



[Rana Florida](#)

CEO, *The Creative Class Group*

Your Start-Up Life: World's 100 Most Powerful Women, Zaha

Hadid on the Struggle to Succeed

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Thursdays at the Huffington Post, Rana Florida, CEO of [The Creative Class Group](#), will answer readers' questions about how they can optimize their lives. She will also feature conversations with successful entrepreneurs and thought leaders about how they manage their businesses, relationships, careers, and more. Send your questions about work, life, or relationships to rana@creativeclass.com.

A conversation with world renowned architect and designer [Zaha Hadid](#), one of *Forbes* magazine's "[The World's 100 Most Powerful Women](#)" and *Time's* "[100 People Who Most Affect Our World](#)."

Hadid studied architecture at the [Architectural Association](#) from 1972 and was awarded the Diploma Prize in 1977. She then became a partner of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, taught at the AA with OMA collaborators [Rem Koolhaas](#) and Elia Zenghelis, before starting her own practice in 1979.

Among her many high profile projects are the [MAXXI](#), National Museum of XXI Century Arts in Rome, [Guangzhou Opera House](#) in China, The [Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art](#) in Cincinnati, Ohio, The [Riverside Museum in Glasgow](#), Scotland, and the [BMW Central Building](#) in Leipzig, Germany. She has created a number of iconic product designs, including a boot for [Lacoste](#) and furniture for [B&B Italia](#).

A professor at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, she has taught at Harvard University, the University of Chicago, Columbia University, Yale, and many other universities around the world. In 2004 she became both the first woman and the first Arab to receive the Pritzker Prize, architecture's Nobel Prize.

This version of *Your Start-up Life* explores the struggle to succeed as a woman, the importance of collaboration in realizing a complex vision, and the rewards of mentoring and working with the next generation.



Photo Credit: Giovanna Silva

Q. How do you get people to buy your vision of the future when it is so distant from current reality? We are actually finding that our clients are increasingly calling for something radical -- a much broader group of institutions now have a strong willingness to innovate. These are vital characteristics that allow an architect to design extraordinary projects.

Our clients are definitely becoming more experimental -- BMW is a good example. The company is committed to changing the working habits of its managerial staff and engineers by providing them with a dynamic working environment with a close integration of all workers. For the Central Building of the BMW Leipzig plant, we designed a scissor section that connects the ground and first floors of the administration departments into a seemingly continuous field whilst the half-finished cars are moving along tracks between various production units for all to see as a constant reminder of the function of the building. This mixture of functions avoids the traditional segregation into status groups that is no longer

conducive to a modern workplace. The establishment of exclusive domain has been eradicated in favour of a fluid reorganization.

Architecture does not follow fashion or economic cycles -- it follows the inherent logic of cycles of innovation generated by social and technological developments. Mies van der Rohe said: "Architecture is the will of an epoch, living, changing, new." Contemporary society is not standing still -- and buildings must evolve with new patterns of life to meet the needs of its users. I think what is new in our generation is a greater level of social complexity -- which should be reflected in its architecture.

Consequently, our work is operating with concepts, logic and methods that examine and organize the complexities of contemporary life patterns. The repetition and separation that defined buildings of the last century has been superseded by our designs for buildings that engage, integrate and adapt. These new systems allow the organization and planning of complex life processes which overlap and assimilate aspects of our work, education, entertainment, habitation and transportation.

Q. You have been included on several influential lists, including Forbes' 'The World's 100 Most Powerful Women.' You have broken several glass ceilings and paved the way for many women in a male dominated industry. Have your gender and ethnicity helped or hindered your career?

It's a very tough profession -- every architect you talk to, no matter how successful they are, man or woman, has it very hard. Perhaps it was my flamboyance, rather than my being a woman, that gave me such determination to succeed, but I have always been extremely determined. Now I've achieved some success, and I am extremely grateful, but it's been a very long struggle. It's not as if I just appear somewhere and everybody says 'yes' to me -- it's still a struggle, despite having gone through it a hundred times.

