OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

THE ILLUSIONISTS

How Diller Scofidio + Renfro is transforming New York.

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON

Ricardo Scofidio, Elizabeth Diller, and Charles Renfro at the School of American Ballet. Diller says, "When we did our first architectural project, and we had to deal with contractors, and we had to get paid, I felt a little soiled." Photograph by Robert Polidori.

If you're going seventy-five miles per hour on the New York State Thruway, and a 1963 vanilla Porsche swings out beside you, cuts across three lanes, and darts into the distance, there is a good chance that the driver is Ricardo Scofidio, the Manhattan-based architect, trying to clear his crowded mind with speed. Such a driver should be catnip for the highway patrol, but Scofidio, who is seventy-two, has honed a politely defiant relationship with authority figures, which helps things go his way. Once, while driving through New Jersey, he spotted a police cruiser in front of a car dealership, and he knew that he'd set off the radar gun. So he swerved into the lot and pulled up next to the startled cop. "You got me," he announced. The policeman gave him a warning and sent him on his way.

In 2002, he took a similar tack with several Swiss building-department officials who were scrutinizing his designs for a temporary structure that was to sit in the middle of Lake Neuchâtel. Called the Blur Building, it had no walls and no interior—only a walkway and hundreds of nozzles spewing water vapor into the air, creating an artificial cloud. The regulators insisted that it have a sprinkler system, too. Scofidio flew to Switzerland and patiently demonstrated, with water-flow diagrams, that the building essentially was its own ultra-powerful sprinkler. Rather than argue that a firefighting system wasn't necessary, he pointed out that he'd already provided one. The regulators were appeased. "I figured the only way I could win this was to out-bureaucratize the bureaucrats," he told me.

Scofidio's sideways approach to officialdom meshes well with the more direct manner of his wife and collaborator, Elizabeth Diller, who prefers to overwhelm people with reason. When they are together, Diller becomes the designated explainer, persuader, and theorist. He silently nods, occasionally tries to raise an objection, then sits back with a resigned smile, waiting for his turn to speak.

Diller and Scofidio's relationship began as a form of resistance. He was a professor at Cooper Union, married with four children; she was his most brilliant student. Neither felt committed to architecture. He was thinking about abandoning it, and she worried that it was too commercial a vocation. Nevertheless, design was what they talked about most. Tod Williams, an architect who taught with Scofidio, and who also married his creative partner, Billie Tsien, recalled, "Ric felt invigorated by Liz. In architecture, the collaborations are so intense that having someone you share a deep connection with is incredibly important. Ric's more intuitive, and she's much more intellectual. He thinks a lot about physical things, and she brings a way of talking about life."

In 1979, the year Diller graduated, she and Scofidio moved in together, started working side by side, and, without quite meaning to, founded a studio. (They also married, although they can't remember exactly when.) Charles Renfro, who joined the firm in 2000 and three years later became a partner, said of them, "For years, they refused to tell people they were married. They'd say, 'We're business partners first, life partners second.'"

They don't, at first, seem perfectly matched. Scofidio is a tall, laconic man with a slight stoop and a distracted air. His finger has a tendency to alight on the pewter-colored soul patch on his chin, as if he were surprised to find it there. He sometimes gives the impression that he is looking over people's heads at something amusing on the horizon. We spent many hours together, over several weeks, before I could be sure that he would recognize me the next time we met. Diller has short, tousled hair and a gaze that combines burning concentration with deep fatigue. It sometimes seems as though her entire life had been an extended creative confrontation. Her parents wanted her to become a doctor; when she immersed herself in art instead, they hoped she would at least channel her passions into a reputable profession—like architecture. "My response was totally defiant," Diller recalled. "I wanted to go a hundred and eighty degrees in the other direction." Yet the intellectual rigor of architecture seduced her. It was years before she admitted to her parents that she had, in fact, received a degree in the field. "I never gave them the satisfaction," she said. At fifty-three, she still had a note of triumph in her voice. With her firm, she has turned orneriness into a professional strategy. "We aren't a service organization," Diller recently grumbled to Scofidio, as they went over a client's list of demands. "We're not just there to solve problems. We *make* problems."

The firm's designs for the redevelopment of the High Line, in Chelsea (left), and for the Institute of Contemporary Art, in Boston.

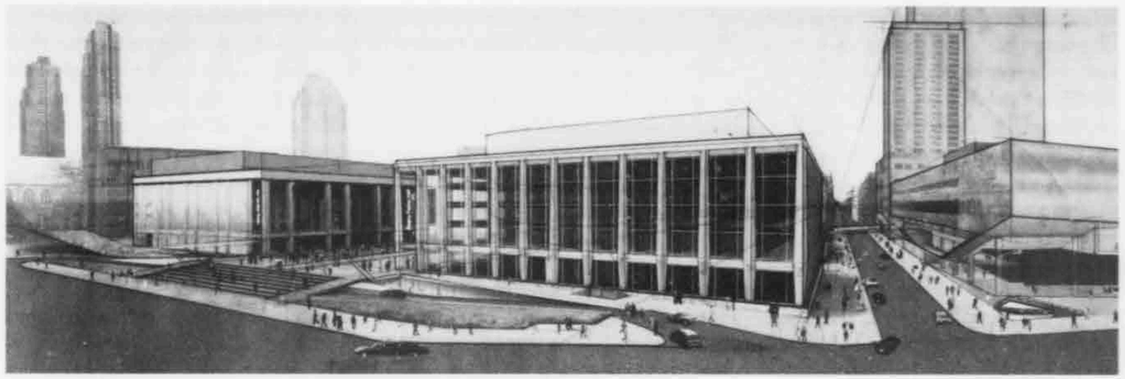
COURTESY CITY OF NEW YORK/FIELD OPERATIONS, IWAN BAAN/COURTESY DILLER SCOFIDIO + RENFRO

