

# Annabelle Selldorf brings the sensibility of Mies and Loos to the conversion of a Beaux Arts town house into the **NEUE GALERIE** in New York City

By Suzanne Stephens

**Y**ou could almost call it invisible architecture. Annabelle Selldorf's approach to designing spaces for the display of art is so subtle, it reaffirms the essence of architecture found in what Mies van der Rohe called "beinahe nichts"—almost nothing. She is known as an architect who has deftly manipulated proportion, materials, detailing, and lighting to create art galleries and artists' lofts and other residences known for their restraint and clarity. In this recent conversion of a large New York town house into the Neue Galerie, a museum for early-20th-century German and Austrian art, the contents—painting, sculpture, and art objects—stand out dramatically against mute yet luminous environments. Selldorf has also isolated the major architectural features of this palatial landmark, designed in 1914 by Carrère and Hastings, so the spiraling marble and wrought-iron stair, the domed skylight, and the marble and wood wainscoting of the major rooms emerge in full relief. The difficult combination of restoration and modernization is intended to look effortless: Selldorf did not try to make an aggressive architectural statement that would compete with the museum's collection, which includes paintings by Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, and furnishings and objects by Adolf Loos, Kolomon Moser, and Josef Hoffmann. At the same time, she did not try to create a white-box, Minimalist backdrop for the work on view nor, conversely, to bring back the total turn-of-the-20th-century domestic splendor of this mansion built for industrialist William Starr Miller. "You continually make judgments about how to keep the entire work coherent and intact yet also serve the purposes of exhibiting art," Selldorf remarks. "It was a painstakingly discreet renovation."

The idea of the Neue Galerie was initiated by Serge Sebarsky, the late art dealer and collector, and Ronald Lauder, chairman of Estée Lauder, who is a collector himself as well as the former ambassador to Austria. In 1994, Sebarsky bought the 80-year-old structure—itsself a



**Project:** *Neue Galerie New York, Museum for German and Austrian Art, New York City*

**Owner:** *Ronald Lauder*

**Architect:** *Selldorf Architects—Annabelle Selldorf, principal; Randy Goya, Anne Nixon, project managers; Gretchen Stoecker, project architect; Leander Grayson, Karen Lu, project team*

**Engineers:** *Gilsanz Murray Steficek (structural); Jack Green Associates (MEP)*

**Lighting:** *George Sexton Associates—George Sexton and Brian McIntyre*

**General contractor:** *Clark Construction Corporation*

**Waterproofing:** *Associates Construction Consultants*



The vestibule of the former town house reflects Annabelle Selldorf's distillation of modern and traditional motifs.







Beaux Arts reprise of early-17th-century houses enclosing the Place des Vosges in Paris—from the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, which had occupied it for 40 years. After Sebarsky’s death in 1996, Lauder reportedly spent \$20 million to buy the house from the Sebarsky Foundation and renovate it to accommodate a 23,000-square-foot museum with 4,300 square feet of exhibition space. Selldorf, who at the time had recently restored an Italian Gothic palazzo in Venice for an art foundation, was brought in to see what she could do. It needed work. “The whole concept for the museum evolved through ongoing conversations with Ronald Lauder; the museum director, Renée Price; and the curators,” Selldorf says. “We didn’t want to restore it in such a way that it seemed overdone and unnatural.” One of the first decisions was to bring back natural light into the stair hall by removing a roof that had been placed over the domed skylight. Selldorf installed a structural glass skylight above the dome, which also serves as a small outdoor terrace for the museum’s fourth-floor offices.

The house’s largest public rooms were situated on the second floor, or piano nobile, where a surfeit of marble trim and oak wainscoting confronted Selldorf. This floor was chosen to showcase the permanent collection of Austrian art, while German art and objects were placed upstairs on the third floor, along with galleries for temporary exhibitions. In the former music room on the second floor, Selldorf kept the marble but removed mirrors so that the paintings could be mounted against white plaster panels edged with gilt molding. With the insertion of a gridded, backlit, glass-paneled ceiling, the gallery has a luminous quality that

brings out the deeply saturated colors of the paintings. The former library on the second floor, lined in boiserie, displays design objects of the Wiener Werkstätte and related ateliers in bold wood vitrines inspired by ones in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

On the third floor, the quiet palette of white and gray painted drywall creates a neutral backdrop for mounting art works. Although the original parquet could be kept on the second floor, new oak planks, 4 inches wide, were installed on the third. The luxurious sheen of these horizontal planes brings Adolf Loos to mind, just as the linear stretches of gridded steel grills for return air are reminiscent of Josef Hoffmann.

