

The stellar success of a woman in architecture

Responses to Hadid's death in the mainstream press

On the media coverage of Zaha Hadid's death

Katie Lloyd Thomas

Like so many of the responses to Zaha Hadid's unexpected death in the early hours of 31 March 2016, the 'analysis' by BBC Arts Editor Will Gompertz was published online only a few hours after the announcement made by her practice. It was clearly hastily written. Whilst Gompertz at least acknowledged Hadid as 'one of the world's great architects', even if only within the limited time frame 'of the 21st Century and late 20th Century', he went on to describe the 'sensuous lines' of her architecture, and to make the infuriating claim that 'she brought a femininity to Modernism'.¹

For anyone with a feminist sensibility, this comment was a double blow. First, it suggested that Hadid's work merely inflected the modernist project, and in so doing it undermined her path-breaking contribution to the discipline for – as Edwin Heathcote recognised in his own obituary for the *Financial Times* – she in fact 'invented an entirely new architecture'.² 'Femininity' here was probably little more than a glib reference to the 'sensuous lines' (feminine curves and all that) of Hadid's later designs, but at the same time the very inclusion of the term serves to inscribe the supplementary nature of her contribution. 'Femininity' points to a minor quality or nuance that leaves its subject (modernism) firmly intact.

Second, this offhand comment threw into relief how little Gompertz, and indeed most of the commentators who covered Hadid's contributions in the days following her death, were aware of

the thrust of feminist discourses that have, since the 1970s, asked how the arrival of the 'feminine' into architecture could critically interrogate and transform the fundamental tenets of the discipline and the ways architecture is practiced. While so many tributes by women architects attest to the significance for them of a woman making it into the otherwise male firmament of 'starchitects' (see, for example, Gordana Fontana-Giusti's excellent obituary in this *arq*, pp. 95–98, or Zaha Hadid Architects (ZHA) employee Tegan Bukowski's beautiful piece in the *New York Times*) neither the character traits that enabled Hadid to succeed in a male-dominated profession and in the marketplace, nor the way she ran her office, nor the qualities of her buildings would normally be described as 'feminine'. In fact Denise Scott Brown suggested it was precisely the degree to which she fitted the masculine idea of the architect that made her a comfortable winner for the Pritzker Prize:

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*The Pritzker jury has a certain definition of architecture, an almost 19th century notion of great men and of design that is generated through the genius of one mind. It's taken a long time to find a woman to fit these notions.*³

Hadid may have led by example, but she neither challenged the patriarchal structures of the profession beyond referring to the discrimination she faced in general from clients and the establishment, nor did she adopt 'feminine ways of knowing' or acting in her own practice that could have the potential to alter architecture's operations and processes from within. Rather, Hadid conformed to the conventional expectations of a masculine model of success in architecture and thus contributed to their reproduction.

However, and to my surprise, I found myself moved by the news of Hadid's death. I felt immediately that visceral, physical sensation I identify with the loss of someone close – as if a part of the regular universe has been snatched away leaving nothing in its proper place. As a young architecture student in the late 1980s, already troubled by the near absence of women in my chosen field, I had been bowled over by Hadid's early paintings, especially her designs for the Peak Leisure Club, Hong Kong (1982–3) and for the much smaller Hafenstrasse Office and Residential Development, Hamburg (1989). But I was frustrated by the shiny, form-driven architecture that later emerged when Hadid was finally able to realise her visions, and

critical of what I knew of the ethos of the practice as it expanded and produced ever larger and more spectacular corporate and cultural institutions around the world. Here, I try to understand the contradictions between my own ambivalence to Hadid's work and values, and the personal sense of loss and outrage I felt at much of the commentary following her death.

