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 ARCHITECTURE/
 GLOBAL
**Singular
 visions**

Elizabeth Diller
*Founding partner, Diller Scofidio + Renfro,
 New York*

“God, that’s so scary.” Elizabeth Diller has just been referred to as architecture royalty and it’s making her feel uneasy. Despite being the force behind one of the world’s most recognisable urban regeneration projects – New York’s High Line – there’s little hint of the “starchitect” to her, even if packed schedules and near-constant air travel are standard procedure these days. “I still want to do things my way,” she says from the firm’s Manhattan headquarters, close to the former raised railway turned leafy walkway. “The studio has always been interested in ideas propelled more by curiosity and experimentation than just getting rich or famous.”

Being a risk-taker yet remaining part of the mainstream is a tricky thing to pull off. Three proponents of the art, Elizabeth Diller, David Chipperfield and Ellen van Loon, explain how they balance architectural innovation with commercial reality.

The 64-year-old founded Diller + Scofidio (it would later add partners Charles Renfro and, most recently, Benjamin Gilmartin) with husband Ricardo Scofidio in New York’s Astor Place in 1981. Having cut her teeth in a Big Apple of grime and crime, abuzz with counterculture, she was a self-declared nonconformist – something that’s still part of her make-up today, she argues. Initially she never thought she’d join the formal ranks of architecture, instead envisioning “making the arts more broadly”. Diller says it was a first fellowship at the American Academy in Rome in 1981 when things really started to “pop in 3D for her” but the biggest shift came in 1990 when the studio was asked to design a home, her first building commission. “It was the first time I realised that it’s

possible to connect architecture and have a thought – to be able to execute a whole thought in an architectural work,” she says. “Because I always believed it was compromising.”

That early residence, the Slow House in North Haven, Long Island, was never completed because the homeowner ran out of funds – but its curved design and radical rethink of modern living piqued the interest of the design world, with the Museum of Modern Art acquiring models and illustrated plans. It was a building that, in many ways, strived to not be a building at all, described on the Diller Scofidio + Renfro website as “a passage from physical entry to optical departure or, simply, a door to a window”. And yet suddenly – and seemingly without really seeking it – the studio was heading towards the big time.

“I guess the question is what does it mean to be mainstream?” says Diller. “I think if it means that your work is becoming diluted to appeal to a majority then it’s bad. If it means that you’re communicating to a broader audience, it’s actually kind of interesting.” It’s an issue that Diller has had to ponder as her firm has taken on a series of mega-projects that have garnered critical acclaim while remaining avant garde. From the experimental Blur Building shown at the Swiss Expo 2002 – a pavilion that used the elements of the lake it sat on to create an enveloping fog – the firm has gone on to work on Manhattan’s Lincoln Center, opened the High Line, overseen a Moma renovation project and designed the bold, honeycomb-like Broad Museum in LA, among other works. Last year the firm also won the bid to build a new concert hall for the London Symphony Orchestra and is currently gearing up for the opening of The Shed, a New York cultural venue, in spring next year.

One of the hallmarks of these projects is a willingness to take design risks. That has meant pushing ahead even when there has been criticism or adversity, from those opposed to Moma’s expansionism to the naysayers decrying the amount of money that the London project will cost. But Diller’s

need to see through an artistic vision started with the High Line. During its early stages, then mayor Rudy Giuliani greenlit the demolition of the railway structure believing, rather ironically when seen from today, that its continued presence would keep property prices in the area deflated. The order was subsequently rescinded by his successor, Michael Bloomberg. Diller admits that the firm wasn’t the first to dream up a reuse project of its kind (Paris’s Promenade Plantée got there first) but says that she never foresaw what a reference point the High Line would become. “The notion of taking a piece of urban infrastructure that’s sort of obsolete was something that I think a lot of people didn’t really think about,” she says. Nowadays it’s being copied by cities around the globe.

