
BD, Online
21 FEBRUARY 2022

Building Study: Learning from Denise Scott Brown

By [Elizabeth Hopkirk](#) 21 February 2022

As Selldorf Architects unveils £30m proposals to reconfigure the National Gallery and Venturi Scott Brown's landmark Sainsbury Wing, Elizabeth Hopkirk meets the women leading the project



Source: The National Gallery, London

The fortress-like National Gallery, with the Sainsbury Wing to the left of the Wilkins building on Trafalgar Square

When New York's Selldorf Architects beat a shortlist of mainly British talent in last year's high-profile competition to reconfigure the National Gallery, it would be fair to say it raised a few eyebrows. The practice, led by Annabelle Selldorf, was up against Stirling Prize-winning locals David Chipperfield,

Caruso St John and Witherford Watson Mann for the prestigious job of remodelling the “Temple of the Arts” in time for its 200th anniversary in 2024.

It's a tight timeframe and for the gallery's project lead, Sarah Younger, the concern was whether a US architect would be able to get to meetings given the ever-changing covid travel restrictions. As it transpired, Selldorf has been able to fly in every month for a few days at a time. She also personally attends all the online meetings. “We are getting that incredibly personal attention,” says Younger with relief.

During her most recent visit, Selldorf showed Building Design round the 1991 Sainsbury Wing to outline her proposals ahead of the NG200 public consultation. It is this part of the project that will be most contentious, rather than the alterations to the main 1838 William Wilkins building, because of its legendary place in British architectural history.

The National Gallery had been talking about extending westwards since at least the 1950s. By the time it finally procured an architect for its site, 30 years had elapsed and high-tech was in vogue – but not everyone approved. When Prince Charles infamously used his speech at an RIBA dinner in 1984 to deride [Ahrends Burton Koralek's proposals](#) as a “monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend”, all hell broke loose. The scheme was ditched and eventually a new competition was won by the American practice Venturi Scott Brown.



Venturi Scott Brown's Sainsbury Wing addresses Trafalgar Square and Pall Mall differently. When it was completed in 1991 a busy road still ran across the front of the National Gallery. Trafalgar Square's north terrace was only pedestrianised, by Foster & Partners, in 2003

Denise Scott Brown and her late husband Robert Venturi are among the most influential architects of the last century. Their seismic 1972 book *Learning from Las Vegas* was arguably responsible for bringing the formality of the modernist era to a close by conferring academic weight on kitsch strip-mall architecture, coining the phrase “decorated sheds” and celebrating the built environment’s messy vitality.

For their highly charged first UK commission they created a classically inflected piece of stone and glass post-modernism that managed to pacify the traditionalists while dazzling many on the opposing side. Four years ago it was given the same grade I protection as the Wilkins building in recognition of its significance. Its fabric has been little altered, but changing user requirements have seen its spaces filled with a muddle of accretions. Six years ago it became the gallery’s front door because of its level access but it is not very well suited to this function, says Younger, not least because it doesn’t shout “entrance” at hesitant tourists across Trafalgar Square. (See panel, below.)



Source: Brigitte Lacombe

Annabelle Selldorf

Enter Selldorf, literally. An A-list architect in the US but less well-known here, she could easily be mistaken for any other Renaissance art aficionado as she mingles with the crowds in the foyer of this building she loves. She is an unobtrusive figure, wrapped elegantly against the February weather in a knee-length pea coat and green scarf over jeans and boots. No one bats an eyelid as she quietly points out the chunks of wall and floor she hopes to remove.

What the team **have in mind** has already upset some fans of Venturi Scott Brown's celebrated spaces, but others see the potential to vastly improve what has become a confusing and gloomy visitor arrival experience. Selldorf is proposing removing the wall enclosing the bookshop to the left and part of the internal wall above the ceremonial staircase to the right in order to lend some of their airiness to the low-ceilinged lobby. A portion of the first floor would also be sliced away to turn it into a mezzanine with sensory connections to the entrance below. The views out to Trafalgar Square from here are sensational but currently out of bounds. Replacing the tinted glass with clear glazing would allow views in too. And the gates would come out, although some security has to stay.