The couple's first freestanding building in the United States is the recently opened Institute of Contemporary Art, in Boston. Known informally as the I.C.A., it is the city's first new museum in almost a century, and a sleekly modern reproach to Boston's conventional repertoire of red-brick façades and marble pediments. For one thing, the museum doesn't actually have a façade: its main entrance has been hidden in a corner, and a grand staircase, doubling as outdoor bleachers, has been placed in the back, facing Boston Harbor. The main architectural drama occurs in the air, where the top floor hovers over the edge of the harbor walkway, like a jewel casket held aloft by an unseen hand. As with all rebellious gestures, the I.C.A. derives its meaning from the very conventions it rejects. If nineteenth-century galleries—such as New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art or Boston's Museum of Fine Arts—invited visitors to elevate themselves by ascending their temple fronts, the I.C.A. dangles its treasures coyly out of reach. It's a come-on, an architectural version of Diller and Scofidio's 1993 Times Square video installation, "Soft Sell," in which a female mouth, viewed in closeup, murmured metaphysical invitations to passersby: "Hey, you, wanna buy a ticket to paradise?"

For the first twenty years of their partnership, Diller and Scofidio were barely considered architects at all. They lurked at the profession's cerebral fringe, producing art installations and designing sets for dance performances. They manufactured that Swiss cloud. They designed a champagne flute whose stem contained a hypodermic needle pointing upward. They folded and ironed button-down shirts into a kind of oxford origami. But they hardly built anything with walls, plumbing, and a roof. "My interest was always to do interdisciplinary work with space," Diller told me. "I thought of architecture as one strand in a multimedia practice. When we did our first architectural project, and we had to deal with contractors, and we had to get paid, I felt a little soiled."

In 1990, Diller and Scofidio completed a design for the Slow House, a weekend home in the Hamptons commissioned by a young Japanese art collector. Their models and drawings appeared on the cover of architecture magazines and entered museum collections, including MOMA's. In the end, the client's fortune withered, and the house was never built. It would have risen on a banana-shaped foundation, with the front door at one end, and a curving hallway down its length that led to a picture window facing the ocean. "The view was protected—nobody could build in front of it," Scofidio said. "People pay a lot of money for that. So we were thinking about the monetary value of the view." But they weren't thinking about it the way a real-estate agent might; rather, they wanted to comment on a system that assigns a dollar amount to a slice of sea and sky. The house's pièce de résistance was a monitor placed directly in front of the window, displaying a live video of the same view. The collector could stand in his living room just before dusk, and gaze at a reproduction of the sunset blocked by the screen. This was both more than a house and less—an irritatingly clever demonstration of the postmodern theory that all seeing is "mediated," and all views the product of someone exercising control.

The Slow House design attracted a rash of new commissions, and Diller and Scofidio—architecture's cult ironists—became honest-to-goodness builders, leavening their stubborn devotion to conceptual thinking with elegant craftsmanship. They are working with the landscape-architecture firm Field Operations to transform the High Line, an elevated railway bed on the West Side of Manhattan, into a linear park that feels suspended in the air. The High Line's industrial wilderness, Diller said, represents "a triumph of nature, the romance of the ruin. So we're interested in interpreting the encroachments of nature." (Private developers, who don't care much about postmodern theory but know a good urban amenity when they see one, have already begun flanking the High Line with condominiums and hotels.) Meanwhile, Diller and Scofidio are also responsible for the big hole currently inconveniencing pedestrians on the northwest corner of Broadway and Sixty-fifth Street; it is the prelude to an almost impossibly intricate overhaul of Lincoln Center, which is scheduled to take at least three more years. Diller and Scofidio never set out to become members of the architectural establishment, but they have.



The Lincoln Center plan will lighten the complex by replacing some walls with glass, a strategy that Diller calls "elaborate striptease."

At one end of the architectural spectrum are signature shape-makers such as Frank Gehry, who drapes his bent-metal forms around concert halls, museums, and corporate headquarters so that his personality is more obvious than a building's function. At the other end are the architects whom Renfro calls "programmists," including Rem Koolhaas, who arrives at a form by assessing a client's specific needs. Renfro made it clear that he and his partners skew in that direction. "Programmists have a social approach," he said. "They're saying that life is the interesting part, not the building."

One recent morning, Diller gave me a tour of the first finished element of the new Lincoln Center: a pair of ghostly, floating dance studios in the School of American Ballet. Inside each of two double-height rooms, Diller's team had inserted a glass case that felt as if it were levitating near the ceiling, even though it was quite obviously resting on three massive beams. The kinetic design seemed to be colluding with the dancers in their assault on gravity. Seen from below, dancers in the glass-encased studios looked like figures in a snow globe. Diller makes explicit parallels between dance and design; she talks about her desire to create a "choreography of space," by which she means leading people along pathways through a building, predicting their rhythms, and revealing rooms and views in a calculated sequence.

