

**Soft sell** — With her practice **Selldorf Architects, Annabelle Selldorf** has been slowly and sensitively shaping New York City through user-centred cultural and residential projects. But now she's taking on new typologies and geographies — from masterplanning to education, and from rural Zambia to Beijing's Forbidden City.  
Words by *Francesca Perry*





**In a light-filled, parquet-floored space overlooking** New York’s Union Square, a thoughtful and elegant German-American leans back in her armchair, pauses, and says: ‘It’s better to be happy than to be unhappy.’ I laugh drily: ‘If only it were that easy.’

Perhaps surprisingly, I’m not describing a therapist’s session. On a sunny April morning I am sitting with Annabelle Selldorf in her eponymous practice’s offices – a high-ceilinged, open-plan affair – discussing her approach to architecture, to work, and to nurturing the 75-strong New York firm she initially set up in 1988. Happiness is not something you often hear architects talk about, but then again the narrative that Selldorf presents sits apart from that of prevailing high-octane, competitive architecture and busts myths which continue to define architectural success.

Selldorf first settled in New York in the late Seventies, having moved from her native Cologne in Germany – but no grand plan motivated this. ‘I didn’t get into architecture school in Germany,’ she admits simply, and consequently relocated to study architecture at the Pratt Institute. She loved New York, and stayed. But when Selldorf set up her

1 (previous page)  
Annabelle Selldorf

2 One of the Selldorf-renovated exhibition halls at the French art centre created out of a rail depot, Luma Arles

3 & 4 Visualisations of Selldorf Architects’ proposals for the Frick Collection in New York, which will comprise sensitive repurposing, expanding and upgrading of facilities

firm in the late Eighties, her ambition was more about independence than any lofty driving principles. ‘I was fairly unequivocal by the time I set out on my own,’ she says. ‘I wanted to be independent and make my own decisions.’

The practice grew slowly – ‘Everything happened quite gradually,’ Selldorf explains – and suffered a blow in the financial crisis a decade ago. ‘We had moved into this [Union Square] office in 2007 with 40 people, as we had grown out of our old office,’ she says. ‘Then the recession hit. I thought I was going to have to open a pizza restaurant in here or something!’ The practice shrank, and then grew again.

Although Selldorf’s early projects were mainly residential (a typology she continues to this day), her practice has become known for its sensitive and user-focused cultural projects – from the Neue Galerie New York (2001), a museum of early-20th-century German and Austrian art within a Beaux Arts building, to Luma Arles (2015-18), the transformation of a 19th-century rail depot in France into a centre for contemporary art. And now, the practice is undertaking the renovation and expansion of the much-beloved New York institution, the Frick Collection, completing in 2023.

1 - HARRY MITCHELL 1, 2, 3 & 4 - COURTESY OF SELLDORF ARCHITECTS

**‘My way of working on and thinking about space is not about making a gestural statement.’**  
Annabelle Selldorf

Selldorf’s first non-residential project, she explains, was a gallery for Michael Werner in New York (1990). ‘He said he didn’t like architects,’ Selldorf recalls. ‘He didn’t want the ambition of an architect to interfere with his vision of a space to show art. I was fine with that, because my way of working on and thinking about space is not about making a gestural statement. I proved to him that with thoughtfulness and dedication you can solve more issues than meets the eye. That set up a particular paradigm that we’ve stuck to.’

Read about Selldorf’s work and the word that crops up again and again is ‘subtle’. Hers is not a showy architecture – in an industry perhaps dominated by it – and she is clear about that. ‘If you believe in the transcending power of architecture, is that not evidence of a controlling and overpowering way of expression?’ she asks. But ‘subtle’ doesn’t quite capture the work’s intentions, which, she explains, are more about a power that nevertheless doesn’t ‘knock you over the head’.

