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TU Delft

THE ARTIST AS ARCHITECT

TRACING ARTISTIC THOUGHT IN
ARCHITECTURAL AND URBAN DESIGN

WORKS FROM
MICHELANGELO
AND ZAHA HADID

EUROPEAN SETTING
A CROSS-PERIOD ANALYSIS
FROM 1500 -2020

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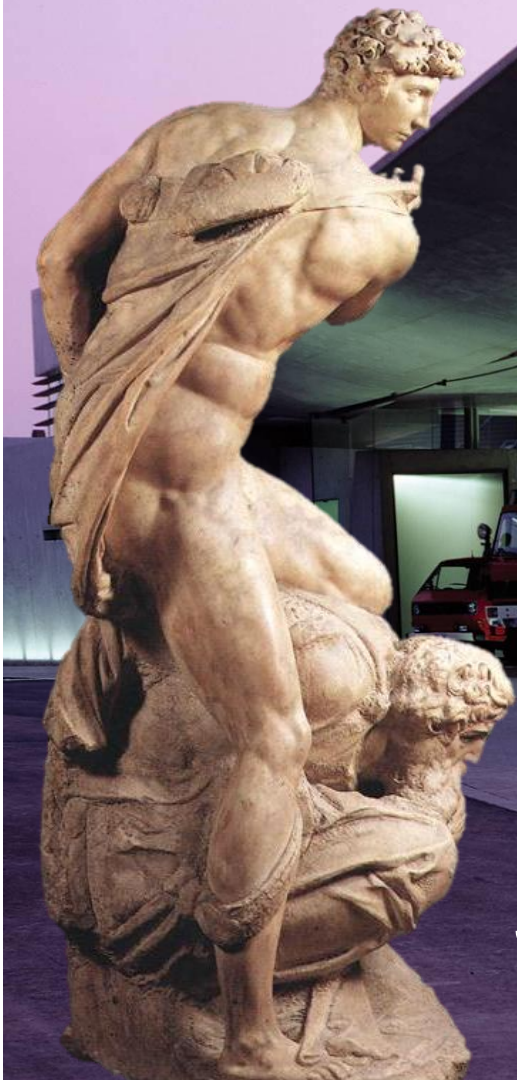


Figure 1: (Front cover) Vitra Fire Station, Zaha Hadid Architects

Christian Richter, *Vitra Fire Station*, 1990 – 1993, photograph, Zaha Hadid Architects accessed February 20, 2026 <https://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/vitra-fire-station-2/>

Figure 2: (Front cover) Genius of Victory, Michelangelo Buonarroti

Carolina Romero Hernandez, *Genius of victory*, 1532-1534, marble statue, Michelangelo Buonarroti accessed February 26, 2026 <https://arsartisticadventureofmankind.wordpress.com/tag/michelangelos-tomb-of-julius-ii/>

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01 | INTRODUCTION

Architects & artists

This thesis investigates how an artistic background influences the way architects conceive, represent, and design space. It asks how artistic modes of thinking developed through practices such as drawing, painting, and sculpture, shape architectural form, spatial composition, and urban imagination. Rather than treating art and architecture as separate disciplines, this study explores their deep structural interconnections.

Through a cross-period analysis of European contexts from 1500 to 2020, the research traces a lineage from Michelangelo to Zaha Hadid, examining how artistic training informs architectural methodology across radically different historical conditions. By comparing figures who began as artists and later operated at architectural and urban scales, the thesis identifies recurring patterns in the translation of artistic thought into built form.

Ultimately, the study positions the architect not only as a technical problem solver, but as a spatial thinker whose understanding of proportion, mass, movement, and composition is often rooted in artistic practice. In doing so, it reconsiders architecture as a discipline continuously shaped by the intellectual and perceptual tools of the artist.

The choice of this topic stems from a personal interest in art, particularly architecture, as an artistic form. This interest was further reinforced by the enthusiasm the course coordinator expressed during lectures on the architecture of the ancient Roman Empire. Through this shared enthusiasm, the student developed a deeper curiosity about architectural history and its artistic significance.

The selection of Michelangelo is rooted in the student's longstanding interest in art, ranging from artists such as Van Gogh to Michelangelo himself. Michelangelo stands out as a central figure of the Renaissance, renowned not only as an architect but also as a sculptor and painter. His multidisciplinary approach to art and architecture makes him an influential and compelling subject of study.

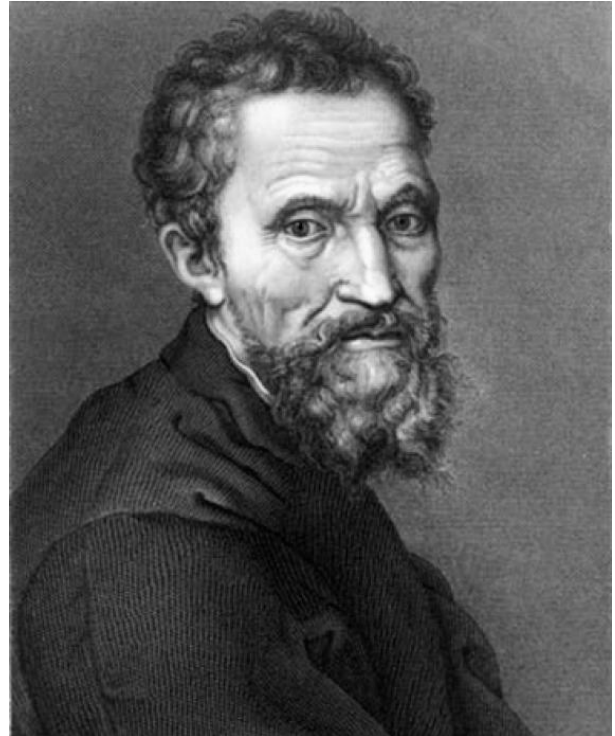


Figure 3: Michelangelo

Lapham's quarterly, *Portrait of Michelangelo*, 1475 – 1564, Painting, Lapham's quarterly accessed February 20, 2026

<https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/contributors/michelangelo>

Zaha Hadid was chosen due to her exceptional ability to merge architecture with advanced mathematical concepts, an area the student finds both challenging and admirable. Hadid was the first woman to receive the Pritzker Architecture Prize, the most prestigious award in the field. She is widely regarded as one of the most influential architects of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, making her an important figure in contemporary architecture.

Michelangelo and Zaha Hadid are suitable for comparison. They can both be considered some of the greatest artists and architects of their time.¹ Michelangelo challenged classical architectural norms during the Renaissance, he could evoke a tension between pre-existing, static boundaries, and dynamic forms that strain against them.² Similarly, Zaha Hadid pushed the boundaries of modern architecture through innovative, fluid designs made possible by advanced mathematics and digital technologies. Despite the historical distance between them, both architects transformed architecture into a powerful artistic expression, making their comparison both relevant and insightful.

The case studies

The thesis focuses on the 'bookends' of each artist's output: their early, career-defining projects and their late-period masterpieces. This selection reveals how their design priorities evolved over time, contrasting the raw ambition of their beginnings with the refined complexity of their final works. The selected case studies are analysed chronologically, and then compared to each other.

¹ Robert Coughlan 1979, 169-179

² James S. Ackermann 1961, 21

Figure 4: Zaha Hadid

Dmitry Ternovoy, *Portrait of Zaha Hadid*, 2013, Photograph, Casa ed Eleganza accessed February 20, 2026 <https://www.casaedeleganza.it/blog/2025/11/03/zaha-hadid-architetto-opere-milano-miami/>



***HOW DOES AN ARTISTIC
BACKGROUND INFLUENCE THE
WAY ARCHITECTS UNDERSTAND
AND DESIGN SPACE, FORM, AND
COMPOSITION?***



The sources

To answer the research question and provide appropriate methodology, the sources and approach are divided into two categories.

The **PRIMARY SOURCES** for this thesis will mainly consist of architectural drawings, sketches, models, and plans by Michelangelo and Zaha Hadid. For Michelangelo, this includes historical drawings, sketches, and writings related to his architectural and urban projects. For Zaha Hadid, this includes digital models, design drawings, project documentation, and interviews. Visual and spatial documentation, such as photographs, maps, and plans of their buildings, will also be analyzed to examine how their artistic thinking translates into architecture and urban composition.

