This building study will not concern itself with the so-called superstar status of its architect. Neither will it adopt inappropriate superlatives that inaccurately place the building at the forefront of state of the art architectural progress; those that allude to performative infrastructures, warp factors, or fractal forms of linear urbanism. It will instead focus on the physical reality of one of the world’s largest pieces of hand-crafted in-situ concrete, and one of Zaha Hadid Architects (ZHA) most accomplished projects to date, the Pheno Science Centre: a building that challenges formal convention, compressing construction history by merging ancient and modern techniques as handmade formwork meets advanced computer analysis. Cast from over 27,000 cubic metres of self-compacting concrete, the fact that this building is a technological triumph is not in dispute. It has been discussed at length in an earlier technical review (AR January 2006). Its completion, however, now lies in its holistic coherence, both as a work in its own right – as a synthesis of materiality, space making and formal manipulation – and as an experiment in place-making; or, as Hadid defines it, mini-urbanism.

In anticipation of this long awaited work, many have rushed to draw early conclusions, illustrating observations with bleak unoccupied photographs set in stark isolation. This review, however, attempts to unify building, user and locale through Dennis Gilbert’s insightful photographs of the building in use images that deserve to be seen in amplified format. It also seeks to demonstrate how the building has found its place in Wolfsburg; how it has resolved its three relations when viewed from station, Porschestraße, and neighbouring Autostadt visitor centre; and how it performs as a science centre, established to help broaden Wolfsburg’s appeal as a cultural destination.

Despite the City Architect’s interest in an island building, placed at the centre of the site, ZHA’s strategic decision to push the building hard up against the ICE rail line was key to its success in defining a public space and termination to Porschestraße, the city’s main public precinct. With preoccupations born from her 1994 Cardiff Bay Opera House proposals, Pheno serves as a critique of the Modern Movement’s use of the ground plane, which in Hadid’s view failed to usefully regenerate land liberated by plots. Her second critique of Modernism focuses on the limitations of mass-production when applied to civic situations, which is not only pertinent to Wolfsburg’s industrial heritage, but also to Hadid’s interest in producing civic buildings that derive essentially from uniqueness; one-off responses to sites and situations that apply unity and extend thirty years of the Hadid architectural research curriculum, which in relation to Pheno includes subject categories like Continuous Surfaces, Carved Spaces, Excavations, Fields and Liquid Spaces... continued p52

DESTINATION WOLFSBURG

Burg or a berg ... stronghold or floating mass? ... Pheno is open to interpretation.

SCIENCE CENTRE,
WOLFSBURG, GERMANY
ARCHITECT
ZAHIA HADID