'The greatest female architect in the world today'

Despite the enormous diversity of approaches to the significance of Hadid's gender in the commentaries following her death, it is striking that none are able to ignore the fact that she was not a man. While less prevalent than in the reports following Hadid's award of the Pritzker Prize in 2004 (brilliantly deconstructed by Despina Stratigakos in her book *Where Are the Women Architects?*, reviewed in this *arq*, pp. 178–181) many begin with an account of Hadid's appearance and personality. Here, for example, is the first paragraph of the report in *The Economist*:

Zaha Hadid, like her architecture, was striking to look at. Ring-like objects stretched across her hands like delicate cutlery, and she favoured pleated fabrics, feathers, unusual silhouettes and complicated footwear. Like the swimming pools with swooping double-curved roofs she built for the London Olympics, she was instantly recognisable. But like the cancer centre she designed for Kirkcaldy's Victoria Hospital, she was reluctant to reveal everything at once: a spiky exterior protects a sheltering and intimate interior from a bleak setting.⁴

If Adolf Loos initiated a minor tradition of relating the

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architect's taste in clothing to the quality of their designs, Hadid's dress is described here more like the excessive costumes of the exotic Josephine Baker than the restrained tailored suits Loos considered appropriate. But of

course, in foregrounding pop-psychology and Hadid's fashion-sense this opening paragraph trivialises her achievements. As guest-nownajs asks in response to the *Economist* article, 'When was the last time you read a obit [sic] about a male that starts with descriptions of their clothes and appearance?'⁵

Others intentionally hold back from discussing Hadid's contribution as a woman. It's not until the eighth paragraph of Deyan Sudjic's measured, serious obituary for *The Observer* that he makes his single reference to her gender, as the 'first woman to win the Pritzker Prize'.⁶ Sudjic's piece stands out by acknowledging, in addition to Hadid's design talents, her skills in organising her practice; introducing computers and parametric software and negotiating the jump from a practice consisting of twenty-five employees to one employing more than 400 people; professional achievements that go beyond the mainstream idea of Hadid as a temperamental artistic genius and have been little acknowledged elsewhere. Some, such as the architect Eva Jiříčková, argue that Hadid herself would not have wanted her gender to be an issue, and that such references should be avoided. 'If we can eliminate the practice of talking about female architects,' she proposes, 'it would be the greatest tribute we could give her.'⁷

Of course, Hadid's gender should not overshadow the discussion of her architecture. As Karen Burns discusses in her insightful article, 'The Woman/Architect Distinction', the term 'woman architect' is itself problematic, in that it assumes the architect is normally male, and makes it difficult for the female architect who wants to self-identify as an architect – not as a 'woman-architect'.⁸ Igea Troiani suggests in her essay, 'Zaha: An image of "The Woman Architect"', that Hadid 'moves between feminine and masculine gender-typed behaviour depending on context' and proposes the use of the term 'transgendered' since she conforms to neither stereotype,⁹ but this kind of analysis seems to shift the focus too much to Hadid's persona once again. Hilde Heyen looks not at Hadid's personality *per se*, but uses discourse analysis to expose the gendering of architectural success in terms of male genius in the Pritzker Prize citations. In Hadid's citation, Hilde Heynen observes,

"[...] professional achievements that go beyond the mainstream idea of Hadid as a temperamental artistic genius"

her struggle to realise her designs is described in masculine terms – as 'heroic'. Hadid is 'undaunted', and her designs in turn are 'audacious' and 'bold'.¹⁰

The difficulty of speaking about Hadid as an architect without referring to her gender only confirms that the architect and the practice of architecture is presumed to be masculine, and that a woman who succeeds within it, in the mainstream, is an exception. But avoiding the issue cannot be the answer. Ignoring Hadid's gender also means playing down at least two of her considerable achievements; first, her persistence and courage in getting her work realised despite the sexism and racism she faced. Hadid acknowledged these challenges only later in her career. As Laura Mark reported in February 2016, Hadid admitted 'I'm judged a lot more harshly because I am a woman' and that her success had been 'a long struggle'.¹¹ Second, the degree to which she has become a role model for many women in architecture, including women in Iraq who are taking up architectural studies as never before, is significant. Despite her reservations about being seen as a 'woman-architect' Hadid accepted the Jane Drew Prize for her outstanding contribution to the status of women in architecture at the first *Architect's Journal* 'Woman Architecture of the Year' Awards in 2012. ZHA also considered Hadid's success as a woman an accolade, making it the first of her achievements listed in the statement they released just after she died; 'Zaha Hadid was widely regarded to be the greatest female architect in the world today'¹² they wrote, and many of the early news reports followed suit. Whether we want it to be relevant or not, to succeed as a woman in architecture today, at the level Hadid secured, must be recognised as an achievement in its own right.

