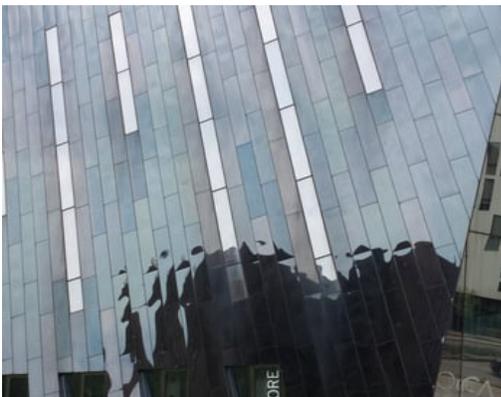


William T. Eberhard AIA, IIDA: ESSAYS ON ARCHITECTURE:

## Museum of Contemporary Art/ Cleveland

University Circle; Cleveland, OH



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Essays on Architecture:

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The Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art may be the most obvious example of the local community's perilously weak design culture whose manifestation began with the selection of the architect and was proven shamefully inadequate with the completed project.

MOCA, founded in 1968 by Agnes Gund and Nina Castelli Sundell as The New Gallery, retained prominent Cleveland architect Richard Fleischman FAIA in 1989 to renovate 20,000 sf on the south side of the former Sears store on Carnegie Avenue just west of the Cleveland Clinic. Fleischman responded with a simple yet effective intervention of the open lofty space with a curving glass wall, held in place by a red steel structure that served to animate the space and separate the gallery's store from its flexible exhibit spaces.

Despite an accessible location with abundant free parking, the MOCA Board decided that it needed a larger and more prominent space. The organization's traffic was very low. More space could have certainly been bargained for as the Cleveland Play House had purchased the former Sears store and engaged starchitect Philip Johnson to design a Post-Modern series of masses for their theatres on the north side of the structure. In 2009, CPH partnered with Playhouse Square and Cleveland State University to create the new Allen Theatre complex at Playhouse Square and CPH sold its facility at East 86th and Euclid Ave. to the

Cleveland Clinic.

A member of the MOCA selection committee confessed to me in private that MOCA knew of its limited traction with the community and needed to strategize to raise money to fund any location change. With Toby Lewis, the ex-wife of noted Cleveland philanthropist and arts patron Peter Lewis on the board, MOCA believed that if they retained some new potentially important architect to design the project to impress Peter Lewis, Toby could convince Peter to donate the money to fund the project and they would all be off the hook.

But Peter Lewis, annoyed and embarrassed with the skyrocketing costs and perceived mismanagement of the Lewis Weatherhead School of Management project at Case Western Reserve University by his favorite hand-picked architect Frank Gehry, had already penned an infamous public letter in late 2004 justifiably criticizing conservative attorneys and board members of Cleveland institutions, corporations and foundations for keeping their organizations too safe and toilet-trained. He told the community that he was going to withhold his money until local institutions got their act together, and he proceeded to give \$50 million to the Guggenheim and \$101 million to his alma mater, Princeton, where his gifts exceeded \$233 million.

The MOCA Board and Toby Lewis believed that focusing on out-of-town firms that appeared to be



Above: MOCA Stair & "Cafe"/ Snack Counter  
Right Above: MOCA Foyer/ Ticket Counter  
Right Middle: MOCA Lobby/"Atrium" Entrance



gaining traction on the world's stage would convince Peter that they had their act together enough to free up his purse strings. It did not work.

And MOCA was not entirely honest with the community about its selection process and criteria for selection. MOCA's public posture suggested that it wanted to give internationally significant emerging talent an opportunity to do an iconic building because no Cleveland architect could supposedly deliver such a response. Steven Litt rubber-stamped MOCA's spin and half-heartedly post-rationalized the process because he felt that only one Cleveland firm was and is capable of distinguished work, which illustrated how out of touch both Litt and the MOCA Board had become with the real efforts and skills of the Cleveland architectural community at that time.

On the condition of anonymity, the MOCA selection committee member who admitted that MOCA was aware of its lack of support in the community also stated that the MOCA Board composition, the composition of the architect selection task force and the selection process was intentionally elitist with the singular expressed objective of having the "right" people pick an acceptably elitist firm so that MOCA could extract the approval and money of Peter B. Lewis

to fund the project. Peter did not bite.

It could be argued that the "right" people did not know what an acceptably elitist firm was. It could also be argued that the contempt Lewis had for Cleveland institutions and 'leaders' after his 2004 letter was sufficient to trump any attempt at currying his favor to fund anything for anyone, including his ex-wife's project.