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Diller’s risk-taking is also on full display at The Shed. Part of the vast Hudson Yards development in association with the Rockwell Group, it’s a building whose external shell – a steel diagrid frame – is set on sliders, meaning it can open onto an adjoining plaza, shifting the size of its imprint and playing with the notion of outdoors and indoors. “It’s a constant concern of how you design a building that is flexible enough to be able to be transformed by others but still have architectural character,” says Diller. “Because the typical response is that you make it neutral and generic, and therefore it can be used for many things. But I actually don’t believe in that.”

Diller has never lost the passion for the arts that she had when first starting out. Work with cultural institutions courses through Diller

Scofidio + Renfro’s portfolio (for The Shed project, for example, the firm responded to a request for proposals from the city long before a private client existed) and she’s constantly tinkering with side projects. Many of these are money-losing artist installations done simply “because they need to be done”, like the time the practice filled New York’s Columbus Circle with 2,500 traffic cones for 24 hours in 1981, or a video installation that appeared in an old porno theatre in 1993. The desire to do everything from overseeing exhibitions to creating installations may feel “so normal” but it’s the multi-disciplinary nature of Diller Scofidio + Renfro that sets it apart.

In early October, Diller went one step further and co-created and co-directed *The Mile-Long Opera*, an open-air performance on the High Line featuring 1,000 singers and billed as a biography of the city at 19.00, when life transitions from day to night. Diller says the opera tapped into the idea of the speed of change in the city, something that had been weighing on her mind. Indeed, given how the High Line has been such a vehicle for transformation in the area – including all the talk of gentrification and price hikes that accompanies it – it seemed like a logical step. But Diller is keen to point out that the project was about being “hypersensitive” rather than taking a stance on what is good or bad. “Ultimately it’s a celebratory project and kind of a love affair with New York,” she says.

There’s little sign that Diller is easing up on the workload as she breaks off the interview to dash to JFK for a flight to Milan. And with projects underway or in the pipeline everywhere from China to Brazil, Russia and Australia, the year ahead isn’t likely to be any less hectic. Not that Diller would have it any other way. “For me it’s all about curiosity and doing something different that I’ve never done before,” she says. “It’s the excitement of that and I think that I will never be satisfied. I just don’t have that kind of character!” — EJS

Five key projects:

1. **Slow House 1990-1991**
Never completed but showed Diller and her studio were prepared to take risks. A turning point in her career.
2. **Blur Building 2002**
An experimental temporary pavilion for Swiss Expo on Lake Neuchâtel, shrouded in a fine mist.
3. **The High Line 2009**
The project that turned Diller into a household name and Diller Scofidio + Renfro into a desirable, international outfit.
4. **The Broad 2015**
LA’s latest cultural institution: a bold façade that somehow doesn’t clash with Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Concert Hall opposite.
5. **The Shed 2019**
Diller Scofidio + Renfro may be building a high-rise for the Hudson Yards development but more interesting is this ultra-flexi cultural institution.



David Chipperfield

Principal, David Chipperfield Architects, London, Berlin, Milan and Shanghai

Architect David Chipperfield's work is quiet but the man has found his voice. "I try to speak out. It's a little absurd that you have to become famous in order for what you say to have resonance," he says of today's issues, such as Brexit or the environment. "But finding yourself in that position, it's irresponsible not to speak up."

Chipperfield, who was born in 1953 and educated in London, launched his own practice in 1985 after working for architects including Richard Rogers and Norman Foster. His earliest builds were for fashion designer Issey Miyake, and a certain understatement has marked the commercial, residential and cultural buildings that his offices in London, Berlin, Shanghai and Milan have produced ever since. London and Berlin are the largest outposts of Chipperfield's international practice, the latter having grown into a lively courtyard campus in Berlin-Mitte. The architect's presence in the city is palpable in museum projects such as the Neues Museum and the ongoing refurbishment of the Neue Nationalgalerie by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, erected in 1968.

