

The Diva

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We had gathered in London at the Diva's flat in Kensington for cocktails and dinner. It was the evening of January 18, 1998. Lord Peter Palumbo was there and so was Lord Nicholas Crickhowell. The delegation from Cincinnati had arrived at about 8:00 PM, jet lagged and weary from the overnight flight to London and a long day's work. A certain awkwardness pervaded the room until acclimatization and alcohol began to take their effect.

At about 9:15 there was a loud knock at the apartment entry. The room fell silent as everyone looked toward the front door which was opened by one of the Diva's assistants. It was the Indian carry-out delivery man. Dinner had arrived!

The Cincinnati delegation was more formally known as the Contemporary Arts Center Architect Selection Committee. The Committee had been set up the previous June and consisted of several Contemporary Art Center Trustees including Dr. Stanley Kaplan, then the Board Chair, Lynne Meyers Gordon, Dorothy Reed, Alice Weston, Charles Demarais, the CAC Director at the time, and me, the sole architect on the Committee. Dick Rosenthal, Committee

Chair was unable to join us on the trip, but Harris Weston, Alice's husband and former CAC Board Chair did accompany us. The journey that took us to the flat of emerging architectural superstar, Zaha Hadid, in London that evening, and points beyond in the coming days had actually begun two years before.

Since its founding in 1939, the CAC had moved from the basement of the Cincinnati Art Museum to the old Women's Exchange Building on Fourth Street and then in the early 70's to the new Formica Building complex.

After twenty years of success and growth on Government Square the leadership of the Contemporary Arts Center in the early 90's was once again feeling the constraints of its space. Lack of visibility, poor accessibility, and size limitations were viewed as constraints from increasing membership and accommodating the demands of larger or non-traditionally configured exhibits and performances. The publicity surrounding the

Mapplethorpe show and the subsequent doubling of membership had given impetus to the dream of moving from a second floor leased space “over Walgreen’s” to a highly visible and accessible permanent home. The goal was to let the community and the art world at large know that the Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati had matured and was ready to take its place along with other nationally recognized arts centers. The dream was to create a building whose architecture itself would speak to the community about what the Contemporary Arts Center does and to step out of the shadows of the then better known and more visible Cincinnati Art Museum and the Taft Museum which each has an imposing and recognizable architectural setting. The first big question was: “Where?”

One lovely spring afternoon in 1996, Dr. Stanley Kaplan, who was then President of the CAC Board, was strolling west on Sixth Street from Main, approaching Walnut when he glanced up and suddenly saw the Batsakis Hat Shop and Cleaners at Sixth and Walnut as if for the first time. He said it was one of those eureka moments when he realized that while Batsakis was a treasured local asset, this was not the highest and best use of this corner located directly across from the new Aronoff Center for the Arts. That very afternoon he excitedly called Charles Desmarais, the CAC Director to arrange for a meeting of the Board to share his idea, for a new Contemporary Arts Center building on the northwest corner of Sixth and Walnut. The concept was quickly embraced by the Board.

The initial obvious challenge was to get control of the site, which not only accommodated the Batsakis operation, but also the old King’s News Store, which many will remember as a somewhat anemic predecessor to the more notorious Hustler store and also a busy McDonald’s restaurant. With the completion of the Aronoff Center for the Arts and the widespread talk of creating an entertainment district the City of Cincinnati moved aggressively to acquire the property required for the new structure.

By April of 1997 it was announced that eight private donors had pledged a challenge fund of \$4.5 million toward a new building, contingent on roughly equal financial support for land acquisition by the City of Cincinnati. Additional funds for construction and endowment were planned to be raised from private and government sources toward what was expected to be an approximately 52,000 square foot building with an anticipated cost of about \$12 million for building construction costs. With the

Board approval to create a new museum building in downtown Cincinnati, it was decided that the CAC should not only reassert its position as an incubator for the new art of tomorrow but also create a building that would be a landmark and a vital part of the cultural life of Cincinnati.

With this decision, the CAC Board determined that it would mount an international competition to select the architect for the new building. In July 1997 announcements of the plan for a new CAC building were published in architecture and art journals and 300 architects from all over the U.S. and around the world requested information packets on the proposed project. Ultimately 97 architects submitted the required credentials for review by the Architect Selection Committee. Over a period of two intense days in September all of these submissions were reviewed. The task was not to select the finalist, but to eliminate those who were thought to be not the right fit for the challenge. At the end of the two days, we had reduced the list from 97 to 12, and all were invited to come to Cincinnati to be interviewed by the selection committee. Of the 12, three had to decline because of schedule problems and so on December 12, 1997, nine well known figures in contemporary architectural design assembled in Cincinnati for two days of interviews.

