

# WHERE IS THE DOOR?

## USING THE DESIGN PROCESS AND WAY-FINDING TO HELP A 75 YEAR-OLD ART INSTITUTION FIND RELEVANCE IN TODAY'S URBAN SOCIETY

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Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) has difficulty engaging the greater community despite the central downtown location; world-renowned architecture; and a talented, dedicated staff--posing a threat to sustainability. Group research revealed impediments to visitation based on the physical elements of the CAC; however, these conflicts underscore a broader need for an abstract re-design of the art center's mission. If the assets of contemporary art and its stakeholders can be leveraged for inclusivity and co-creation, the CAC could assert itself as a community leader. With this vision in mind, several questions arise: Where is the door? To whom is it opened? Where does it lead?

### BACKGROUND

This was a semester-long studio sponsored project with the DAAP Graduate Design Strategy and Theory Studio and the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center. The class was comprised of design students from around the world as well as graduate students from Art History, Anthropology and Planning<sup>1</sup>. Given that this was a first year graduate course and the majority of the enrolled were international students, there was an additional need to design a curriculum which would challenge all students and actively engage the global students; allowing them to contribute at their highest level. Wayfinding provided an avenue for this engagement; it became a metaphor for navigation of the user experience of the institution from the personal, societal and global level.

### 1. DESIGN PROCESS

The original problem statement was to refine the wayfinding experience of the interior and exterior of the Zaha Hadid building, to explore opportunities to attract new members (focus on the 25 to 40 year old urban professional segment) and analyze the current building usage to see if there were new opportunities for space utilization. Several multidisciplinary design teams set out to create new design solutions that would connect people to the building and the experiences that are the CAC. Various research methodologies were employed by the teams to identify tensions and opportunities related to the building, brand and mission of the CAC. Phase one research

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the figures and research shown in this document reflects the research of the entire class and not just that of the authors.

included: observation, interview, way-finding analysis, competitive benchmarking, and a VOA analysis. Phase two research included: storytelling (the hero's journey and brand archetypes), personas and scenarios.

As the design research phase progressed one team's research delved into the current sense of place that the CAC held in the local arts community. This journey led to further research including: stakeholder analysis, trends and data analysis<sup>2</sup>, a review of publications related to art funding and current public perception and creative place making, along with interviews.

## 1.1. VOA (VALUE OPPORTUNITY ANALYSIS)

"The VO's differentiate a product or service from the competition in the way that the people's needs, wants and desires influence the purchase and use of the product." (Cagan, Vogel, 2013, p. 73).

A VOA was conducted comparing the CAC to other art museums and institutions in the city.<sup>3</sup> Three design teams conducted a VOA analysis against 7 other institutions and in all instances the CAC was rated as weak in both interaction and emotion ratings when compared to the other institutions. Below is a VOA analysis from one of the design teams. The CAC's VOA was compared with the Cincinnati Art Museum and 21C. The CAC is a powerful building, grand in scale and evocative in nature, constructed out of materials, which communicate permanence and strength; however, the building can overpower the visitor making many feel small, lost and overwhelmed.

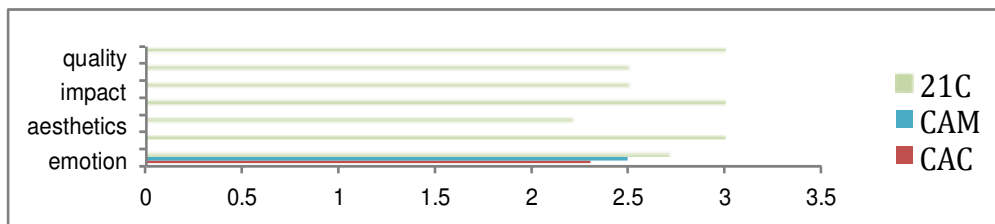


Figure 1: VOA of the Physical Locations and Exhibits



Figure 2: VOA Photo Journey

## 1.2. WAYFINDING

In 2003, the CAC moved to its first permanent home, the Lois and Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, designed by famed architect, Zaha Hadid. This is an iconic building that frequently exhibits from the leaders in contemporary art, yet visitors are not finding their way to it. Attendance numbers have been dropping for several years and revenues are down. Can the CAC find a way to open the door?