On an autumn day in the German capital, Chipperfield has just arrived from Seoul, where he's handed over the Amorepacific headquarters, yet he shows few signs of weariness. Sitting down, a conversation unfolds highlighting Chipperfield's ideas about architecture's social and aesthetic roles – notions also guiding a retrospective exhibition in Vicenza, which recently completed its run.

Chipperfield's upcoming projects lean towards culture: the James Simon Galerie in Berlin will be completed this year as a structure tying together the city's Museum Island complex. There's also the Elbtower in Hamburg, the Kunsthaus Zürich, the West Bund Art Museum in Shanghai and a new music venue in Edinburgh. On the drawing boards are a masterplan for the

Minneapolis Institute of the Art and work on the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. All executed with a voice of reason that transcends the spoken. — KB

MONOCLE: You're known for your spatial understatement. Was this a strategy or signature from the outset?

DAVID CHIPPERFIELD: In looking backwards, things look much more obvious than they do looking forwards. In the early 1980s, Britain was not an easy place, economically or culturally. And not an easy place to start a practice. Issey Miyake invited me to Japan and my first buildings were in Tokyo, Kyoto and Okayama. Beginning a career is anything but strategic; it's far more opportunistic.

m: Why was it was so difficult in the UK?

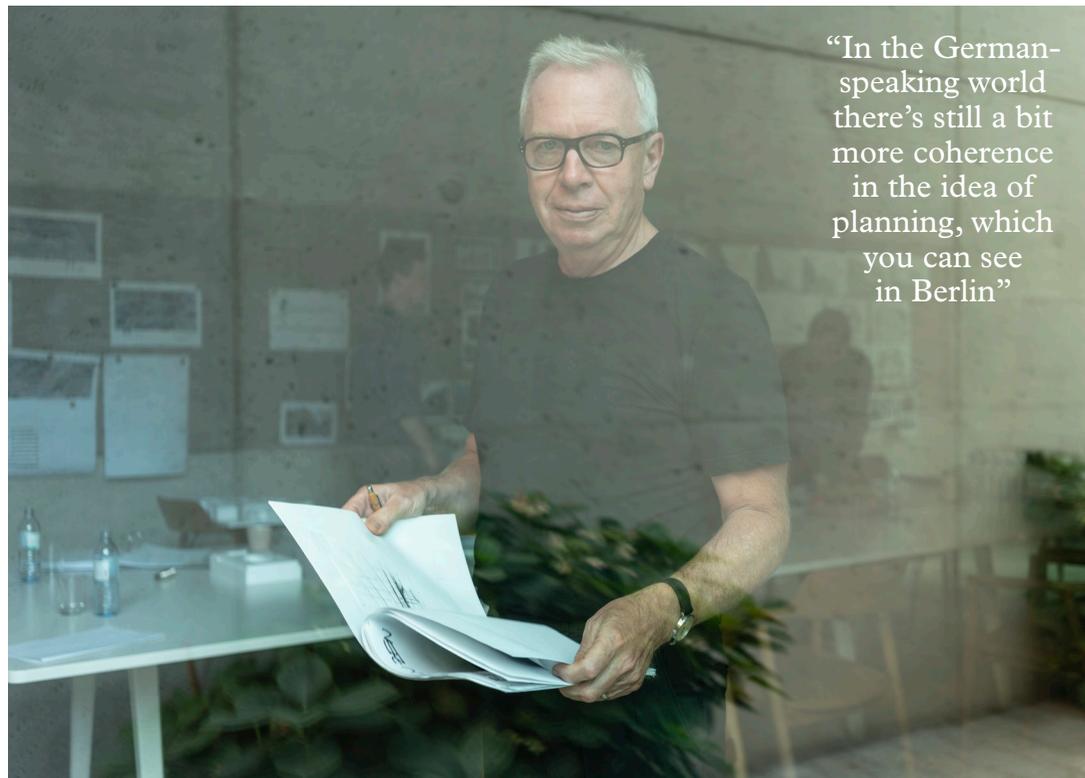
DC: The commercial sector never encourages young architects. It was also the period of Prince Charles being very vociferous against modern architecture. This has changed. Thirty years ago we didn't have much good design or good food, now we have too much of both. But the patronage system is still difficult.

m: Do you work on maintaining a kind of brand?

