



Yesterday Cologne, today New York. Architect Annabelle Selldorf

AN ARCHITECT BETWEEN WORLDS

Annabelle Selldorf – Woman of the Hour

Born in Cologne, she now lives in New York City. She loves art, but is not afraid of commercial projects.

Females, it is said, are natural born multitaskers. Annabelle Selldorf is the living proof.

An interview about how to succeed in a man's world, the force of astrology and the art of restraint.

Text Michaela Cordes

Annabelle Selldorf designed the Neue Galerie in Manhattan for the cosmetics company heir Ronald Lauder and his exquisite collection of German and Austrian art.



I really like it here! If visitors to this New York apartment have this feeling, Annabelle Selldorf has succeeded in what she set out to achieve – restraint bordering humility.



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 ence on me ...,” says Annabelle

Selldorf of the factors that reflect her current style, which finds particular favour with prolific art collectors, as well as private individuals such as Anna Wintour and the Henkel family. This private apartment on Upper West Side in New York has been created from what were formerly two adjacent properties (photo left), in which Annabelle Selldorf has only worked with the highest quality materials, incorporating exclusive furniture by Vica design into the interior. The company's repertoire also includes replicas of pieces originally designed by her father, Herbert Selldorf. The art of Selldorf is clear to see here too – the aesthetic of the materials is beautifully brought to bear through the design's simplicity (photo below).



Her client list reads like the Who's Who of the international art scene, mixed with a touch of zeitgeist and fashion. Annabelle Selldorf has not only designed the Neue Galerie to house the private collection of cosmetics company heir Ronald Lauder. Her portfolio also includes private homes for Anna Wintour, her friends the Henkel family and the Newhouse publishing dynasty. A native of Cologne and now New York resident, she has long been part of the hall of fame of the world's most famous architects in a still very male-dominated profession. She succeeds in achieving what many of her colleagues are sure to admire – a shrewd balancing act between the worlds of art and commerce. Having designed the first shop on Fifth Avenue for the thriving US fashion label Abercrombie & Fitch, she is now working on further flagship stores in London and Los Angeles. And where

is best to catch her? On the phone, somewhere between the worlds. A surprisingly intense talk at Heathrow Airport, shortly before her trip back home to New York.

Hello Miss Selldorf, how are you?

Very well, thank you. I've been travelling around Europe for the past few days and am about to fly back.

There is no hint of stress in her voice, she sounds very gentle, warm and well-balanced. Despite living in New York for many years, a very subtle hint of her Cologne origins shines through in a most charming way.

Ms. Selldorf – An intellectual public wander around the Lauder collection of German and Austrian art in the Neue Galerie. At the same time, young people are shopping for trendy T-shirts and ripped jeans to the sound of hip music at Abercrombie & Fitch on Fifth Avenue. You build for individuals with prolific art collections, yet are equally at home creating flagship stores for one of the best-loved youth fashion brands in the US – how ▶



“Women don’t end up banging their head against a brick wall as much as men.” Perhaps this

is why she appears to pull off the balancing act between art and fashion with such playful ease. Selldorf demonstrated her awareness of zeitgeist with her flagship store for Abercrombie & Fitch in New York (photo right). She designed the grass green armchair and light-bulb lamp for the furniture label Vica (photos this page).



do you manage to please these different worlds?

Good question. Architecture is ultimately very much about basic attitude and personality. I’m proud of the fact that we engage so intensely with a subject matter and the client’s personality. And that very intimate and individual projects emerge as a result that become a kind of portrait of the client or the subject. I don’t regard it as a contradiction in this sense. It’s a little like *(laughs)* wearing a gown in the evening and a business suit during the day. These are different things that nevertheless embrace the scope of my aesthetic.

Your company “Selldorf Architects” states on its Website that you preserve a particular respect for the historical in your work. Is it advantageous to work as a German architect in a country that seems more willing to detach itself from the past?

I am not sure that it is an advantage but it is certainly a character trait. As a non-native American, you almost inevitably view things differently

from someone who has grown up in the USA, and you are always trying to somehow strive for a quality of style and for authenticity. People in Europe are often very quick to deride America’s alleged lack of history. In fact, this isn’t actually the case. Being engaged with architecture, you often analyse part of a certain period and identify its particular qualities. It is therefore often relatively unimportant whether a building is two, five or a thousand years old. For me, authenticity is always the key factor.

Richard Meier says that an architect is always a diplomat at the same time – do you agree?

Her voice smiles. I admire those colleagues of mine who aren’t diplomats. I am diplomatic because that is simply part of who I am, but I sometimes wonder, if maybe it would be better to be a little less diplomatic.

Why? What do mean by that?

Well, you might be able to get things done quicker... Continued on page 160

She can do fashion too! Heavy beach wood, lots of glass, steel and cool music. Selldorf has created a mecca for the US youth with the first Abercrombie & Fitch flagship store.