Methodology: All teams were asked to analyze the way-finding process for the CAC including: discovering, navigating to and within, the overall experience, ease and the impact of journey.

<sup>2</sup> The CAC had provided financial documents for analysis. This information was not allowed to be included in this publication.

<sup>3</sup> Cincinnati Art Museum (CAM), and 21C, a boutique hotel and contemporary art gallery, were each juxtaposed to the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center.



Figure 3: Wayfinding Analysis: Where is the Door?, Created by: Authors and other Design Team Members

Despite well-received reviews focused on an aesthetic appeal, group way-finding research has shown inefficiencies related to the building's functionality. Limited signage makes it difficult to locate the CAC from the neighborhood or the street, and subtle signage is difficult to interpret leaving many to ask, "Are we there yet?" Once you are assured you have arrived at the CAC, the next challenge arises: finding the door. The entrance is an exercise of urban camouflage blending into the facade. Once inside, the ticket kiosk is in a far corner, difficult to locate due to lack of interior signage, prompting the additional question: "Am I in the right place?"

The international acclaim of the building makes critique and refinement of the building difficult. The vision of the architect is held sacrosanct, making renovations or alterations difficult. Change is often limited to the application of temporary signage solutions. Overall the research revealed the CAC was viewed as a stoic building with an invisible front door. This troublesome reality is also analogous to the perception of contemporary art by Cincinnati's residents. The expanded wayfinding analysis in the flowing sections discovered that right or wrong, it is viewed as an art form that is unapproachable--one that can often only be understood by the culturally elite--not the average businessman walking past the "invisible" door or the urban resident living just a few blocks away.

### 1.3. DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

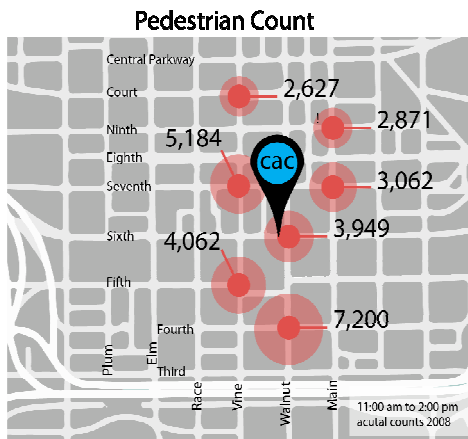


Figure 4: Pedestrian Count, data was extracted from (Downtown Cincinnati, Inc. 2008)

While issues related to navigation are telling, the greater understanding of community engagement requires an understanding of the local population. A demographic analysis provides an overall synopsis of the age, sex, ethnicity and income in the downtown neighborhood. A pedestrian count takes a closer look at the immediate downtown population by illustrating current as well as projected pedestrian activity in the street network applicable to the CAC. A pedestrian count revealed that over 4,000 people passed the CAC on an average day. That contrasts sharply with an average daily attendance of 125 people.