"In one fell swoop it makes you feel you have arrived in the place you were meant to," she says.



Source: National Gallery

The staircase in Venturi Scott Brown's Sainsbury Wing. Selldorf is proposing removing the lower part of the three-storey internal wall and part of the first floor so it becomes a mezzanine connected to the lobby below. The upper part, with its frieze celebrating great artists, will stay

PRESS CUTTING

Selldorf acknowledges she is proposing some “very significant change” but “firmly believe[s] it’s within the rules of this architecture”. What rules? “They are difficult to discern, idiosyncratic and personal. I don’t profess to channel Venturi Scott Brown, but if you approach things with an attitude of respect and admiration you can enter a dialogue. I am a different person, a different generation, a different architect, but if you work hard to understand why someone did something you can layer the decisions into major and minor.”

That respect is clear. She describes visiting the Sainsbury Wing as a young architect soon after it opened and “being in awe of what they had done ... I remember climbing the stairs and marvelling at how the old building meets the new building. They are not the same but they both love art.”



Source: Studio Maha, courtesy of Selldorf Architects

Selldorf Architects’ new entrance at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in California. This was Selldorf’s first experience of working on a Venturi Scott Brown building

Now 61, she recently worked on another Venturi Scott Brown building – at the Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla, San Diego – where she successfully faced down hostility. “When that happens to you for the first time it’s intimidating,” she smiles disarmingly. Realising that some of her critics had not visited and did not understand the proposals gave her confidence. Later she visited Scott Brown in Philadelphia. “That was a big moment for me.” A mixture of humility and pride stopped

