

WAR OF THE WORLDS

Rearing its woozy head above Antwerp's sober Port House, the multifaceted extension by ZHA makes a clean break with the past, writes *Christophe Van Gerrewey*

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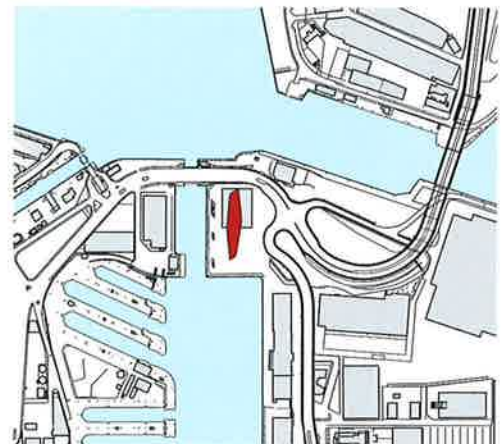




With Antwerp Port House, Zaha Hadid Architects have staged the battle between old and new so straightforwardly that it becomes brutal. The old is identified with the symmetric order of a disused fire station from the early 20th century, while the new is recognisable in the multifaceted shape of the extension. This is, paradoxically perhaps for a building designed by an architect of Hadid's generation, in line with the Venice Charter of the '60s, and with the Modernist prohibition to mingle what exists with what is added. Never, inside nor outside, does it become unclear what is new and what is old – with the exception, perhaps, of

the short moment when the panoramic lift leaves the former fire station (and the base of a never materialised spire) and enters the first floor of the office building. As ZHA emphasises, a study by heritage consultants Origin – revealing the orientation of the old building, the equal importance of the four elevations, and the originally intended tower – was the foundation of the project.

All this tallies with the one rule laid down in the competition in 2008: the original building had to be preserved. The port was 'pleasantly surprised' when all candidates (ZHA, Xaveer De Geyter, Kempe Thill, Rapp + Rapp and Vier Architectos) opted for a structure above the fire station – not one



Now covered with a glass roof, the disused fire station's central courtyard becomes the building's main reception area (below).

The glass parasite floats above, its triangular facets reflecting changing light conditions, much like the water rippling around it

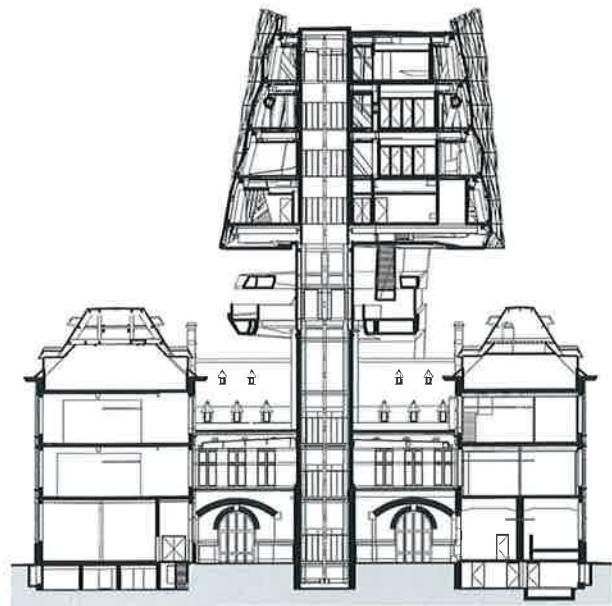


practice planned to build next to it. What is easily forgotten is how at the moment of the competition, Antwerp had recently decided to construct a colossal viaduct, that would complete the ring road, and hopefully resolve traffic jams. The designs from 2008 reacted to this future situation – to a prospective skyline with a monumental bridge connecting the port to the city, linking both banks of the river Scheldt, and serving thousands of cars, high above, on a daily basis. Also in ZHA's first renderings, the viaduct is there as a horizon, but also as a generic and infrastructural counterbalance to the singularity of the Port House.

