



## **‘A GLIMPSE OF ANOTHER WORLD’: ZAHA HADID’S MOBILE ART PAVILION**

**Sophie Kazan**

*This review of the Mobile Art Pavilion (MAP) designed by Zaha Hadid for the fashion house Chanel considers the innovative form, materials and space of the building, and ponders the irony of its permanent installation in the grounds of Paris’ Institute of the Arab World.*

Keywords: pavilion, touring, mobile, plastic, Hadid, Chanel, Institute of the Arab World.

**Sophie Kazan** is an art historian, writer, and director of the PR agency Pinkpoppy Art & Communications. She studied at L’Ecole du Louvre in Paris, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London (BA Hons), and at Oxford University (Master of Studies). She has worked for various arts and culture organisations in the UK (the Ashmolean Museum, Sotheby’s, Bridgeman Art Library), as well as in Belgium, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates.

### **‘A Glimpse Of Another World’: Zaha Hadid’s Mobile Art Pavillion**

(Sophie Kazan, Pinkpoppy Art & Communications)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2013w13sk>

To view the images used in this article in a larger and more detailed format, follow this link:

<http://openartsjournal.org/issue-2/issue-2-galleries/article-12>

## ‘A GLIMPSE OF ANOTHER WORLD’: ZAHA HADID’S MOBILE ART PAVILION

Sophie Kazan

### Abstract

*This review of the Mobile Art Pavilion (MAP) designed by Zaha Hadid for the fashion house Chanel considers the innovative form, materials and space of the building, and ponders the irony of its permanent installation in the grounds of Paris’s Institute of the Arab World.*

In 2006, wishing to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Chanel 2.55 quilted purse, the French fashion house Chanel decided to stage a touring exhibition of artworks inspired by this vintage style handbag. An opportunistic exercise in brand awareness and promotion for Chanel, this exhibition was to feature photographs, films, sculpture, drawings, paintings and installations by twenty well-established contemporary artists from around the world. Chanel’s Creative Director, Karl Lagerfeld, believed that instead of touring international art galleries, the exhibition, like the handbag, should itself be mobile, contained in its own recognisable structure, which would travel from city to city.

Lagerfeld approached the award-winning Iraqi British architect Zaha Hadid, convinced that there was nobody else for the commission. The result was the Mobile Art Pavilion (MAP), a white Taurus-shaped single-storey structure assembled from moulded plastic panels held in place by a steel frame (Figure 12.1). Not incidentally, the general effect is not unlike the quilted surface of the Chanel bag. Lagerfeld was likely familiar with Hadid’s innovative approach to design, and the fact that she had already in 2000 designed a slick, transportable pavilion – the first of the annual Serpentine Pavilions for London’s Kensington Park. However, unlike Hadid’s Serpentine Pavilion, which updates the tented pavilions of old with a folding angular steel-framed construction, the MAP is much more curvilinear, organic and asymmetrical. Like a couture dress, it has the impact of a confident and self-congratulatory aesthetic statement.

In addition to the Venice Biennale, where it premiered in 2007, the MAP was originally intended to ‘tour’ five major cities: Hong Kong, Tokyo, New York, Moscow and London. It never reached the last two destinations. Each location was visited and studied in advance so that climatic and demographic factors could

be incorporated into the design. The pavilion was built in an industrial zone in North Yorkshire, in northern England, and was then transported to Venice for the 52<sup>nd</sup> Biennale. Over the next several months, it was installed at the Star Ferry Car Park in Hong Kong; the National Yoyogi Stadium in Tokyo’s Olympic Plaza; and the Rumsey Playfield in New York’s Central Park.

In 2011 the MAP was then shipped to Paris, as it had been gifted to the Institute of the Arab World (IMA), a relevant and increasingly important museum since gaining status amongst the prestigious group of Paris’ *Musées nationaux*. There, it was happily received, and permanently installed in the forecourt, in honour of the architect Zaha Hadid’s Arab heritage, and to highlight the magnitude of contemporary Arab creativity (Figure 12.2). It has since become an annexe exhibition space known as *Le Mobile Art*. Ironically, though, it had now lost the very mobility that had lent it that name.

