

THE EMPIRE BUILDER

IN THE HIGH-STAKES
WORLD OF AMERICAN
ARCHITECTURE,
ANNABELLE SELLDORF
HAS BECOME A QUIET
POWERHOUSE, BRINGING
HER LUSH VISION TO
HOMES, ART GALLERIES,
MUSEUMS—AND
EVEN AN ELEGANT
RECYCLING PLANT.
BY DODIE KAZANJIAN.

ANGLE OF REPOSE

For the New York art dealer Per Skarstedt and his family, Selldorf recently completed this 10,000-square-foot house in Sagaponack on Long Island, with a mahogany exterior and sliding glass walls to maximize the relationship with the outdoors.

Photographed by
Jason Schmidt.





SERENE DREAMS

"Art is my fundamental inspiration," says Selldorf, in a Max Mara coat, a Ralph Lauren Black Label crewneck, and Richard James trousers, at her recent project, the Sims Sunset Park Material Recovery Facility in Brooklyn. Hair, Thom Priano for Garren New York Salon for R + Co.; makeup, Hannah Murray. Details, see In This Issue. Photographed by Inez and Vinoodh.

Houses are like portraits," says Annabelle Selldorf, whose beautifully designed spaces—town houses and apartments as well as galleries and museums—have made her the go-to architect for the international art world. "They look like their owners. I need to know who you are in order to design something for you. There are all these layers to the process, which may be akin to portraiture."

We're in Chelsea on a May morning, and we've just visited two of the quietly luxurious town houses that she recently renovated for power art dealers Barbara Gladstone and Ursula Hauser. A youthful-looking, fine-boned 54-year-old in a navy Prada blazer and a pleated skirt, Selldorf was born in Cologne, Germany, but she has lived in Manhattan for the last 35 years, and has the alert focus of a native New Yorker. She walks to work and takes her dog with her; she gets around town on Citi Bikes; she fancies dry martinis; when she's not in jeans, she favors navy pantsuits (by Jil Sander or custom-made) and French blue shirts; and she can hail a speeding cab with her piercing, two-finger whistle. "Oh, God. Look at that," she says, pointing to a blaze of climbing red roses on a house across the street. She pulls out a camera and takes a picture. "Maybe in my next life I'll be a landscape architect. I actually quite mean that."

Don't expect to see red roses climbing up the front of the 20,000-square-foot metamansion that Selldorf Architects is building for superdealer Larry Gagosian, behind a landmarked facade in the East Seventies. It's still a construction site, but the fifth-floor swimming pool has gone in, and Gagosian, who wants everything right now, expects to be in residence before the end of the year. "It'll look like the Larry I know," says Selldorf, who has done plenty of work for Gogo since 2008. What does he look like to her? "Somebody who has tremendous breadth—an amazing eye, self-deprecating sense of humor, somebody who loves art and knows a good thing from a bad thing."

Being in tune with her clients has been a hallmark of Selldorf's work. Like Renzo Piano and many other top-flight architects, she believes that great buildings require great clients, and often, she says, "the client knows more than you do." Soon after Massimiliano Gioni, the New Museum's chief curator, was named director of the 2013 Venice Biennale, he was seated next to Selldorf at a dinner party. Gioni had been thinking about how he could "neutralize" the exhibition space known as the Arsenale, whose vaulted ceiling and monumental proportions tended to overwhelm the art. "We were talking about Venice," he recalls, "and she said, 'I think the Arsenale should be neutralized'"—his exact word. Gioni had never used an architect for any of his installations, but that conversation led to weekly meetings with Selldorf, who worked with him on the solution—an overhead scrim that ran the whole length of the building and kept your eyes down. "The risk of inviting an architect for the Venice Biennale is that they want to impose their own signature," Gioni tells me. "She wasn't like that at all. It was more about calming down the space and allowing people to look at the work—not the space."

If there's a signature to Selldorf's work, it probably has to do with Baudelaire's concept of *luxe, calme, et volupté*—clearly designed spaces and often quite sensuous materials, such as marble, terra-cotta, and teak, a tranquil antidote to our hectic and overstressed lives. Her art galleries and museum spaces encourage an undivided focus on art; her domestic interiors let people be their best selves. "I'm the equivalent of slow food in architecture," she says, laughing. "Our work is not about big gestures. Take the MAXXI in Rome," she continues, referring to a building by Zaha Hadid, the most celebrated female architect of our time. "Whether it's a good or bad museum, it's certainly about a big gesture. That's never what we do. For better or worse, ours reveals itself much more slowly."

The architecture critic Paul Goldberger makes the point that "really good architecture doesn't depend solely on big gestures. It often depends on a whole lot of small gestures executed really well, and I think that's Annabelle. When you talk with her, there's this consistently intelligent, fresh, well-mannered, and stimulating dialogue, and that's very much how her buildings are—well mannered, but stimulating, creative, and intelligent. Memorable, in a quiet way."

