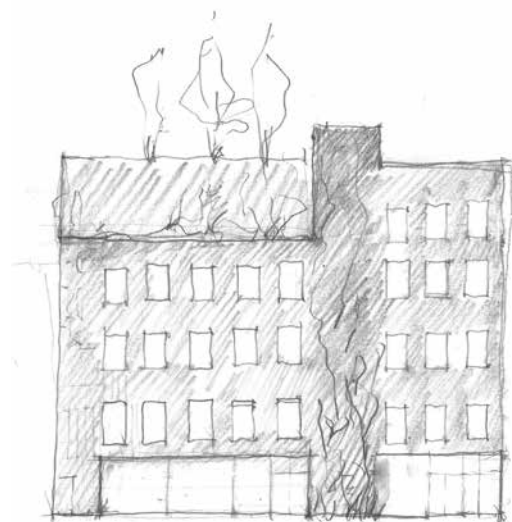


ON BEING REAL

The honourable Selldorf Architects



Sketch of the David Zwirner gallery, 20th Street, a new five-storey exhibition and project space coinciding with the gallery's 20th anniversary, 2013
© Courtesy of Selldorf Architects

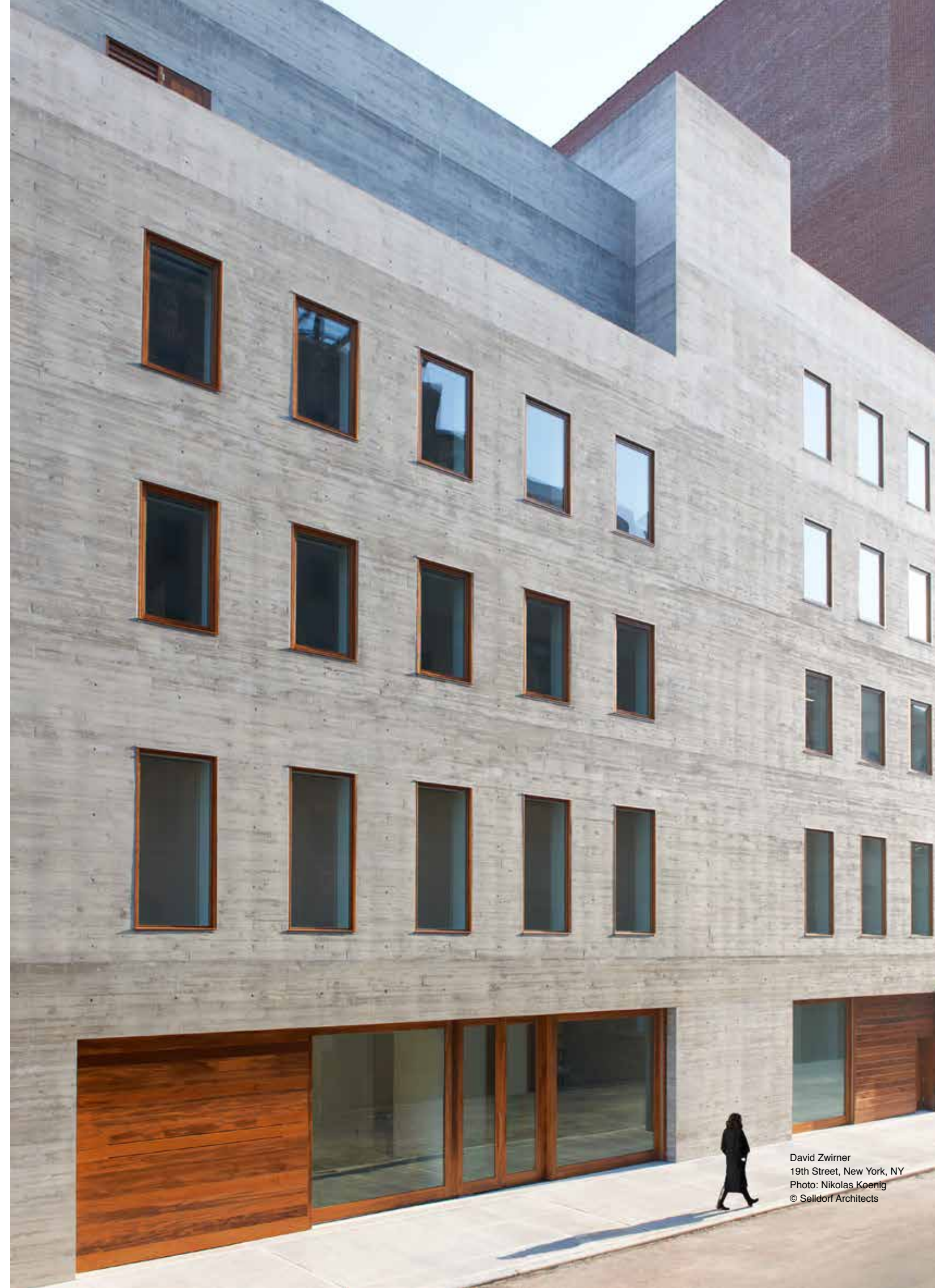
Surely, once upon a time architecture was purely about integrity and poetry. Or perhaps not. Maybe such buildings have always been the exception, varying in percentage of distribution depending on the multifarious characteristics of the era. Whatever the case, the work of Selldorf Architects can serve to reassure us that in our current day a genuine, context-driven approach is being exercised by some. The firm has worked on public and private projects that range from museums and libraries to a recycling facility, creating architecture that is both contemporary and timeless and that – significantly – doesn't aim to be a sculpture or a beacon or a show-off.

