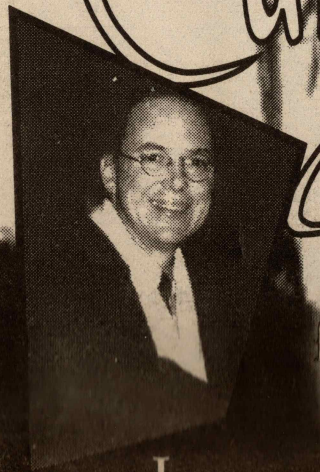


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Inside thoughts on the Architect Committee's search for the designer of the new Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center
by Charles Desmarais, Executive Director

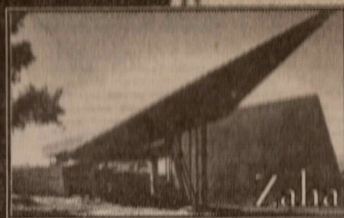
January 17. Delta Air Lines Crown Room. "Start your travel journal with a list of the sights we aren't going to see," Alice Weston says. She has a point: we and the other five members of our party are leaving on a tour of some of the great capitals of Europe, yet we have no plans to visit even one public museum, and if we catch a glimpse of Trafalgar Square or the Eiffel Tower it will be from the window of a moving cab.

Our group is representing the Contemporary Arts Center and its Architect Selection Committee, and we are on a mission. After trimming an international list of candidates from over 300 to 97 to 12, we have now settled on a "short list" of three possible architects, all of them figures who loom quite large in the world of advanced architectural ideas. We will sleep in a different country each of the next five nights. Over the next six days we'll conduct interviews at the finalists' studios in London, Berlin, and New York, and we'll visit buildings in those and three additional cities...

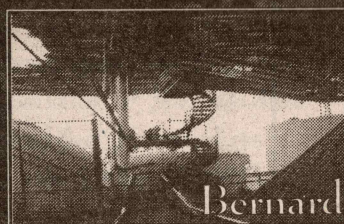
Our group includes CAC trustees James Fitzgerald, Lynne Myers Gordon, Dr. Stanley Kaplan, Dorothy Reed, Alice Weston, as well as her husband Harris (not a member of the committee but a former Board Chairman and a respected advisor) and me. The others are donating their time and the costs of the trip; Delta Air Lines is sponsoring me. Also on the committee, but unable to join us on the trip, are Jay Chatterjee and Richard Rosenthal.

January 18 Galeb is Zaha Hadid's regular driver, and she has loaned him to us for the trip from Gatwick Airport to our London hotel. "She must have everything perfect."

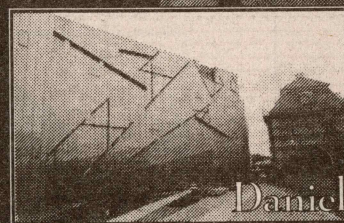
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Zaha Hadid, London



Bernard Tschumi, Paris



Daniel Libeskind, Berlin

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Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, continued from front cover

he has just told us, when the car phone rings. It is Zaha's office, for me: after an all night trip, it appears we may be 20 minutes behind schedule; would we like to postpone our appointment at the studio for 20 or 30 minutes?

Office of Zaha Hadid, 10 Bowling Green Lane, London. We discover a cramped flight of stairs leading to an unmarked, loft-style space...The room is filled to capacity with young, intense people at computers, all dressed in the black uniform of the hip designer. Graham Modlen, Brian Ma Siy, and Markus Dochantschi take us through several projects in the form of models, drawings, and computer animations. One model describes a proposed hall for a major garden exposition in Germany; Markus pries the building from its landscape and sets it on end in a vertical stand: the long structure becomes a futuristic flower vase.

After 40 minutes, Zaha arrives. She, too, is dressed in black—an Issey Miyake wrap—and as she waves her arms, speaking in a rapid staccato, or plays with her long hair, she inhabits a space roughly equal to that of her three young assistants.

We have met Zaha before, as we have met all the finalists when they came to Cincinnati among nine semi-finalists invited to view the site and present their qualifications. So there is less posturing and unease than the situation might otherwise dictate, and we get down to business promptly.