I do not know how MOCA settled on Farshid Moussavi, the British Iranian-born architect born in 1965. Moussavi had helped form the firm FOA - Foreign Office Architects - in 1995 with her husband. At the time MOCA selected Moussavi, her only significant achievement was that she had co-authored the firm's design for the Yokohama International Ferry Terminal competition. She left the firm five years after being hired by MOCA in 2011 to open her own practice when she and her partner divorced.

The MOCA decision to hire Moussavi can be framed as either bold or foolish, given her limited achievement at the time. It is unclear what the criteria were for the selection of MOCA's architect over the five other contenders in 2006. She prevailed over Michael Maltzan Architecture of Los

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Above Left: MOCA Cleveland  
Right: FAO's Yokohama Port Authority Terminal; 2002



Angeles, Office dA of Boston, and Reiser + Umemoto, SHoP Architects and StudioMDA, the latter three of New York.

The firms selected by MOCA for serious consideration were all big on renderings and very small on actual built work at that time, which is what made them all “emerging.” MOCA failed to avoid firms that had attracted few clients brave or foolish enough to entrust important commissions to those who are not experienced in building science, construction technology, detailing and quality control.

The Yokohama Port Terminal facility by FOA/ Moussavi is an interesting undulating platform, but its execution reveals poor quality in even the most flattering photographs. The firm’s web site in 2006 listed only six completed projects in its then 14-year history, four of which were three small restaurants and a private flat. The eligible firms were staffed with principals who were teaching part-time and practicing part-time, so much of their work reflected “projects”- pretend buildings and competitions that will never be built with renderings done by their students.

While a design competition would have given MOCA a perfect opportunity to elicit scores of alternatives from the best, brightest and bravest minds from every corner – including Cleveland, and select the best idea prior to committing to any firm, MOCA Executive Director Jill Snyder has actually stated that MOCA “didn’t have time” to pursue this alternative.

This alternative would have actually been more time effective than the ten months it has took MOCA to form its selection task force, retain a selection consultant and conduct its three-tiered selection process. And given that it took MOCA seven years to complete a

30,000 sf project, her excuse at lacking the time to stage a competition simply does not hold water.

The truth is that a competition would have been a risk for MOCA’s secret reliance on what it hoped would be a politically correct path to the Peter Lewis wallet.

MOCA project’s scope was extremely small – 30,000 sf – less that two floors of the Tower at Erieview. It made no sense to hire an architect from London for such a small project when the costs of communication and interaction assume monumental proportions in relation to the project’s size. For context, the Cleveland Clinic Health Campus designed by London’s Sir Norman Foster is 487,000 sf, over sixteen times the size of MOCA’s building, and is reportedly costing \$515 million, nineteen times the cost of MOCA’s project. Wikipedia lists the Cleveland MOCA projects as one of FAO’s accomplishments. The Yokohama Pier web site states that the terminal was rebuilt substantially in 1988 and 2002.

In a 2006 article in *The Plain Dealer*, architecture critic Steven Litt singled me out as one who disagreed with his support of the Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art’s architect selection process, but Litt did not identify any basis for our disagreement. It is quite simple: Interviewing firms from Los Angeles and London for a 30,000 sf commission is like going to the grocery store for a loaf of bread in a 747 airplane.

The Architectural and Design community in Cleveland has long been overlooked or offered only a token role when important projects have come along. I believe that the City’s lack of a meaningful “Design Conscience” at civic, corporate and foundation levels is largely responsible for this. If you travel to strong cities in the world today such as London, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and even Los Angeles or Philadelphia, you will discern a Design Conscience that results in a quality in the built environment that reflects the values of that community. This does not mean that the style of each project is alike, but that a commitment to quality, materiality, accepted urban design standards, sustainability



Above: MOCA Lobby/ Atrium  
Right Above: MOCA Main Entry  
Right Upper Middle: MOCA Offices  
Right Middle: MOCA Mayfield Elevation Exterior Panel Olicanning  
Right Bottom: MOCA Conference Room

and innovation is or is not evident.

But having a Design Conscience requires engagement and an active and purposeful dialogue in the community between clients, citizens and design professionals about values, what constitutes design excellence and what constitutes the difference between mere buildings and legitimate works of Architecture, which is when the built environment functions as a symbol.

This is essential if you are to know what “good” design is and how to get it. Architecture critics of late use the word ‘iconic’ often in ways where its meaning is altered to mean something that is by intent heroic, when its literal meaning is an object that is considered symbolic of something else, usually a virtue or something spiritual.

