



SUNDBLE

Architect
Annabelle Selldorf
masters the art
of restraint.

BY TED LOOS

PORTRAIT BY MICHAEL WESCHLER

An installation featuring a piece by Donald Judd at the David Zwirner gallery in Chelsea, designed by Annabelle Selldorf

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—ANNABELLE SELLDORF

In architecture, sometimes the lightest touch has the biggest impact. That proposition might sound ludicrous in light of the dramatic, eye-catching new buildings that are going up around the world all the time, but it seems more reasonable after a visit to the Neue Galerie for German and Austrian art and design in New York.

Architect Annabelle Selldorf took the venerable old bones of a 1914 Carrère and Hastings Beaux Arts beauty and rejuvenated it as a surprisingly modern venue for showing art, without losing its original character.

Completed in 2001, the Neue Galerie project may be Selldorf's signature achievement, but her work is everywhere these days, particularly in the art world. She's responsible for the brand-new David Zwirner and Hauser & Wirth gallery spaces in Chelsea (as well as the design of several other galleries in the U.S. and Europe); she often designs exhibitions for the various outposts of the Gagosian Gallery empire; and her renovation of one of the key buildings of the beloved Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, is due to be completed next year.

"Some architects have a signature move," says the urbane and straightforward Selldorf, comfortably seated in her Union Square office in New York City. "I don't believe that's a good attribute to have. Ours is much more quiet work, and it's not in the first instance about the big gesture."

This exquisite sensitivity to the task of renovating older structures comes naturally to the German-born Selldorf: her father was an architect who did work renovating old houses and her grandmother had an interior design business. Educated in the United States at the Pratt Institute and Syracuse University, Selldorf hung out her own shingle in her late 20s instead of toiling away in obscurity for a more famous name—the first of many moves that displays her quiet confidence.

"When you're starting out, and somebody gives you a bathroom to renovate, you put all of your energy into that," she says, adding that she learned to work "inside-out" early on.

Selldorf is the rare woman with an acknowledged spot in the top tier of architects—the female peer who gets the most attention now is probably Zaha



The David Zwirner gallery in Chelsea

Hadid, whose work is as different as can be from Selldorf's. Although looking at architecture through the lens of gender can be misleading, it's hard to imagine one of her male peers saying, as she does of her tricky Clark renovation, "Sometimes it's a little bit like being a chiropractor: you make somebody stand up straighter and better, and you repropotion things, but you do it with a light hand."

Selldorf has mastered the art of dealing with some of the art world's most powerful men—Larry Gagosian, David Zwirner and Neue Galerie founder and billionaire collector Ronald Lauder are no one's idea of pushovers. "They are not used to having anybody contradict them," she says. "And it's not so much that I contradict—I interpret. I think that sometimes, it may be easier to do that as a woman. The different kind of communication we bring to the picture is helpful."

By all accounts, the deluxe new Zwirner gallery she completed this past winter displays her ability to create a ground-up structure that holds its own in any context. From the striking, board-form concrete façade to the light-filled, intelligently progressing spaces inside, her architecture has richness and clear purpose. The same is true of the luxury apartment building she designed at 200 11th Avenue, with its terracotta cladding on the first three floors and an undulating stainless steel rain screen above, examples of what she calls her efforts to achieve a "tactile, sensuous quality." (The building became famous, or infamous in some circles, for its special car elevator; each single-floor residence has its own garage-in-the-sky.)

Selldorf is still stretching her talents, too. Her latest commission, a new recycling facility in Brooklyn due to open this fall, is out of character with her other work in terms of usage, but she came up with a breathtakingly simple design that's in keeping with the modern look of her portfolio.

A lot of people in the art world are expecting that, one day soon, Selldorf will receive a commission that has eluded her thus far: a from-scratch museum project. In her understated way, she makes clear that it's high time. "It's been 28 years that I've been doing this, and now I feel I know what I'm looking at, what interests me and how to push things forward," she says. "I feel ready to go."



Above, an installation view of sculptures by Paul McCarthy at Hauser & Wirth in Chelsea; below, interior views of the renovated Neue Galerie in New York

