

books



CALATRAVA: COMPLETE WORKS 1979-2007 (by Philip Jodidio; Taschen, rrp £79.99) Santiago Calatrava is an architect who used to be feted by critics, but is now largely shunned by them. In this respect alone he is similar to Daniel Libeskind. We're starting to see the backlash against Zaha Hadid, too. Being very, very successful is no way to a critic's heart. We like to see a bit of struggle, and we like to see artistic development. When the world is falling over itself to offer you commissions, the creative hunger – and the originality that comes with it – does tend to fade somewhat. The compensation is that you can do pretty much what you like. But it takes different architects in different ways.

Calatrava, as if to buck the trend, is determined to be ever more startlingly different, ever more sculptural, ever more organic and curvy and bony. And white, always white. His buildings – be they opera houses or skyscrapers – get steadily more extreme. Because they make excellent photographs and are also undeniably exciting to visit, they tend to be popular. For a dark-suited, slightly monkish individual with practically no media profile as a personality, Calatrava is one hell of a showman when he puts out the product. The trouble is, he thinks he's an artist.

He does derivative sculpture – shades of Brancusi, often – naive watercolours and drawings, usually figurative rather than abstract. This book is full of all that stuff – how does an eight-page fold-out of charging bulls grab you? – and you just want to get past it and on to the next knock-your-socks-off building. Yes, yes, this architecture draws its inspiration from nature, that's obvious. Now will you please stop going on about it?

Over-the-top though it is, you cannot deny that his sequence of arts and science palaces in his native Valencia is stunning. His bridges are beautiful. His towers can tend to resemble Tintin's moon rocket but one in particular – to be America's tallest, the twisting corkscrew of the Chicago Spire – looks promising. He's done a fabulous sinoidal wave of a winery in Rioja. I'm less sure about his kinetic buildings. Yes, some of them move. They flap, they wave. Crowds gather every day at noon in Milwaukee, for instance, to see the giant wings of the Art Museum's Quadracci Pavilion do their stately salute. I've seen it. It's quite a sight. Then you think, what else can it do?

Somehow Calatrava's buildings lack the spark of human warmth. They have a sinister quality. Unlike his great Catalan hero of a century ago, Antoni Gaudí, they lack joy. Indeed, Calatrava's bony structures would make great sets for sci-fi movies. What aliens lurk among their giant bleached ribcages?

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To order *Calatrava* for £71.10 (plus £4.50 UK p&p),
ring the *World of Interiors* Bookshop on 0871 911 1747