

Architect builds following on shape of things to come

By John King

CHRONICLE URBAN DESIGN WRITER

For a case study in how today's architectural elite takes shape, consider the career trajectory of Lindy Roy.

She's been profiled in the New York Times and photographed by Vogue. She worked on a "new" World Trade Center alongside such big names as Richard Meier and Rem Koolhaas. She now has a solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

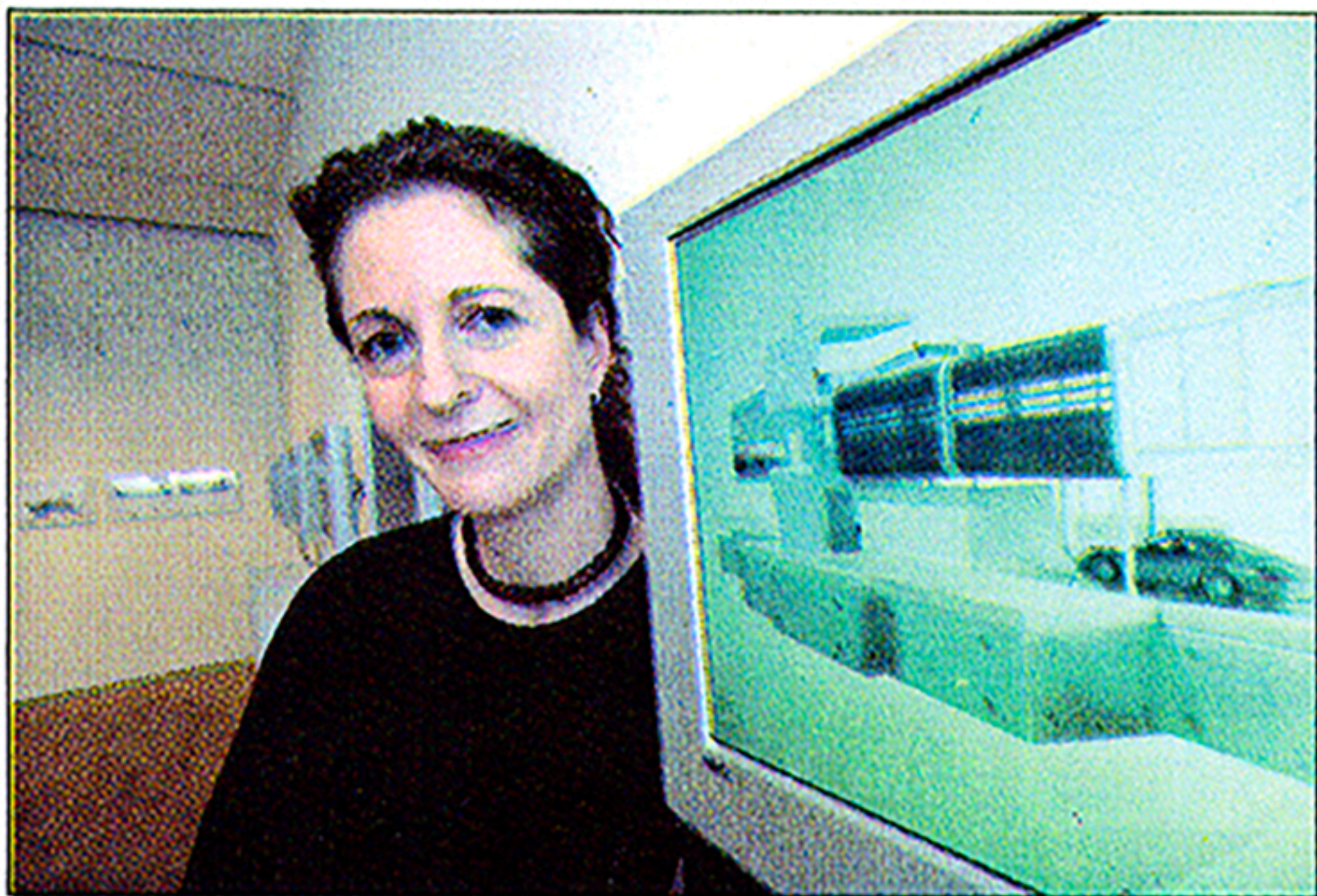
But don't fret if no buildings by this "buzz-generating young archi-

Roy/Design Series 1 Architecture is on display from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Fridays through Tuesdays and 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursdays through Sept. 7 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., San Francisco. (415) 357-4000, www.sfmoma.org.

tect" (Zagat Guide to Shopping) come to mind. There aren't any. The only place she's designed that actually exists is a 13,000-square-foot furniture showroom in New York.

No matter. The South Africa-born New York resident is a star in

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CHRIS STEWART /The Chronicle

Architect Lindy Roy with one of her designs at SFMOMA.

Roy strives to turn designs into reality

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certain circles — and if she's a bit baffled by the attention, she's happy to try and parlay it into something more.