‘Why does nothing get said about Zaha without criticism?’

When I found out that Hadid had died, I was in the Austrian Alps with my family, and not far from the series of shiny white eruptions the practice had designed (2004–7) inspired by glacial formations, as stations for the Nordpark cable car railway to take tourists out of Innsbruck and up to the mountains. Before researching this piece, I knew the project only from a single image of it that I flash up in undergraduate lectures on the subject of materiality in architecture. In this close-up photograph of one of the stations, a woman wearing a little black hat reaches up to touch the curving underside of the bulging canopy, her other hand resting on the handlebar of a red baby buggy. It is a nonchalant image, juxtaposing the ordinary everyday life of a mother and baby with the extraordinary form that seems to swell out of the wide-spaced grid of black silicon marking its glossy surface (in fact, the grid masks the seams where the moulded glass panels have been fixed to the steel rib structure).¹³

I had used this image in my lectures because it so conveniently supported a critical argument against the kind of architecture that privileges form, and devalues matter – a set of concerns long part of my own research that themselves emerged out of an engagement with feminist philosophy and architectural theory of the 1990s, and more recently with feminist new materialism.¹⁴ White and shiny, like the surface of the blank page, with the Cartesian geometry that conventionally governs architectural form at the design stage distorted and pushed outwards as if by a turbulent internal force, the Nordpark stations serve to highlight the immaterial geometric procedures of the design process that produces them. The presence of the grid makes more evident than in ZHA’s other buildings where the form appears seamless, the degree to which this architecture is committed to the pursuit of form-making and obscures the material and labour processes through which buildings come into being,¹⁵ an issue for which Hadid famously gained considerable notoriety when she said that responsibility for the deaths of migrant workers building the 2022 Qatari World Cup stadia was ‘not her duty as an architect’.¹⁶

What strikes me now, however, is how lazy I’d been with the image. I’d assumed I knew something about it, and used it as shorthand to support my argument without bothering to look up any details of the project. This tendency is endemic in the media coverage of Hadid and her work. Most famous have been the erroneous claims that some of the Qatari World Cup deaths had occurred on the site of the El Wrakah Stadium, first made in 2014 (before construction had even begun on site) by journalist Martin Filler in the *New York Times Review of Books*,¹⁷ who later lost a lawsuit for defamation filed by ZHA. This was repeated by Sarah Montague in her interview with Hadid on BBC Radio 4’s flagship news programme ‘Today’ following her receipt of the RIBA Gold Medal in September 2015.¹⁸ While architects are typically praised in the mainstream media when they win awards, this interview saw her become the target of bitter criticism. In a similar example, when Hadid received the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2004, journalists filled their column inches with vitriol often directed at the architect’s looks and personality as well as at the perceived shortcomings of her buildings. As Stratigakos explains in *Where Are the Women Architects?*, the coverage prompted Robert Ivy, the editor-in-chief of *Architectural Record*, to quip: ‘Having learned what we did not care to know, regretfully we did not adequately learn why Hadid deserved the prize.’¹⁹

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Comparing the UK mainstream media coverage that followed her death to that after the Pritzker Prize, it is evident that commentators have, in general, curtailed their criticism and better concentrated on Hadid’s achievements. Rowan Moore’s measured obituary for *The Observer*, for example, mentions some of the controversies that surrounded Hadid’s career, but confines his more critical reservations about