MOCA itself used the word ‘iconic’ in an aspirational sense when it announced FAO’s engagement to design the project.

Mr. Litt appears to be uncomfortable with this part of the equation, for he has not often had an active voice in this discussion, though as the City’s only architectural critic, it is his job to be leading the discussion. I believe that this is a contributing factor in



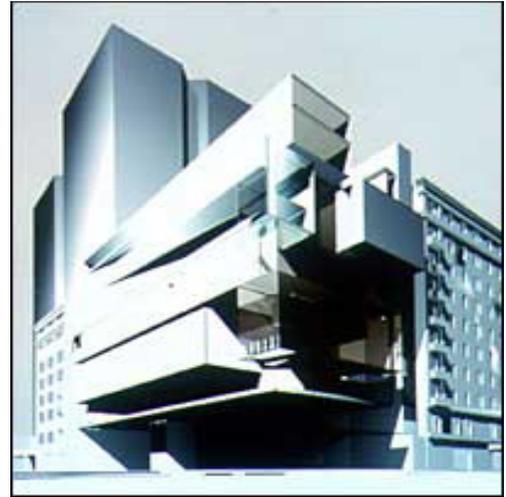
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Left Above: Cincinnati's Rosenthal Center for Contemporary by Zaha Hadid; 2003  
Right Top: Zaha Hadid's Presentation Rendering for the Cincinnati Center for Contemporary Art



the absence of a clear Design Conscience in Cleveland, with Litt agreeing (2006) that the city has a “weak design culture.”

At the time Moussavi was selected, she had never done a project in the US or a museum of any kind.

### **Lack of Traction with the Community:**

This lack of a design culture also explains MOCA's lack of traction with the Cleveland arts and design community. With a paltry 20,000 visitors each year, MOCA did not have the support of the local art and design community. This has been true in part because MOCA does not itself support the local art and design community in a meaningful way. It is unfortunate that the opportunity to select a worthy and emerging talent from its own community to champion contemporary art and architecture in northeast Ohio and involve the community in the design process was lost by MOCA. They failed to even touch the possibility.

In fact, it was apparently never even considered. Tragic evidence of the community's genuine indifference to MOCA is that its media “sell” of its architect selection with its silky-smooth selection consultant, Jones Kroloff Design Services (New Orleans), at Frank Gehry's Peter B. Lewis Building at Case drew a pathetic 41 attendees, including MOCA's participants and its ten selection committee representatives: Jill Snyder and nine representatives of the Museum's Board—Harriet Warm, Harriet Goldberg, Agnes Gund, Hope Hungerford, Stewart Kohl, Toby Lewis, Mark Schwartz, Marjorie Talalay, and Paul Westlake, as well as only two interested local Architects.

Like Cleveland's MOCA, the Cincinnati Center for Contemporary Art has no permanent collection. But it is far more active and engaged with its community than MOCA

Cleveland, hosting six to ten exhibitions and 20 performances annually. In February 2016, Cincinnati's CCA ended charging for admission which resulted in its attendance soaring from just over 84,000 annually to 137,000 in the 10.5 remaining months of 2016.

The Johnson Foundation and CCA's patron group committed to subsidizing admission for three years with a gift of \$225,000. CCA's lobby includes a café that functions as a work destination and a place for people to chat over a beverage and/or sandwich. A new café operator will be reportedly expanding the menu to full restaurant service. Even before the free entry boost to attendance, Cincinnati CCA drew over twice as many visitors as does MOCA Cleveland six years after occupying its new building. Now CCA draws over 300% more visitors than MOCA. At the time the MOCA project was announced, Snyder predicted their attendance would climb to 60,000 visits a year. To date, they have achieved only half of the increase they projected.

Cincinnati's CCA's traffic and traction was and is far more significant than that of Cleveland MOCA. Their 2003 museum designed by Zaha Hadid from London, Cincinnati's CCA delivers 82,265 sf - almost three times the size of MOCA's program. While its completed design is far more concrete and bunker-like than its 2001 unveiled translucent design models and renderings, unlike Moussavi's MOCA, it is an exciting and fun facility with exciting content. Moussavi's is neither.

Hadid studied at the Architectural Association in London - as did a number of Cleveland Architects - and was a partner with Rem Koolhaas in the Office of Metropolitan Architecture. She taught at Yale and Harvard and was the first female recipient of



Left Above: Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum; Bilbao, Spain; 1997  
Right Top: MOCA Exterior panel discoloration



the Pitzker Architecture Prize in 2004, the equivalent of the world's Nobel Peace Prize for architecture.

