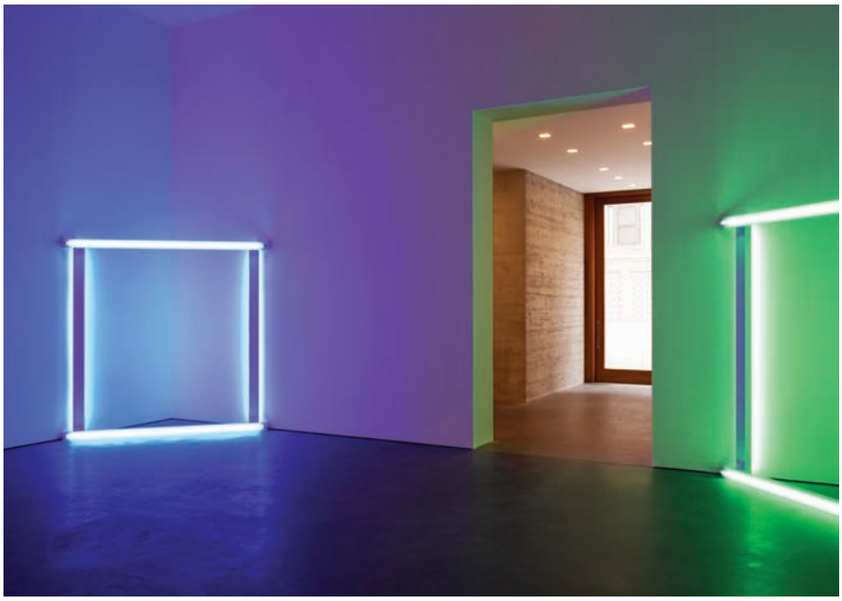
Other People and Their Ideas

No 18

Annabelle Selldorf

Interview by Tom Eccles

Annabelle Selldorf was born in Cologne and studied in New York, where she established Selldorf Architects in 1988. Since then the practice has worked on a mixture of public and private projects, gaining along the way a reputation for an elegant minimalist approach that has made it the 'go-to' architect for gallerists on both sides of the Atlantic. Among those Selldorf has designed gallery spaces for are David Zwirner, Gagosian, Hauser & Wirth, Gladstone Gallery, Michael Werner and Acquavella Galleries. She has also designed the tent for Frieze Masters and studio spaces for Jeff Koons, David Salle and Not Vital. Among others, Selldorf is currently working on a project for the Luma Foundation to renovate a series of buildings on an 8-hectare former SNCF site, Parc des Ateliers, in Arles, France.



ARTREVIEW *In a number of recent articles and interviews, your work has been compared to, and you yourself compare it to, 'slow food'. In fact you say: 'I feel like I'm the equivalent of slow food in architecture. What we do isn't spectacular. Unless perhaps it's a slow spectacle.' What does that mean?*

ANNABELLE SELLDORF Our work is seldom about spectacular gestures but rather about a series of decisions which come together and pertain to structure, proportion, light and specific use, the strength of which reveal themselves more gradually. On another level it refers to the speed of my brain...

AR *I thought you might be referencing a kind of Arts and Crafts movement: a resistance to acceleration and perhaps a whiff of 'taste'. A response to accelerated capitalism, and initially a reaction to a proposed McDonald's at the foot of the Spanish Steps in Rome, the slow food movement proposes 'sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment'. 'Knowledge' and 'discernment' are other qualities of the cooking school of thought. I wonder if the analogy worries you? Perhaps that's too aggressive.*

AS Aggressive indeed – Arts and Crafts, taste... These are big words that conjure up connotations that I do not like so much. And then when you go on to 'knowledge' and 'discernment', I get very nervous – absolutely! Enough with the analogy! Certainly though there is a distinct generalisation that has happened in architecture as a result of a culture that develops and consumes much more rapidly than the speed at which it can be digested. It does not seem that permanence and longevity are necessary values, and so that has changed the paradigm.

