

# Good Architecture Happens in Dialogue

In Conversation with Annabelle Selldorf



The Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London was designed by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in 1991. In her redesign, Annabelle Selldorf has replaced the dark glazing with clear panes and reimagined the staircase. © Edmund Sumner

Annabelle Selldorf believes that a good detail is efficient, intelligent, and tactilely intelligible. In this interview, the Cologne-born, New York-based architect explains why architecture has a lot to do with listening.

## **Ms. Selldorf, your father was an architect, and your grandmother ran an interior design business. Did that shape your sensitivity to detail from an early age?**

I do think that you become attuned to certain things in childhood. My brother, for example, writes about football for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*; he isn't particularly interested in architecture. But I sometimes notice from his reactions to his surroundings that it was part of our upbringing. For my father, the aesthetics of his designs emerged from how things were made. That is still an important principle for me today. As a child, I definitely didn't want to become an architect. I grew up in the 1960s and '70s and saw how difficult it often was for my father to secure new commissions and deal with clients. When I was 18, I thought I could earn a lot of money with far less effort. But that ended up being my downfall.

## **What did you actually want to do for a living?**

I took my A-levels at a French school and imagined going to Paris and cycling across the bridges of the Seine with my scarf blowing in the wind. That's why I would have liked to become a diplomat – without having any clear idea of how to get there. Because I had so little direction, my father advised me to study law. At the time, I found that absolutely insulting. Today I think that would probably have been very wise. When I visited New York after my A-levels, I was fascinated: here you could be anonymous on the one hand, and yet find real intimacy on the other – in encounters with people from a completely different cultural background. In the end, I studied architecture at the Pratt Institute. It worked out well for me: I had to find my own way without being able to rely on the expectations of my friends or family.



Annabelle Selldorf reorganised the postmodern foyer of the Sainsbury Wing through a series of precise interventions: she had the non-load-bearing columns removed and opened up the first floor to create a curved mezzanine level. © Edmund Sumner

**Your office has around 50 employees. How do you organise internal communication, and how do you bring experienced and younger staff together?**

Every project is different. Sometimes I have to delve into a topic on my own first before I know how we can get started. Sometimes three or four of us sit together and ask ourselves: What are we actually looking for here? Where do we start? Many of our staff have been with us for decades and use a similar vocabulary. The younger people bring their own ideas. They don't fundamentally change the guiding principle, but they ask insightful questions. So the design process tends to start in a smaller group, which then grows as the planning progresses. I can't draw on a computer, and I find that liberating. Because what really interests me has to do with scale, with precision, with the question of how a design works structurally. Material choices come later for me – the be-all and end-all for me are volume, proportions, and scale.

**So you still draw by hand?**

I sketch from plans that others have drawn. That's an important process. The distance between the technical drawing and the sketch is a meaningful gap. If I drew them myself, I wouldn't need anyone else. That distance helps a design idea to mature.



In the extension to the Frick Collection in New York, Selldorf draws on the material palette of the historic buildings and also uses Indiana limestone in a rusticated finish. © Nicholas Venezia

**What are the most important aspects for you when designing a museum, beyond the exhibition space itself?**

What concerns me most is the circulation: How do I get in? Where do I go? How long does it take? Is the space too long, too high, too wide? All of that is part of the spatial experience. From there, one question leads to the next: How do I ensure that visitors don't get lost inside the museum? How do they know where they are, where north, south, east, and west are? Daylight and orientation go hand in hand. Through the light in the room, I can sense whether it's raining outside or the sun is shining. Daylight must be part of the circulation to create balance and a sense of wellbeing – a word that sometimes prompts a wry smile, because architecture is supposedly meant to provoke unease.

**Unease? Do people really want to go to a museum and feel uncomfortable?**

Discomfort is supposed to make us question things. I don't believe that – nor is it my aim to create unease. That doesn't mean spaces aren't allowed to have complexity. Even the movement of people through a space creates complexity. Visitors may not grasp this at first glance, but they will sense it. This complexity is part of architectural thinking, but it has nothing to do with unease or provocation.



One Domino in Williamsburg: The pearl-like, porcelain-clad facades of the two towers change depending on the light, the time of day and the weather. © Ivane Katamashvili

### **What makes a good detail?**

A good detail is not only efficient, but also intelligent. It should be tactilely intelligible. A building near our office has windowsills made of solid limestone blocks. A curve has been milled into them to allow water to run off. A discreet detail that lends the building a special character. A solid piece of stone, worked by a stonemason, projects from the otherwise flat facade. Those windowsills made me think about their making: someone had thought carefully about how thick the stone should be and how far it needed to protrude from the facade. I try to remember such everyday details – in the hope that I might be able to apply them at some point.

### **You have built a great deal in New York, actively helping to shape the city.**

That is a great privilege. We have completed many residential buildings there. I am convinced that you don't just build them for the people who live in them, but for everyone who lives in the city. I want them to feel a connection to the building. No matter where I am, I take in buildings and imagine they are characters. You'd almost want to prescribe therapy for some of them. And sometimes I'm delighted because it's clear that someone has thought about their contribution to the city.

New technologies allow for highly expressive architecture. But my contribution is quieter and focuses more on longevity. And on genuine exchange: I offer something, and the other person gives something back. When I design a space for someone I don't know, it should come to life through its inhabitants. I don't want to impose on anyone how they should live, but rather stay open to how things develop.

### **Looking back, are there any projects you would approach differently today?**

Not many. I'd approach most projects in exactly the same way again; they are good and timeless. Of course, there are also situations where you didn't assert yourself enough or set out to do something that couldn't be realised. It's interesting how, looking back at your own work, you think: 'I could have done that better.' The hardest thing, anyway, is letting go of a project once it's finished. After seven years of working on the Frick Collection, it still feels strange to me to go in there today and buy a ticket at the front desk.

More on this in [Detail 6.2026](#) and in our [Detail Inspiration](#) database.



Annabelle Selldorf, © Selldorf Architects

**Annabelle Selldorf** heads the New York-based firm Selldorf Architects, which she founded in 1988. She obtained her Bachelor of Architecture from the Pratt Institute and a Master's degree from Syracuse University in Florence. In 2025, *Time* magazine named her one of the 100 most influential people in the world. The Pratt Institute awarded her an honorary doctorate in Fine Arts. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and has been honoured with its Award in Architecture.

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