What Selldorf cares about is architecture's relationship to daily life. "I'm interested in how people fit into a space," she says. "It sometimes seems as though statement and form have prevailed over life, or something like that. I try to find a balance, a degree of calm, because life

is deeply unsettling. It's a balance of many, many things. I think there's a pitch that's agreeable to everybody—a particular sound or taste or light."

Cologne, when Selldorf was growing up there in the postwar years, was full of artists and creative people. "That was my parents' community," she tells me, "and it very much

shaped who I am today." Her father was an architect, and her mother worked with him as an interior designer. They—and eventually Selldorf, too—designed furniture for Vica, the family firm founded by her grandmother in the 1950s.

Selldorf was the middle child—older sister, younger brother—and becoming an architect was never one of her ambitions. "I thought it meant a lot of work and very little money, so it wasn't something I was terribly keen to get into." Her best friend at school suggested that they both go into interior design, though, and that led to her applying to architecture school. She didn't get in, and went to work for her father instead. A few months later, nineteen years old and eager for new experience, she lit out for the Territory (New York, of course) and landed a paid summer internship with Stelle-Gluckman (Frederick Stelle and Richard Gluckman), a newly hatched architectural firm with close ties to the New York art community.

Over the next few years, Selldorf earned an architectural degree at Pratt. She went on to take Syracuse University's architectural master's program in Florence, where she studied with Colin Rowe and Werner Seligmann, and traveled extensively, steeping herself in the world's architectural highlights. "That's when I realized there was nothing else I wanted to do," she tells me. "I didn't have a plan. I thought that plans were scary, and I still do. But fairly soon after I got my master's, I realized I wanted to work for myself."

She started her own firm in 1988. Operating out of a

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GREEN DAYS

Harmonious minimalism characterizes this easygoing vacation home in Wainscott, New York.



SET IN STONE

Selldorf favors the use of boldly variegated Paonazzo marble in small spaces such as bathrooms.



WALK THIS WAY

A travertine-floored breezeway in the Sagaponack house of Bill and Julie Macklowe.



STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Selldorf designed a sleek five-story, 30,000-square-foot Manhattan gallery for David Zwirner in 2013 in poured concrete with teak-framed windows.

ON A ROLL

Andy Warhol's 1985–86 *Hamburger* anchors the kitchen of a Manhattan apartment decorated with subway tile and a Selldorf-designed banquette.



ON THE WATERFRONT

Seldorf's acclaimed Sims Sunset Park Material Recovery Facility, a landmark \$110 million plant, opened late last year.



FIELD OF DREAMS

The light-filled Skarstedt house is sited to frame spectacular views across meadows to the ocean.



rent-stabilized loft in SoHo, with one table and a futon that somebody had given her; Selldorf got her first project almost immediately—"a minuscule renovation of a kitchen and bathroom." She was good-looking, personable, an articulate talker and a better listener, and other interior renovations soon came her way, including the office headquarters of Daimler-Benz in the Seagram Building. Soon after that, the German dealer Michael Werner hired her to design his first New York gallery, on East Sixty-seventh Street. Werner had just ended his partnership (and marriage) with Mary Boone. "He hired me because he really didn't want to hire an architect," Selldorf recalls. They spoke German to each other, and "the way he talked fit into the way my brain worked. He taught me a lot—how to look at things, and about materials. Michael thinks visually, and he does not think in clichés." (Werner once said, "I don't have taste, I have prejudices.") The gallery was the first of many projects they would do together, and it was the real beginning of her career in the art world. She did Jeff Koons's Broadway studio; a Selldorf loft conversion for the Michael Werner Gallery on Greene Street led to several others in the same building—studios for artists Eric Fischl and April Gornik, an art gallery and living space for John McEnroe, and a ground-floor gallery space for David Zwirner. Zwirner and Selldorf had both grown up in Cologne, "and the fact that we're from the same place connects us in a very deep way." (His wife, Monica, worked for Selldorf before she cofounded the handbag company MZ Wallace.) Zwirner's ascent to the top echelon of New York art dealers has required an expanding empire of bigger and more impressive spaces, and Selldorf has done all of them, including his double-width East Village town house and his first London outpost, a renovated Georgian town house in Mayfair. "David has been my great patron," she says.

There have been several others. Ronald Lauder, the collector and philanthropist, chose her in 1997 to turn a Beaux Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue and Eighty-sixth Street into a private museum for his collection of Austrian and German Expressionist art. "That was a damn lucky break," she says, "a comprehensive renovation and restoration of a landmark building. I didn't realize what a big deal the Neue Galerie would be. We just did it. If you keep your focus narrow, you don't become overwhelmed by the scope of things." By this time, she had about 20 people working in her office on White Street, and the more or less unanimous accolades raised her profile tenfold. Suzanne Stephens, in *Architectural Record*, called the museum "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." According to Massimiliano Gioni, "Her restraint in that building is incredible. . . . In great exhibition spaces, architecture has to be everywhere and nowhere, and that's what she gets right."