We left the ballet school, and Diller led me out to Sixty-fifth Street and into the offices of the Film Society of Lincoln Center. After ushering me through a narrow corridor and past an unmarked steel door, Diller went down several flights of stairs, into the bowels of the complex. Behind another steel door was a cavern-like room, where a boiler was making snoring sounds. "There it is," she said, pointing to a freestanding wall of honeyed wood twenty-five feet high; the surface curved and folded back on itself, like a slice of prosciutto on a platter. "That's the future Alice Tully Hall."

We were looking at a mockup of the interior of Lincoln Center's main chamber-music venue. Whereas an architectural model is a miniature of the whole, a mockup is a full-scale fragment, intended to give a tactile sense of what it would really be like to inhabit a space. Diller turned off the boiler room's fluorescent tubes, and for a moment the only source of light was the lurid glare of an "Exit" sign. Then she fumbled with a computer panel, and the mockup's undulating wall began to glow. Architects use the word "skin" to describe any thin surface, but this looked eerily like the real thing—a living membrane with dozens of lights shining through it. "Architecture is nothing but a special-effects machine," Diller said. "We wanted to steal the show, just for a moment, before the performers come on."

The countless string quartets and chamber orchestras that performed at Alice Tully Hall always seemed stuck at the end of a long, cheerless tube. Now the hall has been closed for renovations, and when it reopens, in a year and a half, it will retain its basic shape, but it will be both sleeker and more comforting—a room without edges, only fleshlike folds. "We couldn't move the stage or reconfigure the entrances," Diller explained. "We could only strip out the skin and replace it. We wanted to make it acoustically better, and give it a warm, intimate feeling. One way was to declutter it, making it a seamless womb in which the acoustical elements—the walls, the floor, the ceiling, even the stage—would all be part of the same skin."

The Tully Hall mockup had been built both as a study tool and as a prop in an elaborate process of persuasion. The first phase of architecture is articulating a need; the second is creating a fantasy; the third is coaxing people with money and power to share that fantasy. In the case of Lincoln Center, Diller has needed to seduce a lot of people, among them the leaders of a dozen constituent organizations, the members of various task forces and "working groups," and a vast network of city bureaucrats. "At the beginning, we didn't realize what we were getting into," Diller admitted. "I was frustrated by the layers that had to be worked through to get anything done. But, after a while, I began to understand that negotiating all these components was an interesting endeavor in itself. Talking to City Planning, or to all the constituents who don't see eye to eye—it's an incredible creative challenge."

One of the principal decision-makers is Reynold Levy, the president of Lincoln Center. Diller told me that Levy had repeatedly brushed aside the idea of luminescent walls, calling them an expensive frill. Nevertheless, she had her staff spend a year working out the logistics with a millworker in Philadelphia and a resin manufacturer in Salt Lake City, in case Levy changed his mind. "When we proposed shining light through a wall, we thought it would be easy," she said. "Architects love shining light through everything. They're like kids who will put anything in their mouths. We found a way to laminate the veneer onto molded-resin panels, and resin can transmit light. But then we had to figure out how to get the veneer cut thin enough, which can be done only by one company, in Japan. We had to figure out how to attach the veneer to the resin, so it wouldn't separate. We had to figure out how to mold the resin and the wood together, so it would make these curves and give us these complicated geometries. We had to figure out how to light it. Fluorescent light is bright, but it makes a buzz. Halogen gets too hot; the veneer might crack. So we went with L.E.D. lights."

"I'm a green thief."

The mockup was built in Salt Lake City, and was expensive to transport, so Diller kept pleading with Levy to go see it there. Finally, he found a Sunday when he could squeeze in a day trip. Diller cancelled a lecture she had agreed to give in Italy that day, and flew to Utah with him. "As soon as he saw the mockup, he fell in love," she recalled. "It's because he's capable of totally falling for something that he has to be so careful. As long as you can block out that irrational part of you and just reflexively say no, you're safe."

Levy, recalling the trip, said of Diller, "I think she would have thrown me off the plane if I hadn't agreed."

Scofidio was born in 1935 into a family that couldn't do without music. His father was a New York jazz musician who played the alto saxophone and the clarinet with Paul Whiteman. "I'd go to sleep and there'd be a fifteen-piece band in the parlor upstairs," Scofidio recalled. "I'd wake up and my mother would be playing the piano." He took up the double bass. He still plays it from time to time, and for years his instrument occupied valuable real estate in the firm's cramped studio, in the East Village. He speaks in a deliberate, gravelly rumble that suggests a Charles Mingus solo. "Music is in my DNA, but it was a rotten profession back then," he said. "So I went into art, which was my other passion." He was also a tinkerer. As a teenager, whenever his father's car broke down, Scofidio got it moving again. Now he has the Porsche, which pleases him for its mechanical elegance. When he really wants to lose himself, he heads for the track at Lime Rock Park, in Lakeville, Connecticut, where he can whip around a mile and a half of curves in about a minute. "It's only when you're out on the track that you really appreciate what mass, weight, and speed can do," he said. "There's nothing else that can enter your brain. Work, clients—all vanish." When he's on the job, the gear-works of architecture make him happiest. He sketches truss joints for hours on end, especially on weekends, when the phone rings less. I spent one morning walking with him amid the overgrown weeds of a still-untouched portion of the High Line, near the Javits Center, and he lovingly pointed out the track's rivets and iron guardrails—the gorgeous brawn of nineteen-thirties engineering.

