

the BIG PICTURE

Known for her *monumental* architectural feats, *Annabelle Selldorf* has kept her parallel career in furniture design *under* the radar—until now.

Say this much about Annabelle Selldorf: she certainly knows how to keep a secret. Having spent the better portion of her career in the design-world spotlight, Selldorf has been hailed, both in the U.S. and abroad, for a remarkably diverse catalogue of built work, including but not limited to museums, apartment buildings, even an honest-to-goodness recycling plant, all marked by the same forward-thinking, hyper-refined sensibility. With a heap of awards to her name, and still more impressive commissions in the pipeline, it might be assumed that by now, 30-plus years since the founding of her eponymous firm, the German-born, New York-based architect is pretty much a known quantity. Yet, as it turns out, there's another side of Selldorf—one that's been hiding in plain sight the whole time.

"I always had a hesitation about taking credit for it," says Selldorf. The "it" in this instance is furniture—quite a lot of furniture. Indeed an entire furniture company, called Vica, which the architect has operated in tandem with her architectural practice since 2004 and which has produced many of the sofas, chairs, and tables seen in her well-known buildings and interiors. To hear Selldorf tell it, the fact that product design has remained a relatively obscure part of her creative activity is not due to its being intentionally hidden; it simply reflects the natural lay of the land in the profession. "Architects don't want to buy furniture designed by other architects," she says. It is hardly worth it, in her view, to publicize something that was mainly of interest to herself.

But that perspective has begun to shift. Debuting this fall, the relaunch of the newly retitled Vica by Annabelle Selldorf collection shows the architect staking a stronger claim than ever before as a maker of high-design furniture aimed at the commercial marketplace. "It's been an evolution," she says. "We've had this little company more or less as an appendix to Selldorf Architects. Now I feel like it actually stands on its own two feet." Featuring a full suite of lighting, seating, cabinetry, and more, the recently expanded line mixes older designs with original Selldorf creations, and it has obvious appeal to an audience that extends well beyond her fellow architects. The secret is out, though the real surprise is what lies behind the work, as well as what it might mean for the designer's future.

To understand just how surprising Selldorf's furniture is, it helps to look at the buildings that have so far upstaged it. Trying to sum up her sprawling portfolio is no easy task—which is not to say that many critics haven't tried. "The art world's favorite architect;" a maker of "stealthy architecture;" the prophet of "Cool Pragmatism;" appraisals like these are a good start, yet none of them (including the last one, from the current author) are quite as effective as simply trying to see her work, to convey its visual and conceptual logic.

Take one of her most celebrated projects to date, the David Zwirner Gallery in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, completed in 2013. As approached from the outside, the building is more than a bit daunting, an austere block of

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raw concrete relieved only by a wood-and-glass entryway and rows of tall, narrow windows. Yet look closer—those windows are trimmed in reddish timber, the same that surrounds the door. The whole building’s massing is actually a bit off, with a recessed upper-story balcony to the western side that reduces its bulk, as though a gentle hand had pushed into the blocky envelope. And then there’s the concrete: on closer inspection, its texture is delicately ridged, evidence of the wooden formwork it was poured into.

The same sense of detail—and the same feeling of upended expectations—continues inside. Visitors enter by way of a tight foyer, the semi-obligatory gallery vestibule with its wall of artist books and a glimpse of the main-floor gallery beyond. And then, turning right, they find something astonishing: a towering staircase, again lined entirely in raw concrete, running the full height of the structure. Moving from the compression of the entryway, or from the gleaming brightness of the exhibition spaces, visitors experience the dark stairwell as a kind of optical astringent, a palette cleanser for overstimulated art lovers.

Subtlety-as-shock-tactic is rather a Selldorf special. The architect has spoken often of her indebtedness to the heroes of 20th-century design, of the “utter modernity” of figures like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius; yet, while she plainly owes a great deal to the rationalist postwar tradition, Selldorf’s work is stranger by far, pushing rationalism into the sublime. In modest interior renovations, like the 2001 design for Manhattan’s Neue Galerie, and in major public buildings, like the upcoming expansion of the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, Selldorf Architects distills Modernism to its ghostly quintessence.

