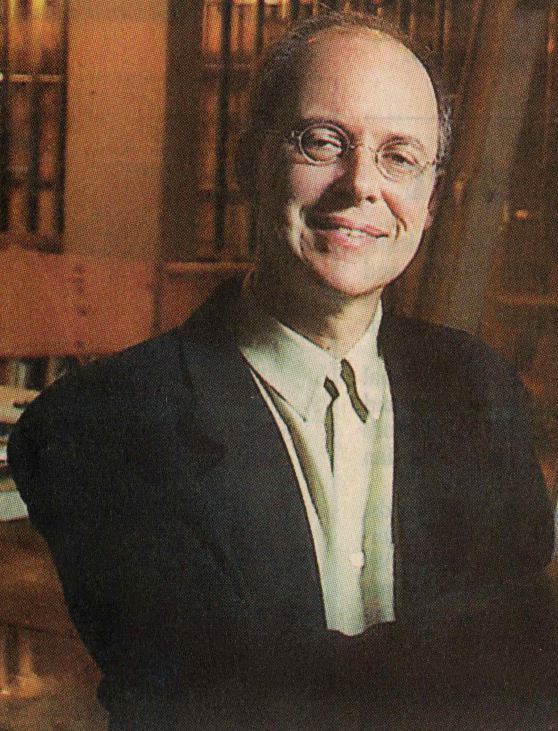


Contemporary
Arts Center's
Charles Desmarais
is a big reason the
Rosenthal Center
is happening



The Cincinnati Enquirer/
STEVEN M. HERPPICH

Museum director embraces the new

By John Johnston / The Cincinnati Enquirer

Even when he's wearing a hard hat, nobody will mistake him for a construction worker.

Charles Desmarais, the driving force behind the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, has come to tour the unfinished steel and concrete building at Sixth and Walnut streets.

The slender, balding, 53-year-old museum director looks dapper, as usual, in a black suit, cut low in front, and a pale green shirt fashionably buttoned at the collar. He wears oval wire-rim glasses and exudes a certain smugness. He glides more than he walks.

He is, at first glance, just what you would expect an art museum director to be: refined, sophisticated, even a little snobby. His ability to work with powerful politicians, mega-money donors, heavy-weight corporate types and his own board is in large part why the Contemporary Arts Center is being transformed into the \$35 million Rosenthal Center, scheduled to open in the spring.

Given that, it's difficult to picture what he once was: the son of a sheet-metal worker, growing up in a large family in rough-and-tumble neighborhoods, earning money at fast-food joints, and escaping the drugs and jail time that befell some members of his family.

Mr. Desmarais (pronounced day-mar-RAY) remade himself early in life, erasing nearly all vestiges of his blue-collar roots.

Now he's remaking the Contemporary Arts Center.

"A lot of people are threatened by change, or prefer not to have a lot of change in their lives," he says. "I thrive on change."

When the Rosenthal Center opens on May 31, changing the face of downtown, it will be a personal triumph for Mr. Desmarais, who calls it "the biggest curatorial project of my life." He began planning for a new building within a year of his arrival in Cincinnati in the spring of 1995.

The city, too, will celebrate. Not since 1886, when the Cincinnati Art Museum was built, has a free-standing art museum been constructed here. It will be the first American museum designed by a woman, London-based Zaha Hadid. The buzz in national and international architecture circles has been building since Ms. Hadid's early designs were revealed.

"Even before they tore down the old buildings, I was seeing this building in their place," Mr. Desmarais says, pausing

Charles Desmarais

Occupation: Director, Contemporary Arts Center.

Born: April 21, 1949, New York City; raised in New York and Bridgeport, Conn.

Home: Downtown Cincinnati.

Marital status: Married since 1985 to Kitty Morgan, editor of *Cincinnati* magazine. No children.

Education: Bachelor's degree in art, State University of New York, 1975; master of fine arts, SUNY at Buffalo, 1977.

Current project: Preparing for the May 31 opening of the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art.

Desmarais: Arts center director not shy about big changes

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on his construction tour.

There was little or no talk of a new building when the CAC hired him seven years ago. The arts center – perched in an out-of-the-way spot above a Walgreens on Fifth Street – had foundered in the years since the furor caused by the 1990 Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition, and it was hemorrhaging red ink.

“Charles really turned it around,” says Dr. Stanley Kaplan, a philanthropist who became chairman of the board of trustees shortly after Mr. Desmarais’ arrival and is still a trustee. “He not only knows a great deal about art, but he’s a heck of a good administrator.”

Within a year, Mr. Desmarais had steered the CAC into the black. When the center convened focus groups to learn why people became members, the responses stunned him.

“It was, ‘Whoever heard of a museum above a Walgreens? Whoever heard of having to travel up an escalator? The place is foreboding.’ That’s when I realized, if this place was going to grow, it needed (a new) facility.”

Discussion started in '96

Serious discussions were under way by the spring of 1996. Dr. Kaplan first suggested the suitability of the site at Sixth and Walnut, and he and his wife, Mickey, were the first to make a major pledge: \$1 million (which later increased to \$2.4 million). Other major donors followed: Otto M. Budig Jr., the Rosenthals, Harris and Alice Weston.

