

PHILIP MICHAEL WOLFSON

The artist, designer and architect speaks on running Zaha Hadid's studio in the 1980s

“Some of the most famous architects that we have today were just starting to teach there,” said Philip Michael Wolfson, as he recalled joining the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London in the late 1970s. A third-year student coming from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, Wolfson's move to London and his studies at the prestigious institution granted him an environment that was stimulating, exciting and beautifully creative.

“It was a great period,” he said, “and the atmosphere was fabulous. Everyone hung out with each other, from the staff to the students – there was no segregation. You had studio spaces where you could draw, but they were basically just this mishmash of underground caves.”

Born in Philadelphia to a NASA engineer, the multidisciplinary designer is known for experimental furniture pieces that are akin to fine art structures, made through his namesake studio, established in 1991. Working across Europe and North America, Wolfson has also delivered residential interiors and shown his pieces at leading international art and design exhibitions, galleries and public venues.

Inspired by 20th century modernist movements like constructivism and futurism, his designs are fluid, forceful and, at times, delicate. Before his solo career, though, he worked closely with one of the world's most renowned architects, Zaha Hadid, and led her design studio in the 1980s when she was just establishing herself, her name and her work.

“I noticed her at the association,” said Wolfson. “It was a small building and a small campus. And, at that time, she had been teaching with Rem, but I was still in my third year so I wasn't yet working with her. The following year – my fourth year – I studied with her. And I just found out that the year I studied with her was the first year of her teaching on her own. The following year, she'd have an assistant helping. That introduced me to the whole scene, really.”

Wolfson's cousin had just founded the Wolfsonian in Miami, a museum that exhibits the owner's collection of decorative and propaganda arts – a wide range of furniture, paintings, books and prints. Occasionally, Wolfson would meet his cousin in Italy and tour the antique shops, reviewing materials that originated anytime between 1850 and 1945. They were trips that drew Wolfson into a niche area of modern art history that would inspire his work, as well as build a foundation for his impending friendship with Hadid.

“I loved the works of early modernism,” he said. “I was aware of them and excited by them all and so was Zaha. So it kind of started to come together, but I chose not to study with her in my

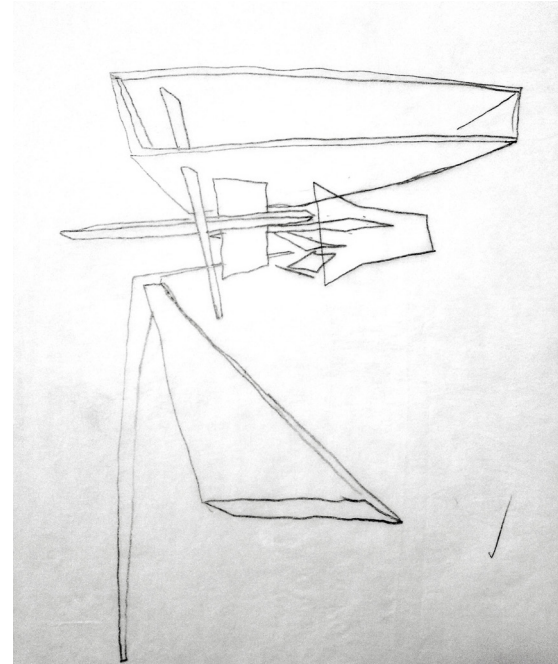
**Written by Rima
Alsammarae**

**Photos courtesy
of Philip Michael
Wolfson**





←
Wolfson
standing with
Hadid at the
exhibition
of the Peak
Leisure Club,
held at the
Architectural
Association



→
A drawing by
Zaha Hadid,
courtesy of
Wolfson

occupies the entire building, plus some.

"I want to write a book on the early years and try to explain Zaha," added Wolfson, "which I don't think anyone can do. She's a very intense and complicated character, and that was the way our relationship was. We would have arguments, I'd storm out of the office and leave for six months, but then come back again. Even after I set up my practice, I'd still go back to work on some projects, like the Cincinnati Museum.

"When I left, it was because I felt like I needed to – for the office to take that next step and for her to deal with peo-



↓
Wolfson's de-
sign 'Origami',
made during
his time with
Hadid

final year because she was a very excitedly demanding tutor, and at the time, my thought process was that if I wanted to graduate, I needed to study my final year with someone else," he laughed.

"But in my fifth year, I had a very memorable tutorial with Zaha on my thesis project, even though I wasn't a student of hers. I had asked her to look at my designs that I had been working on, and that's really when there was this breakthrough of sorts. We started having an argument about the ideas behind the project, and I think it was quite stimulating for both of us. A few months later, when I was graduating, she asked me to come and work with her, which I did in 1982."

Upon joining Hadid's studio, Wolfson was part of a newly formed three-person team that included himself, Hadid and a fellow graduate from the Architectural Association. The previous team had left the studio because Hadid's projects weren't yet

gaining traction, and working from her small Mews house ("It was the size of a shoebox," said Wolfson), likely started taking its toll.

The new team, fresh with enthusiasm and ideas, began working on a proposal for the Peak Leisure Club competition in Hong Kong, which they won. The design reflected Hadid's developing architectural style and explained itself through abstract sketches.

The following decade saw more competitions and proposals, and Hadid's studio slowly but surely began building itself. When Alvin Boyarsky, the then chairman of the Architectural Association, sponsored Hadid to carry out an exhibition, he gave the team a space in the school. The studio moved there, and artists came and went. "It unfolded from there," said Wolfson. Later, Hadid would get a space in Clerkenwell, where the office remains today – except now, Zaha Hadid Architects



ple on a level that wasn't like 'student-teacher', which I think she always had that relationship with people. She was always very intense with the people around her and that's what made working with her exciting. You were really involved and felt truly a part of it."

The last 10 years of her life saw a booming career, celebrity and a growing distance between herself and Wolfson. Stretched across their work and travelling the world over, few opportunities came up for the old friends to reunite. "At the time that she passed, we had been trying to get back together," said Wolfson, "but that's life."

Wolfson is currently looking forward to a number of events, including Lakes Sweden, a new installation in the US; the launch of TX Series, a new production design of table centrepieces for the Willer Gallery in London; and Art Miami 2017, where he'll be exhibiting a few selected works.



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