Elizabeth Diller

Diller Scofidio + Renfro

Profile: Norman Kietzmann Interview: Katrin Schamun

Fotos: Diller Scofidio + Renfro
There are architects who build and those who would like to build. New York architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro constitute a third category. They came to architecture rather late in the proceedings, having initially worked in the fields of art, theater and performing arts. “Our research topic is space and its limits within our culture” says Elizabeth Diller, explaining the studio’s tactics. For her, architecture is much more than just assembling functional boxes. It becomes a method of questioning contexts and relating them to each other. To this end it sometimes even dissipates.

If there were a way to gauge the impact buildings have, in the case of Diller Scofidio + Renfro’s the arrow would always be pointing upwards. Even though their studio has not realized more than a handful of projects since it was established in 1979, its influence on the current architecture scene is nonetheless immense. Their secret? It is their perception of space, which defies architecture’s conventional view and transfers it to a different aggregate state. In their work space begins to flow.

It becomes a medium which can be regarded as a state of permanent change and development, something that has long since left the limitations of the static behind. In 2002 Diller Scofidio + Renfro were finally able to put into practice what they had written about in numerous articles on a theoretical level. Their temporary pavilion for the Swiss National Exhibition, erected as a metal construction hovering above Lake Neuchâtel, was more than just a conventional type of building. It was perhaps what architecture always wanted to be: A cloud which changed its shape, size, and
appearance with the direction of the wind, allowing the boundaries between inside and outside to completely blur. Using innumerable little nozzles, which vaporized the lake water into an opaque cloud, the architects created a sensuous experience into which, surrounded by thick rain capes and 100 percent humidity, visitors were able to immerse themselves.

With this piece of work Elizabeth Diller, Ricardo Scofidio and Charles Renfro liberated architecture from much more than its previous materiality and structure. In a certain way they reinvented it. It was the first building to have a facade you could not touch but still feel. And it was the first building to actually achieve the variability and movement called for back in the architectural Utopia of the 1960s. While Wolf Prix was still talking about cloud plans from the early days of his youth, Diller Scofidio + Renfro had long since intelligently turned them into reality. They created a building which could no longer be defined in terms of classic footprints and elevations. But more than that, the multi-sensual impact of the building cannot even be adequately captured with photography or film. It can only be experienced directly on location.
Diller Scofidio + Refro’s success in uniting a whole series of architectural utopias in a single building while at the same time throwing overboard those conventions in form, function and structure which save most architects from progressive designs, is explained not least of all by the charismatic New Yorkers’ personal history. This too began in the 1970s and by no means went by the book.

Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio met at Cooper Union School. She was born in 1954 and studied art while he was her 20-years older professor. From then on a couple in their private and professional lives, the apartment they shared on Cooper Square soon became a well-known New York meeting place for the art and architectural scene.

It was not surprising that the first practical projects they undertook in addition to their numerous theoretical works were on the borderline between art, performance and theatre. The architectural aspect, however, was already clearly perceptible, as was with their playful sense of transformation. Between 1993 and 1998 they created works from “falsely” ironed shirts entitled “Housework Series.” Probably the best-known - and at the same time most boring - piece of clothing was transformed into a complex spatial figure by means of origami folds. Small-scale architecture, which appeared mysteriously familiar and yet strange.

They advanced this playful observation in other works. In their “Master/Slave” installation in the Cartier Foundation in Paris in 1999, visitors became voyeurs of a strange scenario. In the middle of a showcase measuring 10 x 10 meters a whole group of historical robot toys from the 1960s and ‘70s moved along a conveyor belt almost 90 meters long. The robots, all from the collection of Vitra boss Rolf Fehlbaum, stood in a row which moved, stopped, and then continued again. They stood in queues like the unemployed at the Labor Office. Or were they just travelers waiting at the booth for hours for their ticket? The exhibition was structured such that it was impossible to observe the robots up close. All one could see was the view on the laterally mounted monitors, which displayed images from the observation cameras inside the showcases. No angle was spared from view - even when the line of robots moved down a ramp and was photographed by x-ray machines, like at airports. The inner mechanical life of the little humans robots was suddenly made visible to the outside.
“Architects should reveal our cultural world, examine it - I call this evolution. Our aim is to give answers,” Elizabeth Diller continues. What makes them different from other theoreticians is their unerring sense for rather obscure subjects that can nonetheless be implemented, even if they first have to be roused from a deep, Snow White-style sleep - as has been the case with their highly regarded current project in their hometown, New York. In the heart of the meatpacking district they transformed a disused elevated railway track into a park suspended over the city. Like the “Blur Building” this appears as a strange hybrid entity which combines a technically constructed foundation with partly wild, partly newly cultivated vegetation.

