MOONSOON RESTAURANT, SAPPORO

Although the tongues of flame and glacial splinters originally appear as abstract totems in Hadid's early painted studies, the built project is remarkably similar in terms of form and spirit, suffused with gravity-defying shapes that suggest movement and infinite space.

The first floor restaurant is a monochromatic world through which clear glass tables drift like stray shards of iceberg. A staircase formed from extruded slabs of unpolished optical glass leads down a triangular dining area defined on two sides by a grid of rectangular etched glass panels. On the third side a series of irregularly cut panes screens off the kitchen. The central focus of the restaurant is a long, low-lying table, of the type commonly found in Japanese drinking establishments. This rigid, rather lifeless slab is flanked by chairs that look as though they have been moulded from snow. Hadid actively exploits the surface textures and natural irregularities of her chosen materials—stainless steel is brushed and burnished and the slabs of optical glass retain the undulating hallmarks of the extrusion process. In the generally rigorous scheme of things, these subtleties acquire an enhanced visual potency.

If the two floors do resemble heavenly palaces, then the sculptural fibre-glass dividers—dubbed the 'Orange Peel'—that joins together the opposing cosmo-plane, is an erotic and mastoid entity. It emerges embryonically as a tightly wound coil above the dining area and penetrates upwards, toad-like, to the hellfire floor, where it

Sapporo's famous seasonal ice sculptures

behavioural abnormality is sanctioned, as long as it is seen to be part of a larger context. This context is usually governed by an elaborate system of ritualistic rules, with pleasure derived exclusively from respecting, following and becoming absorbed in these rules. One obvious example is the 16-hour-a-day salaried men's energetic nocturnal drinking habits. Such excessive behaviour is tolerated and even encouraged, because it is recognised as simply one aspect of the larger culture of work and company loyalty. Similarly, much is made by Westerners of the apparent lack of aesthetic control practised in Japanese building, which then tends to be held responsible for the frequently nightmarish condition of the urban environment. But this freedom to cut loose stylistically is contained by an exciting and singularly immutable framework of building regulations and structural requirements. When idiosyncratic outsiders such as Hadid are precluded into this fixed model, a fascinating tension is generated, akin to the heightened, slightly fearful anticipation that surrounds a potentially dangerous experiment. However, on the strength of a single restaurant interior is too soon to predict whether this particular experiment will fulfill its tantalising early promise.

Moonsoon restaurant, Sapporo, Japan
Architect Zaha Hadid