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Selldorf Architects Transforms Former Hotel in Chatham, New York, into Shaker Museum



The exterior of the building that will house the Shaker Museum expansion in downtown Chatham, New York, with design plans in the works by Annabelle Selldorf and her team. Photography courtesy of the Shaker Museum.

Earlier this year, directors of the Shaker Museum—founded by John S. Williams 70 years ago in Old Chatham, New York, to showcase furnishings and objects made by the Christian sect—acquired a nearby building that soon will house their collection of more than 18,000 artifacts, marking the most dynamic expansion yet. *Interior Design* Hall of Famer [Annabelle Selldorf](#), founder and principal of [Selldorf Architects](#), signed on to design the space, which will serve as a community hub while paying homage to the Shaker craft and lifestyle, complementing the museum's programming in Mount Lebanon, New York, where the group lived for more than 150 years.

The 30,000-square-foot structure in downtown Chatham also will provide a permanent facility for the museum's collection and archives, which have been in storage for the last 10 years following the close of its previous location. "The museum was located in John Williams' dairy barn, which was not an ideal environment for storing or showing a collection," says Lacy Schutz, executive director of the Shaker Museum. "We wanted to make a plan to get the collection back on view in a sustainable way." That process has been a true collaboration. Selldorf's team, along with landscape architect Thomas Woltz, owner of Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects, are working closely with museum staff to create a space reflective of Shaker traditions, while paving the way forward when it comes to mixed-use communal environments.



The Shakers are known for their minimalist wood furnishings, like this bench. Photography courtesy of the Shaker Museum.

"At this particular moment in history, it really behooves us to look at how the Shakers lived their lives—they chose a very alternative lifestyle...and made an effort to include everyone," adds Schutz, noting that the new space will be accessible to all and provide areas for public programming. On a broader level, the project also will shift the way people interact with museums, creating an environment that allows visitors to become part of the space, rather than pass through it. "We didn't want to create a passive viewing experience," Selldorf tells *Interior Design*.

The Shakers, known for their simple yet elegant wood furnishings, took a deliberate approach to nearly every aspect of their lives, evident in their designs, which piqued Selldorf's interest. "One of the reasons perhaps why we connected, and why we so much wanted to work with Lacy and her team, is

because they talked about the ethos of the Shakers, and everything they were talking about rang so relevant to us,” Selldorf adds. “It’s not just a museum... It also connects a kind of culture, if you will, from the past to something everyone is aching for right now—community, belonging, and openness.”

Though design plans for the building, which functioned as a hotel in the 1800s, are far from finalized, Selldorf and her team plan to incorporate energy efficient natural materials throughout. The \$15 million dollar project is expected to break ground in 2021 and wrap up in 2023. “My excitement about the existing building is that it has some simplicity, and austerity even, that Shaker buildings have,” says Selldorf. “I’ll be guided by use of materials the Shakers had, but also careful to not make anyone think we’re trying to make a Shaker piece of architecture.”



A look inside the existing building, which opened in the early 1800s as a hotel.
Photography courtesy of the Shaker Museum.

Woltz is taking a similar approach for the project's landscape design, relying on native plants to create a garden area that resonates with the Shaker approach to cultivating plants, rather than aiming to replicate it. "The Shaker landscapes were highly managed and reflected order, productivity, and beauty," says Woltz, noting that this ethos aligns with that of his team.

The new building will feature a small wooden outdoor amphitheater surrounded by a carefully curated variety of plants arranged in geometric patterns, taking into account the site's inherent slope and shape. "We wanted to create a wheelchair accessible gathering space where people could sit and contemplate," he adds. "Finding a coherent geometry is what really holds the site together." An approach the Shakers surely took to heart.

A wood stool built by the Shakers. The historic Shaker Village at Mount Lebanon, New York, functioned as a communal society from 1787 to 1947. Photography courtesy of the Shaker Museum.