The design of the MAP can be considered in the light of a recent trend in pavilion design, which has in part developed under the aegis of the Serpentine Gallery. Since 2000 when Hadid was commissioned to build the first Serpentine Pavilion, London’s Kensington Gardens have been witness to a temporary building being erected here every summer, by a contemporary architect (or artist) of international standing. In



Figure 12.1: The Mobile Art Pavilion in Central Park, New York, 2008. Courtesy of Zaha Hadid Architects. Photograph: John Linden.



Figure 12.2: The Mobile Art Pavilion in Paris on the forecourt of the Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA). Courtesy of Zaha Hadid Architects. Photograph: Roland Haibe.

contrast with these structures, the MAP has more to do with the convergence between fashion and art, though it is arguably more than just a stylish and portable exhibition space. But what kind of fashion statement or work of art is the MAP, and what innovative ideas might it contribute to the design of pavilions, either in terms of exhibition spaces or mobile buildings?

### Design and Structure

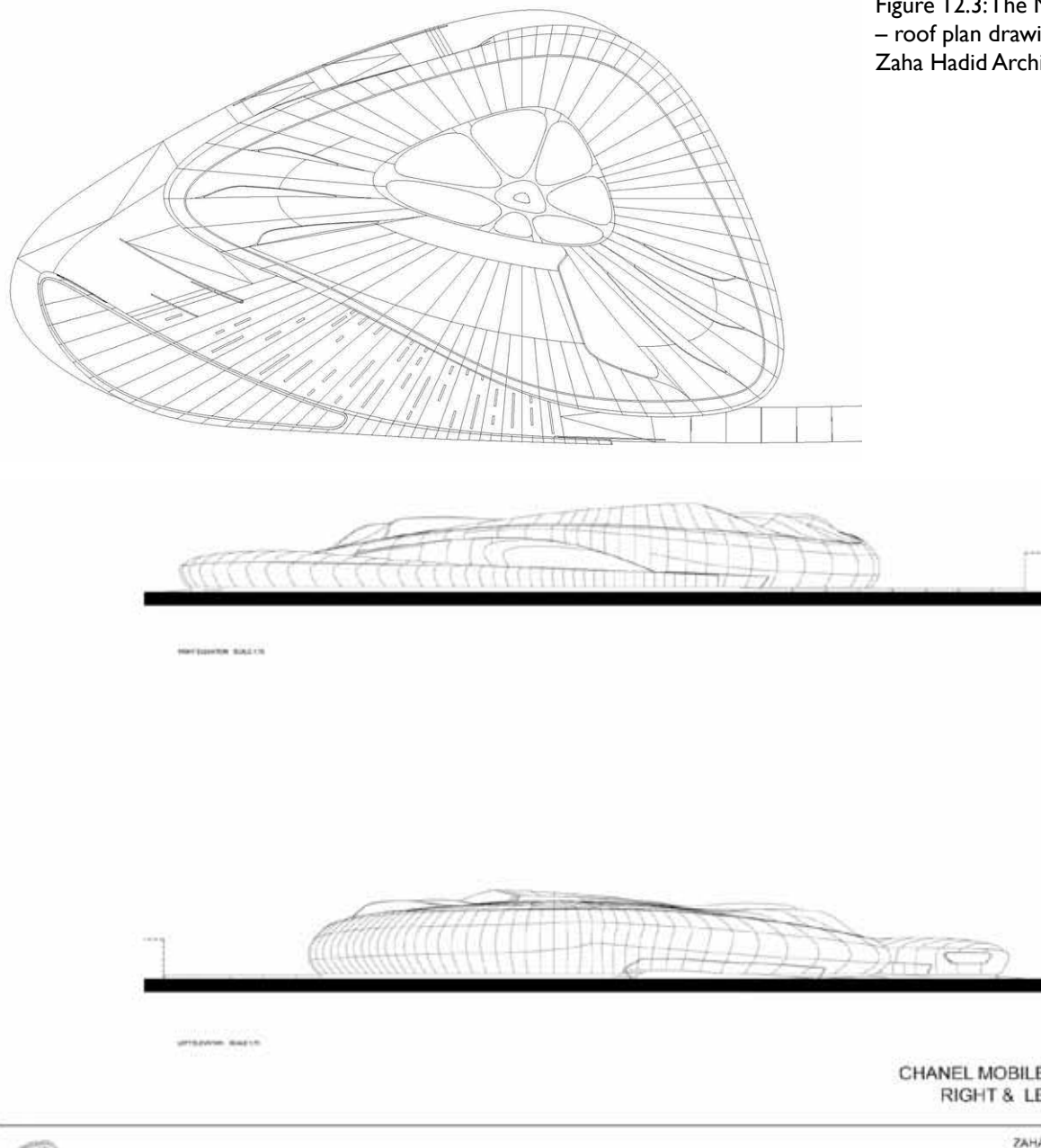
In recent times, travelling exhibitions have involved a lot more forward-planning. The responsibility and legal requirements of building a structure and opening it to the public is taken more seriously. In the case of a mobile structure, it must not only be easily taken apart, to be packed, transported and reassembled. It also needs to observe all of the usual health and safety requirements. The independent firm of designers and engineers, Arup Associates, which previously assisted in the construction of several of the Serpentine Pavilions, was commissioned to ensure that the MAP was built quickly, met all the regulations, and had the necessary lighting, insulation, ventilation and guttering. It was also important that, in-keeping with a pavilion, the MAP was

