

His ‘Soft White Cube’ Is Conquering TriBeCa

With more than a dozen projects, the architect Markus Dochantschi of studioMDA is reshaping the state of the art gallery, one historic building at a time.

By Zachary Small

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Construction crews were roaming TriBeCa. All around, one could hear the omnipresent drills echoing from within historic cast-iron buildings. Inside 384 Broadway, standing before a junk heap quadruple his size, the architect Markus Dochantschi was explaining how a gallery might find its own identity when virtually everyone has the same white walls and concrete floors. God was in the details — and in the lighting fixtures and in the floorboards.

“The architecture must speak,” Dochantschi said, above the noise of sledgehammers and buzzsaws, which are transforming the derelict space into a flexible showroom for the multicultural artists of Alexander Gray Associates. The architect insisted on keeping ornamental details like the Corinthian columns and tin ceilings from the early 1900s. “If it was just another completely neutral space, then why come to this gallery?”

Designs for contemporary art galleries have stayed relatively unchanged for the past century, with most dealers favoring a rigid “white cube” style harking back to when artists from the de Stijl and Bauhaus sought to minimize distractions. Institutions like the Museum of Modern Art soon adopted the white aesthetic as a neutral space in which to view abstract art. Critics have grumbled for decades that the style is “antiseptic” and “restrictive,” but there have been few major galleries willing to abandon the industry standard.



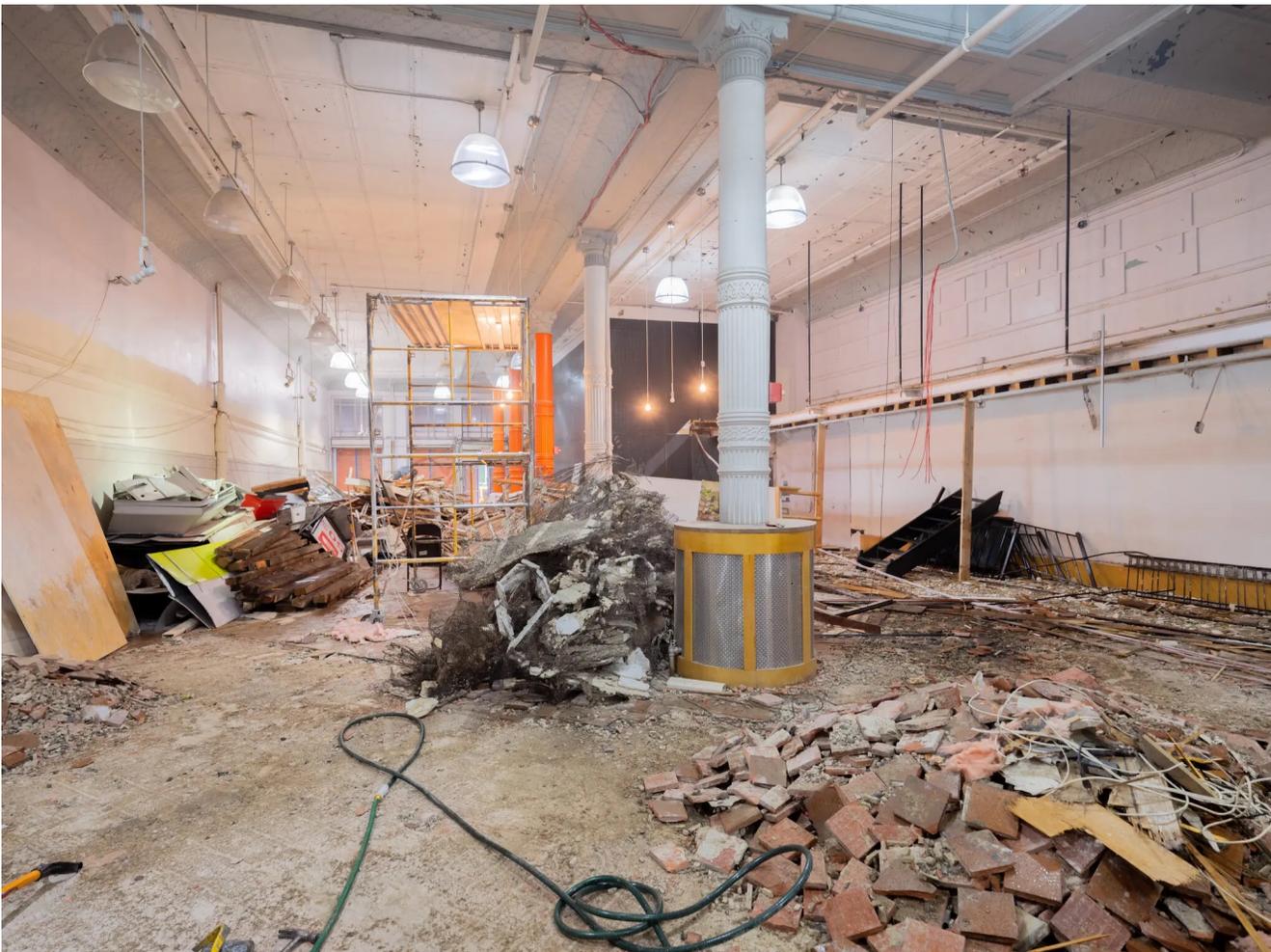
A rendering of Alexander Gray's new TriBeCa gallery space with lighting that pays homage to the building's original open atrium. Dochantschi insisted on keeping ornamental details like the columns at back. studioMDA