Fitting out the museum with ducts and returns for the HVAC while keeping close to the ceiling heights of the town house was a headache. As Selldorf put it, she needed to “snake ductwork down the walls and former chimneys” and also create an enormous mechanical space on the roof. Finding room in the house for a bookstore and café on the ground floor, plus offices and storage on the fourth and fifth, “was like cutting holes in the air,” Selldorf notes, “but in the end it was quite efficient.” In designing the 70-seat Café Sebarsky on the ground floor, Selldorf left the oak paneling of the former dining room facing Central Park intact. But to shift the mood more toward Austria and Germany, Selldorf filled the café with reproductions of chairs Loos had Thonet build to his own specifications for his famous Café Museum in Vienna in 1899.

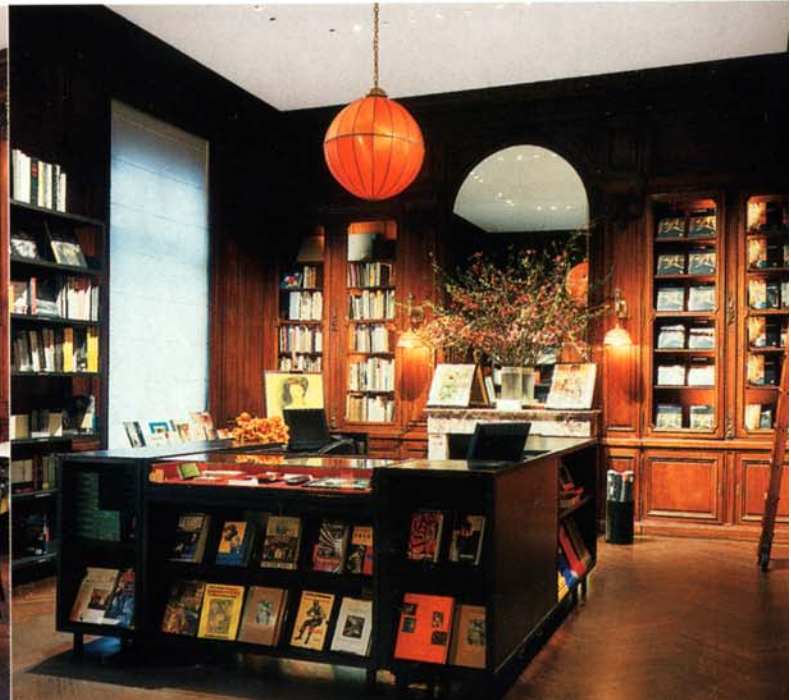
Although Selldorf states, “It’s important not to over-restore,” she doesn’t feel that the architect’s role should be passive. New needs and idiosyncratic spaces have to be dealt with. For example, a white-glass-pan-



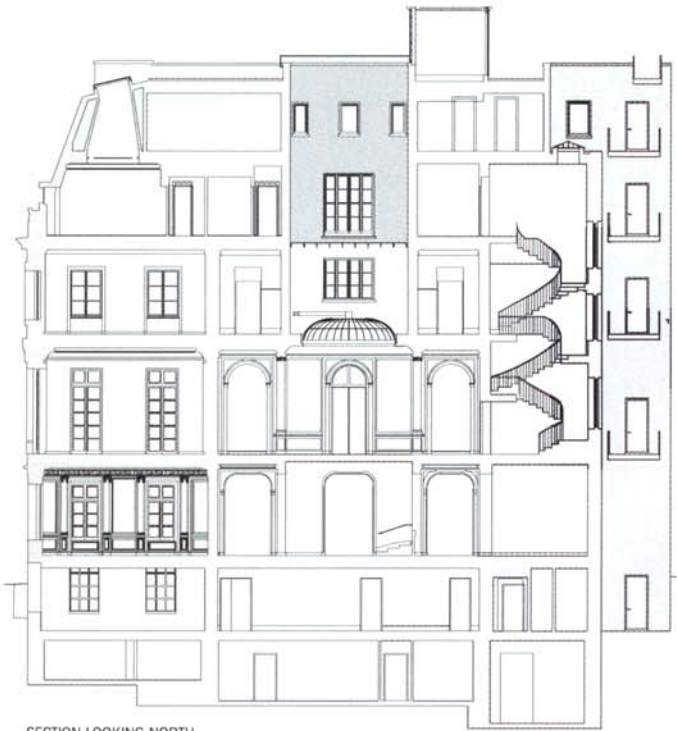


A new white-glass-paneled elevator (opposite, far left, and above right), illuminated by an Adolf Loos pendant lamp, slips beside the

