

Profile: Annabelle Selldorf, toughing it out amid the crucible of art and architecture

The collaborative, Cologne-born architect's high-profile revamp of the National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing has had a tricky birth. But as the controversial project completes, she remains (mostly) serene in the face of criticism



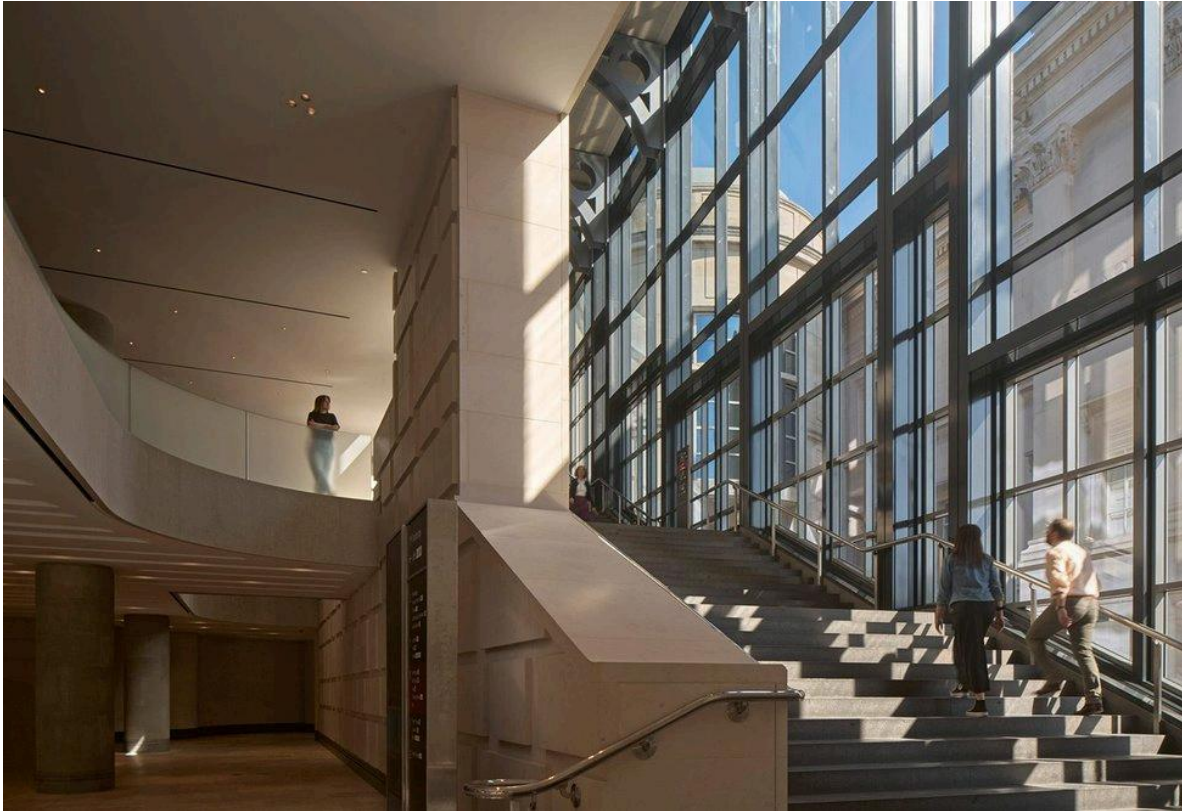
Annabelle Selldorf leans against a new column in the lobby, its incised Pietra Serena cladding reflecting the material's use in the galleries above. Credit: Agnese Sanvito

At this point in the Sainsbury Wing saga, Annabelle Selldorf might be forgiven for gritting her teeth. Charged with updating a highly controversial public building with an overpacked programme on an unforgiving site, dealing with acknowledged flaws and changed functions, she's endured half a decade of condescension from British pundits with strident opinions but few constructive suggestions.

Yet, after a small ribbon-cutting ceremony, with final tweaks ongoing, she exudes contentment: 'It was unbelievably nice, with the builders, some of the architects, some gallery people – it was moving.' An encomium follows to Gabriele Finaldi, director of the National Gallery since 2015: 'He's not only unbelievably smart, but truly kind and inspirational. You don't get that every day.'

Rather than being a duty fulfilled, this praise clearly comes from the heart – and building close collaborations, even enduring friendships, is key to Selldorf's practice. It's an approach that finds a highly receptive audience among art galleries looking to extend, restore and upgrade.

A small current selection: an expansion at the Art Gallery of Ontario is now under construction; a third project for the Clark Art Institute is [kicking off](#); and a first major Paris project, at the Musée Yves Saint Laurent, was [announced](#) in early May.



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The substitution of clear glass for the original tinted glazing at the National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing enhances the relationship with the adjoining Wilkins Building. Credit: © The National Gallery, London. Photo Edmund Sumner

‘I don’t believe in imposing myself’

Selldorf refuses any ‘architect to the arts’ tag, and the [CV](#) of her 65-strong New York practice reveals mixed-use developments, one-off residences, university projects, a rammed-earth winery, and a strong line in waste management.

Yet art institutions, each one with its complex accumulation of spaces, politics, public, patrons and finances, do seem to gratify her ‘singular frame of mind’: ‘When you renovate or restore, you have to ask how the structure works, what it could deliver. There aren’t formulaic answers, as each building has a personality and each institution has a DNA that is truly theirs. You need to understand it, work with it, preserve it, augment it, challenge it, whatever the case may be. I find that process super-interesting.’

