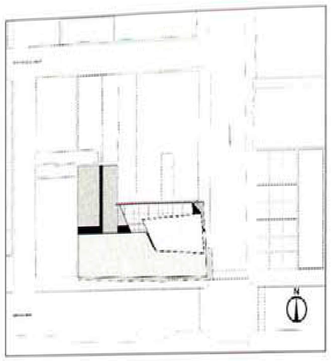
**CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM, CINCINNATI, USA**
ARCHITECT
**ZAHA HADID**



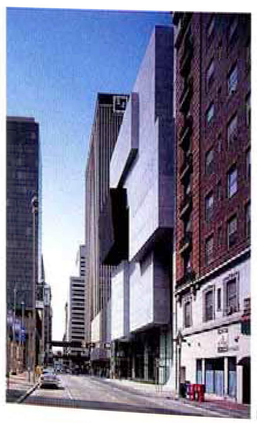
site plan

Zaha Hadid's new Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati is her debut in the United States, her first museum (a similar institution in Rome is now under construction), and her first to occupy a traditional urban site. It will astonish admirers and detractors who have viewed her previous work as shards of light travelling at warp speed, transforming mass into energy, and putting everything into motion. Here, the energy is pent-up, the motion arrested. The CAC is designed from the inside out, as a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle of galleries and offices on six levels above the street, which manages to stand out from and fit into the urban grain. It is one-of-a-kind and a good citizen, just as this remarkable institution has been since its founding, in 1939.

Established (like the Museum of Modern Art in New York) by three society women, the Modern Art Society was the first American institution west of the Hudson to exhibit the avant-garde. Its first permanent home was in the basement of the sternly Neo-Classical Cincinnati Art Museum – no thanks to the then director, who declared: 'Anyone who likes modern art must have a hole in his head'. It acquired a new name and its own second-floor space downtown, and, in 1990, it famously fought a landmark court battle to stage an exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs, which a judge had declared obscene. Buoyed by its victory over the puritans, it sought a new, expanded presence at the heart of this conservative city. 'The building itself would be a sign, proclaiming to the city, to visitors and the world: "here is a place that values experiment, innovation, and diversity",' wrote director Charles Desmarais.

# OUT OF THE BOX

**Zaha Hadid's urbane complex of galleries and gathering places reshapes the public's perceptions of challenging works of art.**



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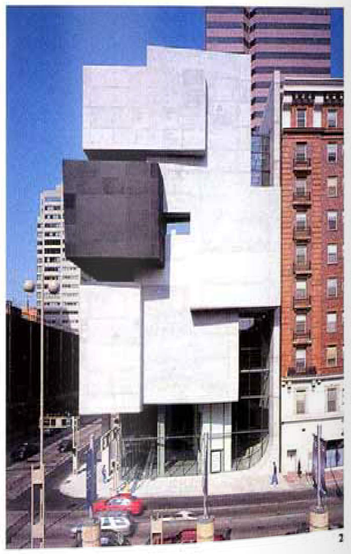
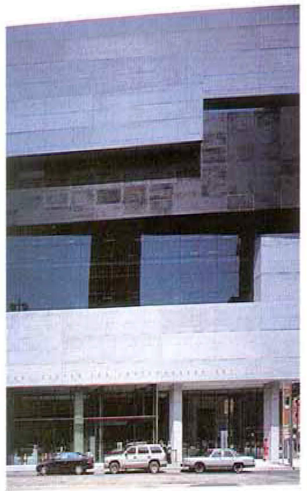


2

1
Expanding its presence, the CAC occupies a prominent corner site.
2
The city grid is subtly fractured by the new intervention.
3
Galleries are expressed as stacked bars of concrete and aluminium.



4

4
The boldly articulated mass appears to hover over the recessed glazing that envelops the ground floor.
5
The entrance hall is intended as a lively extension of the street.
6, 7
Galleries are linked by escalators streaking through a narrow void.

