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Zaha Hadid
Contemporary Arts Center
Cincinnati, Ohio, since 1998

Michael Mönninger

A Successful Synthesis of Art and Space

The crisis in art and competition between its disciplines have for some time recast architecture in the leading role in the arts as a whole. Now that traditional, object related art has been relativized by the nonrepresentational idiom of minimal, conceptual, video, and performance art, architects feel challenged by a new freedom in design to transform their own work into exhibition pieces. They strive to create psychological and emotional environments that are inspired by the utopian ideal of the early modern movement: the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a synthesis of all disciplines.

Although the range of expression is limited in an applied art form such as architecture, designs that want to apply the generic claim of the objects to themselves share an approach to utilizing a common plastic characteristic: dissolving spatial and access systems, and adapting floor plan and elevation in the sense of a continuous flow of space from the horizontal into the vertical.

The archetypal image of this three dimensional figure - Tatlin's constructivist spiral monument for the Third International in 1920 - has found widespread acceptance in stage and theater design, from Frederick Kiesler to Walter Gropius. But its first large-scale use was Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim museum in New York - an eight-story building with one continuous spiraling level. Yet this first realization simultaneously destroyed the intended synthesis between fine and applied art just when it had reached its peak. For curators across the world have found the sloping levels and the omni-present contact to the open spaces to be a visual and acoustic distraction to the contemplative experience of art. And thus the new addition to the Guggenheim in New York and the planned expansion for the Museum of Modern Art are both expressions of a return to classic choices: separation into different floors and neutrality in exhibition rooms.

With her award-winning competition design for the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, Zaha Hadid tries to find a balance between the radical, modern spatial integration and the classic division. The eight-story building - six main floors and two mezzanine levels - in downtown Cincinnati strives for harmony between architecture and urban development by integrating the structure of the urban plan as an "urban carpet" into the ground-floor lobby like a modern version of the loggia and by a relief-like extension of the vertical to the rear. Floors, walls, and ceilings are treated in a variety of ways, intermingling and merging in undulating levels and ramps. Yet this synthesis of horizontal space and vertical access is far from complete. For Hadid has located elevator shafts and stairs behind the urban carpet wall to the rear, set far enough back from the gallery *per se*, despite the wall openings, to avoid unwanted interference between the different sections.

In a newer version of a similar design, Rem Koolhaas's unrealized designs for the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris and for the Jussieu university library work with the total integration of ground

plan and elevation by means of meandering promenades which run through the entire building. By contrast, Hadid is more forward in her articulation of the interplay between mass and space and between open and closed elements, more implosive than explosive in approach by comparison to the aesthetic of her earlier buildings.

The Cincinnati art museum, founded in 1939, like the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is an exponent of the first generation of exhibition buildings in the United States. In the absence of a permanent collection, the contemporary art division organizes changing exhibitions. Until recently it was housed in a rented space in an apartment building. The new building, whose costs are estimated at \$18 million, will offer three times the space with a total of 8,000 square feet. To prepare for the unpredictability and the flux of future exhibitions, performances, and other uses, Zaha Hadid has decided to forgo neutrality; instead she has created strongly articulated rooms that are anything but neutral.

As far as one can see from existing plans, the building reverses the traditional structure from heavy to light components, with individual floor sections rising above the recessed entrance atrium in a cubical manner. In contrast to the massive, cantilevered floors in Marcel Breuer's Whitney museum in New York, Hadid's façades are transparent and open. The architect explains that she wanted to chisel the individual rooms as roughly and unpolished as possible out of the large volume and at the same time achieve an impression of weightlessness.

What is unusual is not only the placement of offices and workshops, which are generally to the rear of such buildings but are here visible behind transparent façades along the front, but also the multiplicity in individual building sections. Thus the reception desk and the cash counter can be transformed into a bar at night; a (still somewhat undefined) rotating, suspended ceiling between the lobby in the raised ground floor and the performance space in the first basement level will allow for flexibility in both areas.

The galleries, whose ceiling height ranges from 4.5 meters to 9 meters, are not linked in the manner of an enfilade; instead they are connected by intermittent ramps that open up varying lines of sight. This differs from the standard tour by allowing visitors to view exhibitions and individual spaces from above, from below, or from the side. The galleries float like pipes or stacks above one another, leaving great gaping voids that act as negative connective elements. Zaha Hadid speaks of "multiple perception," of "distant views," and also of a more physical experience of the space; the rooms, increasing in size and transparency from floor to floor, are all designed to profit from a maximum incidence of daylight and are crowned by an open roof garden.

Ambitiously, the State of Ohio has been a patron of architecture for the past decade. It has supported projects by Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman, and other artist/architects. Should the city of Cincinnati actually build the Contemporary Arts Center designed by Hadid, it would be a breakthrough on several levels. For the first time the masterful architecture of the Iraqi architect, inspired by constructivism and suprematism, would be put to the test in a real setting and on a large scale. Moreover, "deconstructivist" architecture - often criticized as hostile to context because of its plasticity - could finally prove that it is capable of urban integration in a dense city location.

Finally, the leading role of architecture in the arts as a mega exhibition object beyond discipline would be relativized at least to the extent that Zaha Hadid's powerful three-dimensional flights of fancy would result in a sufficiently structured and layered exhibition landscape, where art and space could compete equally for the visitor's attention. In Cincinnati, Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, as well as the corporeal, psychological, and emotional dynamics expressed in the concepts of the new "event" architecture from Koolhaas to Hadid, could merge to create a successful synthesis.