

Behind the story: Annabelle Selldorf on peeling back the Sainsbury Wing

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I realised, later, that Annabelle Selldorf must have thought I'd said 'plumbing' not 'planning' – my Yorkshire mumble misheard over the transatlantic phone line.

But if she thought the question was bland, the New York City-based German-born architect did not show it, giving an update on taps and pipework and an amusing anecdote about persistent 'faucet' salesmen keen to get a look-in on the practice's much-anticipated revamp of the Sainsbury Wing at London's National Gallery.

Since Selldorf Architects won the headline-grabbing scheme last July, the 61-year-old gallery guru has talked (and listened) to a lot of people. Probably about subjects just as niche as fitting out the loos.

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[This week](#), the first results of those many conversations went out to public consultation ahead of a proposed planning application in July.

The brief to 'vastly improve the welcome experience' for visitors to the Grade I-listed wing in Trafalgar Square is complex and detailed.

The wing was completed by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Associates in 1991 – a replacement for ABK's infamously never-realised 'carbuncle' (as Prince Charles described it) – and today acts as the gallery's main entrance. Originally the building had been designed not as the gallery's gateway but as a home for early Renaissance paintings.



Annabelle Selldorf: 'I enjoy my conversations with Denise [Scott Brown] a great deal. She is immensely smart and very proud of their building'

Source:H Michell

With tall railings in front and black glass on its elevation next to the main 1830s William Wilkins building, the wing has, as Selldorf says, a slightly ‘ominous’ foyer and street presence.

Her task is to literally break down barriers. Though her proposals are still at the early stages, initial concepts include removing the heavy gates, which are closed nightly, expanding the footprint of the lobby to make it brighter, less cramped and more welcoming, punching ‘slab cuts’ between the existing floors, a change of footprint and location for the book shop, and improvements to its ‘loop’ circulation.

There are plans, too, for a new public square in the south-west corner in front of the Wilkins Building and the opening up of Jubilee Walk, which runs between the two sides of the gallery.

The job is effectively what Selldorf calls a series of ‘logical, inevitable and harmonious’ tweaks which will subtly shift the gallery’s centre of gravity. It is unlikely to cause as much controversy as the earlier extensions.



The revived atrium, which will be opened up and made ‘less cramped’

Last June Selldorf told the AJ that her practice’s style was ‘not an architecture, first and foremost, of a loud bang’.

She is best known in the UK for her high-end private galleries such as Hauser & Worth’s 2009 exhibition spaces in Savile Row. However, her practice has increasingly led on a clutch of major cultural commissions, such as the near-complete Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and the Frick Collection in New York.

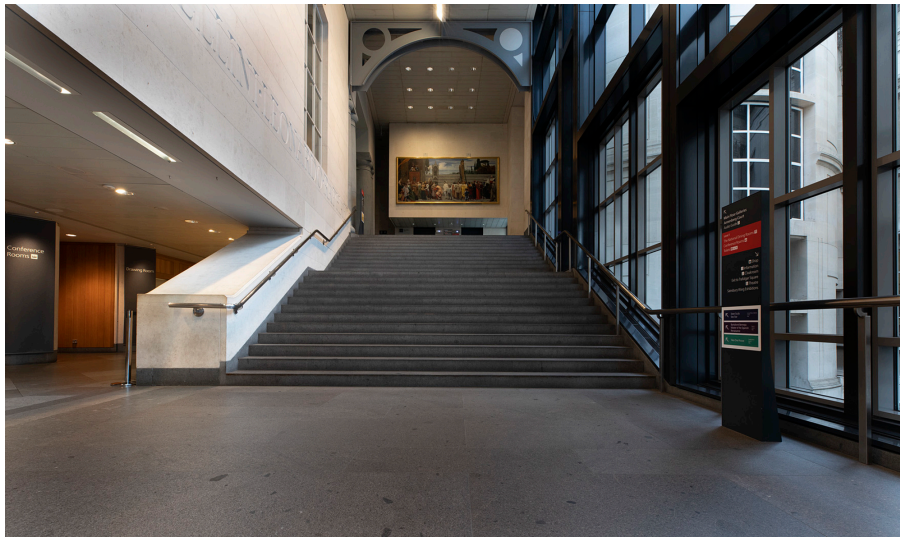
The National Gallery hopes its project, which initially had a construction value of £30 million, can open in time for its 200th birthday in 2024, hence its ‘NG200’ branding.

Having had six months to properly examine the Sainsbury Wing, disparagingly called a ‘Postmodern classical trifle’ by critic Jonathan Glancey, her emerging plans echo her proclaimed light-touch ethos. ‘My instinct is not so much to add anything but to sort of peel away layers that allow a simpler kind of coming together,’ she tells me.

A key move will be to replace the dark office-style glazing – a choice mainly driven by conservation issues at the time – with clearer glass.

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Selldorf says this will open up east-west views, letting natural light through the building from the top of Trafalgar Square to Whitcomb Street.



The existing stairs in the National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing

It will also allow those outside to look deeper into the building and see what's going on. 'There are some drawings that Venturi Scott Brown did [in the late 1980s] that show visitors going up the stairs and seeing the activity outside,' Selldorf says. 'In reality that doesn't happen today.'

The architect is working on the project with Purcell, Vogt Landscape Architects, Arup, Pentagram and Kaizen – a team that saw off such thoughtful UK-talent as Caruso St John, David Chipperfield Architects and Witherford Watson Mann Architects last summer.

Selldorf has kept a promise made at that time, to engage with Scott Brown about the many proposed alterations to her and her late husband Robert Venturi's 40-year-old building.

'I enjoy my conversations [with Denise] a great deal,' she says. 'She is immensely smart and very proud of their building.'

'What she cares about most is the relationship between Leicester Square and Trafalgar Square – the urban planning and the wellbeing of people.'

'The sum of our seemingly small interventions brings a result that [will be] much more people-centric, that's much more welcoming and inclusive in ways that it hasn't been able to be before. Denise is very cognisant of those things [and has been] very positive about that.'

The opinions of the original architect are not the only ones Selldorf is taking on board.

'In museums there are many departments, and everybody is protective of their territory,' she says, 'but they're also really interested in being able to contribute.'

For instance, how do you make a fully accessible entrance while stopping terrorists driving through your front doors?

'The security people are super hardcore because their mandate is to protect,' she says. 'We all care about protection, but how do you give people a sense of safety and, at the same time, make a barrier-free entry? Barrier free in every way.'

On a broader level, Selldorf is thinking too about how the new entrance will set the tone of the National Gallery.

'How can we create an atmosphere, both architecturally but also organisationally and operationally, that makes people feel like this is the nation's museum and also their museum? And those are big words.'