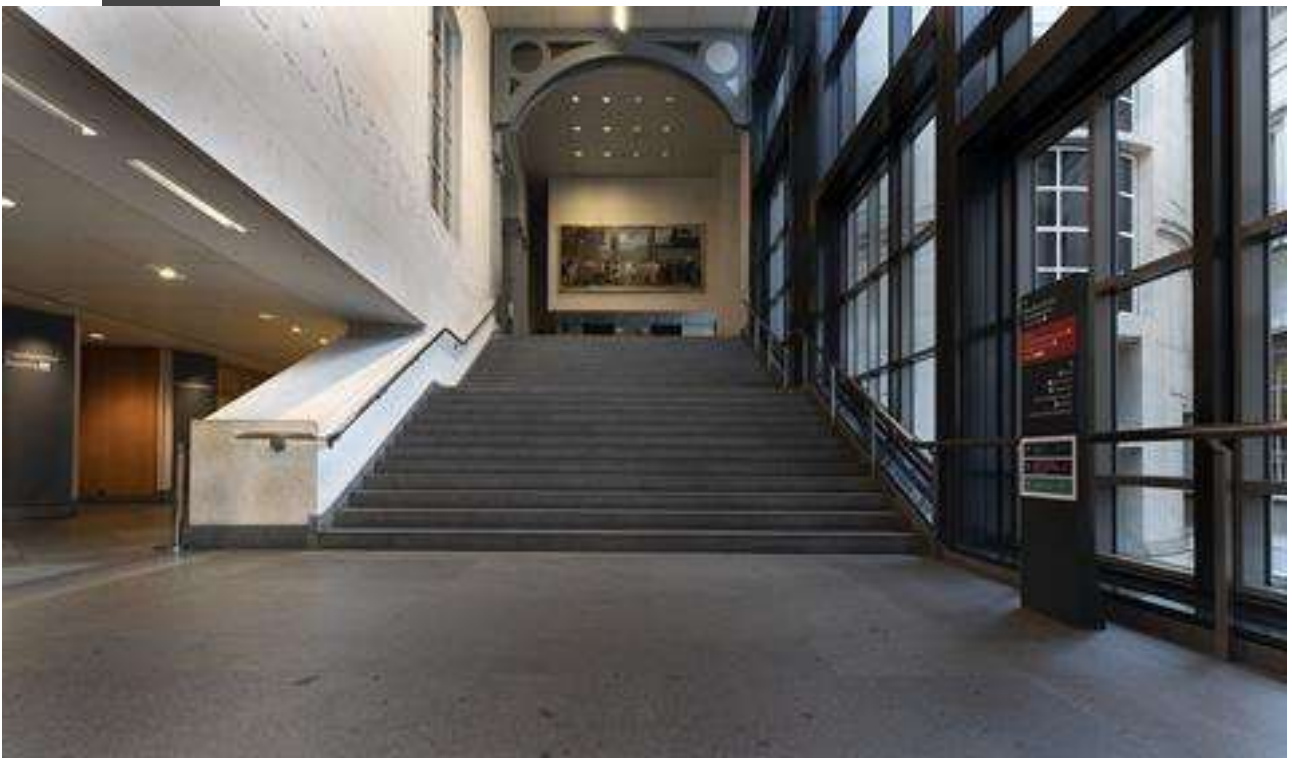
PRESS CUTTING

her getting in touch earlier but “I learnt about myself, that I should have reached out sooner”. Any fear that Scott Brown would somehow take over the project was unfounded. “She doesn’t tell me what to do but she does have her opinions. By listening to her, every time I learn something.”



Source: Selldorf, 2022

Selldorf says her practice’s proposals would bring more light to the Sainsbury Wing entrance and make it easier for visitors to navigate



Source: The National Gallery, London

Existing view of part of the Sainsbury Wing staircase, from the first to second floor

They still speak “with some regularity”. Has Scott Brown, whom Selldorf describes as “smart as a whip” despite her 90 years, given her blessing to the alterations? “It’s not my right to say that – she has to say that. I am really grateful she continues to want to talk. I am sure she wouldn’t agree with everything that I have in mind. Nor is she so deeply embedded in the project that she can necessarily envisage every aspect. She is wise in not wanting that. She recognises it’s my project but she is also so generous in offering her opinions – and they matter.”

Watching the visitors bustle around as we stand at the foot of the stairs with takeaway teas, she adds: “The more I study the building the more brilliant I think the architecture is and the more I think that with a light touch we can make it a more welcoming place.”

But she confesses there’s “no shortage of feeling the responsibility”. That comes partly from studying the carbuncle row and all the competition entries from the time. She was taken aback by the extent to which anger still lingers. “Coming from outside, I hadn’t realised how deep in the English psychology that sits,” she says.

