

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

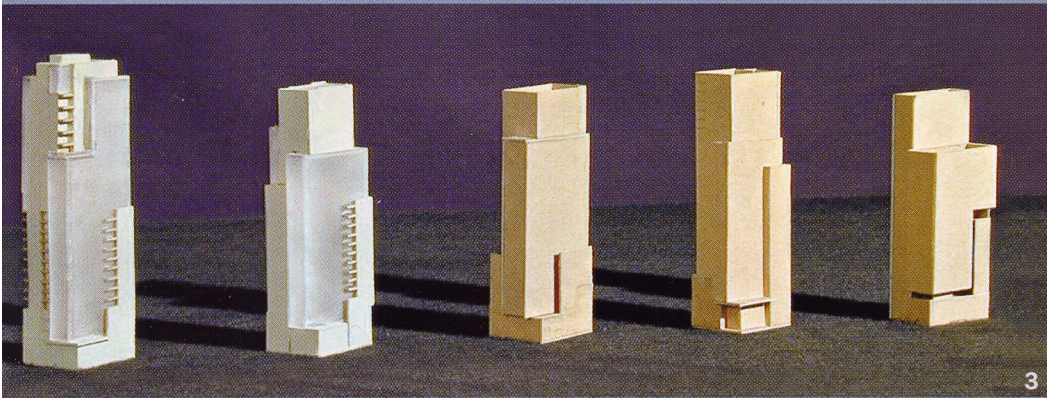
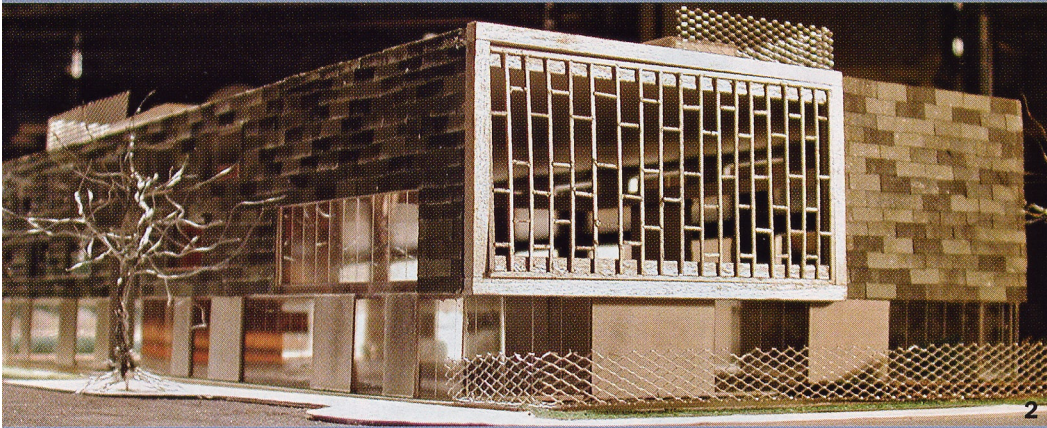
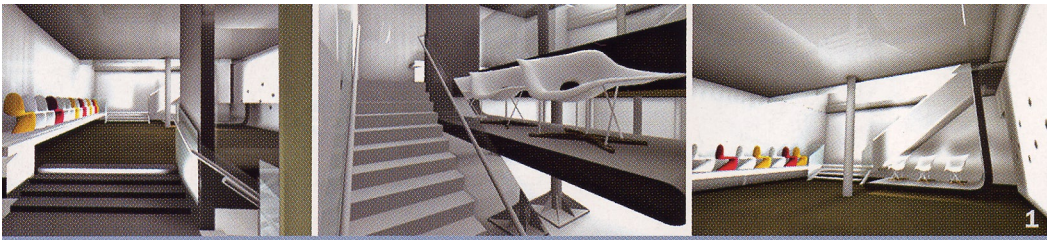
Ten Degrees of Modernism:
Pushing The Outer Limits

DESIGN VANGUARD 2002

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WHY WOULD
A CLIENT
ENTRUST A
YOUNG,
SMALL,
UNTESTED
FIRM WITH A
PROJECT?

1. ROY
2. Studio Gang/O'Donnell
3. La Dallman Architects
4. Kuth/Ranieri Architects

Taking a leap of faith

By John E. Czarnecki, Assoc. AIA

New York architect Lindy Roy had never had a project, other than a temporary installation, built before this year. That did not deter Vitra, the furniture manufacturer based in Basel, Switzerland, from selecting Roy's firm, ROY, to design the company's New York showroom, which opened last month in Manhattan's Meatpacking District. In giving the young firm its first commission to be realized, Vitra took a risk with the uncertainty of new, untested design ideas and capabilities. Vitra relishes that.

Constantly seeking to define "new" in the culture of design, Vitra is a proponent of the design vanguard. But why would the company, which has only a handful of showrooms in the United States, select ROY for its New York home? For Vitra to tap a new talent is not unusual, but for a small, young firm to get a high-profile commission as its first built project is. Every architect has to get that first project somehow, and Lindy Roy was lucky, in some ways, to have attracted the right attention in New York with a compelling portfolio of conceptual designs.