SECONDARY SOURCES will provide contextual and theoretical understanding. These include books and articles on the relationship between art and architecture, analyses of renaissance architecture, and contemporary architectural theory and parametric design. Additional studies on urban design, architectural representation, and the influence of artistic training on architectural practice will support the analysis. Comparative studies discussing similarities and differences between historical and contemporary approaches will also be included.

The methods

Both Michelangelo and Zaha Hadid will be analyzed through four categories: artistic training, spatial thinking, form and technique, and representation. These are ordered in the same manner as the designers thought process during a design. Working from the abstract to the presentation of the finished result.

The first category, artistic training, examines how each architect's artistic background informs their architectural approach. Rather than focusing on biography, the analysis identifies how artistic principles translate into spatial and formal decisions within the projects. These analysis use colors stemming from the suprematism movement Hadid was strongly influenced by pointing out different objects or spatial elements.

The second category, spatial thinking, investigates how space operates and is experienced. This includes an analysis of movement, volume, light, and thresholds, considering how circulation directs the body, how space is generated through additive or subtractive processes, how light shapes perception, and how boundaries between spaces are defined.

The third category, form and technique, focuses on the relationship between artistic intention and material execution. This includes the study of geometry, material expression, and construction logic.

Finally, representation examines the role of drawings, sketches, models, and digital tools in the design process and how these methods contribute to the development of architectural form.

Each case study will first be analyzed individually through these categories, after which the results will be compared to identify broader patterns in the relationship between artistic practice and architectural design.

Figure 5: (Previous page) The David, Michelangelo Buonarrotti

Victor Ruiz, *Michelangelo's the David, 1501*, Sculpture, Visit Tuscany accessed February 20, 2026
<https://www.visittuscany.com/en/ideas/michelangelos-david-some-facts-you-might-not-know/>



02 | CASESTUDIES

Julius II tomb

The spatial conception of the Tomb of Pope Julius II is an architectural manifestation of Michelangelo's profound sculptural mindset. Long before the first chisel struck marble, the project existed as a sequence of exploratory stages concerned with three-dimensional form rather than mere surface appearance.

Michelangelo's process typically began with loose, small-scale sketches where figures were redrawn from multiple angles to refine gesture and proportion. Even on paper, his subjects were conceived spatially; he was not drawing a figure against a background, but rather a volume occupying a void. This conceptualization then transitioned into small clay or wax models (bozzetti), which allowed him to study balance and mass in the physical world.³ Only after the spatial relationships were resolved through these tactile studies would he begin the monumental task of carving the full-scale marble. When approaching the marble block, Michelangelo employed a direct, subtractive method that was radically different from the incremental approach used by his contemporaries. He viewed the block not as a raw material to be shaped from the outside in, but as a container holding a captive form. He famously believed the figure already existed inside the stone, and the sculptor's role was "the power of removing" the excess.⁴

**CREATION, IN THIS
SENSE, WAS AN ACT
OF SUBTRACTION**

³ James S. Ackerman 1986, 56-57

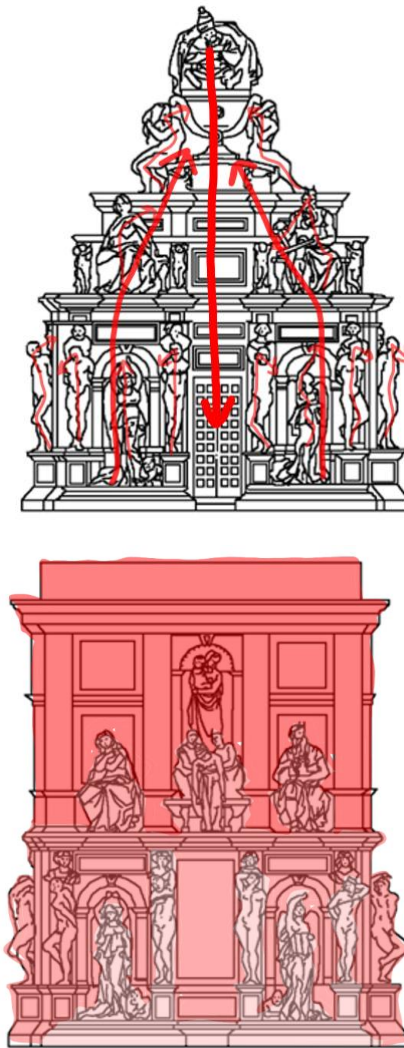
⁴ James S. Ackerman 1986, 56-57

Carving began from the most projecting points, as if the figure were being excavated or uncovered from within the mass. This required extraordinary foresight; once the material was removed, it could not be replaced. This subtractive logic ensures a singular unity in the Tomb of Julius II; the monument is not an assembly of separate architectural parts but a field of carved mass from which figures emerge with a shared physical DNA.

The final composition in San Pietro in Vincoli ⁵ organizes the viewer's experience through a strictly frontal and directed axis of movement. Unlike free-standing monuments that invite the body to circulate, this wall-based structure stabilizes the observer in a position of direct confrontation. The viewer is transformed into a spectator before a stage. The central figure of Moses acts as the anchor of this encounter, his intense gaze and tensed musculature pulling the eye inward. From this focal point, the surrounding architectural frames and flanking figures guide the gaze upward and diagonally, creating a sense of restless energy. While the viewer's body remains stationary, their perception is highly dynamic, navigating a surface that refuses to remain flat. Michelangelo's subtractive method is mirrored in the way the monument constructs volume and depth.

Rather than building outward with additive elements, the tomb reads as a layered mass carved into varying depths. The niches, columns, and projecting figures create multiple spatial layers within the surface of the wall as shown in the analysis. Some elements remain recessed and embedded within the architectural frame, representing the contemplative or the contained, while others, most notably Moses, project aggressively into the viewer's space. The result is a profound spatial tension between containment and prominence. Figures appear partially liberated from the stone, reinforcing the sculptural narrative that form is something being revealed rather than constructed. The monument effectively transforms a shallow architectural footprint into a deep, three-dimensional sculptural field.

Light acts as a critical operational tool in activating these carved volumes. The deeply modeled surfaces of the marble catch light unevenly, producing a sculptural version of chiaroscuro. This play of light and shadow is not merely atmospheric; it is structural. The deep folds of the drapery, the anatomical precision of the musculature, and the dark recesses of the niches create shifting gradients that emphasize the depth of the carving.



⁵ James S. Ackerman 1986, 56-57

Figure 6: (previous page) Moses, Michelangelo Buonarroti
 Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Statue of Moses*, 1516, statue, Livio Andronico accessed March 11, 2026
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_%28Michelangelo%29

Figure 7 & 8: Reconstruction of the project for the Julius II Tomb dated 1505-1516, Michelangelo Buonarroti
 Herbert von Einem, *The tomb of Julius II based on early sketch*, 1973, Own analysis over image, accessed March 25, 2026



Figure 9: Tomb of Julius II, Michelangelo Buonarroti
James S. Ackerman, Study of Julius II, 1516, Pen sketch,
The Architecture of Michelangelo, accessed March 6, 2026

Light clarifies the relationship between projection and recession, allowing the viewer to perceive the monument as a complex spatial relief. As the light changes throughout the day, the figures appear to shift in their level of emergence, lending the static stone a sense of animated, temporal life. The thresholds within the monument, the boundaries where architecture meets sculpture, are sites of constant negotiation. Architectural niches establish clear, rational limits, yet the sculptures continually challenge and subvert these boundaries. While the figures of Leah and Rachel (representing the Active and Contemplative lives) occupy their niches with relative poise, Moses breaks the frame, his limbs and drapery spilling over the architectural edge.

This movement across boundaries creates a dynamic relationship where the wall is no longer a limit, but a starting point for spatial expansion.

