Introduction

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Aus so krummem Holze, als woraus der Mensch gemacht ist, kann nichts ganz Gerades gezimmert werden.
Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.
—Immanuel Kant

Although still young in terms of the measured trajectory of an architect's career, Annabelle Selldorf has been in practice for almost twenty years. This monograph brings together an impressive range of projects in terms of scale and typology—from important historic renovations to a twenty-story Manhattan tower—by her firm, Selldorf Architects. But what emerges most strikingly is a quietly robust, serious, and highly articulate architectural voice, one that is unusually grounded in human values and concerns.
Annabelle Selldorf gained international recognition in 2001 with the Neue Galerie New York, an assured and deceptively deft transformation of a mansion from 1914 designed by Carrre and Hastings into a museum for an important collection of German and Austrian art. The fit between the formal neoclassicism of the building and the work it now houses seems so right that it's easy to forget what a tense demarcation this is. The challenge is not just to relate modernity and tradition but to juxtapose two diametrically opposed ideologies. Although both schools were working in the prewar era, there is a seismic divide between the old order and modernism at its creative zenith, between the pomp and historicism of the firm dubbed architects to "the Fortune 500 of the Gilded Age," frequently hired to decorate new wealth in the era of the robber barons, and the Weiner WerkstŠtte, a revolutionary collective of architects and artists dedicated to designing a more democratic world order.
Yet far from resembling a battleground, Selldorf's sparely modern transformation fosters a quiet harmony and integrity as both voices are given space and credence. Although the visitor might imagine that the Carrre and Hastings building has been faithfully restored to its original state, in fact it was substantially altered to accommodate modern museum requirements and also delicate adjustments and corrections to the original architecture where Selldorf uncovered inconsistencies.
Selldorf was selected for the Neue Galerie partly because of her affinity with the art and design of the era but also, it could be argued, her ability to frame memory in a way that is utterly contemporary. Her conversion of a magnificent bank by Sir Edwin Lutyens from 1923 into an art gallery treats the original building with respect but also forthrightness, with an honesty and unfussiness in the restoration and finishes. The strategy means that the ornate, cubic, wood-paneled banking hall, which could be overpowering, works unexpectedly well as a space for contemporary art. The basement vaults with massive steel safe doors and scuffed walls, left more or less untouched, give it an unexpected toughness. In a renovation for the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, housed in a mansion on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the classic interior appears respectfully intact; behind it, however, is a new library that is treated with an industrial directness that expresses the library stacks as the engine of the institute and the books as its fuel. The presence—even celebration—of tangible knowledge is refreshing in our increasingly ethereal and incorporeal virtual age.

The dialogue between old worlds and new and by extension between Europe and America is ingrained in Selldorf's own background. She grew up in Cologne in the 1960s and 1970s before moving to the United States in 1981 to study architecture first at Pratt Institute and then at a program run by Syracuse University in Florence. Along with Schinkel's

monumental neoclassicism and Mies and Bauhaus functionalism, which have remained significant influences, her early years were grounded in craftsmanship and making. Childhood memories cluster around the sounds and smells of an industrial yard housing carpentry and upholstery workshops for Vica, an interior design company founded in the 1950s by her paternal grandmother and later run by her father, the architect Herbert Selldorf. Today Vica also manufactures and markets furniture, lighting, and hardware designed by Selldorf, which is still made in smallish workshops using traditional craft techniques.

Central to Selldorf Architects' practice is the engagement in making spaces for art—for looking at art, for creating it, for housing artists and gallerists. It's a subject about which she has thought deeply for over two decades. Her position could hardly be further from the self-absorbed narcissism of iconic museums in the post-Bilbao age. At root is a simple observation: "I don't want to challenge the art." Selldorf's deliberately low-key approach, which starts with establishing the best conditions for displaying the particular work, has led to long relationships with galleries such as Michael Werner, David Zwirner, and Hauser & Wirth, but it doesn't mean that the spaces are without subtle artifice. In the Chelsea gallery for David Zwirner—a modest run of three single-story buildings that were originally stables and later garages—the existing structure informs the shapes of the new spaces, but they are given a dramatic rhythm with the insertion of additional skylights and slot registers where the new walls meet the ceiling. In a building for the Gladstone Gallery, commissioned to provide space for large installations, modern semi-industrial references, such as the rigorous black brick facade with ribbon windows and the deep trussed ceiling retained from a former sound studio, give a recognizable texture to the new. Without being old-fashioned or even nostalgic, real materials along with certain architectural details give a tangible sense of familiarity, even history, to the contemporary. They also subtly link the new building to the converted industrial spaces that have proved such a sympathetic backdrop to art, becoming the standard for galleries and artists' studios from the mid-twentieth century on.