Annabelle Selldorf – Woman of the Hour

Continued from page 52 *short pause for reflection* ... Oh, no, actually that's not right. When I really think about it, I'm actually fairly obstinate and persevering. You should try to strike a balance. It is very important to satisfy the client. That isn't meant to sound as though I subordinate myself. I think it's important to establish a working relationship with people that is based on mutual respect. When someone hires me for advice, I expect him to actually be willing to listen to my expertise. I make sure that I listen to the client, with the aim of achieving the optimum result for them. This is the best case scenario for forming not just a well-balanced relationship, but often a very inspiring one as well.

That sounds as if it is beneficial for a client to have a strong personality?

Absolutely, if best it can almost become a kind of leitmotif. A relationship of giving and receiving. This isn't always the case – but it works in principle.

Can you describe a typical Selldorf fan.

First and foremost, they have a sense of humour! Otherwise, the vast majority of my clients do not want to live in ostentatious, excessively decorated buildings and interiors. Instead they have a predilection for well-proportioned rooms that convey balance. They prefer a more understated style that is confident to some degree without having to shout out loud.

Your clients often wish to accommodate their large art collections. Would it be reasonable to say that you create the suitable passe-partout?

Yes, perhaps. I'm not all that interested in people saying: Oh, that's a Selldorf building! I am more concerned about evoking an emotion. A "There's something I like about this place!" where people then slowly start to think why. That doesn't mean that I shy away from giving a building an individual look. I am certainly not someone who would advocate neutrality. I simply want everybody to have their own voice. I am always extremely interested in finding the right tenor.

How did your style evolve? Who has influenced you the most?

People are influenced by a large variety of different impulses. I was in Stockholm last week and would always maintain that Gunnar Asplund has influenced me, but is that actually really the case? You observe so many things – in Vienna, for example, there's a resonance in early 17th century architecture that I would regard as such an impulse for me. When I built in Venice I suddenly thought that I had to look at everything from a Venetian perspective. But ultimately the dimensions for an interesting work are multilateral. I always try to keep looking ahead and remain open. Certainly my family, my father, has been an influence on me. I grew up in an architectural household. In those circumstances you obviously develop a certain eye.

Was it always your childhood dream to become an architect and enter into the same profession as your father?

Definitely not! Quite the opposite in fact. I actually thought of it as a strain when I was a child. It was more of a deterrent for me. I had all kinds of plans, and wanted to become a journalist or a diplomat. After finishing my schooling I was rejected at a German university, so I looked elsewhere and ended up going to America. Back then, New York was the only place I wanted to go and I started doing various different internships there. I went on to study at Pratt University and have stayed in the city ever since. Architecture is one of the few things where you just can not let go. And it is simply impossible to be a half-hearted archi-

tect, as there is just such an amazing amount of work involved, as well as a high degree of commitment and focused activity.

Your father, Herbert Selldorf, must be very proud of his daughter's success.

It is not for me to say as his daughter, but yes, of course we are amazingly close and I am pleased to say that we always have fun whenever we are together. We have a similar perspective on things, without inevitably always thinking the same thing.

As a female architect in a male domain – are there certain benefits to being a woman?

I always like to joke that I have never been a man so I can not really judge. The fact is that being a woman always has certain advantages. Women have a different perspective on things to men, they don't end up banging their head against a brick wall so much, are better at coming to a consensus and can perhaps work with a broader overview as a result. It would be naïve of me to say that there aren't still structures in which you are not initially taken seriously as a woman. You have to be able to assert yourself and can not allow yourself to be all that sensitive.

What star sign are you?

You can not ask that question! Asking someone their age and what their star sign is taboo.

Asking about someone's star sign is not allowed? Why not?

OK, I am 46 years old and a cancerian.

Cancerians are said to be able to empathise well with others and with their expectations and wishes ...

Of course this is a question of personality, as well as perhaps of astrology. I don't mind listening to others because I know on the other hand that I can assert myself once I have contributed something.

Venture a look into the future – how will we live?

I am interested in producing a positive impetus and reflecting on things, or quite simply perceiving an environment – that may sound very clichéd, like "I want peace in the world", but I don't mean it that way. Rather I have a firm desire to devote my time and energy intensively to my calling. After all, it is not about doing a job but, in the broadest sense, about providing a cultural contribution. The state of our civilisation in the 21st century is a widely diversified field. For me personally, this isn't so much of a technological nature, as is palpable in much contemporary architecture where technology is employed to arrive at an expression. I think in terms of content.

A home for Annabelle Selldorf to her own very personal taste – what would you attach most importance to?

To peace and quiet! Uninterrupted communication, uninterrupted noise

is so prevalent. I would want to create rooms and spaces where peace abounds. This isn't like at Abercrombie & Fitch of course – I personally strive for a certain balance and am far more possessed by this sense of stability than I am by superficial polemic.

Can you let us in on your next project?

(laughing) There is one. But I'm superstitious when it comes to things like this. If I talk about it, I am afraid that I will jinx it. This much I can say – I have a very exciting idea tucked under my pillow. **MC**



Made by Selldorf:
The Palacio Canet
on Majorca.