Dick Rosenthal, the Selection Committee Chair, and his wife Lois hosted cocktails and dinner at their home the night before the interviews to provide a relaxed setting for the committee and the candidates to get acquainted. For the contemporary architecture aficionado this was like being invited backstage to meet the performers at a rock festival. Almost as if it had been scripted, all the candidates showed up in black and most had accented their black uniforms with red scarves of various lengths and widths. It was a beautiful star-lit early winter night filled with good food and drink and the excitement of conversation with architectural celebrities from around the world.

Over the following two days, Saturday, December 13th and Sunday, December 14th, we met from morning to evening. Each candidate was given an hour and a half to make his or her case. They spoke variously of their past experience, their credentials and their visions for a contemporary art museum for the 21st century. As always, the effectiveness of an interview or presentation was based not only on what is said or shown but also as importantly on how intangible connections were made between the

interviewers and the interviewees. By the end of that Sunday afternoon, after nine interviews and two days of intense togetherness the committee was tired and somewhat confused and just wanted to go home. By December 20th, though, we had had time to reflect on the interviews, the questions we had asked, the pronouncements the interviewees had made and without too much disagreement we agreed on a slate of three finalists: Bernard Tschumi, whose offices were in New York and Paris, Daniel Liebeskind, whose office was in Berlin, and Zaha Hadid, whose office was in London. We recessed for the holidays with the commitment to return to our task in the new year of 1998.

In order to make the final selection of the architect, we had agreed that we needed to go out to see actual buildings designed by them, to meet some of their clients, and to visit their offices. And so on the afternoon of Sunday, January 17, 1998 our intrepid group gathered at the Delta Crown Room in the Greater Cincinnati Airport to await the boarding call for Flight #36 with a 7:20 PM departure for London. Over the next six days we would conduct interviews at the finalists' studios in London, Berlin, and New York and we would visit buildings in those and three additional cities. We would sleep in a different country each of the next five nights. Our itinerary was timed to the hour – no time for sightseeing, theatre, opera, or strolls down boulevards – and each hotel and restaurant reservation had been mapped out to coordinate with our next appointment.

At 9:00 AM on Monday, January 19th, we were all crammed into a limo sent by candidate #1, Zaha Hadid, and were racing through a cold January downpour from Gatwick toward London to drop off our soaked luggage at the Kingsley Thistle Hotel on Bloomsbury Way. By 11:30 we had found our way through the portal marked “Boys” to the nineteenth century school building on Bowling Green Lane, where the office of Zaha Hadid was located, up two flights of steps in the loft type former gymnasium.

The room was filled to capacity with intense young people at computers, all dressed in the black uniform of the hip designer. Sketches – really abstract paintings – covered the walls and we were told by several of her assistants that these are conceptual sketches for commissions she was pursuing or ones she had lost. Frankly none of them were recognizable as buildings - but as abstract paintings, they are indeed beautiful.

Forty minutes later, Zaha arrived. More than simply arrived, no doubt without any rehearsal, she swept into the room like a diva – dressed in black – in an elaborately pleated, dramatically draped Issy Miyaki designed dress that added more volume to her presence. She filled the room as she waved her arms and spoke in the rapid staccato of her Arabic accented English. Some of our group couldn't understand a word she said – like watching an Italian opera without subtitles.

While the title “diva” is usually reserved for opera singers of great talent and bigger than life personalities, the word of course translates literally to “goddess” and refers to the transformation of a female artist to a goddess like figure. If a lady wishes to be a diva, she must know her own worth, demand it from her colleagues and deliver it to her audience. Obstacles exist only to be demolished. Nothing can stand in the way of a legend in the process of creating itself, and Zaha Hadid was definitely in the process of becoming a legend.

Zaha had at this point only designed one building of note – a small firehouse located at a manufacturing plant in South Germany – and at 48 was the youngest of our three finalists. But her unconventional approach to architectural design and her undeniably beautiful, dark and sensual drawings together with her seemingly fearsome and fiery presence had already earned her the designation as architecture's diva.