After the Neue Galerie, offers came thick and fast. She worked on numerous art galleries, including Acquavella and two for Per Skarstedt; Christie's New York; and private houses for clients around the world. Abercrombie & Fitch had her design flagship stores worldwide. Her practice was moving beyond interior renovations and into buildings she designed from the ground up. Her new Union Square office expanded accordingly. She now has five partners and a staff of 65. In

a profession where women have been excluded or held back until quite recently, the extent and quality of her built projects is virtually unprecedented. There's been much talk about her luxury terra-cotta-clad condo building on Eleventh Avenue at Twenty-fourth Street—where an automobile elevator allows high-profile tenants, including Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban, to park their cars right outside their apartment doors. (She has five other condo buildings under way in downtown Manhattan.) Her largest and most important gallery building so far is Zwirner's 30,000-square-foot, poured-concrete monolith on West Twentieth Street, with gorgeously detailed teak window frames. "Annabelle has a great feeling for space and materials," Zwirner tells me. "I've worked with her over and over again because I felt that every single project was successful."

It's hard to see how all this work has allowed any time for a private life. I ask her about this over a quick uptown breakfast at the Mark hotel. "Private life? What private life?" she says. But there has definitely been one. Selldorf has had a number of love affairs, not all of them happy. "If you are an independent professional person, it's very hard to find somebody to have an equal relationship with. . . . I always thought I would meet somebody and have kids with them, but I didn't want to have kids without the right person." She also has many good friends, the closest of whom is probably Gordon VeneKlasen, director of the Michael Werner Gallery,

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whose vacation house (by Selldorf) in East Hampton is just down the street from hers. "There's nothing frivolous about Annabelle," VeneKlasen tells me, "but that doesn't mean she's not funny and entertaining. Her sense of humor is sometimes really corny."

VeneKlasen, Barbara Gladstone, and other friends rallied around her in 1996 when a ghastly freak accident put her in the hospital for several weeks. As she was loading an architectural model into the back of her VW Golf, a truck sideswiped a UPS vehicle, which pinned her against the fender of her car, breaking both her legs. Her injuries required several operations and a year of intense physical therapy, but she made a complete recovery with just "a few major scars."

Six years ago, Selldorf was invited to enter an architectural competition for a major recycling plant (plastics, metals, and glass) in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Intrigued by the chance to do something so different, she accepted, and won the contract. The general manager of Sims Municipal Recycling, her client, was Tom Outerbridge, a ruggedly good-looking bachelor who has been in the recycling business for 25 years. After working together on the project, harmoniously and professionally, for about two years, they started seeing each other outside of work. For the first time in Selldorf's life, she had found what seemed like an equal relationship. "I'd had relationships, but always with men living somewhere in Europe, which was full of complications." Outerbridge is all-American, born and raised in New York and Maine. They've lived together, in her lower Fifth Avenue apartment, for a year and a half, and she greatly enjoys spending time in his isolated log cabin on 700 Acre Island in Penobscot Bay. Outerbridge has gained a deeper understanding of art, especially minimal art, through her, and Selldorf has mastered the technique of "chinking," filling the gaps between logs. The

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Now it's after midnight, and Ibrahim has invited about a dozen friends to one of the city's excellent seafood restaurants. The meal stretches on for hours, the table laden with bottles of Bordeaux and wide platters of shellfish and fried plantain. Ibrahim argues for a while with a Paris-based curator about whether it's possible to persuade prominent African artists to donate work for an auction she's planning, to benefit the center.

"It's not realistic," the woman says coolly, her cigarette pointed skyward.

To which Ibrahim replies, "I think it is." Sometime around 2:00 A.M., the chef at the restaurant joins the table for a last drink. She's met him before. Not only is he a fabulous cook, she tells us, he's one of Dakar's hottest deejays. When the chef mentions he's looking to open a new restaurant, Ibrahim scrolls through her BlackBerry, showing him pictures of her empty building back in New York. "So you'll come cook for us?" she says, as if the matter has been decided. "And sometimes deejay the parties?" She tilts the phone so he can better see. "Come and visit," she says, her voice charged with hope. "I'll show you around." □

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Brooklyn recycling facility opened last December and pleased any number of critics. Michael Kimmelman, in the *New York Times*, called it "elegant, actually, and not just for a garbage site... an ensemble of modernist boxes squeezing art, and even a little drama, from a relatively meager design budget."