In 1956, Scofidio entered Columbia University; four years later, he came out an architect. By the mid-seventies, he was a partner in a Manhattan architecture firm, he had his teaching gig at Cooper Union, and he was fed up. The nineteenth-century architect Henry Hobson Richardson may never have said that an architect's first, second, and third priority should be "Get the job," but many people believe he did; Scofidio felt that the Richardson principle so dominated the profession that it had no room for idealists. In the early seventies, he was hired to help tackle a busing crisis in Buffalo by designing a racially integrated educational complex, but even that socially conscious project left him disillusioned. "It was a political ruse for politicians to get votes," he said. "They had no interest in actually studying or doing anything. Architects had to take work like that to stay alive, and that forced you to compromise."

So Scofidio quit practicing, even though he still had a family to support. He held on to his academic job, but considered it a stopgap: "I thought, If I'm not back in architecture in a couple of years, I shouldn't be teaching." Then, one day in the fall of 1976, he got into an elevator at Cooper Union with Diller and her architect boyfriend. When Scofidio stepped out, the boyfriend turned to Diller and said, "*That's* the one you're going to end up with."

Diller was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1954. Her father, a Jew who had eluded the Nazis, was the wealthy owner of a textile factory—making them a target for the country's anti-Semites. One day, she returned to their apartment to find it boarded shut. In 1959, the family immigrated to New York, leaving all their assets behind. They lived in Inwood at first, and eventually moved down to Greenwich Village. Her father became a hotel manager.

She enrolled at Cooper Union with the idea of becoming a filmmaker or a photographer. But, even as Scofidio was getting ready to reject architecture as a cynical business, Diller was increasingly drawn to it. "I realized that I was in the wrong place," she said. "In art school, it was about feeling. In architecture school, it was about ideas." (In his classes, Scofidio noted, "If you said, 'I like this,' the next question was: 'Why?'")

Diller's intelligence is an obvious feature that people can't help but comment on, like Julia Roberts's smile or Don King's hair. When she and Scofidio began their relationship—secretly, at first—she outfitted his discontent with a theoretical framework. If architecture was to be more than a service business for rich clients, then it had to pose a new set of questions. Together, Diller and Scofidio began interrogating the field's basic parameters. Why was the "plan view" the standard perspective for blueprints, when nobody ever saw the world from directly above? What is a window? What is a wall?

Scofidio left his family but not his professorship. In 1979, he and Diller moved into a loft in a storage facility across the street from the school, at 36 Cooper Square. "For years, it was just me and Liz working and living there," he recalled. "We were virtually the only tenants. The owner liked it that we lived there, because we could keep an eye on the place and let him know if the pipes froze." They were doing architecture in the sense that their installations and theatre sets had to be built, and sometimes you could walk inside them. But their budgets were minuscule, and Diller and Scofidio functioned as their own contractors, clients, and critics.

"When we started out, I didn't understand collaboration," Diller told me. "I wanted to sign my ideas, and I wanted Ric to sign his. I had a similar problem with sharing a bed and a bank account." Eventually, keeping their thoughts apart felt as awkward as having separate shelves in the refrigerator. "There were times when I'd work for three weeks solid on a project, and Liz would come by and spend three minutes on it, and it would change radically," Scofidio recalled. "So the question became: What is authorship? It certainly didn't depend on the time you spent on it." They decided to become officially known as a creative sum: Diller + Scofidio.

One of the first installations that they signed together was "The withDrawing

Room" (1987), in which they attacked some fairly innocuous domestic conventions. A dining-room table and chairs were hung near the gallery's ceiling; a wall sliced a conjugal bed into two hinged halves, which swung apart so that partners could lie head to head, but in different rooms. Two people who acknowledged no clear divisions between their architecture and their marriage, or between their office and their bedroom, had created a space in which design disrupted domesticity.

"It was a projection of a possible program," Diller explained. "It was about alienation and control of your space. Bodies can still merge, or they can be in totally different spaces. I think that would be an interesting bedroom. Well, I wouldn't say 'bedroom,' because that's an old-fashioned term, but an interesting *condition*."

Diller and Scofidio made frequent grant applications; whenever they received substantial money, they hired more associates. "We'd take on a bunch of people and say, 'We can't pay you very much but we'll have fun doing something beautiful, and when we're done we'll go our separate ways,'" Scofidio said. These temporary designers crowded the studio—a raw space whose bathroom was demarcated by a piece of fabric hanging from a beam. Architecture, even scruffy nonprofit architecture, is a round-the-clock profession, and, as projects overlapped, their apartment began to resemble a cross between a sweatshop and a commune. "People might be working until three or four in the morning, and another group would come in to give a client presentation at nine," Scofidio said. "It got so that we had to check into a hotel to get some sleep. The turning point came when the FedEx guy wandered in to use the bathroom."

Eventually, they moved out, reserving the apartment for their work. I first visited the studio several years ago, and it looked as though some household tasks had remained unfinished since 1979. An airplane propeller lay on the floor, a relic of some forgotten plan. "This is not a typical office," Scofidio told me at the time. "It's more of a skunk factory. When clients come to visit, I tell them, 'You're about to walk into the inside of our brain.'" But, even then, their business had outgrown their image of themselves. Lincoln Center officials came downtown for regular visits, enjoying the experience of slumming.