That night we did meet at Zaha's apartment for cocktails and dinner. The hostess's intimidating persona was gone as she smiled and chatted and although some of the furniture of her own design was striking in its unconventional materials and shape, overall the place projected a comfortable, informal and slightly unkept coziness. Her guests, Lord Peter Palumbo and Lord Nicholas Crickhowell were there to assure us that, no matter how adventuresome her works may be, Zaha is no wild-eyed outsider. Lord Palumbo himself is a connoisseur and great fan of modern architecture, who besides his home in London, also owns homes designed by Le Corbusier in Paris, Mies van der Rohe, near Chicago, and Frank Lloyd Wright at Kentuck Knob, near Pittsburgh, PA.

Polumbo and Crickhowell had been on the jury that selected Zaha Hadid out of 296 entries to design the new Opera House for Cardiff, Wales. Her selection and design proposals for the Opera House were soon the center of controversy, however, and the whole project was ultimately dropped. Why did the project not go forward, our

Cincinnati delegation asked. “Prejudice,” Lord Palumbo replied. “And because she’s a woman.” “It was very racist, very unpleasant,” he said. Lord Crickhowell added, somewhat bitterly, “we were let down by a bunch of clumsy politicians who failed both the generation that brought us to the millennium and those that will inherit what we will leave behind.” On that somber note, our Cincinnati delegation filed out into the cold London night to hail taxis to take us back to the Kingsley Thistle Hotel for a restless first night of our European quest.

The following day, Monday, January 19, we arrived early at Waterloo Station for the 8:53 AM departure of the Eurostar Channel service. It’s a two hour and forty minute train ride from London to Paris, including the twenty minutes in the tunnel under the channel, but we were stopping first in Lille where we were met by candidate #2, Bernard Tschumi. He had flown in from his New York office to meet us and show us several of his buildings. After a quick lunch, we were off by taxi to see Le Fresnoy, the French National Studio of Contemporary Art.

Bernard was literally beaming as he walked us around the perimeter of this very large project. Less a building than a huge hanger, his design is a roof of steel and glass covering a collection of early 20th century buildings converted beautifully into classrooms, studios, and galleries. Above the original red tile roofs of the old buildings, hung by rods from the new steel structure are brightly painted catwalks, ramps, platforms and spiral staircases which our brave Cincinnati delegation dutifully traversed. Bernard told us as we finished our tour that it is critically important to visit an architect’s work, because pictures in a book are static. “Architecture is about moving through space,” he said.

At 4:00 PM it was back to the station in Lille for the train on to Paris. I kept worrying we were going to lose someone as we scrambled abroad but our crew of seven found its way to our seats for the one hour trip to the Terminus Nord in Paris. We checked in at the Libertel Hotel across the boulevard from the station and quickly located the bar. My Bushmills on the rocks never tasted better. But no rest for the travelers. We were soon off to dinner at an exquisite art nouveau era bistro where we were all surprised to be joined by former Cincinnati and long time Paris resident Peggy Frank Crawford, one of the three women who, fresh out of college in 1939, founded the Modern Art

Society in Cincinnati – now the Contemporary Arts Center. The evening slid into a night of memorable stories, food and wine.

The next day, Tuesday, January 20th we were up early once again to grab taxis for our 8:30 AM meeting with Bernard Tschumi at the Parc de la Villette to see another of his projects on the northern edge of the city. Our tour consisted of a hurried walk through the 136 acre park where Bernard had designed a series of 26 exquisite pavilions.

At 11:00 AM we were back in taxis for the short ride to Charles De Gaulle airport for the hour's flight from Paris to Basel, Switzerland, near which we would be able to tour Zaha Hadid's then only completed building, the Vitra firehouse. Those who have flown into the airport at Basel know that is rather peculiarly located, 5 KM north of Basel in France and the airport terminal is actually split down the middle with half being French and the other being Swiss. To further confuse matters, we have flown there in order to go to Weil am Rhein in Germany where the Vitra plant is located. Earlier instructions had informed us that we should depart the terminal through the exit to France – not Switzerland – where we were met by cars provided by the Vitra company, which whisked us across the German border to Weil am Rhein.

