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Morphing Lincoln Center

Elizabeth Diller, Ricardo Scofidio, Jorge Otero-Pailos

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1. Juilliard School / Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center, New York City. Original building, Pietro Belluschi, architect, 1969. Intervention and restoration, Diller + Scofidio, architects, 2006–8. Night view from southeast during construction, 2008. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

Interview

Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo
Scofidio

Interviewed by Jorge Otero-Pailos

Morphing Lincoln Center

Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio have added their signature to Lincoln Center's Julliard School building, forty years after Pietro Belluschi's original design was completed in 1968. Their intervention involved demolishing the eastern façade and extending the footprint of the building over the existing plaza toward Broadway. In this interview, Diller and Scofidio argue that their radical transformation of the historic fabric nevertheless functions as a means of preserving the most historically significant features of the original building, including its internal organization, which was previously hidden behind uniform travertine and is now exposed through strategically located glass apertures. In a significant departure from typological and stylistic theories of architectural restoration, Diller and Scofidio advance the notion of morphing as a way to extend the significant elements of a historic building without mimicking or negating them.

JORGE OTERO-PAILOS: Let's start with the question of unity. Your work at Lincoln Center involves a range of interventions throughout the campus. What holds your project together?

ELIZABETH DILLER: The project started very small, looking at West Sixty-fifth street, and then it grew to include the expansion of the lobbies of Alice Tully Hall that faced the street, then was enlarged to include the Hall in its entirety along with the expansion of the Julliard School—the two institutions housed in the Pietro Belluschi building. It then grew again to include a new space for the Lincoln Center Film Society and a redesign of the main plaza facing Broadway. The issue of the continuity of language was important because, if done the wrong way, it could feel like a lot of little small things. There is a 50s and 60s language there that had not been intruded upon. What we're trying to do is to have a cohesive language that doesn't feel entirely alien to what's there, but at the same time it is in another idiom; it's something that would never be mistaken for contextualism, but something that is of the DNA of what's there.

We really wanted the new work to be legible. But at the same time we were concerned about it being alien. Lincoln Center is part of the iconography of New York, and even though the buildings may not be stellar—and they underwent a lot of criticism when they were built—now they're part of the

city. We felt that the right thing to do, and the most interesting thing to do, was to play off of what's there, as if developing the new from the old DNA.

JOP: How would you characterize the DNA of Lincoln Center?

RICARDO SCOFIDIO: It has to do with notions of the public. The DNA of the original Lincoln Center was to be public, but the fact is that it came in and obliterated Hell's Kitchen. They wiped out an area that the civic leaders wanted to clean up, but they still found themselves embedded in that area with all its social tensions. So there was a desire to make it like a fortress, with a main approach from Central Park and the more refined, genteel area of the city. There was at one point a plan to cut a huge swath from the Metropolitan Opera straight to Central Park doing this kind of huge Versailles approach.

ED: Urbanistically, Lincoln Center was automobile oriented, not pedestrian or community oriented. All the performance venues were raised up on a plinth, which created a plaza level that was supposed to be the public level. Below it, the street dives from Broadway to Amsterdam, by something like eighteen feet, a full level. And negotiating that change in topography there is an opaque travertine wall. The plinth is also the enclosure for the garage and the central mechanical plant, so that's what's connecting the whole campus together in a sense, but at the same time, it's what divorces it from the city. All of those parks and open spaces on the plinth were supposed to be for public activities, public concerts, and all of that. But Lincoln Center has a very hard time staging things in those public spaces. There was an idea among the new leadership to democratize the campus. They wanted to break down the hostile quality of the place and return it to its original intent to be public. We were very much politically aligned with the clients to make the campus more open, more porous, to bring the outside in and to bring the inside out, to make these open spaces a destination for the public without tickets to an event. So you can choose to go there instead of going to the MoMA sculpture garden or to Central Park.

RS: We always felt that we ought to make Lincoln Center more Lincoln Center than Lincoln Center. That is, to really pull out all the activities, conditions, energies that are there and really make them public. For example, nobody knew how to find Alice Tully Hall. I mean, things were literally buried and not visible to the public. So our work became more a stripping away and exposing, rather than literally adding to.

ED: We did it by eroding the edges, by making the base transparent, by making many more entrances, by making them really interesting thresholds, by reconnecting, by actually taking

2. Juilliard School / Alice Tully Hall, montage of south elevation during construction, 2008. Photograph by Jorge Otero-Pailos.

down the Milstein bridge which was a two-hundred-foot-long shadow over Sixty-fifth Street, and turning it into just a regular street. To do this we had to reroute a lot of the traffic that went underground so that there would be fewer curb cuts. We added two big electronic stairs and those stairs are meant to basically dematerialize the edge of the base, to flatten it, to make it electronic, to make it informative. It's like an electronic welcome mat to bring the public in.