light and flexible enough to be transported by air or sea to each destination on its tour.

The MAP has a surface area of 700 square metres. Looking at plans and elevations (Figures 12.3–12.4), its shape is not angular like a tent, but rather more like a wheel. A reception area leads onto exhibition galleries that curve around a central, rounded 65-square-metre courtyard, which serves as a space for rest and reflection. The pavilion is an experiment in the use of Fibre-Reinforced Plastic (FRP), a material that is often used in aircraft building because it is lightweight, malleable, and durable, and can withstand extreme temperatures (Figure 12.5). 700 luminous FRP panels are held in place by steel frames, each numbered for easy handling, transport and assemblage.

Although plastic is now an everyday material, and has even been used in a lot of experimental design since the 1960s, it is still relatively uncommon in larger architectural projects. In his essay 'Plastic,' written in 1957, the French philosopher Roland Barthes reflected on what was then a still relatively new invention. He regarded plastic as a magical substance, 'the stuff of alchemy' (Barthes, [1957] 1973, pp.97–9). However, he was distrustful of the artifice and veneer of plastic.

Figure 12.3: The Mobile Art Pavilion – roof plan drawing. Courtesy of Zaha Hadid Architects.



CHANEL MOBILE ART PAVILION  
RIGHT & LEFT ELEVATION

ZAHA HADID ARCHITECTS

Figure 12.4: The Mobile Art Pavilion – elevation drawing, 2007. Courtesy of Zaha Hadid Architects.

Indeed, one only has to look at the shiny white panels that appear to have been made so identically as to be slotted into the MAP's structure with such precision, and the 'other-worldliness' of the resulting structure, to understand Barthes' reservations. Though he intends to be critical of plastic, the idea of it being 'more than a substance' and embodying 'the very idea of its infinite transformation' is what makes it of such interest. This is what makes the MAP so interesting to ponder too. Seven years after Barthes wrote this, the first moon landing in 1959 meant that space-age innovation was less an unknown fear and more an exciting challenge. As a pavilion built for an international fashion house, it is indeed, to use Barthes' words 'ubiquity made visible,' and 'less a thing than the trace of a movement.' How suitable for a mobile building then!

Hadid has stated that the 'Mobile Art Pavilion is all about movement and fluidity' (quoted in Schwan, Gold, Fenton and Sheleg, 2008). Mobility, of course, is implicit in the very word *pavilion* (deriving from the Latin *papilio*, meaning butterfly). She refers to the movement of people around it, through the dimly lit concentric corridors and into its bright courtyard. The MAP has no windows, but natural light seeps through its panels from the outside, and hidden lights also play an important part in shaping the space and determining its experience. The dark, asymmetric steel beams that hold the luminous panels in place resemble pulsating arteries. 'It is an architectural language of fluidity and nature,' Hadid explains, 'driven by new digital design and manufacturing processes which have enabled us to create the Pavilion's totally organic forms – instead



Figure 12.5: Detail of the FRP panels. Courtesy of Zaha Hadid Architects. Photograph: Virgile Simon.

of the serial order of repetition that marks the architecture of the industrial 20<sup>th</sup> century' (quoted in 'Chanel Contemporary Art Container by Zaha Hadid', 2009). While the glossy white walls create a sense of cocooning enclosure, it is paradoxical here that polymers and other manufactured composites are used to get away from an industrial look, and replace it with natural shapes and lines.