None of our finalists has built a great many buildings. They are young in a field in which it can take a lifetime to be noticed. Hadid, at 48 the youngest of all, has completed two freestanding buildings (several others are on the way), and now we get a hint as to why.

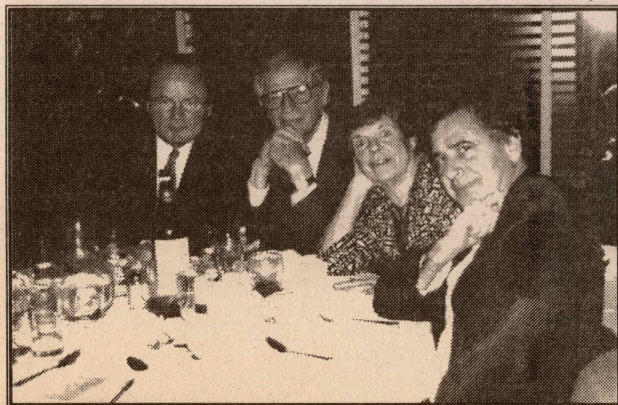
Brian tells us the story, not the last time we will hear it today, of the Cardiff Bay Opera House commission, which Hadid won in a competition with 296 entries. "We had to win the competition three times," he says, as the building became the center of a series of controversies. The model is drop-dead gorgeous, the committee agrees: multi-faceted jewels of glass and steel strung around an "inverted necklace," an angular U-form facing the bay. But the political will to build the opera house with public funds evaporated after a long battle...

Hadid's flat, Kensington We meet not one, but two noblemen at Zaha's home, where she has invited us for cocktails. Lord Peter Palumbo is waiting when we arrive; Lord Nicholas Crickhowell comes a few minutes later. They are here to assure us that, adventuresome though her work may be, Hadid is no wild-eyed outsider...

Palumbo was among the "Assessors" who selected Hadid's design for Cardiff, and he has strong feelings about the project. "Her design received a ten out of ten in every category of the exam," he says. "Some people called it 'unbuildable,' but this was disproved beyond doubt. It would have really put the city of Cardiff on the map internationally." So why did the project not go forward? "Prejudice," he says. "Be cause she is a woman; because she is an Iraqi woman..."

Crickhowell was the British Secretary of State for Wales during much of the controversy and also served as Chairman of the Cardiff Bay Opera House Trust. He, too, says that the project's failure had little to do with the quality of the architecture, but he blames it on clumsy handling all around...

Hadid sends an assistant out for Indian food, so that we can discuss some specifics of her approach to the CAC project... "It's a box situation," she says. "How can you begin to release the site from the requirements of the box?"



James Fitzgerald, Dr. Stanley Kaplan, Dorothy Reed, with Architect, Bernard Tschumi in Paris

"All American cities are about the grid. This needs a forceful subtlety—breaking the grid but not necessarily in a vulgar way." Her delivery is rapid-fire, and it is all I can do to jot down disconnected sentences. "You need a kind of transparency...Vitra (the Fire Station we will visit in two days) is about views, but not about transparency. You can make a solid building that has cuts through it—transparency does not necessarily mean glazing. And you need a kind of luxury; I really do believe luxury is in the beauty of the materials."

I, for one, am inspired, even though the sketches she shows us of concepts (not a building, but a kind of energy diagram) are indecipherable. I am cautious, however, about her ability to help us "sell" the CAC to potential donors and the Cincinnati public. Hadid, for all her fame in certain circles, is surprisingly naive about dealing with the press and public, believing that to "concentrate on doing good works is the best defense against all adversity—from criticism to controversy to outright racism."

19 January *Le Fresnoy, studio national des arts contemporains, Tourcoing, France.* The first actual building we will see on our trip is Bernard Tschumi's "national contemporary art studio," a combination artists' retreat and art school planned to help revive this textile manufacturing and coal mining city near Lille. We have a surprise awaiting us as we arrive: Bernard is in town from New York and will lead the tour himself...

Bernard is beaming as he leads us around the perimeter of his vast project. Less a building than a huge hangar, his design called for a roof of steel and glass, covering an area roughly the size of a downtown Cincinnati block. A collection of turn-of-the-century buildings, four of them, huddles below. They are simple enough on the outside but with beautiful interior spaces, originally used as a dance hall, a skating rink, a bar, and other public function rooms.