‘I don’t think we’re short on confidence in the buildings we make,’ Selldorf says. ‘The hierarchy of articulation is just quite different. I’m after something that is direct. I think

about the long-term, rather than the short-term, experience.’ This focus on user experience is a key preoccupation that defines the practice’s work, and it is often best embodied by its museum and gallery projects, where the design centres on the visitor’s journey and encountering of art. ‘My favourite experiences with our own work is to see the spaces when people use them,’ she says. ‘It’s great to see a space coming to completion as a result of its use.’

Selldorf illustrates her approach by describing a person who repeatedly visits the same space in a museum, yet gets something new from it each time. ‘I want you to go into the same room again and again and to feel free to discover your own potential of response,’ she says. ‘I think that’s provocative, not subtle, without giving you a sign that says “please be provoked by this”. I don’t want to tell people what to think or do, or where to go. What you are doing instead is making it possible for people’s own experiences to fully evolve.’

Perhaps, though, the practice’s apparent ‘subtlety’ comes down to the fact that many of its museum and gallery projects involve renovation, expansion or adaptive re-use, requiring a continuation of context and often – in the case of the Carrère and Hastings-designed buildings hosting the Neue Galerie and the Frick Collection, for example – sensitively honouring heritage.

At the Neue Galerie, Selldorf balanced historical restoration of the 1914 building with structural and mechanical modifications for the exhibition of art. At Luma Arles, alongside shaping the 6.5ha masterplan, Selldorf has converted five historic, industrial structures into two new flexible-use exhibition facilities, a hotel, visitor centre and cafe, with her latest work involving the creation of a new dance studio and artists’ residences within a 19th-century former office building.

At the Frick, Selldorf will sensitively repurpose 5,574 sq m of the museum and create 2,508 sq m of new space, all in order to enhance the institution’s resources for display and exhibitions, conservation, education and public programmes, as well as upgrade visitor amenities and accessibility. The project, which received approval from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in June 2018 despite concerns from conservationist campaigners, is due to break ground next year. >







5 & 6 At the Swiss Institute in New York (2018), subtle interventions, such as a new stairwell and roof pavilions, provide an array of art-filled spaces to explore

In 2018, Selldorf completed the new 697 sq m home for the New York-based contemporary art organisation Swiss Institute, located within a former bank built in 1954. Selldorf was careful not to significantly alter the exterior or change the architectural spirit of the mid-century building. What she has done, however, is transform the interior experience into one that celebrates the viewing of art and visitor's journey, as well as expand the building's ambitions with a brand new roof terrace. Selldorf has created a joyful little building that, unlike most galleries, pays attention to the circulation spaces as much as the exhibition spaces.

Including basement and roof, the Swiss Institute comprises four levels of art, including in the mix a bookstore and a library space. Although a new lift enables full accessibility, visitors are encouraged to use the two stairwells to explore the building (one original terrazzo staircase at the back of the building and one steel and concrete one added by Selldorf at the front). These are not purely functional back-of-house areas, however, but elevated to gallery spaces in themselves, filled with art sprawling across the walls. This trail of art draws you up until you find yourself on the roof, a newly accessible space for further art installations, events or simply relaxation with a view. In order to provide access and sufficient facilities to enable this as a public, art-hosting level, Selldorf has built three minimal roof pavilions painted in pale grey or clad in coated steel panelling – which, from the exterior, reflects perfectly the silvery grey of the original pressed aluminium spandrels on the building facade below.

It is strange, then, that someone so insistent on not making gestural or attention-grabbing architecture is such a

fan of New York City, one of the showiest metropolises in the world. Yet Selldorf loves the city and has lived in Manhattan for decades. 'If you are attracted to discomfort, New York is your place,' she says. 'It's a very aggressive place. It has a huge amount of energy and offers no reprieve.' It sounds like my idea of hell, I say, but how does it impact her work? 'I think in architecture you have to make sure there's enough tension in the world that alerts people to an energy in a space,' she says. 'I am interested in that tension, and the long life of a building and the building's ability to live alongside us through time. And I want my architecture to not be about trend and styles, but more about use and experience.'