Last November, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, as the firm is now called, moved to a vast space in the Starrett-Lehigh Building, in Chelsea. The architects' new neighbors include Martha Stewart and Hugo Boss. Huge columns, reminiscent of an ancient Egyptian temple, give the office, which is on the eighteenth floor, a monumental feel. The décor reflects Diller's taste in clothes: white, black, and charcoal gray, with one area painted the same chartreuse as her favorite scarf. Forty-five architects and designers spend almost all their waking hours in the studio. The staff's dress code is bedhead chic: shirttails sticking out from V-neck sweaters, suspenders over T-shirts, unlaced sneakers. The practice is no longer a shabby cottage industry; it's a business that costs a quarter of a million dollars a month to run and that depends heavily on its partners' ability to bring in new commissions.

The studio still maintains what Diller likes to call its "money-losing division," which works on multimedia art projects, but the architecture side of the business can be financially draining, too. The designers enter several invitational competitions a year, and the cost of doing one can be as much as two hundred thousand dollars. Winning can guarantee years of employment, as with the High Line. In other cases, competing amounts to a form of architectural R. & D. Last year, a Danish public school announced its desire for a "visionary" new facility in Copenhagen's harbor; Diller Scofidio + Renfro responded by proposing that half the campus be submerged. During one of the early design meetings, Renfro raised his hand and said to the assembled team, "Just so we're clear: You know we're going to lose this if we keep going?" The designers talked for a while about whether to adopt a more conventional approach, or to take the request for something "visionary" at face value. They decided to keep working on their amphibious school, and lost the competition. So much for "Get the job."

Whenever a design meeting is called, architects drift over to a drafting table. Hardly anybody sits. Everybody interrupts. Diller presides, jabbing at models and drawings with a disappointed air. Scofidio says little. Renfro offers wry one-liners and categorical opinions. "Liz is the king," a twenty-eight-year old associate, Matt Peterson, explained to me. "Charles is the prince. Ric is the king, too, but he stays more in the background. He waits to say anything until he knows exactly what it is he wants to say." Despite this oligarchic structure, the design process is reasonably communal. Even the most junior staff members are listened to, and though everyone contributes suggestions, nobody takes ownership of any ideas. "Liz and Ric don't agree on everything," Peterson said. "But if they have different ideas we do it two ways. And then one of them gets picked. Usually Liz's."

One Friday afternoon, Peterson and a more senior associate, Gerard Sullivan, showed Diller materials that they had prepared for a Monday-morning presentation. The design was for the scholars' reading room at Juilliard: a small wood-panelled sanctum for perusing the school's collection of rare musical manuscripts. Sullivan and Peterson had worked through the night, and both were badly in need of a shower and a shave. Diller leafed through the pages and asked for a different rendering, which required taking a new photograph of the site and then using a computer to overlay a virtual-wood finish. "I'll be here Saturday and Sunday, so I can look at it whenever you're done," she said.

"I need to get some sleep at some point," Peterson murmured.

Diller nodded absently and went on with her instructions. Sullivan, who had already put his coat on, ground his teeth. After Diller hurried away to the next project, Peterson, who is Australian, began resignedly collecting the scattered drawings. "I did come halfway around the world to be here," he said.

From the studio's bank of windows, the architects can look down on the High Line, which begins across the street from the Javits Center, skirts the Hudson Rail Yards, and runs south through the industrial buildings where trains once delivered goods, all the way down to the meatpacking district. It is a rusted, industrial-age ruin that Diller and Scofidio find perversely appealing just the way it is. If they could get away with adding just a walkway of planks, they would. But parts of the structure are weak, so they'll have to dig down and make repairs to the concrete bed or the steel skeleton; they will then replace the soil and replant it, in order to create an illusion of evocative neglect. A system of concrete planks will allow vegetation to grow in the cracks, and in some places the pavers will leave room for an unruly patchwork of sumac, tall grass, and shrubs. Scofidio had originally hoped to use the top of an elevator as a mobile planter, so that a tree would sink and rise as the car went down to the street and up to the rail bed, but that idea was rejected as a maintenance nightmare.

Scofidio, surveying the project from the office windows, said that the allure of the High Line depends on a certain degree of inaccessibility. "We don't want to make too many entry points," he said. "We have a rhythm that looks like a musical composition—a rhythm like a bass drum on every block. Then we try to find places where we can open up views. My hope is that it doesn't become engulfed by developers." But the High Line crosses an area that is transforming so convulsively that the few meatpacking wholesalers left standing among the gleaming boutiques now look out of place. The developer André Balazs is building a luxury hotel that will grow beneath, above, and around the rail line, as an oak tree envelops an old fence. At Sixteenth Street, the builder of a condominium is negotiating for an entrance for his tenants directly onto the High Line, in exchange for providing public access, as well as an elevator and toilets. The Whitney Museum plans to construct a new outpost on Gansevoort Street, designed by Renzo Piano. Diller is philosophical about the gentrification process. "You have to be supple and understand New York, and the urban ecology of building development," she said. "The High Line is an attractor, and it's going to have big buildings around it. You just have to go with the flow."

Charles Renfro arrived for lunch at the Brasserie—a restaurant in the Seagram Building which the firm designed in 2000—wearing a knit vest over a long-underwear shirt, and a silk bandanna knotted at the neck. The place was full, and several parties huddled in the cramped foyer by the coat check, waiting for tables. "This doesn't work," Renfro said. "We're going to have to do something." He grimaced at the Formica stand supporting the maitre d's computer: "What happened to the beautiful one we gave them?" The Brasserie project had prompted Renfro to join Diller and Scofidio's studio. An undulating sheet of wood, not unlike the one planned for Tully Hall, flows across the Brasse-

"May I represent you across the street?"

rie's ceiling and down the walls, curving into a long banquette. "That wrapper was my idea," he said, after we sat down. He gestured to one side where thin lime-green walls, bolted to modernist benches, formed a series of intimate niches. "Liz thought of tilting the partitions between the booths, and Ric figured out the armature that holds them up. Every piece has a little of each of us in it."