But Dochantschi has cultivated a loyal following by gradually weaning the art world off its addiction to harsh lighting, frosted windows and architecture that intimidates people rather than welcoming them. He is best known for the 2021 renovation of the Phillips auction house at 432 Park Avenue, where he dropped the main concourse into the basement and upset the classic image of a “behind closed doors” auction with large windows that allowed the public to watch sales from the street.

His philosophy of what he calls the “soft white cube” has grown popular in TriBeCa, where he is the unofficial planner of New York City’s new arts district growing between Walker Street and White Street, some 50 galleries strong, according to neighborhood real estate brokers.

“An architectural design should not take center stage when it’s supposed to recede into the background of an artist’s work,” said Gray, who is moving to TriBeCa after 17 years in Chelsea. He selected Dochantschi for the project because of “the quietness” of his other projects —and a strong recommendation from his broker.

Behind every hungry architect is a hungry real-estate agent, and Dochantschi has received many projects through referrals from Jonathan Travis, who estimates that he has placed almost 35 galleries around the block, including Alexander Gray Associates, Luhring Augustine and Marian Goodman.



Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

Travis began selling TriBeCa to galleries nearly a decade ago, after the Whitney Museum started construction on its new space in the Meatpacking District and Chelsea became saturated with galleries interested in ground-floor showrooms with big skylights. TriBeCa was a good alternative because its renovated warehouse buildings already had high ceilings and large basements above water levels that could be used for storage, a feature that Chelsea lacked.

“About 10 years ago, I started cold-emailing gallerists like Marian Goodman,” Travis said, recalling the swift rejection letter that he received from the gallery. But the story changed recently when the gallery’s directors made plans to leave the midtown space that Goodman had rented on West 57th Street for more than 40 years. The contracts were signed in February on a leased space that will become one of TriBeCa’s largest galleries, which Dochantschi is also renovating.

“I find them, he designs them,” Travis said.