DC: We can't pretend that we're not trying to sell ourselves. We're not doctors; we can't sit in an office and wait for people to turn up. But the question is, how do you identify yourself? It puts pressure on you to be clear about what your work is about.

m: You've said that architecture is in a crisis: what is it?

DC: I think environmental issues will take over many aspects of the profession. And architecture has been slightly hijacked by the investment market. We used to have a larger role in projects with a social purpose: building universities, schools, housing, cities. But that requires a certain political structure. As the market has become more important, we are



"In the German-speaking world there's still a bit more coherence in the idea of planning, which you can see in Berlin"

not serving society – we're serving a market. And therefore we become complicit in a different story. It would be nice if architecture had a more embedded place in society. It's becoming marginalised and more about the special moments: the museum, the glamorous railway station. Architects are not involved so much anymore in the way our cities are built.

m: Can we change this?

DC: I'm not sure. Only if the dominance of the free market is tethered somehow. In London the relaxation of planning regulation has encouraged investment. Investment doesn't like rules; it likes freedom. London has given it a certain amount of that, and therefore you get hundreds of projects that don't bear any relationship to each other. In the German-speaking world there's still a bit more coherence in the idea of planning, which you can see in Berlin. But if you go near the Hauptbahnhof now, you see a little London coming.

m: Late capitalism doesn't allow much resistance against the market. Do you think planners can reclaim power?

DC: Well in, say, Switzerland, being a planner is a well regarded profession.

In England you won't get paid properly and you're less respected. In Switzerland, you could do more as a planner than as an architect. But the conspiracy in England has been to not fund the planning departments properly. Which allows more freedom to deregulate, which is what Brexit is about: getting us out of this horrible European regulation.

m: Is it so horrible?

DC: Of course not. I think we need it.

m: How do young British architects cope with this situation?

DC: The current generation is more nimble. They're finding small projects in housing and doing interesting guerrilla-type work in generating projects. One hopes that the system has become more sympathetic. Or maybe they're becoming smarter, operatively.

m: Your work is big in the sense that it spans many cultures, with offices in various countries. Can you tell us a bit more?

DC: It emphasises the cultural dimension of practice. There is something very heightened when you're working abroad. In one sense you are weaker, because you're not from that place. On the other hand you're more

sensitised to its qualities. Next week I'm going to Minneapolis to work on a masterplan for their Institute of Art, which is a cultural outreach. As long as you respect their trust in you, it's quite a valuable position to be in.

m: Why so many museums?

DC: Because the common architectural patronage is diminishing. Museums have become couture patronage, the green zone of architecture. You're sitting in front of a board of trustees who have selected you from several other architects. They're committed to giving the architect a role almost as part of their wider cultural programme; they're not beating you up all the time.

m: There's a lovely smoothness to your cultural spaces.

DC: We're careful to make spaces where artists want to show their work and that don't compete with the work. We don't do that thing where the architect is waving their arms around and you feel irritated at wasting your time looking at something you don't need to look at. On the other hand, to have poor interiors is also irritating. How do you make a museum interior that is both substantial and convincing and, on the other hand, quiet

and unassuming? Our work is quiet; you could even say dull. But when it comes to museums, our reputation is strong. I don't care so much what architects think. When it comes to doing museums, I'm more interested in what artists and curators think.

m: What is it like working on Mies van der Rohe's iconic glass box?

DC: The fascinating part of the project for us has been there isn't much interpretation; the task is to put it back like it was. That is not easy because the pressures to surrender some aspects of the existing project are strong – his window frames don't insulate properly but changing these too much would mean changing the aesthetics of Mies' building, which we won't do. Our role as a guardian has been to broker the aesthetic and the technical. The paradox is if we do our job well, no one will know we've done it. It's only if we do our job badly, people will know.

m: Do you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist?