Tschumi has designed some new building elements to supplement the existing buildings, but his most impressive contribution is in the area he calls "The In-Between," the space between the new steel canopy and the original red tile roofs of the older buildings. Hanging on rods, suspended above the quaint old structures, are brightly painted catwalks, spiral staircases, ramps, landings, and platforms.

The effect is of a giant jungle gym for adults or, as Bernard points out, a concrete realization of Giambattista Piranesi's fantasy architecture of the 18th century. There could be no better argument for the need to actually experience buildings in selecting an architect, rather than rely on slides and books, than Le Fresnoy...

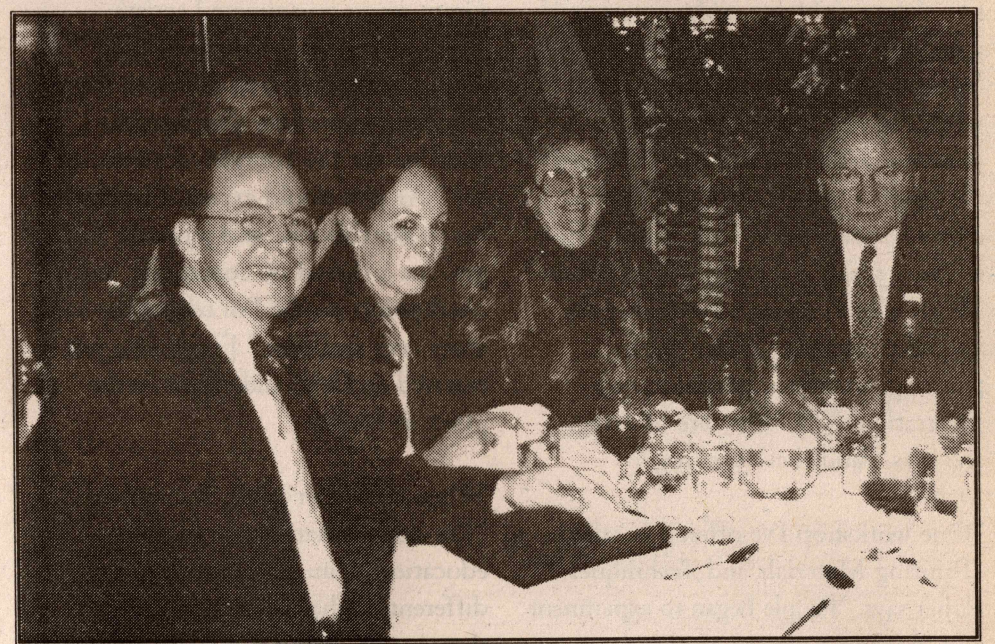
"The history of architecture is a description of static space. My work is about moving through space. So I say (partly as a polemic) I feel an affinity more to filmmakers than to other architects," Bernard says.

Chez Julien, Paris The trains from London to Lille, then to Paris, have left us time for nothing else than a nice dinner here and a quick tour tomorrow morning of the city park planned by Tschumi. We have been joined for dinner by Peggy Crawford, one of the three women who, as kids fresh out of college in

1939, founded the Modern Art Society, now the Contemporary Arts Center. Peggy has lived in Paris for many years now. She is willing to share the story of the first MAS exhibition.

The show consisted of only three paintings, along with didactic materials. But what three paintings! Paul Gauguin's *Yellow Christ*, Auguste Renoir's *Dancing at the Moulin de la Galette, Montmartre*, and Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Icons all of the history of

art. "The address of the Modern Art Society was the same as our home address, 401 Forest Avenue," says Crawford, who had returned to her parents' home after college. "One day I came home and my father said three crates had been delivered for me, and that they were in the garage." Someone at the Museum of Modern Art, where the loans were coordinated, just shipped the precious paintings to the address on the Society's letterhead.



Charles Desmarais with search committee at dinner in Paris

20 January *Parc de la Villette, Paris.* We meet at 8:30 am to tour the project that in 1982 catapulted Bernard Tschumi, at age 38, from underground theorist to internationally famous builder.

