Clarity of Purpose with Annabelle Selldorf

Interview by Michelle Grey
Photography by Brigitte Lacombe

For more than three decades, architect Annabelle Selldorf has shaped the art and cultural landscape through a quiet yet powerful commitment to clarity, context and care. Born in Cologne in 1960 to an architect father and interior designer mother, Selldorf's early exposure to design was practically genetic – an inheritance she has carried forward with subtlety and purpose. Since founding her New York-based firm in 1988, she has developed an architectural language that's defined not by bravado but by deep listening. Her spaces – whether for powerhouse galleries such as David Zwirner and Hauser & Wirth, or for world-renowned institutions such as the Frick Collection and London's National Gallery – seek not to dominate but to support, allowing art, people and place to take centre stage. A trained modernist with a reverence for light, proportion and material honesty, her approach is intuitive, rooted in the needs and identities of her clients, and guided by a belief that buildings, like people, are living participants in the world.

My conversation with Selldorf was over Zoom – a crisp glass of red at the ready – at the end of her workday. She reflected on her long-standing relationships with galleries, her process of designing with empathy and precision, and the evolving role of architecture as both a service and a cultural force. From her early collaborations with artists such as Jeff Koons and Eric Fischl to transformative civic projects spanning continents, Selldorf's work embodies a rare blend of rigour and humility. What emerges is a portrait of an architect who eschews signature flourishes in favour of deep engagement – someone who listens more than she speaks, and designs spaces that speak volumes in return.

Michelle Grey: When you're working with contemporary galleries, does their roster of artists or curatorial vision influence your design?

Annabelle Selldorf: Absolutely. With David Zwirner and Iwan [Wirth] and Manuela [Hauser], we've worked together for so long that it has become a completely organic thing. If I were to design a house for you, I would want to find out all kinds of things, like how you live. What's your interaction? Do you have lots of guests? Are you very private, formal or informal? All of it is like a puzzle that sort of sets the stage, if you will, to get the vibe. There are many overlaps. Suppose you consider Hauser & Wirth and David Zwirner, who have very different artists. In that case, there is an intuitive understanding about how they make room for their artists, because in both cases, the artists are what the galleries are all about. So, how do you find a middle ground? At face value, big rooms with tall ceilings, good lighting, and it's all the same for somebody who doesn't want to see the difference. Hauser & Wirth is more interested in embedding their artists in a more intimate setting, perhaps. And as I say that, it doesn't seem quite right, but it is where the intuitive dimension sets in. It's about knowing them, knowing how they interact with their artists and their audience.

MG: You recently led the refurbishment of the Frick in New York and then the Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery in London. Is there a difference when you approach the design of a commercial gallery versus an institution?

AS: Yes, absolutely, because there are certain rules that apply – for instance, an institution has to deliver certain services to its audience. In a way, I'm the foil. I process their needs, then they become almost a portrait. My working process involves gaining a sense of understanding of who the actors are and how they interact with the space, and then I bring myself into it. I'm extremely opinionated, but at the same time, everything is predicated on listening to the needs and desires of these individual galleries.

David Zwirner, for example, is an incredibly participatory client. There's not a thing that escapes them. With Hauser & Wirth, they have more of an idea about what the end product is like, and you have to be really careful to make sure that it also delivers all of the functional aspects that they are less focused on in the design, but that I know will ultimately make the gallery successful or not.

MG: It almost feels like your ability as an architect is the cost of entry, but communication provides the bedrock of any successful project.

AS: I definitely think so. We try to step back, stand by, record and reflect. It's a process. For me, it's very important that every space we create is rooted in the place where it resides... A gallery in Italy is different from a gallery in Los Angeles, and how different, I don't know that I'm so good at putting that into words. But it's part of the information that you have available to work with light, with the flow of circulation, etcetera.

MG: You design buildings, galleries and institutions around the world, so I imagine it's not always possible to fully immerse yourself in every city. How much do you try to engage with the local culture and context of each project? Is it more of an on-the-ground, experiential process, or do you rely more heavily on academic and architectural research? What does that process typically look like for you?

AS: It's very seldom that I have weeks to immerse myself. But I know Los Angeles a little bit, so when we did David's gallery most recently, it was very much a new venue in a different neighbourhood. It's composed of a new building in two existing buildings. I think about how these gallery spaces speak to

Art Gallery of Ontario. Aerial view of the Dani Reiss Modern and Contemporary Gallery looking northwest. Rendering by Play-Time, courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario, Selldorf Architects, Diamond Schmitt, and Two Row Architect.

one another, and how they’re also allowed to have their own vocabulary. The two galleries that were in existing buildings had very expressive wood trusses in the ceiling, and the new building has extremely tall ceilings with very fine skylights, so they read differently, yet are continuous with the overall aesthetic.

MG: I read somewhere that you said that the architecture should disappear in the best sense of the word, and I always thought that was an interesting concept. Could you explain what you meant by that, and how it relates to your practice?

AS: I think it’s really about context. I believe that, as architects, our work is very precise. It’s very specific to form, function, all of those things, but it also includes thinking about how something is built, how there is integrity in the structure. It’s not self-effacing in the sense that we have to disappear. It is actually the opposite. It’s assertive in the sense that it has clarity of purpose and that it provides resolution to contradictions.