Michael Scott, an artist in New Richmond, says Mr. Desmarais is a “shrewd politician” who was “able to align himself with the right people to make (the project) happen.”

But while Mr. Desmarais was proving himself adept at courting politicians, business leaders and arts patrons, the CAC’s programming suffered, some say.

Says Carl Solway, a member of the CAC board: “I think once the decision was made to move forward with raising \$35 million, the center’s administration made a clear-cut judgment not to engage in any exhibition of such a controversial nature that it would interfere with ... this intense fund-raising.”

Mr. Desmarais disagrees, saying the CAC has always remained consistent in its mission. “The people who give to the center are people who believe in innovation, diversity and free inquiry, and if we don’t pursue those values, we lose them as donors.”

Mr. Solway says he expects the center to take more programming risks in the new building. Meanwhile, he credits Mr. Desmarais for having “ameliorated a lot of old problems between the (CAC) and the corporate community. Charles is a very personable individual, and he’s used that skill in a very positive way.”

He’s also a perfectionist, says his wife, Kitty Morgan, editor of *Cincinnati* magazine.

“I’m allowed, because I’m his wife, to ignore his perfectionism sometimes,” she says, “but I think it might be harder for people who work for him. He’s very demanding that way. He is so driven to get this organization to where he really thinks it can be. And he pushes, very, very hard.”

“He tries to keep in control. When I first met him, (he was) Mr. Caffeine,” she says, moving her hands and arms frenetically. “But he realized, in dealing with a lot of people, you’ve got to be listening. ... He just cut out the coffee.”

Jim Fitzgerald, chairman and founder of FRCH Design Worldwide and a CAC board member, is another strong backer of Mr. Desmarais. He, too, has seen both sides of him.

“Charles can be very impatient,” he says. “He can also be very charming and diplomatic. He has to bite his tongue sometimes, or step back from the precipice.”

Says Mr. Desmarais: “Part of my personal style – getting excited, raising my voice, of being abrupt – perhaps is being a New Yorker.”

He was born in Manhattan, the oldest of seven children. Everyone knew him as Charlie. His father bounced from job to job – freight mover, egg man, then cab driver who “got the (crap) kicked out of him once too often.” Mrs. Desmarais wrote letters, trying to find her husband something better. When a job as a sheet-metal worker at an



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Charles Desmarais and his wife, *Cincinnati* magazine editor Kitty Morgan, share a Court Street home.

aircraft factory came through, the family moved to blue-collar Bridgeport, Conn. They lived in public housing for a time.

Charlie was a smart kid who did well in school without really trying. He had no exposure to art at home. But fancying himself an intellectual, he subscribed to *Time* magazine at age 13. He figures that’s where he first read about New York’s Museum of Modern Art.

Getting there meant riding a train into the city. He made a couple of friends a deal: If they visited the museum with him, he’d go to a Yankees game, then they’d spend the night at his grandfather’s.

Also as a teen, he managed people at a McDonald’s and other fast-food restaurants, gaining some useful skills. “I also picked up some really bad habits – micromanaging everybody’s every move. You have to try to unlearn that,” he says.

His earnings helped pay his way to college in the late 1960s. He was the only one of his siblings to go to first. (All six of his siblings eventually became nurses.) It was a tumultuous time, not only for the country but also for the Desmarais clan. Charlie’s parents split up. Later, some members of his family became involved with drugs and served jail time.

Going to college was his chance to change, profoundly. He changed the way he spoke, dropping his thick, lower-middle-class New York accent. He changed the way he dressed. What’s more, “I kind of divorced myself from my family,” he says. Only in the last 15 years have those relationships been rebuilt.

He left Bridgeport and was no longer Charlie. He was Charles.

On a path toward art

First at Western Connecticut State, then the State University of New York, he found a less dangerous, more beautiful way of life. He discovered photography as art. And he put himself on a path that would eventually broaden his love of art and lead him to gallery and museum jobs in Chicago, Southern California and, finally, Cincinnati.

He says his background has made him a better museum director.

“I may not be as smart as a lot of people around me,” he says, “but I make up for it by working hard.” He also says he can walk easily in two worlds: the one populated by big-money donors and board members, and the one inhabited by regular folks who spend \$45 for a CAC membership.

He’ll even admit to some lingering blue-collar resentment of privilege. “There’s still this kid waiting to fight at any provocation,” he says, “because I’m just as good as you are.”

There’s irony in that, given this observation from his wife: “I think sometimes people can read Charles as a bit of a snob,” she says. “I hate to say this, but it’s something he’s actually needed to become, in order to, perhaps in his world, gain credibility.”

They met in 1984 when he was director of the California Museum of Photography at the University of California, Riverside, and she was writing a travel story for *Sunset* magazine. They married a year later (his third, her first).

They live downtown in a bright, airy Court Street loft, notable for its aluminum spiral staircase, 1950s

furniture and an eclectic mix of art, some by well-known artists, some by nobodies. You’ll find an 18th-century Giovanni Piranesi print here, and one by hot rodder Ed “Big Daddy” Roth.

