

BEYOND IMAGINATION

CAROLINE ROBERTS, GLOBAL HEAD OF PEOPLE AND TALENT, ZAHA HADID ARCHITECTS, DISCUSSES HOW THE FIRM IS FACING UP TO LIFE AFTER THE DEATH OF ITS INFLUENTIAL FOUNDER

ZAHA HADID ARCHITECTS (ZHA) is one of the most progressive practices in the industry. The buildings designed by the firm are groundbreaking and iconic. From the Guangzhou Opera House in China to the London Olympics Aquatic Centre in the UK, they are bold, complex and innovative.

Similar words might be used to describe the firm's influential founder, Zaha Hadid, who tragically died in March 2016. Caroline Roberts, Global Head of People and Talent, started her role with the company just two weeks later.

The death of a founder is a hard situation for any firm to manage, but an added layer of complexity is present when they are as involved as Hadid was with her eponymous firm's major projects. Unsurprisingly, as a company they are still dealing with it on a day-to-day basis. ▶



CV

CAROLINE ROBERTS AT A GLANCE

- Senior Studio Manager, BBC, 1994-1997
- Organiser, World Service News and Current Affairs, BBC, 1997-1999
- Business Manager, BBC, 2000-2001
- Learning Executive, Career Development Programmes, BBC, 2003-2006
- HR & Development Manager, BBC, 2008-2009
- Business Manager, BBC Trust, 2010-2011
- Business Partner, Arqiva, 2011-2012
- HR Director (VP), UK, Europe and Africa, Fox International Channels, 2012-2014
- Director of HR and Marketing, Chartered Institute of Arbitrators, 2015-2016
- Global Head of People and Talent, Zaha Hadid Architects, 2016 to present



“CLIENTS WOULDN'T COME TO US IF THEY WANTED MOCK TUDOR. THEY WANT SOMETHING BEYOND THEIR IMAGINATION”

THE HEYDAR ALIYEV CENTER IN BAKU, AZERBAIJAN

▶ “People are still coming to terms with it,” Roberts says. “Projects last a long time in architecture, so there are still projects we’re doing that she played a major role in. The shock was huge, as was the sadness. People have a tremendous loyalty to her. There was a huge generosity to her character, as well as the genius, that people really appreciated. People still talk about her as though her death was yesterday.”

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

She says the firm is lucky that so many people who have been with the business since the start are still there, including Hadid’s business partner Patrik Schumacher. “It’s almost like her mantle has been passed to other people,” she explains. “There’s a huge loyalty to honour what she started. Teaching is still at the heart of the firm and Patrik does a lot of it himself, lecturing internationally and in the UK. We have particular links to the **Architectural Association**, where Zaha had a studio and lectured herself. As a thought leader, we host regular smaller group sessions at the gallery. We also have regular continuing professional development and knowledge sharing sessions and encourage innovation.”

Roberts started her career in radio production at the **BBC**, working on national programmes and for the World Service. It was a job that gave her a great sense of purpose as it allowed her to work on news programmes that would be heard in places where independent and impartial news was difficult to come by.

As she progressed and took on senior roles with increasing management duties, she became responsible for more staff training and was offered a role focusing on that across the whole of the broadcaster. She set up a pan-organisation attachment scheme which allowed colleagues to spend time in other departments, learn new skills and then apply them to their own job. “It’s a fantastic way of getting real learning and inspiring people who are very creative, and for whom doing an online or classroom course is not the right thing,” she says, and it’s a principle she still stands by at ZHA. “We have monthly lectures that different departments will give, but people also transfer across the organisation.”

She gives the example of their interiors department, which has welcomed those in the firm with an external architectural background. “It’s about bringing the outside inside. It’s interior architecture, so it makes sense for architects to go and work there,” she explains.

The sheer range of projects ZHA has been involved in means diverse knowledge, and the sharing of it, is vital for the organisation to thrive. As well as iconic buildings, the company has produced award statues, furniture, clothing and collaborative jewellery ranges with **Bulgari**. “There’s a sense of pride,” says Roberts. “People talk about it here as a family and you really get the sense that it is.”

CHALLENGES AHEAD

After setting up the attachment scheme at the BBC, she next moved into the broadcaster’s career

coaching department, but found she wanted to have a broader view of people's working lives. "All the time I was meeting people at a certain point in their career, but I was curious about the entire employee life cycle. I also had my own encounters with some bad HR practices and started to think, 'I could do this a bit better'."

Roberts decided to see if she really could, taking on her own attachment as a business partner within the BBC's HR department. After maternity leave, she worked in resourcing before being selected for a high-potential scheme on which she was mentored by the HR Director of BBC North. He recommended that if she wanted to make a career in HR, she should leave the BBC, and that's exactly what she did.