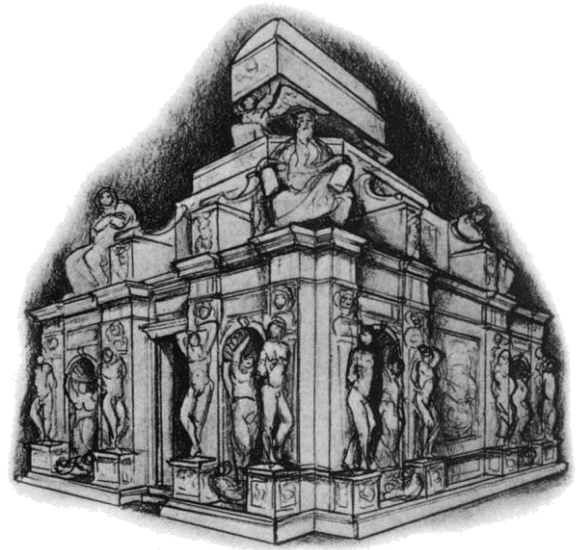


Figure 10: Tomb of Julius II, Michelangelo Buonarroti
Michelangelo Buonarroti, Sketch of the tomb, 1505, Pen sketch,
Web Gallery of Art, accessed March 6, 2026
https://www.wga.hu/html_m/m/michelangelo/sculpture/giulio_2/index.html

The monument operates at the precise threshold between relief and full sculpture, embodying Michelangelo's belief that design is the act of revealing the spirit within the material.

Ultimately, the Tomb of Pope Julius II translates sculptural thinking into a holistic spatial drama. It is not a building, nor is it a collection of statues; it is a "spatialized" painting carved into stone. Movement is frontal and confrontational, volume is born of subtractive excavation, and light dramatizes the emergence of form. The viewer does not enter this space physically, but they inhabit it through a visual and bodily encounter with the sculptural field. In this work, Michelangelo proved that the act of architecture could be synonymous with the act of carving, transforming a static wall into a stage where the eternal struggle between spirit and matter is made visible.

Figure 11: (next page) Tomb of Julius II, Michelangelo Buonarroti
Michelangelo Buonarroti, Tomb of Julius II, 1545, Marble, Web Gallery of Art, accessed March 6, 2026
https://www.wga.hu/html_m/m/michelangelo/sculpture/giulio_2/index.html



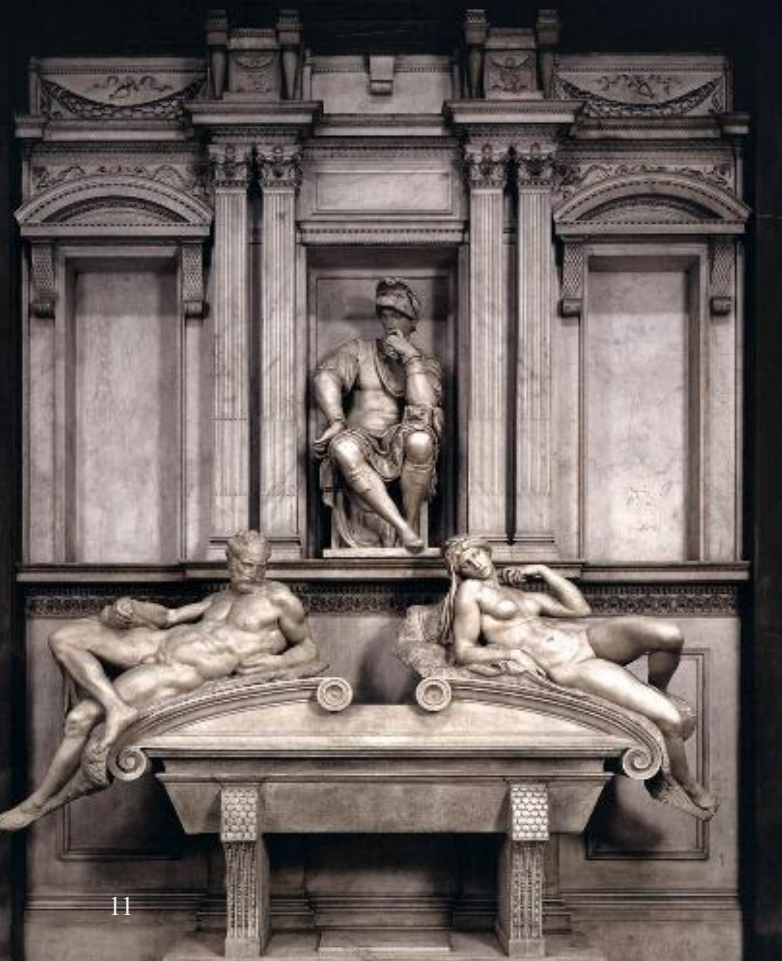
Medici Chapel

Michelangelo's design for the Medici Chapel, or New Sacristy, in Florence stands as a powerful demonstration of how sculptural training can fundamentally reshape architectural thinking. Rather than approaching architecture as the design of enclosing space, Michelangelo conceived of the chapel as a carved mass, an extension of the same artistic logic he applied to marble. In this space, architecture is not a neutral framework for sculpture; it becomes sculpture itself.

Trained first and foremost as a sculptor, Michelangelo developed an acute sensitivity to mass, depth, and the expressive potential of form emerging from material. This sensibility is fully translated into the architecture of the chapel. The walls are not treated as thin surfaces but as thick, weighty bodies. Architectural elements such as pilasters, cornices, and niches do not sit lightly on the surface; instead, they appear embedded within it, as though carved out of a continuous block of stone. Michelangelo, in placing tombs into a recessed arched niche divided vertically into three bays behind an ornate freestanding sarcophagus, respected a tradition that had inspired the finest efforts of early Renaissance Tuscan sculptors.⁶

⁶ Charles de Tolnay 1934, 5

Figure 12 & 13: Medici chapel, Michelangelo
Michelangelo Buonarroti, Medici chapel, 1545, Marble,
Web Gallery of Art, accessed March 6, 2026
https://www.wga.hu/html_m/m/michelangelo/sculpture/giulio_2/index.html





Although Michelangelo employs the classical vocabulary of the Renaissance, his use of it departs significantly from established norms. Traditional clarity and balance are replaced by compression and displacement. Columns are pushed into corners as you see in red, entablatures are interrupted (blue)⁷, and niches are carved so deeply that they seem to hollow out the wall itself. These manipulations reflect a sculptor's instinct to model and reshape form rather than an architect's concern for structural legibility. Classical elements become flexible tools, subordinated to visual and spatial expression.⁸

⁷ James S Ackerman 1986, 27

This sculptural logic is especially evident in the vertical articulation of the chapel. As the eye moves upward, the architectural elements compress and the windows diminish in scale, creating a perspectival pull toward the lantern above. The dome reinforces this movement, guiding the viewer's gaze upward in a controlled visual progression. Here, Michelangelo demonstrates his mastery of spatial composition, treating the entire interior as a unified work in which perception is carefully orchestrated.⁹