### The Contemporary Pavilion

Hadid was the first to design a pavilion for London's Serpentine Gallery Pavilion programme, back in 2000. So impressed by this radical reinvention of the 'accepted idea of a tent or a marquee' (website for the Serpentine Pavilion, 2000) were they that the Gallery's directors decided to make the building of a Serpentine pavilion an annual tradition, and commission a contemporary artist or architect to create a

pavilion within the grounds every summer. The MAP must therefore be seen in the light of some of the other pavilion structures that have been built here in London's Kensington Gardens over the past decade, and which have done much to showcase architectural innovation in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Two Serpentine commissions (Figures 12.6–12.7) in particular bear comparison to the MAP in the way that they structure space, and for the feeling that they create for visitors on their interiors, with the effects of light. These two examples are the 2007 pavilion designed jointly by Danish artist Olafur Eliasson and Norwegian architect Kjetil Thorsen, and the more recent 2012 pavilion, designed by the Swiss firm of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, together with the Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei. Both structures have a circular plan vaguely similar to the MAP, and similarly explore space through line, using it almost rhythmically to guide the visitor's movement. In both instances, the designers have not only considered the structure itself, but also recognised the viewer and how he or she will experience or perceive the interior, and how light enters or is filtered into it. These two points are similarly characteristic of Hadid's MAP, and is the kind of thing whose exploration or experimentation is facilitated by pavilion design.

The 2007 Serpentine pavilion was an upward spiralling structure, which had vertical canvas-like slats or openings that broke down the conventional walls separating outside from inside. These identical slats lined the circumference of a ramp, progressively leading the viewer up from the ground, along the gallery, and onto the roof. Eliasson is an installation artist whose work often treats light, water, and temperature – appealing to the viewer's senses and thus encouraging him or her to interact with space in a more embodied manner. Whereas Hadid's use of shiny FRP integrates the MAP into a whole, and reflects the light, the surface of Eliasson and Thorsen's pavilion is broken up by vertical wall slats that bring the light inward, creating shadows on interior surfaces. This also ensures that the viewer is not confined within the space, and that the pavilion is not a simple container. While some pavilions aspire to emulate permanent buildings, focussing on the strength of their foundations or outer structures, this capitalises on the pavilion's transience and fluidity, creating a stronger sense of symbiosis with the environment, and putting importance instead on the shapes created in space. The shape of the roof in this pavilion is reminiscent of a carousel or a spinning top, and the vertical forms of its interior recall a fulcrum.

The 2012 Serpentine pavilion, conceived by Weiwei, with Herzog and de Meuron, is circular in structure,



Figure 12.6: Olafur Eliasson and Kjetil Thorsen, Serpentine Gallery Pavilion 2007. Courtesy of the Serpentine Gallery. Photograph: Luke Hayes



Figure 12.7: Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron and Ai Weiwei, Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, 2012. Courtesy of the Serpentine Gallery. Photograph Iwan Baan



Figures 12.8 and 12.9: 'Zaha Hadid – Une architecture' exhibition, at the Mobile Art, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 2011, Courtesy of IMA and Zaha Hadid Architects.

and experiments with the possibilities of other materials, including cork, whose colour and rough earthy feel brings excavated earth to mind. About the pavilion, Weiwei has stated: 'we tried instinctively to sidestep the unavoidable problem of creating an object, a concrete shape' (Serpentine Pavilion website, 2012). For him, the answer was to dig into the earth and create shapes in the ground, which would recall the previous structures that have come and gone before it. The pavilion's roof doubles as a shallow pool reflecting the sky; this shelters a subterranean pit, with asymmetric walls, some of which are truncated and also serve as benches. The viewer descends below 'sea level' as symbolised by the overhead pool, which reflects the sky. The pavilion sets up a dialogue between enclosure on the one hand and symbiosis with the environment on the other, between architecture and landscape. The 2012 pavilion therefore moves away from being an ornamental structure that creates a vista.

