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How Annabelle Selldorf Became the Architect of Our Moment

BY DODIE KAZANJIAN, PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

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MAINE LINES

Selldorf on the tiny island in Penobscot Bay where she spends downtime. Her New York–based firm's renovation of the Frick Collection aims to open at the end of the year. *Vogue,* September 2024.

Annabelle Selldorf, the architect of the Frick Collection's renovation and expansion, is leading me on a hard-hat tour of the site on Manhattan's Upper East Side, a few months ahead of the reopening. We are standing inside the beloved Beaux Arts building, on scaffolding inside a large, curving oval space that will be the new auditorium—something the old Frick never had. For some reason, I have a sense of enveloping

pleasure and purity, as though I'm inside an egg. "I wanted this space to be the color of nothing," Selldorf tells me. "I think it's always fascinating how an overcast sky can be active and yet have no color." When the workers were skimming and sanding and painting many undercoats of the same whitish primer on the ceiling, she realized that the "nothing" effect was integral to the space, and that no other color was necessary to produce it. "That's when I thought, Okay, let's stop. Let's not do any more, because the less we do, the better."

The nothing effect is a key to Selldorf's architecture, which has placed her at the top of her profession. "I think Annabelle Selldorf's goal is to create a space that you can feel but don't have to focus on," Michael Kimmelman, the *New York Times* architecture critic, says. "There's a rigor and a Miesian order and attention to materials, but also a humanity in her work. She is one of today's most thoughtful architects of spaces for art."

Born in Cologne in 1960, Selldorf came to architecture through her parents. Her father was an architect and her mother worked with him as an interior designer. They also designed furniture for the German studio Vica, which was founded by her grandmother Ludovica in the 1950s, and which has been reinvented as "Vica by Annabelle Selldorf," a line of furniture, lighting, and accessories run out of a Selldorf-designed gallery space in downtown New York. Annabelle has lived in the city since 1980. In 1988, she opened her firm here, and not too long afterward, the German art dealer Michael Werner asked her to design his New York gallery. It was the beginning of her collaboration with the art world, designing spaces for artists (Jeff Koons, Eric Fischl, and April Gornik) and galleries (David Zwirner, Hauser & Wirth). Her budding architectural practice got what she calls a "damn lucky break" in 1997, when Ronald Lauder asked her to turn a Beaux Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue into a private museum for his collection of Austrian and German Expressionist art. The result was the Neue Galerie, which launched her career. Originally built by Carrère and Hastings in 1914, it was the perfect calling card for the job at the Frick, another Carrère and Hastings mansion built the same year (for the industrialist and collector Henry Clay Frick).

IN THE ROUND

The Frick Collection's sculptural new auditorium, seen here from two angles, is a centerpiece of Selldorf's renovation.

In addition to the Frick—"by a long shot my favorite museum in New York," Selldorf says—she has recently finished or is working on major renovations at the National Gallery in London, the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, as well as new residential towers

for the Two Trees Domino Sugar Factory redevelopment in Brooklyn and private homes in Manhattan, Long Island, Mexico, Mustique, and other points around the globe. One of the many reasons her clients love her is that she's such a great listener. But she doesn't hesitate to disagree when necessary. When the French perfume expert Frédéric Malle asked her to build him a modern version of a group of saltbox houses on beachfront property in Southampton, Long Island, he remembers her saying, "Absolutely not! Not when you have the view, and that type of light. You are not building a house with tiny windows!"

Selldorf is also building a new winery for the preeminent Château Haut-Brion, near Bordeaux, and just before COVID struck, she finished adapting a "very, very simple" 1840s house for herself and her partner, Tom Outerbridge, on the southernmost tip of a tiny, remote island in Penobscot Bay, where his family has summered for generations. "Tom loves the island," Selldorf says. "When we met, it took him a while to invite me to Maine because it was clear that if I didn't like it, our relationship would not have lasted."

She and Tom, who runs a private recycling company, and Jussi, their 12-year-old corgi-Lab mix, lived on the island for 18 months during the pandemic. The nothing (and everything) effect that she wanted for the ceiling of her Frick auditorium is all around you on the island, a never-ending moving picture of sky and sea. Although there is no ferry and there are no roads, shops, or markets of any kind, and only a handful of houses, the island somehow got high-speed internet in 2019 "just in time," and, like the rest of the world, Annabelle and Tom found that they could carry on their careers from their island home. "I think I worked harder on the island than ever in my life, but the things that are fundamental about architecture—drawing, proportion, scale—I couldn't do on a computer screen," she says. "I work with a pencil." (A yellow 0.9 mm Pentel.) "I can't draw on the computer, and it was so hard for me not to be with my team in the office." That team ranges from 65 to 70 highly talented and fiercely dedicated people, some of whom have been with her for more than 20 years.