It's still very difficult for women to operate as professionals because there are still some worlds women have no access to. But I don't believe that much remains of the stereotype that architecture should be a male rather than a female career. 50% of first year architectural students are women, so women certainly don't perceive this career as alien to their gender. In our office we have no stereotypical categories that relate to gender at all.

You now see more established, respected female architects all the time. That doesn't mean it's easy. Sometimes the difficulties are incomprehensible. But in the last fifteen years there's been tremendous change, and now it's seen as normal to have women in this profession.

Being an Arab woman and a modern architect certainly don't exclude each other. I should say that yes, I am an Arab, but I was not brought up in a traditional Arab way.

I have not lived in Iraq for thirty years, so in that sense I am maybe not a typical Arab. Why I often mention this, that I am a woman and an Arab, is because of the setbacks it can present. You cannot believe the enormous resistance I have had to and sometimes still have to face, just for being an Arab. And a woman on top of that! It is like a double-edged sword. You work hard to overcome one -- and then the other comes up. The moment my woman-ness is accepted, the Arab-ness seems to become up as a problem.

I'm Iraqi; I live in London. I don't really have a particular place. I think when you are an expatriate you can re-invent yourself, or invent your world -- you have liberation from certain rules. I can say from my personal experience, it is actually a very liberating experience, being totally displaced.

Q. How important is collaboration in executing your vision? What traits do you look for in your team members?

It's very difficult to get anywhere in the profession without being meticulous, but it is important to learn how to trust others. A brilliant design still benefits from the input of others. Learning to trust other people to work on your vision is crucial. You must learn early on that you can't do everything yourself; you can do bits of it yourself, you can ask people to do things the way you want them done, but you also have to rely on their strengths and abilities. Teamwork has been very important to me for a long time. I've always believed in it, and that's why things are manageable.

Q. Where does your inspiration come from? Describe your creative process.

We never take a brief literally but instead try to interpret the purpose of an institution, as it is not only the form of a building that interests us but we also research new and better ways in which people can use a building. I think the most interesting part for me, from the early period till this day, is the process, by which we make a new diagram of how the building will be used. That's really the beginning of every project. This diagram deals with how you respond to the client's requirements for the new building -- and to the site at the same time. There is a notion of design there. All the forces operate at the same time to come up with one thing.

We have a very diverse formal repertoire. Each of our projects responds to its brief and context in a totally unique way, but there are some principles we always adhere to and one of them is to first investigate and research the landscape, topography and circulation of the site. We then draw lines of visual connections with the local environment and lines of movement that become evident from these investigations, and bring these lines into the site -- using them to inform our designs. This "embeds" the design into its surroundings, so each project has the strongest possible relationship with its unique urban environment.

I'm always curious about the next step, the next big thing. I think computer programs that encourage more complex geometry are very exciting. The rapid developments that computing has brought to architecture are incredible. Our designs demand continual progress in the development of construction technology, and the industry continues to respond by providing ever more sophisticated tools and materials. There is a strong reciprocal relationship whereby our more avant-garde designs encourage the development of new digital technologies and construction techniques - and those new developments in turn inspire us to push the design envelope ever further. In every period there is a new challenge. We have a whole section of our office researching new design and construction techniques. The office maintains this principle and there is always a lot of collaboration with engineers and with people doing experiments with materials to work on new discoveries and push them into the mainstream. The next step is obviously more advanced materials and fabrication.

Q. Did you know from early on that you wanted to be an architect? Was your talent innate or learned?

When I was perhaps 6 or 7 years old, my aunt was building a house in Mosul in the north of Iraq. The architect was a close friend of my father's and he used to come to our house with the drawings and

models. I remember seeing the model in our living room and I think it triggered something, as I was intrigued by it. When I was a kid, I travelled to Europe every summer with my parents, and my father made sure I visited every important building in sight! I still remember visiting Cordoba when I was 7 years old. That was the most stunning space. Of course there are lots of other truly great spaces but this mosque left a really tremendous impression on me.

