A windswept plain outside Leipzig is an unlikely place to find the latest crop of supercars and luxury cars. Looming through the frost and fog of a Saxony winter, BMW’s new manufacturing plant materials as a sprawling agglomeration of impressive grey shells surrounded by acres of workers’ cars. From the autobahn, it looks like a nondescript shopping mall, rather than a carefully calibrated synthesis of manufacturing technology, superstar architecture, big bucks and branding. At its heart, or rather brain, is Zaha Hadid’s Central Building, the formal, technical and social focus of the plant that keeps the entire operation running smoothly, capable of churning out 650 box-fresh Series 3 Beemers each day. It is a serious investment in architecture, and for Hadid, as car companies start to resemble she Medici, a chance to build on an almost operatic scale and put her architectural ambitions to the test.

Officially opened in mid May by Chancellor Schröder, the new plant was one of Europe’s largest construction projects. With an appropriately mammoth budget, building £900 000 million (Hadid’s building accounted for £37.1 million), it was seen as a reassuring commitment by BMW to the industry and economy of its native land. When the company first announced its intention to build a new manufacturing complex, expressions of interest came from all over Europe. Located almost exactly at the centre of Germany, Leipzig was chosen for its convenient geography (easy connections with BMW’s Munich nerve centre) and its skilled but languishing workforce (135 000 people applied for jobs at the plant). Historically, Saxony is a carmaking country, with connections dating back to 1904 when August Horch founded the firm that later became Audi in Zwickau near the German/Czech border. Today, along with Audi and BMW,