

Annabelle Selldorf on National Gallery win: 'Our work is not about loud bangs'

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The AJ talks to Annabelle Selldorf, founding principal of Selldorf Architects, about how she won the competition to remodel the National Gallery

You have beaten five UK practices to win this job and, following Venturi Scott Brown, have become the second US practice to win a major commission from the National Gallery. What should we make of that?

It was an open competition entered by 55 people from all over the world. Of the six finalists, five were in London - I was the only woman and international firm. If nothing else, this demonstrates that there was no particular bias. The shortlist was formidable and the practices very different from one another.

The complexity of the project is perhaps not obvious to everybody. The process allowed everyone to immerse themselves in these issues. It also gave us the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the leadership of the National Gallery.

The contest process was run entirely during the Covid crisis which meant you were not able to visit the competition site in the usual way. How did you feel about that?

I was quite worried about it. But the bottom line is what you can find out about the National Gallery you wouldn't just find out by visiting it. It is about understanding the plans and, because it was built over different periods of time, that isn't easy.

But that was also what I enjoyed about the process. There was so much to learn and [then have moments like] 'Ah, I can make a connection here, maybe!'

It is not about an ingenious idea. The lonely architect sitting in a studio coming up with a fantastic scheme. It is about making cross-connections ultimately in a collaborative way to make this building, which is already great, better.

Does the history of the earlier 1982 contest and Prince Charles's intervention leading to the shelving of ABK's winning scheme bother you?

I have entered many competitions and not won them and it is very hard. It is disappointing to all those who don't win. That disappointment is raw.

You spend a great deal of time thinking about a problem and engaging with it. And that engagement is very personal.

We are not building a new building

The way in which the previous competition went wrong was a very different situation to what we are looking at now. I've studied all of those plans – to the extent possible – and there were international schemes which were interesting and good. The urban context of Trafalgar Square would have been so totally different.

Even that 'original' winner went through all these modifications and through all these different programmes.

It is all speculative. Would it have been better? Would it have been worse? In some ways it is time to put that behind us.



Model of the never realised Ahrends Burton & Koralek [ABK] design for the National Gallery Extension (1983)

So you trust that your scheme will get taken forward?

These things are super complicated. It is very different [now]. We are not building a new building. By comparison, it is reasonable to expect that we can get support. The reason why I have to trust that we get support is because we are going to do something that makes the National Gallery better for a lot of people.

And that's the real goal. It is not to foist a different, monumental 'something' on to the square. It is to make [the building] much more accessible, much more welcoming, much healthier and much safer.

In the process of doing that we will be improving the public realm, making people understand this is now the main entrance and trying to reinforce the route of Jubilee Walk. These are simple goals but they are difficult to do because they are only possible to do with incremental moves.

How are these moves articulated in such a way that they clarify things that are already there but make a real palpable difference?

Putting yourself in the shoes of the National Gallery, why do you think chose you?

We are good collaborators. We like to listen. To some extent we also understand their predicament. I am familiar with the subject matter.

We understand the National Gallery's predicament

My motto has always been that when we work with our clients we have an agreement that they can't push us to do things that we aren't convinced should be done but [ultimately], because they are the clients, we have to prove our points. As long as that is in a good balance it becomes a working *together* rather than a working *for*.

Are there any similarities with your expansion and extension of Frick Collection in New York, where you have worked to enhance the original 1914 home of Henry Clay Frick?

There is some similarity in the sense that people care a great deal about the building. People don't like change. Except that they want the change. [You have to have] a certain amount of carefulness, perhaps. But also conviction.

Describe what your practice does to those who may not know you – the old elevator pitch!

Our work is quietly resonant. It is not an architecture, first and foremost, of a loud bang. I'd rather do less than more.

I'm interested in the transformation that architecture can produce. It is not about the first impression, it is about that lasting 'thing' that we've probably all experienced in a variety of different circumstances.

Fundamentally I'm a modern architect. That's the language I use. My deepest conviction is that architecture is in the service of people. Therefore what we do has to make things better.

What is your approach to reusing existing buildings, including here with a listed building?

Denise Scott Brown is alive. I intend to speak with her and make sure she understands what the considerations are and that there is a fundamental respect for her original vision.

The more I looked at the building the more I realised what the different considerations were, especially from an urban point of view. It is very interesting and quite brilliant.

Denise Scott Brown is alive – I intend to speak with her

So there is a very practical reason [not to demolish and restart]. Why take something down if you can reuse it? That is a fundamental attitude that I [have] that becomes ever more urgent as we fight climate change.

There is also a more formal, architectural [reason] looking at what we have achieved and how do we support a particular moment in time? Understanding that adjustments are possible and necessary because we don't live in a formaldehyde block.

Why did you go for this competition in the first place? And did you think you had a shot at winning?

I love the National Gallery and I love the pictures. It is one of my favourite places in London. We felt we had something to contribute. There are projects [like this] where you think 'I would love to do this'.

Our spectrum of schemes includes [everything from] recycling centres to storm water sewage treatment facilities. I'm interested in all of those things because they matter to people.

But art projects are very personal to me. I have a lot of experience with those kinds of projects. As an office, we have lots of experience. And we care about these schemes.