DC: As an artist you have to be optimistic, to believe in the common good and in the future. But in architecture I'm a bit pessimistic. We are at a very critical and confusing time. Brexit is unbelievably frustrating. I also find myself in a position where, whether one likes it or not, one has a voice, and there's a certain responsibility to use that beyond your own professional advantage. I try to speak out.

m: How exactly?

DC: An example: I run a foundation in Galicia in northern Spain, where I have a house. I'm trying to contribute on a pro bono basis to profoundly influence how a region might be planned in terms of controlling water quality, changing traffic systems, getting rid of plastics and promoting local economies. It's an ambitious project. The region has a certain autonomy and we have an effect. In the era of fake news and transactional politics, it's interesting how saying simple, sensible things is effective.

PHOTOGRAPHER: David Fischer

Ellen van Loon

Partner, OMA, the Netherlands

There's an infectious energy to Ellen van Loon that comes through in everything from the way she talks to the buildings she creates. It might be what has helped persuade so many clients to let her design such challenging and radically beautiful structures over the years. Upon graduating from the Delft University of Technology she headed to post-wall Berlin, where she worked for Foster + Partners for most of the 1990s and cut her teeth on major projects such as the renovation of the Reichstag.

She returned to the Netherlands in 1998 for a job with Rem Koolhaas' Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) and quickly ascended to partner in 2002. After the success of Berlin's glass-encased Dutch embassy she went on to design the breathtaking Casa da Música concert hall in Porto, which remains one of OMA's most noted works and won the firm a Riba European award.

So what makes Van Loon tick? We caught up with the self-confessed workaholic on a rare break from juggling several commissions, including a performing-arts centre in Manchester, a French court house and a major renovation of the Dutch parliament in The Hague. — VR

MONOCLE: What is it about large-scale projects that you enjoy?

ELLEN VAN LOON: When projects become more complex you have opportunities to do things with buildings that you wouldn't normally think of. There are more issues to think about and every issue drives your design in a certain direction. So the scale of options increases – and no, it's not daunting for me at all.

M: What are your guiding principles when you work?

EVL: One of the key elements in projects is the human behaviour in buildings. We try to push that. For example, in theatres, normally the front and



back of house are separated from each other. The public never sees what happens behind the scenes. It's in those kinds of relationships where I think it's interesting to make new connections. Instead of separating different functions we try exposing them to each other, so you get new relationships between the users in the building.

M: How has your style evolved?

EVL: We like to make every building different because every project asks for a different approach, so I try to come up with a new style and new type of building on every project. Although I'm not sure outsiders would say the same, maybe they recognise an OMA building or an Ellen building! But, for example, the Rothschild bank

in democratic countries, the parliament is supposed to be a democratic building, or should look like one. But if you analyse these buildings there are a lot of layers of transparency and non-transparency, of how political decisions are made. Some need to take place in full privacy, some not. So it's that play of how you incorporate all these layers into a parliament building that is interesting. The corridor in this type of building has a totally different meaning than in an office. And, of course, there's the history, which has not always been that democratic. What do you do with the history of the country in a building like that? For me, history is key to where we are now so I think it's important to show it.

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in London was very different to the Casa da Música in Porto. I do my best to try to get something new in there that is specific to the client, location or function.

M: You're renovating the Dutch parliament building at the moment – how have you approached that?

EVL: I'm not allowed to say anything about that project! What is special for me about it is the whole political culture. The funny thing is that

M: When you look back, which project are you most proud of?

EVL: It's not a matter of what I'm most proud of, more what stage of development [I was at]. So Casa da Música: I'm not saying it's the best building I've done but for me it was a special moment in time. It was the first time I did a project like that from beginning to end, in a culture I didn't know when I started. It was an emotionally loaded period so in that sense it takes a special place in my life.