Perhaps it is this preference for timelessness that explains why she has publically stated she is not a fan of the city's mega-developments like Hudson Yards (see page 54). Selldorf is acutely aware of the impact of architecture on the urban landscape: 'Thinking back to the early years of the practice, I used to go around New York in a yellow cab and point out my projects,' she recalls. 'It was funny to think that you could become a part of the city. But when the projects get bigger, you have to think: what is it that I'm doing? You're changing the image of the city.' She pauses, trying to find the precise words: 'The thick affluence that permeates life in New York these days is worrisome, because the proportion of poverty in the city is not less than it used to be. Nobody in the office can afford to live in Manhattan. People have to move further and further away and travel more – with very little investment in infrastructure. Those kind of conditions are deplorable. We must always think: how does our work contribute to such conditions and what can we do about it? We think our work is a good balance.' >



5 & 6 – NICHOLAS VENEZIA, COURTESY OF SELLDORF ARCHITECTS



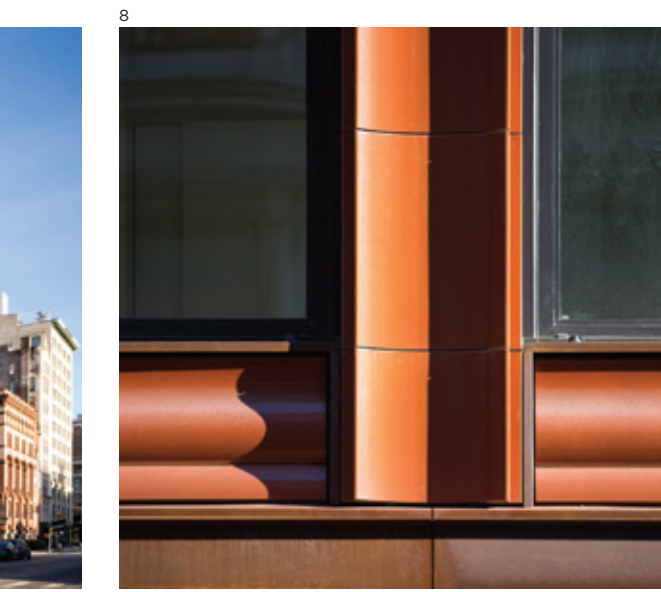


Nevertheless, Selldorf Architects does tend to build housing on the higher end of the spectrum – though none of the projects could be said to represent the trend in superluxe supertalls admittedly. Two minutes from her office in Union Square, and visible from it, is her newest residential project nearing completion this summer: the 1,719 sq m and 22-storey tower at 21 East 12th Street. The bulk of the tower sits above – and set back from – a two-storey retail base that engages with the pedestrian level of this corner plot in a busy part of Greenwich Village. On top of the podium and surrounding the base of the 52-unit tower, Selldorf has designed rooftop gardens – some for the communal use of all residents, and some for the two townhomes located on this level. The exterior of the tower is pale cast stone, which is meant to fit in with the neighbourhood’s prewar limestone buildings. From street level, the tower appears surprisingly minimal, almost to the point of being monolithic, with no surface decoration. Perhaps it does its job of blending in with the area, but it unfortunately appears rather dull to the pedestrian observer.

Selldorf’s New York residential projects from the earlier half of this decade, however, feel more exciting and creative. With projects like 200 11th Avenue (2010) and 10 Bond Street (2015), Selldorf harnessed the opportunities of newbuilds to create sculptural, even colourful, presences on the streetscape in ways that simply are not possible in her many adaptive re-use cultural projects. Surprises continue on the inside of these works too: the 19-storey, 16-unit 200 11th Avenue project has become known as the ‘Sky Garage’, because it has a drive-in car lift that brings residents’ vehicles up to their private garages. Faintly ridiculous, maybe, but certainly a departure from sensitive restoration projects.

This building’s facade is sculptural, with a gently rippling, metallic form, its stainless steel cladding shimmering in the sunlight. The lower storeys form a contrast, clad in darker, yet bronze-like, terracotta. Fully residential rather than mixed-use, the building unfortunately has no active street frontage, functioning better as an eye-catching element on the Chelsea skyline.