Encompassing 136 acres at the edge of the city limits, it is less a park, Tschumi says, than "the largest discontinuous city building in Paris." Twenty-six "follies," red metal-clad structures that are variations on the theme of a 35-foot cube, dot the park on a regular grid of 120-meter (390-foot) intervals; each folly serves a distinct function, whether as a cafe, videotheque, children's art workshop,

or observation pavilion. There are ten thematic gardens, 18 lawns, and, incorporated by Tschumi into the plan but not designed by him, a science and technology museum, separate theaters for classic and modern drama, and separate concert venues for classical, jazz, and pop music. It's no wonder the official guidebook calls La Villette "une ville jardin, un jardin dans la ville"—a garden that is a city, a garden within the city.

Marie Vag Lugosi, the parks' chief of protocol, is our guide, and Tschumi's idea of a relationship between architecture and cinema is her theme...But the experience is closer to visiting a museum packed with objects, with sculptural forms and carefully composed images at every turn...(Today's *Herald Tribune* carries a story about the record-breaking crowds at the new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.)

The new CAC building is not only, or even primarily, about more space; it is part of a strategic plan to increase visibility and access, both by relocating to a prominent corner with ground-floor entry and by constructing a building that signals a commitment to the fresh and innovative. If we can match, over three years, the three-month record of a new building in a grubby Spanish city, the plan will have succeeded.

Vitra GmbH, Charles Eames Strasse, Weil am Rhein, Germany As guests of the Vitra company, a manufacturer licensed to produce furniture by many of the world's leading designers, we have been whisked to a meeting with the CEO, Rolf Fehlbaum.

Dr. Fehlbaum is one of the most enlightened patrons of new architecture anywhere, having commissioned buildings early in the careers of Tadao Ando, Frank Gehry, Nicholas Grimshaw, and Alvaro Siza. When he asked Zaha Hadid to design the Vitra Fire Station, he needed a functional building: a tool for the people charged with keeping the corporate campus safe and a place to house trucks and equipment. She gave him that and far more; it is the acknowledged masterwork of a career that has existed largely in the perfectible world of drawings and models. The building is a revelation, both to me and, clearly, to several others in our

group. It is, as Rolf points out, "remarkably mature and sophisticated for a first building."

Though the Fire Station is dynamic in the extreme, that dynamism, as befits the work of a mature artist, has been achieved through subtlety and care. This is apparent even as we approach the building on the road from the company gate. One wall, the "back" of the building, is parallel to and continues the path of the roadway, but other walls and a big, trapezoidal porte-cochere peel off the front at slight angles, gently nudging the building into our path. The illusion created is that the building will draw us into and through its dark and deep space.

Inside, there are more surprises. The entire building is smaller than the current CAC exhibition galleries, but it seems to go on forever. Large windows give unobstructed views in some directions while in others the space is tweaked and torqued, sustaining through much of the interior a sensation of endlessness. Light plays a major role, breaking in shards off metallic surfaces, glinting from cuts and slices in the walls and ceilings. "The word I was looking for," says Mrs. Weston, "is elegant."

...Dr. Kaplan asks about Hadid's responsiveness to suggestions and criticism. "Zaha will listen," Fehlbaum says, "but only to legitimate opinions. You cannot argue a purely technical issue with her, for example, without considering aesthetics." He also gives us this advice: "One can't have a building that satisfies 100% of all reasonable concerns. If one listens to the curators, listens to the housekeeping staff, listens to trustees and donors and artists and delivery men, there is no room left for the architecture."

21 January Daniel Libeskind's wife and business manager Nina has collected us from the airport and is taking us directly to the site of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, now nearing completion.

We pass Jean Nouvel's Galeries Lafayette department store, the one pierced from top to bottom by a gigantic cone of glass, and I'm heartsick that there's no time even to peek inside. Across the street is another department store, this one by I.M. Pei:

Rising dramatically out of the mass construction pit that is Potsdamerplatz is a corporate tower by Renzo Piano, transparent green against the gray sky. Nina rattles off the list of other prominent architects who are building here, a veritable Who's Who of the field, but I am not fast enough to get it all down. Then look...There's the famous Metalworkers Union Building by Felix Mendelshon. Over there! Peter Eisenman's social housing block, looking quite the worse for wear. Stop! Stop! Mies van der Rohe's New National Gallery! My first Sharoun building! Gropius! It's useless to protest. We are here for 26 hours, and every minute is accounted for.