I don’t like to approximate things. I like things to be very thorough. So, in a renovation, for example, you have to explore, understand and listen to the building that is there and what it is able to deliver. Then find the dialogue that does justice to both the existing building but also its new purpose, and that becomes architecture. It’s not necessarily characterised by expressive form, or it’s not like the red dress that is unforgettable, but rather something that calmly and assertively takes hold of the place to thoroughly answer all of the questions.

MG: When you speak about buildings, you describe them with such vitality – as if they’re more than just static structures, almost like living entities engaged in a kind of dialogue with their surroundings. Do you experience them that way yourself? Is there a part of you that sees buildings as living organisms when you interact with them?

AS: I haven’t thought about it quite like that before, but I don’t think that you’re wrong. The interesting thing about architecture is that when we build something new, it becomes a part of the world. And not just with the limited resources that we have, but the thought and the effort that goes into providing, in the most basic form, shelter, then subjecting what is an inanimate object to a lifespan. For that lifespan to be fulfilled and fulfilling, you have to make the building the participant, right? And you have to do that with sensitivity. It’s like a person. As they get older, they no longer walk as well as they used to. And just as I was getting on the call, I switched on the light that sits behind my desk, which has a foot switch, and I reached out to the wall to steady myself. Am I like some old person who can’t just stretch their foot out? I think that everything is about care, consideration and support. Buildings over time, age, and they need caretaking, and they can slip into different functions, and they can continue to deliver over a longer period of time.

MG: That’s really beautiful. On another note, I’d love to hear about your architectural influences both early in life and now.

AS: My architectural influences are far and wide. I think what’s so beautiful about architecture is how it interacts with a place, with a climate, with the circumstances. I’m a trained modernist. I grew up in post-war Cologne. Cologne had been just about completely destroyed, with the exception of some of the most wonderful churches you can imagine. Rebuilding this city was redefining the next chapter in history, and to some extent, architects knowingly or unknowingly participate in that continuum. I think it’s worthwhile appreciating the different dispositions. I believe that they go beyond just ourselves, but they invite us to think harder and sort of go deeper across our own tastes and biases; they come in sooner or later. You like one material over another.

Back to the influences, of course, I, like so many colleagues, have always loved the international style modernist architecture by the likes of [Ludwig] Mies van der Rohe. He was from a small town, not far from where I was raised. I’ve always thought that it was funny that I had a sense of how this came to be. And so I suppose that’s always with me, an idea that the quality of space is not in primarily about materials, but it’s about the bigger issues that have to do with transparency, with the rendition of light, with the quality of structure and the clarity of structure. They don’t exist just for their own sake. Then you find different expressions of that across time and space. I’ve spent a lot of time in Venice, and I know that the city of Venice, the architecture, the Palazzi, the streets, have had a deep impact on how I think about space, but can I tell you

exactly how that is? It's not like a one-for-one translation.

MG: Do you think that place, and environment and community and culture, have more influence than a specific person or a specific artist?

AS: Absolutely. Maybe it's not the same for everybody, but I think that I have been so lucky to be able to visit a lot of places, to see a lot of things. Seeing and recognising and carrying that forward produces an amalgam of references that are then available to me as a tool, as things that exist in my head then come out in my pencil.

MG: As a female architect and to have come so far in your field, do you feel a responsibility to young women coming up? Is that something you think about, or is it predominantly about the work and the merit of the work?

AS: It's a little bit of both. When you're in your work, there are things to think about, and I don't think about them as a message carrier. Having said that, I've only ever practiced as a woman, so I can't imagine that anybody should be disrespectful to us. I'm a whole hell of a lot more aware of how people treat you now.

I think back on the sort of paternalistic, maybe condescending, sort of ways in which we've been brought up. But I didn't know about that at the time. It's a really funny thing, because I believe this distinguishes my generation from younger women whom I marvel at because they are so confident and so even righteous in claiming their place. I think I, we, did it in a slightly different way, and sometimes I think it would be good to find a middle ground to facilitate better communication. Now that I'm older, nobody grabs my rear end. When I was in my 20s, that happened, and I was just embarrassed.

MG: I imagine you have the opportunity to work on many of the projects you're passionate about. But is there a dream project – something that hasn't yet landed on your drafting table – that you still hope to take on one day?

AS: It's just not how I think. Somebody recently asked me if I had designed the ideal house, and I thought, I don't know what that means, because who is it for? Where is it? What are we doing there? I feel both lucky and privileged to encounter interesting people who are willing to engage with me. At this point in my life, I enjoy working on projects that benefit the public. Are they necessarily institutional? No, not always. Are they about being spiritual? Perhaps.

I feel very comfortable in my ability to find an architecture that I can defend and that I believe in, but it is necessarily a product of a counterpoint that is the client, and where meaningful dialogue takes place. At the end of the day, unlike the fine arts, architecture is, in my mind, a service business, and so I want to understand what that means, and I want to understand how you can fulfill and produce spaces and buildings that mean something for the purpose that they are created for. And it's never a straight line. It's never about my way or the highway. Almost always, you learn from other people's perspectives, something that makes the content richer and more interesting. For me, that's what it's all about.

MG: The way you speak about architecture – as a process of negotiation, patience and deep listening – feels like it could double as a kind of relationship advice. Do you ever think about architecture as a metaphor for how we build and sustain meaningful relationships?

AS: Well, that could go a long way. Not every story would be funny. I have a studio with 65 people, and I want to know each person, understanding what they bring to the process, and I'm very aware. This is really where you get to after practicing for a long time. The collaborative process doesn't prevent you from fully exploring your ideas, but bringing others in is always much better.