It's late May, and Selldorf has invited me for dinner at her apartment. She's just back from Arles, in the south of France, where Maja Hoffmann's LUMA Foundation has commissioned her to convert several old rail-yard buildings into an art space. (It will act as a counterweight to a new tower by Frank Gehry.) Early the next morning, she will leave for California to meet with the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, which has commissioned her to design its \$30 million expansion. A 30,000-square-foot addition that will triple the museum's exhibition space, it is by far her most important commission to date. "I can't begin to tell you how excited I am about this," she says. She's also excited about her extensive renovation of the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts—it opened to the public on July 4.

Accelerating recognition (she just completed four years as president of the Architectural League) has made no dent in

Selldorf's calm, soft-voiced equilibrium. She cooks the salmon steaks; Tom provides the homemade seltzer. She burns her hand at one point but makes light of it. Their dog, Jussi, a corgi-yellow Lab mix, presides from his special under-the-table basket. (He's named after the detective's dog in the Swedish TV series *Wallander*, Selldorf and Outerbridge's favorite.) A Mozart aria plays discreetly on the stereo—Selldorf listens to classical, jazz, and indie music at home, and goes to concerts at BAM and Carnegie Hall. The apartment is a distillation of the Selldorf aesthetic: floors of gray-and-white veined marble laid down in twelve inch-by-36 inch blocks; stainless-steel kitchen counters; suave pairings of classic Ming and other antique furniture with modernist pieces that she or her parents designed for Vica. Rigorously chosen artworks hang on the walls, from Old Master paintings and drawings to contemporary works by Donald Judd, Sigmar Polke, Peter Doig, and Robert Gober. The architecture is everywhere and nowhere. Outerbridge, who seems content to let Selldorf lead the conversation, intercedes at this point. "Sometimes I can't see that everything she thinks is superbeautiful is beautiful," he says, with a fond smile. "But she's expanded my horizons in many ways."

The conversation turns inevitably to architecture. "Architects are not artists, and artists are not architects," she says. "Architecture, however, is the mother of all the arts. Everything starts with the built environment. I do not think that I am an artist, at all. But art is my fundamental inspiration."

Gluckman, her early New York mentor, tells me that fifteen years ago, "Annabelle would say, 'Please, let's merge.' And perhaps I should have. The postscript is that she would not have been as successful an architect had she partnered with me. She did it on her own." □

A FINE FEAST

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with Steve, where he's the master and I'm slightly effete around him," Brydon says. Coogan adds: "But slightly undermining." In the new film, they are older, and both characters must struggle with their changing rapport with each other and the world. "Coogan," ogling young women on a restaurant patio at one point, waxes irritably philosophical on the passage of time. "It's funny, women that age just look straight through us, don't they," he says. "They don't even find us *lascivious*."

That's another thing true in real life, Brydon says. He's 49. Coogan is a year his junior. As a young man, the

Lancashire-raised Coogan came up through the British political-satire show *Spitting Image* and the news parody *On the Hour*, where he made a name for himself playing a character called Alan Partridge: a stiff, socially maladroit broadcaster who wears unflattering sweaters and says things like "Well... that was classic intercourse—so, thanks!" Early on, Coogan was known as an impish wild child, but in recent years he's settled down into a growing body of work, taking parts in Hollywood and developing ambitious projects of his own. "I like good, old-fashioned American films that have intelligence, are entertaining, and shed some light on the human condition—*It's a Wonderful Life*, *Some Like It Hot*," he says. "I don't want to lose the British voice to what I do, but I don't want the movies to be parochial, like British dramas." Last year, he co-wrote, produced, and acted in *Philomena*, the awards-season favorite starring Judi Dench, in which he plays a laid-off journalist delving a bit too far into the past. Since then, he says, writing has been his great pleasure. At the moment, he's developing five screenplays, most drawn, like *Philomena*, from real life. "I've discovered using comedy to tell stories that might otherwise be difficult or dull," he says. "I love going to meet someone where they live and talking to them and finding out about them. To me, that's been a real revelation—it sort of not being about me."

Brydon, who is best known in Britain as a TV-show host, entered Coogan's life as a fan—a struggling young actor doing voice-over work. At Brydon's urging, a mutual friend, the actress Julia Davis, helped arrange a brief meeting between the two men, and Brydon sent Coogan a tape of some comedic characters he'd invented. When he heard nothing, he engineered a run-in at a pub where he knew Coogan was a regular. "I think you've got something. I'd like to work with you one day," Coogan told him—an offhand comment that turned out to be prescient. Brydon got a small part, as a "Baptist fan" on Coogan's *I'm Alan Partridge* show. Later, in 2006, they costarred in Winterbottom's *A Cock and Bull Story*. That movie contains scenes of Brydon and Coogan improvising together—the director had asked them to riff on-camera one day, while he waited for some weather to clear—and these proved to be among the movie's most cited moments.

Winterbottom saw a larger potential. A few years later, he took the two men to lunch with a proposal: Why not do a TV series in that improvisatory register and set it in

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