

## case study

The Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, Cincinnati



“Steelcase helped us create an intimate connection between the architecture of the building and the people who will visit it and work within it.”

**Michael P. Kelley, IIDA**

Vice President and Director, Interior Services,  
KZF Design Inc.

Steelcase

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iDirector, Interior Services  
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Cincinnati, Ohio

*The 82,265 square foot Contemporary Arts Center transforms a small wedge of urban cityscape into an exuberant expression of the close relationship between art and architecture. The building “resembles a gigantic jigsaw puzzle whose parts, enclosing individual galleries, slide past one another like multi-layered curtains... and protrude beyond the building line like an overscaled wall sculpture.”*

Roger Yee, Senior Editor of Architecture for Visual Reference Publications

## Artistic expression.

### Objectives

Today, Cincinnati has a new museum that brings the world of contemporary art to the street, and engages the city in a dialogue that promises to be heard far beyond the Ohio River Valley. It's a bold stroke, even for a town with a reputation for fighting hard for the freedom of artistic expression. It was this same institution—the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center—that in 1990 started the works of Robert Mapplethorpe on their way to a First Amendment legal battle and a national debate over the public funding of art. The outcome was a major win for the freedom of expression.

When the Center announced its intention to build a new home for itself, 97 architects responded to the call for entries. The field was eventually narrowed to three, and Iraqi-born, London-based architect Zaha Hadid was chosen from the finalists. The Lois & Richard Rosenthal Contemporary Art Center opened its doors to the public in May 2003.



Founded in 1939 as the Modern Art Society, the Contemporary Arts Center was one of the first institutions in the United States dedicated solely to exhibiting contemporary art. Once housed in the basement of the Cincinnati Art Museum, it has in recent years occupied space above a downtown retail store. When the Center decided to build its own facility, it did so with one clear objective: to introduce new forms of artistic expression in a way that would intimately engage visitors in the process.



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The sculptural effect that Yee describes floats out and onto the city like an ocean liner struggling to break loose from its anchorage.

# Creating integrated spaces.

## Situation

When the building of a major new home for contemporary art is announced, particularly one designed by one of the world's leading architects, it creates a lot of attention. Steelcase was immediately drawn to the project, along with almost every other major furniture manufacturer, and a lot of smaller ones. The opportunity to participate in a project of such far-reaching significance does not come often, and Steelcase was determined to offer whatever help it could to make it possible for Zaha Hadid to fulfill her dramatic vision for what would become, in Hadid's words, "a forum for the exchange of ideas and a gathering place for people of all ages." The Center, Hadid explained, "should act as a socializing force in Cincinnati... an important civic space—like a public living room—inserted in the heart of downtown." It was the kind of vision that is part and parcel of the Steelcase philosophy of creating integrated spaces that bring people together in environments designed to encourage interaction and foster creative thinking.

Michael P. Kelley, IIDA, vice president and director of interior services for KZF Design Inc., the Cincinnati architectural firm that helped Hadid develop her design, remembers the many calls that came in as the project began to take shape: "There were a lot of companies that wanted to be involved, but we knew from the beginning that it would take a special kind of partner to help us fulfill Zaha Hadid's vision in an integrated and holistic way. Once Steelcase joined the team, a wealth of possibilities opened up literally overnight."



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**Situation** *continued*

Jim Hackett, president and CEO of Steelcase Inc., happened to be in Cincinnati and asked to see the building. It was the beginning of a relationship that Kelley calls fortuitous. “I knew right away that Jim understood what we were trying to do,” Kelley says. “He picked up on the subtle nuances of Zaha’s vision, and he understood what it would take to make it real. He was very excited.”

Steelcase invited Kelley, Charles Desmarais, who was museum director at the time, and benefactor Richard Rosenthal to come to Grand Rapids to talk about the need and what it would take to fulfill it. “Steelcase invited us to Grand Rapids for a first-hand look at their newest products and most recent development activities,” Kelley recalls. “I saw things that made my head spin. This was not the Steelcase I remembered from my early product specification days. To see what they had done with Pathways Post and Beam was astounding. And the expanded and freshly integrated Werndl Collection from Vecta were works of art in themselves. But the incredible thing was how all these products—hundreds of them—all came together as a unified whole. It was a wonderful selection.” Although Kelley did not know it at the time, it was the start of what he would later call “one of the most rewarding partnerships of my career. Steelcase and Loth MBI, the local Steelcase dealer, pulled out all the stops. I felt like their entire organizations were 100% engaged throughout the process... right down to the placement of the last piece of furniture.”

Kelley immediately began making sketches. “You wouldn’t think a museum would require all that much furniture,” Kelley says, “but when you consider everything that goes on behind the scenes, the need is huge. I had no idea what to expect since there were some specials involved, but before I knew it my “wish list” became a full-scale operational plan. The response and support from Steelcase was overwhelming.”

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# There's an art in all of this.

## Solutions

The Rosenthal Center redefines the boundaries between art and life in various ways. According to Hadid, “the building itself is as original and enigmatic as a piece of abstract or conceptual art. Like a work of art, it has its own strong formal logic.” That logic is the logic of the city itself, with intersecting angles and avenues that draw the community in. The idea, as Hadid explains it, is to create “a gathering place for people of all cultures and ages... an ever-changing menu of visual and performing art that feeds the cultural vitality of Cincinnati.”

