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Elizabeth Diller
“Redesigning New York without thinking about who will pay me”

> The American architect reveals the secrets behind The Shed and the High Line
> “In the US, the public sector doesn’t fund culture, but it helps bring people together around projects.”

by Andrea Veglia

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Elizabeth Diller, recently in Turin for a conference, is the woman of the moment in the architectural world. A few months ago, she inaugurated the new spaces of London’s Victoria and Albert Museum. She is among the finalists in the competition for the renovation of the Louvre in Paris.
At the Venice Architecture Biennale, ending on Sunday, she is present with three installations. Canal Café, for which she received the Golden Lion, stages the cycle of phytodepuration: water drawn from the lagoon is purified and transformed into a cup of coffee.
A New Yorker born in Łódź, Poland, she leads Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the firm that arguably more than any other has contributed to New York’s transformation in the first quarter of this century, with projects such as the renovation of Lincoln Center and MoMA, the High Line – the disused elevated railway turned linear park and now a symbol of the city – and The Shed, a multidisciplinary cultural center.

You worked on the Shed project for three years without having a client. How did it begin?
“Everything started with an open call for proposals from anyone with an idea for a new cultural entity at Hudson Yards, over the train yards in Manhattan. It was 2008, a moment of great economic recession. No one would respond, because culture is the first thing dismissed when there’s no money. So I figured: ‘Well, let’s try!’ New York lacked a place where all the arts could be under one roof. We envisioned this building that was a kind of transformer – it could get bigger, smaller, indoors, outdoors – and the city said, ‘It’s fantastic, but we don’t have the money to fund it. Why don’t you just develop it?’ A very informal dialogue began, but there was no client, no budget, no one paying us. So we thought that this could be self-sustaining. That was one of the most important elements, because in the United States there’s no public money for culture.”

How did you manage it?
“It is mostly philanthropy that supports culture, but at that time even wealthy people weren’t sure they still had money in the bank. Thinking about what could finance it, we considered the Frieze art fair and Fashion Week, events that already existed and rented space. If this were a place for culture, for cultural enterprises, with a balance betw productions and shared use of the space that generated income, maybe it could w started building a network, speaking with many people. Three years later, the city asked us to present the idea to Michael Bloomberg, who was then mayor.
We explained our plan. He didn’t give us money, but he assigned financial experts to help us”.

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A big help…
“It was incredible. And behind the scenes we could rely on Kate D. Levin, the commissioner of cultural affairs. Even though she couldn’t do anything specific, she made it possible for us to gather all the city’s cultural organizations in one meeting to understand what we all needed. That way we became allies, not competitors. It was a brilliant idea. From there the project truly took shape. In 2012 a startup was formed—then called Culture Shed—and we finally obtained a contract.
Over the next year and a half, we raised the money and assembled the board. In 2019, The Shed opened its doors.”

The Shed is physically connected to the High Line, a project that has become known worldwide and attracts 8 million visitors a year—more than the Met, MoMA, or the Empire State Building. In that case, everything began with a citizens’ committee…
“The High Line was an abandoned elevated railway. In 1999, Rudolph Giuliani, then mayor, signed an order to demolish it. Two young activists, not yet thirty, began campaigning to save it. They looked at it from above and saw plants growing there by chance—an accidental ecosystem. In 2003 they launched an ideas competition and showed the proposals in Grand Central Station. There were wild ideas from students all over the world. The Bloomberg administration took an interest and launched a competition. Ric (Scofidio) used to say we had to save the High Line from architecture. And with that idea, we won. Construction began in 2006, and from then on, the park was opened piece by piece.”

And how was it funded?
“Partly by the city, but most of the money came from donations. Barry Diller – no relation to me – and his wife Diane von Furstenberg contributed substantially. The city ended up with an asset that nobody expected to be successful: they had only envisioned adding some green space to an area that had none, but it ws so much more becoming.”

In Italy, the belief is that culture and public spaces should be funded by the state, and private contributions – except from banking foundations – are marginal.
“For Americans it’s a kind of societal obligation. Many own art collections and truly see themselves as patrons. They feel deeply connected to institutions. There’s a whole history of patronage in America: museums and concert halls like Carnegie Hall are named after wealthy families. Then in the Reagan era, funding for cultural institutions was cut; they were no longer seen as necessities but as luxuries – and as such, should be supported by the wealthy. It was a horrible idea, but that’s what happened, and today there is very little dependence on government.”

In 2018 you created the Mile Long Opera on the High Line, involving a thousand singers arranged along the entire length of the park. A completely autonomous project. How do you find the energy for initiatives like that?
“We’re an architecture studio. But I believe one must always try to do something one isn’t quite ready for. When I'm obsessed with something, then I make it happen, no matter what.”