

Q&A

Lindy Roy

ARCHITECT LINDY ROY PRACTICES INTELLIGENT DESIGN IN A CAREER PORTFOLIO THAT PUSHES BOUNDARIES, BOTH IN TERMS OF INNOVATION AND GEOGRAPHY.

BY MARK BROWN

Oh, to be young, attractive and prodigiously talented. Such is the fortune of Lindy Roy, whose architectural achievements range from designing a 3,400-sq.-ft. house for the prestigious Coco Brown/Richard Meier-sponsored Houses at Sagaponac to Houston's low-income housing to Cancer Alley. The latter is a conceptual-phase, environmentally aware project with photographer Richard Misrach that traverses the lethally polluted Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans.

Roy, a South Africa native, has kept quite busy after her quick ascent in the architecture world, including opening her own shop, Roy Design, in New York. Although she considers her firm blessed with its accomplishments in recent years, much of her success stems from her levelheaded approach to design and an intelligent sense of innovation that guides each project she produces.

What guidelines were you given for the Houses at Sagaponac project, if any?

The guidelines were to design weekend getaways that would offer an alternative to the McMansion syndrome—these kind of overblown, over-the-top mansions that are populating the beaches. The idea was to design something that captures the spirit of the weekend beach house. Other than that, Coco Brown pretty much left it up to the architects to determine the size, the number of rooms and really what the program would be.

What approach did you take?

We were interested in making a house that was very light and open, integrating the landscape and making a pleasure out of the swimming pool. The pool actually moves into the house, into the living room, and turns up to form a wet bar, then folds into three stories and travels up into the master bedroom suite. All the pleasure elements are attached to this.

Although the project is experimental, it focuses on livability, correct?

That's the interesting thing, because designing a house is such a personal thing for a client. To actually design a house on spec—without a particular client in mind—it was quite a delicate

dance to make something that had a specificity to the site and to an assumed user. We were encouraged to be creative, but within parameters. We had the reality that someone who hadn't commissioned this house would have to live in it. That's why the plan is incredibly simple; it's just a rectangle with spaces that flow into one another. When you look at it in sections, it's far more complex, because there are these interlocking S-shapes that allow the spaces to flow.

What's the role of the architect these days? Artist? Environmentalist? Social engineer?

People often ask, "You're an architect, so what do you specialize in?" The expectation is that you'll say, "We do hotels" or "We do houses" or "We do commercial." Often when one is supposedly interested in ecological design or interested in social issues or thinking about working in a politically charged environment, being interested in that tends to be mutually exclusive from working in design. People who do design do a certain type of thing, and people who do eco stuff do something else. I'm really not interested in maintaining that. The sites in all our projects represent a challenge, whether it's the physical site or the actual social/political environment that we're operating in, such as Cancer Alley in Mississippi or the low-income housing project we're doing in Houston. Those projects require you to be extraordinarily creative, to push for the biggest bang for your buck or to make an impact within that environment in a very efficient way.

What makes you take on a project? Do you have the ability to pick and choose?

No! This is smoke and mirrors! Obviously, I'm always looking for interesting opportunities and clients who really want to try something not for the sake of being different, but to deal with a problem or a set of issues, constraints or opportunities that really require one to rethink what one will be building. Pick and choose? No. But we've been incredibly lucky. We're working on a project for Vitra right now, which is really an amazing opportunity.

What's the nature of the Vitra project?

It's due to open at the end of the summer in the Meat Market District in New York. It's a retail space in the showroom. And they're an extraordinary



The conceptual Cancer Alley project proposes a reclamation of a contaminated area in Louisiana.

client to work with—just being surrounded by the products they produce is incredible. Creating a place for these things to be shown is great, a real challenge.

How do you balance innovative design with practical function?

We're beginning to work on projects in remote locations. In order for them to be built, you have to understand the processes available in these areas, the manufacturing. We're doing an extreme-ski hotel up in Alaska, just north of Valdez in the Chugach Mountains. The design looks like there's been some thought and innovation put into it. But the real talent lies in the logistics of how we're going to do it there. What's in the local environment that we can use? You can barge stuff up from Portland or Seattle, but you want to start working with the local economy as well.

What's the Cancer Alley project?

Cancer Alley is one of those projects that really has no clients, no funding. Richard Misrach, an incredible photographer, photographs environments that have been decimated—some by the federal government, some by the military. He

did a series on the illegal bombing of the Nevada desert a few years ago. He was commissioned to photograph the stretch of the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, called Cancer Alley, where there's this incredible density of petrochemical companies and disproportionately high incidences of cancer. Plus it's right in this incredible slice through American history and culture, the plantations and the slave revolts, the amazing Cajun culture, jazz and blues. And its proximity to New Orleans had that area positioned to be a potentially intense tourism infrastructure. Then you had this incredible toxic environment where the local residents are some of the poorest in the country and the least able to fight the industry that's contaminating the area. Misrach approached me about 18 months ago to make a proposal of intervening—a reclamation project for the area. We initially treated it as an extensive research project of what produced the conditions right now, and really did some deep research into the geology of the Mississippi, looking at the current state of affairs, and proposed a network that would integrate tourist activities with things that would serve the local

communities. We programmed the barges that are ubiquitous on the river with different functions, like a floating library and computer center that would move down the Mississippi River and tap into the school districts along the routes in a weekly cycle. In the other direction, you'd have the tourist functions: floating hotels, jazz barges, things that would move up the river. These barges could be ganged together into large landscapes. They could be reconfigured so that the pool was next to the computer room, or a soccer field was next to a motel, in a way that didn't separate tourists from local people. It's a project with no real clients, but it's an incredibly mind-numbing project. It's a massive 150-mile stretch, so to really tackle it would require a very serious commitment from a funding agency.

Is that why you got into architecture? To push change?

That's a tough question. I grew up in South Africa in an environment where it was incredibly complicated to negotiate what it meant to be a white person living under apartheid. So I think when you live in an environment where your life is impacted by realities of what a political



system produces and the social effects, it affects the way you think about everything. Whether that made me an architect, I don't think so. It's a question I'm asked a lot because it's not something that's actually conscious. It goes back to this idea that certain types of architects are interested in P.C. projects, and they're not involved in projects that are commercial. I really reject that as a way of working. I think one can apply a design intelligence to a range of projects.

What projects lie ahead?

We're really excited about this extreme-ski hotel up in Alaska. It's a heli-skiing operation, with a three-pad heliport for the hotel. There are challenges when building in an extreme environment—a site that goes from white to psychedelic in a couple of months. The challenge is determining what architecture would work in the site and what kind of hotel you should have for essentially adrenaline junkies who place themselves in an extreme environment. That's promising. We're also working on the renovation of a barn in Upstate New York, a residential project. And Vitra is obviously consuming much focus and energy because it's working fast.

What would be your dream project?

I think just to keep working. We've got some really interesting possibilities. Each project offers an opportunity to rethink and expand. The key is to keep working. Each client is a partnership, a conversation. You're only going to be able to go as far as they wish to go, in a way. The thing that does link these projects is not type, but the kind of client that really sees the value in taking a step back to see what we can really do here. That makes all the difference.

Mark Brown covers music, media and technology for Rocky Mountain News in Denver.