

In defence of the Sainsbury Wing

22 July 2011

The National Gallery Sainsbury Wing extension opened 20 years ago this month. Here we publish Denise Scott Brown's thoughts on the project as it opened, introduced by Ellis Woodman.

The project for the extension of the National Gallery proved one of the most fiercely contested battle lines in the culture wars between modernists and traditionalists that characterised architectural debate in the eighties and early nineties.

The original competition winning scheme for the site, designed by Ahrends Burton & Koralek, had been abandoned following the **intervention of the Prince of Wales** so any subsequent commission was inevitably going to be the subject of intense debate. Sure enough, Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates' realised design attracted an unprecedented level of media hostility. Peter Davey, the then editor of the *Architectural Review*, dismissed it as "picturesque mediocre slime".

Twenty years on, the cultural climate in this country is very different. For many of our leading architects the old polarity between modernism and traditionalism is a bogus one. The influence of the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown has been instrumental in establishing that understanding. The occasion of the Sainsbury Wing's 20th anniversary therefore presents the opportunity for a long-overdue reappraisal of this much maligned building.

In that hope, we present an essay Denise Scott Brown wrote in 1990 but decided it was impolitic to publish at the time. She has added a postscript in which she looks back on the remarkable project from the perspective of the present moment.

Influences ancient & modern on the design of the Sainsbury Wing

Through the arcades of a 15th century home for waifs in Florence, the ancient architecture of Greece and Rome reasserted itself in Italy. During the Renaissance, classical Mediterranean forms were adapted to northern shade to provide a near-universal vocabulary for western building. And over 500 years this tradition has been interpreted, revised, confronted, rejected and reaccepted. Even when countervailed by modernism, classicism has left its stamp on Europe, America and areas under their sway.

The National Gallery's **Sainsbury Wing is a modern building, but it is also a link in the classical chain.** Its design embodies swings of influence and our own sorties down classical paths. We first encountered classical architecture through its outriders in America and Africa and in books at school and home. Time spent in Italy and England in the 1950s brought wider knowledge and a focus on mannerism; and since the 1960s, oscillations "from Rome to Las Vegas then back to Rome" have enriched our professional lives. "Rome" stands for the European city but our love of classicism pertains particularly to its Italian and English interpretations.

In England, purity alternated with perversity, and delicacy with monumentality, as generations of architects adapted classical tradition to local need – and perhaps to the English penchant for architectural rule breaking. The English borrowings were not even-handed. Brunelleschi was less influential than Palladio and, as a result, Palladio is accorded a greater importance in the Anglo-Saxon world than he is in Italy.

^e The reason may lie in the preferences of English architects and their clients. Certainly the Palladian portico sits happily in the English landscape and the Palladian window has become an English institution. In America, pediments and columns adorned plantation mansions and, via Mount Vernon and Monticello, made their way into the vernacular. Palladianism is as American as apple pie. And Palladian symmetries and the mannerist Porta Pia inspired Bob's Vanna Venturi house in the 1960s, and were still relevant to him in London 25 years later.

The Sainsbury Wing is a modern building, but it is also a link in the classical chain. It embodies our own sorties down classical paths

British classicism is echoed on Trafalgar Square in the column rhythms and cornice lines of its institutional buildings, and the porticoes and pilasters of the National Gallery, whose scale barely exceeds that of a large English country house. These formed the immediate setting for the new wing. Since the late 1980s, the English press has asked why, in this context, we spread a "vulgar, American, post-modernist, mannerist, pastiche" like "slime" over our facade and we have given explanations of the design. Broad-gauged and urbanistic, these concerned the tie-in to Trafalgar Square and areas adjacent; the Portland-stone match, going modern or historical (both camps disliked our in-between position); the joys or evils of architectural allusion; and the requirements of early Renaissance paintings. In what follows, the view is from closer quarters and the analysis emphasises influences.