Which is part of what makes the furniture from Vica such a revelation. No question the current collection exhibits the trademark Selldorf subtlety. “It’s not about the pieces themselves,” as the designer puts it. “It’s about how they contribute to a larger composition.” All of it could (and some of it has) fit easily into the background of a Selldorf building: the Saturn Pull, a slim, blade-like door handle; the Star Lamp, rising from a black stem with a five-point base; the Fireplace Surround, a solid black mantle with a bowed, transparent guard. And yet, there appears to be something else at work in some of the brand’s offerings.

The Brubeck Sofa is a wide, curved-back couch whose arms pull inward to embrace the sitter. The Cyrus Cabinet has got plenty of mid-century cool, but it’s the cuddlier, Danish variety, unmistakable in the beaded frame and slender tapered legs. It’s not that the work is more “pop,” or even more homey than that of Selldorf Architects, whose apartments and country retreats for private clients are nothing if not domestic. It’s just that, as Selldorf herself admits, Vica “is very, very personal.” If the furniture from Vica by Annabelle Selldorf feels decidedly expressive, charged with an unusual intimacy, that’s because it is.

“My family’s business was called Vica,” the architect says. Growing up in what she calls “a very industrial neighborhood in Cologne,” Selldorf’s parents operated a small modernist furniture company, turning out products of their own design for a mostly German clientele. Named after her grandmother, Vica-Maria, the firm remained in operation until 1972, eight years before Selldorf herself moved to the United States to pursue her architectural training.

LEFT, FROM TOP—Archival Vica label; Selldorf’s grandmother, Vica-Maria; Selldorf family interior in Cologne, Germany
BELOW—Annabelle Selldorf



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Two decades later, Selldorf revived the title when she began creating furniture as a sideline, starting with special one-off pieces for select friends and acquaintances. “At the time I thought, *Sure, everyone is going to want to buy this!*” she recalls. As her architecture office grew by leaps and bounds, Selldorf quickly found that she was her own best client; the brand added new designs piecemeal as her commissions demanded, though it also came to include reissues of furniture produced by the *other* Vica, as well as collaborations between Selldorf and her parents back in Germany. The Herbert Chair, for example, is named for the architect’s father, and was based on one of his original designs. “I loved that chair very much,” says Selldorf. “That’s still my favorite.”

Not everything that the elder Selldorfs made was necessarily ready to go into the new Vica. The Dodi Woven Chair—yet another remarkably warm, organic design, its black steel frame softened by a caned back and seat—was originally created by Selldorf’s mother; the only problem, says Selldorf, was that it was “damned uncomfortable.” Deferential as she may feel towards the family legacy, the architect did not stand on ceremony: “I messed with it,” she says. Changing the angle of the seatback, Selldorf made the design more suitable for daily use while still preserving its essence (as well as its name, also her mother’s).

So why, after so many years at the margins of her practice, has Annabelle Selldorf chosen this particular moment to add her own illustrious name to Vica’s? “I’m very aware of how the rational part of my brain is on the Cartesian grid,” says the architect. “But I’m actually interested in tactility and shape.” A kind of “sculptural” approach, as Selldorf puts it, has always been present in her work; Vica simply makes it easier to explore sculpture as such, experimenting on a smaller scale and with different formal types.



At the same time, it wouldn’t be reading too much into her current furniture enterprise to suspect, as a psychic motive for Selldorf’s sculptural impulses, a powerful admixture of feelings—love and memory, among others—to be somehow involved. Of course, this being Selldorf, those feelings have to be “channeled into a discipline,” as she puts it; it’s only a question of what direction that channel takes, and if the furniture is any indication, the designer may have some more surprises in store. “People always think I can only deal with right angles,” she says. “But get ready.”

ABOVE, LEFT—Interior featuring the Union Sofa
ABOVE, RIGHT—Interior featuring the Lehmbruck Desk