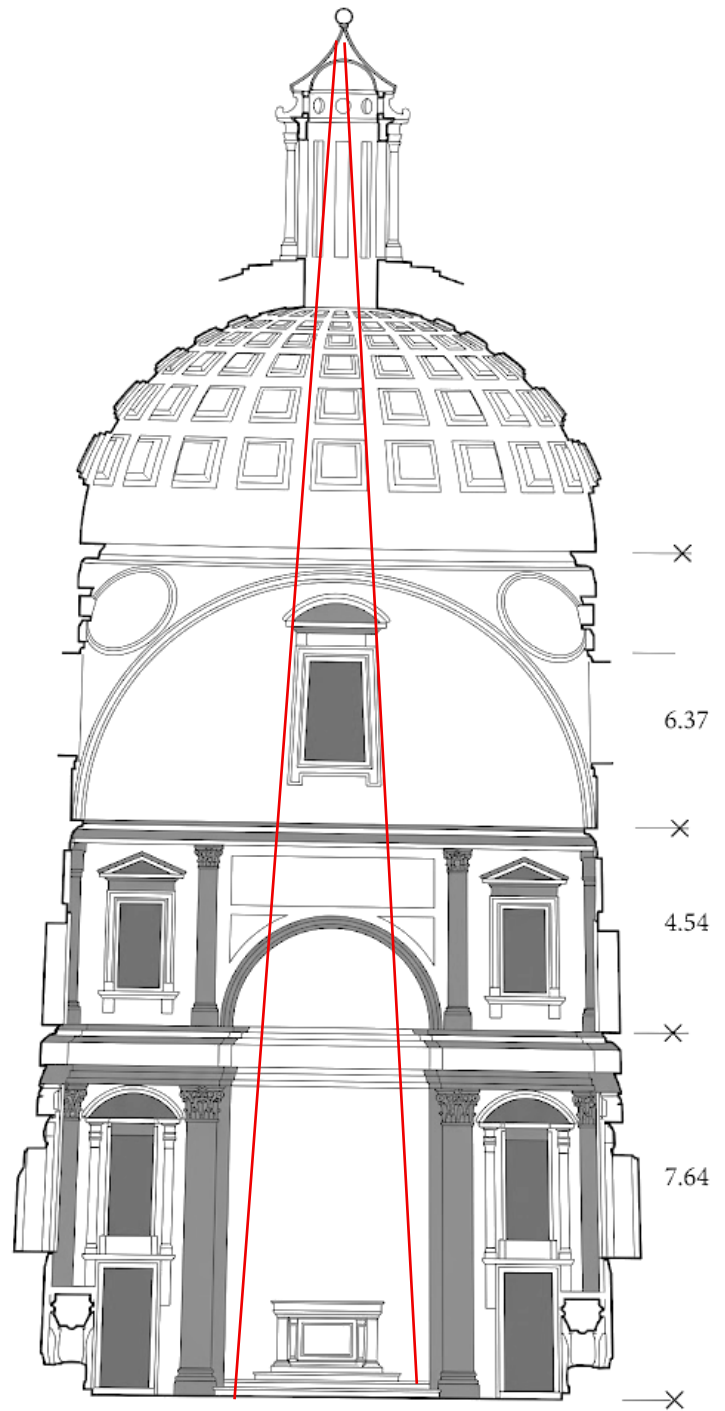
⁸ James S Ackerman 1986, 27

⁹ James S. Ackerman 1986, 24

Figure 14: Medici chapel 1526-33, Michelangelo Buonarroti
 Emil Krén and Daniel Marx., *Medici Chapel, 1526-1533*, Own analysis over image, accessed March 25, 2026
https://www.wga.hu/html_m/m/michelan/1sculptu/medici/01view.html

The tombs themselves further illustrate the integration of sculpture and architecture. Originally, Michelangelo had intended to place a freestanding mausoleum at the center of the space, in line with earlier models such as the Old Sacristy. However, he was instructed to design wall tombs instead. This shift proved decisive. By embedding the tombs within the architecture, Michelangelo was able to merge structural form and sculptural narrative into a single system.¹⁰

Each tomb is set within a deep niche and framed by an architectural structure that both contains and amplifies the sculptures. On the tomb of Giuliano, the reclining figures of Day and Night twist in strained, uneasy poses, embodying the passage of time and the burden of mortality. On the opposite tomb, Dawn and Dusk stretch and sink in similarly restless forms above Lorenzo. These figures contrast sharply with the composed, almost detached statues of the dukes above them, whose gazes are directed not toward their own remains but toward the Madonna and Child positioned between the tombs. This arrangement establishes a symbolic hierarchy, guiding both the physical and spiritual focus of the space.¹¹



¹⁰ James S. Ackerman 1986, 22

¹¹ Robert Coughlan 1979, 138-145

Figure 15: Medici Chapel, Michelangelo Buonarroti

Collana Diretta da Luigi Vagnetti, *Section of the Medici Chapel*, 1965, Digital image, accessed April 2, 2026

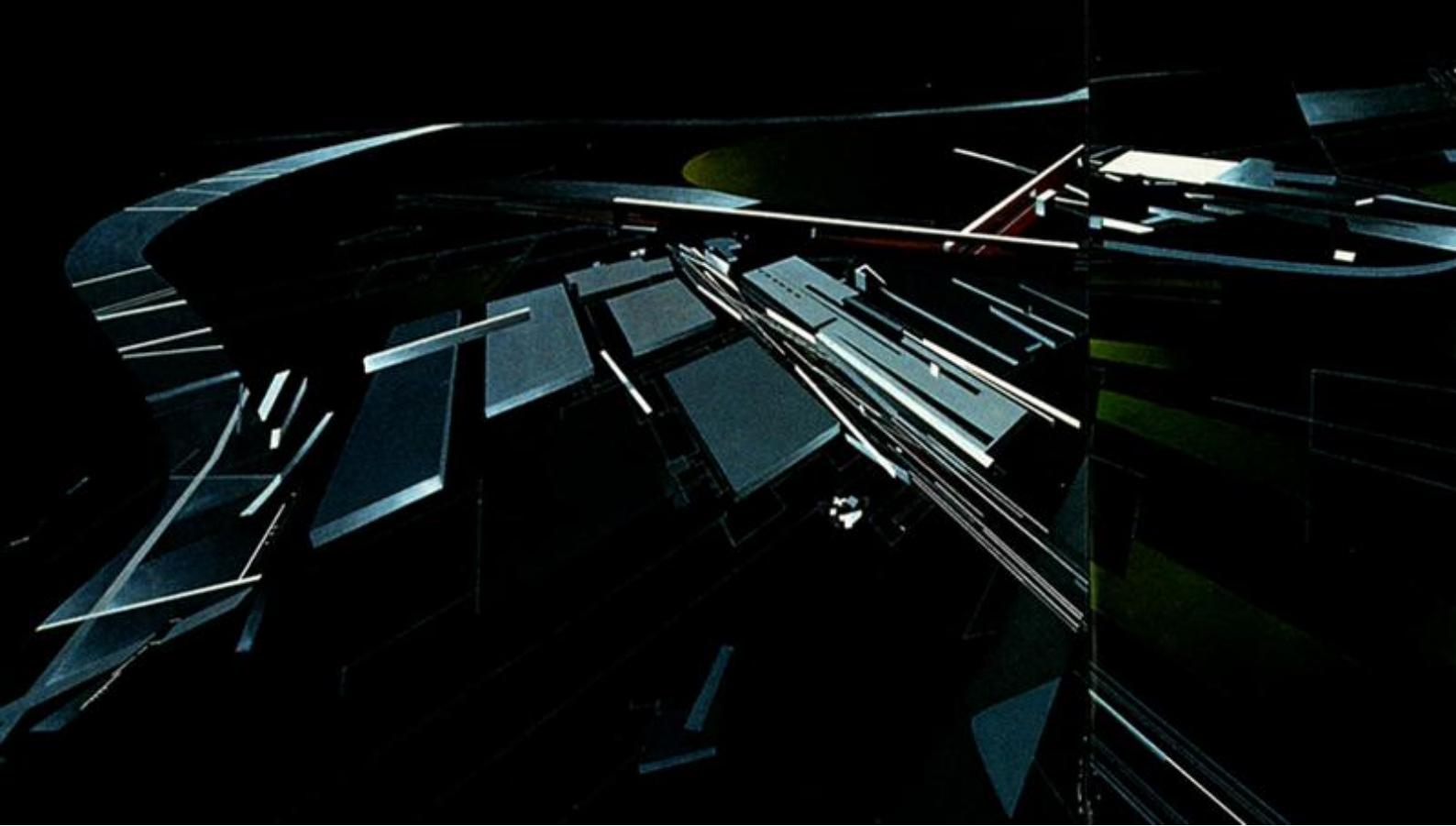
Materiality plays a crucial role in reinforcing Michelangelo's sculptural approach. The contrast between the dark pietra serena stone and the lighter plaster surfaces heightens the perception of depth and mass. The stone elements anchor the composition, emphasizing weight and structural gravity, while light animates the surfaces, revealing the carved complexity of the forms. Through this interplay, the architecture achieves a tactile, almost physical presence, as though it could be felt as much as seen.¹²

Ultimately, the Medici Chapel represents a radical rethinking of architectural practice through the lens of sculptural training. Michelangelo treats architecture not as a system governed by structural necessity, but as a malleable medium for artistic expression. Classical forms are not rejected but transformed, stretched, and reconfigured to serve a new vision. The result is a hybrid space in which architecture and sculpture are inseparable, a unified composition shaped by the hand of a sculptor.