TEXT Cristina Guadalupe Galván

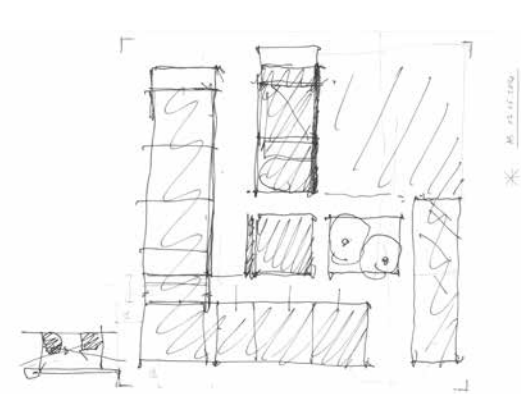
Crises are always blessings in disguise, an opportunity to change and grow. The economic crisis of 2008 was a wake-up call for all of us; it brought us a new awareness of the corruption inside the economic and political realms and also of the need for much more responsibility and transparency in how we administer the common good. The repercussions in the architectural world were predictable. Before the crisis, we were in a period marked by the so-called 'Guggenheim effect', with grandiose, monumental gestures serving political egos and their agendas, to the detriment of city budgets, building contents, programmes, users, and even a proper sense of the

urban. One such example is Santiago Calatrava's City of Arts and Sciences complex in Valencia. But there are countless others. This is especially disastrous in regard to cultural programming, where architecture is thought to be an end in itself (tourist entertainment) instead of a vessel for art and culture.

In the new architectural awareness post-2008, referred to by some as a 'post-Guggenheim' moment, there is a trend on the rise marked by measure and sensitivity, by integrity and poetical rigour. And this is where Selldorf Architects is so relevant; with 20 years' experience, mostly in cultural programming,



David Zwirner
19th Street, New York, NY
Photo: Nikolas Koenig
© Selldorf Architects



Sunset Park Material Recovery Facility
Brooklyn, NY
Photo: John Majoris
© Selldorf Architects

Sketch for the Mwabwindo School
© Selldorf Architects

Mwabwindo School
Mwabwindo village, Zambia
© Selldorf Architects

it is fast becoming one of the most sought-after practices by the art world. DAMN° went to the 65-person office in Union Square, New York, to ask Annabelle Selldorf a series of direct questions. Just like her architecture, she is a kind, intelligent, unassuming person, with a high standard.

DAMN°: Your largest project to date (and winner of multiple awards) is the Sunset Park Material Recovery Facility in Brooklyn, on an 11-acre waterfront pier (the largest of its kind in the USA). It processes 16 to 18,000 tons of recycled material per month! You also just finished a residen-

tial building in Bond Street (in New York's Nolita district), the Hay Library at Brown University, and the renovation of the Clark Art Institute. But your work has always been predominantly in the arts: Neue Gallery, Le Stanze del Vetro, Michael Werner Gallery, the David Zwirner galleries, Hauser & Wirth (New York, London, and Zurich), Gladstone Gallery, and Acquavella Galleries. You've also worked for Gagosian and designed the Frank Stella show at the new Whitney, among others, and right now you are working on the LUMA Foundation in Arles. How did you come to start working in the art sector?