I became interested in geometry while studying mathematics at University. I realized that the logic of maths and the abstraction of Arabic Calligraphy were both connected to architecture. Although there are no formal references to my cultural roots in my designs, it is this mathematics of the Arab world that I am fascinated by -- the mix of logic and abstraction. Geometry and mathematics have a tremendous connection to architecture -- even more so now with the advanced computer scripts used in many of our designs. There is also a connect in Aldus pixilation and geometry, which relates a great deal to Arab identity in terms of algebra, geometry, and mathematics and the fluidity of calligraphy.

Q. You've designed furniture, clothing, and interiors. How do you take your vision across other mediums?

We greatly enjoy our collaborations with others. They provide an opportunity to express our ideas through different media and we see it as part of a continuous process of our on-going design investigation. It's a two-way process -- we apply our architectural research and experimentation to these designs -- but we also learn a great deal from our collaborators, who are leaders in their own industries. A brilliant design will always benefit from the input of others. Of course there is a lot of fluidity now between art, architecture, engineering -- a lot more cross-pollination in the disciplines--but this isn't about competition, it's about collaboration and what these practices and processes can contribute to one another. It is essential to find key collaborators to work with on new discoveries that we can then push into the mainstream.

Q. From London and Moscow to Paris, Tokyo, Cincinnati, Glasgow and Manchester, your work is imprinted globally. How do you overcome the challenges of understanding a new territory and culture?

International architecture is looking for a regional repertoire through all kinds of means. For example, in China, the design of the Guangzhou Opera House had to play a role in its cultural context and immediate settings. We knew the opera house would be set within a new master plan of civic and commercial projects, so our concept of gradually lifting the landscape to draw in visitors and the interplay of the two sculptured volumes on this public arena, gave us an opportunity to use a poetic analogy in our proposal. In Chinese culture, certain kinds of analogical thinking makes sense to people. The idea of pebbles and rocks on the banks of a stream is actually very meaningful for a project located next to the Pearl River. As designers, this is more of a technique for us to articulate the relationship of an object within a landscape; describing how the design is informed by its context. We are not thinking so much of metaphor, but more in terms of analogy -- the landscape analogy -- where features of a natural landscape are expressed within the architecture. For example, the smooth transitions between territories and zones, and smooth transitions between levels.

Q. What advice would you give a student looking for a career in a creative industry who was graduating college today? What is the most important thing they should know?

As a student you have to have some sort of aim. You can't just wobble about. You have to have focus. When I was studying I did not know what would be at the end of the road of each piece of research. I knew there would be something, and that all the experiments had to lead to perfecting the project. That was my ambition, to make it work. I learned that it might take 10 years for a 2D sketch to evolve into a workable space, and into a building. And these are the journeys that I think are very exciting, as they are not predictable. For example, I used to produce hatched lines on my drawings. These became striated models, which eventually became the diagram for MAXXI Museum in Rome. So a simple idea like that would take quite a long journey...

Q. You've guest-lectured and have been a visiting professor and scholar at several prestigious institutions including Harvard University and the Yale School of Architecture, how important do you think it is for successful creatives to impart industry knowledge to the next generation?

I think it's absolutely critical for the profession and education to connect. What is interesting at the moment, however, is that practice is more adventurous than education, which I think is a real turning point. If you compare it to thirty years ago, it was the other way around. Schools are able to really engage with some radical studies. These ideas will of course be watered down over the years, but it takes ideas 20 or 30 years to filter into the mainstream, and often, the more radical the work, the more appropriate and successful.

When teaching, I never know what can come out of the students when they're given an opportunity. They may be scared at first -- not of me, of course! -- but they just need to be given confidence to do their best, with a degree of freedom. I think that's why the students like to come and work in our office. Their only obligation is to work hard and do their best. They feel they're part of the process, and of the progress we make. You need to let people grow, and it's exciting to see them and their work mature, contributing to the development of a project.

