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# Mexico City to the Met: Frida Escobedo's Supercharged Path to Fame

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Frida Escobedo, the architect who designed the new Tang Wing for Modern and contemporary art at the Met, exudes a quiet confidence as she navigates a complex project with a daunting array of stakeholders. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

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By Robin Pogrebin

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Sometimes it can be hard to hear what Frida Escobedo is saying. She is reserved, restrained, a self-described introvert.

But that quiet aura should not be mistaken for timidity or deference. Despite the weight of being the first woman to design a wing in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 154-year history — and, at 45, relatively young for such a major architectural commission — Escobedo has brought a bold conviction to her vision for the museum's new Modern and contemporary art galleries, unveiled last month.

"I have a soft personality," Escobedo said in a recent interview at her West Village design studio. "But I can be very persistent."

This muted forcefulness seems to have enabled Escobedo to navigate a project that could intimidate even the most experienced architects, given the daunting array of stakeholders with strong opinions — from the Met's trustees and curators to city government officials (the museum occupies public land) to the protectors of Central Park, into which the wing thrusts.



Viewed from its southwest corner, Frida Escobedo's rendering of the Tang Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, housing Modern and contemporary works. She created new openings to Central Park and terraces on two floors. Filippo Bolognese Images; via Frida Escobedo Studio

"She's very considerate, but also very confident in the propositions that she puts forward," said David Breslin, the curator in charge of the Met's Modern and contemporary art department. "It's an enlightened idea of what leadership actually means."

On a recent wintry day, Escobedo, a native of Mexico City, walked a reporter along the walls of her studio, which contain designs and image boards. She spoke about current projects — a new home for the National Black Theater in Harlem with the New York City-based Handel Architects; a major overhaul of the Pompidou Center in Paris with the French studio Moreau Kusunoki; a residential project in the Boerum Hill neighborhood of Brooklyn.

The office, where her New York staff of 15 clicked away at their computers, was clean, uncluttered and calm. Escobedo exudes a sense of order and singular focus, describing little delineation between work and play.



A rendering of the overhaul of the Pompidou Center in Paris (Moreau Kusunoki is lead architect, in collaboration with Escobedo, the co-designer). Moreau Kusunoki and Frida Escobedo Studio; via Frida Escobedo Studio

“It becomes really pleasurable — you feel like you’re not really working — and I have an amazing team of people who I feel almost are my extended family because I spend so much time with them,” she said. “My office is my home in a way.”

There is an unmistakable power to Escobedo’s presence, in part because of her striking Frida Kahlo-esque beauty (pronounced eyebrows), though she said she is not named after the artist. She spends half her time in Mexico City and says its influences are deeply ingrained, along with the spirit of independence that drove her to establish an architectural practice in Mexico City at just 23 years old.

“I never worked for another studio,” she said. “I started my office when I was very young, and then of course there was very little money to develop the projects that I was trying to do. The idea of trying to do more with less was always present, and how to achieve that with simple materials and rather than depending on supersophisticated detailing or rich, complicated finishes.

“It was more about the big gesture,” she continued. “What does it say? How do you play with light and these other more simple means to achieve something that feels interesting and engaging?”



Civic Stage designed by Escobedo for the Lisbon Architecture Triennale, 2013, Lisbon, Portugal, rises higher as the audience grows. via Frida Escobedo Studio; Photo by Delfino Legnani

Escobedo was hardly a household name when she was selected in 2022 to design the Met’s new wing, which had been through several false starts before finally gaining momentum.

Her body of work consisted mostly of temporary structures, such as those for the Lisbon Architecture Triennale, the Chicago Architecture Biennial and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. She had limited experience working in the United States.

But after an international search, the Met chose Escobedo over four other firms: Ensamble Studio, Lacaton & Vassal, SO-IL and David Chipperfield, whose earlier design for the wing had ballooned in price to as much as \$800 million (hers is expected to cost \$550 million).



Escobedo and Max Hollein, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, look over the model that Escobedo's team made for the Tang Wing. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Max Hollein, the museum's director, said, "She has a deep understanding for art and also for the museum as a public space," adding that "she's not someone whose architectural language overpowers."

"When we do exhibitions, when we commission artists, we trust in people's voices — projecting toward the future," continued Hollein, whose father, Hans Hollein, was a Pritzker Prize-winning architect. "I could see she was the right architect to do this."

The Met commission is a significant step forward for Escobedo, particularly given the barriers of sexism and skepticism that she has repeatedly had to push through in her home country.

"It's really exhausting. It's very challenging," she said. "People don't have the same level of trust in a young woman as, say, an older-age guy. So it's difficult to get commissions."

Rather than be cowed by such doubters, however, Escobedo has consistently set out to defy them. "I'll prove you wrong, I can make it," she said. "I needed to say something and to do something."



Escobedo spends half her time in Mexico City and says its influences are deeply ingrained, along with the spirit of independence that led her to establish an architectural

practice at just 23. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Born in 1979 in Mexico City to a doctor father and sociologist mother, young Frida was always working with her hands — drawing or making models — but was wary about becoming an artist.

“Expressing yourself and your emotions, and transforming it into something that you want to present to someone always felt a little bit intimidating,” she said. “So design and art felt like a safer ground for me.”

Escobedo studied architecture at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City before completing a master’s degree in art, design and the public domain at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design.

The Harvard program, in which she was surrounded by artists, scientists and designers, “changed my life,” Escobedo said.

