

Selldorf Architects' healing touch is just what the wounded National Gallery needed

A new chapter has begun for London's premiere public gallery as the redesign, led by a New York-based architecture firm, proves a restoring grace to the controversial Sainsbury Wing.

Parisians have the palatial expanses of the Louvre. New Yorkers have the Met's wings, partially extending into Central Park. Londoners have the halls of the National Gallery. Yet, in comparison with their French and American counterparts, the buildings that house Britain's primary collection of European paintings are comparatively diminutive.

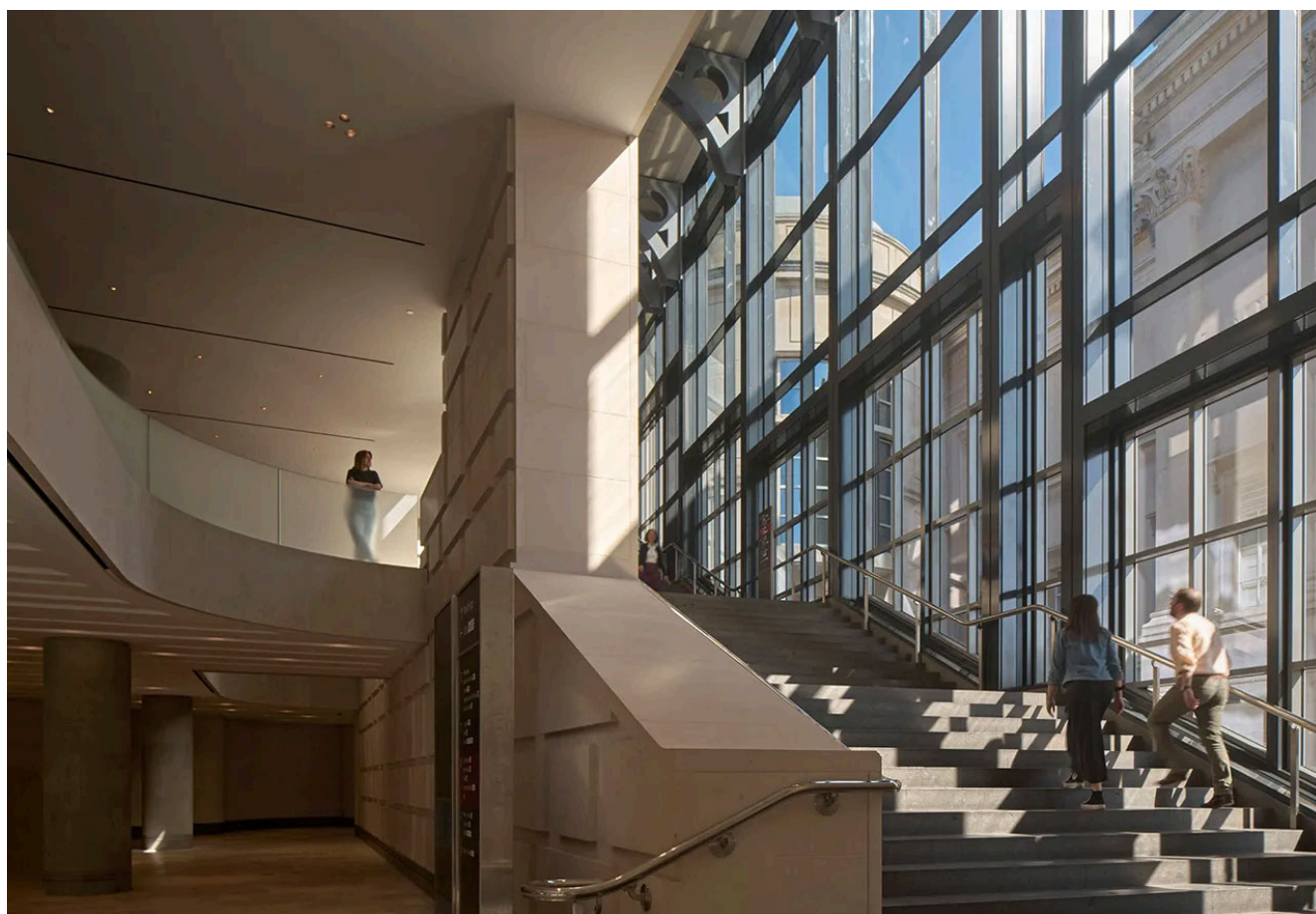
In 2018, New York-based Selldorf Architects was appointed to redesign the National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing. The remodel was heavily criticised when it was publicly announced in 2022, particularly regarding the removal of the building's non-structural columns. Despite the controversy, the project has proven a success: its emollient results are exactly the salve the gallery needed.



Big draw: Sainsbury Wing exterior (Image: Edmund Sumner/The National Gallery, London)

The Sainsbury Wing is perhaps best remembered for King Charles III's infamous "monstrous carbuncle" comment, which single-handedly scuppered its unrealised predecessor. But even the "much-loved friend", the original building by William Wilkins that the wing extended from, was derided for its dowdy neoclassicism when it was built in 1838. This latest reworking was not only to mark the gallery's bicentennial but also an overdue fix of what other national museums take for granted: instead of having to climb the stairs from Trafalgar Square, visitors now have a clear, accessible main entrance via the Sainsbury Wing.

The Sainsbury Wing extension was originally designed by American postmodernist architecture duo Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in 1991. It was given Grade I listed status in 2018 – Britain's highest heritage conservation protections – at the tender age of 27. What's being protected feels like a compromise: as you enter, an eclectic jumble of self-referential jokes play out the tensions between architects and clients in built form. "It's like having an argument with the building," says the project's heritage architect Alasdair Travers. And not only with the building but also with its defenders. The new redesign by Selldorf Architects was vociferously resisted by critics, eight former presidents of the Royal Institute of British Architects and even Scott Brown herself.



Light relief: Sainsbury Wing staircase (Image: Edmund Sumner/The National Gallery, London)

Despite the noise, Selldorf has hit the right tone. The Venturi-Scott Brown's masterful façade – a mannerist remix of Wilkins's classical elements – remains as one of the cheekiest exteriors in the city, albeit with almost illegible signage. Within the structure, double-height spaces carve room to breathe out of the previously crypt-like ceilings. The smoked glass, a puce-tinted hangover from the 1980s, has been banished. And yes, the cutesy Egyptian columns remain.

The upper level of galleries, which was described by its director Gabriele Finaldi as "practically perfect", remain unchanged. Instead, we are treated with a resplendent rehang, where the original enfilades of sandstone archways boast newly-placed works.



State of the art: The wing's interiors have seen a once-in-a-generation rehang (Image: The National Gallery, London)

But the unsung heroes are the state-of-the-art metal security measures at the entrance. There has been a despicable spate of attacks on irreplaceable artworks, from Potsdam to Rome, Canberra to the National Gallery itself, where vandals masquerade as revolutionaries. Museums have been beefing up bag checks, banning liquids and putting yet more glass barriers and plainclothes officers between the public and what is supposed to be *their* collection. The new, nearly invisible metal detectors are a welcome return to a museum experience based, on the surface at least, on trust. I can feel free to enjoy the Old Masters without being searched like I'm about to throw a can of soup.