

Annabelle Selldorf

BY IAN VOLNER

PORTRAIT BY DEAN KAUFMAN

One of the loading bays of Selldorf Architects' Sims Municipal Recycling Facility in Brooklyn's Sunset Park neighborhood. (OPPOSITE) Annabelle Selldorf in her firm's Manhattan office.



The first thing one notices is the voice. Finely modulated, with a faint, unplaceable accent. And everything it says seems carefully considered and weighed, the words issued in just the right quantities. Not to suggest there's anything awkward or artificial about it: It's simply the sound of someone who approaches things—design, culture, America—a little bit from the outside. Someone who tries to pick her way through what she says as deliberately as possible. “I’m a stickler for words,” says architect Annabelle Selldorf, who moved to the U.S. from her native Germany in 1980,

adding, “I still make mistakes, and I hate it. Just the other day, I said I wanted to go out and ‘paint the town black.’”

Whatever color she uses—and whether or not she gets the phrases exactly right—Selldorf has certainly been making her presence felt all over New York and elsewhere in the past few years. At 52, the principal of Selldorf Architects has recently completed or is about to complete a suite of high-profile commissions that are changing people's perceptions of the practice—not to mention her own view. Long known as an architect's

architect, Selldorf has been a go-to designer for art galleries and private homes practically since the day she founded the firm in 1988. But her latest project, the Sims Municipal Recycling Facility on the Brooklyn waterfront, proves that her ultrarefined sensibility can be applied to buildings far greater in scale, and in far more challenging circumstances. Says Selldorf: “This is perhaps the first proof that we can really create a new building that's more than a house.”

Selldorf's slow but steady rise through the profession appears to be a natural function





PHOTO: TOP, MARC LINS. BOTTOM, JONATHAN CHESLEY.

of her coolly cautious temperament, one that seems allergic to grand gestures and brash statements. Her projects have a studied quietude but manage to avoid being reductive, their sobriety lightened by artful surprises. In 2001, she transformed an early 20th-century Fifth Avenue mansion into the Neue Galerie, a showcase that gives its German and Austrian paintings center stage while revealing the beauty of the original structure at key moments. Last year, for the Venice Biennale, she transformed the city's vast (and all too familiar) Arsenale nearly beyond recognition with a sequence of white-walled divisions that finally made the art look like it belonged there. "I feel like I'm the equivalent of slow food in architecture," Selldorf says of her work. "What we do isn't spectacular. Unless perhaps it's a slow spectacle."

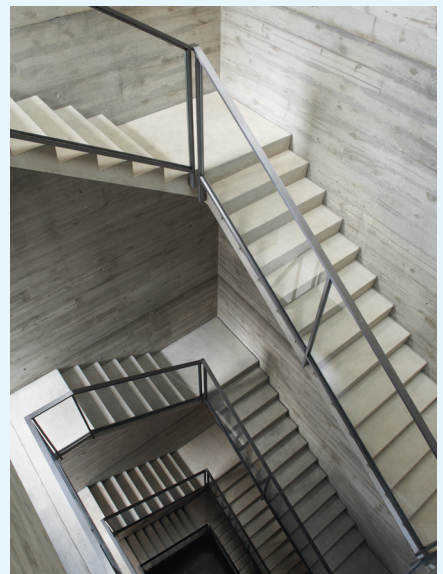
That balance of understatement and style is on full display at the recently opened space for David Zwirner Gallery on 20th Street in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. Unusual for the district—where Selldorf has done renovations for the likes of Barbara Gladstone and Hauser & Wirth—the gallery is a new construction, with 30,000 square feet of exhibition and office space on five floors. The austerity of the gray facade is relieved by the wooden frames of the wide windows, and by the fine grain of the concrete, reminiscent, as Selldorf herself has noted, of the woody texture of I.M. Pei's concrete in projects like his National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Inside, the concrete and wood details, as well as the complex density of the plan, signal a slight break from the area's ubiquitous white-box gallery spaces. For Selldorf, the project was an opportunity "to move away from shaping an interior space to creating a volume," she says. "In a funny way it's an assertion of architecture with a capital A."

Despite her history and standing in the art world, Selldorf doesn't see herself taking any specific cues from the formal or conceptual concerns of modern and contemporary art. "I do not aspire to be Donald Judd or Richard Serra," she says. Her architecture is stubbornly nonreferential, an approach that tunes into context and program only to transcend them with a new and subtle synthesis. In Williamstown, Massachusetts, the firm is finalizing work on the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, a dual interior renovation that includes the refurbishment of the original 1955 structure as well as an adjacent research facility from the early '70s. The question facing the architect, as she puts it, was: "Can we change everything without changing a thing?" Her solution was to let the complex speak for itself, making it, in a sense, more like itself than it was before. Her interventions, which include reorienting the older building to the west and opening up its boxy neighbor with a new central reading room, manage to be tranquil without seeming regimented.

If the mood for the Clark is meditative, Selldorf's Sims project is anything but. The crunch of glass and the hum of conveyor

belts make the facility the architect's least serene building to date: a simple ensemble of steel siding, piers, and walkways that started receiving barges of New York's cast-off aluminum and plastic in December. The idea of a designer known for graceful art spaces doing something so brawny and bare-bones might seem odd, at first. But Selldorf sees the building as bearing out a conviction that's evident in her earlier, more modest projects: "If you concentrate on the fundamental elements and do no more than you have to, but never too little, you can get something that's really taut and intense." With its clear massing and extraordinary framing of the harbor view, the building may actually be the most vivid articulation yet of the architect's overall design strategy—an "experiment," as she calls it, that proves her approach can work anywhere.

"Like I said, I'm a stickler for words," Selldorf says. "It's this desire to find the exact and correct expression—to say with as few words as possible 100 percent of what you want to express." For the designer, this sense of economy—an inherited trait, perhaps, as her parents were modernist designers during the lean years of West Germany's postwar reconstruction—has put her somewhat at odds with the mainstream of the profession, where high-concept, iconic architecture has held sway for two decades. And while there are plenty of other architects out there espousing a minimalist aesthetic, and a few drawing from a similar, refined-functional vein, what makes Selldorf stand out is an elegance despite her vigorous renunciation of the rhetoric of elegance. You could call her style Cool Pragmatism—but then Selldorf doesn't care for schools and styles. "Bringing it together—that's what it's all about," Selldorf says. "You can have the greatest theories and ideas, but if you can't make it physical, nothing happens."



(TOP TO BOTTOM) The main facade of David Zwirner's new 20th Street gallery, designed by Selldorf Architects. The stairwell of the five-story Zwirner gallery. (OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM) The barge entry for the Sims Municipal Recycling Facility. Materials are processed at the Sims facility using optical sorters, then bundled and shipped out.