A box of Cuban cigars sits on a bookshelf. After a trip to Cuba a couple of years ago, Mr. Desmarais immersed himself in cigar culture, amazing his co-workers with the breadth of his interest, which included collecting glass dishes with inlaid cigar labels.

“It’s odd to me to start smoking cigars without learning what good cigars are,” he says.

He enjoys fine dining at Jean-Robert at Pigall’s, but he likes to hang out at Arnold’s Bar & Grill. He’s a regular at the opera, but he attends church festivals.

“Charles,” Ms. Morgan says, “is always interested in something new.”

That’s true in his work life, too.

“I guess I’ve done a lot of remaking of myself over my life and my career,” he says at home one morning before walking to work.

As a museum director, that means understanding the different ways of procuring money.

When he was director of the California Museum of Photography at UC-Riverside for most of the 1980s, he looked mainly to university administrators for support. At the Laguna Art Museum in Laguna Beach, Calif., where he was director from 1988-94, he learned to extend his reach into the community.

Cincinnati operates by a different set of rules. Artistic quality is important here, but he came to recognize that people give money to the Contemporary Arts Center not so much because they are passionate about art, but because they care about the community and see the CAC as a valuable part of it.

“I’ve been constantly amazed that, without offending anybody, Charles pushes people to exceed their own expectations in terms of their capability for giving,” says Joe Hale, vice president of corporate communications for Cinergy and president of the Cinergy Foundation. He chaired the fund-raising campaign for the Rosenthal Center and is in line to become the art center’s board chairman today.

Not a shy fund-raiser

Mr. Hale tells how, early in the campaign when the goal was \$25 million, he called on a major corporation, made his pitch, and was thrilled to get what he thought was a huge commitment.

“I came back and said, ‘Charles, this is great. I got this corporation to donate \$100,000.’ He replied: ‘Joe, at that rate it’s going to take 250 calls to get the job done ... we need to set our sights higher.’”

“He’s not shy in the ask at all,” Mr. Hale says. “Charles has never been one to back down, and at the same time he’s incredibly prepared. If it’s a company, he’s looked at their annual report, he knows what their earnings are, he knows what they’re capable of.”

And Mr. Desmarais knows the opening of the building provides his best chance to impress the biggest audience the arts center will ever have, so he’s leaving nothing to chance. He spent a recent day in meetings discussing details of print and TV advertising, the wording on brochures, the look of newsletters.

Not once did he deal with anything specifically related to art. But

he does that, too.

“He’s a very hands-on guy. In every area,” says Thom Collins. The senior curator once saw Mr. Desmarais pushing a mop a half-hour before an exhibition opened.

Certainly he was hands-on when it came to selecting an architect.

An early backer of Hadid

Early on, Ms. Hadid was his front-runner. She was among a dozen architects invited to Cincinnati to speak with CAC board members in late 1997.

“That was for him a really glorious moment,” says Ms. Morgan. “All these world-class architects coming to Cincinnati and having serious discussions with him, the kid from Bridgeport.”

The list of finalists was narrowed to three, and an eight-person selection committee flew to Europe to view their work. In Mr. Desmarais’ mind, the choice was clear after a visit to the Ms. Hadid-designed Vitra Fire Station in Germany.

“I actually came out of that building with my heart kind of palpitating,” he says. “I love architecture, but I don’t have that experience very often.”

Other committee members had reservations about the temperamental Ms. Hadid. Few of her concepts had been turned into actual buildings. And other finalists were viewed as more charming, which could affect fund raising. Another concern: Several members of the search committee were Jewish; would money flow to a project designed by a native of Iraq?

“I don’t mind telling that story, because I’m so proud (committee members) got past that fast,” Mr. Desmarais says. “... In the end these people said they couldn’t let that matter.”

What mattered was Mr. Desmarais pushed hard for Ms. Hadid.

“Charles was particularly enthusiastic about Zaha,” says Dr. Kaplan, who served on the search committee. “That’s why I cast my vote that way.”

“You could say the board convinced themselves,” says Ms. Morgan. “But I would say as the wife watching all through this that he steered them to make the most adventuresome choice they could.”

Says Mr. Fitzgerald: “He saw the bold gesture and statement it would be to hire Zaha. He saw, before the rest of us did, maybe, how the choice of Zaha would get a lot of attention and bring a lot of good publicity in.”

With publicity comes pressure. CAC staffers have never dealt with a project this big.

“I like it,” Mr. Desmarais says. “I’m not sure all the staff does. Lots of people hate change. I love change. We’re changing and growing, and I find that invigorating.”

“We have so many people who care about the success of this project, that I’m feeling pretty cocky about it, I guess. I can’t see how we won’t have tremendous response.”

The question then might be: How long will Cincinnati have Mr. Desmarais? He’s already getting calls from headhunters. He’ll likely get more after the Rosenthal Center opens.

“It’d have to be a pretty damn good thing” to draw him away, he says.

Then again, Charles Desmarais has never been averse to change.

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