¹² James S. Ackerman 1986, 53-67

Figure 16: Medici chapel, Michelangelo
Michelangelo Buonarroti, Madonna and child, 1521-31, Marble, Web Gallery of Art, accessed March 6, 2026
https://www.wga.hu/html_m/m/michelangelo/sculpture/medici/3madonna1.html





Vitra Fire Station

The transition from the avant-garde canvas to the physical landscape is rarely as literal or as potent as it is in Zaha Hadid's Vitra Fire Station in Weil am Rhein.¹³

This project operates less as a conventional building and more as a constructed spatial composition, avoiding the traditional starting point of object-making in favor of pure abstraction. Before the architecture changes into a recognizable volume, it exists as an investigation of line, plane, and directional force. This method reveals the profound artistic discipline shaping the work: the legacy of Suprematist fragmentation translated into architectural space. Suprematism, particularly in the radical work of

Kazimir Malevich, treated the canvas as a field of floating geometric tensions where planes were dislocated, tilted, and set into dynamic relationships that denied a stable, fixed perspective.¹⁴ At Vitra, this painterly logic is not merely illustrated; it is operationalized. The building behaves as a painting expanded into an inhabitable form, where architecture emerges from the collision of lines extended into planes, and planes thickened into volume.

Fragmentation serves as the primary spatial generator throughout the station. Walls are treated as autonomous abstract planes rather than simple enclosing surfaces; they function as directional vectors that stretch, fracture, and intersect.¹⁵ The geometry progresses with an almost mathematical clarity, from point to line, to plane, to spatial mass, yet this is an exercise in analytic construction rather than digital parametric.

Figure 17: Vitra Fire Station, Zaha Hadid Architects

Zaha Hadid Foundation, *Vitra Fire Station*, 1990 – 1993, painting, Zaha Hadid Architects accessed February 28, 2026 <https://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/vitra-fire-station-2/>

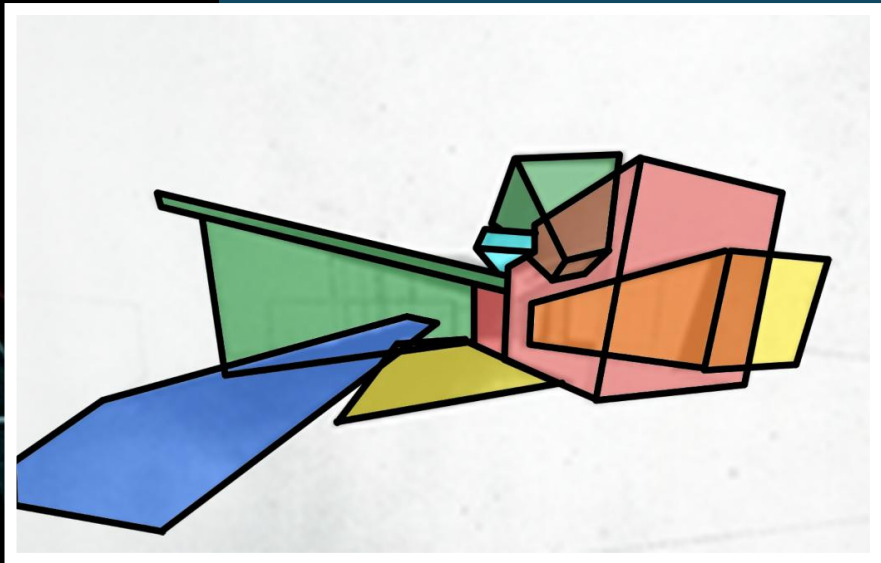
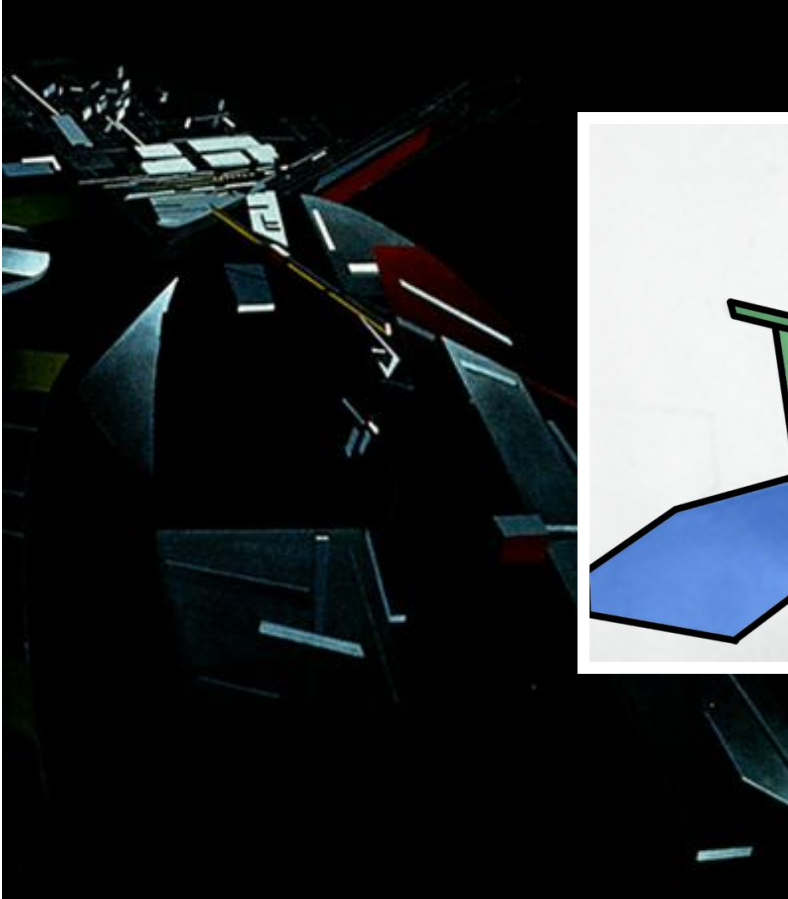


Figure 18: Analysis of the volumes of Vitra Fire Station
Own work

The project unfolds from these abstract relationships outward toward material reality, growing from linear corridors carved into what had previously been residual territory on the Vitra campus.¹⁶ Consequently, the fire station avoids the appearance of an assembled box, instead reading as a moment of frozen movement. Each wall carries an inherent momentum, with diagonal thrusts that pull the eye forward to compress and release space.

The structure appears to be caught mid-shift, as if a set of invisible vectors has momentarily solidified into concrete.

This sense of momentum dictates a circulation that is never neutral. It is sharply directional and axial yet perpetually destabilized by diagonal forces. The human body is not invited to wander fluidly through the station; it is propelled. Long, linear corridors function like stretched brushstrokes, guiding firefighters toward rapid deployment through an experience that is compressive rather than expansive.

This diagonal movement purposefully disrupts classical perspective, ensuring that one rarely stands in a position of symmetrical overview. Instead, sightlines are skewed as walls taper, ceilings tilt, and horizons slip. The result is a destabilized spatial perception where space feels active, resisting balance. This mirrors the Suprematist strategy where depth is intentionally ambiguous and orientation is uncertain, forcing the occupant to experience space as a field of tension rather than a container of volume.

Spatially, the building is additive, assembled from fragmented planes that overlap to create volume through their collisions. It does not present itself as a singular block dropped onto the site but behaves as an extension of the ground plane, stretching outward along the campus edge. Hadid famously described the building as a "shield," implying that the architecture is territorial before it is volumetric. The roofline, articulated and angular, produces a "skyline within a skyline," creating a sculptural dimension that operates as a low, elongated relief against the horizon.

17



Figure 19: Vitra Fire Station, Zaha Hadid Architects

Hélène Binet, *Vitra Fire Station*, 1990 – 1993, photograph, Zaha Hadid Architects accessed March 5, 2026 <https://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/vitra-fire-station-2/>

Figure 20: Suprematism artwork, Kazimir Severinovich Malevich

Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, *Suprematist construction of color*, 1929, painting, Arthive accessed March 5, 2026 https://arthive.com/ru/kazimirmalevich/works/474881~Suprematicheskoe_postroenie_tsveta



This horizontal composition, thickened into three dimensions, allows the building to function simultaneously as sculpture and as vital spatial infrastructure. Within this shell, light acts as another sculptural actor. It is neither diffuse nor atmospheric but sharp and precise. Openings are sliced into the planes to produce linear beams that emphasize the building's angular tensions.¹⁸ Rather than washing surfaces evenly, illumination cuts across them, allowing shadows to sharpen edges and make the fragmentation of the planes more legible.