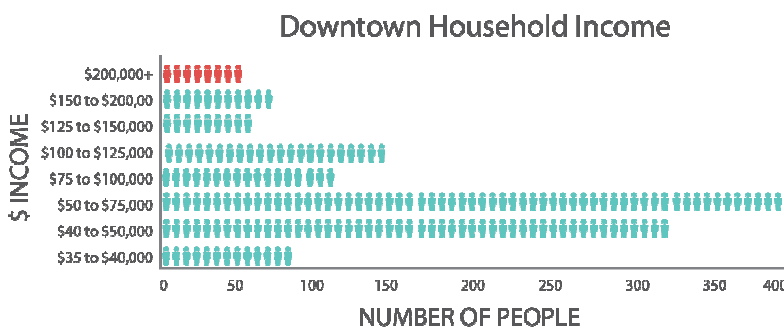


Figure 5: Downtown Income Analysis

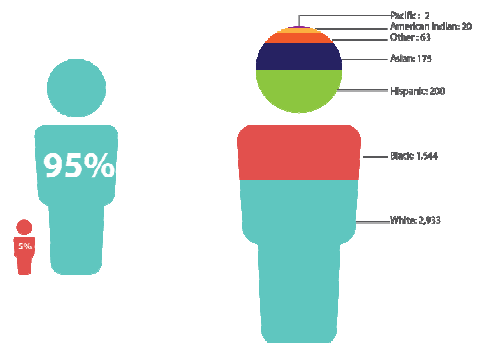
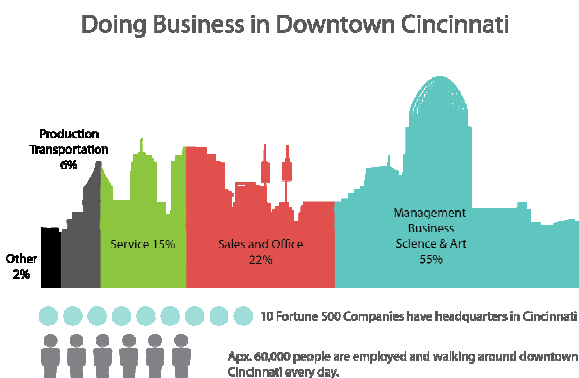


Figure 6: Downtown Demographic Analysis

The demographic data indicates that the downtown population is more diverse than Cincinnati's suburbs with all ethnic groups being represented. Consistent with national averages, the majority of downtown residents--95%--make under \$200,000; however, Cincinnati is a thriving national and regional business center with 10 Fortune 500 Companies headquartered here.



This framework supports a new vision for the CAC to become more inclusive. As a community leader the art center could connect a diverse population with business leaders to foster a sense of creative place in the downtown. This would bolster the role of the CAC in the community and give birth to creative collaboration.

Figure 7: Downtown Cincinnati Business Analysis and Profile

#### 1.4. CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF THE ARTS NATIONALLY AND LOCALLY

The arts have been viewed as a vanguard of both quantitative and qualitative growth by several cities. The planning efforts of municipal governments have attempted to make their neighborhoods more attractive through art districts; however, such a task calls for a comprehensive network of public and private entities that utilize a multitude of resources within a unified front. Economic research consultant, Ann Markusen, surveyed creative place making efforts across the United States. She found that the creative place making process is only successful with the creation of new partnerships, the support of community leaders, the garnering of fiscal strength, the prevention of gentrification and the implementation of performance measurements (Markusen, 2010). The results of creative place making can have a resounding impact on a community.

Place making efforts in Cincinnati are beginning to progress with the revitalization of the downtown periphery, yet improvement can be made in the coordinated effort of businesses and non-profit organizations to ensure the quality of this development and how it affects people. The city still faces the challenges of finding consolidated public support and directing movements for change. Obstacles in the way of a successful arts community are monitored and assessed by Arts Wave, the top funder of the arts in Cincinnati. Tara Townsend, director of impact planning and analysis, found an interesting trend in how art organizations were gaining private donors. Throughout her network of 38,000 donors, she discovered several donors were giving to the same organizations. Upon investigating this pattern, Arts Wave began studying the public perception of art in relation to community development.

Several barriers to the success of the arts were revealed in the Ripple Report. The research shows that many people have negative assumptions of art that counter the ability of art organizations to reach broad audiences. The report generalizes the negative conceptions of art as, "The arts are a private matter," "The arts are a good to be purchased," "People expect to be passive, not active," and "The arts are a low priority," (Ripple Report, p.9 2010). These assumptions stand in the way of the CAC, which should be focused on countering these perceptions by seeking active participation with the community and its leaders.

Research in current trends in arts organizations nationwide affirm the importance of creative place-making and the need for arts institutions as well as the need to rethink traditional funding strategies. In a recent report from NCRP(National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy), Holly Sidford discusses the changing face of the arts and how this impacts giving. The nature of contemporary art is changing. Art reflects our society, which is no longer European, white, and upper-middle class. Today's art transcends all cultures, demographics and mediums, yet the majority of funding (50%) still goes to the large arts and culture institutions which are entrenched in art that is based on elitist, western culture. But there are movements of change, and groups and arts funders are supporting arts groups that benefit marginalized communities. The NCRP recommends that philanthropic foundations give at least 50% of their donations to institutions that contribute to the benefit of marginalized and under-represented populations (Sidford, 2011). This shift in funding philosophy will slowly begin to impact all large arts institutions. Like the CAC in Cincinnati, they will be judged on their contributions to the whole society, not just their traditional patrons: the top 5%.

