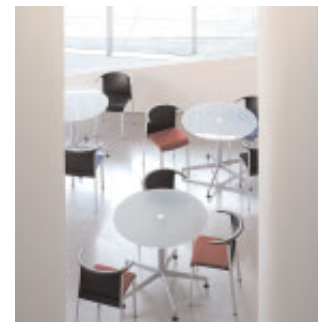


Cincinnati Soars on Its

# Urban Carpet

by Roger Yee



Public rejection didn't discourage Modern art's early devotees from welcoming the new works.

Many Americans saw Modern art for the first time at New York's legendary Armory Show of 1913—and hated it. Works like Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase," an audacious, 1912 abstract painting that depicted neither a nude nor a staircase, quickly became objects of ridicule. However, public rejection didn't discourage Modern art's early devotees from welcoming the new works to New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Cincinnati. Cincinnati? That's right: the Queen City on the Ohio River, the headquarters of Procter & Gamble, Federated Department Stores, and American Financial, and the site of a critical 1990 First Amendment legal contest that established the public's right to see the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe.

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## Cincinnati Soars on Its Urban Carpet, continued

When Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center was founded as the Cincinnati Modern Art Society by art enthusiasts Peggy Frank, Betty Pollack and Rita Rentschler in 1939, New York's Museum of Modern Art was just ten years old. Now, after decades as a guest of numerous quarters, the Center has a freestanding home of its own, the 82,265 square-foot, six-story Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art. This breathtaking concrete, stone and glass structure, designed by Iraqi-born, London-based architect Zaha Hadid, is as bold as anything New York, Los Angeles or Chicago could build.

You can't approach the downtown intersection of Walnut and East Sixth Streets without noticing the Center. Its exterior resembles a gigantic jigsaw puzzle whose parts, enclosing individual galleries, slide past one another like multi-layered curtains on East Sixth Street, and protrude beyond the building line like an overscaled wall sculpture on Walnut Street. Charles Desmarais, director of the Center from 1995 until his

recent resignation (he becomes curator-at-large in July 2004), admits, "The building is an emblem of the Center's involvement in Cincinnati."

The Center's location in the Backstage District, a transitional

neighborhood that also boasts the new Aronoff Center for the Performing Arts, designed by respected architect Cesar Pelli, is the antithesis of its older counterpart across town. The Cincinnati Art Museum has welcomed Cincinnatians since



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1881 to contemplate the great art of the ages from a majestic site atop Eden Park. By contrast, Desmarais cheerfully explains, "The Center engages the public in the art of the last five minutes," making art part of daily life since the 1950s, when it left the Museum's basement for downtown.

## Cincinnati Soars on Its Urban Carpet, continued

The Center displays works by young and emerging artists without collecting any.

Does unpredictable art deserve an unpredictable museum?

Being an exhibition space or what Europeans call a “kunsthalle,” the Center displays works by young and emerging artists without collecting any. Consequently, the Center is free to show art that can be raw, unpredictable and ephemeral. Yet this feisty institution has shared numerous beliefs with more reserved institutions, not the least being a devotion to the neutral “white box” for displaying art. This belief remained unquestioned until the trustees decided to develop a new home in 1996 offering services the public expects from today’s museums, including a café, gift shop, educational and research facilities, and special events accommodations.



Hadid, a respected and articulate theorist, promptly challenged the “white box” after she was chosen as the Center’s architect in 1998. “We told Zaha we wanted a neutral, New York-style loft we could subdivide,” Desmarais recalls. “She replied, ‘Is that how you have to work? What makes a space neutral? Why not build a kit of spaces?’”

Not only did Hadid convince Desmarais and his colleagues that “neutral space” is “a wishful oxymoron.” She also persuaded the Center to create a storytelling environment for “a journey of compression, release, and reflection.” In her vision of the Center, art would interact with galleries representing “something

raw, carved from a single block of concrete and floating over the lobby space.”

Indeed, her design has a storytelling quality. The narrative begins with a ride on an “urban carpet” as the ground curves upward and becomes the back wall, an ascent visitors can experience on the long stair ramps that zigzag up the narrow stairwell. As visitors climb—which most do, ignoring the elevators—they encounter angular galleries of varying sizes and shapes, administrative offices visible from the street, and finally, the “UnMuseum,” a hands-on learning place for children.

## Cincinnati Soars on Its Urban Carpet, continued

How to occupy a brave new world.

How does the interior convey Hadid's vision? Michael P. Kelley, IIDA, vice president and director of interior services for KZF Incorporated, the architect of record that helped Hadid develop her design, observes that the intricacy of geometry and refinement of detailing within the Center are realized through everyday building materials like concrete, steel and drywall. "Everyone made the effort to carry out the flavor and language of what Hadid sketched," he reports. "The emphasis was on quality construction rather than luxurious materials."

To furnish this provocative space, the Center turned to Steelcase, whose generosity registered in numerous ways. "What's wonderful about our partnership with Steelcase," Desmarais indicates, "is that the company let us choose the most appropriate solutions. When we said we wanted a wide-open, contemporary office for our staff, they helped us adapt their most innovative products."



Now that the Center has moved into its new home, Desmarais observes that the odyssey begun by Hadid remains unfinished. "Our next step is to learn how to use this building," he says. "It's one thing to envision it, and another to occupy it. We're all going to be more attentive. We're showing art in a building that's a work of art itself."

## An Iraqi-born Architect at Home in the World.

Ever since the 1997 opening of Frank O. Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, with its swirling volumes of titanium-clad space, the world has celebrated architects who can disrupt our notions of buildings as tidy, rectangular boxes. One of the foremost younger architects in demand for doing this is Zaha Hadid. Hadid, born in Iraq in 1950 and educated at the American University in Beirut and the Architectural Association in London, has been known for challenging popular convention in her theoretical work, which has led her to teaching positions at such institutions as Harvard University, University of Chicago, Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg, Columbia University, Yale University, and University of Applied Arts in Vienna.

Now Hadid is winning major opportunities to test her ideas with actual construction, of which the most ambitious to date is Cincinnati's new Contemporary Arts Center. The Center typifies her approach to design in numerous ways.

First, it reflects her interest in storytelling, creating a journey through space that visualizes the Center's mission as a public forum for contemporary art. In addition, it embodies fresh thinking about the building type it addresses, offering new ways to display art whose form is increasingly unpredictable. Finally, it takes care with its construction, so that the Center's complex forms are properly detailed to fit together well.

People new to her work are likely to be surprised by the Center. Hadid's storytelling tends to be epic in nature, causing the spaces she creates to be pushed and pulled from the usual conventions of straight walls, 90-degree angles and flat roofs. Distinctive as her way of working is, she is determined to give each client a highly personal building that never repeats her past work or anyone else's. This should give such clients as the National Center for Contemporary Arts in Rome, a science center in Wolfsburg, Germany, a ferry terminal in Salerno, Italy, a public square and cinema complex in Barcelona, and the Price Tower Art Center in Bartlesville, Oklahoma—adjacent to Frank Lloyd Wright's Price Tower, no less—much to see and think about.



Zaha Hadid