew and commissions poured into her office. “I started out trying to create buildings that would sparkle like isolated jewels; now I want them to connect, to form a new kind of landscape, to flow together with contemporary cities and the lives of their peoples,” she told Glancey. A new factory she designed for German automaker BMW was laid out in such a way that workers and management personnel crossed paths more frequently.

In 2004 Hadid was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize, considered the profession’s highest honor. She was the first woman to receive the award. In the mid-2000s she finally received a full-scale commission in the British Isles, for a cancer-care building called Maggie’s Centre in Fife, Scotland.

Highly visible Hadid buildings planned or underway included a bridge in the Persian Gulf state of Abu Dhabi, a movie theater complex in Barcelona, Spain, and several new museums. Greater international exposure seemed assured in a project waiting further down the line: the aquatics building for the 2012 Summer Olympics to be held in London. And she seemed to be outdoing herself with each successive design. “Co-curator Monica Montagut quotes Hadid’s statement that ‘I still believe in the impossible,’” noted Raymund Ryan in his Architectural Review commentary of Hadid’s Guggenheim exhibition. “Judging from this display in New York City, there are few limits to what Hadid might do next.”
7 Zaha Hadid

Center for Contemporary Art
Cincinnati, Ohio