

how i see it

New York City

## Roy Story

*Had your fill of banal boutique hotels? Meet Lindy Roy, the South African architect whose outré designs are about to become reality. Adam Sachs reports*

Field of dreams: Lindy Roy, in Manhattan's Meatpacking District.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHITECT LINDY ROY IS in her new office in Manhattan's fashionably dilapidated Meatpacking District. Her hair is demurely pulled back into a nappy cinnamon-hued bunch. She has bent her lean six-foot frame over a pile of packing boxes and is looking for something to show me.

"Ah, here it is," she says, drawing out what looks to be a very expensive and well-designed can opener. She holds the polished steel tool up to the light. "The lines of this


 The logo for the 'how i see it' series, featuring the words 'how i see it' in a lowercase, sans-serif font. 'how' is white on a purple rectangular background, 'i' is white on a black rectangular background, and 'see it' is white on a black rectangular background.

would make a great skyscraper," she says, admiring its graceful form. I have to ask what the pretty little thing is—though I know I probably shouldn't.

"It's a bone scraper," she says, with barely contained glee. Then, by way of explanation: "It's for surgery. I have a whole collection of these old medical instruments that I love. Did you know that Houston is the hospital capital of the United States? When I was living there, I'd go to these sales that they'd have when hospitals would close down. There'd be these guys selling this stuff to clinics, and I would be there oohing and aahing." She proceeds to ooh and aah over some ominous oversized tweezers and other things I'm afraid to ask about. "They may have thought I was nuts, but none of the dealers ever asked me what I needed a bone scraper for."

Rain comes in through the windows of Roy's office. The century-old floor is so sloped that the chairs sometimes roll out from under the young, genial, newly hired supergeniuses of Roy Design, who are too focused on their computer screens to notice. Giant project books grow on tables like sofa-sized White Pages. Most boxes have yet to be unpacked. At present, Roy has four designs in the early stages of construction, and a reputation growing as quickly as the company she's assembled. This is a heady moment for an architect with, to date, a single permanent building to her name.

**N**OT LONG AGO, THE 41-YEAR-OLD CAPETON-ian was a promising conceptual architect teaching in the graduate programs at Tulane and Rice, designing theoretical work on the side. Then one of her unbuilt projects—a spa complex of floating fiberglass room-pods imagined for Botswana's Okavango River Delta—landed in the *New York Times*. The press begat more press. Museum shows followed—as well as a mania for naming Roy the next hot thing in architecture. Erstwhile *Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp gushed: "In recent years Ms. Roy has established herself as a lyric poet of extreme conditions, an ideal designer for the increasingly precarious places toward which our planet is revolving." Elsewhere, the *Times* anointed Roy an "architect on the verge," and *Vanity Fair* photographed her alongside such luminaries as Richard Meier and Michael Graves. All of which led to real-world commissions and to the studio on this trendily befouled block.

Roy's first fully executed project is around the corner from her office: the 13,000-square-foot showroom and store for the Swiss-based modern-furniture company Vitra. The striking and inviting space is defined by undulating rubber-covered "tongues" that dip down from the floor above and display the merchandise to stunning effect. It is a good example of Roy's ability not just to play matchmaker between art and commerce but to make sure the two remain in love and happily married. Being chosen by Vitra to design its New York outpost is no small affirmation: Frank Gehry's first big European job was the Vitra Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany. "Some might say we took a risk," says Guy Geier, chief executive of Vitra USA. "At the time, Lindy had not yet built a permanent space. We have a long history of discovering new talent, as witnessed by the commission of Zaha Hadid, who just won the Pritzker Architecture Prize [in part] for her first built project, a fire station on our campus in Germany. We look at the substance of the work—how the designer

how i see it

thinks and solves problems.”

Another patron impressed by the Roy approach is hotelier André Balazs, who hired her to design his newest venture, in Midtown Manhattan. Again, this is heady company for Roy. Balazs—known to most of the country as He Who Dates Uma Thurman—runs a stable of properties that avoid the pitfalls of most self-consciously hip hotels, whose freshness factor tends to curdle like month-old milk: the Chateau Marmont and the two Standard hotels in Los Angeles, the Mercer in New York, and the revamped Raleigh in Miami.

“Andre’s hotels have a kind of wit to them,” says Roy.