A meeting of aesthetics

Palladio and modernism fight it out on the main facade, he advancing from east to west, it from west to east. They meet at the entry, where an Aalto-like crescendo of openings countermands the classical order, expands eastward to accommodate Trafalgar Square crowds, and cuts off at Jubilee Walk. The new wing's classical elements are syncopated and bunched. Its concertina pilasters, viewed head-on, look like Wilkins columns seen obliquely. Partial and latter-day but monumental, they beat a jazz rhythm, not a minuet, yet suggest a triumphal arch. They must provide civic welcome to millions; pavement-level access to the handicapped; and weather protection to queues waiting to enter. And although they must honour Sainsbury generosity, our pilasters must not vie with the main gallery portico, and must respect our era's discomfort with unalloyed monumentality.

Beyond Trafalgar Square, the facade takes up the rhythms of club buildings along Pall Mall East. Its largest window is both a salute to Palladio and part of the street fenestration. Metal "columnettes" mediate between "human" and "civic" at the entry and acknowledge London commercial traditions. Late in the design process, we learned that similar small columns had decorated the windows of Hampton's, a furniture shop on that spot before the war.

Continuing west, the facade seems to fade. Pieces of cornice drop off, windows become sparse and shadows of themselves, and the broad surfaces and spare silhouettes of 1930s deco are revealed – think Lutyens, Wornum on Portland Place, and the side elevation of the Ministry of Defence Building.

In a strategic spot just west of the entrance, a single classical column plays giant order. Like a toothpick through a sandwich, it pins down the facade's layers and two of the wing's above-ground floors. Like the pilasters, it is copied from Wilkins and via him, Carlton House. Unlike them, it is rounded and fluted. Above the galleries and set back from the facade are lighting monitors. Westminster Council wanted them to be invisible from Trafalgar Square and made us lower them. Yet, though they follow the convention "because-you're-not-supposed-to-be-seen-we-don't-see-you", their functional architecture does the right job and holds its own against the building's other architectures.

Off Trafalgar Square on medieval Whitcomb Street, the building changes abruptly to brick to meet the warehouses it faces. The bricks are speckled beige to tone in with the Portland-stone facade, and striated to give scale. Although Westminster's design committee specified a hand-moulded, cottage brick, they permitted the machine-made wire-cut one that we chose for its colour and refined edges consistent with our stone profiles. Specially manufactured for the National Gallery, its surface was textured to meet design review specifications for evenness of soot retention. At ground level, the shop front and columnettes

continue the 19th century reference and, directly above, stocky windows serve second-floor conference rooms. Above these, windowless walls recall the nearby theatre district, where sheer side streets build expectation for lights and neon around the corner.



Source: *David Grandorge*

on medieval Whitcomb Street, the building changes abruptly to brick to meet the warehouses it faces.

At the north end of the Whitcomb facade is the main loading bay. Refined, “second glance”, modern architecture, it looks like what it is. Around the corner on the north facade, a shoulder-height granite base follows the pedestrian, then arches to form a plaque visible from St Martin’s Street; striated brick continues the warehouse theme and vents to mechanical rooms appear, placed at the building edge to be far from paintings. We wanted no heraldry here but **Westminster insisted** on a limestone “high reader” to draw attention from Leicester Square. We believed outreach northward from the gallery should come from its shared context with the theatre district – old granite and brick industrial and commercial architecture, refurbished hotels, small streets, and a miniature cluster of London plane trees, that was part of our project and was designed to draw the eye toward Jubilee Walk. I also argued for the “backness” of the north facade, asking why a well-tailored suit needed lapels behind. Wouldn’t good lines and simple worsted be sufficient? The late Simon Sainsbury, magnanimous and brilliant steering committee chairman and our loved friend, replied, “Denise, we don’t need another analogy from you!”

Jubilee Walk links Trafalgar and Leicester Squares, passing as it goes between the main gallery and the wing. From the north, the extension reads as a modern masonry building. Moving south, a window wall in the east facade lights the main stair, and overhead is the link from the main building – our Bridge of Sighs. At the front, the side and main facades meet as abruptly as in any Renaissance palazzo.



Source: David Grandorge

The museum shop seen from the entrance hall.

