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Abstract
During the heyday of postmodernism in the 1980s, as architects turned to historical styles, urban traditions, and popular culture to rebuild the public support that modernism had lost, Zaha Hadid declared that modernity was an incomplete project that deserved to be continued. This was an inspiring message and its bold vision was matched by projects such as the competition-winning design for The Peak in Hong Kong (1982-1983). Hadid’s luminous paintings depicted the city and the hillside above it as a prismatic field in which buildings and landform were amalgamated into the same geological formation of shifting lines, vibrant planes, and shimmering colors, at once tangible and intangible, infused with the transformative energy that Cubist, Futurist, and Expressionist landscapes had sought to capture.

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THE MODERNITY OF ZAHA HADID

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During the heyday of postmodernism in the 1980s, as architects turned to historical styles, urban traditions, and popular culture to rebuild the public support that modernism had lost, Zaha Hadid declared that modernity was an incomplete project that deserved to be continued. This was an inspiring message, and its bold vision was matched by projects such as the competition-winning design for The Peak in Hong Kong (1982–83). Hadid’s luminous paintings depicted the city and the hillside above it as a prismatic field in which buildings and landform were amalgamated into the same geological formation of shifting lines, vibrant planes, and shimmering colors, at once tangible and intangible, infused with the transformative energy that Cubist, Futurist, and Expressionist landscapes had sought to capture (Fig. 01). The figure of her building—a hotel—was barely discernible within this field. It was composed of three long prismatic bars—overlapping, rotating, and sliding above one another, as if detaching themselves from the earth or, alternatively, landing from outer space, anchored by vertical staffs, hovering momentarily on terraces cut into the hillside. These images sent ripples of excitement through the architectural world, evidence that modernism was not a dirty word after all. It was alive, larger than life, and totally seductive.

Hadid’s was a different modernism than we had become accustomed to, no longer utilitarian, blandly corporate, or aggrandizing of technology. Her vision of Hong Kong offered a powerful wish image, at once futuristic and archaic, geometric and geomorphic. Hadid had tapped into the largely forgotten vein of Russian Constructivism and infused its revolutionary heroics with cosmopolitan urbaneity. She rekindled the flame of modernity with this new cocktail of desires.

The word “Constructivism” came into usage in the early 1920s, in art most notably with the Working Group of Constructivists formed in Moscow in 1921, of whom Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova became the best known. Yet the term has often been associated with the work of Vladimir Tatlin, whose reliefs, beginning already in 1913, launched a sustained but also diverse field of experimentation into new nonrepresentational modalities of artistic production, for which “Constructivism” has served as an umbrella concept. In the field of architecture, the term was initially associated with the Union of Contemporary Architects, including Moisei Ginzburg and Alexander Vesnin, as well as others such as Konstantin Melnikov. During the late 1920s, a younger generation appeared on the scene, including Ivan Leonidov, whose work on new building and urban types employed the visual language of elemental geometry in a more extreme way than architects had before. At the same time, Yakov Chernikov demonstrated through his teaching that an abstract, graphic (rather than painterly) language of lines, planes, volumes, and color could be employed to generate an extraordinary diversity of things, from machines to engineering works, buildings, and cities.

Though initiated prior to 1917, these lines of research in art and architecture became aligned with the Russian Revolution’s radical politics and served as instruments for the reorganization of life after the overthrow of the tsar. Art was enlisted to create festivals in the street, propaganda on railway cars, and didactic programming in theaters and cinemas. Working at times in parallel with the artists and at times independently, Constructivist architects devised new building types that would be commensurate with the forms of social organization desired in the new Communist state. From apartments to social clubs, theaters, and stadiums, they reconceptualized buildings as social condensers, catalysts for new forms of collective living. During the early 1920s, these various trajectories coalesced into the challenge of defining a new paradigm that would unite art and life and transform the world into a new artistic reality.

With their project Exodus, or The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture (1972, Fig. 02), Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis with Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis had already revisited Russian Constructivism at the Architectural Association in London, where Hadid would soon emerge as Koolhaas and Zenghelis’s most talented student. This project looked to Leonidov’s proposal for a linear infrastructural city of 1930 in attempting to develop an alternative to “the behavioral sink of a city like London.” Seeking to operate at the scale of metropolitan reconstruction, the group turned to Constructivism to strike a path between the legacy of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne), on the one hand, and the more recent artistic urban visions of Superstudio’s Continuous Monument (1969), Archizoom’s Non-Stop City (1969–72), Archigram’s Plug-In City (1962–64), Yona Friedman’s Spatial City (1958–59), and Constant’s New Babylon (1956–64). For Koolhaas, the work of Leonidov became a strategic ingredient in an explosive, ironic mixture that also included the raw vitality of the enclave-city of West Berlin, fantasies of decadence in early twentieth-century Manhattan, Surrealist juxtapositions of incongruous fragments, and the typological delirium of O. M. Ungers.