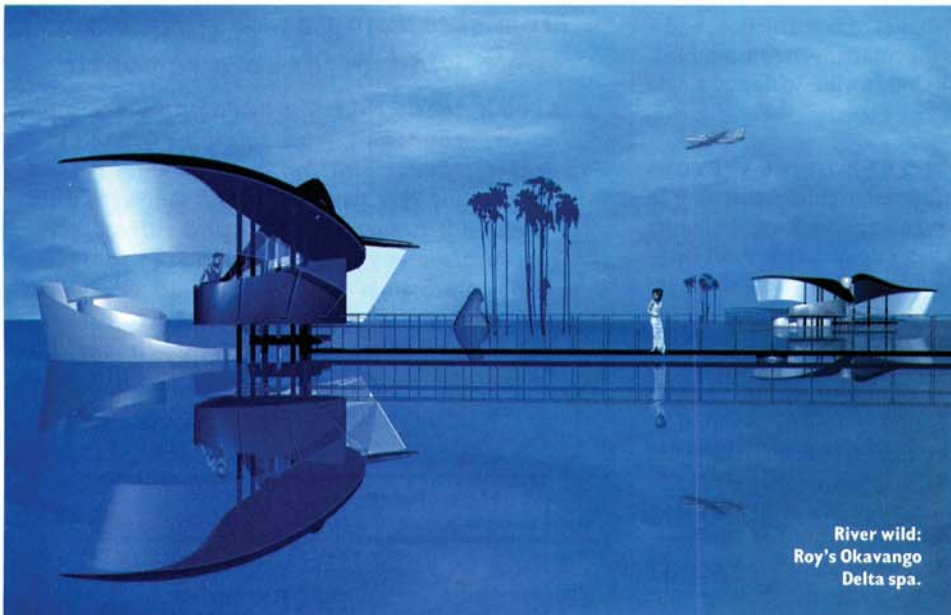
cellent toy for a boy. It does not look like a signature obsession of a soft-spoken academic, one of the few female architects operating without male partners. This is Wind River Lodge, a hotel and helicopter landing base for the extreme sport of heli-skiing. The X-shaped steel-and-glass structure will rise out of a

**At present, Roy has four designs in the early stages of construction. This is a heady moment for an architect with a single permanent building to her name**

Niagara Falls and even many Swiss hotels. You had the luxury of a Ritz, but then you looked out and encountered the Matterhorn.”

At the head of Wind River Lodge is what Roy calls the “helmet piece,” a dual-purpose structure that sums up the functionality and fun of the project: It’s half air-traffic-control tower, half hotel bar. “There’s a wall between them,” says Roy, “but there’s one counter that runs between the areas, and on one side they’re landing the helicopters and on the other they’re hanging out at the bar.” A one-way mirror allows bar patrons to unobtrusively observe the air-traffic controllers at work.

Planning the ski lodge meant not just making drawings but getting on the phone with pilots to discuss helicopter wake patterns and studying helipad construction and weather patterns. In other words, it meant jumping into the action—which is what Roy’s hotels are really about. She shows me notebooks filled with sketches and facts about helicopters and snow. “Do you know how you die in an avalanche?” she asks with the cheerfulness of someone describing a cherished bone scraper. “You breathe out, and the moisture from your breath creates an ice mask and you suffocate.” She investigated emergency devices that channel your breath behind your back to keep you alive



River wild: Roy’s Okavango Delta spa.

“They’re all different, but they all tap into the vibe of a place and represent that in an interesting way. For the New York hotel, our environment is 45th Street, so you’re tapping into this incredible energy and trying to capture it somehow.”

Details on the aggressively no-frills, hostellike hotel were scarce when I talked with Roy over the summer, although construction was under way and the plan is to open next year.

**O**N DISPLAY IN THE ENTRANCE to Roy Design’s Gansevoort Street offices is a scale model of a resort that doesn’t look like one. Sleek and gunmetal gray, it might be a flying fortress, a robotic bug, or an ex-

mote chunk of ice in Alaska’s Chugach Mountains.

The lodge was one of three Roy designs included in a 2002 show about the future of hotels at the Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt design museum. Donald Albrecht, curator of “New Hotels for Global Nomads,” compares the ski lodge and the Okavango Delta project to the original nature hotels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “The big thing then was what they called the ‘sublime experience’—like the hotel built at the Grand Canyon. You were comfortable, but you were confronted with nature in a way that was almost scary. That was the idea behind all the hotels initially built at

until you’re dug out. It’s a far cry from devising bathroom layouts for boutique hotels.