The boundaries of the station are rarely blurred; they are abrupt, angular, and precise. Thresholds occur as sharp spatial breaks where corners slice and planes terminate cleanly. This sharpness reinforces the Suprematist influence, maintaining the autonomy of each plane even as they form an enclosure. However, this geometric assertion does not produce isolation. Instead, the building extends the site, laterally, thickening the campus edge to create structured pockets for activity.

Ultimately, the crucial aspect of the Vitra Fire Station is not what the building looks like, but how it conceives space as an energized field generated by intersecting lines of force.

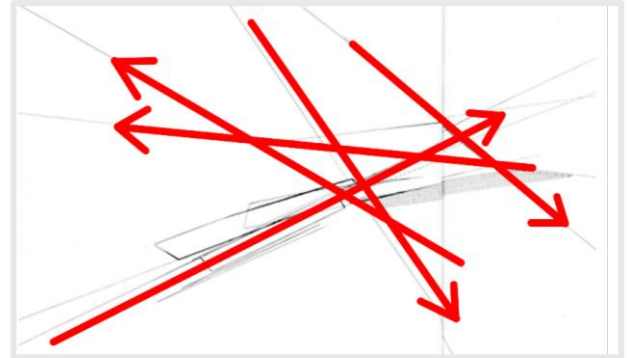


Figure 21: Analysis of the boundaries
Own work

By moving from a macro territorial strategy to a micro spatial articulation, Hadid allowed abstraction to condense into built form. The fire station does not merely sit on its site; it transforms the edge into force and the abstract into the operational, proving that the canvas can indeed become space.

**‘IF YOU ARE IN THE
BUILDING, YOU SEE
EVERYTHING,
CONTINUING
WHEREVER YOU
MIGHT BE’**

¹³ Vitra Fire Station, zaha-hadid.com

¹⁴ Patrik Schumacher 2004, 60-67

¹⁵ Yoshio. Futagawa 1995, 62-91

¹⁶ Patrik Schumacher 2004, 60-67

¹⁷ Yoshio. Futagawa 1995, 62-91

¹⁸ Patrik Schumacher 2004, 60-67

Wangjing Soho



The design operates as a direct translation between sculptural intuition and digital fabrication, where form is not merely applied to a structural grid but emerges as a continuous field of flowing geometry. Rather than assembling discrete elements, the three towers develop as a family of volumes shaped by perceived directional forces, as if wind currents or water erosion had carved their surfaces over millennia. This architectural language is not one of additive composition but of continuous transformation, where each tower evolves from a singular geometric logic to create a cohesive, shifting landscape of vertical forms.

Digital tools serve as the contemporary sculpting instruments in this process, allowing complex, double-curved surfaces to be modeled and rationalized for the reality of construction. Through parametric modeling, the fluid gestures of early conceptual sketches are translated into precise structural systems and

The artistic synthesis of Wangjing SOHO in Beijing represents a profound evolution in Zaha Hadid's career, marking a transition from the sharp, fragmented "Suprematist" logic of her early work to a more fluid, "Parametric" language. In this project, the architectural mindset is inseparable from the digital technologies that produce it.

buildable envelopes. The resulting geometry is fundamentally curving, avoiding orthogonal grids in favor of continuous surfaces that sweep upward and taper toward the sky. These forms destabilize conventional architectural perception; instead of corners and planar façades, the surfaces bend and stretch to produce a sense of constant motion. The towers appear aerodynamic and organic,

Figure 22: Wangjing Soho, Zaha Hadid Architects

Zaha Hadid, *Wangjing Soho*, 2009-2014, floorplan & mass study, Zaha Hadid Architects accessed March 6, 2026 <https://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/wangjing-soho/>

Figure 23: Wangjing Soho, Zaha Hadid Architects
Virgile Simon Bertrand, *Wangjing Soho*, 2009-2014, photograph, Zaha Hadid Architects accessed March 6, 2026
<https://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/wangjing-soho/>



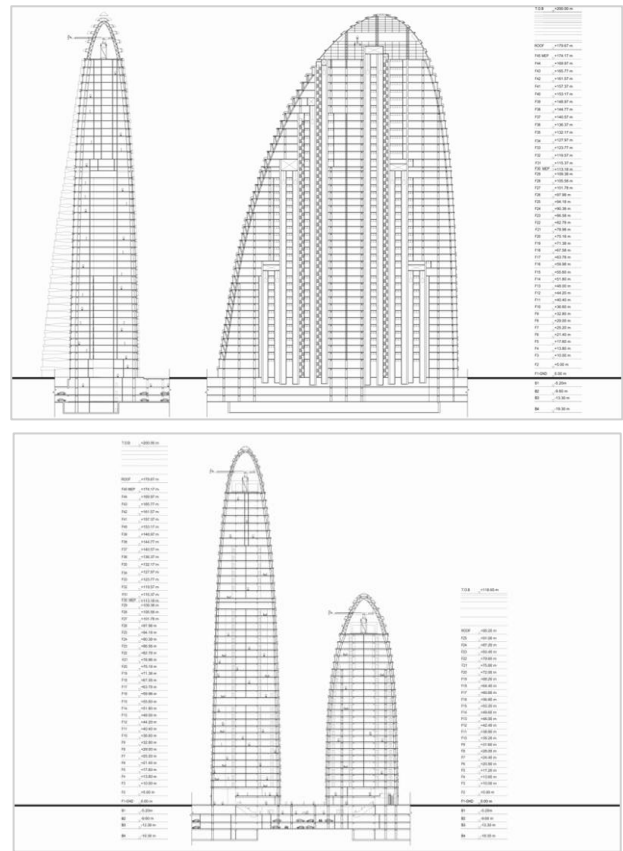
resembling eroded landforms or desert dunes where geometry is defined by gradual deformation rather than rigid alignment. This curvilinear language does more than define the silhouette of the towers; it organizes the spatial relationships between them. The buildings lean and curve away from one another,

creating an undulating "canyon" of expanding and contracting voids at the ground level.¹⁹ Movement through the site is choreographed by the geometry itself, as the human body experiences a sequence of widening and narrowing passages framed by smooth, towering surfaces.

In this way, the towers do not function as isolated objects placed on a sterile plaza; they operate as integrated elements within a continuous spatial composition that merges the urban fabric with the architectural object.

Material expression reinforces this sense of fluidity through a façade conceived as a smooth, "continuous skin." Composed of horizontal ribbons of white aluminum and glass that wrap around each volume, the skin creates a layered texture that emphasizes curvature while maintaining visual continuity. Rather than a heavy or tactile materiality, the surface feels light and atmospheric. The reflective glazing captures the shifting light of the Beijing sky, allowing the towers to change appearance throughout the day as shadows trace the deep curves of the façade.²⁰ This treatment effectively dissolves the traditional distinction between wall and roof, as surfaces fold seamlessly over the crest of the towers, reinforcing the perception of the building as a singular sculpted mass rather than a collection of separate parts.²¹

The construction logic of Wangjing SOHO reveals how digital tools mediate between this high-level artistic intention and structural feasibility. In conventional high-rise architecture, the structural grid often dictates a repetitive, box-like form. Here, the relationship is reversed: geometry initiates the design, and the structural system, including the reinforced concrete cores and floor plates, adapts to support the tapering profiles. Parametric modeling allowed each individual façade panel to be rationalized into buildable components that follow the changing curvature of the towers while maintaining a consistent assembly logic. Technology, therefore, becomes the bridge that ensures these complex forms do not remain merely conceptual but are realized with spatial clarity.



Ultimately, Wangjing SOHO demonstrates how architecture can operate as large-scale digital sculpture. The towers behave less like stacked floors and more like carved volumes rising from the earth. Just as a sculptor manipulates clay, the architect here manipulates surfaces, vectors, and parametric relationships, with the final building serving as the physical manifestation of these digital operations. In this context, the artistic mindset is not separate from technology; it is amplified by it. Computational tools extend the capacity to shape space, allowing sculptural ideas to evolve into an inhabitable urban reality. The result is a trio of smooth, flowing figures that translate abstract geometry into a landmark of the digital age.