The Jewish Museum of the Berlin Museum. There is no entrance to the new Jewish Museum visible from the street because visitors will enter through an underground tunnel from the existing historical museum. So a somber building, clad in gray zinc, with no clear front or back, becomes foreboding indeed...

There is so much symbolism loaded into this great museum structure that I could not begin to record it all. From the air, the building is a jagged form—a "blitz" the locals call it, a lightning bolt—but it is clearly meant to be read as a broken Star of David. At this point, before signage and exhibitry, the path through the museum is confusing and circuitous—a seeming metaphor for the wandering of the Jews through history. Order, paradoxically, is imposed by The Void, the only straight line running through the museum from end-to-end, a four-story space walled in concrete and devoid of ornament that leads, eventually, to the Point of No Return, an unheated, uncooled concrete tower with a single sliver of window, far beyond reach...

It is a building that has already been justly hailed as one of the great architectural feats of our era. Yet one wonders what Libeskind will do with a commission that he does not embrace so passionately, that does not draw upon so deep a well of heritage and pain...

Sale e Tabacchi Restaurant, Berlin When we drove up to the museum site, Daniel had emerged

from a construction trailer wearing his trademark broad grin. The newspapers have crowned him winner of a competition to design a new monument for the city, and though the government official who will make the final appointment has not been heard from, things look good.

He gives me a clear idea of how seriously Berliners take such matters. A series of two-hour public hearings with each of the four finalists has routinely attracted 600-700 people...

Daniel's apparent rapport with the public of Berlin is impressive. He has weathered the long political meetings and the scrutiny of an uninformed press and public. He claims to embrace, and be embraced, by the people and the process, and I believe him. The subject



Search Committee members at dinner in Berlin: Charles Desmarais, Alice and Harris Weston, James Fitzgerald, Dorothy Reed, Dr. Stanley Kaplan with architect Daniel Libeskind

of Hadid's problems with the Cardiff Opera House comes up, and he becomes a bit impatient: "She expected the public to love it because it was a good building. All of her arguments were made to the specialists, all of her arguments were architectural. She didn't talk to the people." My point, that perhaps she couldn't talk to the people because she didn't know how, but that the people may still be the losers for it, is lost on the group.

Studio Libeskind, Windscheidstrasse, Berlin-Charlottenburg... Daniel takes us through his office, a series of project rooms, each devoted to something on the boards at one stage or another. There is a model shop where, we are told, everyone from interns to senior architects is expected to work out the various stages of ideas in three-dimensional form. Most of the activity is centered on the room housing eight or ten computers and a large model of Libeskind's proposed addition for London's Victoria and Albert Museum, a \$52 million spiral of fractal energy.

He takes us into a room...where a wall of frenetic sketches has been installed. This is his analysis of the CAC project which, unlike Hadid's purely conceptual approach, gives us the first glimpse of what our building could look like. It is a bold first effort, a dark rectangular box cleft from top to bottom with a curving shaft of light, and it gets the committee's attention like no theoretical discussion could.

But I am not the only one, I realize later, who is troubled by Daniel's failure to play by our unwritten rule that the design must grow out of discussion with us as clients, and out of a deep understanding of the particulars of our situation. If we are to be so proud as to attempt to create a new paradigm for the contemporary art museum, we surely won't succeed with quick answers to complex questions. In fact, though he has had details on the site and size of our proposed building for months, his drawings show a building twice as tall as we anticipate, on a site "footprint" of entirely the wrong dimensions.

22 January Block 2, IBA Housing, Nochodstrasse, Berlin Zaha Hadid's social housing block is intensely disappointing. The project was severely constrained by a deadly combination of small

budget and insensitive clients, we are told by Stefan Schroth, who is our guide and was the local contact architect who collaborated on the job...As housing for poor people, it is also poorly maintained...