“With the extreme ski project,” Roy says, “you’re working within this kind of paramilitary envelope, where the pilots are Vietnam vets and the skiing itself is pretty dangerous but at the same time you’re designing a *hotel*, which is all about pleasure and leisure. So the question becomes how to balance these two seemingly exclusive things: danger and control, freedom and pleasure.” Albrecht calls the ski resort “a kind of James Bond operation.” “There’s pleasure in the danger,” he says. “It’s like S and M, in a sense. Lindy provides this extreme confrontation with nature,

Photograph courtesy of Lindy Roy

though you're not roughing it in any of these environments. Architecturally, the forms and spaces are very beautiful and the creature comforts are all there."

**I**'D COME TO THE MEATPACKING District to see Roy not just because she's architecture's Hot New Thing but because the kind of thinking she's doing may help solve the riddle of what comes next for hotels. The global triumph of the boutique hotel is now complete. Just as gift-sized brickbats of Toblerone are sold in every airport duty-free, so must all the cities of man have their hip hotels with their oversized plant pots and overbearing house music. Roy and I compare notes and agree on a particularly egregious one in Johannesburg. The place, which shall go unnamed, isn't so much bad as it is placeless. It looks like it was airlifted out of Los Angeles. "The nature of hotels is that they're about being somewhere else," Roy says. "But travel has become so generic these days—like shopping, the homogenous things you see in every city. So the real trick is how you make a space place-specific. Of course, neither do you want to be hit over the head with it every step of the way."

Good architects are like good travelers: curious, informed, and open to inspiration. "It's all about assimilating vast amounts of divergent information and trying to make sense of it," she says. "The way I like to work is to open a thing up as wide as possible."

Talking with Roy about hotels means talking about avalanche survival skills and the compressive strength of alligator jaws. About swarm theory and the flight patterns of birds of prey and the mingling habits of business travelers at bars. About how you apply traditional tribal braiding techniques to fiber-optic cables—and, naturally, about the pheromone-sniffing capabilities and nesting genius of termites. The safari outfit that hired her to design the Botswana camp wanted to make sure it didn't get something that looked, as Roy puts it, "like a Club Med that had just been plopped down there." Little chance of that. The spa's floating room-pods are tethered to thousand-year-old termite hills. The

**I'd come to see Roy not just because she's architecture's Hot New Thing but because she may help solve the riddle of what comes next for hotels**

pools are meshed-off extensions of the delta itself, though the resident alligators can't possibly penetrate them because the compressive strength of their jaws has been anticipated on a computer in Manhattan.

Roy calls the trend in spa travel "the marketing of stress." What she tries to engineer into her projects is something a bit loftier, an up-close in-tuneness with nature that soothes but never bores. "It's a completely holistic experience," she says, "without being, you know, lentil-headed, crunchy-granola."

**I**N 2001, ROY CAUGHT THE EYE of real estate developer Harry "Coco" Brown II, the man behind the Houses at Sagaponac, at the eastern end of Long Island. Brown assembled a dream team of the top names in architecture (Hadid, Johnson, Meier, et al) to contribute designs for an upscale housing development for well-heeled design fanatics. It's an audacious proj-

ect, somewhat akin to inviting all living Nobel laureate writers to sign your yearbook. Among those invited was Roy, whose 3,400-square-foot house will have an indoor-outdoor pool flowing through it. In addition to the Sagaponac house, Roy is working on a hush-hush retail project and a New York City apartment building that she hopes to sheathe in all-weather wood paneling. Hotels, though, will always be of particular interest to her, she says, because "you are designing for an experience that is by definition outside one's normal routine. The architecture is the interface between the guest and an unfamiliar environment."

"The boutique hotel has really played itself out," she continues. "It's become its own international brand. So now we're at a moment of figuring out what's next, and those moments are always the most interesting." Interesting for hotels in general, and for Roy's career specifically. Even as planning progresses on Wind River Lodge and the floating spa, she continues to find inspiration in the shapes of found objects. On her way to work one morning, she discovered an old propeller waiting for her on the cobblestoned streets like a message. The curves of the metal made her think of the thatched roof of her hotel in the Kalahari. The old find sits on her desk now, its lines waiting to be translated into a Lindy Roy original. □



Hot seat: Vitra's Manhattan showroom.

Photograph by Richard Barnes