Hadid first came to light with the exhibition of her drawings for the Peak competition in Hong Kong in 1982. And thanks to a small 1993 fire station in Germany that was never occupied as a fire station because it did not meet code, Hadid became the darling architect of the world and went on to design numerous polymorphic projects around the world, including Rome's MAXXI Center, the Guangzhou Opera House in China, the London Aquatics Center for the London 2012 Olympics, the Galaxy SOHO in Beijing, Antwerp's Port Authority Building, Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Innovation Tower, China's Beijing Daxing International Airport, the Library/ Learning Center at Vienna University of Economics and Business and the Heydar Aliyev Center in Baku, Azerbaijan. Hadid died unexpectedly in 2016 of a heart attack at aged 65 after checking into a Miami hospital with a bronchial infection.

One must acknowledge the precedent for a star Architect to lift up an organization as Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain did. But the Cincinnati CCA had far more juice with its community and a much larger scale than Cleveland MOCA to justify the action of hiring a starchitect from London. Moussavi has even yet to ascend to Hadid's level at the time Hadid was hired by CCA. And Moussavi was not then nor is she now a starchitect.

When the Cleveland Children's Museum approached Leadership Cleveland in 2006 for help organizing its capital campaign, LC instead told CCM that prerequisites for a successful capital campaign included 1). a track record of financial stability, 2). the presence of a quality, active and engaged Board, 3). vibrant community relationships, 4). recognized excellence in core areas, 5). a positive climate for

capitol campaign (HealthSpace has just gone under and the Botanical Center was unstable) and 6). a quality site that is a magnetic destination.

It can be reasonably stated that MOCA had none of the prerequisites for a successful campaign save its excellent location. As an argument intended to support its relocation and capital campaign, MOCA argued that its Cleveland Playhouse location was to blame for its low attendance of 20,000 visits a year. Yet the Cincinnati CCA drew five times MOCA's attendance when it was above a drug store downtown with expensive parking required for a visit.

### **The Design:**

With a spectacularly legible corner at Euclid Avenue and Mayfield Road that provided an outstanding opportunity to make contemporary art and MOCA legible and inviting to Cleveland and our visitors, Moussavi instead delivered a black box with no legitimate rationale or symbolism.

The four-level structure is a truncated box that rests on the ground as a hexagon and rises to a square at its top. Moussavi's composition is merely an abstract geometric game, implying that all contemporary art is abstract, arbitrary and removed from existential function and utility.

Its exterior surfaces are clad in vertical black stainless steel panels at an angle that were supposed to be, as Steven Litt described them when the facility opened, a "shimmering, crystalline shell wrapped in slightly undulating, reflective panels." The panels are stained and streaked since they are at an angle to track the

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trapezoidal surfaces caused by the geometrical extrusion of the hexagon base to its square top. Water runoff soils the stainless and leaves run marks at the lower panel joints, leaving a constant image of soiled imperfection.

The panels do not shimmer or undulate. They are most certainly not remotely crystalline. Litt may have had too much of Moussavi's Kool-Aid on this one. They can be reflective under certain conditions but one thing they are not is beautiful. Their color shifts and oilcanning are an image of imperfection, inappropriate to a museum. Moussavi was unable to successfully wrestle with the details of her idea of materiality to deliver a museum-quality exterior solution.

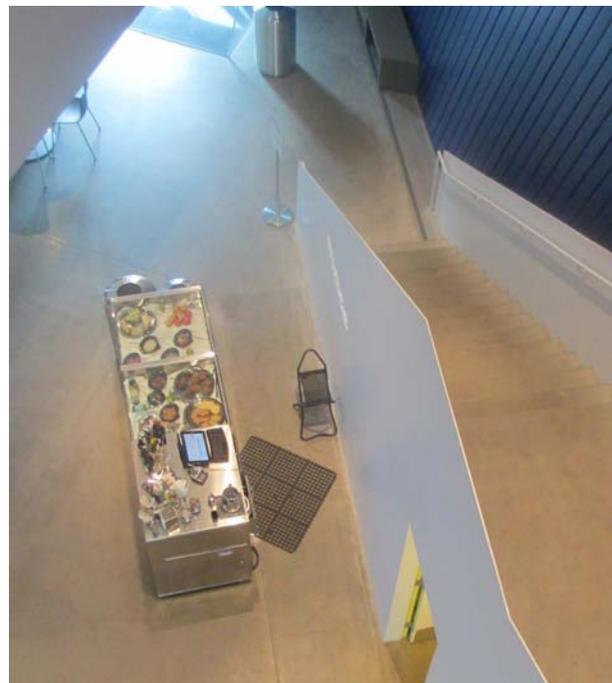
Windows are cut into the façade via the omission of the steel panels, so they are at something like a 17-19 degree angle off of true vertical. From the exterior, one is compelled to wonder why. From the inside, the windows are disorienting if one is in one place – a meeting room, office or gallery – for any period of time and attempts to look out the window. Their angles induce dizziness, even nausea.

