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Patrik Schumacher, principal of Zaha Hadid Architects

Zaha Hadid Architects (ZHA) was founded in 1980 by the legendary Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid, crowned “the queen of the curve” by *The Guardian* for her distinctive style representing “liberated architectural geometry, giving it a whole new expressive identity”. Sadly, Zaha passed away four years ago, and Patrik Schumacher took over, championing the company’s cutting-edge, beautiful architecture throughout the world.

Schumacher has degrees in mathematics and philosophy, as well as a PhD in architecture, and joined the firm when it was in its infancy. He was not, he tells me, driven by financial gain but by ideas and the company vision. “I believed in her and the firm.”

Zaha Hadid’s creativity and tremendous drive was tempered by an intense and occasionally abrasive character. Schumacher was able to survive and indeed thrive. With only four in the company, everyone had to pull their weight and cover all ground to keep the business alive.

Complementary skills

During their business partnership of almost 30 years, Schumacher and Hadid worked through thick and thin, giving lectures together and bidding for projects all over the world from Azerbaijan to Mexico, from the Middle East to China. Their projects ranged from an opera house to retail, from culture centres to mega cities. At the point of Hadid’s untimely death in 2016, ZHA had 36 projects on-site in 21 countries. They were undoubtedly a tight team with complementary skills – Hadid’s genius of innovation and creativity; Schumacher, magician-like, weaving ideas and creativity into finished products through systematic thinking, backed up by theory.

Inspiration

He misses her as a friend of course but also “her inspiration, her drive to succeed and dedication to architecture.” Despite the huge loss, the company has maintained its success, continuing to win bids with an enviable 30 per cent success ratio. How did he manage to continue with Hadid’s legacy with such apparent ease?



“The company had matured in the couple of years before her sudden death. Especially after the previous global financial crisis, we had purposely started to build a sound infrastructure headed by a solid management team. For example, we formed a Zaha Cluster, a circle of the 40 best design brains within the company, responsible for much of the front-end design work going out. I also have the support of the board of directors, financial professionals and others on hand to help, so I am not shouldering everything alone.”

About 50 per cent of ZHA’s revenue is generated from projects in China and I ask how the practice got involved with that country in the first place. I learned that Hadid and Schumacher had popped over to southern China from Hong Kong when on a teaching assignment there in the late 90s. “Shenzhen was a small fishing village at the time, it looked poor, with no shops, but there were lots of people making

things with their hands, in professions such as tailoring. You hardly saw any Western faces,” he recalls.

Fabulous buildings

Soon after they met the celebrated entrepreneur couple Pan Shiyi and Zhang Xin of the Soho China Group in Beijing. Their varied backgrounds and cultures – Pan was originally from Hong Kong and brought up in Britain – and strong desire to create fabulous buildings in China combined to make them a potent and multiple award-winning force in architecture in the decades to come.

Despite the challenges of lengthy decision-making processes, fast delivery expectations, Schumacher enjoys working in China, finding its political and financial stability reassuring. Having worked there since launching its first project of Guangzhou Opera House, 2003 – 2010, ZHA has now developed a comprehensive project management system

with permanent local offices based in Beijing and Hong Kong.

Thrilling

Unlike in Europe, several buildings go up together, a community is built, whole districts are created on a big scale at the same time – a thrilling experience and a great challenge for any architect. UK government support has been welcome and helped secure ZHA’s recently completed Beijing Daxing International Airport, the largest airport in the world. This was necessary as the French and American competitors had mobilized support from their governments. Irrespective of the diplomatic efforts, ultimately the best scheme won.

What advice could Schumacher share with other Western businesses working with China? “Hiring capable Chinese colleagues and gathering a reliable and trusted circle of support is crucial. We regularly give lectures and share our knowledge in China. Basically, we make ourselves available, develop friendships and build trust. I still need to be involved in PR at the most senior level but we rely on our local staff to maintain the good relationship we have with related partners on a daily basis on the ground.”

Vibrant

Riding on the wave of the global architectural boom, ZHA has grown in the last two decades with astonishing speed. The number of permanent staff has increased from 40 to 400, and it has 950 projects in 44 countries.

With only three projects built in England though, I hope that Zaha Hadid Architects will bring more of its modern, innovative buildings to these shores. After all, London, in Schumacher’s opinion, is the most exciting city in the world with a vibrant and versatile architectural environment, and where he and Zaha Hadid developed their craft and prepared themselves for ZHA’s global success.



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