Q. After Frank Gehry designed the new AGO in Toronto, I had the chance to have dinner with him. When I asked him who the next visionary architects were, he cited you. Who do you think are the next generation of visionaries in design and architecture?

What is exciting now is the invigorated ethos of worldwide collaboration; a truly collective research culture where many contributions and innovations that are directly relevant feed into each other along the lines of a unified design research programme. Talents flourish in this new global movement.

BMW Central Building



Photo credit: W. Hutchmacher

CMA CGM Headquarters



Photo credit: C. Richters

Guangzhou Opera House



Photo credit: Hufton+ Crow

Mobile Art Chanel Contemporary Art Container



Photo credit: J. Linden

London Aquatics Centre

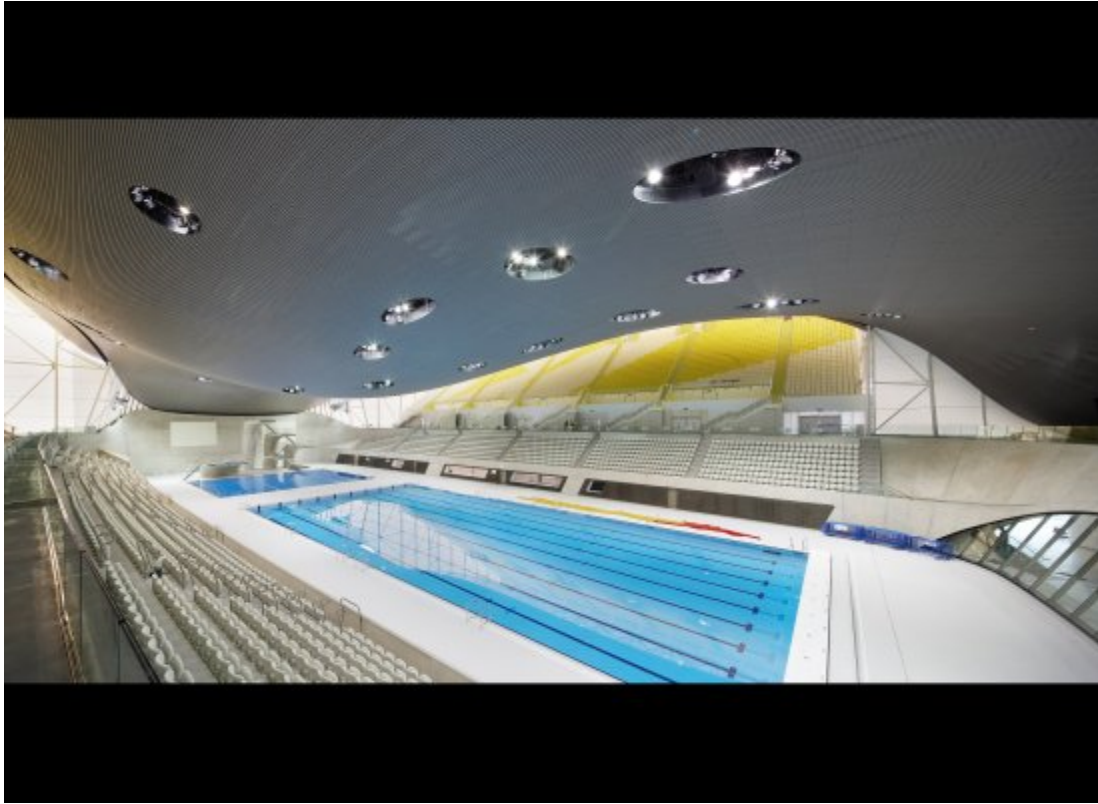


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Maggie's Centre Fife



Photo credit: H. Binet

Burnham Pavilion



Photo credit: M. Litvin

Phaeno Science Centre



Photo credit: W. Huthmacher

Vitra Fire Station



Photo credit: H. Binet

MAXXI: Museum of XXI Century Arts



Photo credit: I. Baan