AR *You are famous for (among other things) the design of David Zwirner's gallery in Chelsea that exemplifies a heightened sense of auratic experience. You've been perhaps unfairly associated with a 'minimalist' approach to organising space or at the very least having a 'restrained' approach to architecture. I know you've said you don't want to be Donald Judd or Richard Serra, and that architecture is not art, but how would you describe your work in relation to minimalist strategies?*

AS I think that strategies in architecture address fundamentally different conditions than those in art. Perhaps it could be said that they have to serve a wider set of circumstances and references for that matter. Minimalism in architecture has become a question of style, which I am not very interested in. I believe that we always have to start with utilitarian purpose, but obviously that is not enough. There has to be an idea – it includes how and for what purpose people use space, but more importantly how they experience it. It seems to me that finding a very narrow path where an intervention does as little as is necessary – never too much but enough to be monumental – is a goal. To that end, analysis and a quest for resolution is the means. Somehow it is about a very rational approach that is rigorously subjective – if that makes any sense.

AR *Maybe you could unpack some of those concepts in real terms, say in terms of David Zwirner's gallery. What is rational, subjective and utilitarian about it?*

AS David Zwirner's building is a good example of all that in my mind: to begin with, there was a definition of the spaces and their attributes. It was evident that the central need was to provide a large, tall, column-free exhibition space that would be mostly lit with daylight, yet have the flexibility to be divided in different configurations to serve different kinds of art, and that other aspects of the programme – more exhibition space on the second floor, showrooms, a kitchen for those working in the building, etc – could all be rationally organised. But the choices that pertain to how the structure is expressed, the juxtaposition of varying

above David Zwirner, New York, with exhibition of work by Dan Flavin. Photo: Jason Schmidt. © 2013 Stephen Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

facing page Annabelle Selldorf. Photo: Dean Kaufman

proportions and exposure to differently orientated windows together with a concrete staircase winding upward in a tall skylit space, as well as the choices of few materials, are subjective and wilful decisions. Yet I view them as a deliberate attempt to get to that tenuous balance of doing nothing too much but not failing on account of not enough. I think of the building as a whole, which occupies a tight spot in an urban context, and therefore the facade as an exercise of the same balance.

AR *I think that could probably be said of many of your projects, including the Neue Galerie in New York, where you renovated a 1914 Carrère & Hastings Fifth Avenue mansion into a museum for Ronald Lauder's collection of early-twentieth-century German and Austrian art, including Klimt's famous* Adele Bloch-Bauer I *[1907, one of the most expensive paintings ever to be sold]. Or Hauser & Wirth's former premises in Piccadilly with the transformation of a 1923 bank building by Sir Edwin Lutyens (what you call 'a jewel box of a building'), provide evidence of an astonishing level of restraint on your part. What makes these buildings now Selldorf buildings? Where is* your *signature?*

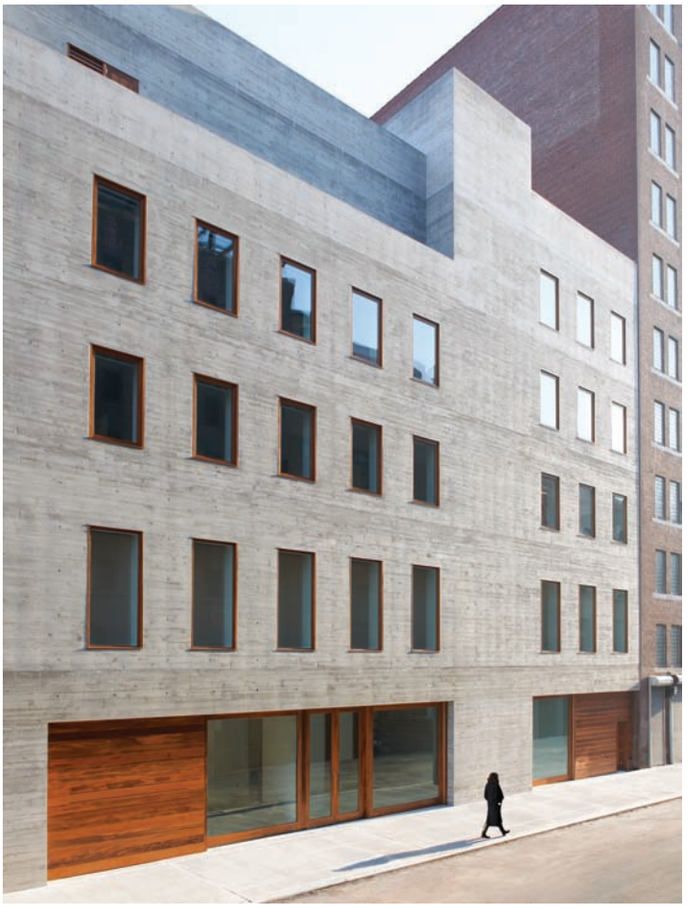
AS The question about signature is always interesting because it is about the difference between legibility and individual imprint. I don't perceive it to be my responsibility to provide the 'easy to recognise' attribute, though I believe that there is a distinct handwriting in our work.