"When I looked at Lindy's dossier, I was completely taken," Rolf Fehlbaum, the C.E.O. of Vitra, told *RECORD*. "It's important to look for a new voice—a new promise."

Not all clients, though, are as experienced in selecting designers as Vitra, and not many young architects have the same access to connections in the New York design world as Roy has had. Why would a client—any client—take a leap of faith to go with a young architect for a project? As *RECORD* presents its third annual Design Vanguard in this issue, we posed that question to young firms that had been featured in previous Design Vanguard issues or in *archrecord2*, as well as to one of each of their clients with work in progress at press time. How did the client come to select the architect for a given project, and what was the learning curve, for both architect and client, as the job proceeded?

In New York, Roy completed the Vitra showroom after having only one other realized project—a summer 2001 installation at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, New York [*RECORD*, *archrecord2*, August 2001, page 51]. In Chicago, Studio Gang/O'Donnell [*RECORD*, Design Vanguard, December 2001, page 82] has designed its first community center, with both child and adult day care, for the Chinese American Service League. La Dallman Architects of Milwaukee

[*RECORD*, *archrecord2*, April 2001, page 55] had completed a few smaller projects before being chosen by a local developer—a recent Ukrainian immigrant—to design a 30-story condominium tower in that city. And in San Francisco, a German couple with multiple homes in Europe and the United States hired Kuth/Ranieri Architects [*RECORD*, Design Vanguard, December 2000, page 106] for a second time to execute a major reconstruction of a residence. These four cases offer a diverse selection of client and project type, but all of the clients share one thing in common: They chose younger firms with developing practices when they could have gone with larger, more experienced companies.

A case for the new

Institutional clients, in particular, are increasingly looking to smaller, younger architecture firms because of the unique, fresh approach and attention that they can bring to a project. Brad Cloepfil, 46—whose Portland, Oregon-based, 15-person firm, Allied Works Architecture, was named last month to design the new home for the Museum of Contemporary Arts and Design in New York City (see story in this issue, page 24)—has noted the trend. "A lot of the next generation of architects are getting opportunities that, say 30 years ago, I'm not sure a small 10- to 15-person firm would have gotten," says Cloepfil, who received his first major East Coast commission with this winning competition and was also recently selected for the Seattle Art Museum expansion.

The Museum of Contemporary Arts and Design (formerly the American Craft Museum) intentionally focused on smaller, younger, or emerging firms in its selection of an architect for the renovation of Edward Durell Stone's Two Columbus Circle for its new home. It did not invite larger firms with more museum experience to apply. Competition finalists included Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects, Zaha Hadid, and Toshiko Mori.

Holly Hotchner, the director of the museum, explained: "The museum has always advocated for emerging artists—that's what we do. And since we are also very much in the world of design, it seemed appropriate to look for a person to design our building—which we think will be the greatest object in our collection—who would be in the same spirit as the artists we show. We want this project to be the cornerstone of [Cloepfil's] career."

Cloepfil described his relationship with the museum thus far as “an exciting fit. Institutions that hire emerging architects are really looking at ideas rather than objects. In this and other recent commissions that I’ve gotten, clients are more interested in a way of thinking and investigating and a way of exploring ideas, rather than just getting a product.”

Making a name in New York

For Roy, 39, the opening of the Vitra showroom (renderings, below) was, in a way, her debut as a New York architect on a par with the most innovative thinkers in the profession. A pair of New York innovators and mentors—Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio—helped her along the way. Andrew Goetz, Vitra’s New York-based director of development, said Vitra had initially considered a wide range of top design talent for the New York showroom, including Greg Lynn, SHoP, Herzog & de Meuron, Rem Koolhaas, Annabelle Selldorf, as well as Diller + Scofidio. Vitra had seriously considered Diller + Scofidio after the husband-and-wife pair had designed the company’s showroom installation for Neocon in Chicago, but they were too busy after winning recent competitions.

Diller + Scofidio offered a list of architects that they thought would be appropriate for the high-profile job, and Roy’s name was on the list. After reviewing portfolios, Fehlbaum selected Roy.

“In looking at Lindy’s portfolio, we definitely thought she had the makings of somebody special,” Goetz said. “It would be very easy to pick Rem Koolhaas at this time, but we wanted to invest in a younger talent that we believed in. It reinforces the concept that risks are important to take and are worth taking.”