It was this logic that inspired Michael Kelley to choose a mix of Steelcase products that would function in harmony with the dynamic architecture of the building and that would help “feed the cultural vitality” that the building was designed to achieve. “The office spaces are every bit as integral to this vision as the gallery spaces themselves,” says Kelley. “Every piece of furniture was carefully selected to complement the building and the individual needs of the people who work there. At the CAC, staff activities are no back room operation... public and private spaces are equally integral to the whole.”



“Every piece of furniture was carefully selected to complement the building and the individual needs of the people who work there.” **Michael P. Kelley**

**Solutions** *continued*

The building's central office space is a good example. Kelley used the Werndl Freewall™ system from Vecta to support people who need to balance personal privacy with the need to collaborate. "A certain degree of visual privacy is important to the people who work here," Kelley says, "but at certain times of the year the need to work collaboratively is essential. The Werndl system is light in scale. It doesn't overpower the space, and it's easy to move around. This is important during times of peak activity, like campaign drives and periods of membership renewal."

Kelley used the Steelcase Impact™ wood desking system in the museum's private offices. "The Impact system was a wonderful solution," says Kelley. "It's a collection of modular building blocks that stack like the building itself. We customized these offices to support each individual job function, and the people who occupy them couldn't be happier with the result."



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"I tried to include collections of furniture that were pieces of art in themselves." **Michael P. Kelley**

**Solutions** *continued*

But it was the third floor office spaces that presented the greatest opportunity to create an intimate connection between furniture, architecture, technology and people. It was an opportunity for Kelley to showcase Pathways Post and Beam. And it was also an opportunity for Colin Nourie, principal of triplefive design Inc. in Cincinnati, to become involved in the project. “Colin was a terrific resource,” Kelley says. “He was instrumental in helping us push Post and Beam to the limit with new applications and special product features that mesh beautifully with Zaha Hadid’s vision for the building.”



Kelley used the new Post and Beam fence-height option to carry out the cityscape vision that Hadid sought to achieve. “Post and Beam is a remarkably agile product,” Kelley says, “It’s inherently flexible, and with Colin’s help and strong support from Steelcase we were able to create an environment that actually conforms to the unique angles that define the space. The workspaces are wonderful examples of the concern Steelcase has for user comfort and control, and they are sensitive to the architectural integrity of the space they occupy. There’s an art in all of this that is very rewarding for a designer.”

Steelcase and Steelcase Design Partnership products are used throughout the building... from public spaces like the café and “black box” lecture and performance hall—where 110 Cachet chairs “become a visual line of art”—to the storage areas that house research materials and records.

**Pathways Post and Beam by Steelcase**

Create new types of work environments with this remarkably versatile architectural framework.

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# A seamless connection.

## Result

Cincinnati has a new museum that critics are calling “a piece of art to hold art.” But it is also a practical and functional public building. It is a facility for research, a place to dine and shop, a place to accommodate public and private events, and a place for children and adults to learn. There is a seamless connection with the outside streetscape that invites people to enter. Once inside, they experience an environment of remarkable grace and beauty. “I tried to include collections of furniture that were pieces of art in themselves,” says Michael Kelley.

His success in doing so is summed up by the museum’s former director. “One of the best features of the building as far as I’m concerned,” says Charles Desmarais, “is that the staff will have offices that encourage energetic thinking and energetic work.”

Zaha Hadid is pleased: “I hope people who pass by on the street will be curious about what they see. They should ask themselves, ‘What’s going on in here?’ and not hesitate to walk in and find out.”



Sketch by Zaha Hadid.

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**Results** *continued*

Steelcase has had a special relationship with architects dating at least as far back as 1937 when the company worked closely with Frank Lloyd Wright to help fulfill his vision for a new kind of office environment for the S.C. Johnson & Sons Company headquarters building in Racine, Wisconsin. The building, along with the furniture that was designed to go in it, changed the way we think about the work environment. It set a new direction for corporate interiors, and demonstrated—for the first time—the concept of integrating architecture and furniture as a unified whole.

Today, Steelcase products can be found in many great buildings designed by many great architects: in corporate offices, in research centers, in public buildings, in healthcare facilities, in schools and universities, and in many other environments where people work and interact. Steelcase helps people do what they do better, and it helps architects and designers create intimate connections between the buildings they build and the people who occupy them.

This is one of the reasons the Contemporary Arts Center turned to Steelcase. “What’s wonderful about our relationship with Steelcase,” says former Arts Center director Charles Desmarais, “was that when we said we wanted a wide-open, contemporary office for our staff, they helped us adapt their most innovative products.”

Just how do these products help to convey Hadid’s vision? Michael P. Kelley, IIDA, vice president and director of interior services for KZF Dession Inc., the Cincinnati architectural firm that helped Hadid develop her design, says it best: “They are pieces of art in themselves.”





## Zaha Hadid

In 2004, Iraqi-born, London-based architect Zaha Hadid became the first woman to win the coveted Pritzker Architecture Prize. It is the most prestigious recognition an architect can receive, and has been compared to the Nobel Prizes in importance. According to the Pritzker jury citation:

*Her path to world-wide recognition has been an heroic struggle as she inexorably rose to the highest ranks of the profession... fellow professionals are mesmerized by her dynamic forms and strategies for achieving a truly distinctive approach to architecture and its settings. Each new project is more audacious than the last and the sources of her originality seem endless.*

Cincinnati's Lois and Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art is Hadid's first American project.

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