### **Fashionable Article or Work or Art? Experimental Structure or Exhibition Space?**

Like Hadid's MAP, the 2007 and 2012 Serpentine Pavilions present the visitor with new ideas and innovative shapes. The Serpentine Pavilions encourage the visitor to think about time and movement, and offer alternative viewpoints from above or below ground level. In contrast, the MAP is a more intimate and insular structure, which detaches its visitors from the outside world, in order to 'give people a glimpse of another world' from the interior of the pavilion ('Zaha Hadid Architects: Exhibition Pavilion', 2011). It was also vital that the MAP should be a closed environment on account of the art that it holds. Therefore, MAP has a protective function, not unlike the handbag that inspired its design. Even so, like the Serpentine Pavilions, the MAP has the character of a work of art in its own right. The purely artistic quality of this pavilion was underscored by the critic Dalya Alberge, who likens Hadid to a magician: 'Hadid is ... constantly morphing and transforming. ... She uses geometry as an artistic medium to paint pictures and craft sculptures of the physical world around us' (Alberge, 2010).

In spite of its visual allure, the MAP was first and foremost designed as a functional structure or a receptacle, like the Chanel bag itself, to carry and host an art exhibition (Figures 12.8–12.9). But while a museum's exhibition space concerns itself with practical matters like the ambient temperature inside its galleries and the conservation or longevity of art works in its collection, sometimes over its accessibility to viewers, the MAP is a space in which viewers can get very close to the works of art on display. Many of the exhibitions staged here thus far have included installations or conceptual pieces that are freestanding or hang from the ceiling, or can be mounted on small pedestals.

What this means is that the MAP's environment and structure appear to dictate that it can only be an exhibition space or receptacle for contemporary art that is in no need of protection or guard. The MAP would not, for example, be able to host other kinds of exhibition, for instance those showing conventional paintings or costlier artifacts which here could not be properly protected. But then one probably would not expect any pavilion to be able to rival the traditional purpose-built museum in this function. Even so, it would seem that the MAP partly sacrifices its function as a receptacle (i.e., an exhibition space) to aesthetic form, to the sleek visual appearance that it creates.

This is not necessarily a cynical assessment, for the MAP might be seen more as a testing ground for the exhibition space of the future. Although the MAP now rests on a museum forecourt, the benefits of the mobility that it still symbolises (and the ease with which it may be transport) should not be overlooked. Looking ahead, one can imagine the MAP serving as inspiration for mobile pavilions that have the potential to bring art to marginalised communities never before 'visited' by art or culture projects. Although fixed in place now, the MAP nevertheless still serves as a model for future mobile exhibition spaces that could perhaps be built. With the fast-paced, virtual world that many now inhabit long hours of the day, could transitory, visually pleasing, made-to-measure pavilions or exhibition structures be the museums or art galleries of the future?



## Bibliography

- 1 Alberge, D. (2010) 'Zaha Hadid, architect of the Sheikh Zayed Bridge', *The National Newspaper*, 16 October, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/environment/zaha-haid-architect-of-the-sheikh-zayed-bridge#page2> (accessed 25/05/12).
- 2 Barthes, R. ([1957] 1973) 'Plastic', in *Mythologies* (trans. A. Lavers), London, Granada, pp.97–9.
- 3 'Chanel contemporary art container by Zaha Hadid,' in *archiCentral*, 20 February (2009), <http://www.archicentral.com/chanel-contemporary-art-container-by-zaha-hadid-6563> (accessed 25/05/12).
- 4 Schwan, A., A. Gold, G. Fenton and K. Sheleg (2008) 'Central Park to host Mobile Art Chanel contemporary art container by Zaha Hadid [Press Release]', October, [http://support.centralparknyc.org/site/DocServer/MOBILE\\_ART\\_RELEASE.pdf?docID=1663](http://support.centralparknyc.org/site/DocServer/MOBILE_ART_RELEASE.pdf?docID=1663) (accessed 25/02/13).
- 5 'Serpentine Pavilion 2000, by Zaha Hadid', Serpentine Pavilion website [http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2000/06/serpentine\\_gallery\\_pavillion\\_20\\_5\\_html](http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2000/06/serpentine_gallery_pavillion_20_5_html) (accessed 18/04/13).
- 6 'Serpentine Pavilion 2012, by Herzog & de Meuron and Ai Weiwei, 1 June – 14 October 2012', Serpentine Pavilion website, [http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2012/02/serpentine\\_gallery\\_pavillion\\_2012\\_html](http://www.serpentinegallery.org/2012/02/serpentine_gallery_pavillion_2012_html) (accessed 01/02/13).
- 7 'Zaha Hadid Architects: Exhibition pavilion', in *Arch 20*, 16 May (2011), <http://www.arch2o.com/exhibition-pavillion-zaha-hadid-architects/#.UNMEv15Lr0c> (accessed 20/12/12).