"That aspect sort of feeds on itself," Roy, 39, said of the media hype after bursting into laughter last week at hearing the Zagat plug. She was in San Francisco for the opening of the exhibition, her first.

"What's happened the last two years is beyond belief," she conceded. "I want to keep doing the kinds of things we've been doing, but in the realm of them actually becoming real."

As much as anything else, Roy's ascent shows that architects — like other artists in the media eye — can benefit from the endless quest for what's new and unexpected.

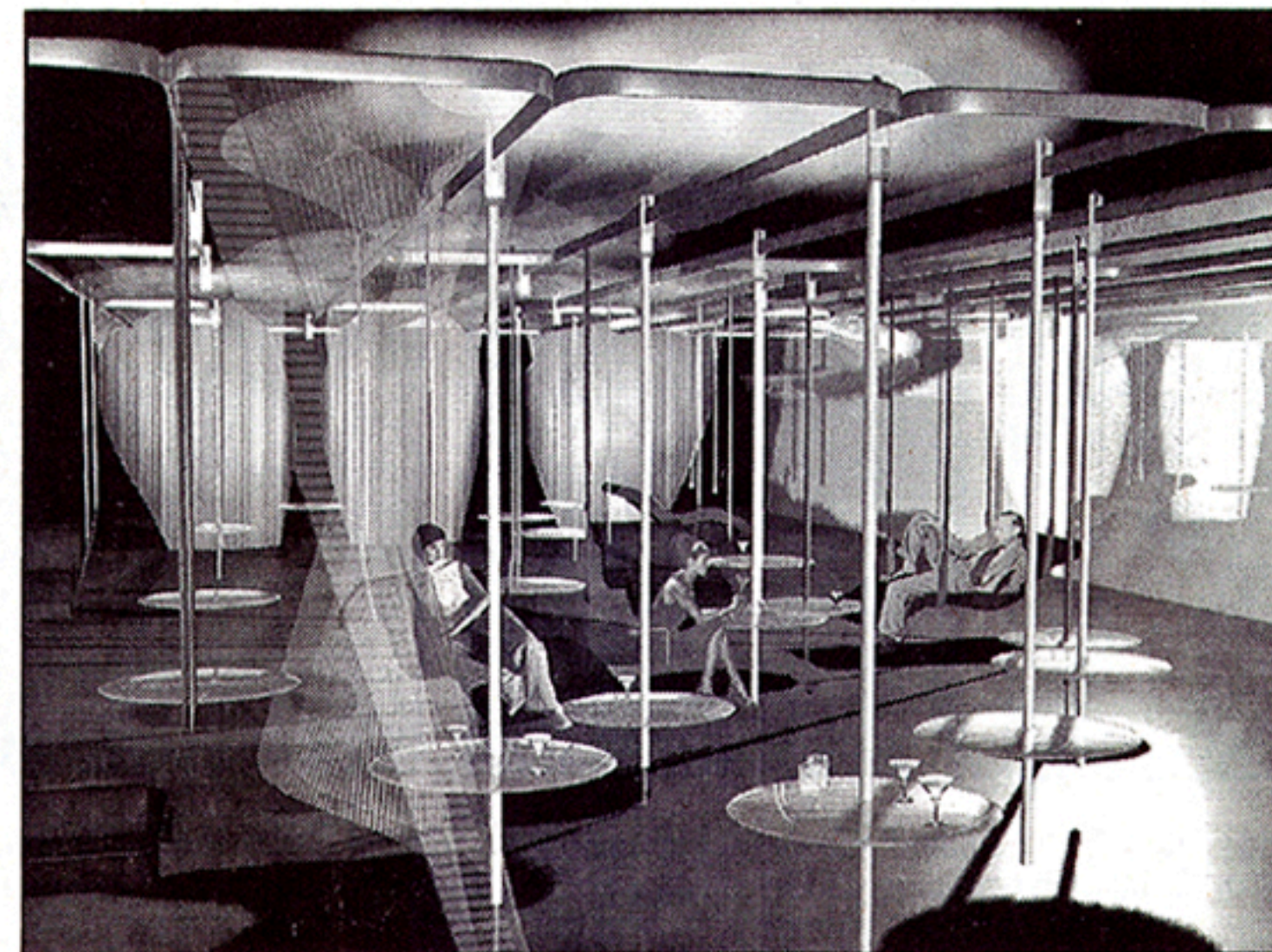
When she designed a yet-unbuilt African delta spa complete with floating meditation pods — done gratis in return for staying at a tour operator's safari camp — New York Times architecture critic Herbert Muschamp proclaimed "this is not Adventureland but an adventure into ideas." That clip helped Roy with a cold call to the developer planning a Long Island summer home subdivision who had designs by everyone from post-modern patriarch Michael Graves to newly ascendent Zaha Hadid, whose Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati opens next month as the most eagerly anticipated American building this year.

Roy was added to the roster. That drew the attention of Vitra, a Swiss furniture maker renowned in design circles for giving early commissions to Hadid and Frank Gehry. Roy's New York Vitra showroom opened last November — two months after Roy was one of 16 architects, most of them far better known, enlisted by Muschamp to craft an alternative vision for lower Manhattan and the World Trade Center site.