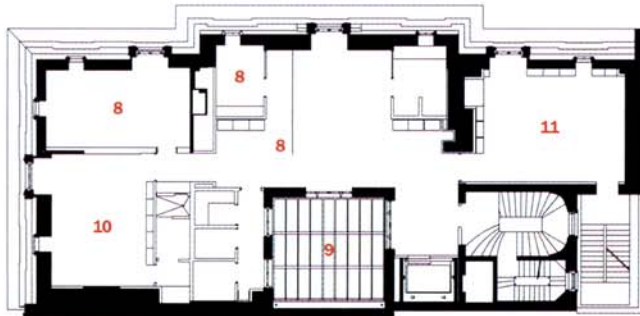
main stair (opposite, right). Ceiling fixtures in the café and bookstore (below left and right) are based on Josef Hoffmann designs.



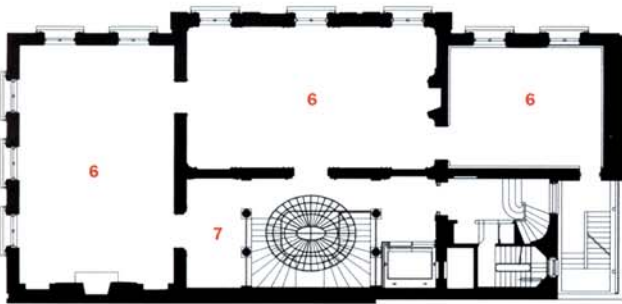




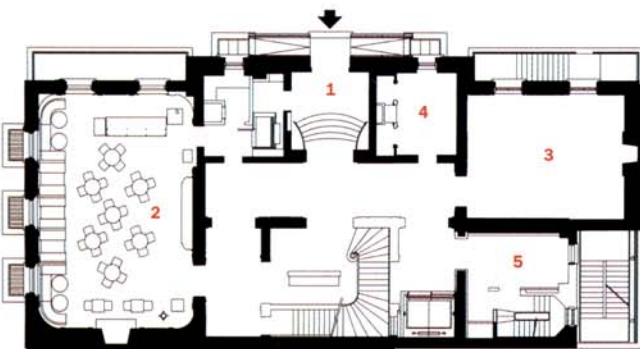
SECTION LOOKING NORTH



FOURTH FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR



In the design shop, vases by Josef Hoffman are illuminated in the vitrine above a Hoffmann desk. The mantelpiece clock by Adolf Loos is part of the permanent collection.

1. Entrance
2. Café
3. Bookstore
4. Shop
5. Coatroom
6. Permanent exhibition
7. Hall
8. Administration
9. Terrace with glass floor
10. Office
11. Conference room





On the second floor,  
the former library now  
displays objects from  
Wiener Werkstätte and  
related ateliers in  
custom wood vitrines,  
illuminated by  
recessed track lighting.







The third-floor galleries are covered with new oak planks (above), dramatizing furniture by Loos and stainless-steel return-air grills (below).



eled elevator cab is tucked into a space next to the main stair. Selldorf resisted the idea of inserting an attention-getting historicist or modern mechanistic device there. “Instead of a spectacle, we made the elevator a white, silent, shiny Miesian box, to look as if it had always been there, unless you thought about it,” she explains.

Like Mies van der Rohe and Adolf Loos, Selldorf emphasizes stringency of line and proportion, offset by luxurious materials. In this process of distillation, the architectural firm devoted a large amount of time overseeing the execution on-site. “You’ve got to be finicky,” Selldorf advises, adding, “I had a dedicated team of architects—stubborn about the craft and the detail.” The result is a highly disciplined work of art that recaptures the spirit of the old New York town house, but allows the German and Austrian artifacts to emerge brilliantly and clearly from their elegant backdrop. ■