her and the work of her practice to a paragraph relating his personal experience working in her office. He closes with her own justification for a ruthless approach to design, ‘that buildings are around for a long time, and it is therefore worth spending more on something exceptional’.²⁰ The appreciative tone of Moore’s obituary is in marked contrast to the highly critical profile he wrote for *The Observer* in September 2015 following Hadid’s RIBA Gold Medal award entitled ‘Zaha Hadid: A Visionary Whose Ideas Don’t Always Make Sense’ in which almost every paragraph introduces a new but familiar failing: the lack of practicality of her designs, their prodigious costs, her difficult personality, her complicity with the abuses of those she works for, and the ‘frozen monumentality’ of so many of her built works.²¹ Sparing no punches, and prompting a considerable backlash in the online comments (501 of them!), *The Guardian*’s architecture and design critic, Oliver Wainwright, manages the barest celebration of the ‘thrilling experience’ of the London Aquatics Centre or Phaeno Science Centre in Wolfsburg in his article, ‘Zaha Hadid: Creator of Ambitious Wonders – And a Fair Share of Blunders’. He too focuses on the ‘failings’ of Hadid’s work – from the inelegant relationships of her smaller buildings to their existing contexts or the oft-cited disfunctionality of the Vitra fire station, to the cost overruns and protests that have blighted some of her largest projects. For some of the online respondents it wasn’t at all clear from Wainwright’s article just what Hadid’s contributions to architecture had been. One wrote, ‘Celebrate the good. Acknowledge contested legacy. Let the reader understand why the person’s death may have been reported as a headline in national media.’ Another asked, ‘Why does nothing get said about Zaha without criticism?’ to which TotallyBlunt replied in no uncertain terms, ‘She’s female.’²²

In conversation with me, Wainwright explained the distinction between this ‘comment’ piece *The Guardian* asked him to write, and the more neutral format required of an obituary, that Deyan Sudjic provided for the newspaper the next day, writing from scratch. For

obituaries, the newspaper's guidelines specify a certain distance:

Tributes and expressions of sentiment should be minimal – no more than one sentence of either. A couple of honours or awards are quite enough. Euphemisms and mention of 'battling' serious illness have no place.

In contrast, the comment should be 'opinionated' and it needs to be written quickly. Wainwright was commissioned to write it at 16:15 on the same day Hadid died, and he filed the report at 18:10, drawing on what he already knew and recalled of Hadid's work, having already written a number of articles about her and ZHA. He says that it was important for him to retain a critical objectivity in evaluating Hadid's contribution and to avoid the temptation to pass over what was problematic about it just because she had died.²³

“Hadid’s manner was a result of the endless criticism she has been subjected to, despite her achievements”

Wainwright confirmed in conversation, and in an article following the Radio 4 interview debacle, entitled, 'Why is Zaha Hadid Given a Harder Time than Her Starchitect Rivals?',²⁴ that the explicit criticism of her work and personality in media appraisals is not a matter of 'casual sexism'. While he recognises how often Hadid has been singled out as a target for criticism, 'in contrast to other celebrated architects (Richard Rogers, Norman Foster, Rem Koolhaas, etc.) who are rarely pulled up for their ethical and personal shortcomings', he puts it down to Hadid's unguarded public manner. It's impossible to conclude on this but personality seems an insufficient explanation. One may just as well argue in the other direction that Hadid's manner was a result of the endless criticism she had been subjected to, despite her achievements (indeed the transcript of Sarah Montague's Radio 4 questioning is telling in this respect). Either way, Hadid as a figure has served to open up a set of debates that we should be having about architecture in the neoliberal age; about the problems

of its spectacular forms, its working practices, its capacity for ethical agency, its financialisation, its service of capital and profit more than for the public good, and so on. When a woman leading a successful practice is complicit with these forces, she acts no worse than a man in the same position, yet she provokes crucial questions and a critique of the contemporary profession. Why has Hadid served to the degree she has as a lens to focus these questions so they burn into our collective consciousness? As women enter politics at a high level and run large-scale construction projects (at the time of writing, Hillary Clinton has just secured the Democratic nomination for President in the US, the UN looks likely to elect a woman for its next Director General, and the Panama Canal extension is just about to open, having been managed by a female chief engineer) do we expect them to challenge the *status quo*? Does their presence somehow expose corrupt values and compromises that would otherwise remain acceptable? Are our expectations of women higher?