Annabelle Selldorf: I grew up in Cologne, which at the time was a town with a lot of artists and also a lot of history. I knew a bunch of people there and met more of those people in New York when I came to live here at the age of 18. I haven't any hobbies, so alongside working, I would go to see exhibitions. I knew David Zwirner vaguely, as I was acquainted with his sister. So when he started-up his gallery (he was fantastic), he asked: "Do you have time for me?" And I said: Yeah (obviously)! And soon after that, we were both on our hands and knees staining the floors. And that's a nice thing to think back on. We've since done so many projects. I am incredibly grateful for this, as it's also a measure of growing up together.

DAMN°: After all these years of practice, what have you learned?

AS: That there are some people who think about culture, civilization, art, and matters of art authentically, and then there are a lot of people for whom art is first and foremost a business. For me, art is about an inspired way of communicating where we are at. It continues to push boundaries – I love interacting with the fine arts. As an architect, you have a slightly different trajectory, a different outlook, and different tools, so I kind of insist on keeping the two things separate. Working with art also has something to do with seeing yourself. That ability to see then pushes you to process. It goes back to the old self-knowledge thing, right? The things you learn from being around art are not just the specifics pointing in a particular direction, but sort of understanding the categories of thinking. And that continues to be something I am really interested in and appreciate being around.



DAMN°: What can you say about this moment in architecture?

AS: I am really at odds with it. It depends on the time of the day you ask me. OK, I will start with the upside! I find that architects are more ready to think about the social impact of our work at every level. But it's not a political decision, like if you are a leftist you will pursue affordable housing, for example. Whichever path you choose, you have to address these issues. The ethos really has to inhabit all of our thinking and doing. And in a way, you have pre-empted it already; I feel that there is a sort of egotistical component that exists in architecture

Frank Stella: A Retrospective
Installation view, 2016
Whitney Museum of American Art
New York, NY
Photo: Ronald Amstutz

Neue Galerie
5th Avenue, New York, NY
Photo: Todd Eberle
© Selldorf Architects

10 Bond Street
New York, NY
© Selldorf Architects



Portrait of Annabelle Selldorf
Photo: Cristina Guadalupe Galván

Luma Arles
Arles, France
© Selldorf Architects



today that's very much supported by the top end. Although I don't feel that architecture should have to write the world. The missionary zeal is something I am always deeply sceptical about, but by the same token, the money that rules the world should not enslave it. I sometimes think that the kind of architecture I practice is going to disappear ...

DAMN°: How come?

AS: Well, have you been to Hong Kong lately? Hong Kong is fascinating. In some ways, there are so many people who do what architects used to do. A lot of people talk about how the architectural profession has changed; in certain circumstances, we are asked to become advisors and consultants. And I like that, but that's not the only thing I want to do and can do. The world is full of consultants for everything. You don't need one architect to address all matters. The world is full of billboards, too. I actually just went to Miami the other day, and noticed that there is a developer who is a character in the art world, and he has hired all these young, well-known, up-and-coming architects. They were all doing façades! Nothing else. It's just bookends, just a title and nothing behind it.

DAMN°: What makes a good book then?

AS: It's never just one aspect. In the end, the work is the composite of one's attention to design, the desire to go through it step by step and to really do it thoroughly. But then, beyond the design, you have to stick with the project all the way, until you say OK, now it's yours. I feel that our work finds its validation when it's in use, and that is its purpose. It's for the people who are going to use it, and if it is a

bathroom for one person, then it is just that bathroom, and it gets as much attention as the recycling facility over here. You have to think about virtually everything all the time, until all is done. And even then, you probably still need to be thinking about it. It involves so many big decisions and so many small decisions, and none of them can be ignored.

DAMN°: So what's real quality then?

AS: Oh! What's real quality? It's so many things. Real quality is life transforming. Real quality has to do with a big experience. It is coming to a place where you can do what you are meant to do, and more. Real quality on one level is an understanding of how things go together and how they last a long time; how they are at once a testimony to this time and have a timelessness to them. On the physical level, that's easily defined. Real quality belongs to the things that position themselves in the back of your mind as a memory and an experience and the pleasure of that experience. Like when you see great architecture, you immediately know it and feel it – I think that's universal. I think great architecture is archetypal. •

Events in April 2016:

Annabelle Selldorf is being awarded the Medal of Honor from the New York City Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

The opening of Steinway Hall, the new home of Steinway & Sons in New York, a retail flagship and a recital hall, recording studio, practice room, and concert artists' selection room.

Selldorf Architects Portfolio and Projects, a comprehensive monograph, designed by Michael Bierut/Pentagram with specially commissioned portfolio photography by Todd Eberle, is being released by Phaidon.

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