ON THE ROAD
Selldorf with her dog, Jussi, in the small utility vehicle she uses to get around on the island in Maine.

While Selldorf was on the island, the firm won competitions for the work at the National Gallery in London and the Hirshhorn. The first phase of the National Gallery job involved a redesign of the Sainsbury Wing's entrance, inside and out, and Selldorf's changes had to weather a public critique by Denise Scott Brown (wife and partner of Robert Venturi, a founder of postmodernist architecture), whose firm—Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates—had designed and completed the building in 1991. "She's making our building look like a circus clown…wearing a tutu," Scott Brown told a reporter for *The Guardian* in 2022. This wasn't the first time Selldorf encountered criticism from Scott Brown. The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego had also been redesigned by Venturi, Scott Brown in 1996, and when the museum chose Selldorf to do a renovation and 40,000-square-foot expansion, Scott Brown joined 70 architects, critics, and preservationists in signing a protest to stop this "tremendous mistake." (The museum opened in 2022.)

When Annabelle got the National Gallery commission, she visited Scott Brown. "I made peace with her and I thought we had a nice relationship," Selldorf tells me. "But she had an unreasonable expectation that I wasn't going to change the building. The project was there to begin with because the Sainsbury Wing wasn't perfect. It didn't function as a main entrance." The revolving doors and complex fenestration made entering the museum crowded and confusing. Selldorf's design clears and simplifies the space, and adds a public square for gathering outside to make the experience more coherent and more welcoming. After considering all of the criticism and complaints in the press, the Westminster City Council gave the Selldorf design a green light and the new wing is scheduled to open next May. "Many years down the road, this will be remembered as a Venturi, Scott Brown building and not as a Selldorf building," Selldorf says. "And I think that's right."

> "Architecture is such a *real* profession. You have to think about how people use space… and how you can make them feel better"

It's been 10 years since I first wrote about Selldorf for *Vogue,* and her reputation has continued to rise. She's been tapped to serve on many boards—World Monuments Fund, Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters—and she takes these very seriously. She still gets around town on Citi Bikes, buys her groceries at Union Square Market, and prefers quiet evenings at home, cooking simple things (rarely fish), and chatting with Tom—and Jussi—about their day. They all enjoy watching Scandinavian police procedurals on TV. Although she has no signature style, and is never referred to as a starchitect, there is no one as adept as she is at making the subtle and intensely sensitive interventions that add up to great architecture. The closest she has come to a grand gesture may be her minimalist auditorium for the Frick. She beat about 70 architects in the international competition for the Frick job. "Annabelle has a track record of working really respectfully and astutely with historic buildings, being true to

herself as a modern architect, but merging what she does with what came before," Ian Wardropper, the Frick's director, says. "I wanted her to create a beautiful space that would harmonize with what was there before. We genuinely hope that you need to pause and ask yourself what's new and what's old." The museum's beloved round Music Room had to be eliminated to make space for a much-needed special exhibitions gallery that connected with the permanent collection, and a lot of people complained about that. But as Wardropper explains, "Sometimes progress requires taking down what was there before, and the Music Room has always been too small for its purpose and the acoustics were always subpar." Concerts and lectures and performances will now be in Selldorf's sculptural 220-seat auditorium. It will be called the Stephen A. Schwarzman Auditorium, in recognition of a gift from Schwarzman's foundation.

Selldorf and her partner, Tom Outerbridge, in Islesboro, Maine.

One of Selldorf's most unusual projects is the Château Haut-Brion winery, in the Bordeaux town of Pessac. Prince Robert of Luxembourg, the chairman and CEO of the centuries-old wine estate, happens to be a childhood friend of Annabelle's partner, Tom Outerbridge—they became friends over summers in Maine—and Prince Robert and Annabelle hit it off. They began talking about the winery in 2014. He wanted to bring the complex machinery of winemaking up to date in a totally carbon-neutral structure. He also wanted to introduce a visitor center with a museum that tells Haut-Brion's storied history, of a winemaking tradition that goes back some 2,000 years. "What's exciting about Annabelle is that she could build a recycling facility in Sunset Park and then do the National Gallery in London," Prince Robert says. (That's how she met Outerbridge—he was the general manager of the municipal recycling plant that hired her.) "For me, that made it clear that she could understand great winemaking. Also, there's something that corresponds between Annabelle's character and talents and the type of wines that we make at Haut-Brion."