Diller and Scofidio had spent so many years merging their identities—in 1999, they became the first architects, and the second married couple, to win a MacArthur Foundation Award—that promoting Renfro to partner was a little like adding another person to their marriage. At forty-two, Renfro is younger than three of Scofidio's children. "I'm not sure if I'm the kid they never had or the sibling who can break up a fight," he said. "I'm also very parental on occasion. I sometimes have to remind them that they have a third partner. It's not second nature to them to bring someone else into their decision-making." Tension is built into the firm's working method: all decisions are made by unanimous agreement, but Diller and Scofidio get to hash out their positions in private.

Besides being a pleasant place to have lunch, the Brasserie is also a form of social commentary. Behind the bar, a row of video monitors shows still images from a digital camera that is trained on the revolving door, recording each customer's arrival. The screens bring glimpses of the street into the windowless dining room, turning a surveillance system into a form of narcissistic entertainment and display. Since the images remain on the monitors for several minutes, you can sit at the bar and see your televised double enter the restaurant. Here, the watched watch themselves. I asked Renfro what he thought the impact of this architectural essay might be on our fellow-diners. He answered with a question: "Will people understand that the Seagram is a Mies van der Rohe building—the most famous glass building in the world—and this is a room with no windows, and so we invented another form of windows? No. But you'd likely give some thought to surveillance."

A few days later, I asked Tod Williams how much such theories matter once a building is open for business. He responded that architects try to exert control over the interpretation of their work, but they can't. "Because Liz talks about her projects so much, I start by reading them in her terms, but on my own I experience them differently," he said. "In the end, the Brasserie is a restaurant."

The Brasserie gave the studio a reputation for treating modernist landmarks with a mixture of respectfulness and theatrical flair. Lincoln Center, the grand dowager of performance-arts complexes, needs similar treatment. It is designed for certain minutes of magic: when the opera lets out on a winter's night and snowflakes mingle with the fountain's illuminated spray, or when, in the half hour before a concert starts, crowds swarm like moths toward the luminous box of Avery Fisher Hall. But, during the daytime, the plaza becomes a desert of pavement, and the buildings, dressed in soot-stained travertine, reveal their dowdiness. One of the goals of the redevelopment is to make the glamour last all day.

In some ways, Lincoln Center is a holdover from another New York. Its planners built the complex as much to keep the wrong sort of people out as to welcome the right ones in. The various performance halls are spread out on a rise above the street. Great faceless walls rear up like castle battlements on the western side, which at the time of construction faced low-income neighborhoods. Today, though, Lincoln Center huddles in the shadow of luxury high-rises. Discussions about renovating began with the understanding that making a bastion of snobbish defensiveness feel fresh, democratic, and inviting required some delicate, yet bold, interventions.

The call went out to internationally prominent architects—including Richard Meier and Norman Foster—who responded with proposals that involved tearing down a large chunk of Lincoln Center and starting anew. "We had architects who came to us and said, 'Avery Fisher Hall's in the wrong place, so we have to either move it or move Broadway,'" Reynold Levy recalled. As the multimillion-dollar egos jostled each other, Diller and Scofidio stepped in with a message of startling humility—in essence, "We love Lincoln Center." They found the center's marbled modernism a little hokey, but it was a hokeyness that they liked. Diller talked about revealing the complex's essence by "peeling" away walls and replacing them with glass, referring to the process as an "elaborate striptease." She proposed extending Juilliard toward Broadway and breaching the building's mass with a glass-walled dance studio visible from the street. Instead of practicing behind concrete walls, dancers would perform on Broadway, day and night. The architects' most audacious stroke was the decision to put a restaurant in the stylish but unfriendly plaza in front of the Vivian Beaumont Theatre. In the new design, a long, windowed dining room supports an undulating grass roof that dips down to plaza level at one corner and lifts toward the sky at another. In nice weather, Upper West Siders, Juilliard students, and Met choristers can mingle on the green slope, making the campus feel more collegiate.

"Money, I'm home!"

Throughout the design process, Lincoln Center's leaders have seen relatively little of Scofidio or Renfro; Diller makes all the presentations and navigates the byzantine web of committees and conflicting agendas. So Diller got the credit for figuring out how to get patrons to the theatres while minimizing the risk of being hit by a car. To approach Lincoln Center from the front, pedestrians have had to negotiate the bow tie formed by Broadway and Columbus Avenue, climb a set of treacherous stairs, and then watch out for taxis speeding through the drop-off lane. Diller couldn't do anything about the thirteen lanes of converging traffic out front, but she suggested that the drop-off lane be depressed below street level and bridged by a longer, more glamorous staircase that would stretch from Broadway up to the plaza. Diller sold what she calls "a sexy, ceremonial entrance" as a bonus to a neat piece of traffic engineering. "There was an 'Aha!' moment when she showed that image of the tunnel under the stairway," Levy told me. "Everyone said, 'That's it!'"