The main tower of the building is a striking, prow-like form that works quite well but, still, I can't help wondering why Hadid has sent us here. Perhaps it's in the interest of full disclosure; more likely it's because she has so few buildings to show. If you can see past problems that were out of her control, you can get a good view of another aspect of Hadid's work. If you can't, you might give up on her.

Stefan tells me as we say good-bye, "Zaha called me last night. She said to me, 'They will choose Danny. They will see what has happened to my building and the way the owners care for it, and they will see his beautiful museum, and they will choose him.'"

Delta Flight 93, Berlin to New York Does "personality" matter? If someone is a good designer, do we care whether they are fun to be with?

I believe that Rem Koolhaas, one of the most famous architects alive and the one assumed by the art and architecture worlds to be an obvious choice for the CAC, destroyed his chances in the November interview by utterly blowing the "relationship" part of the client/architect relationship.

Earlier, he had flown to Cincinnati on his own nickle to meet me and see the site. We spent two hours and, while I might not choose the word "charming" to describe his manner, I was nonetheless awestruck by his intensity and his intuitive understanding of our needs, our city, and our site.

On the interview weekend, though, he did not (or could not) take advantage of opportunities to meet the committee socially, and his presentation was clipped and formal. (Indeed, when I tried to introduce him to committee members before he began, he quickly shook hands without looking at people.)

When he called me after learning that he was not a finalist, he asked, "What went wrong? I know I was right for your building. I could feel it. I could see it." I felt he needed to hear that had he said the same thing to the group, he might well have gotten the commission. I said as much, and I felt horrible when he agreed.

23 January Office of Bernard Tschumi Architects, West 17th Street, New York Bernard's loft office in Chelsea is the only office of the three we have visited during normal business hours. Maybe that's why it is so quiet.

Bernard shows us a few models of past projects, then leads an hour-long discussion of his entry in the competition for the reconstruction of the Museum of Modern Art, which he lost after surviving to a three-way final contest. Clearly, he wants us to assume that the lessons he learned over five months of intensive work will be applied to the new Contemporary Arts Center.

When he discusses the CAC project specifically, he demonstrates a firm grasp of the issues. He has read our brief carefully, and has analyzed the problem in detail. A wall of drawings shows spatial relationships and possible organization schemes; series of photographs of the site are arranged into long panoramas at the bottom of the wall. If the choice is to be made based on clarity and articulateness of communication, Bernard will be the obvious choice. But is the simple solution necessarily the best?

We will go to see Tschumi's Lerner Student Center, under construction at Columbia University, where he is Dean of the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. But the rain and mud will make it impossible for us to enter the construction site, and the models and drawings we have examined probably give a better sense of it anyway.

Delta Flight 711, New York to Cincinnati. We all feel as though we've been through a graduate-level course in contemporary architecture, but I think it's fair to say that we have been more than educated by the search process. We have been transformed.

Some of us began eight months ago as ready—perhaps knee-jerk—advocates of the new and different. Others started with a predilection for the classically, beautifully, predictably modern. Jim Fitzgerald, as a respected and successful architect (he is a principal of one of Cincinnati's biggest firms, FRCH/Worldwide), came to the process with more practical knowledge and experience than all of us combined. He started out, I think, more sensitive to all that can go wrong and more acutely aware of all the failed projects that have gone down awash in suspect "theory."

But I have found Cincinnatians in general, and CAC trustees in particular, to be among the most fair-minded and considerate people I have ever known. If this group started with their individual tastes and concerns, it also was ready to listen and judge each applicant on his/her own merits. By the time we had gone through the interviews in Cincinnati, the group felt that it had selected three strong candidates. But would they work for Cincinnati? Would they be just too challenging? Too unconcerned about budgets or oblivious to the response of a cautious and frugal public? Too far out?

Once on the trip, we all saw in Zaha Hadid's model for the Cardiff Bay Opera House the workings of a mature mind, and her Fire Station just plain blew us away. We recognized in Bernard Tschumi's Le Fresnoy a "brilliant resolution" of the unique puzzle he created for himself, and saw his planner's mind at work. And all agree that Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum is the work of "a genius."

By the end of the trip, Fitzgerald, the careful one, gives voice to our good fortune and to the dilemma we now face. "I'm convinced," he tells me, "that any one of them will give us a great building." **E**