## Contemporary Art Museum, Cincinnati, USA

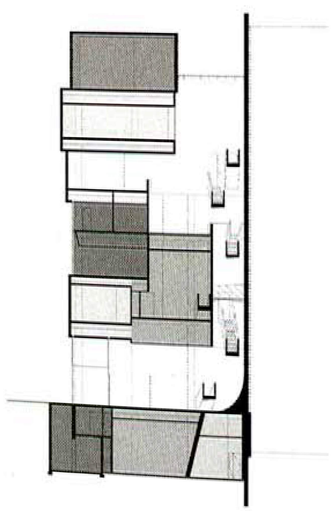
Architect
**Zaha Hadid**

The CAC conducted lengthy public discussions on how architecture could best express its mission, and drew up a detailed programme, before narrowing the choice from 97 contenders to three. Daniel Libeskind and Bernard Tschumi presented designs that indicated a determination to go their own ways; Hadid was selected for her openness to dialogue and the relevance of her ideas. 'How can you begin to release the site from the requirements of the box?' she asked the committee. 'All American cities are about the grid. This needs a forceful subtlety – breaking the grid but not necessarily in a vulgar way.' Unpredictability was part of the mandate. 'Neutral space is a wishful oxymoron,' she declared.

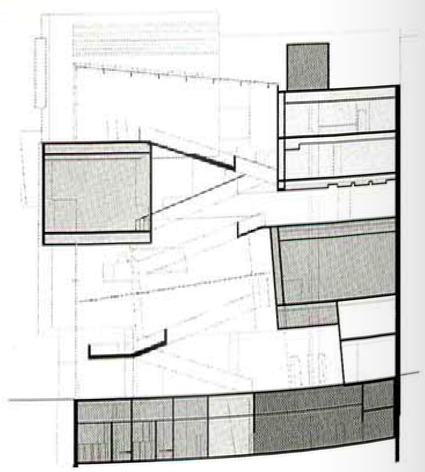
'All space is coloured by individual memory and experience. We propose that the new Center should reflect the variety of contemporary art in the way the building articulates its settings and spaces … multiple perceptions and distant views should create a richer, more perplexing experience, taking your body through a journey of compression, release, and reflection.'

These concepts are brilliantly realized in the completed building, which occupies a corner site across from Cesar Pelli's Aronoff Center for the Arts. The keynote is, as Hadid anticipated, 'forceful subtlety'. On the long, south facade, galleries are expressed as stacked bars of concrete and blackened aluminium, bracketing the blue-tinted band of windows that light two levels of staff offices, and projecting out to the east as a windowless, geometric relief. The black metal absorbs light while the pale concrete reflects it, adding depth to the facades. This boldly articulated mass appears to float above the recessed glazing that wraps the open ground floor. The concrete pavement, lit with fibre-optic channels, extends through the glass and curves up at the rear of the building to establish a connection between the street and the galleries – a feature Hadid calls the 'Urban Carpet'. Silhouetted against the poured concrete wall are skylit staircases with polished aluminium treads and lighted handrails that are contained within black steel box beams, forming shallow Xs as austere and assertive as anything by Donald Judd.

Hadid has put 8700 square metres of usable space on an 1100-square-metre site, but the interiors have an amplitude that belies the



