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20 Years Of Celeste Umpierre's Subtle Revolution In Spatial Harmony And Natural Poise

2025 marks the 20th anniversary of Celeste Umpierre's acclaimed architectural practice, CU-A. Over two transformative decades, Umpierre has subtly influenced New York's architectural narrative with a graceful, minimalist touch sensitive to abstraction, but no stranger to bespoke elegance. Umpierre's formative years were spent immersed within the verdant, sapphire landscapes and winding cobbled streets of her native San Juan, Puerto Rico. Her minimal yet expressive design ethos was forged during her youth between the sea and sky, as she swept across the Caribbean by sailboat.



Upper East Side Townhouse (2023)

Grace, simplicity, flow, and the elongated horizon come to mind when admiring not only wind-driven sails but also her architectural work. A balanced dance is ever-present between tectonics and form, much like that of a sailboat's tightly engineered beauty. The architect recalls, "I have always been obsessed with how amazingly systematic sailboat design is. Transforming spaces, like the beds being seats, tables folding up, there's this quirkiness that happens to make it super efficient."

Travelled Influences

Umpierre earned her Bachelor of Environmental Design (1987) at the University of Puerto Rico, surrounded by examples of the Tropical Modernist movement, iconically adapted from the International Style. There, floating stairs defied gravity above light-bending pools that reflected tropical courtyards shaded by brise-soleil, leaving an indelible influence on her design sensibility.

During her Master of Architecture from Princeton University (1990), Umpierre cultivated a lifelong commitment to critical thinking and the importance of architectural theory. A summer studying the architecture of northern Italy through freehand sketching can be attributed to Umpierre's unwavering analytical eye, which can dissect and invent forms and systems at a moment's notice.



Sculptural Stair for Upper East Side Townhouse (2023)

Umpierre honed her craft at a number of renowned architecture firms before founding CU—A in 2005, including Gwathmey Siegel, Gluckman Mayner, Rafael Viñoly, and Lupo Rowen Architects, in addition to a collaboration with Diller Scofidio + Renfro in 2013. Notably, she served as project architect for distinguished works such as the International Center of Photography Museum and the Tokyo International Forum's Hall C Theater. Her tenure at Gwathmey Siegel included leadership of the award-winning Central Park South Residence (2008 AIA Honor Award), establishing her reputation in high-end residential architecture.

Architecture as a Living Instrument

As an experienced designer, Umpierre often blurs the boundary between image and function. She recalls intense conversations about design principles with her late mentor, Charles Gwathmey, "Should architectural form express structure and function or an abstract idea?" Her answer to this long held design dilemma draws parallels with her muse, the sail— "I strive to integrate both aspects, creating designs that are conceptually driven yet true to their tectonic expression."

While democratizing access to architectural projects, the internet has also flattened public perception of many spaces into two-dimensional images. As a result, Umpierre has doubled down on the importance of high-quality detailing and craftsmanship, a testament to her stint with Gwathmey. Through Umpierre's lens, architecture is responsive, with ebbs and flows like the path of a sail. The way it feels, sounds, and relates to the environment, is just as important as it looks. Umpierre's devotion to conceptual and theoretical work may be a callback to her days studying amongst the continuous planes and geometric forms of tropical modernist structures.

"I was always very attracted to abstraction, seeing the light coming in, more so than the details of traditional architecture. It was mostly the idea of the space and the sequence of how you go through it that mattered to me." She fondly recalls her time at DS+R leading a \$35 million undulating penthouse renovation on Fifth Avenue as a great example of bringing such principles into fruition.



Oblique Cabinet for 5th Ave Residence (2018)

Residential, Cultural, and Hospitality Projects

CU—A's works typologically originated in residential architecture, and have since broken into the realms of culture and hospitality. Their early interventions are clustered within the tree lined historic district in Jackson Heights, Queens, with a series of pre-war garden apartment restorations. And in 2008, the practice completed the Park Slope Brownstone, a critical first step into grander residential renovations.

Subsequent milestone projects included the Upper East Side Townhouse (2018), representing their mastery of townhouse and rooftop landscape design; and the Ismaili Jamatkhana (2020), a significant new venture for the firm, demonstrating their expanding experience with religious and cultural architecture. CU—A is also set to complete Forma Med Spa in 2025, a high-end hospitality project that underscores their capacity for luxury and meticulous detail. Lastly, the ongoing restoration and reinterpretation of the iconic Gwathmey House in Amagansett (2025), features CU—A's dedication to architectural legacy and delicate historical preservation.



Saltbox Redux, Englewood, New Jersey (2022)

According to Umpierre, "Since Gwathmey was my mentor, the opportunity to work on his masterpiece feels like a full circle moment." Reflecting on 20 years of CU-A, Umpierre sees her architectural journey as a non linear path often during experiences that continue to guide her practice into the future. Her unwavering ability to stay inspired by the current architectural landscape while maintaining her integrity as a designer is the soul of her practice, and the source of its well nourished creativity.

While responding to where the winds take her, Umpierre is still an experienced navigator and can tune her sails to reach her ambitions. The architect fondly recalls what inspired her in the first place, "Nature is very important, whether it's the ocean, the plants, the water, or the sun. The abstraction of space, the sequence of how you move through it, that's what I carry with me from Puerto Rico". As CU-A celebrates this 20-year milestone, Celeste Umpierre continues to weave her influence into New York's architectural fabric, reaffirming her role as a pivotal figure shaping the city's contemporary built environment. www.cu-a.com

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