## 1.5. FIGHTING FOR DOLLARS

Art institutions are fighting for funds on all fronts. Non-profit organizations are under continued pressure to relinquish their tax benefits and other tax deferments. They are being asked to prove their public benefit to the community (Merritt, E. E., & Katz, P., 2012) Funding has been reduced on all fronts: local, state and national government; corporate donations; grants; and personal donations. Below is a table that shows how individual charitable contributions are being distributed.

Percent of Individual Charitable Contributions by Adjusted Gross Income, 2005

Recipient	Under \$100,000	\$100,000 to \$200,000	\$200,000 to \$1 million	Over \$1 million
Arts & Cultural Orgs	1%	2%	15%	15%
Religious Organizations	67%	57%	23%	17%
Combined purpose funds	9%	11%	11%	4%
Organizations devoted to helping meet basic needs	10%	12%	6%	4%
Health Organizations	3%	6%	5%	25%
Education organizations	3%	6%	32%	25%
Other	7%	6%	8%	10%

Figure 8: (created from: Merritt, E. E., & Katz, P. M.), TrendsWatch 2012: Museums and the pulse of the future, (American Association of Museums)

The chart illustrates the giving gap between the very wealthy and the remaining 95% of the population. This is especially telling in the areas of the arts and culture versus religious donations. There is a significant drop in “arts giving” by individuals making less than \$200,000 or approximately 95% of the US population (<http://www.marketingcharts.com>). When evaluating this information holistically it appears that if the perceived contribution value of an institution can be shifted from “the arts are a private matter” to “the arts are social activators for the community” this shift would create opportunities for increased individual contributions. We attempted to find methods and models that would enable the CAC to shift how contemporary art is perceived by the 95%.

## 2. KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The researchers compiled the preceding research with interviews with the CAC staff and local Arts educators and supporters to identify areas of strength, limitations and opportunities. These findings are shown in the following graphic:



## strengths

## limitations

## opportunities

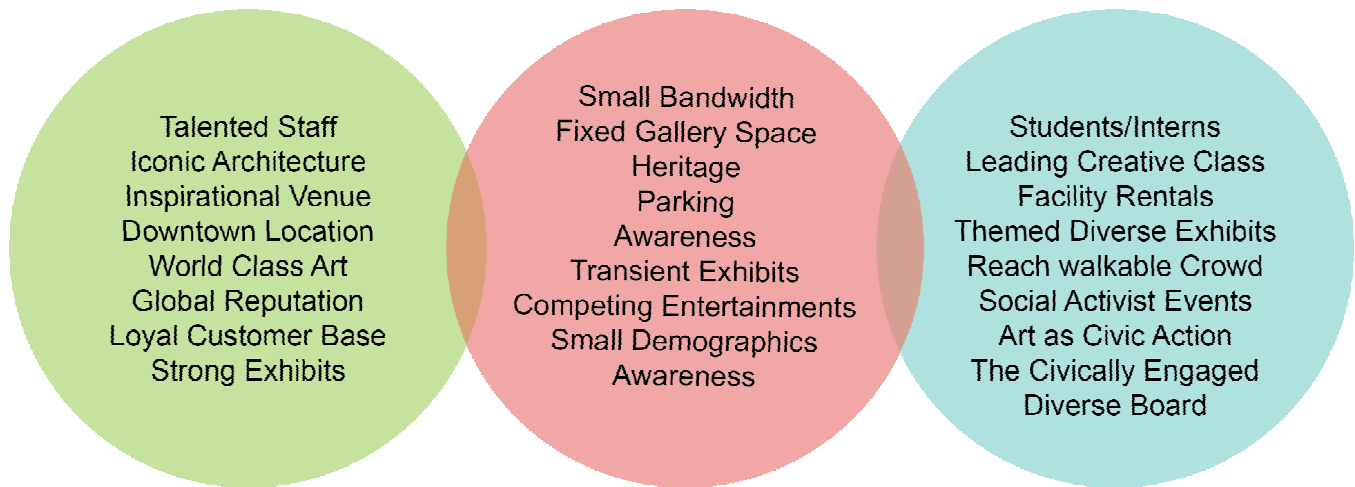


Figure 9: CAC SLO Analysis

The analysis reveals these seven key findings: 1. An established well-respected institution with an over-worked dedicated staff. 2. The lack of permanent exhibits means the CAC spends the majority of its budget and resources acquiring the world re-known exhibits and performances it is known for. 3. The CAC has a large number of programs and offerings, many with low attendance. These offerings demand a high staff commitment. Any new offerings should be designed to minimize impact on staff workload. 4. The CAC is a large floor with an entire floor devoted to a children's center that generates a low ROI. 5. The architecture and art are thought provoking and evocative and this power should be harnessed and used. 6. The current funding of the institution relies on a large endowment, alternative sources of income and funding should be found. 7. The CAC is in the position geographically, socially and artistically to be the epicenter of creative collaboration and placemaking for the city, the region and the country.