¹⁹ Patrik Schumacher 2004, 223

²⁰ Wangjing Soho, [zaha-hadid.com](https://www.zaha-hadid.com)

²¹ Patrik Schumacher 2004, 223

Figure 24 & 25: Wangjing Soho, Zaha Hadid Architects

Zaha Hadid, *Wangjing Soho*, 2009-2014, sections, Zaha Hadid Architects accessed March 6, 2026
<https://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/wangjing-soho/>

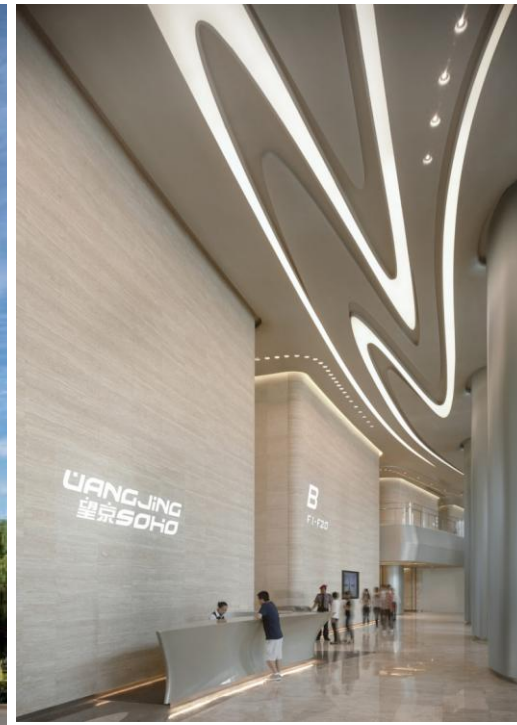


Figure 26, 27 & 28: Wangjing Soho, Zaha Hadid Architects
Virgile Simon Bertrand, *Wangjing Soho*, 2009-2014, photograph, Zaha Hadid Architects accessed March 6, 2026 <https://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/wangjing-soho/>

03 | CONCLUSION

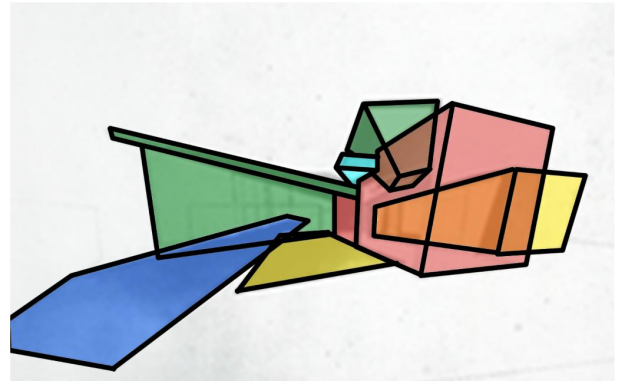
Artistic training

Michelangelo and Zaha Hadid each translate an artistic discipline into a spatial logic that redefines architecture from within. Michelangelo's sculptural training manifests in an architecture of mass and subtraction, where walls are treated as carved bodies and classical elements are compressed, embedded, and made plastic. The Medici Chapel behaves not as a container for sculpture but as sculpture itself, a unified material composition shaped through depth, weight, and controlled deformation.



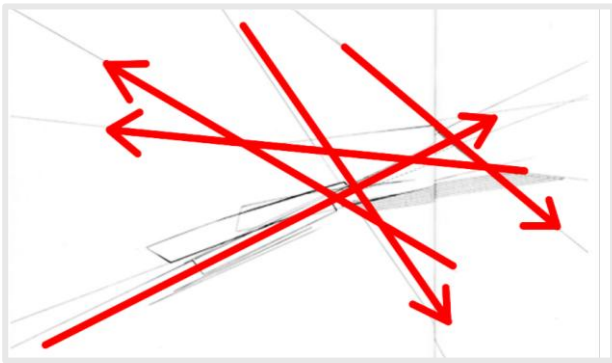
Hadid, by contrast, operates through the discipline of abstract painting, particularly Suprematist composition. In the Vitra Fire Station, architectural form emerges from fragmentation, directional force, and the expansion of line into plane and volume. Space is not carved but constructed through intersecting vectors, producing a building that reads as a painting unfolded into three dimensions, where movement and tension replace stability.

In both cases, architecture becomes an extension of artistic thinking: Michelangelo's work behaves as carved mass, while Hadid's operates as spatial composition in motion. Neither is purely building in the conventional sense, each is a disciplinary crossover where architecture inherits the logic of another medium and, in doing so, transforms its own.

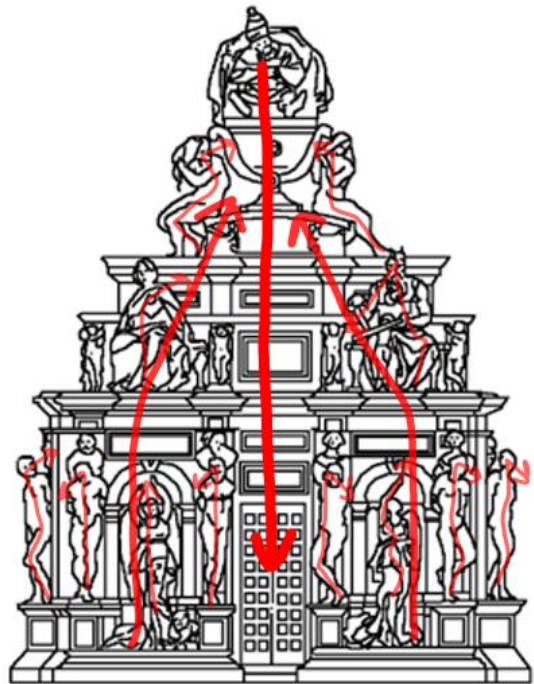


Spatial thinking

A comparison between the Tomb of Pope Julius II and the Vitra Fire Station reveals two fundamentally different spatial conceptions rooted in their creators' artistic disciplines. In Michelangelo's monument, space operates through a sculptural logic of frontal confrontation. Movement is dynamic, guiding the viewer towards the central figure of Moses, from which the surrounding architectural elements guide perception upward and outward. Volume is therefore experienced as layered and subtractive, created through deeply carved niches and projecting sculptures that emerge from the wall. Light intensifies this spatial effect through dramatic contrasts of illumination and shadow, producing a sculptural chiaroscuro that emphasizes depth and material presence. The boundaries between architecture and sculpture remain tense yet clearly articulated, as figures push outward from their architectural frames.



The Vitra Fire Station operates through an almost opposite spatial logic. Here movement is diagonal and directional, with elongated corridors and sharply angled planes propelling the body through the building. Volume is additive, formed by fragmented planes that intersect to generate space. Light cuts sharply across these surfaces, accentuating their angular tension, while boundaries remain precise and abrupt. The result is a dynamic spatial field where architecture behaves like a painterly composition translated into inhabitable form.