Over at 10 Bond Street in NoHo, however, a similarly eye-catching facade indulging in craft and materiality is complemented by active, ground-floor retail frontage. Above this sits six storeys of residential. Although the building’s low-rise scale, red-brown hue and structural rhythm echoes the local vernacular, in terms of materiality and articulation the project departs boldly from its surroundings. The exterior is defined by a terracotta and corten steel frame in regularised bays. While the ground-floor lintel and upper cornice of the building exterior is corten steel, the frame



within consists of custom-cast, glazed terracotta panels that almost exactly match the weathered steel’s warm and earthy colour. The vertical panels of terracotta form continuous concave columns, while the horizontals are cast as muscular, rippled ribs. Inside the apartments, Douglas fir flooring and Vermont marble bathrooms continue the celebration of raw yet refined materials.

Questioned on materiality, Selldorf explains that the priorities for her architecture lie in utility, function, structure, proportion and light, but that she believes the practice’s buildings ‘ought to contribute to their urban context and become part of our collective memory of the texture that makes the city’. She continues: ‘Material, texture or tactility and colour are among the things that allow for the visceral experience of a building and become a part of that memory. The exploration of the opportunities of materiality and craft are enjoyable.’ >



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Annabelle Selldorf



7 & 8 Glazed terracotta and corten steel combine to articulate Selldorf’s NoHo residential project, 10 Bond Street (2015)

9 The minimalist residential tower, 21 East 12th Street, nears completion in Greenwich Village (2019)

10, 11 & 12 Shimmering terracotta and stainless steel are used on the rippling facade of Chelsea residential project 200 11th Avenue (2010)







13 - JASON SCHMIDT. COURTESY OF SELLDORF ARCHITECTS 14 - MARC LINS

It would certainly be interesting to see Selldorf bring the sculptural, colourful, craft-orientated sensibility seen in her residential projects to some of her cultural projects, which continue to be defined by the contexts of historical buildings. There has only been one such fully newbuild gallery project in Selldorf's portfolio: the David Zwirner contemporary art gallery on 20th Street in New York's West Chelsea (2013). 'The pleasure of any newbuild project is that there is a certain freedom to create priorities and hierarchies – in other words the underlying rationale of a structure is generated by me rather than being a given,' explains Selldorf. 'There are always constraints of course, but they are of a different nature and allow for a more unequivocal expression.' More minimal than sculptural, the project's exterior nevertheless continues to indulge in the craft and texture of its materials: shuttered raw concrete with teak detailing. But it's not all form-first: the building was the first LEED-certified commercial gallery in the US when it opened, incorporating five green roof spaces and locally and responsibly sourced materials.

It's not just cultural and residential projects that Selldorf is contributing to New York City, however. In 2013, the practice completed a 4.5ha waterfront masterplan for a material recovery facility in Brooklyn's Sunset Park neighbourhood, for Sims Municipal Recycling and the City of New York. The project features a 13,000 sq m recycling facility – comprised of a series of buildings including an educational centre – as well as landscaping of native plants. The practice harnessed recycled materials throughout the project, including recycled steel for the buildings and recycled glass for the plazas. The project also includes photovoltaics, a wind turbine, and bioswales for stormwater management.

Now, Selldorf Architects is working on designs for a new large-scale municipal project: a CSO (Combined Sewage Overflow) facility in Gowanus (just north of Sunset Park) for



13 Selldorf's only fully newbuild cultural project, the David Zwirner gallery on 20th Street (2013), boasts a minimal concrete aesthetic

14 The Material Recovery Facility in Sunset Park (2013)

15 A visualisation of Selldorf's designs for the Gowanus sewage overflow facility

the NYC Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The facility is comprised of an eight-million-gallon underground tank for stormwater and sewage and an above-ground head house wrapped in a louvred terracotta. The practice has been working with landscape architects DLAND Studio for the surrounding public open space and harnessing public feedback into the design through ongoing engagement.