Naturally in projects that are more about renovation/restoration or repurposing I prefer an attitude of restraint, whereas in new construction it is more possible to establish a vocabulary, or a grammar that answers to its own rules, as it were. In all cases – new construction or renovation – it always comes back to trying to find a path of resolution and clarity.

AR *That's an incredibly restrained answer! What do you really think about the phenomenon of 'starchitects'?*

AS I wonder who came up with this word in the first place. It does not contribute anything qualitative – it does certainly not say anything good – is a starchitect similar to a starlet? It is a word full of innuendo, but I am not sure to what end – damn architecture as a whole or just the architects to whom this label is attached? I remember that when Richard Meier did the apartment buildings on West Street and Perry Street, people became interested in the fact that developers had hired a well-known architect – a starchitect. I thought that this actually represented a positive trend in commercial architecture: developers hiring an architect known to design buildings of a certain quality rather than an unknown licensed professional to build the least expensive building with the most square-footage. It got more complicated though, because then architects became part of the 'branding' for buildings, and quickly the starchitect word was entirely pejorative.

AR *Without bringing on a libel suit to this magazine or to you, can I ask you about the recent brouhaha with Zaha Hadid in which she was incorrectly quoted as being indifferent to labour conditions in one of her projects for the World Cup in Qatar? It does, though, raise the question of ethics and responsibility among today's leading architects. Do you think they are any different from, say, multinational corporations with their own particular brands to maintain, etc?*



Exterior of David Zwirner, 20th Street, New York. Photo: Jason Schmidt

AS It appears that it all started with a journalist's book review gone awry. Rather than focusing on the book, the disproportionate attention fell on Zaha Hadid's decidedly glib response to questions about labour conditions on projects in the Far East in another newspaper interview, but reporting of the circumstances was so mixed up and wrong that one had to wonder if – at minimum – the publishing magazine had done any fact-checking whatsoever. Certainly I did not think that Hadid's lawsuit seemed commensurate to the understandable irritation about being seemingly wilfully vilified. But the question of ethics has to enter the picture – it is worrisome that large commissions around the world get realised by well-known architects and transgressions are taciturnly overlooked. While it may not be the architect's role to negotiate labour conditions, it seems that the status of 'starchitect' offers an opportunity to be outspoken and to direct the eye of the public to unacceptable conditions. Needless to say, any public criticism may come at the cost of those commissions, which presumably explains the lack of any vocal outreach. While there are differences between the multinational corporation and the leading architect – the corporations actively negotiate the conditions, whereas the architect may have merely a voice readily heard – ethical responsibility exists for both.

AR *In an age where the public and private are essentially blurred, can architecture clarify or does it mask the difference between the two?*

AS This is damn hard to answer and I am not sure how to tackle it. Where to begin? Everybody talks about public space – where in spatial terms the blur of public and private happens – and what it has to deliver. Nothing interests me more. Public space has become synonymous with 'available to everybody', which then in turn often means that it can only be less specific and consequently precludes a sense of privacy or intimacy or focus. It gets very complicated very quickly, though I believe that articulating differentiated spheres without accepting exclusivity as a tradeoff is entirely possible. But then we'll have to get more concrete...