Arriving at such moments of concord requires hundreds of hours of experimentation, frustration, and inventiveness. I spent an afternoon at the studio, sitting in on an extended discussion about the footbridge that will eventually connect the two parts of Lincoln Center, on either side of West Sixty-fifth Street. Until last summer, the main campus and the northern wing, which includes Juilliard and the administrative offices, were linked by a wide overpass that gave the street below the grim, dark look of an industrial facility. That blot has been taken down, and the architects originally proposed replacing it with a glass catwalk cutting diagonally across the street. Problems proliferated: the long span proved too expensive; the city bureaucracy sent conflicting signals; and the supports for an alternative version would have had to be threaded through a tangle of buried utility cables.

The day I visited, dozens of models for the overpass cluttered the studio's shelves and work surfaces; they ranged from expressively baroque shapes to clunky platforms. The team had decided to focus on a sleek steel-and-glass scheme with side panels tapering in opposite directions, like arrows flying past each other. Diller worried that the flat metal surfaces would feel too opaque. "How do we break up the mass?" she asked. She picked up a model that showed tiny perforations punched in the metal cladding and expressed enthusiasm for it. One of the senior project architects, Robert Condon, objected. "What I like here is the simplicity," he said. "The minute you add up these openings, you lose that. It's like we don't have the self-confidence to say, 'This is what it is.' Now we have to make it diaphanous?" He spat the last word out, as if it were vulgar.

The conversation bounced between aesthetics and practicalities. Could the starkness and gloss of steel panels be considered "light"? How would the glass sides be held in place? Could a canopy be attached? How would the city bureaucrats react? Eventually, a couple of tired architects, who had been sketching elements of the design, started fighting over a pencil and a piece of tracing paper. "C'mon guys, let's keep our eyes on the big picture here," Diller said. "What's under our feet? Concrete's not going to read."

"Can we use steel?" Renfro suggested.

Diller vetoed the idea. "That'll be slippery."

"Steel will rust out," Scofidio added. "What if you cover the surface with mesh?"

"That'll get gum in it," Diller objected. "And what about high heels?"

But Renfro seized on the idea of carpeting the walkway with wire mesh. "We can fill the holes with resin. Then you light it so it'll glow. That's so easy!"

Diller nodded. "The whole surface wants to be luminous," she said. She

LISTEN

Everything about you,
my life, is both
make-believe and real.
We are like a couple
working the night shift
in a bomb factory.

Come quietly, one says
to the other
as he takes her by the hand
and leads her
to a rooftop
overlooking the city.

At this hour, if one listens
long and hard,
one can hear a fire engine
in the distance,
but not the cries for help,

just the silence
growing deeper
at the sight of a small child
leaping out of a window
with its nightclothes on fire.

—Charles Simic

often endows architectural details with anthropomorphic passions.

Condon was getting dyspeptic: "Just make it out of radium. That'll glow."

A week later, Levy came in to see a model of the bridge. Diller tried to brief him on the studio's creative process, show him various rejected models, and work her way logically to the new consensus. "Where's the latest bridge?" Levy interrupted. "I like to skip to the end of the book." Diller produced the model, which depicted steel panels on the outside and naked trusses inside. "We're very excited about this," she said. "It doesn't feel like a compromise." Instead, it was the Hitchcock-cameo of bridges: simple, unobtrusive, and scene-stealing, all at the same time.

"I like it, too," Levy said. "Go for it."

Levy later told me that what he appreciates most about Diller is her ability to cut through a thicket of logistical brambles with an elegant intellectual stroke. "There is no higher compliment that you can give an American than to say she's a pragmatic problem solver," he said. "I don't see her as an architectural philosopher. I am aware that she goes up to Princeton and indulges that side of herself, but we haven't seen it."

Toward the end of the fall semester, I drove to Princeton, where Diller has been teaching since 1991, to follow her around for an afternoon of "desk crits"—a series of one-on-one sessions in which she evaluated her graduate students' final projects. They had each designed a hypothetical U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. Diller's first student produced a drawing of a building shaped like a border wall. She explained that an embassy is an "interface" between one country and another, so she had distilled its architecture down to pure façade: a building ten feet wide and a mile long, with "digital information" projected onto the exterior. Diller wondered how you could fit a visa office into such a skinny structure, let alone a meeting hall.

"It works," the student assured her. "I've figured it all out."

"I'll have to take your word for it. But what's going to be on those screens? Who's going to control them? It's not enough just to say 'digital information.' You have to be more specific."

Diller moved on to a student who had put the embassy on pontoons on the Tigris River, using the roof as a bridge between Shiite and Sunni neighborhoods. Then came a young man who had the idea of a "self-dismantling" embassy that would shrink as the military components of the American mission fell away. He had gone through a spasm of building models, and his drafting table was covered with them. "We're always taught that we're building for permanence, but why?" Diller mused. "I like the idea of a prosthetic architecture! When a section is removed, the building readjusts its weight distribution, like a living body. The question is: Can the building's progressive decay be encoded in the choice of materials? Can you use materials that deteriorate at different rates?" Neither Diller nor the student seemed bothered by the notion of representing the U.S. presence in Iraq in terms of a body with its limbs falling off.

The architects in the Chelsea studio don't have the leeway that Princeton students do to use architecture as a means of rewriting an unsatisfactory world. But they still subscribe to the belief that architecture expresses a society's aspirations, and also to the more tenuous assumption that it can mold society itself. The shape of a baseball stadium can affect a batter's swing; the form of a courthouse can ease the path of justice. Such utopian thinking underlies the firm's method: rather than execute what clients demand, the architects instruct them in what they really want—and show them what their desires really mean.