Vitra is a manufacturing company, licensed to produce furniture designed by many of the world's leading architects and designers. The company CEO, Dr. Rolf Fehlbaum, is not only a connoisseur of classic modern furniture but he is also a patron of new architecture and the company campus sports early buildings of Tadao Ando, Frank Gehry, Nicholas Grimshaw as well as Zaha Hadid's already iconic first structure, the Firehouse. Although the building was indeed designed to house the company's fire brigade, shortly after its completion, Vitra determined that it was more economical to outsource fire fighting services to the local municipality. So the famous firehouse, early in its existence, had already been converted to a museum displaying the famous designer chairs manufactured by Vitra.

The building itself is rather small, but we approached and entered it with a kind of reverence usually associated with a house of worship. It is entirely a poured concrete building and is curved and soft and delicate in ways that seem to defy the inherent characteristics of cement but that are only possible with a material that morphs from soft and wet to the permanence of stone. It really is one of those remarkable structures that

when one sees and enters it, he intuitively understands the difference between what is simply a building and what is architecture.

When the Selection Committee sat down with Vitra CEO, Dr. Fehlbaum, after the tour, he gave us some advice about the selection of our architect for the new CAC. He told us, “One cannot ever have a museum that satisfies 100% of everyone’s reasonable concerns. If one listens to the curators, listens to the housekeeping staff, listens to trustees and donors and artists and deliverymen, there is no room left for architecture.”

After dinner and an overnight in Basel, our group was up early on Wednesday, January 21st, day four of our journey, to catch the 8:15 AM Swiss Air flight to Zurich and then on to Berlin where we were met by candidate #3, Daniel Liebeskind. Our first stop was at his first major design commission, the Jewish Museum then nearing completion. As we drove through Berlin, just a few short years after the fall of the wall, we were treated to a veritable outdoor museum of new buildings recently completed or under construction, designed by members of what would be an international “Blue Book” of contemporary architectural stars – if such a Blue Book existed.

The first sight of the Jewish Museum was startling. It is a large somber building, entirely clad in gray zinc with jagged gashes lacerating the surface. These cuts in the skin of building serve as windows. There is no visible entrance. Access is through an underground tunnel. Viewed from above, the plan is meant to be read as a broken Star of David. Inside, the building was a noisy, dusty construction site, but Liebeskind toured us through the cold, hard sometimes tangled and confusing interior that would house the future exhibits. Clearly this was a creation that had drawn deeply on Liebeskind’s own well of heritage and pain as he described his creation with great fervor and intensity. We exited the building deeply moved.

The next stop was at Daniel’s office and his natural warmth and charisma lighted the way as he showed us his loft type office, a series of rooms devoted to his many projects on the boards, including his proposed \$52 million addition to London’s Victoria and Albert Museum. The mix of earnest young designers hunched over computers recalled the visit to Hadid’s office three days ago in London, but the atmosphere here felt more charged and the pace more frenetic. This was clearly a busier place with a sense that everyone was charging breathlessly toward some impending deadline.

We had dinner that night with Liebeskind and his wife Nina and several of his senior project managers at the Paris Bar in Charlottenburg. He entertained us with stories about his days, 15 years earlier, when he had taught for several years at the University of Kentucky School of Architecture in Lexington and his memories of his drives to Cincinnati and the pleasure he always experienced as he came to the cut in the hill and the Cincinnati skyline emerged as he descended into the Ohio River Valley. He sketched verbal pictures of some of his early thoughts for our new CAC building and how it would become part of that skyline. Certainly none of us imagined that night that the reality of his dream to affect the skyline would happen 10 years later not with his design for the CAC but with the construction of the Ascent in Covington.

Thursday, January 22, 1998. This was the last day in Europe for the Contemporary Arts Center Architect Selection Committee, but our tour of buildings and architect's offices was not over. Delta flight #93 from Berlin took us to New York where after check-in at the Holiday Inn near Chinatown, we once again met candidate #2, Bernard Tschumi whom we had been with in Paris just two days earlier. We enjoyed a noisy welcome home dinner at the Odeon Restaurant and planned for our visit to Tschumi's office the following day.

Friday, January 23rd began with an 8:00 AM visit to Bernard's office, located in a high, open loft space in Chelsea. In contrast to Hadid's and Liebeskind's offices, Tschumi's was calm, quiet, and organized and seemed to match the restrained and elegant but warm personality we had met in Cincinnati and in France. He showed us models of several past projects and discussed at length his entry into the competition for the reconstruction and expansion of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He was one of three finalists but ultimately lost out to Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi. Finally he showed us a wall of drawings and photographs relating to the CAC site in Cincinnati and discussed his analysis of the problems and opportunities and his thoughts about building organization and circulation. The clarity of his thinking and articulation of potential design solutions were impressive.