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—Andrew Goetz, of Vitra

Investing in new talent is something that Vitra has done for decades. Vitra handed Frank Gehry his first European commission, the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany, in 1987, and selected Zaha Hadid for her first built project—the Vitra Fire Station, completed in 1993. “Zaha was, at the time, more of a promise than a proven reality,”

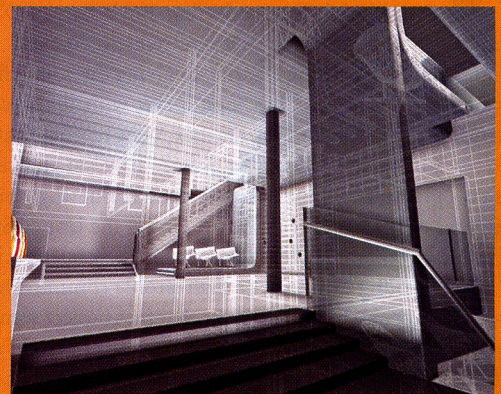


For the Vitra New York showroom (renderings, right), Lindy Roy (above) employed a palette of materials including steel, wood, and industrial rubber that reinterpret the semi-industrial character of the surrounding Meatpacking District. Vitra chairs are placed on raised platforms for easy viewing at eye-level, and wall sections are sheathed with backlit polycarbonate panels.

“It’s very much a part of the Vitra ideal to work with younger architects and be looking toward the future.”

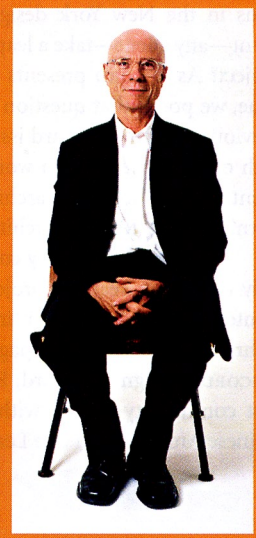
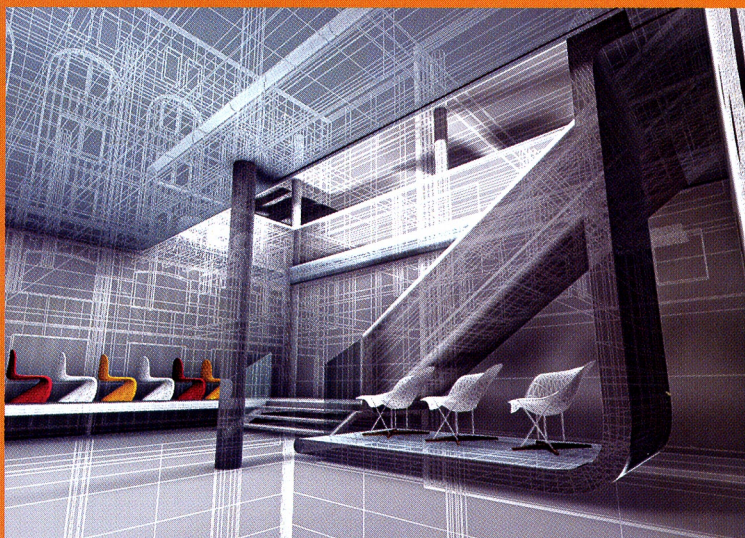
—LINDY ROY

ARCHITECT: ROY
PROJECT: Vitra showroom, New York City



“When I looked at Lindy’s dossier, I was completely taken. It’s important to look for a new voice—a new promise.”

—ROLF FEHLBAUM, C.E.O. OF VITRA (PICTURED BELOW)



Fehlbaum said. “We take a lot of effort to find the right people, and then we work with them to interpret what we are and what we want to be.”

Because this was her first built project, designing the showroom was clearly a learn-as-you-go process for both Roy and Vitra. Working with Peter Himmelstein Design and graphic designers 2x4, Roy imaginatively employed a palette of steel, wood, industrial rubber, and polycarbonate panels in the 13,400-square-foot space that includes a gallery, showroom, retail, and offices. “Having a client acknowledge that there were no expectations that I would be more advanced in terms of building experience was incredibly liberating,” Roy said. “Once that was on the table, it was a very open relationship, and it never was an issue.”

Evolving client = challenging program + more time

Chicago’s Studio Gang/O’Donnell has had a bit more experience in having projects built, but it has recently been working with perhaps its most challenging client group—the Chinese American Service League (CASL)—on a project with an extremely complex program, the city’s Chinese American Service Center (pictured below). The \$5.3 million,

36,000-square-foot facility will accommodate 14 different programs for the Chinese community, including adult and child day care, a community hall, youth center, chef-training kitchen, and offices. Led by partners Kathleen O’Donnell, Mark Schendel, and Jeanne Gang, the eight-person firm was chosen for the CASL project in 1998 and construction just began last month. What took so long?

“We started talking about a two-story building with 20,000 square feet and now we’ll have a three-story building with 36,000 square feet,” said Bernie Wong, the executive director of CASL, which has served Chicago’s Chinatown community out of a number of disparate locations for 25 years. “We had a large growth spurt with our programs at the same time as they were planning [the building].”

Studio Gang/O’Donnell architects undertook an extensive study of CASL’s programmatic needs. The design went through a number of iterations, including a courtyard scheme that had to be abandoned when the need for more square footage increased. CASL had considered a number of larger and more experienced Chicago firms, and narrowed the list down to five. Studio Gang/O’Donnell was ultimately chosen because