AR *Recently in New York, the Museum of Modern Art tore down the Folk Art Museum designed by Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects. While the building was far from loved among many New Yorkers, how did you react to a cultural protagonist destroying the work of fellow architects?*

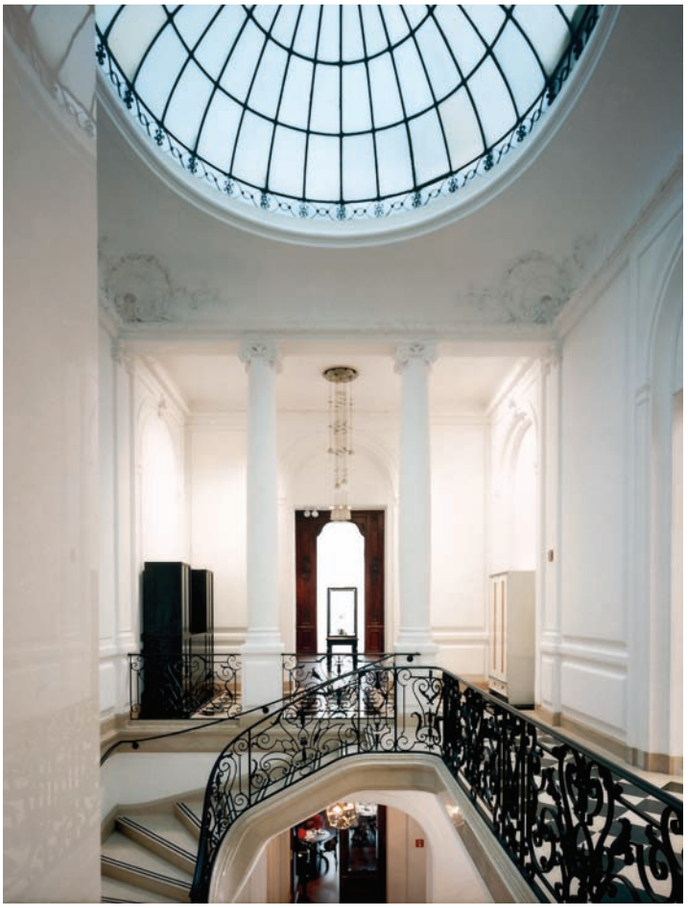
AS First of all, I think that there were many New Yorkers who *did* love the building; I am sure there were as many or more who did than

those who did not like it. In fact people have been passionate about the building from the day it was built. Like it or not, it was a remarkable building in New York's increasingly bland streetscape. Rather than focusing on Diller Scofidio + Renfro, whose commission it was to prove that the building is fundamentally flawed and cannot be repurposed, I think the greater attention has to be given to the institution that was hellbent on this very argument being the only possible one. Obviously that did not go over all that well in the [architectural] community. After all, was MOMA not the first museum to include the art of architecture in their mission? Of course there could have been a different attitude to the building, but the desire to tear this little building down in favour of a streamlined circulation loop existed long before DS+R was hired – though I do not mean to exonerate their decision to oblige. All explanations by the museum and their new architects are perfectly plausible, except that they do not go to the core of the issue. What is fascinating is that ultimately it is private property, and that's all that there is to it – the public has no say.

AR *What would you like to do next? I could imagine you making the most exquisite library. Slow reading?*

AS What would I like to do next? I am insatiable, so I want to do it all... On second thought, maybe not all. What I would like to work on are projects that are about public space. I want to do new construction – build!

A new art museum would be great. A new library would be excellent. We have recently completed the renovation of an existing library at Brown University, called John Hay Library. What was interesting about it was the fact that the very beautiful main reading room in the classical 1910 Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge-designed building resembled in proportion and expression some of the great reading rooms in the world, like Cambridge, for example, but the actual proportion of the space was much smaller. Anyway, working on this library was fascinating to me because libraries today need to do such different things than they used to. Universities, but also public libraries, are so much less about books – as more and more information is available digitally – and instead so much more about providing spaces to meet, learn and study. Renovating this old library, we reinstated a certain formality in the grand old room, but we made it very light and airy, and apparently students love spending time there. So, it would be extremely interesting to build new and define new spaces relevant today: maybe grand and beautiful, but without the intimidation of authority. It goes back to the earlier conversation of public meeting private. It could be a worthwhile task to find a way to give great private spaces with dignity to people in the context of larger welcoming public space. And then I also hope that books will continue to be around...



Neue Galerie, New York. Photo: Adam Friedberg