Managing the strongly held opinions of art-world folk via reasoned dialogue must require resilience. I ask whether she ever feels like imposing a vision. ‘I do come with knowledge, allowing me to circle around, figure out the practical thing, the reality of the infrastructure. Then there’s a more intuitive interpretation, the desire to find something less tangible. I don’t believe in imposing myself, but also don’t want to be self-effacing, to disappear – I want you to find something that you weren’t able to see before, that results from understanding all these circumstances, then to push further to something that’s different, that’s new, that elevates you.’

The undertaking is perhaps made easier by a Cologne upbringing immersed in the arts – Selldorf’s father was an architect, her mother an interior designer and Sigmar Polke a family friend – but also by

the nature of that upbringing: ‘When I was a kid, you were not supposed to talk at table over the adults – you had to find your own way to feel relevant. And my way is to not force you to say, “Oh my God, you’re so relevant,” but to find yourself. So I seek to be very specific – to know for myself what I am after.’



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A new wing connecting the research centre and main museum at the Clark Art Institute will be the third collaboration between Selldorf Architects and the Massachusetts-based institution. Credit: Jeff Goldberg courtesy of Selldorf Architects

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If art institutions approve of this consideration (it has led to positions on the board of the Chinati Foundation and the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, among others), some in her own profession have been less generous, particularly around two projects by Venturi Scott Brown.

Unprecedented planning applications and intemperate remarks

In 2022, having already been critical of alterations at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Denise Scott Brown [condemned](#) Selldorf’s ‘arbitrary, meaningless’ proposals for the Sainsbury Wing, strongly defending the integrity of its conception, rather than engaging with its new role as the gallery’s main entrance.

Selldorf always knew a project involving unprecedented planning applications on a 30-year-old, Grade I-listed building was going to be hard. With no extra space, constraints abound. Venturi Scott Brown’s widely admired second-floor galleries are on a level with those of the original Wilkins Building, thus the rest of the packed programme needs to be squeezed onto four low-ceilinged storeys below: ‘It’s like a bag; you just have to stuff it full with all those things.’

Alterations focus on easing the journey from street to galleries with additional light, space and sightlines, including a new forecourt and subtle reductions to heavy ironwork outside; opening up the lobby horizontally and vertically to allow for a pause post-security and pre-art; creating a genuine mezzanine with a bookshop, restaurant and bar; and employing clear glazing to enhance views in, out and across. The connection with the adjoining Wilkins Building is strengthened, and the Sainsbury Wing’s facade, with its folds, fades and cutouts, has new visibility and transparency.

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These steps are logical attempts to deal with difficulties noted during the Sainsbury Wing's inception and operation, and in its new duties. Yet a chorus of press, preservationists and ex-RIBA presidents has lined up alongside Scott Brown to present its longstanding problems as complexities, some using intemperate language suggestive of self-publicity, some about-turning from their own early disparagement of the original design. In this narrative, the ground floor has been recast as a sensuous crypt, from which visitors are released into the light of the collection galleries, rather than fleeing its depressing gloom.



The expansion of New York's Frick Collection focuses on increasing and enhancing space for display, amenities and research, while retaining a unique character derived from its origins as a private mansion. Credit: Nicholas Venezia

Although she sees humour in the scenario, Selldorf admits she is not immune to criticism: 'I am the kind of person who gets a little scared and wonders if the other shoe is gonna drop. Even so, I didn't anticipate people would feel free to say such things. I really try to think of it as a sign that they care, but if somebody accuses me of making an airport lounge, I do get a little offended, because that's just not what I do.'

Recent [praise](#) for the sensitivity and dexterity of another protracted, prickly renovation by Selldorf Architects, at the Frick Collection, New York, affirms the validity of her approach, learning about the institution, understanding its differences, ensuring it works. And she has just been appointed to transform

Although empathetic to the personal journey that has led early critics of the Sainsbury Wing to embrace it as an old friend, she believes ‘it doesn’t really help an institution serving the public. I don’t so much care about changes in opinion, but I do care about things that don’t work: the unpleasantness of queueing for coats where others are trying to get to exhibitions, or standing outside in the loggia and in the rain. That has very little to do whether you like an old shoe or not – those issues are real.’



The Frick Collection, New York. Credit: Nicholas Venezia

‘I think there’s a generosity of spirit in the National Gallery’

Certainly, as a survivor of the 1990s iteration myself – working on catalogues in a basement across the road, pushing through its heavy doors to assist stocktakes in its underperforming bookshop, attending meetings in its dark boardrooms and empty restaurant – to preserve the Sainsbury Wing’s failings does not seem a generous public act. And Selldorf and Finaldi firmly believe that an attitude of welcome takes precedence over material or form when providing the public with access to its own collections.

They clearly enjoy working and facing difficulties, together: ‘I think we came out at the other end knowing that we did things with reason and authenticity.’ An extensive refurbishment of the gallery’s research centre awaits them both next year.

Selldorf is grateful for the ‘responsibility and privilege’ that is her own office, but also salutes the ‘small city’ that makes up an undertaking of this size: ‘I feel lucky to lead projects, and have distinct ideas, but you always have to validate them. You’re not out to realise your own thing come hell or high water, but in constant dialogue with the wider team, the client, the regulatory agencies, and the constituents who will use the building.’

The result? ‘I think there’s a generosity of spirit in the National Gallery, and we’ve brought that to a space that wasn’t living up to it before. Now, when you explore the galleries, you know that everything that’s below exists to get you there. And I’m really proud of that.’