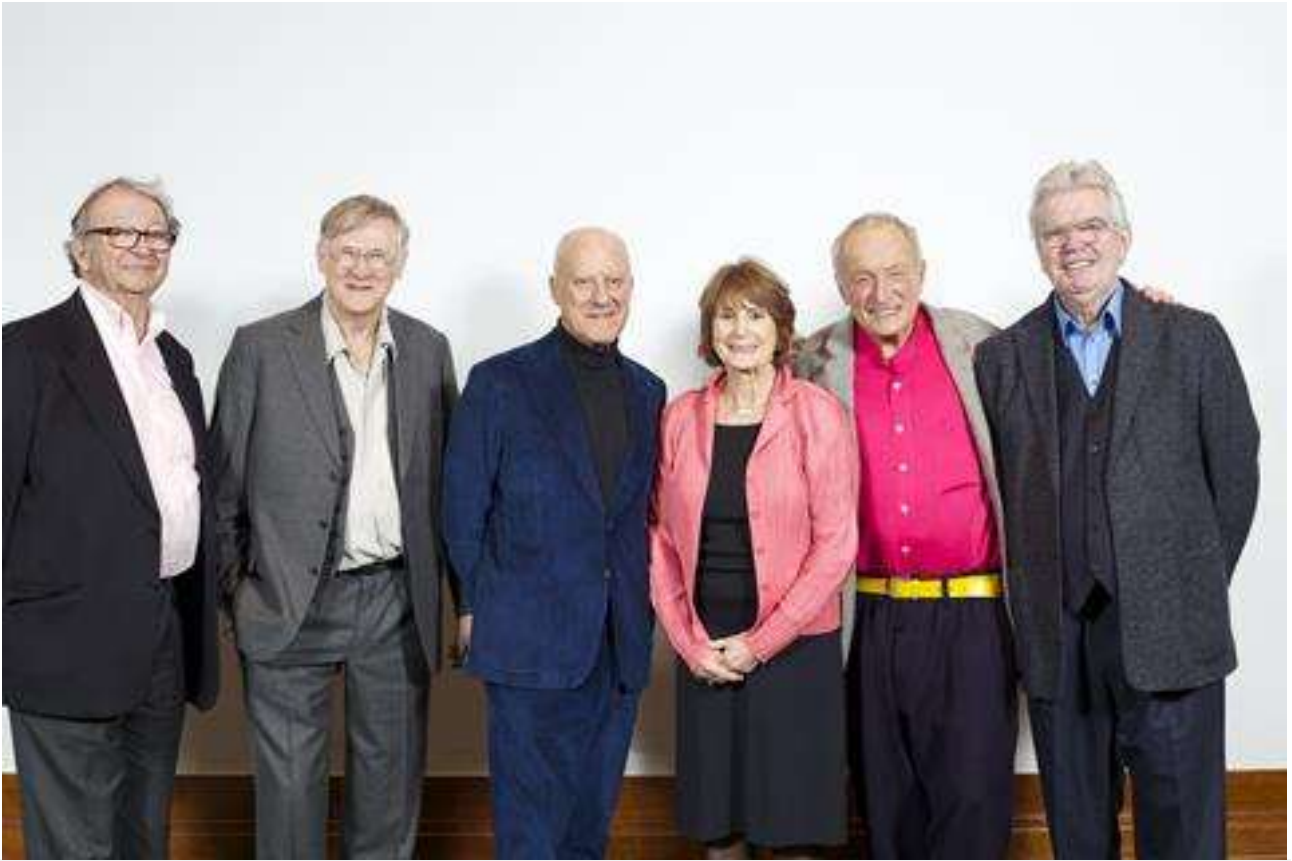
That was not the only controversy. The year the Sainsbury Wing opened, 1991, the Pritzker Prize was awarded to Venturi, solo. Years later Scott Brown said she had always felt excluded by the architectural elite. She wrote an essay about it in 1975 which she didn’t dare publish until 1989: *Room at the Top? Sexism and the Star System in Architecture*.



Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown

In a 2013 interview she told [CNN](#): “In the 70s and 80s we thought we were suffering alone; by the 90s I was still having a great deal of trouble and when I said anything it made powerful men very angry. By the 90s, we had to tell them we were not going to suffer in silence.” The Pritzker Prize jury’s decision was based on the Fountainhead fallacy that great architecture was the work of a “single lone male genius”, she said. More than 2,000 people have now signed a petition calling for her name to be added to the prize, including nine Pritzker winners. All to no effect.

Scott Brown is far from the only female architect to have been edged out of the history books, of course. Another is Patty Hopkins, co-founder of Hopkins Architects – and Sarah Younger’s mother. In 2014 Patty and her husband Michael posed with their high-tech peers Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, Nicholas Grimshaw and Terry Farrell to publicise a BBC documentary, *The Brits Who Built the Modern World*. When the photograph was published Patty Hopkins had been [airbrushed out of the line-up](#), sparking a furore.