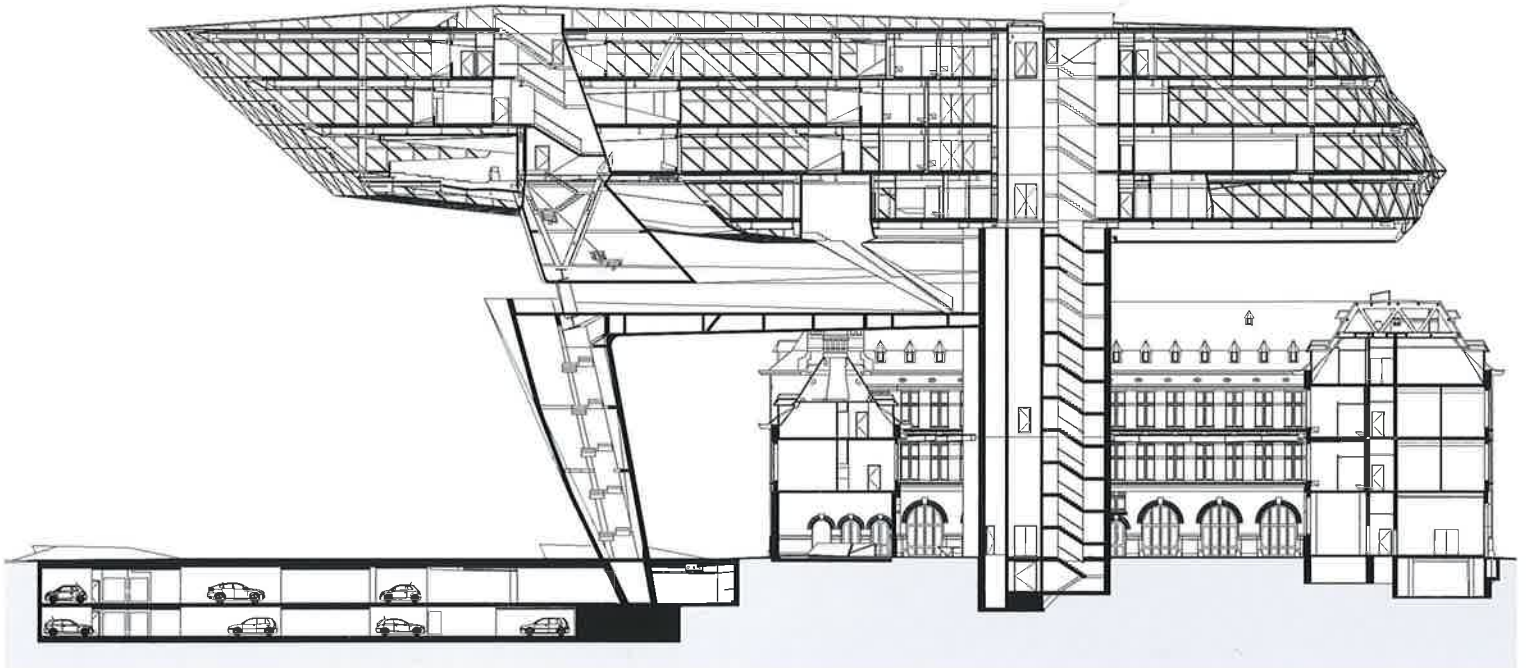
The competition was won by Hadid, although no jury report has been made public. Only Marc Van Peel, president of Antwerp Port Authority and member of the city council, declared laconically: 'All candidates combined the new with the old, but ZHA's design was the most brilliant.' In 2009, following a referendum, the viaduct was cancelled – not surprising in a city, although built around a major European river, that has shown a neurotic fear of bridges: the first one has yet to be constructed. In 2016, it was decided to tackle Antwerp's traffic problems with a set of tunnels, and they should be ready by 2025. The consequence for the Port House:

without a visible connection, it remains a lonely presence in an industrial area, isolated from the city, as a spectacle without a real audience, minimally present in the northern skyline. This doesn't mean that port and city aren't coming closer, and this has been decisive in the shape and the orientation of the building, as project architect Joris Pauwels indicates. The quays of the disused Kattendijk dock, with the Port House close to its northern edge, slowly filled with housing – apartment towers by David Chipperfield, Diener & Diener and Tony Fretton – extending the city's borders in the direction of the port.

The question remains which task the Port



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House has in this process of rapprochement – and which meanings and urban values it radiates to the city of Antwerp. It is here that a more subtle contrast between old and new is at stake. How do Hadid's poetics, developed in the early '80s, survive 30 years later, in an era that is indeed different, both for the late architect and her office, as for the culture and the capital ZHA are working for? A once iconoclastic way of envisioning the future of architecture – let's not forget how Kenneth Frampton heralded Hadid's drawings in '83 as the suggestion of 'the scintillating paradise of the world' and as the start of 'a new modern project' – is now the driving force behind what seems to be a

production line of images of powerful brilliance. The theoretical impetus behind Hadid's oeuvre – the words instead of the objects, or the ideas instead of the forms – tends to be forgotten as an unimportant relic of the past. It's something that happens to architects, to the extent that it provides a definition of the term: the increasing productivity and scale of their offices make it impossible to update theoretical views, while older ones simply get out of sight, out of mind.