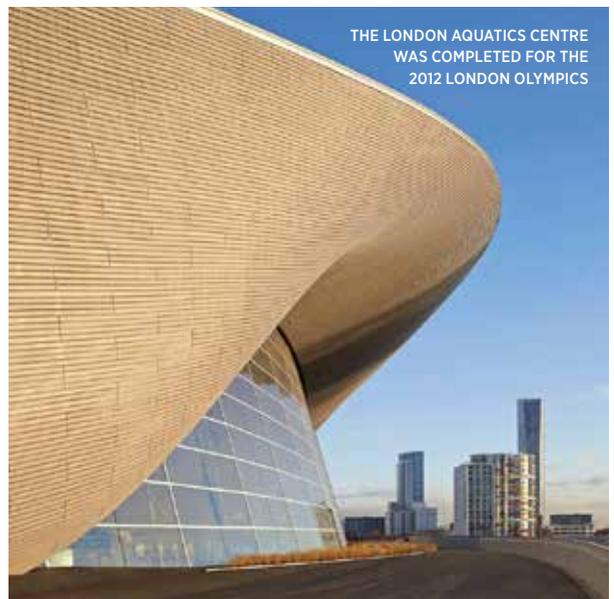
She left to work with telecommunications company **Arqiva** as an HR Business Partner, next moving on to become HR Director UK, Europe and Africa at **Fox International Channels**. The role was a big step up and was also international, but it allowed her to work in TV again. She then spent a year working with the **Chartered Institute of Arbitrators** before moving to ZHA. And while she has spent large parts of her career in the world of media and broadcast, she says that many of the challenges she faces now are similar to other global organisations. With the headquarters of ZHA sitting in London, but with offices in New York, Mexico City, Dubai, Hong Kong and Beijing and a hugely international workforce, Brexit has been a difficult situation for the firm. "For many international workers, it's not just the red tape of applying for permanent residency," she says. "People feel very hurt by it here. The immigration skills levy in the UK is a business cost and I do wonder if it will make it more difficult to hire skilled workers."

As the firm was founded by a strong female leader, it's not surprising that gender diversity is still a major consideration. While it is well above the industry average in terms of its percentage of female workers (40 per cent, compared with 25 per cent at most firms), it continues to be active in the conversation to improve it. "We're firmly committed to attracting women to the company. We're partners with Women in Architecture, the initiative set up by the *Architectural Review*. It shows publicly where we stand on the issue."

On a personal level, she says she enjoys the challenge of the workforce themselves. Roberts says that employees are happy to challenge ideas, and this means that if she is bringing in new policies, she must ask herself questions in a way she has not



ZAHA HADID'S PROPOSED DESIGN FOR THE AL WAKRAH STADIUM, TO BE USED IN THE 2022 QATAR WORLD CUP



THE LONDON AQUATICS CENTRE WAS COMPLETED FOR THE 2012 LONDON OLYMPICS

BUILDING OUT

Zaha Hadid Architects now have offices in:

London • New York • Mexico City • Dubai • Hong Kong • Beijing

needed to in the past. "When you are talking to people who can divert rivers, coming up with a poor HR policy is going to be found out very quickly," she laughs. "If a river being in the way won't stop them, if they can command the elements, an ill-thought-out piece of people planning will be found out straight away. In this business, even those without formal management training have startling intellects and a ▶



“PEOPLE TALK ABOUT IT HERE AS A FAMILY AND YOU REALLY GET THE SENSE THAT IT IS”

- ▶ grasp of people issues, so you never have to explain things twice.”

PLANS IN PLACE

So in the wake of these challenges, where does ZHA hope to go next, and how will the people strategy support this? Roberts says the goals of the company are to continue creating buildings that aren't defined by any project typology. “Having a broad portfolio where we can show our style on a range of buildings, from commercial to residential to public buildings, is important. We want to keep pushing the boundaries of what is possible.” The company also has more traditional goals, such as entering new markets. New projects in Australia are in progress, while plans to expand there and in South America are in place. They are also doing more work in the Middle East, says Roberts. “Work is about to start on the Dubai Lighthouse, which is an amazing building, even by Dubai's standards!”

She adds that, while from the outside it may seem difficult to see how the firm balances business and creative goals, internally it is easy to see how this comes about. “With such a strong creative vision present at the firm, I find myself constantly amazed at what they are able to do. Clients wouldn't come to us if they wanted mock Tudor. They want something beyond their imagination.”

To support this, Roberts says she and her team must be at the top of their game as well. “We've got world-class architects, they deserve world-class

HR. This function is new to many practices in the industry and that means we have an opportunity to forge a new way and learn from what has gone on elsewhere without repeating trends that do not serve business goals.”

Roberts is well aware of the criticisms HR can face, and believes there can be truth to it. She says as a function it has a capacity to waste time and to misunderstand business priorities. To build her own vision of how people strategy can support business goals at ZHA, she has gone back to basics, avoiding vanity projects that won't help employees in the long term. “It's all about enabling people to do incredible work,” she explains. “Sometimes it can be mundane, simply getting things to work properly. When I joined I saw things I'd like to improve, processes I'd like to streamline and benefits I'd like to introduce. But they are all designed to make people's lives here easier. HR is always an overhead for businesses, so you must have a reason to be there. If it's not to make people's lives easier, why have it?”

And while some of these changes have been around more basic business functions, others have been to tackle more complex issues. “We get our work through tenders and through competitions,” she explains. “Architects can be working for months on designs that they truly feel are the best for a particular project and then come second. That can be almost like a bereavement in itself for staff.” She has introduced more skills training to help them deal with this, and to help managers have pivotal conversations with people.

And she adds that, while this competition in the industry can be heartbreaking, it is also what drives great architects to succeed, and great movements to begin. From the great rivalry of Brunelleschi and Ghiberti that sparked the renaissance to the competitiveness we are witnessing now to dominate the skyline of Dubai, it is needed to push boundaries and break moulds. “There is a real sense of connection from Master James of St George, to Brunelleschi, to Christopher Wren, and all of these people over history, creating these great buildings,” she says. “I'd like to think in hundreds of years, we'll still be looking at the magical and fantastical buildings this practice creates.” ■