Litt referred to the windows as “diagonal window stripes... (that) admit light to the interiors.” The effect, in Moussavi's words, is that of a “building that changes through time and unfolds as you experience it in a manner similar to a movie.” Nonsense. The Emperor has no clothes.

Unlike the former MOCA facility, there now is no parking at/ for MOCA, so one must scavenge as best one can and find a space in the CWRU garage on Ford a half block away. The building's entry is neither off of Euclid Ave. or Mayfield Rd., but instead at a reverse angle off of Euclid to the north through a narrow triangular glass plane. The entry foyer is irresponsibly small. One is immediately confronted with a reception desk in a very narrow space



Above Left: MOCA's angled windows compete with art.  
Above Right: Entry at Admission Counter is too tight.  
Below Middle: “Gallery Blue” exterior envelope.  
Below Bottom: Promised “cafe” is an 8' snack counter and a pair of trash cans one must loop around to go up the stair.



inside the revolving door. With one couple in front of us, the only way to not intrude in their admission ticket transaction was to stand back a few feet, which caused us to be hit by the revolving door from the next visitor's attempt at entry.

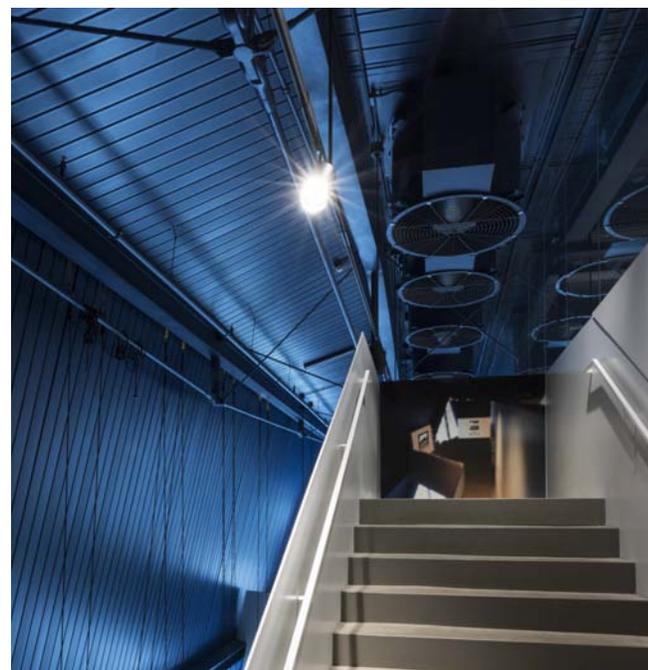
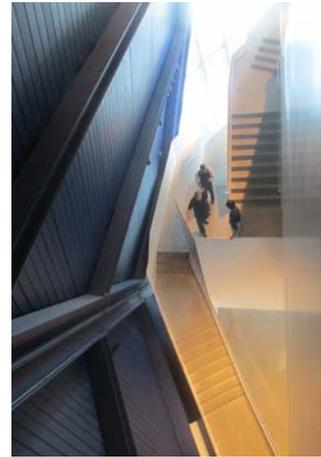
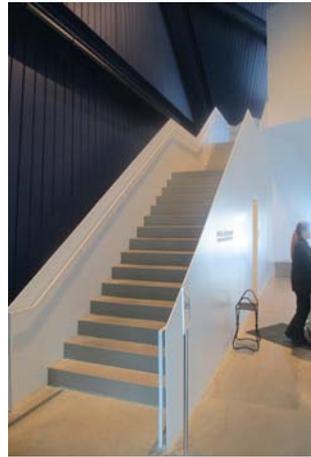
It is disturbing that even with Moussavi making such a freshman mistake, local architects Westlake Reed Leskosky/ DLR Group who were retained to prepare construction documents for Moussavi could not have caught this and kept such a mistake from being constructed.