### 3. DESIGN CONCEPT

Co-creation is a strategy that emphasizes the generation and ongoing realization of mutual goals and values. It views experiences as forums for participants to share, combine and renew each other's resources and capabilities to create new value. This design concept will transform the Contemporary Arts Center into a hub of co-creation on a local, national and international scale: creating collaborative opportunities throughout the community in multiple areas: the arts, business, innovation, education and social action. As the epicenter of community-based arts for action in the region it will be a point of outreach with a local socially active community

The Innovation Co-Creation Center is a creative collaboration between local businesses, the CAC and the higher-education community, and the socially active. The CAC Innovation Co-Creation Center would be housed in a repurposed non-gallery floor. The Innovation Co-Creation Program would be a joint program with students and faculty from local colleges and universities joining local, national and global businesses to participate in Co-Creation Workshops and Programs. The students receive mentoring and exposure to professional processes and practices, and the business and social clients benefit from the creative force of talented, young minds and the creative catalysts of the art and architecture of the CAC.

At the same time the CAC will lead social efforts through a Community Co-Creation initiative providing Cincinnati's variety of non-profit groups that work on ameliorating urban problems with inspiring events that are themed and

fueled by current exhibits. The events will inspire and connect members of the community, leading to an interrelated effort for progress. Focusing community outreach efforts to social groups and creating partnerships will help the CAC redefine itself from a visual arts venue to a center of co-collaboration and community involvement. Groups will work together increasing participation by non-core consumers by creating co-creation experiences with the socially active, non-art types and the disenfranchised.

The power of co-collaboration will expose the entire region to the CAC and to the strength, power, and inspiration of contemporary art, transferring the inspiration of art into action. Contemporary art cannot forever be new; however, it can inspire change and thus be revolutionary. This is the brand that can propel the CAC into a position of community leadership and as a generator of place in the city.

### **3.1 DESIGN CONCEPT DETAILS**

1. Leverage the time and talent of non-CAC staff by creating a partnership with local colleges and Universities. 1. An established well-respected institution with an over-worked dedicated staff. 2. Generate additional income by offering programs and services through the Innovation Co-Creation Center. 3. Repurpose the 6<sup>th</sup> floor to be the permanent home of The Innovation Co-Creation Center. 4. Design The Community Co-Creation Center's activities to expound on the content of exhibits. 5. Generate revenue from the professional offerings and the social events while increasing awareness of the CAC to a larger audience, moving the core "who target" from the 25 to 40 year old urban professional segment (a segment that is already well represented in their membership). In addition explore alternative sources of charitable giving such as: group sourcing and micro-giving

The Community Co-Creation Center could be a joint program with the Diversity by Design Project. Diverse by Design is a joint project of Agenda 60 and Vision 2015, working in collaboration with many of the region's large and small businesses and civic and community organizations.<sup>3</sup>

## **4. CONCLUSION**

"Where is the door?" is an appropriate analogy to describe the user experience and perceptions of the CAC physically, emotionally and socially. The CAC needs to physically reveal the path to its door as well as overtly engage new patrons to enter. "To whom is it opened?" can be answered more broadly by changing the current perception of contemporary art in Cincinnati through creative place making and innovative co-creation programs partnering with business, education, and non-profit organizations augmenting efforts toward inner city improvements. And finally, "Where does it lead?" points to CAC becoming a powerful business incubator that can link business leaders with young professionals and aspiring students while serving as a platform for social groups to express community problems. Backed by the influential power of art, these groups can better connect to their audiences. Upon this strategic platform, the CAC will be at the forefront of development: not an entertainment niche.

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<sup>3</sup> Diverse by Design is a joint project of Agenda 60 and Vision 2015.





Figure 10: Photo Montage, CAC Staff, Google Maps, CAC Annual Report, Cincinnati, CAC, JR exhibit CAC 2013

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