Celebrating women-in-architecture

In contrast to this mixed press there have also been some consistently positive appraisals of Hadid's life and work. Both Despina Stratigakos (in 'For Female Architects, the Loss of Zaha Hadid is Personal')²⁵ and Gordana Fontana-Giusti (pp. 95–98 in this **arq**) describe the sense of loss that many women, like myself, have felt following the architect's death. Even women of her generation who have taken more politicised and critical routes through architecture feel this loss and have been frustrated by the ambivalent media response. For example, not long after Hadid's death, I spoke with Jos Boys and Julia Dwyer who had both been involved with the feminist collective Matrix in the 1980s, developing feminist critiques of the 'man-made environment'²⁶ and actively pursuing new participatory and non-hierarchical ways of making architecture with women. Nevertheless, they wanted Hadid's considerable achievements properly recognised, particularly in relation to the place of women in architecture. Stratigakos suggests that this 'different, intimate' grief felt by so many women comes from the loss of a role model: 'She leaves, as part of her great legacy to female architects around the world, a duty

to carry that light forward for the next generation of women who, like Hadid, will fight for – and, I hope, find – their place in architecture.'

***[...] the loss of a role model
[...] an opening once again
closes over***

However, although I admire Hadid's achievements and was glad that as a woman she held a place in the firmament of 'starchitects', I find it difficult to accept Hadid as a role model. My own sense of loss is better explained by Fontana-Giusti. Hadid has indeed been for many women a 'powerful guardian of this place' and her loss thus leaves it 'empty and undefended'. An opening once again closes over.

But perhaps there is more than this. When Hadid entered architecture, she was not just one of an otherwise male group born in the 1950s who went on to become 'starchitects'. She was also one of another group – a trailblazing group of women who went into architecture. While some of them have become well-known architects leading their own practices or working closely with male partners (Patty Hopkins, Kazuyo Sejima, Odile Decq, Françoise-Hélène Jourda, Yvonne Farrell, Sheila O'Donnell, Benedetta Tagliabue, Carme Pinós, Francine Houben, Julia Barfield, Kathryn Findlay, Louisa Hutton, Amanda Leveté, Allison Brookes, Liz Diller, among many others) others have taken a more critical position to the mainstream, developing critical histories, theory and practices many of which are explicitly feminist (Jennifer Bloomer, Jos Boys, Peggy Deamer, Julia Dwyer, Catherine Ingraham, Anne Thorne, Lynn Walker, Christine Wall, Sarah Wigglesworth). Not all of these women practice as architects, but they have been profoundly important to women of my own generation in providing both mainstream and critical models to those of us who aspire to take our own place as women in architecture. Seen this way, Hadid belongs to another firmament, one to which I relate personally and politically. Her loss, while tragic in its own right, also brings home the importance of this great generation of women-in-architecture, and the need to celebrate and evaluate work, not

just of women architects succeeding in the great-men-of-architecture model, but of those for whom feminine values are not merely incidental, and feminism is central.