Source: RIBA and Jackie King

The Brits Who Built the Modern World (l-r): Michael Hopkins, Nicholas Grimshaw, Norman Foster, Patty Hopkins, Richard Rogers and Terry Farrell at the RIBA. Patty Hopkins was later airbrushed out of the shot

When I ask Younger, over a video call, why last year's competition did not offer opportunities for more diverse practices, she points out how unusual it still is to have a major practice run by a woman. "I've never worked with a female lead," she says. And Younger's credits include some of the biggest cultural projects in the country, starting with Herzog & de Meuron's conversion of Bankside Power Station into Tate Modern in 1999 and taking in Caruso St John's unlocking of Tate Britain, Jamie Fobert's extension at Tate St Ives and Stanton Williams' Open Up project for the Royal Opera House. None of them female-led practices.



Sarah Younger is NG200 project lead for the client

When I suggest this is astonishing, Selldorf shoots back: “It’s not astonishing because there aren’t that many. It’s only been about 10 years that women architects have been working in that realm, Zaha Hadid exempt.” Nonetheless she was shocked to discover that none of the other practices shortlisted for the Sainsbury Wing were run by women – and this time round there were only two: hers and Publica. “It’s time for that to change,” she says. The hurdles faced by Scott Brown’s generation are improving, she says, but “with resistance”.

For now it is clear both women are enjoying working with each other, as well as the wider team from Purcell, Arup, Vogt Landscape, Pentagram, Kaizen, L’Observatoire, AEA Consulting and Kendrick Hobbs, whose members they repeatedly single out for praise in our conversations.

Selldorf describes Younger as fun to work with, a “powerhouse who charges forward”, and says they are aligned in how they think. “Never foregrounding that we are women, but we can have conversations that 30 years ago the boys didn’t have. We are having rounder conversations – it’s not about winning the contest. If you have a better idea, let’s pursue it. If I can’t be open to being convinced by something that might be better, I will be darned.”

Younger finds Selldorf and her 65-strong practice a breath of fresh air. “There’s no ego. She listens and she just gets on with it. You set them a task and 10 days later they come back with a host of ideas and solutions.”

Maintaining that lively pace will be critical if they are to meet their goal of getting the scheme to planning in July and opening phase one in time for the institution’s bicentenary. There will be much public scrutiny in the meantime. Younger is undaunted. “Remember I was brought up in a glass house in Hampstead,” she laughs.



Source: Historic England

The Hopkins House by Michael and Patty Hopkins – Sarah Younger’s childhood home



The National Gallery: Sainsbury Wing, left, and part of the Wilkins building on Trafalgar Square

THE PROBLEM

The much-altered 1838 Wilkins building was designed on a very shallow site for tiny visitor numbers. Its entrance, under the central portico, is accessed up steep steps and brings you in halfway through the collection's chronology. Sarah Younger says the spaces have never really worked.