Is Selldorf interested in pursuing more masterplanning projects? 'Absolutely! Are you kidding me?!' she cries. 'Masterplanning is about using sociological concepts and translating them into a physical plan extended over time. It's so multidimensional.' >





Although it's safe to say that the majority of Selldorf's projects are found in her hometown of New York, there are signs the portfolio is expanding, geographically as well as typologically. In 2015, Selldorf Architects was commissioned by 14+ Foundation – an organisation dedicated to increasing education accessibility for rural African communities – to create a 175-student primary school in southern Zambia. Mwabwindo School, which is coming to completion this year, is 'an entirely new typology for us,' says Selldorf. She knew the foundation's New York-based CEO Joseph Mizzi, who asked her to design the project pro bono. 'I was fascinated by the idea of the organisation,' says Selldorf. 'His energy and initiative are so igniting and contagious.'

How did Selldorf approach such a new type of project? 'We started by learning as much as possible about the land, the people and the local educational techniques,' she says. 'All of the architecture is based on ideas about the school, the children, how they come together, wayfinding and community activities.' The design for the school is comprised of mud-brick classrooms, an internal 'street' and courtyard spaces covered by a corrugated metal roof canopy, held up by slender steel pillars. A covered assembly space will function both for the students and as a hub for local civic gatherings. The project also features a community vegetable garden and housing for teachers.

Selldorf speaks of the 'simple building principles, simple forms' of the project, which won the 2017 Panerai Design Miami/ Visionary Award. The mud bricks have been handmade on site in collaboration with the community and constructed by local masons in order to provide employment and training opportunities. 'It's a humbling experience to see how much of a difference you can make,' says Selldorf. Environmental sustainability is central to the project too: rainwater will be collected for the community garden, solar panels will provide energy and a windmill will pump well water to the facilities.

Asked about whether this school project might open up a new sector in the practice's portfolio, Selldorf responds positively: 'I think educational projects are a fascinating opportunity. I believe that many cultural and educational projects are fuelled by the same idea: making learning environments positive places for people to come together.'

A different kind of learning environment, on a different

continent, is also underway for the practice. In January of this year, it was announced that Selldorf Architects had been chosen by the World Monuments Fund to design an interpretation centre within the 18th-century Qianlong Garden in the Forbidden City in Beijing, due to complete in 2020. The garden, which has not previously been accessible to the public, was originally designed as a private retreat for the Qianlong Emperor, with four courtyards, rockeries and 27 pavilions and structures. Selldorf's plans include an exhibition space with information on the garden's history, an area showcasing the restoration process and an open space with views of the rockeries. 'Being able to work in the Forbidden City is both a privilege and a responsibility – and a very interesting learning experience,' explains Selldorf (who, it's worth noting, is also on the board of the World Monuments Fund).

So with projects in Asia and Africa, could we see Annabelle Selldorf taking her sensitive and user-focused architecture more regularly to different countries and continents? 'I'll go anywhere!' she replies with a laugh, explaining that for her, it's more about the nature of the project than the place – although of course once a project has begun, the context of place becomes a central component.

But as any good therapist – I mean architect – would tell you, the values you embed in your work, wherever that work may be, have to start at home (or in this case, the office). 'The culture of the practice is the thing I'm most proud of,' says Selldorf. 'It is a source of the biggest satisfaction to me. I started as a single practitioner and didn't want partners. Learning to include and celebrate other people's intelligence is the most interesting thing. Nothing happens on one's own. Listening, collaboration – that's what we're about. And being open to continuous learning – learning to be curious.'

There's something else noteworthy about the culture of Selldorf Architects: it is a female-led practice in a city, and an industry, in which such firms form the minority. There are four partners at Selldorf in addition to Annabelle; three of them are women. 'Is that significant?' she asks rhetorically. 'Yes.'

Annabelle Selldorf and her practice champion the importance of listening, dialogue and problem-solving. She may not be a therapist, but she might be as close to one as the architecture world can get. ■

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16 Mwabwindo School under construction in rural Zambia