"*Architects*," Diller said—by which she meant "normal" architects—"will say, 'We need a conference room,' so they know it has to have a big table, and some chairs, and they'll start looking at materials. *We* would start talking about power relationships."

When I asked her whether they had subjected the conference room in their own studio to a similar analysis, Diller grinned. "Of course not," she said. "We just needed a big table and some chairs."

It's hard not to feel that the pressures from accountants, building codes, clients' demands, and fluctuations in the cost of steel have been salutary for a team of architects who once scorned those constraints. There's less leisure for rhetoric when construction documents are due. But they all need to keep a little theory in their lives, and that is why the three partners have maintained connections to academe. Scofidio still teaches at Cooper Union; Diller has her students at Princeton; Renfro is on the faculty at Columbia. Yet they have mixed feelings about the role teaching plays in their creative lives. "You have to give so much," Diller moaned one day in Boston. "You're sapping the energy you have for your own work." We were having a late lunch after the opening ceremonies for the Institute of Contemporary Art. The morning's adrenaline was wearing off and Diller looked drained. Renfro, too, seemed tired and burdened. His cell phone rang and he got up to take the call. "That was about Lincoln Center," he announced when he returned. "They want to talk to us to plan a meeting about planning a meeting." He rejoined the discussion of teaching. "It's when you have time to think, outside the professional demands of the office," he said. His cell phone rang again, but he silenced it and raised his eyebrows as if to say, "You see?"

Scofidio placed his fingertips together and closed his eyes. The others waited a minute or two, until he had figured out just how to formulate his thoughts. "When you teach, you go through two or three problems in a semester, and it keeps your brain working on a faster rhythm," he finally began. "One of the things I loved about playing jazz was the immediacy of it. And, with our earlier projects, we'd work on something for two weeks, put it up for a month, and then it would be in a landfill in New Jersey. With the I.C.A., it's been five years from the time we first heard about the project until today."

The Institute of Contemporary Art used to occupy a hunkered former police station in Boston's Back Bay. In 2001, its director, Jill Medvedow, heard a Harvard lecture by Diller and Scofidio, who were on her short list of architects to design a new building. The architects knew that she was in the room and expected her to greet them afterward. Instead, Medvedow recalled, "I slipped out, my head spinning, thinking, I absolutely can't choose them: they're too academic, too theoretical. But I was strangely drawn to them and their work, so I decided to visit them at their studio. The language and the conversation were so different! They convinced me that they had been speaking to an academic audience at Harvard, but they were quite capable of switching languages."

The theatrical stroke of the new I.C.A.—the way its upper section levitates above the water's edge—is partly the product of logistical constraints. Medvedow wanted all the art to be displayed on one floor, and since the site's footprint wasn't big enough, the solution was to turn the gallery into one gigantic cantilever. Nautical planking on the boardwalk rolls up the museum's outdoor grandstand and runs beneath a glass curtain on the second floor, across the auditorium's stage, and on up the back wall. From there, it doubles back along the ceiling, creating a wooden wrapper similar to the one in the Brasserie and Alice Tully Hall.

The outside of the museum commands attention; the inside becomes a mechanism for framing views. The theatre has no wings or flies or backstage—only a glass wall facing a vista of water and oil tankers gliding slowly by. One level above, the galleries are nestled in the building's interior, away from the broad glare of daylight. A glassed-in corridor runs along the side like an imperial sunroom, offering a wide-screen view of the city. The architects had planned to cover the glass with an adhesive film that would emulate those early flat-panel computers which could be viewed only head on, and went dark when seen from one side. The film would have allowed a three-foot transparent slice directly in front of each person; a visitor could see the whole panorama incrementally, by walking the hallway's full length, but never in a single sweep of the eye. "For us, it was an opportunity to have a more dynamic and active relationship with the view—not to dispense it all at once but to have it reveal itself slowly," Diller explained. The mayor of Boston stopped by during construction and was appalled that anyone would want to obscure such a spectacular view of his city. The glass was left clear.

"It's not such a big deal," Diller said, after recounting the disagreement for the third time. "We're over it."

Scofidio shrugged. "They'll do one show, and then they'll put the film up."

"Bring me a stem cell."

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The space that best represents the firm's conceptual approach to architecture is the I.C.A.'s *médiathèque*. A cabinet-like room drops down like a trapdoor from the underside of the cantilever. Ostensibly, it's a haven for research and electronic art, and it does contain computers. But the real focus is a single window at the bottom of steeply raked bleachers, framing a rectangle of water that appears as a moving, liquid abstraction. Some visitors drift to the lowest level, where the view includes a distant strip of piers, but Diller hates it when they do that.

"I think of the window as the fireplace," Scofidio said. Diller touched him on the elbow and shook her head emphatically: wrong metaphor. "*We* think of it as the ultimate screen saver," she explained. Not coincidentally, the idle computers in the room had images of waves lapping across their screens. On the day that the I.C.A. opened, Diller and Scofidio watched a man wander into the *médiathèque* and stand just where he was supposed to, at the top of the stairs, mesmerized by the slow dance of water and light in the harbor. Finally, he shook his head in wonder, turned to go, and murmured, "It's amazing what you can do with high definition." The architects were thrilled. After all these years, they had finally succeeded in making reality look like an elegant illusion. ♦