But the clock was ticking and we had a building to see and a plane to catch. Our attempt to tour Tschumi's new Student Center Building at Columbia University where he was Dean of the Graduate School of Architecture was thwarted by a heavy downpour and

a sea of mud so we opted for the Crown Room at La Guardia where we rested our feet and cradled our cocktails before our 3:30 PM return flight to Cincinnati. It had been a whirlwind crash graduate level course in contemporary architecture. Exhausting but exhilarating, and our work had just begun.

After a week of getting up close and personal with the three finalist “starchitects” and globe trotting to visit them and their works, the CAC Architect Selection Committee had returned to Cincinnati to become a jury. Not a jury to convict but a jury to select. The process of making our final decision had many of the same uncertainties of any jury as we weighted the documents and information, our impressions, our emotions.

Our expert witnesses consisted of an advisory panel of outside experts who were to provide the committee with recommendations and information regarding the works, reputation, and track records of the architects under consideration. Our experts were Jay Chatterjee, Dean of the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning at the University of Cincinnati, Aaron Betsky, then Curator of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco and now Director of the Cincinnati Art Museum, Ben Nicholson, author, theoretician, and professor of architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, and Jane Merkel, author and architecture critic.

For a rather modest stipend, each of the finalists had been asked to produce a series of conceptual sketches addressing his or her approach to our design problem. These were not building designs but big idea concepts for organizing our detailed list of needs into a three dimensional package that would sit at Sixth and Walnut.

We listened to the opinions of our advisors as we met to look at the concept design submissions and then sent them on their way. We retraced our steps through Europe and New York and retold our impressions of the people and their work. We met several times as we debated and argued the fine points of design and the practical future issues of logistics and communication with our architect. The jury was almost hung on several occasions, but finally on a cold and dreary Sunday in March 1998, we gathered at the home of Dick Rosenthal determined to make our final decision. After some final heated discussion and two ballots, the unanimous decision was made to select Zaha Hadid as the architect for the new Contemporary Arts Center. We all felt that any one of the three would be capable of designing a great building, but we were persuaded and

convinced that the bold decision of selecting Zaha would not only give us a visionary work of architecture but would also provide desirable publicity for the CAC since this would be her first building in the United States and this would be the first American Museum designed by a woman.

By the time Zaha began her design for the Contemporary Arts Center in the spring of 1998, she had been out of architecture school for over twenty years and this would only be her second building. For many years, she was famous for her designs of buildings that never got built and she had been dismissed by some critics as only a “paper architect” whose visions were unrealizable.

Zaha was born in 1950 in Baghdad and grew up in a very different Iraq from the one we know today. The Iraq of her childhood was a liberal, secular, western-focused country with a fast growing economy that flourished until the Baath party took power in 1963. Her bourgeois intellectual family played a leading role in the country and her father was a politician, economist and industrialist. Zaha is a Muslim, but she was educated by Catholic nuns in convent schools in Baghdad and Switzerland and then went on to earn a degree in mathematics at the American University in Beirut.

Following her graduation from American University, she moved on to the Architectural Association in London in 1972. This is a graduate school of architecture which in the 70’s was the perfect place for ambitious, independently minded, budding architects to flourish. It was home to a precocious generation of international architects who are now household names in contemporary architecture such as Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind and Bernard Tschumi – all contenders for the Contemporary Arts Center commission. After graduation in 1977, Zaha partnered for several years with Rem Koolhaas, but then returned to the Architectural Association to teach and to start her own office.

As Zaha began to work with the new CAC Building Committee, consisting of Chairman Dick Rosenthal together with Stan Kaplan, Marvin Rosenberg, Tom Williams, Director Charles Desmarais and myself, she spoke of how she wanted to connect the building to the city. She planned to do that in two ways. First she wanted to both symbolically and actually bring the city sidewalk right into the building lobby creating what she called the “urban carpet” that would not only cover the floor but would curve up

the back wall. In addition she wanted the other lobby walls to be glass to create a great “public room” that would invite passersby in and hopefully up to the floors above. Since the CAC is not a collecting museum and the ever rotating shows consist of unpredictable objects in every imaginable medium, the gallery rooms would be of various sizes on different levels with walls at various angles. She explained her concept for linking the five floors of the building with long sloping ramps.