“It was showing me that it was true: Architecture was not just about developing housing or doing retail or hospitality or these very traditional things,” she said. “It could be something else. You could be doing an installation, it could be doing furniture, it could be writing about it, it could be doing performance. All of these were talking about space.”

That multidisciplinary sensibility has informed Escobedo’s approach to design. “It’s amazing to talk to an architect who has also an artist mind,” said Petrit Halilaj, the Kosovan artist who created last year’s Met rooftop commission. “You can talk about space or color or love.” Halilaj first met Escobedo at the 2013 Lisbon Architecture Triennale, where she had designed a circular sloping stage that elevates the performer as the audience grows.



The Escobedo-designed expansion of La Tallera Siqueiros, a museum, workshop and artist’s residence in Cuernavaca, Mexico. The architect opened the museum’s courtyard to the plaza by rotating murals by David Alfaro Siqueiros from their original position, making them part of the facade. via Frida Escobedo Studio; Photo by Rafael Gamio

She initially worked mostly in Mexico, on projects including an expansion of La Tallera Siqueiros, a museum, workshop and artists’ residence in Cuernavaca; a renovation of the Hotel Boca Chica, a 1950s celebrity destination in Acapulco; and the El Eco Pavilion for the Museo Experimental El Eco in Mexico City, a site-specific installation.

Escobedo’s breakout moment came in 2018 when, at 38, she became the youngest architect at the time to design the Serpentine Pavilion in London, a prestigious annual commission.

Her design featured a partly enclosed courtyard framing a triangular pool, with latticed walls made of gray concrete roof tiles and a curving mirrored canopy. The axis of Escobedo’s pavilion referred to the Prime Meridian, the global marker of time and distance established in 1851 at Greenwich, England.

“She basically creates sculptures which are only complete when they are occupied,” said Hans Ulrich Obrist, the Serpentine’s artistic director, adding that Escobedo’s designs establish “a link between the local and the global — a kind of a balance. We were sure she would go on to do great things.”



For the Serpentine Pavilion in London, in 2018, Escobedo reinterpreted Mexican elements to create a perforated wall of concrete roofing tiles. Niklas Halle'N/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



The structure forms a celosia, a type of wall in Mexican domestic architecture. It encloses a courtyard but lets in the breezes and the light. Yui Mok/PA Images, via Getty Images

From there, attention started to grow. In 2019, Escobedo was honored as an International Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects and her studio was named one of the world's "100+ Best Architecture Firms" by the architecture magazine Domus. She went on to teach at Columbia, Harvard, Rice and Yale.

In 2021, Escobedo was chosen to collaborate on a project of the National Black Theater and the developer Ray, called Ray Harlem, which includes residential, retail and performance spaces. "It was like she was communicating to both the future and the past," said Sade Lythcott, the theater's chief executive, "and understood the importance of built space to gather community and to amplify the spirit and the soul of a people.

"I was nervous to choose the architect who had the least experience in the States and was the youngest by far," added Lythcott, whose mother, Barbara Ann Teer, founded the company in 1968. "But my gut instinct was, this building had to be Frida's flagship here."



Rendering of the National Black Theater's mixed-use project, Ray Harlem, includes residential, retail and performance spaces. The project is in collaboration with Handel Architects via Frida Escobedo Studio

The Met has rapidly raised her profile, yet apparently not her ego.

“She’s not like those starchitects,” Laurent Le Bon, the Pompidou’s president, said of Escobedo. “She wants to learn about the story of the building.”

Escobedo’s design for the Oscar L. Tang and H.M. Agnes Hsu-Tang Wing — named after its lead donors — connects the galleries to the rest of the museum, creates openings to the city and the park through new windows and encloses the building in a limestone lattice screen.

Among the architect’s influences were the Bauhaus textile artist Anni Albers, the ancient pyramid Huaca Pucllana in Peru and the pre-Columbian Peruvian city of Chan Chan.

“I’m interested in the idea of materiality and how it can reflect specific shifts or geological strata, or how it can absorb time and get the patina of time,” Escobedo said. “Materials that age well or that express subtle changes.”



Rendering of a south-facing gallery and terrace in the new Tang Wing for Modern and contemporary art at the Met. “What she does is help provide order and calm and balance to a series of spaces where the idea will be to create rupture,” David Breslin, the Met curator, said of Escobedo. Filippo Bolognese Images; via Frida Escobedo Studio

The architect started on the Met project by embedding herself in the museum for a year, getting to know the institution, the art and the staff. While she has welcomed input, Escobedo has also defended her design decisions, such as the varying heights of the galleries. And she has managed to walk the line between carefully honoring the Met’s history and courageously rethinking its approach to the art of our time.

“Being a good listener at an institution of this scale has really helped her,” said Breslin, the Met curator, who is reassembling the collection that will fill the 70,000 square feet of galleries (the project also includes about 18,600 square feet of terraces, as well as a cafe and new staircases). “There is a poise and equanimity that you also see in the rigor of her architecture. What she does is help provide order and calm and balance to a series of spaces where the idea will be to create rupture.

“It’s a quiet confidence,” he added. “It’s understated, but it is extremely present.”

Much like her personality, Escobedo’s design for the new wing is not attention seeking or noisy. Instead, she seems to be approaching the project as a gentle process of evolution rather than a radical revision.

“One of the things that I’m interested in is this idea of architecture as being a living thing, that it is constantly changing and shifting and that it needs to adapt and it’s not fixed,” she said. “That’s a condition for every aspect of life: Nothing is permanent.”

**Robin Pogrebin**, who has been a reporter for The Times for nearly 30 years, covers arts and culture. More about Robin Pogrebin

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