Could you flesh that out a little bit? I ask.

"First of all, our wines are always understated. There's a depth to them. There's an elegance. They're intellectual wines, and Annabelle is 'still water runs deep.' She takes her time. She's thoughtful. She's not out to wow you. She'll measure her words and find the exact response to a particular question or problem. I think that thoughtfulness and that humility will be reflected in our project."

Selldorf gives a lot of consideration to the materials she uses, and for the exterior of the new winery she chose rammed earth, an ancient building method using compacted blocks of soil and other natural materials. "With wine, everything is about the ground where the vines grow," she explains. "It was symbolic to use the earth from that place and make it visible."

HOME FRONT
A snapshot by Selldorf of the 1840s house she shares with her partner, Tom Outerbridge, in Maine.
Photo: Courtesy of Annabelle Selldorf.

For the flat, elegant, geometric façade of her residential towers (one of them is 55 stories, the other one is 39) at Domino Park in Brooklyn, she used white pearlescent ceramic tiles, made in Spain, to reflect the changing light from the sky throughout the day. “It’s maybe a little like everything I do,” she says. “I wanted it to feel like it’s there and it’s not there. When the sky is overcast, it’s incredibly beautiful. It’s a powerful building.” Was she thinking of that wide open, cinematic sky up in Maine? “No,” she says, “but who has access to the unconscious? It has something to do with the sky, that’s absolutely true. I thought of the Domino building as an anchor next to the Williamsburg Bridge. I wanted it to almost disappear at certain times. The ephemeral quality is something I find really fascinating.”

The whole house in Maine is wood—white pine inside and cedar outside. When they bought it, they thought they’d use it only on weekends and short vacations, but they’ve found they can stay longer—and now drive up with Jussi whenever they can find a

stretch of time when she's not traveling. (In the past few weeks, she's been back and forth to London three times and to Bordeaux and Texas and Paris, where she's just been hired to renovate the Musée Yves Saint Laurent.) She works during the week but not on weekends, which is when they hike, wandering in the woods and along the rocky beach, and often take a picnic lunch on their boat, a mini version of a lobster fishing skiff. This same boat takes them to and from the island in the summertime. "I'm not a serious hiker, but I love long walks," she says. They keep a small utility vehicle on the island—"much less than a truck," she says—to navigate the virtually roadless terrain. Tom tends the garden with its 100-year-old lilacs and its lettuce, squash, tomatoes, and other veggies. She's the cook.

At 64, Annabelle Selldorf is still infatuated with architecture. "I'm much, much more aware of the reason why I enjoy doing what I do," she says. It's late afternoon and she's talking to me from her all-white upstairs office on the island. "Until I worked with Ian Wardropper at the Frick, I don't think I made it clear to myself that I'm a practical person. I'm a visual person. I think about how things go together. I have very strong opinions about what is beautiful, but at some point I realized it's about something bigger than that. Architecture is such a *real* profession, and we can imbue it with all kinds of theoretical thinking, but it's pretty basic when you're working in the public realm. You have to think about how people use space and how they circulate and how you can make them feel better."

She continues, "Good architecture is infused by profound thinking about shelter and society. It includes art, but it's not the only thing it is. As a young architect, I was preoccupied with putting materials together to make space. I now think more about how people want to come together and in what kind of a space. And that space can be almost nothing."

What does almost nothing look like?

"It looks like having paid attention to absolutely everything all the time." She pauses before adding, "What does that look like? It looks like it is at ease and it is in service. The in-service part is really important."

TAKING CARE

"Good architecture is infused by profound thinking about shelter and society," Selldorf says. "I aim to do no more than what needs to be done, but no less either."

She tells me that one of the grand moments in her life came soon after the opening of David Zwirner's 20th Street gallery, when the artist Richard Serra came up to her. " 'You're the architect?' he said. I said, 'Yes,' and he said, 'Good job.' Could there have been a bigger compliment?"

"No unnecessary flourishes, right?" I ask. "Like your Frick auditorium."

"I aim to do no more than what needs to be done, but no less either."

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