

DESIGN

The Form Mistress

In an age of highly expressive architecture, Annabelle Selldorf is about restrained and understated elegance. From reinvented Beaux-Arts galleries to handsome residential towers, the Selldorf statement goes against the grain BY DAVID NETTO

IF YOU HAVE VISITED AN ART GALLERY OR MUSEUM in the past 10 years, there is a very good chance you have been in an Annabelle Selldorf-designed building. It is also just as likely that you didn't notice. So quiet and sensitively deployed is her architecture that its calling card is a form that will enhance but not upstage the purpose at hand.

Since the Cologne, Germany-born, Pratt Institute-educated architect was launched to international prominence with the opening of New York's Neue Galerie in 2001, Selldorf has maintained a position in the architecture world as a kind of anti-Daniel Libeskind, creating structures and interiors that offer an intriguing combination of discipline and seduction, authority mixed with charm, equal parts modesty and authorship. The Neue Galerie, a sensitive Modernist renovation interwoven with the existing Beaux-Arts architecture of one of Fifth Avenue's last remaining great houses, was the start of a career spent largely as a leading architect to the art world, but which Selldorf is now shifting into other arenas, such as the construction of a recycling facility in Brooklyn. (At the beginning of her career, there were stints working for Richard Gluckman and FXFOWLE Architects, but Selldorf has had her own office since completing her master's degree at Syracuse University in 1997.)

She may be a Modernist at heart, but Selldorf, at 50, is primarily a practitioner of what Mies van der Rohe identified as the hardest thing to achieve in architecture: an interesting plainness. In her gallery work she found a natural context for this sensibility, not to mention a programmatic need for architecture to know its place. "Architecture is about aging well, about precision and authenticity," she says, sitting in a cozy book-lined section of her office on a recent weekday afternoon. "There is much more to the success of a building than what you can see. I'm not suggesting that gestural architecture is always superficial, but solid reasoning has its place."

While Selldorf has become best known for her gallery projects—beautifully engineered and illuminated white boxes—her atelier, whose glass-walled offices sit above the former Warhol factory space in Union Square, has also quietly been building a portfolio of notable residential work that embodies her low-key and disciplined aesthetic. One of these is a town house in New York's East Village neighborhood—a renovation in which Shaker-like white rooms contain flashes of highly colored marble at a mantel or applied to one wall. Clearly this is someone who seeks a subtle product but is unafraid to

experiment with a combination of extremes to get it. "I typically say my work is not about materials. It's juxtaposition I'm interested in. I tend to be reductionist, so what I do use has to have power. But not the power to distract," she says. Her Pika House in Dunton Hot Springs, Colorado, takes the original form of a small steel-frame tower with wooden cladding. This seems a curious solution for a ski house until Selldorf explains that the premise was twofold, to reference the height of the surrounding birch trees and occupy a footprint no bigger than an indigenous log cabin.

A magnetic force appears to be at work, one that draws Selldorf to Beaux-Arts architecture of the early 20th century. Beginning with the Neue Galerie, and again in a former London bank building by Edwin Lutyens for Hauser & Wirth, then once more in New York's Acquavella Galleries, in a superb town house by Ogden Codman, Selldorf has renovated a series of buildings that epitomize the grandeur and gravitas of the Edwardian urban world. Within context Selldorf found opportunity: "When you have rules to abide by, does that curtail you as a designer, or set you free? People think of classical architecture visually, but I think the brilliant part of it is actually spatial."

In Selldorf's Beaux-Arts renovations, you have to look hard at first to see where the original shell leaves off and the new architecture begins. But that is the point. You then start to notice details—the Vienna Werkstätt-style light fixtures, the smoothness of new wall planes inserted into a stage of deftly reduced opulence—and it becomes apparent that the building has been reinvented with precision and respect. And humility. Selldorf's in-progress renovation of the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, whose neoclassical main building dates from the 1950s, is another working illustration of her gallery-design philosophy: Don't challenge the art.

Her latest New York project is a 19-story loft tower at 200 Eleventh Avenue in Chelsea, recently completed and now being occupied. Capturing the imagination of most is the building's internal car lift, which allows residents to park their cars directly in front of their apartments—an extravagance even for luxury buildings in New York City. But outside is where the real action is: The undulating forms of the three-story terra-cotta base are the most unusual parts of this design. "All-glass construction is in abundance today," Selldorf says. "But one of the things I've always loved about New York is

there is so much precedent for ornament on industrial buildings." One part ornament and three parts industry are married here in a signature Selldorf gesture, with the building's base referencing Josef Hoffmann's Austrian Pavilion at the 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (the event which gave us the term Art Deco), and the 1920s stone skyscrapers of New York's financial district.

Next on the agenda for Selldorf is the Gowanus Canal recycling project for Sims Metal Management, which will open next year. This corrugated-metal building's utilitarian look might be hard to fall in love with, but makes sense when you think about how architecture is used: As part of its environmental program, the facility will have a tribe of goats living on-site to provide engine-free landscape maintenance.

As for what the future holds, Selldorf says, "There's no architect who doesn't want to build a library—and I am no different. With so much scrutiny now attached to reading—because of technology and how we approach it as a social activity—that is a very exciting area in architecture." ♦



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NIKOLAS KOENIGTSMARK; ABOVE: ADAM FRIEDBERG; OCEAN KAUFMAN; NIKOLAS KOENIGTSMARK; FRANCIS HALLARD



SCENES FROM MANHATTAN, clockwise from top left: A marble bathroom in an expansive Selldorf-designed beach house in Sagaponack, New York; the grand staircase and skylight in Neue Galerie, on 85th Street; the 19-story residential tower at 200 Eleventh Avenue is Selldorf's tallest work to date; Gladstone Gallery's 21st Street building; the exterior at 520 West Chelsea, an 11-story condo building; Selldorf in her office; light floods the sitting room of an East Village townhouse.