RS: Lincoln Center clearly felt that their constituents, the body of people who use Lincoln Center, were getting old, and they weren't bringing in the younger generation. And I think they thought that if they made new public spaces, this would start to attract a younger crowd there. I don't think they were thinking about it in terms of the architecture or seeing this as a renovation or revitalization. They wanted somehow activate Sixty-fifth Street and make it a little bit more pleasurable for people to walk on. I think they saw it primarily as something that would help change the constituent body that was at Lincoln Center.

3. Broadway façade of Juilliard School / Alice Tully Hall prior to intervention. Photograph courtesy Diller + Scofidio architects.

JOP: It is interesting that you associate the public with access—both physical and visual—from the street. Travertine, which is ever present at Lincoln Center, stands in the way of that access. It clads the plinth and conceals interiors. At key points, you are replacing it with glass, precisely to provide public access. Yet travertine was meant to signify publicness, in reference to the classical civic spaces of Renaissance Rome, like the Campidoglio. You are continuing the use of travertine but also grafting glass as cladding at key moments, especially in the Belluschi building.

ED: I think your observation is totally right and I think that's maybe what's behind it to different degrees of consciousness. I think initially what we wanted to do here was to have a double skin, to have translucent travertine and have a glass skin just behind it. But we couldn't pull that off, so it went in another direction. But we always wanted to undermine the travertine that was there and sometimes we just removed it and sometimes we're just altering it in different ways. It was a pretty complicated thing to figure out what could be done here from a programmatic and a formal standpoint.

RS: Travertine is always a skin. The travertine in these buildings is not load bearing. It's as though, in travertine becoming transparent, it's more than it becoming glass.

ED: It's interesting because the other travertine buildings that were built before establish a kind of classical monumental scale and form. The Belluschi building, even though it is massive

4. The Broadway elevation of Juilliard School / Alice Tully Hall, with structure exposed, prior to creation of new structure and glass façade. Photograph courtesy Diller + Scofidio architects.

and top heavy, is not in that more classical, monumental modern style that the other buildings were. It is a brutalist building that shamelessly takes on travertine as a clad. That's why I call it "brutalism in drag." It knows better, but it has to conform with the rest of the look and the outfit of Lincoln Center. So it's kind of outing the building a little bit, through details that allow the skin to be more skin-like.

RS: There was actually some very beautiful design that went into the Belluschi building, which had always been hidden behind the travertine. So we wanted to tease this out and we didn't want to erase it. We did not want to make it a hodge-podge of things, but really to finally reveal the unity of the building by removing this skin. In a curious way, this is a lot like our mantra on the High Line where we're defending it from architecture. There is the desire to go in and be the architect, on the other level, you understand you can really just go in and tease out incredible things that are there, you don't have to overlay them or redo them, you can bring them forward. There are three halls in this building that people were never really aware of that are now exposed to the public. The entrance to Juilliard, which is now off of Sixty-fifth Street, actually returns back to the original entrance that Belluschi had designed and that got erased when the building was built.

ED: Basically there are two projects and two clients for this building. There's Juilliard above and there's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts below, which owns Alice Tully Hall and

5. Juilliard School / Alice Tully Hall under construction, 2008. The overhanging southeast corner opens vistas of the entire Lincoln Center site just to the south. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

6. Exposed structure of new corner of Juilliard School / Alice Tully Hall at Sixty-fifth Street and Broadway, during construction, 2008. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

7. The completed new glass façade of Juilliard School / Alice Tully Hall following intervention by Diller + Scofidio. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

runs it. The expansion could only go sideways toward Broadway, it couldn't go up because the building had no lateral bracing. We basically extruded the top three floors out into Broadway. And then we sliced that volume on the diagonal of Broadway so this line is very clear. It's a very sheer glass façade. By expanding this building and undercutting it so it's acute in one direction in plan and also has an acute profile in sections, we allowed our two clients programs and identities to be separated. One cantilevered element sits on top of a new framed entrance to Tully, which never really had any identity. Tully was definitely the most internally focused building at Lincoln Center. A building like the Metropolitan Opera or even Avery Fisher Hall is very exhibitionistic with a lot of glass, showing the buzz of people, the exchange, and the exposure. All that is very much a part of the vocabulary of Lincoln Center. But not the Belluschi building, which was really fortress-like. We asked ourselves, "Why shouldn't it be as exhibitionistic as the Met?" And through these parallel activities of expanding, framing, exposing, and so forth, we treated it like a big architectural striptease. We'd take away the stone and it'd be exposed, and then we'd dress it up with glass.