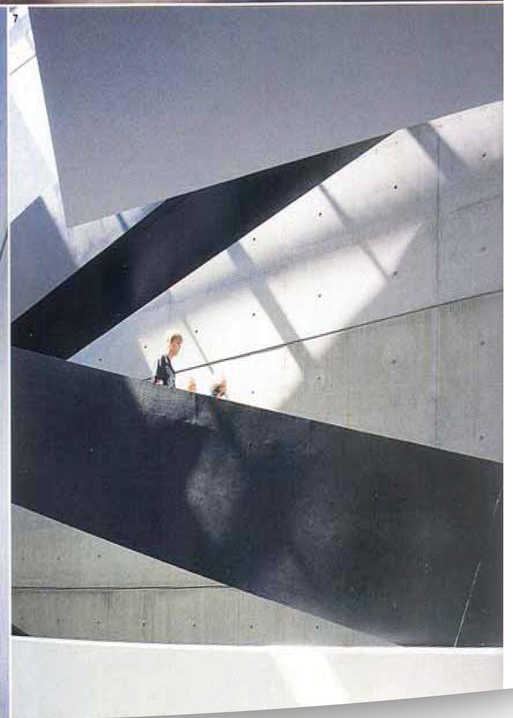
cross section



long section

5

6



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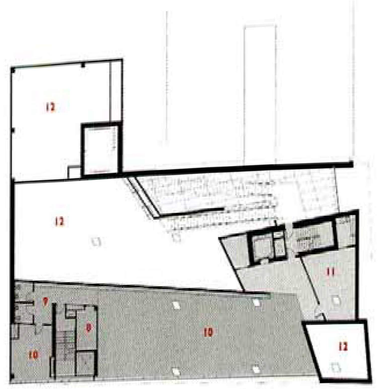
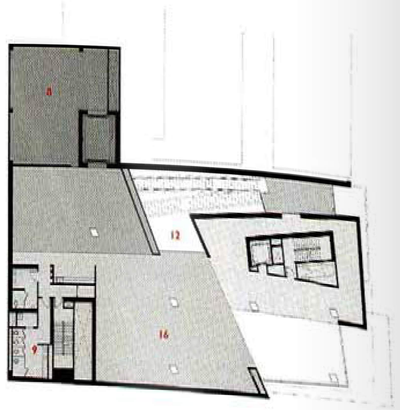
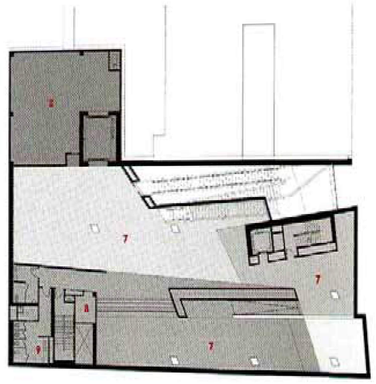


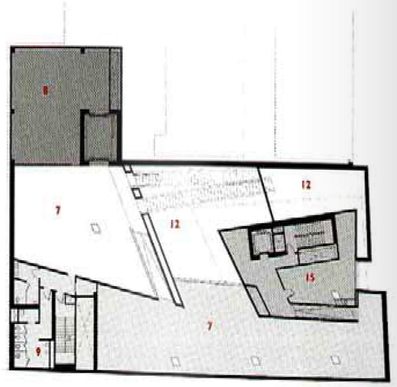
third floor



sixth floor

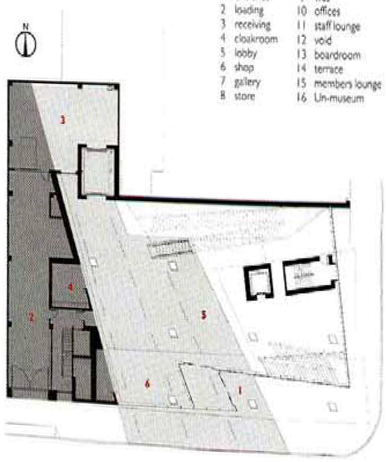


second floor

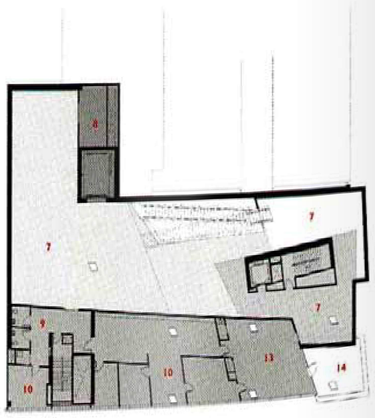


fifth floor

1 entrance
2 loading
3 receiving
4 cloakroom
5 lobby
6 shop
7 gallery
8 store
9 wcs
10 offices
11 staff lounge
12 void
13 boardroom
14 terrace
15 members lounge
16 Un-museum