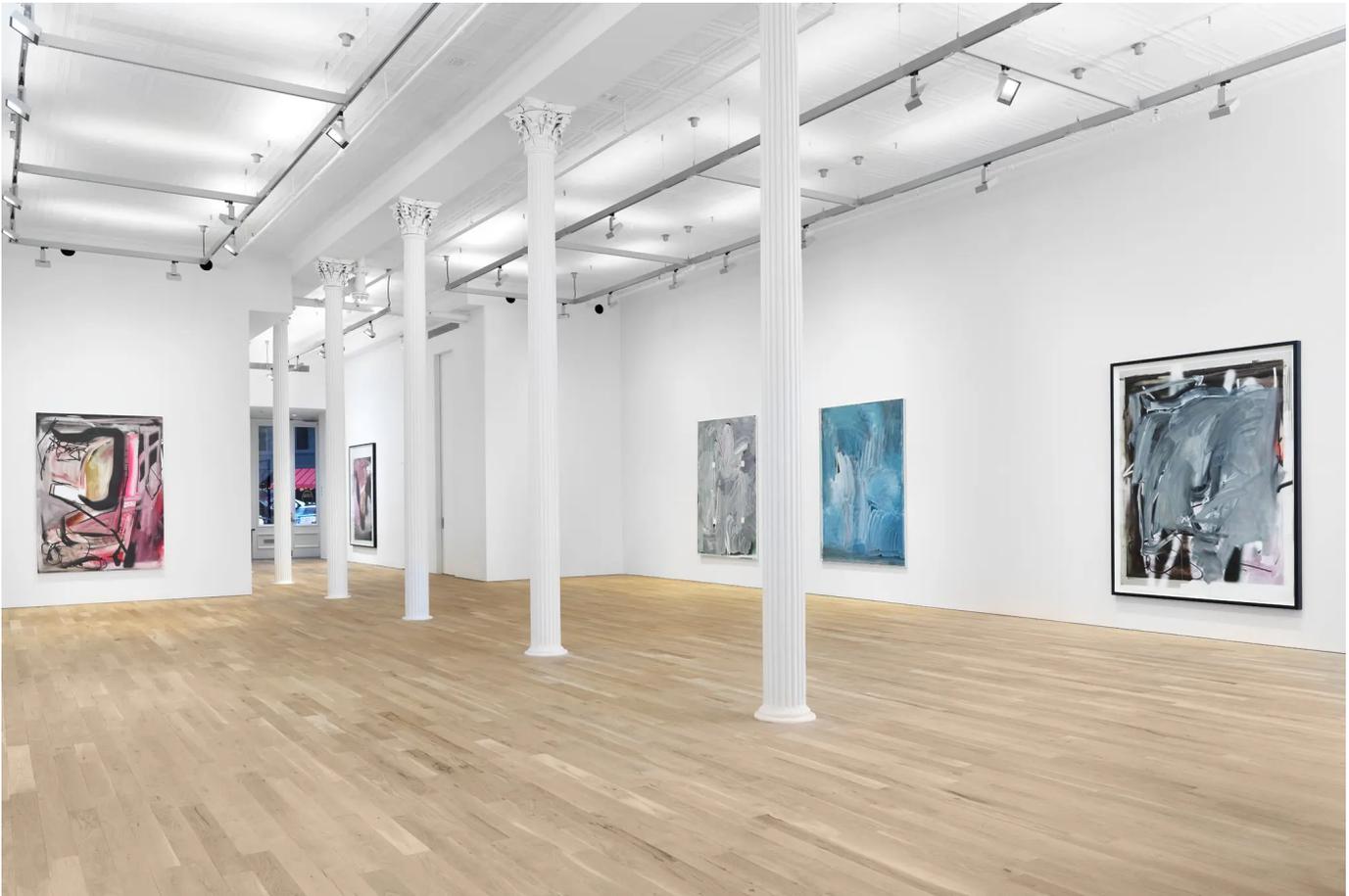
Dochantschi became interested in architecture as a teenager in 1980s Germany, when a friend he was photographing noticed that he kept focusing on the buildings she was posing near instead of on her face. He studied architecture, briefly worked as a construction worker and landed a job with Zaha Hadid in 1995, eventually becoming her teaching assistant at the Yale School of Architecture.



A rendering of the Phillips auction house by studioMDA, completed in 2021 at 432 Park Avenue, shows the dropped main concourse, reached via a large stairway. studioMDA

“She was very demanding,” he recalled. Dochantschi experienced the up-and-down challenges of working for a starchitect when Hadid lost two major commissions, including the Cardiff Bay Opera House, resulting in studio layoffs and leaner budgets. (Hadid died in 2016.)

His experience with Hadid put Dochantschi into contact with some of the world’s leading architects. He remembers how Robert A.M. Stern and Frank Gehry debated the future of his career after he received positive media attention for a kitchen design. “Everyone will know you as the architect who builds kitchens,” he remembered Stern warning. He also recalled Gehry retorting that he had done kitchens for the first 20 years of his career, saying, “Look where I am now and look where Bob is.”



Luhring Augustine’s gallery in TriBeCa, renovated by studioMDA, with Jeff Elrod’s exhibition, “The Last Handshake” (2020-21), on display. via Jeff Elrod and Luhring Augustine, New York; Photo by Farzad Owrang

Dochantschi opened his design firm, studioMDA, nearly 20 years ago in TriBeCa. One of his first commissions was designing an art fair booth for David Nolan Gallery. He has designed over 250 booths since then, which led to the renovation of the Midtown headquarters for Phillips.