#### Sources

**Roof:** Laurenc Roofing (built-up); Premier Roof (installation standing-seam copper roof)

**Windows (wood):** Historic Windows

**Steel:** O’Keefes

**Glass:** Gray Glass (low-iron); Century Glazing (structural)

**Skylight:** Atlantech Systems

**Cabinetwork and custom woodwork:**

Budd Woodworking; Donadic

Woodworking; Michael Gordon

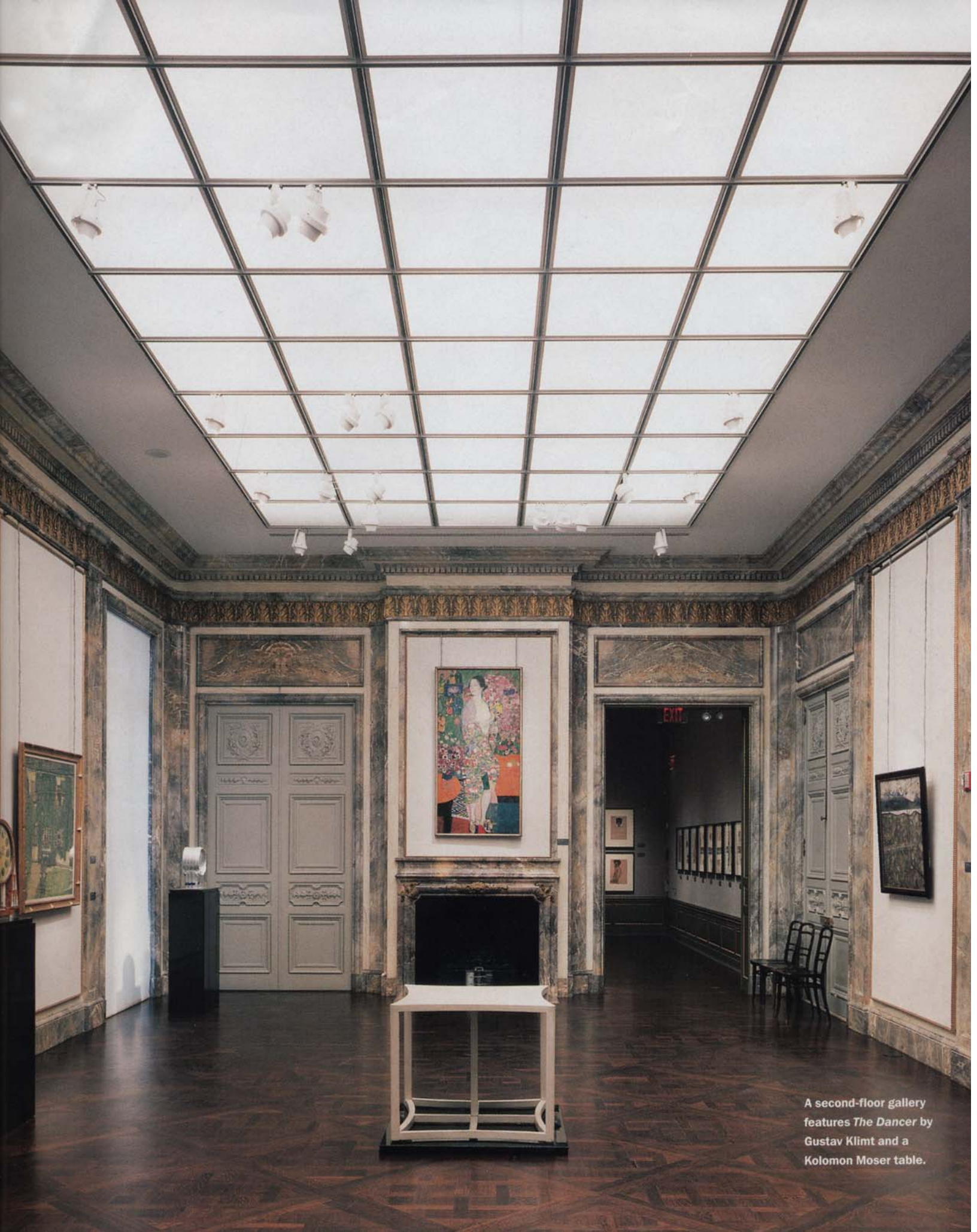
**Wall coverings:** J. Edlin Interiors;

Sam Kasten Handweaver (fabric)

**Exhibition lighting:** Nulux

**www** For more information on the people and products involved in this project, go to Projects at [architecturalrecord.com](http://architecturalrecord.com).





A second-floor gallery features *The Dancer* by Gustav Klimt and a Kolomon Moser table.