



Ph: Brigitte Lacombe. Courtesy of Selldorf Architects

ANNABELLE SELLDORF

“A Moment in Civilization”

For an architect who is a star by any standard, Annabelle Selldorf comes off as modest and unpretentious, wanting to focus only on her work and the soulful thought that goes into it. Born and raised in Germany, trained at Pratt and at Syracuse University’s masters program in Florence, Italy, Selldorf has become known, since founding her New York-based firm in 1988, for finding the beauty in pure utility – and through beauty, harmony. “In an age of highly expressive architecture, Selldorf is about restrained and understated elegance,” writes *The Wall Street Journal*. These qualities are expressed in small matters like window frames and in large ones like proportion, circulation, and lighting – in projects ranging from humble, such as a primary school in rural Zambia and the new material recovery plant in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park, to quite grand, like luxury residential buildings in SoHo and prestigious art galleries in Chelsea.

By Stephen Greco

In addition to new architecture, Selldorf’s work has included the “reinvestigation” and renovation of existing buildings, such as Ronald Lauder’s Neue Galerie and the main spaces of the legendary Four Seasons restaurant. One of the most sensitive and complicated projects in the latter vein is the renovation of two buildings at the venerable Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, Massachusetts: architect Daniel Deverell Perry’s neo-classical Museum Building of 1955, and Pietro Belluschi’s fortress-like Manton Research Center of 1973. It is a project that fits into a major expansion of the Clark, masterminded by Tadao Ando with the architecture firm Gensler and landscape architecture firm Reed Hilderbrand, that includes a reorganization of the spatial orientation of the campus and a new visitors’ center.

Rethinking the 1955 and 1977 buildings was “not really about creating a big gesture with recognizable handwriting,” explains Selldorf, “but about improving circulation as if it had been meant to be that way. I think it’s very important to allow visitors an easy way to find their own path.”

American entrepreneur Robert Sterling Clark and his wife Francine founded the Clark Art Institute in 1950 to house the collection they’d built over decades. (The Clarks reportedly chose to locate their collection in the Berkshires rather than in a museum in New York, where they lived, owing to their Cold War concern that New York was too vulnerable to nuclear attack.) Containing works by Degas, Homer, Monet, Renoir, Sargent, and many more masters of European and American art, the Clark’s 1955 Perry building is a white marble temple, dropped into a verdant landscape – a neo-classical vision of stately repose. It is particularly beloved, though Selldorf says that no one could say exactly why. “Was it because of the art in it? Was it because of the architecture? Was it the marvelous landscape all around? I tend to think it was all of it together.” The Belluschi building, on the other hand, bristles with a very different kind of energy, which Selldorf describes as “brutalist” and “unapologetic.” When it was built, the entrance to the temple was reorganized from its front portico to its rear, where the Belluschi building is located. “It created a very awkward circulation and a very strange entry to the museum that nobody ever liked. But people got used to it in the way people get used to many things.” Selldorf’s task was to iron things out and bring out the best in both buildings.

The Belluschi building, admits Selldorf, was “not particularly beautiful.” Still, says the architect, there are a lot of “fantastic” details and great spaces in it, so she decided to

make it “the best piece of architecture from its own point of view, so to speak.” Besides improving the circulation, Selldorf rethought the building’s largest space, an atrium, working closely with architect and designer Richard Renfro to modulate the daylight and make an “unattractive reception hall” into a grand public reading room where scholars, staff and the public can comfortably gather.

“We spent a lot of time working with the curators,” says Selldorf. “In the Perry building we asked, what should the experience be as you’re looking around? In many ways, people come to the Clark to visit old friends, so how do you honor that as well as present the collection so there is room for occasional change?”

This is a building, says Selldorf, in which certain construction elements lead one to think that Daniel Deverell Perry, who died at 97 in 2002, was trying to express a modern sensibility in a classical environment.

“I think for the most part he didn’t want to build a temple,” says Selldorf, who was elected this year to the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters, the latest of many high honors. “It’s not modern for sure, but it’s really not a classical building – not in its original layout. The central room where all the Renoirs hang has that sort of complicated skylight that really gave more than enough light to the room – which is nice sometimes, but hard to work with.”

Selldorf’s thoughtfulness when working out such “intangibles” as lighting and proportion seems to reflect a deep understanding of the effect architecture has on the soul.

“I think these matters inform the purposeful into something poetic,” she muses. “And they do that in a way that meets the subconscious. I have forever wondered why we have certain ideals of beauty. They can change a little bit over time, and they vary in different cultures, but by and large we agree on beauty, and I think that has something to do with harmony, with balance and peace. And yet beauty presents a challenge – to question it, so it’s a curious combination of things, not all symmetry, not all rational. It has to have a twist.”

Selldorf’s deep understanding of beauty and its relationship to the human soul was one reason why many New Yorkers were relieved when they heard that the architect would be in charge of breathing new life into another beloved landmark, the space long occupied by The Four Seasons restaurant. “There was so much that hadn’t been attended to in a while,” she says – “repolishing the sculpture, taking care of the paneling – mahogany, rosewood, walnut...”

Opened in 1959, in Ludwig Mies van der

Rohe’s monumental Seagram’s Building and designed by Mies with Philip Johnson, the restaurant became an epicenter of global business power as much for its magnificent architectural proportions and design details as for its food (American seasonal fare, which was also boldly modern when introduced here). The restaurant’s interior, comprising the storied Grill and Pool rooms, was designated a New York City landmark in 1989 – and Selldorf’s restoration work, along with that of architect and designer William T. Georgis, restored the splendor of the original experience of the place.

“Both rooms feel now like somebody loves them,” says Selldorf. “That hadn’t happened in a very long time, despite the fact that many prominent and fancy people came there, and everybody held on very tight to having the same venue. There comes a time when that feels old and stale. Like everybody else, I think it’s the most incredible place in New York City, and the way it turned out is really very special.”

It is a commitment to elevating the quality of human life that seems to serve as a through-line in Selldorf’s work.

“I am always interested in architecture for people,” says the architect, whose 65-member firm is the subject of the book *Selldorf Architects: Portfolio and Projects*, published by Phaidon in 2016. “What that means is that the work grows out of a sort of idea – a notion of how humans can be benefited in architecture. Architecture is a presentation of a moment in civilization – it might as well be the best it can. It’s not just a snapshot to demonstrate that we can suspend something in midair – though that might be part of it – if we imbue it with the desire to make life better.”

Visit the Clark in Williamstown, MA. clarkart.edu

Stephen Greco’s most recent novel is *Now and Yesterday* (Kensington). He is currently at work, as librettist, on an opera based on *Gulliver’s Travels*, with composer Victoria Bond and director Doug Fitch.

Following page: The Impressionist Gallery: Pierre de Wiessant, *Nude Study*, modeled 1886; cast 1967 by Auguste Rodin. From a private collection. Ph: Mike Agee. Courtesy of Selldorf Architects.

On the walls, from left to right: *Portrait of Madame Monet*, c. 1874. *Sketches of Heads* [The Berard Children], 1881; *Peonies*, c. 1880; *Thérèse Berard*, 1879; *Bather Arranging Her Hair*, 1885. All by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. *Seated Nude*, 1884, by William-Adolphe Bouguereau. The collection of the Clark Art Institute



“What is striking when you look at Annabelle’s work is the fact that she’s extremely respectful of the architecture and the spirit of the place.”

- Olivier Meslay, *The Felda and Dena Hardymon*
Director of the Clark Art Institute since 2016.