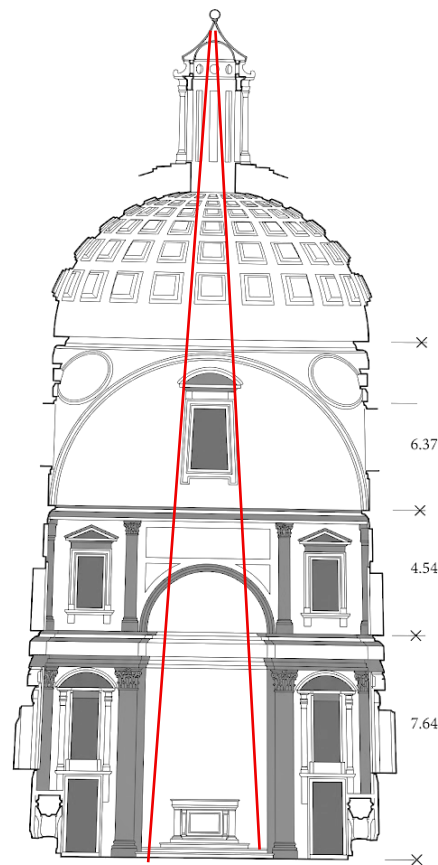
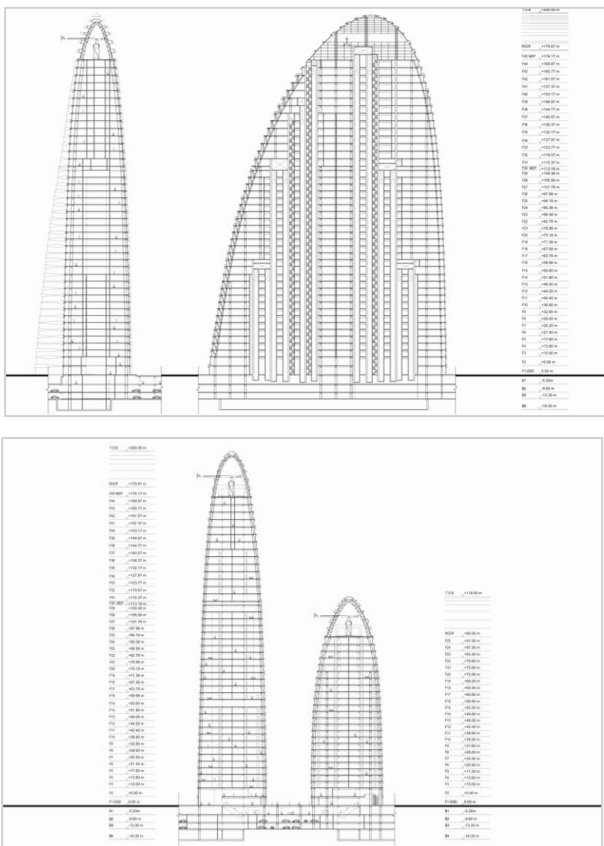
Form and Technique

The relationship between artistic vision and material realization is also central to the architectural language of both architects.

Michelangelo's architecture relies on distorted classical geometry. Classical elements such as pilasters, cornices, and pediments remain present, but they are manipulated to create tension rather than order. Pilasters are elongated, niches are deeply recessed, and architectural elements are pushed beyond their conventional proportions. This manipulation reflects the sculptor's approach to form: architecture becomes a material field shaped according to expressive intention. Stone plays a critical role in this process. The contrast between *pietra serena* and plaster highlights the depth and mass of the carved surfaces, reinforcing the sense that architecture is physically excavated from solid material.

Hadid's formal language, by contrast, emerges through curvilinear geometry enabled by digital technology. Projects such as Wangjing SOHO rely on parametric modeling to generate continuous surfaces that cannot be achieved through traditional architectural methods. The smooth envelopes and flowing volumes of the towers demonstrate how digital tools function as contemporary sculpting instruments. Structure adapts to the geometry rather than dictating it, reversing the traditional hierarchy between engineering and form.

In both cases, technique acts as a bridge between artistic concept and built reality. Michelangelo's technique is the physical act of carving, while Hadid's is computational modeling and digital fabrication. Yet both approaches allow artistic vision to directly shape architectural form.



Representation

Perhaps the clearest distinction between the two architects lies in the role of representation within their design processes.

For Michelangelo, representation is closely tied to material thinking. His sketches, clay models, and studies serve primarily to understand volume and proportion before carving begins. Design evolves through the physical manipulation of material, with the final form gradually revealed through subtraction. The act of making becomes inseparable from the act of designing.

Hadid's process operates in the opposite direction. Her drawings and paintings are not descriptive representations of a building but generative spatial experiments. She uses distorted perspectives and renderings instead of floorplans, sections and façades. These abstract compositions explore perspective, movement, and geometry long before construction becomes possible. Architecture emerges from the transformation of these visual explorations into buildable structures.



Figure 29: Anatomy sketch, Michelangelo Buonarroti
Michelangelo, *Study of a leg*, 1524, sketch, Teylers Museum Haarlem, accessed April 13, 2026 <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/michelangelo-drawings-cleveland-museum-art-1657066>

This contrast highlights two fundamentally different design methodologies. In Michelangelo's work, material generates form, while in Hadid's work representation generates architecture.

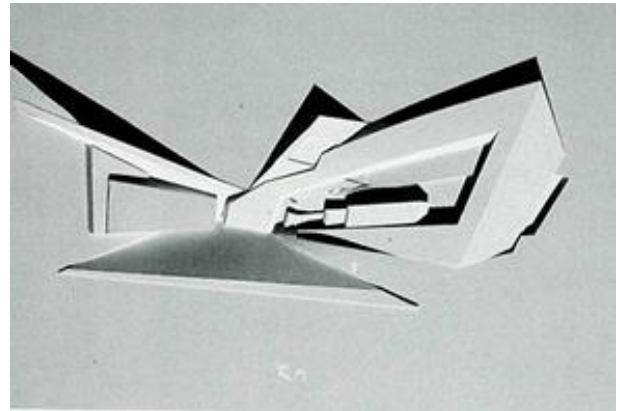


Figure 30: Vitra Fire station, Zaha Hadid Architects
Zaha Hadid, *Perspective of Vitra Fire station*, 2009-2014, collage, Zaha Hadid Architects accessed March 6, 2026 <https://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/vitra-fire-station-2/>

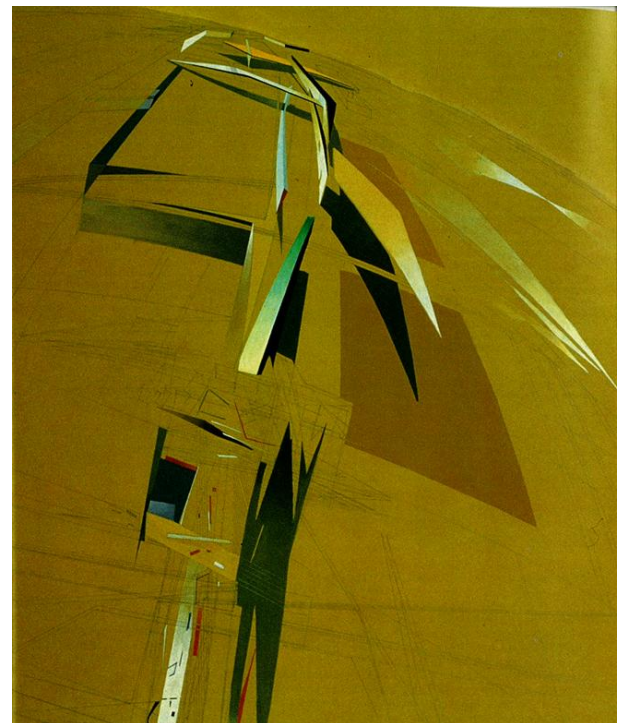


Figure 31: Vitra Fire Station, Zaha Hadid Architects
Zaha Hadid, *Vitra Fire Station*, 2009-2014, render, Zaha Hadid Architects accessed March 6, 2026 <https://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/vitra-fire-station-2/>

Final Reflection

Ultimately, the comparison between Michelangelo and Zaha Hadid demonstrates that architecture can function as a direct continuation of artistic practice. Whether through sculptural carving or abstract drawing, both architects reveal how artistic training shapes the way space is imagined, represented, and constructed.

Across five centuries of architectural history, their work shows that the architect is not merely a technical planner but a spatial thinker whose intellectual tools originate in artistic disciplines. Michelangelo transformed stone into architecture through the logic of sculpture, while Hadid transformed abstract drawings into inhabitable landscapes through digital technology.

Together, their work illustrates a continuous lineage in which architecture emerges as an expanded form of artistic expression, bridging material craft, spatial imagination, and technological innovation.



Figure 32: The 3D printed model (left) and a test in wax (right)
Oak Taylor-Smith, *Michelangelo's small model*, Sculpture, Factum Foundation accessed February 28, 2026
<https://factumfoundation.org/our-projects/facsimiles/facsimile-of-a-wax-prisoner-by-michelangelo/>



Figure 33: "Jonge slaaf", Michelangelo Buonarotti
Michelangelo, *The Young Slave*, 1530, Sculpture, Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze accessed February 28, 2026
<https://epochtimes.nl/de-grootsheid-van-michelangelo-en-zhuangzi/>

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