While the “High Line Park” - whose first two-kilometer long section of construction was opened in June 2009 - is considered one of the most ambitious development projects in New York at this time, Elizabeth Diller, Ricardo Scofidio and Charles Renfro, who joined the studio as a new partner in 2004, have also been commissioned to work on another major project in the city: The conversion and extension of the Lincoln Center of Performing Arts. What they prescribe for the world’s largest cultural center is far more than just a visual facelift inside. Their plans envisage opening up the self-contained ensemble and expanding it into the context of the city, overcoming its hermetic feel.

With their two first completed buildings Diller Scofidio & Renfro have demonstrated that they are not only able to conceive architecture but to turn it into reality as well. In addition to the Slighter Building (2000) in Gifu, Japan, in which they compacted 105 residential units into a slightly offset, rhythmical facade strip, it was the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston, which opened in 2007, that enabled them to give free rein their spatial qualities. The building, the first new museum to be built in the east coast city for 100 years, appears as a striking, hovering structure projecting far beyond Fan Pier in the historical harbor. The public space, one of the most frequented squares in the city, is directly linked to the culture center by way of a large flight of stairs. Here too an essential aspect of their work is revealed. Even though Diller Scofidio + Renfro are always perceived as intellectuals in the international architecture scene, their projects never come across as being elite. Far more than this, however, they are so open and integrative that they take the wind out of even the most conservative sails. And in this, perhaps, lies their greatest achievement: They have liberated the avant-garde from the salon.
Interview

30 years of Diller + Scofidio. You started out in 1979 not as a classic architecture studio but at the interface between art and architecture. How do you see the relationship between these two disciplines?

In the art scene we are regarded as architects, among architects we claim to be perceived as artists as well. We are confronted with the division of both disciplines every day, but in our work we don’t differentiate between them. When Ricardo and I set up our studio we initially devoted ourselves to performance art, the theater and visual art. But our interest extended far beyond just these fields and there any number of topics that attracted us: communication between people, how cultural conventions emerge, and the influence of private and public space on people. Architecture and art are both part of our world, part of the cultural sphere in which we experiment. We display the results of our research in art installations, and sometimes in architecture installations as well – that doesn’t matter, makes no difference to us, the boundaries are frequently blurred. The projects are far more dependent on external circumstances, from the size of the budget, from a too narrow, then again sufficient timeframe the client gives us.

Does it make any difference to you that whereas previously you were involved with art projects you now primarily plan buildings for art?

Just as architecture is part of art and culture we see architects as a partner for cultural institutions. Our approach doesn’t involve shaping a building into a sculpture as Frank Gehry, for example, does. He sees the protagonist in architecture, whereas art is subordinate to it. For me this is not an artistic way of designing. Architecture needs to
I never once thought about becoming an architect. I never once thought about becoming an architect. I did choose to study it, but saw it as a good education and at the same time an experiment. I became interested in art very early on, and after high school I wanted to work with cinema. When I went to Cooper Union in the 1980s I was impressed by the then Dean of Architecture John Hejduk and his lectures. For him architecture meant more than just building, he described it as an intellectual and cultural investigation of the world and people. That won me over.
What do you see as the tasks facing current and future architects, after all you are teaching the next generation?

The majority of those practicing see architecture as a service to society. Of course it is more than that. Their most important task is to question and to clarify: traditions, customs, things that are out of date, illogical. Architects should reveal our cultural world, examine it – I call this evolution. Our aim is to give answers. This also involves constructive but critical analysis of society. I see the role of the architect as finding new ways of and bases for working together in our human networks. This is the only way we can bring about changes in the world.

How do you demonstrate this concern in your projects?

We often address conventions and question them: Why are circumstances, things, the way they are, how do they come about, what happens on a more unconscious level and is not even noticed. We encourage people to question the circumstances of our everyday life: Look closely, read between the lines, take a different view. Don’t shut yourself off to the fundamentals. One of our research topics is space and its boundaries in our culture. We research the influence architecture has on our social behavior.

Even before there was an extreme rise in the need for security in 2001 – not just in New York – Diller & Scofidio were among the first artists to use the new media in their works and in a playful manner make the surveillance of people a theme of their art installations. Where did you get the inspiration for this?