It was in this context that Hadid rediscovered the Suprematist and Constructivist precursors to the Utopian artist-architects of the 1960s, turning specifically to Kazimir Malevich to find her own way of dreaming the future by deliberately tapping into experiments left incomplete. Where Tatlin and the later Constructivists abandoned the medium of painting in favor of materially based reliefs, assemblages, spatial constructions, stage sets, and even architecture—all of which already occupied the same world as the observer—Malevich launched a “new painterly realism” in 1915, called it Suprematism, and declared it the key to transforming the world. His display of over twenty canvases—with Black Square hung in a corner—at The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings: “0.10” in Petrograd (1915, Fig. 03) served to demonstrate both the deductive rigor and generative potential of what he considered a new system of pure painting. Its systematic character lay in the permutation of elemental shapes in black, white, and red—beginning with the square, then the circle, cross, rectangle, trapezium, triangle, ellipse, and combinations of all these. Through the show, Malevich attracted...
With such a beginning—a beginning that denies, but in contrast, foregrounds the nothingness of space. He even called them satellites architectural drawings—plans, sections, and perspectives. In Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism (including Malevich's own, such as Fig. 01) to discern the implications of Malevich's operation. Drawing on Cubist decompositions of landscapes into prismatic fields, Futurist expressions of dynamic energies, and Expressionist renderings of psychic experience, Hadid transformed Suprematism from an art of building complex structures out of elemental geometric shapes into one that seeks to make visible the elemental nature inherent in the world. Where Malevich declared in 1920 that the forms of Suprematism "have nothing in common with the technology of the earth's surface," Hadid's paintings bring mathematical and geological geometries into greater alignment.

Hadid created Suprematist paintings of Suprematist buildings in Suprematist landscapes and cities, using architectural drawings—plans, sections, and isometrics—in place of pure geometric figures. The plan of the Architekton-hotel appears several times in different places on the canvas, in solid red and black and in compositions of mixed colors, so that it is transformed into a series of abstract shapes floating in space. In the bottom left corner, the building is decomposed into its constituent planes of color, bringing the painting even closer to Malevich. Rather than reinforcing the volumetric integrity of the various blocks that make up the Architekton, Hadid's application of color decomposes its masses into planes, much as Theo van Doesburg had done for his Maison Particulière project of 1923. Where modernists such as Malevich sought an origin, or ground, for their work in the autonomous properties of different mediums, Hadid's painting of Suprematist buildings envisions the building of Suprematist paintings.

With such a beginning—a beginning that denies, but then compounds, folds, and twists the modernist idea of origins—we could say that Hadid took seriously Malevich's statement that Suprematism was itself merely the beginning of a new art and that he was merely its initial mediator. Or we could also say that she gave Malevich a "monstrous child," to borrow the image that Gilles Deleuze gave in describing the relationship of his books to those of philosophers with whom he was in dialogue, such as Bergson, Leibniz, and Spinoza. In "Mediators," an essay from 1985, Deleuze took issue with the return at that time of the modernist problem of origins and insisted instead that creativity was mediated: "Mediators are fundamental. Creation is all about mediators. Without them, nothing happens. They can be people... but things as well, even plants or animals.... Whether they're real or imaginary, animate or inanimate, one must form one's mediators. It's a series: if you don't belong to a series, even a completely imaginary one, you're lost." Deleuze suggested that, in fact, a change of paradigm was underway, exemplified by the shift in cultural preference from sports of energetic movement, such as running and throwing a javelin, which presume starting points, leverage, effort, and resistance, to sports such as surfing, windsurfing, and hang gliding, which "take the form of entry into an existing wave."

In employing Malevich as mediator, Hadid entered into an existing wave, one that had already gone beyond Malevich and his pursuit of origins, although Malevich remained a presence in it, as did ideas of new beginnings, first principles, and universal elements. Through interlocutors, such as Vasily Kandinsky (Fig. 07), revisionist students such as El Lissitzky, and more distant admirers such as László Moholy-Nagy (Fig. 08), Suprematism had already become a broader, more diverse movement, which...
Malevich encapsulated what he called "the formula of three-dimensional spatial Suprematism" as a black, red, and white cube, and prepared sketches of Architectons in color. See Zhadova, Malevich, p. 62, n. 71. See also Malevich's Table No. 3 Spatial Suprematism (ca. 1920s), which is illustrated in Kazimir Malevich 1878–1933, p. 151.


9 See Zhadova, Malevich, p. 60.

10 See Zhadova, Malevich, p. 60.

11 Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam cite Deleuze saying, "I imagined myself getting onto the back of an author, and giving him a child, which would be his and which would at the same time be a monster. It was very important that it should be his child, because the author actually had to say everything that I made him say. But it also had to be a monster because it was necessary to go through all kinds of decenters, slips, break-ins, secret emissions, which I really enjoyed." See Tomlinson and Habberjam, "Translator's Introduction," in Gilles Deleuze, Bergsonism (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 8.


