

excerpts from

An Interview with Charles Desmarais

Director, Contemporary Arts Center

You're about to construct the Contemporary Arts Center's first free-standing home, located in downtown Cincinnati. The project will also be the first building in the United States by the London-based architect Zaha Hadid, and the first museum building in America designed by a woman. Why did you choose Hadid to be your architect?

Our selection committee narrowed down the choices to three very strong finalists: Bernard Tschumi, Daniel Libeskind, and Zaha Hadid. I think the committee settled on those three out of a feeling that a contemporary art museum in a downtown setting ought to give you a sense of energy and dynamism, as distinguished from a more contemplative feeling.

It wasn't easy to choose among the finalists. Any one of them would have given us the dynamism we wanted. I think what nailed it for Zaha Hadid was the infectious enthusiasm she brought to her discussions of the project.

Hadid understands contemporary art and is excited by it. Out of that excitement and understanding, she has designed a building that is more than a series of boxes into which you just drop art objects. She has created spaces that heighten our engagement with art — spaces that let energy flow back and forth between the city and the museum, spaces that give artists something to push against when they make or install their work.

You've mentioned the CAC's downtown location as [a] defining factor. How does the Center's physical presence contribute to the sense of engagement you want to achieve?

When the Center was founded, it held its exhibitions in the basement of the Cincinnati Art Museum...The CAM is in the tradition of great old American museums, located in a public park high on a hill overlooking the city. It's the kind of location that promotes contemplation, along with a reverence for art, for the museum, and for the community that could build such a wonderful place.

All of that is fine — but the CAC is a scrappier kind of institution. It sees itself as much more directly engaged in daily life. So, in the 1950s, the Center came down off the hill and moved downtown, eventually [in 1970] creating a space for itself on the second floor of an office and retail building. Since then, the Center has been a place where people can stop by on a lunch hour or after work or on the run. And that's really affected the way the Center engages its community. Instead of being places of refuge, where you escape from the day-to-day and contemplate higher subjects, our exhibitions are part of a larger political and cultural conversation.

What kind of physical presence does the public expect of the CAC?

First of all, people expect a building that is identified as a museum. They don't see the options as an either-or choice, between having a palace on the hill or having an

unmarked loft. People believe an institution can be fully contemporary and at the same time own up to its status as a museum. One of the reasons we're excited about the CAC's new building is that we're making a sign for the museum. The building is an emblem of the Center's involvement in its community, and of the CAC's role in the city, the nation, and the world of art. And it stands for the part of our city that embraces creativity, innovation, and diversity.

Second, people expect us to provide services beyond those we would have performed in 1970. A museum is supposed to have education spaces, a café, a book store, a place for events and parties, a research space where you can read a book or magazine related to the subject of the current exhibition. For the first time in its long history, the CAC will be able to step forward and offer those services.

Why is it important to you to have the non-standard spaces that Zaha Hadid designs, spaces that are "extraordinary"?

To have built just another container for contemporary art, another big white box, would have forced us into putting on the same kind of exhibitions as a whole network of other institutions. If we were to become a mini version of the Museum of Modern Art or the Pompidou Center, we would

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satisfy one part of our mission, which is to keep our immediate community up-to-date; but we wouldn't be doing anything more to serve audiences and artists on the national and international level.

By creating a building that interacts with works of art, we force ourselves to do things that no one else will do, that no one else could possibly do, because they won't have this instrument.

What I mean, on the simplest level, is that a work of art presents different possibilities for understanding when it's in different settings. That might have to do with nothing more than the angle at which you view the piece. In our new building, you might see an object from above, from below, from a range of different side views. So part of the excitement simply has to do with putting works of art into this context.

Beyond that, we also want to invite artists to make things for these spaces. These pieces will engage directly with the architecture. And, of course, we'll also continue to show a range of installation work. Given the uniqueness of Zaha Hadid's building, artists will have opportunities that wouldn't present themselves in another space.

Some of the [site-specific] works will be semi-permanent installations in our children's education space: a facility we call the UnMuseum.



Kevin Miyazaki

What is the UnMuseum?

Like every other art institution, the CAC has been striving to improve the way it introduces children to art. The whole field is changing rapidly. And yet, for the most part, education centers in art museums still operate on a model of telling children what to think. At best, museum educators ask questions of the children, in a more literary way.

By contrast, science centers and history museums have been presenting kids with hands-on exhibits. The children learn by doing. With the UnMuseum, we're attempting to import some of that interactive approach into museum education.

One of the things we've thrown into the mix is to ask contemporary artists to join us in planning the UnMuseum. We've invited a range of artists — some of them well-known, some not — to create works of art that kids can manipulate and change. The idea is for kids to discover on their own how we get meaning from visual art.

The new building is going to be located in...the Backstage District. Why should the CAC build there?

The CAC will add another kind of experience to the Backstage District — an experience that is more day-time than night-time, an experience that is more participatory. You don't have to buy a ticket a week in advance, as you do with a concert or a show; you don't have to pay a lot of money. You can join in the CAC much more casually than that. The Urban Carpet, as Zaha Hadid calls the entrance, is rolled out, waiting for you to step up.

I also think there will be great synergy between our visual arts institution and the performing arts center across the street. That combination will be of tremendous educational and aesthetic and recreational value to people. And I believe this will help keep the neighborhood growing.

Summing up, how would you characterize the difference between the CAC of 1970, and the CAC that will occupy Zaha Hadid's new building?

The home the CAC moved into in 1970 was one of the few spaces in the United States at that time built specifically to exhibit contemporary art. It's hard to remember, but in 1970 there was no P.S. 1, no New Museum of Contemporary Art, no MOCA in Los Angeles, and certainly no Wexner Center in Columbus. The growth in the field has been tremendous since then.

By creating this new building, the CAC is keeping up with that growth, which it helped to foster. But, more than that, the CAC is also acknowledging a change in its public role. Our building demonstrates that the Center is not an out-of-the-way, "alternative" institution. What the CAC does is now central to our community.

"This is extraordinary news for everyone. It's a magnificent selection. Bravo!"

**- Richsard Koshalek, Director,
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, May 1998**

For the complete text of interviews with Zaha Hadid and Charles Desmarais, visit the CAC web site at <http://www.spiral.org/newbuilding.html>