We always aim to be a step ahead of others with our work. We are interested in new technologies, new media and how they impact and influence our life. In our investigations we aim to remain objective while at the same time not foregoing a critical view. From this standpoint topics emerge that take one down different paths. We normally conduct our research work over a number of years, this is what makes our work stand out and distinguishes us from many architects.
Right now you are working on two very different projects in New York: the High Line Park in Chelsea and the Lincoln Center of Performing Arts. A few months ago, part of the Center, namely the Alice Tully Hall, was completed. What method of working do you have to adopt when tackling projects of this magnitude?

It goes without saying that a project as important as the Lincoln Center – the very first and today still the largest art and cultural center worldwide – is particularly appealing to us. The main task involved as regards conversion work was to ensure due urban integration of the entire building complex into its surroundings. The Lincoln Center was intended to become part of the city’s public space again. The original 1960s plans envisaged a self-contained art campus, with which in building terms the cultural institution set itself apart from city life. For our plans the whole entrance had to be completely revised. Previously you could only get to the concert hall, the Alice Tully Hall from the road, through a small entrance, and access to the school on the storey above it was totally concealed; a giant pedestrian bridge over the road led to it. With our design we recreated the relationship between the cultural institution and the public in the city. With our plans the entire complex opens out onto the road and is accessible through several entrances.

With both the Lincoln Center in New York and the ICA in Boston you place great value on the rapport between the building and public space. How important is the relationship between these two areas?

Creating a transition from a city’s public space and the private space of a building is always a challenge. Architects have responsibility to the people that are going to be using their building. Cultural facilities are always social places, where there is communication and life. With our architecture we influence the way passers-by perceive things. By way of example: For the design of the Alice Tully Hall we asked ourselves
how we could bring the mood on the inside of the building closer to those passing. We designed the ground floor as a lobby flooded with light and featuring bars and restaurants. In front of the building there is a plaza, where it is pleasant to linger, and which forges the link between the building's interior, clearly visible through the glass, and the public space outside, and which invites passers-by to explore the building.

What is the greatest skill in major public projects such as these?

I think it's the compromises that are made. There are constant negotiations, in which all those involved air criticism from the point of view of their own discipline and bring in their own subjective standpoint. Whenever I give one of my lectures, with some 50 images, about 40 minutes long, it's a short summary of the history of our studio and presents our projects, I notice that I express myself differently depending on the listeners. If I'm giving the lecture to architecture students at a university, I primarily emphasize the architectural or spatial aspect. Lecturing to developers or clients I use other terminology. During the negotiations for the Lincoln Center I gave my lecture six times with the same text and the same images. Each time, however, it was as if I were communicating in a different language, as I was always addressing a different audience – with representatives of the city, the local authority, with officials from the Listed Buildings Bureau, academic groups, and artists’ groups. I’m not being cynical here, but just want to make the point. It’s about finding a creative process, about how to liaise between a vast range of groups in this network, how to guarantee collaboration that functions well, in order to ultimately create something great that still reflects the idea behind the design and all those involved.

And the challenge in designing?

I personally wish there were fewer restrictions, more room for research. The main task in the renovation of the old Alice Tully Hall building was to improve the acoustics in the concert hall. What was interesting here was the emotional effects architecture can trigger. During the project we investigated psychoacoustics. We learned that if you can see better and feel better, you hear better as well. Listening to a concert...
activates different senses and together these create the musical experience. As an example, if you use material with plastic in it for the acoustics in a music hall, from a technical point of view it might well be a better choice than a wooden ceiling. However, a hall fitted with wood completely changes the feel of the interior, such that people feel more comfortable and enjoy the entire listening experience in a far more positive way.

Thank you very much for talking to us.
Works

Alice Tully Hall
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York, USA 2009

The High Line
Public Park, New York, USA 2009
Light Sock
Chandelier for Swarovski, 2009

Chain City
Installation, Architektur Biennale, Venice, Italy 2008

Institute Of Contemporary Art Museum, Boston, USA 2006
Brasserie
Restaurant, The Seagram Building, New York, USA 2000

Blur Building
Exposition Pavilion for Swiss Expo, Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland 2002

Travelogues
Permanent Installation, JFK International Arrivals Building, New York, USA 2001
Slither Housing
Social Housing, Gifu,
Japan 2000

Vice/Virtue
Glassmanifest, Leerdam
Netherlands 1997

Para-Site
Installation, Museum of Modern
Art, Projects Series, NY, USA 1989