What remains in the case of Hadid are 'overpowering' buildings – a word I heard uttered more than once during the public tour of the Port House. The guide wasn't

well grounded in architecture, and opted to praise the economic importance of the port, not only for Antwerp, but also for Belgium and Europe, and – taking into account the ecological efforts both during construction and performance of this building – for the planet in general. This may seem unimportant, but the tours are fully booked months in advance, often by people usually uninterested in architecture. Thousands will get to hear this economy-driven boasting, while the story behind Hadid's architecture remains unacknowledged.

This might not only be the result of public relations or of a silent aversion to an intellectual approach to architecture. There

The rigid symmetry of the old gives way to new non-Euclidean geometry. Not even the desks or coffee spaces, designed by ZHA, are allowed to be rectangular



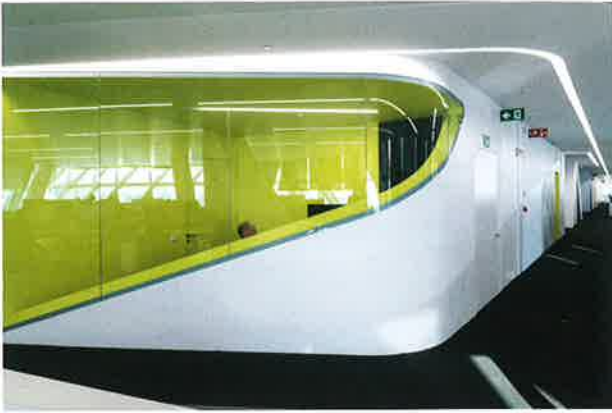
is something historical or even antiquated in Hadid's method, rooted as it is in the relatively stable and prosperous Western society of the early '80s, with a generation of audacious architects who tried to react to this supposed order by criticising, parodying or even dismantling the postwar remnants of academic Modernism. An important moment was the exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture* at MoMA in '88, and from all the architects who were on show there, Hadid was really in her place, and she has remained unspokenly faithful to the formal ideology of Deconstructivism. The terms Mark Wigley, co-curator with Philip Johnson, used in the catalogue, remain

strikingly applicable to ZHA's architecture: 'Deconstruction gains all its force by challenging the very values of harmony, unity, and stability, and proposing instead a different view of structure: the view that the flaws are intrinsic to the structure'. The historical paradox is that Hadid, with this view, tried to continue the revolutionary praxis of the Russian Constructivists of the early 20th century, while Zaha Hadid Architects have since 2000 expressed the dominant order by means of indeed overpowering and disordered architecture.

The office building in Antwerp illustrates that more than other related projects from their portfolio, such as the library and

learning centre at the University of Economics in Vienna, completed in 2013, which also has a base with a protruding sculpture on top. The Port House is different because it's an extension of an existing and rigidly symmetrical building, emblematic for the classical, repetitive, ordered and supposedly oppressive and dishonest architecture Hadid wanted to get rid of, by infusing the discipline with invention, complexity, non-Euclidean geometry and frighteningly unlikely building structures. Christian Rapp, in 2008 contender in the competition for the Port House but since 2015 city architect of Antwerp, publicly called it 'a nightmare realised' shortly after

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completion, expressing the view of many of his colleagues. It was a remark that unintentionally echoed another one of Wigley's descriptions from '88: Deconstructivist projects 'mark a different sensibility, one in which the dream of pure form has been disturbed. Form has become contaminated. The dream has become a kind of nightmare'. Port president Van Peel asked Rapp for apologies – a strange reaction, since one of the reasons ZHA's Port House works, is that it *is* unprecedented and unreal, as indeed a nightly and onerous manifestation of architecture's subconscious, certainly in the context of Belgian architecture, that has

remained more or less devoid of debauchery or iconolatry.

Another contradiction of Hadid's architecture is the way it deals with function, or declines to do so. It was never the intention of Deconstructivism to abort practical use, only to show how relationships between form and function are fictitious. It would be naive, however, to state that the proper quotidian functioning of the Port House isn't, in one way or another, hindered by the formal and constructive bravura. At the time of the competition, the budget amounted to €28 million, while the final cost rose to €63 million. With an office staff of 500, an all too simple calculation would

indicate individual working places worthy of €126,000 each. In reality, landscape offices are somewhat willy-nilly furnished inside this chunk of architecture, while the irregular facade of triangular glass panels only offers very fragmented views of the surroundings. Even the desks or the coffee spaces, designed by ZHA, aren't allowed to be rectangular. The daily business of office workers hasn't been the main concern here – neither of the architects, nor of the client. Literally and figuratively, the emphasis is primarily on the self-portrait of the port and its economic activities – striking, indispensable, dominant, but not rationally explicable.