Despite her fearsome reputation, our committee found the early days of our work with Zaha to be stimulating and enjoyable. Creative Design is the art of seeing things that are still invisible. Zaha’s early non-figurative paintings depicting her design ideas for the building were so abstract that the actual building design remained largely invisible to the Building Committee but she clearly had a vision. When I suggested a somewhat more conventional process that started with preliminary plans and building facade studies and proceeded to ever more final and detailed architectural designs, she snapped that “design is not a linear process.” While based on my own training and experience, that theory was heresy, we were convinced that we were working with a visionary and talented architect, and that we would be wedded to her design methodology for the duration.

We were on a journey that would take us from Zaha’s first preliminary concepts, through innumerable iterations that slowly produced a final 80,000 square foot building design that met the CAC’s stated needs and could be built within what eventually became a \$35,000,000 budget. This budget not only included the actual building cost, but also fees and land acquisition and a \$5,000,000 addition to the Center’s endowment. It was a very long journey and very bumpy at times. What under more conventional circumstances might have been a three year process from start to finish stretched out for five years. But in the end the CAC had the building that Zaha Hadid had promised from the beginning and a building that not only met the Center’s needs but also brought national and international attention to Cincinnati and the Contemporary Arts Center.

There is the now famous quote from architecture critic Herbert Muschamp in the New York Times in 2003 when he said that “the Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati is the most important American building completed since the end of the cold war.” And in the same year Paul Goldberger, architecture critic for the New Yorker said “the building puts Cincinnati’s Contemporary Arts Center on the international

architecture star map.” Articles and photo spreads on the building appeared in professional journals and popular rags all around the globe. It was even listed recently in a new publication entitled “1001 Buildings You Must See Before You Die: The World’s Finest Architectural Masterpieces.” The Contemporary Arts Center is one of only two buildings included from Cincinnati, the other being the University of Cincinnati’s Aronoff Center for Design, Architecture, Art and Planning by Peter Eisenman. If the building was good for the CAC it may have been even better for Zaha Hadid. She has publicly credited the opportunity she had in Cincinnati with proving to the world that she was more than a theorist and could do great architecture. There is absolutely no doubt that since her selection as the architect for Cincinnati’s Lois and Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, Zaha Hadid has become an international celebrity in the world of architecture and in 2008 she is still the world’s only major woman architect – one who will go down in the history books.

In recent years Zaha has taught at Harvard, Columbia, Yale, the University of Illinois and the University of Vienna, Austria. She is listed by Forbes magazine in 2007 as one of the World’s 100 Most Powerful Women. She has been made a Commander of the British Empire, an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and an Honorary Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. In 2004 she was awarded the architecture profession’s most prestigious international award, the Pritzker Prize. Perhaps most importantly to her, she has received a flood of architectural commissions for important buildings around the world.

The opening words of the citation when Zaha was named as the first woman to win the Pritzker Prize were: “Her architectural career has not been traditional or easy.” Most would say that this is an understatement. “All architects have to struggle, but Zaha seems to have had to struggle more than most. Her single-mindedness, her singular lack of compromise are the stuff of legend.” Hadid’s forcefulness is both her curse and her blessing. She admits she can be her own worst enemy at times. “As a woman,” she has said, “I’m expected to want everything to be nice and to be nice myself. I don’t design nice buildings. I don’t like them. I like architecture to have some raw, vital, earthy quality. I don’t do nice!” She admits to not being patient or tactful. She acknowledges that people say she can be frightening. But she insists this is all in the pursuit of her

vision for creating great architecture. “It would be so easy,” she says, “to say ok, that’s good enough, but sometime one cannot be nice while striving for perfection.” Or as someone once said, “Well behaved women seldom make history.”

So back to the definition of a diva: “a woman of great talent and a bigger than life personality, who lets nothing stand in the way of her pursuit of perfection.” Zaha may bristle at the designation, but personally I think it fits her perfectly.

An interesting footnote. On the occasion of the opening of the Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art on May 24, 2003 in Cincinnati, the eight staff members who accompanied Zaha all wore black tee shirts saying “If Zaha were a man, would they call him a Diva?”