“In Holland, we have a saying that playing good soccer is simple and playing simple soccer is very difficult. It’s a little bit the same here,” said Jean-Paul Engelen, the Americas president at Phillips who helped select the architect. “There is no ego to his work.”

Engelen said that Dochantschi earned the commission because of the simplicity and flexibility of his design, which includes movable walls. Curators who need to present a growing number of untraditional art mediums with screens and projectors appreciate these details. It's just one component of his soft white cube philosophy. "The white cube implies neutrality, but I don't think there is any neutral space," he said.

What differentiates him from a designer like Richard Gluckman, whose layouts for galleries at Gagosian in Chelsea and Sotheby's were built around architectural details like skylights?

"I'm not celebrating the skylight, I'm using the skylight," Dochantschi said. "I love clean well-proportioned white walls, but they can coexist next to an old wooden floor, or a typical TriBeCa tin ceiling."



Exterior of the Bortolami Gallery renovated by studioMDA in TriBeCa. Roland Halbe



The Bortolami Gallery at 39 Walker Street, renovated by studioMDA, with "Tondi, situated works" by Daniel Buren, 2018. The architect kept the original columns. Credit...Roland Halbe

Gluckman, 75, helped popularize the adaptive reuse of buildings that he transformed into contemporary art spaces, as well as the interior renovation of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum; and the Dia Center for the Arts in Chelsea. But he disagreed with the idea that his designs could ever upstage the art on display.

"There is a myth of flexibility, and galleries expect to have a tabula rasa," Gluckman said in a phone interview. "But flexibility is not necessarily appropriate for every single space."

Instead, the architect suggested that most galleries should be designed with a sense of permanence, abandoning their track lighting and removable walls. Not that Gluckman is some great defender of the white cube. "I'm a bit tired of it," he said, adding that digital artworks might look better in galleries with gray walls that can reflect the highly saturated colors of a computer screen.

Dochantschi introduces warmth by refurbishing historic TriBeCa details like old flooring, exposed wooden beams and extravagant columns. The renovations do not come cheap, with a range from \$150 to \$300 per square foot — which puts the price of a typical 2,500-square-foot gallery glam-up in the neighborhood of \$500,000 to \$1 million.

Most gallerists said that it was money well spent. Stefania Bortolami relocated to TriBeCa in 2017, hiring Dochantschi to renovate a former social security office filled with plywood and drop ceiling tiles. She has expanded twice with him since then, taking over two more floors.

“It was a wreck, but I thought, OK, let’s take this gamble,” she said during a tour of her gallery. Dochantschi designed the space with concrete floors, a skylight above the back wall, and a basement hatch that would make installing shows easier for art handlers.

Bortolami leaned over to Dochantschi and congratulated him on the Marian Goodman commission — a multimillion-dollar renovation of 385 Broadway, where the annual rent is nearly \$2 million. The gallery will encompass 30,000 square feet, with five floors and a basement.

“But I hope it is not too expensive because we have to make sure that the gallery stays in the neighborhood,” Bortolami warned the architect.



A rendering of Marian Goodman’s future gallery in TriBeCa. StudioMDA plans for it to include viewing rooms, a library and archive, storage and administrative offices. studioMDA

Despite the many construction crews roaming around Walker Street, gallerists still worry about the longevity of TriBeCa's arts scene. After their decade-long leases end, will everyone be looking for the next hot neighborhood? Luxury brands usually follow galleries, eventually pricing tenants out in a pattern that started in TriBeCa nearly 40 years ago, trailed dealers into SoHo and eventually to Chelsea.

But for the moment, galleries keep flocking to TriBeCa.

This spring, the hotelier and art collector Lio Malca plans to open a three-story gallery at 60 White Street that has Dochantschi digging into the basement for more storage.

Dochantschi is also more than halfway through construction of a new gallery for Nino Mier, whose space inside a former jeans shop has gaping holes in the floor and a wall of storefront windows. One of Dochantschi's first acts was to remove the metal grates that covered the windows; they obstructed the southern light and stopped passers-by from looking inside.

The architect wasn't so worried about the security. "If people want to get in, they will," he said. "But I will not compromise on the lighting."