RS: Facing Broadway there is now a large expanse of glass. If you walk around the city and look at buildings with glass that big, you find heavy structures behind them holding them up. We wanted to do a glass façade that wouldn't have a heavy structure, that would feel very diaphanous and visually clear. One of the goals in opening Lincoln Center up was not to suddenly put back a glass wall that became equally a kind of a barrier with a heavy structure.

JOP: When does the work of revealing the public nature of the Belluschi building turn into an exhibition of something other than what was there?

ED: We're not saying, "look here, this is where I begin." For example, at the south façade of Julliard you can't actually see where the new work begins. We did everything we could to use the travertine out of the same quarry and the same part of the quarry. Everything was the same. We made a point about having a continuous transition from the old to the new. But the places where we needed openings did not coincide with the existing window pattern. So we came up with this sculptural idea of making punches in very random, or seemingly random, places. That, to me, is closer to morphing than to an intervention or to an expressed addition. It's like the building itself is twisting itself into something and there are all these different moments. Every time you make a section, it's a very different section. And that's something that happens in space

8. Juxtaposition of existing Sixty-fifth Street façade of Juilliard School / Alice Tully Hall at left with intervention by Diller + Scofidio at right. Photograph by Jorge Otero-Pailos.

9. Detail of intervention during construction, contrasting existing travertine with new glass elements. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

10. Alice Tully Hall lobby, 2008. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

and I think that morphing may be applied to Lincoln Center work in general as a kind of time and space issue.

JOP: It is interesting that you relate your concept of morphing to the question of time. One could argue that the nineteenth-century understanding of time, as a sequence of discrete segments, led to the notion that new additions to existing buildings should be distinct from the old, articulated and separated through a joint. You seem to be thinking of time as something that is, on the one hand, embedded and continuous, but also impossible to reverse engineer.

ED: I think that that's a really important observation in terms of the joint at Juilliard; that's why we fretted over it so much. Because the proper thing to do would have been to express where the new work begins, unless you were just doing something contextual and, you know, postmodern. In that case I guess you would want to deny that joint entirely, you might want to deny the joint or you might want to express the joint in some kind of new historical language. We wanted to have that much more slippery connection than either a kind of historicist approach or an appropriate preservation addition approach.

RS: With landmark buildings, historical buildings, the assumption is that any addition has to be very clearly read as something separate from the old. The joint has to be expressed, the material isn't going to be the same material. You want to read that as the addition. And in that case, we've broken those rules.

11. Lincoln Center, New York City, 2008. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

ED: Yeah, that would be the proper preservationist approach. But I think we make up for that because the reason for insisting on the distinction between new and old is in order not to make a fake thing, to not pass something new into something that might have been built originally. We stuck to the ethic of being very honest about what's new is new.

RS: If the Belluschi building had been landmarked and we had to adhere to those traditional rules we would never have produced this. It would have been a totally different resolution.

ED: If it had been landmarked we wouldn't have been able to strip that east wall off.

RS: What's important in what we were able to do is that the joint blurs the moment of its execution. It can be very difficult to know when the building happened.

ED: Because you can't find the joint.

RS: Because you can't find the joint, but also in the sense that in the over fifty years of Lincoln Center, values changed as needs changed, and the building kept adapting itself. And we're at this point where it is today. And you know, one could say, "that happened over fifty years" and one would not be able to disprove it. Even though it happened within two years.

ED: The language of the joint is such that it doesn't really call attention to itself. It doesn't allow one to point to it, to that element. The joint blurs itself. Just coming back to what I said earlier, we were struggling to find a unifying language of everything that's new that we're putting in there. And part of that unifying language is this blurring or morphing.

Author Biographies

Elizabeth Diller is a founding member of Diller Scofidio + Renfro since 1979. She was born in Lodz, Poland, and attended the Cooper Union School of Art and received a Bachelor of Architecture from the Cooper Union School of Architecture. Diller is an associate professor of architecture at Princeton University.

Ricardo Scofidio, RA, a founding member of Diller Scofidio + Renfro since 1979, was born in New York City. He attended the Cooper Union School of Architecture and received a Bachelor of Architecture from Columbia University. Scofidio is professor emeritus of Architecture at Cooper Union and has been a practicing architect since 1964. Diller Scofidio + Renfro's built projects include the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, comprised of Alice Tully Hall, the Juilliard School of Music, the School of American Ballet, and other public spaces; the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston; the Blur Building for the Swiss Expo 2002; the High Line in New York; and the Creative Arts Center for Brown University. For commitment to integrating architecture with issues of contemporary culture, the MacArthur Foundation presented them with its "genius" grant (1999–2004), the first time the fellowship had been awarded to architects.