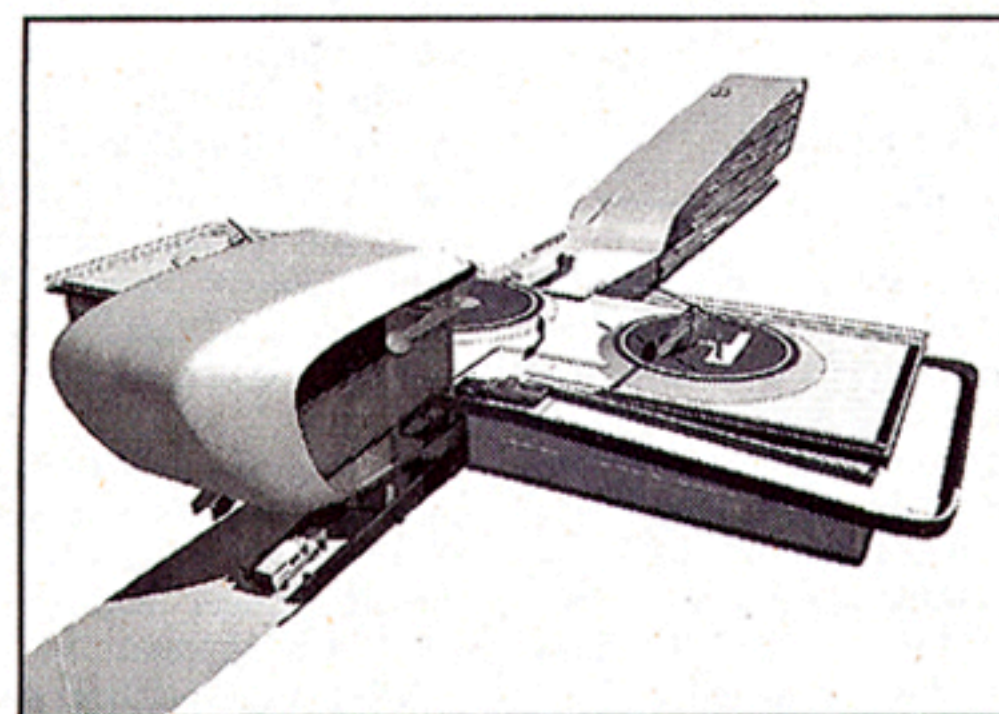
"We weren't part of the shenanigans around the big boys working on the overall site," Roy says of her small firm, which in two weeks designed a condo tower to go above West Street. The one session she attended, "I was the only woman in the room. ... I don't think in these terms anymore, but it was 'here we go again.'"

Roy's sudden emergence also caught the eye of SFMOMA architecture curator Joseph Rosa, who knew Roy when both attended the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture.

"She's shown a wealth of talent but also an openness, an edgy sense of pleasure, and that comes through in her work," says Rosa, who likes how Roy headed to teaching gigs in Louisiana and Texas before returning to New York in



Digital renderings courtesy of LINDY ROY



Above, Lindy Roy's digital rendering of a bar's interior. Left, the architect's design for the Wind River Lodge in Alaska. The circular area is a helicopter pad where extreme skiers could be dropped off.

1998. "She's almost nomadic. She'll move anywhere."

What the exhibition also shows, fortunately, is Roy's fresh subtle talent.

The most provocative thing about the nine projects on display is the unassuming way they defy expectations. Roofs twist to form walls, floors and ceilings fold into one. Roy makes the shifts feel natural. There's no flash of pyrotechnic drama.

The Vitra showroom showcases the smooth ease of how Roy crafts space. The ground floor retail space is a whopping 1,745 square feet, so Roy puts it on display by raising it three steps just beyond the front door. Directly ahead, a rubber-covered 6-foot-wide belt slides down from the second floor to serve as a display podium. On the left along the wall, a shelf that displays furniture turns a corner in the rear of the room to become the landing that leads upstairs.

The room unfolds around you. The architecture doesn't call attention to itself.

Most of the works here are for people with money — the delta spa was followed

by a lodge for extreme skiers in Alaska — so it's heartening that Roy's creativity also breathes life into a housing prototype designed for a nonprofit developer. Her approach: a streamlined shotgun shack with a double-story entrance to catch breezes that are then pulled through the house by ceiling fans. The corrugated steel roof pitches up steeply — and angles down just as steeply on the right to form one of the house's walls.

"I'd love to keep that range," Roy said last week. "The thing that links most of our projects is the desire of the client to look at something in a new way."

Ultimately, what Roy wants from the attention is not just chatter but clients. Preferably ones with land and lines of credit, as well as a sense of adventure.

"The publicity stuff is hugely important. Because of it, I was able to move through the credential barrier," Roy suggested. Then she laughed. "Or maybe I should say the barrier is being prodded. Nobody has signed checks yet."

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