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Phaeno Science Center, Wolfsburg, Germany, 1999–2005. Zaha Hadid Architects.

Zaha Hadid

Guggenheim Museum, New York City
June 3–October 25, 2006

In a lecture, architect Peter Zumthor once declared that he would talk about his buildings only if they were still in design; anything built should be visited. Like music or food, architecture must be experienced directly. A recent exhibition at the Guggenheim illustrates why.

Zaha Hadid is a 30-year retrospective of the work of today's leading female architect. Spread along the Guggenheim's great spiral ramp, this collection of abstract paintings, drawings, photos, and three-dimensional objects catalogues Hadid's famous formal and spatial gymnastics. A group of exquisitely folded white paper models are a highlight. Hadid's stunning attention to craft in buildings and their representation is clear. I walked away struck by the beauty of what she makes.

And yet, for all the bluster of Hadid's public persona, the exhibition is remarkably

timid, and never gets much beyond a marketing pitch. It seems that Hadid (or the architectural establishment around her) is still trying to establish her presence rather than using this opportunity to delve deeper. There's none of the creative processor vitality evident in the Frank Gehry exhibition on view in the same spot a few years ago, nor do the curators offer additional context, critical analysis, or the experience of being *in* a Hadid space. Instead, we're faced with collages of flat photos.

Hadid's Cincinnati Art Center is a remarkable building — spatially dynamic, well-crafted, beautiful in its own right while also enhancing the art on display inside. But I say this based on a recent Ohio road trip, not on this exhibition. If you miss *Zaha Hadid*, don't worry. Buy the catalogue, and then visit her buildings.

Gretchen Schneider, Assoc. AIA, is a designer at Rogers Marvel Architects in New York City.

The Venetian Dilemma

Directed by Carole and Richard Rifkind

DVD, 56 minutes
(available from Filmmakers Library;
www.filmmakers.com)

“After 1,500 years, Venice is running out of time. To survive, some say Venice must modernize. Or must she?” With this question, Carole and Richard Rifkind frame the bitter debate that has stirred the emotions of Venetians for 30 years. Their compelling and beautifully photographed documentary focuses sharply on the opposing views of the dilemma.

Residents, who believe that their city is “cracking under the weight” of tourists (a projected 20 million next year), seek to preserve their place and way of life. City planners recognize the impact of tourism on the city's delicate fabric and argue that “to preserve is to die.” They propose an ambitious program of public-works projects to modernize the city's economic base, including a subway system connecting the island to the mainland and the airport.

Because of its unique heritage, Venice belongs to the world, not only to its residents. Venetians must stop bickering, develop creative ways to deal with tourism, and accept that change is inevitable. Venice is indeed running out of time.



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Sketches of Frank Gehry

Directed by Sidney Pollack
DVD, 83 minutes

Riding the documentary wave, Hollywood director Sidney Pollack (*Out of Africa, Tootsie*) agreed after much prodding to do a film on his longtime friend Frank Gehry. The result, *Sketches of Frank Gehry*, features sweeping money shots of popular Gehry stock: Bilbao, Disney Hall, and the Stata Center at MIT, among others, choreographed to an original, benign score. Woven among these arty montages are conversations between Pollack and Gehry at his house, in his car, and in his office. We also see Pollack and Philip Johnson, Pollack and Gehry's therapist, Pollack and the LA artists who make up Gehry's coterie.

If you're an architect and want to show your friends what you do, you might recommend this film. In Gehry's case,

there's lots of folding, cutting, and taping of silver paper, heavy sighs, big hand gestures, and more cutting and taping. Such architectural drama seems to hold the audience's attention.

The film's underlying premise is that Gehry is the only architect with any guts. Perhaps you agree. (One of the most absurd or perfect scenes — depending on how you feel — is when he walks onto the stage of Disney Hall after a concert to a standing ovation, feigning humility.) A parade of celebs — the architectural kind (Herbert Muschamp) and the real kind (Dennis Hopper) — tells us why Gehry is the best. The only naysayer is Princeton professor Hal Foster, who is shot in some dark cave-like place, clearly unenlightened; he looks like Lurch from *The Addams Family*.

But what's shown also tells a darker story: Gehry works with only two people in his office of hundreds, and he's never seen wandering around the firm or



interacting with any underlings. He's the lone genius; his believers do his bidding and give him wide berth. The film adulates the genius who dumped everything to express himself, including his entire staff and his first wife. (According to the film, dumping her was the critical step toward becoming Gehry the legend.) Creepily, this seems like a prequel to *My Architect* (the film about architect Louis Kahn): You can't help but think about the hapless victims of Gehry's ambition.

Rachel Levitt is a designer and writer.

PHOTO: SONY PICTURES HOME ENTERTAINMENT.



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