Materiality also figures significantly in Selldorf's architectural vocabulary; she approaches it in a way that subtly references context and history. In a recent project, the Pika House in Dunton Hot Springs, Colorado, the fairy-tale rustic vernacular of a wooden house in the forest is extrapolated as a cedar "cabin" that rises sixty feet, almost the height of the surrounding spruce trees. It's an unexpected and playful solution, but one that stems from the site's practical restrictions. In order to disturb the trees as little as possible and fit the local context, Selldorf limited the footprint of the new building to that of traditional log cabins in the area (about twenty-four by thirty feet), but this had to be reconciled with the need to provide 4,500 square feet of living space. Thus evolved the towerlike wooden house, a shape that is both fantastic and logical. The unusual form was also partly about the inside looking out, about creating opportunities to frame views at different heights. The living room and library nestle among denser lower branches, while the rooftop terrace has views grazing the treetops. If the north facade looks a little like a miniature skyscraper planted in the forest, that is in part because the columnar structure references Mies's Seagram Building. The south facade, with much smaller windows and wooden shutters, has an almost rustic charm, although the detailing of the wood gives it a modern rigor.

Selldorf's ability to leaven modernity with references to vernacular traditions as well as with a rigorously stripped-down neoclassical sense of balance and proportion recalls the highly original practice of Swedish architect Gunnar Asplund, whose work Selldorf admires. In another rural house, Satur Farms on the North Fork of Long Island, the timber facade has a classical symmetry that hints at vernacular farmhouse architecture, a relationship emphasized by the overhanging roof and the way the house appears literally planted in the flat fields.

It is the sense of a single idea carried through every sinew of a finished form that gives

buildings like the Pika House and Gladstone Gallery a heightened charge. Selldorf describes her working method in terms of two distinct stages: an initial "play" period, when she comes up with an idea, and then the hard grind of making it work, making sure that the idea is carried through to the end. With an unusual frankness, she distinguishes between projects where she believes the end result measures up to the original idea and others where it—in the architect's eyes at least—falls slightly short or has become diluted along the way.

Selldorf deliberately chooses materials that retain a natural resonance, whether waxed steel and untreated cedar in the Pika House or hand-cut black brick for the Gladstone Gallery. For a new condominium building, 520 West Chelsea, she selected midnight blue terra-cotta blocks. One of the most memorable sensations of walking among 1920s and 1930s skyscrapers in downtown Manhattan is the scale, tactility, and material sensuality at street level, something increasingly lost in the recent tide of hard, shiny, featureless glass facades. Although 520 West Chelsea is a relatively low-cost build, the facade is elevated by the terra-cotta, which was custom-made in the last such factory in Rochester, New York. The curved profile of the blocks and liveliness of the deep blue glaze give them a warmth and sensuousness that hold their own in the masonry street, playing to the historic context without pastiche or appearing traditional. In the wonderful text *The Eyes of the Skin*, Juhani Pallasmaa writes: "Touch, the only non-passive sense, divulges an unconscious sense of doing, revealing why traditional architectural metrics were derived from actual dimensions of the body."

In 200 Eleventh Avenue, Selldorf's largest building to date, with completion planned for 2009, the architect and her team designed a building in two parts: a sixteen-story tower that appears to grow out of a massively dimensioned three-story plinth. Here the use of terra-cotta blocks—this time a rich iron color—and the almost organic sculptural articulation of the plinth bring a human sensuousness to the base of the structure, while the choice of material also relates it to industrial buildings in the area.

Pallasmaa has written, "Modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless." Selldorf's architecture attempts to redress this. She foregrounds craftsmanship, materiality, and human dimensions and sensations such as tactility alongside conceptual rigor. There is undoubtedly a seriousness and respect for traditional values, but it is not in any way old-fashioned; it is rather in tune with our increasingly heartfelt desire for authenticity, the real and rooted.

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