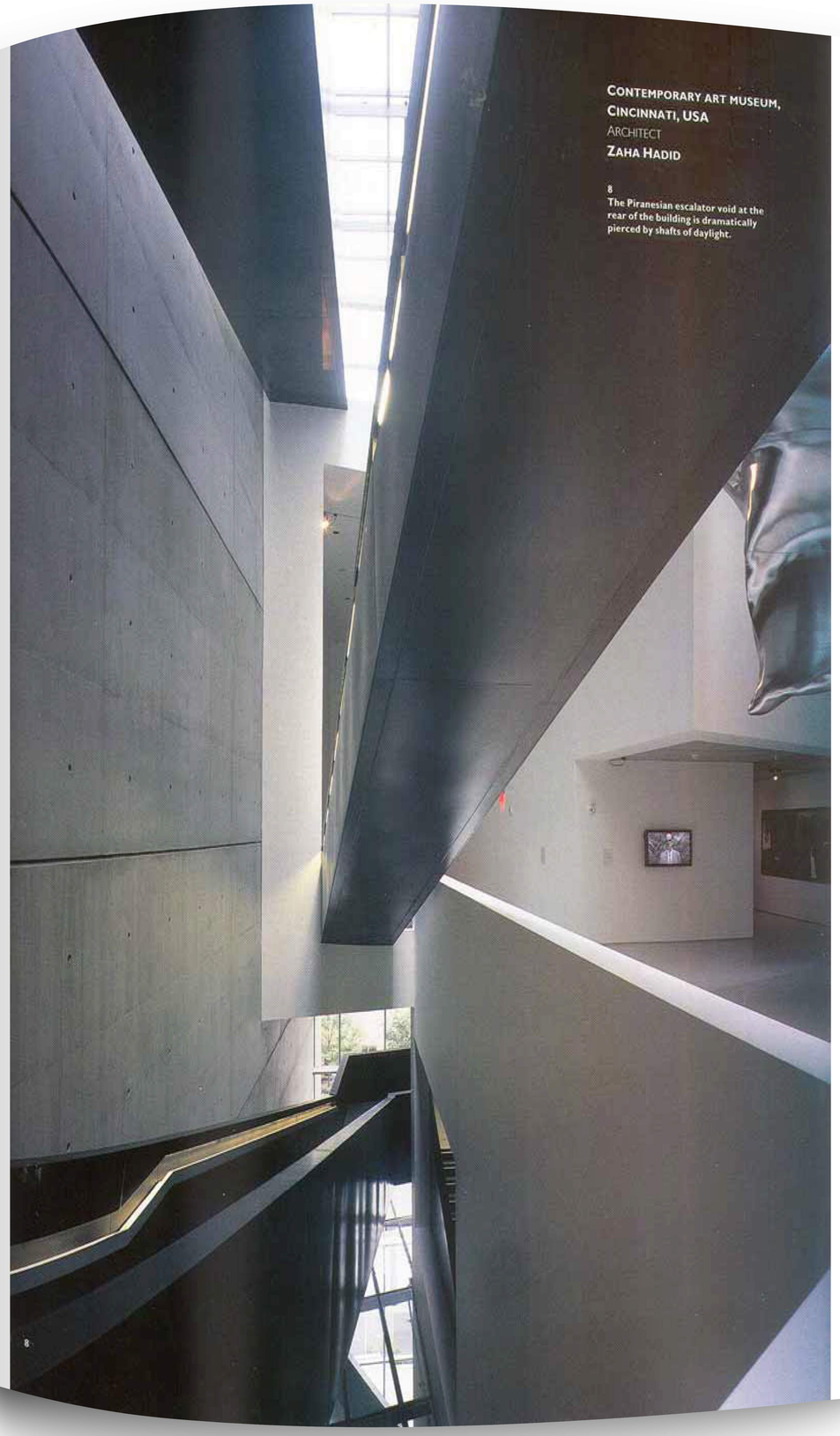


ground floor plan (scale approx 1:500)



fourth floor





**Contemporary Art Museum, Cincinnati, USA**
Architect
**Zaha Hadid**

8
The Piranesian escalator void at the rear of the building is dramatically pierced by shafts of daylight.

9

9
Typical gallery space, an elegant neutral container for the vagaries of contemporary art.
10
The labyrinthine interior is a stimulating voyage of discovery.
11
Varied spaces challenge artists, curators and visitors.

10

11

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physical constraints. She describes the open-plan, split-level lobby as an indoor park, drawing in passers-by to use the sales area and café, attend a reception or descend to a performance in the basement black box. It's a gift to the city that reinforces the CAC's bid for a broader audience. Cuts in the floor provide visual links between the two levels, and the galleries seem to defy gravity, hovering within this lofty, luminous volume. Hadid likens this illusion to the rock suspended in mid-air in the painting by René Magritte. Galleries occupy most of the second, fourth and fifth floors; the sixth is a children's educational area called the 'Un-Museum' and will be used for interactive exhibits. Balconies open onto the skylit void to the rear, allowing visitors to look down and across, and to enjoy the same sense of connectedness they share on the spiral ramp of the New York Guggenheim. However, in contrast to the relentless unwinding of that glorious vortex, which can be encompassed from a single vantage point, the CAC is a voyage of discovery.

Desmarais expressed a wish for 'a spatial and formal experience that is dynamic rather than merely useful: that announces to all who enter that this is a place for experiment, a place to leave behind assumptions and conventions, a place that lays us open to the surprises and challenges that are necessarily presented by new art'. Hadid has come through for her client. The constant alternation of enclosure and void, the shifts of angle and level, the cutaways that reveal unexpected vistas, and the openings in the fifth-floor members room that reconnect you with the city, all contribute to a feeling of exhilaration few art museums can match. The varied spaces will challenge artists and curators to respond to them, as much as their work will test visitors' appetites. MICHAEL WEBB

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