production, like burly minders clustering round a potentially temperamental film star. Inside, the production halls for body making, assembly and paint finishing (not designed by Hadid) are relatively light and airy, but their scale is mind-bogglingly vast: Staff use bicycles and scooters to get around the interiors, an endearingly Monsieur Hulot-esque touch amid the robotic sophistication. Developed especially for Leipzig BMW’s hyper flexible work structures means that the plant can vary its operational times from 60 to 140 hours a week, depending on demand, with no loss of efficiency.

The Central Building is distinguished from its lumbering supporting players by Hadid’s characteristically dynamic geometry—in plan, it resembles a lightning bolt, physically connecting (and metaphorically animating) the surrounding sheds. Interstitial spaces are landscaped to become contemplative courtyards. The building’s sleek horizontality is emphasised by long slits of glazing cut into its flanks (Zaha’s version of Go Faster stripes, perhaps). At its north end, a huge dark blue volume, like a whale or ship’s prow, juts out from behind the sheds to mark the main entrance.

Visitors, management and workers alike, since everyone uses the same entrance, are greeted by a soaring glazed lobby that acts as a giant vitrine for BMW’s past and present, together with a café and the obligatory merchandise boutique. Overhead, the car skeletons (a raw steel chassis is known as a Body in White) slide soundlessly past, drenched in cool blue light. Here you also encounter the building’s imposing concrete structure, its astonishing precision made possible by the miracle of self-compacting concrete (AR January 2004). It seems as though the technical capabilities of construction and the architectural potential of form-making, through computer visualisation, has at last caught up with and made manifest the outpourings of Hadid’s imagination, for so long widely considered unbuildable.

Beyond the entrance hall lies a modern Parametric office landscape of terraces, ramps, plateaux and staircases. The building’s primary organisational strategy is a scissors section that fuses ground and first floor into a continuous entity. Two terrace structures, like hanging gardens of Buroholland, step up in opposite directions, along the north-south axis framing a long void in between. At the bottom of the void is the auditing area—every 50th car is pulled off the production line and taken to bits for quality control purposes. Experimentally, individual workers are actually conscious of being part of a larger enterprise. There are no hierarchies or management offices—each of the 740 Central Building employees, from trainee to CEO, has an identical, no-nonsense modular workstation. The only enclosed spaces are technical and testing areas on the ground floor and these have large glazed walls like shopfronts overlooking an internal street. “Structure creates behaviours” proclaims BMW somewhat ominously, but within the elaborate contortions of the architecture there is a discernible sense of community, of space and placemaking.

From River Rouge to Lingotto, car factories, like cinemas, are a truly modern building type, shaped by the technological and commercial demands of the twentieth century. Of their time and for their time, they manifested a kind of heroic industrial spirit, even romance in the case of FIAT’s Lingotto plant in Turin with its whizzy rooftop test track. At their best, such buildings stretched architectural imagination to devise solutions that could put manufacturers ahead of their competitors and express brand supremacy. A recurring theme of this issue is the extraordinary lengths today’s car manufacturers will go to in order to hijack architecture in the service of their products. With Hadid, however, you sense BMW have got something rather different—a genuinely radical building, both formally and spatially, that re-imagines the conventions, activities and hierarchies of the industrial workplace and recasts them as an efficient, flexible and dynamic organism. This really is Go Faster architecture. CATHERINE SLESSOR

Architects
Zaha Hadid Architects, London
Structural engineers
Anthony Hunt Associates
A&D Arge Gesamtplanning
Services engineers
A&D Arge Gesamtplanning
Landscape architect
Graaf Max
Photographs
Deane Gibb/View except p. 15

Office terrace.

The plant dining hall, shared by workers and management.

Intimates have a hard-edged, industrial quality that reflects the building’s complex programming.