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Notes

1. Will Gompertz, 'Architect Dame Zaha Hadid Dies after Heart Attack', *BBC News* (31 March 2016), available online: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-35936768>> (accessed 31 May 2016).
2. Edwin Heathcote, *Financial Times* (31 March 2016), available online: <<https://next.ft.com/content/f4d3935c-f75e-11e5-96db-fc683b5e52db>> (accessed 31 May 2016).
3. Denise Scott Brown, in reaction to Zaha Hadid's receiving the Pritzker Prize. See: Hilde Heynen, 'Genius, Gender and Architecture: The Star System as Exemplified in the Pritzker Prize', in *Architectural Theory Review*, 17:2-3 (2012), pp. 331-45.
4. 'Outside the Rectangle', in *The Economist* (9 April 2016) available online: <<http://www.economist.com/news/books/21696432-iraqi-british-architect-refused-choose-between-art-and-building-zaha-hadid>> (accessed 6 June 2016).
5. guest-nownajs, commenting on 'Outside the Rectangle' (12 April 2016), available online: <<http://www.economist.com/node/21696432/comments#comments>> (accessed 6 June 2016).
6. Deyan Sudjic, 'Dame Zaha Hadid Obituary', in *The Observer* (1 April 2016), available online: <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/01/zaha-hadid-obituary>> (accessed 6 June 2016).
7. Eva Jiřičná quoted in Robert Booth, 'Architects Speak Out About Industry Sexism in Tributes to Zaha Hadid', in *The Guardian* (1 April 2016), available online: <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/01/architects-speak-out-industry-sexism-tributes-zaha-hadid>> (accessed 6 June 2016).
8. Karen Burns, 'The Woman/Architect Distinction', in *Architectural Theory Review*, 17:2-3 (2012), pp. 234-44.
9. Igea Troiani, 'Zaha: An image of "The Woman Architect"', in *Architectural Theory Review*, 17:2-3 (2012), pp. 346-64.
10. Heynen, 'Genius, Gender and Architecture', p. 333. See also: Zaha Hadid Jury Citation, Pritzker Prize 2004, available online: <<http://www.pritzkerprize.com/2004/jury>> (accessed 1 June 2016).
11. Laura Mark, 'Zaha Hadid: "I'm Judged More Harshly Because I am a Woman"', in *The Architect's Journal* (22 February 2016), available online: <<http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/zaha-hadid-im-judged-more-harshly-because-i-am-a-woman/10003140.fullarticle>> (accessed 8 June 2016).
12. Available online: <<http://www.zaha-hadid.com/2016/03/31/zaha-hadid-1950-2016-2/>> (accessed 31 May 2016).
13. Martin Spring, 'Innsbruck Cable Car Stations: Zaha Hadid Lifts the Spirits', in *Building*, 47 (2007), available online: <<http://www.building.co.uk/innsbruck-cable-car-stations-zaha-hadid-lifts-the-spirits/3100491.article>> (accessed 24 May 2016).
14. Here I refer in particular to the work of architectural theorists Jennifer Bloomer and Catherine Ingraham, and to philosophers such as Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz, and more recently, Karen Barad, among many others.
15. For an excellent discussion of these issues with respect particularly to the work of Greg Lynn and Karl Chu, see: Konstantina Kalfa, 'Where the Spell is Chanted (Fallacies of Contemporary Architectural Discourse)', in *Architecture and Culture*, 3:3 (2015), pp. 315-25.
16. See for example: Ben Rumsby, 'Dame Zaha Hadid: It is not my Duty to Combat Deaths of Migrant Workers in Qatar ahead of 2022 World Cup', in *The Daily Telegraph* (25 February 2014), available online: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/world-cup/10661347/Dame-Zaha-Hadid-It-is-not-my-duty-to-combat-deaths-of-migrant-workers-in-Qatar-ahead-of-2022-World-Cup.html>> (accessed 24 May 2016).
17. Martin Filler, 'The Insolence of Architecture', in *New York Times Review of Books* (5 June 2014).
18. For a transcript and commentary on the interview, see: Oliver Wainwright and Owen Gibson, 'Zaha Hadid Radio 4 Interview: How and Why it Went so Wrong', in *The Guardian* (24 September 2015).
19. Despina Stratigakos, *Where Are the Women Architects?* (Boston: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 50-4. See my review in this **arq**.
20. Rowan Moore, 'Zaha Hadid, 1950-2016: An Appreciation', in *The Observer* (3 April 2016), available online: <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/03/zaha-hadid-observer-appreciation-rowan-moore>> (accessed 10 June 2016).
21. Rowan Moore, 'Zaha Hadid: A Visionary Whose Ideas Don't Always Make Sense', in *The Observer* (27 September 2015).
22. gingerhugh commenting on 'Zaha Hadid: creator of ambitious wonders - and a fair share of blunders' (1 April 2016), available online: <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/mar/31/zaha-hadid-maverick-architect-designer-appreciation>> (accessed 24 May 2016).
23. Oliver Wainwright, telephone conversation with the author, 6 June 2016.
24. 'Hadid didn't do herself any favours, letting forth a blustering barrage of indignation, but it was a sloppily researched interview, and yet another example of mainstream media focusing solely on her work for dubious regimes - something which most other architects of her international profile are also engaged in, but rarely questioned on.' Oliver Wainwright, 'Why is Zaha Hadid Given a Harder Time than her Starchitect Rivals?', in *The Guardian* (24 September 2015), available online: <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2015/sep/24/why-is-zaha-hadid-given-a-harder-time-than-her-starchitect-rivals>> (accessed 10 June 2016).
25. Despina Stratigakos, 'For Female Architects, the Loss of Zaha Hadid is Personal', in *The Conversation* (9 April 2016), available online: <<http://theconversation.com/for-female-architects-the-loss-of-zaha-hadid-is-personal-57474>> (accessed 12 June 2016).
26. Matrix, *Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).