03 Installation view of paintings by Kazimir Malevich at The Lost Futurist Exhibition of Paintings: “0.10”, Galerie Dobychina, Petrograd, 1915

04 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism* (Supremus No. 56), 1916. Oil on canvas, 31 1/4 x 28 inches (80.6 x 71.1 cm). State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
05 Kazimir Malevich, Suprematism No. 55 (Spheric Evolution of a Plane), 1917. Oil on canvas, 25 1/4 x 19 inches (65.6 x 48.3 cm). Kawamura Memorial Museum of Modern Art, Sakura, Japan

06 Kazimir Malevich, Alpha Architekton, 1920 (1925–26). Plaster, 12 3/4 x 31 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches (31.5 x 80.5 x 34 cm). State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

07 Vasily Kandinsky, White Cross (Weisses Kreuz), January–June, 1922. Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 43 3/4 inches (100.5 x 110.8 cm). Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice 76.2553.34

that Malevich himself struggled with. His worldview was theological and transcendental, yet he sought to account for the evolution of art as part of human history. He explained Cubism, Futurism, and Suprematism as adding elements to art from the outside, from the world of modern technology and experience. At first the audience, he recalled, was shocked and dismayed by such abnormalities, but then came to accept them, thereby expanding the horizon of perception, and of the perceptible as such. He considered individual works to be "constructions" that pushed beyond the closed system of art, which was merely "on its way" toward a future system. Later, after Stalin rejected modern art in favor of Socialist Realism, Malevich painted abstract depictions of peasant life, which he still considered to be Suprematist, suggesting just how much he believed Suprematism to be historically contingent. Hadid extended this contingency into the twenty-first century and understands the relationships of part and whole, one and many, past and future, as immanent. The whole is given but elusive. It does not need to be produced through human works, although they participate in its ongoing metamorphosis. For Hadid, the special contribution that an architecture of form—abstract and dynamic—can make is to stand in for that totality, which eludes every effort, every model, and every allegory that seeks to represent it, in science as in philosophy, theology, and art.

Like Piet Mondrian and van Doesburg, Malevich believed in a hierarchical relationship between art and utility. He was indifferent to function, even when it came to architecture. But Malevich spoke of his art producing psychological affects, expressing things like the "sensation of flight," the "sensation of metallic sounds," the "feeling of wireless telegraphy," and "magnetic attraction." In expressing such sensations, he brought the experience of modern technology into art abstractly, without overt representation. He provided an opportunity for the observer to reexperience these feelings directly through perception, which he held to be more capable than the conscious mind of accessing the absolute. As a result, his images are profoundly ambiguous, open to interpretation but also misinterpretation. They have the poetic character of an open work, which, as Umberto Eco has described, rejects definitive and concluded messages and, instead, multiplies possibilities and encourages acts of conscious freedom.

While Malevich gave priority to form over function and material, he recognized that forms could have applications and utility in quotidian life as teapots, decorated china, textile patterns, clothing, and buildings. While his overly geometrized work in these realms was far from convincing, he suggested in his writings a provocative way to rethink the question of use, which was informed by his expressive conception of art: "a chair, bed, and table are not matters of utility but rather, the forms taken by plastic sensations.... The sensations of sitting, standing, or running are, first and foremost, plastic sensations and they are responsible for the development of corresponding 'objects of use' and largely determine their form... We are never in a position for recognizing any real utility in things and... shall never succeed in constructing a really practical object. We can evidently only feel the essence of absolute utility but, since a feeling is always nonobjective, any attempt to grasp the utility of the objective is Utopian." We are accustomed to objects such as furniture having determined and codified uses, when in fact they can be used in different and unexpected ways. This openness is something that Hadid has pursued in her interiors, from the furniture for her own apartment (originally made for 24 Cathcart Road, London, 1985–86) to her Z-Scape furniture, iceberg sofa/lounger, and Ice-Storm domestic landscape, which beckons one to lie on it, lean on it, climb on it, slide on it, crawl through it, and eat on it, alone or with others.

Certainly the uses of buildings change over time, often radically and unpredictably. In the 1920s, Mies van der Rohe criticized a friend, the organicist functionalist Hugo Haering, for seeking too tight a fit between form and function—optimizing form for only one function when spaces often need to serve many at once and when uses change more rapidly than buildings can. Hadid's buildings, like her furniture, are bigger than their functions, multivalent and multifunctional. They are the infrastructure and support for unexpected events and emergent ways of living as well as programmed scripts. They tease and enable their inhabitants to experiment with other ways of doing things. The subjects of her buildings are both generators of forms and participants in the life and completion of the work over time. It is this combination of attentiveness and openness that defines Hadid's social vision.

Indebted to the catalytic ambitions of Suprematist art and Constructivist architecture, Hadid's modernity is fully self-reflexive, aware not only of its devices and the contingency of its dreams, but also the risks it takes. In a world of instability, contrariness, uncertaincy, and deception, she produces an architecture that embraces flux and polyvalent mixtures. Urbane, daring, and exuberant, her oeuvre supports a vision of life as an art—lived intensely and expansively, with imagination and style. Like life itself, Hadid's modernity is constitutively unfinished and always surprising.