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Little black book: Annabelle Selldorf, architect

Meet the designer who says you can't have a great project without a great client

3 DAYS AGO



By [Alice Hancock](https://www.ft.com/stream/2b82ec49-5b2e-5867-85a4-29ff07d75186) (<https://www.ft.com/stream/2b82ec49-5b2e-5867-85a4-29ff07d75186>)

*Annabelle Selldorf is renowned for the subtle architecture of her buildings. Born in Germany, she founded her now 65-strong eponymous practice in New York in 1988. Her work includes San Diego's **Museum of Contemporary Art** (<http://www.mcasd.org/>), **New York's Steinway Hall** (<http://www.steinwayhall.com/>) and the **Luma** (<http://www.luma-arles.org/>) contemporary art centre in Arles. She has also designed numerous houses in the Hamptons and residential buildings in Manhattan. The firm is currently designing the renovation of **The Frick Collection** (<https://www.frick.org/>) in New York and an expansion of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.*

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I am
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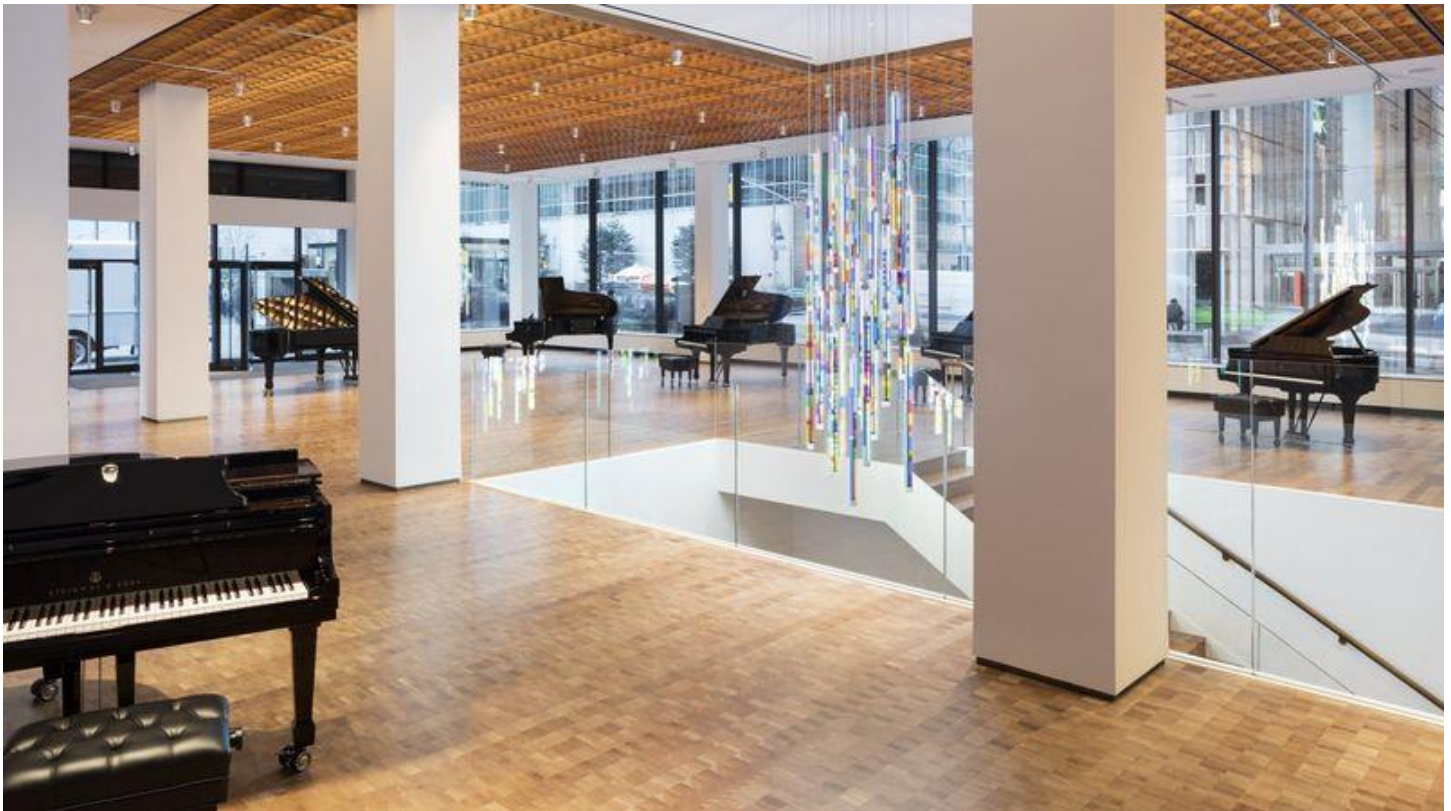
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**Annabelle
Selldorf**



Why did you choose architecture?

I grew up in a family of architects and designers, so being interested in built space came with the territory. But it wasn't until I went to study it that I realised the breadth of all that architecture encompasses, from the physical to the metaphysical. That's when architecture became my passion.



The Steinway Hall in New York

How would you characterise your style?

I am fundamentally a Modernist, but I don't think the work we do has a distinct style or look. What I find more important is what it does: how do the buildings affect people and their surroundings; how do people use a space? And from that one can shape what a building looks like, because, of course, that matters as well. But it is never formulaic, it always comes from a response to the particulars of site and use.



Residential project by Selldorf Architects in Sagaponack, Long Island, New York

How would you describe your own home?

My own home is a prewar apartment in Manhattan. It is a very simple, white-plastered space with a strongly figured white and grey marble floor and there is a lot of art and furniture. It is very comfortable but still sparse.



Name your three top influences.

I would say Mies van der Rohe, Gunnar Asplund and Adolf Loos.

What has been your favourite residential project?

It is always the one that I have completed most recently. Right now it is a compound of three structures on Martha's Vineyard [the Massachusetts island that is a popular summer destination]: an all-glass house with a wooden structure, a restored 19th-century house and a brick barn rebuilt from old drawings.

Which project are you most proud of?

That's impossible to say. Different projects make me proud for different reasons. I am very proud to be working on a **primary school in Mwabwindo** (<http://www.selldorf.com/projects/the-mwabwindo-school>), Zambia for the **14+ Foundation**, (<http://www.14plusfoundation.org/>) a non-profit that builds and operates schools and orphanages in rural Africa. It is a beautiful project that has engaged both the local community and my team.

**If you weren't allowed to do it yourself, who would design your home?**

I would ask **Eduardo Souto de Moura** (<https://divisare.com/authors/9001-eduardo-souto-de-moura>). I have always admired his architecture. It is both rational and precise in a Mies-ian way, but also experiential and even visceral.

What is the one object you would never allow in your home?

Furniture made from trophy animals.

What do you look for in a client?

One of the most rewarding aspects of being an architect is the collaborative nature of the work. People who have their own ideas and are interested in exchange and dialogue usually make the best clients. The old saying that you can't have a great project without a great client is true.



The Luma contemporary art centre in Arles, France

What is the biggest challenge when it comes to designing a residential space?

There is obviously much that is the same from one private residential space to the other — people need space to sleep, to cook, to sit. The challenge is making each specific to the person who will live there. Everyone inhabits their spaces differently. Some people like distinct rooms for each function, others like a more open plan. As an architect, you have to listen and discern those differences to shape space as if it were a portrait.



Residential project in Sagaponack