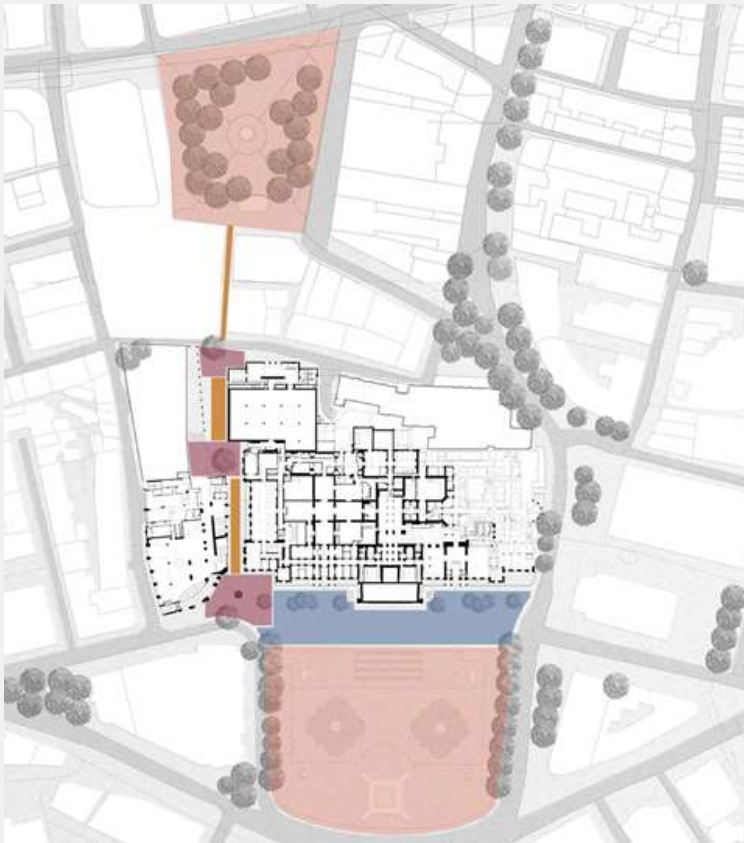
Secondary entrances have been added over the years, with the Sainsbury Wing eventually becoming the main front door, thanks to its level access and space for queues and security checks.

But as you approach across Trafalgar Square it doesn't read as the entrance, leaving all but the most confident feeling shut out of the fortress. Even once inside, low ceilings, thick columns and visitor desks make the space feel cramped. It is not immediately obvious where to go next.

“There is no sense you are coming into the National Gallery; there’s no art,” says Younger. “A push for the project was: how do we create visitor amenities that are comparable to the art, that are the world’s best? I want people to come here and say ‘Wow!’.”

The five-storey Sainsbury Wing – with what director Gabriele Finaldi calls its “practically perfect galleries” – is only connected to the original building at the top, level two, so visitors are forced to retrace their steps.

The whole thing is slightly forbidding. Young people don’t come and hang out at the National in the way they do at Tate Modern, notes Younger, who says: “We want the message to be: this is your building.”



Source: Selldorf, 2022

Illustration of how improvements to Jubilee Walk (shaded orange) will help create better north-south connections. The red shaded spaces are Leicester Square (top) and Trafalgar Square

THE PROPOSAL

The Sainsbury Wing remains the main entrance but will gain a sense of spaciousness by extending the foyer into the large double-height shop on the left. Meanwhile the grand stair on the right is given more prominence by cutting away part of the floor and wall above, opening up the rather squashed former restaurant on the first floor to become a proper mezzanine open to the bustle of the entrance below. It will be a meeting area, democratising its views over Trafalgar Square. Clear glazing will replace the tinted glass, allowing people to see the activity inside for the first time. Selldorf hopes this will encourage people to step through the doors who might not have dared before.

SHOW FULLSCREEN



Source: Selldorf Architects, 2022

Proposed loop connection for the Sainsbury Wing: a basement-level link between the old and new buildings will be created for the first time

The cloakroom and other facilities will be banished to the first lower-ground floor, while a subterranean connection to the main building will be created for the first time, introducing a circulation loop, which is seen as another big win.

Inside the main building a suite of rooms overlooking Trafalgar Square has been freed up by Purcell's just-completed One Gallery hub project relocating offices. These will become public spaces with a members' area behind. A more visible research centre will be created to showcase what staff call the gallery's "engine".

Outside, a wall in front of the south-west corner of Wilkins will be removed and the empty courtyard it encloses incorporated into a new public space. "We were overjoyed when we thought of that, because of the possibility of a square within the square which changes the centre of gravity towards

the Sainsbury Wing, making it a place of arrival and gathering.” It will also make Jubilee Walk a more legible route between Trafalgar and Leicester Squares and, adds Selldorf, give more power to VSB’s famous bunched columns.

SHOW FULLSCREEN



Source: Selldorf, 2022

Illustration of how the space outside the Sainsbury Wing and on Trafalgar Square could look on completion, with clear glass and without gates