At the entry, a pleasant gift store is to the left and the 'lobby' lobby is to the right. The lobby is an awkward space. An irregular two-story space with slashing windows facing south, direct sunlight is often a problem. Its north and west walls are tall white drywall planes while the south and east surfaces feature the interior surface of the exterior wall which is an inappropriate corrugated metal panels and the structural steel painted in a saturated midnight blue hue. The contrast of white wall surfaces and the blue walls is severe and overwhelming.

To the west and one's right upon entering the lobby space begins where Moussavi spent most of the budget and her time designing something in the otherwise unremarkable shell: a stair that is open, rising all four levels and providing the only real spatial animation in the building. The facility's only legitimate entertainment or potential for a pleasing spatial experience is the act of climbing and descending this stair.

The stair takes you close - too close - to the exposed steel and sloping exterior envelope surfaces that lacks any refinement and takes your eye and attention away from the objective of experiencing contemporary art - the intended purpose of the building. Architects sometimes lose their perspective and balance and make their work about their idiosyncratic ideas instead of the client's program and objectives. Moussavi is guilty of that here. With a weak client in a weak design culture with a weak understanding of design excellence, such eccentricities get missed. MOCA and Moussavi share the blame.

Moussavi claims that she realized during the design process that she could save floor space in the small building by stacking the code-required fire stairwell immediately beneath the open public stairwell; "It happened at one point, and it didn't seem as exciting at the time as it did later when we came to realize the consequences. The staircase in itself is like a spectacle. At an (art) opening, if you see somebody you don't want to talk to, you can take the route through the



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interior stairs. But you may be wearing the ultimate outfit and you may want to exhibit it, or you may feel very sociable." In reality, you take the public stairs because the enclosed stair is inconspicuous. More nonsense.

The stair also brings the visitor in close proximity to lights and the glare they bring which indicates that Moussavi has no skills as a lighting designer. And when one reaches the top on level four, make certain your hats and hair are not displaced by the large HVAC equipment waiting at the very top of the stair, which is entirely too close to one's head. Your reward for the long and awkward climb is not a handsome space or a rewarding spatial experience. Moussavi clearly is not skilled with integrating building systems into her shell with any grace.

Hadid's Cincinnati museum also features a stair as its signature element. But Hadid's stair unifies the gallery levels and is a far more elegant black mass stretching between levels with exaggerated tread depths, making the acts of ascent and descent a dance in itself. And Hadid's stair rewards the user with a wonderful wash of daylight from its skylight above, symbolically representing that one's effort to experience and embrace contemporary art leads to enlightenment – or even brings one closer to God. Moussavi's climb brings you unceremoniously to the HVAC unit, proving that there is no question who is the architect and who is the pretender.

The tiny bit of gallery spaces that exist at MOCA fight for the right to display art and enable its reading/ appreciation/ absorption/ understanding while trying to see it instead of the saturated blue envelope and the silly windows. The building is in the way, and unlike a design excess from the likes of Pei or Gehry, there is no reward or uplifting experience to be gained for the effort and sacrifice.

Not only is Moussavi's MOCA not good Architecture, it is not Architecture. Not only is this not Architecture, it is a bad building. Why didn't Westlake Reed Leskosky/ DLR Group help more? They wrote the program for the project. Were they just mute draftsman for Moussavi's unrefined concepts and weak design?

At \$900/sf for exposed concrete floors, mediocre lighting, an exposed steel frame, a blue fire-protected exposed exterior skin on the interior, and streaking stainless steel panels that exhibit stains and color shift, MOCA's \$27.2 million looks poorly spent, especially when compared to Hadid's building in Cincinnati. While an admittedly smaller building - eggs and buildings *are* cheaper by the dozen - Moussavi's MOCA is almost twice the cost per square foot of Frank Gehry's Weatherhead School of Management a block away which got Case and Gehry worldwide attention.

The great tragedy of MOCA's lack of understanding of what design excellence is and Moussavi's indulgence of her



Above & Below: Cincinnati Center Contemporary Art Stair by Zaha hadid

whims is that the project and the location had all of the potential to be a true architectural set piece and an exciting ever-changing learning lesson for the community and visitors. With any transparency – if only at street level – the changing displays of art could have been both a visual magnet to increase foot traffic to the museum and the neighborhood as well as an educational gesture to display a rotating quiver of contemporary art and in doing so, enrich our lives and our community.

Instead, MOCA and Moussavi gave us instead the old 'mystery of the black box' trick. But alas, there is no magic or man behind the curtain.

Cleveland deserved better.