Seen obliquely from Jubilee Walk plaza, the wing is still a modern building but it weaves through a Portland-stone billboard containing classical information – it's a classical decorated shed. Sadly, this entry's task of welcoming and supporting crowds, introducing them to what's ahead, and honouring the generosity of donors will be impeded until the steel pylons standing in the way are moved to one side. Behind the stone entry is a glass skin that fronts the ground-floor lobby, houses the main doors, gives views on the square from the restaurant, and forms the rear wall of the portico.

The interior strategy

Inside, a major task was to seam new and existing galleries together coherently and keep them at the same level, while maintaining mandated Trafalgar Square height lines. This required placing the high-ceilinged temporary exhibition spaces in a second basement and sandwiching three low floors between them and the main gallery floor. This constraint, the price of a great advantage – nearness to the main gallery – conditioned the character of all floors.

The galleries aim for the airiness of a palazzo and are tuned to the delicacy of early Renaissance paintings

The entrance hall is a long, low space with far-flung views. Here, visitors leave their coats, gather their minds, and set off to explore. The architecture is crypt-like but hints at more. Rusticated limestone walls, incised inscriptions, ceiling coffers (rust and ochre tinted in our design, grey in the gallery) and heavy

columns (stand-ins for people on an empty day) suggest a quiet civic street and are intended to prepare visitors for the subject matter, scale and lighting of the paintings above. Left of the entry, the museum shop is framed by two columnettes. In our design it glowed like an Aladdin's cave but did not divert attention from the main flow toward the stair (after all, it is not in an airport mall, fighting for our attention; its nearest competitor is blocks away). But on the return journey it beckoned, enlivening the vista from the stair. So did the poster-bearing display cases built into the far sides of the central columns. These have been replaced by painted boards, encrusted to the columns, showing gallery plans.

The staircase to the art suggests an Italian cortile stair. Its trapezoid shape makes upward movement seem shorter and downward longer (though Lord Nelson on his column enlivens the descent). Its irregularity echoes the lobby of a Lutyens bank, and both derive from Georgian methods of maintaining symmetry in staterooms on irregular sites by fitting circulation and service spaces into residual areas. Pulling rectangular galleries from our site challenged us; we're happy to have achieved as many as we did, reasonably functionally. But eventually the perimeter dictated, as it does in all ancient sites. And we liked that.



Source: *David Grandorge*

Entry to the main staircase from entrance foyer.

The "cortile" includes Jubilee Walk and is defined by the Wilkins west facade and the interior wall of the Sainsbury stairway. The stair itself is contained by one glass and one stone wall. Its architecture continues the outdoor theme, with very big Georgian windows; over-sized, incised, institutional lettering; and, on the mezzanine, 1920s Greek revival balustrades, saluting Philadelphia's Art Museum. At the top landing, traffic converges from bridge, stair and elevator before entering the galleries. This permits Sainsbury and Wilkins visitors to start their trip through the wing together – a desire of the curators that seemed unachievable until Bob devised the long, street-like stair connecting Pall Mall East to the Bridge of Sighs.

The first view of the paintings is from the east–west axis that traverses the entire National Gallery. At its Sainsbury end, arches in false perspective – a la Teatro Olimpico – extend the street metaphor, pull you along, and terminate in Cima’s The Incredulity of Saint Thomas. This painting contains a central arch that fortuitously mirrors those we chose for the perspective.

The galleries aim for the light airiness of a palazzo; their wood, stone and stucco are tuned to the delicacy of early Renaissance paintings. Our youthful saunters through palazzos and a trip with the client to see Italian and German museums helped us to choose rooms over modern continuous space as settings for the paintings. We were also intrigued by the windows in palazzo museums, especially those set cheek by jowl with paintings and juxtaposing art with views of busy sunny streets below. They flew in the face of conservator standards but helped, we felt, to keep the art part of life. Although the museum is a world of rules too profuse to describe, we felt that some informality and a recognition of context could make the paintings all the more special. We hoped to give the benefits of windows without the risk of sunlight.

Shared enthusiasm

Then there was John Soane. Shared love of the Dulwich Picture Gallery helped to cement our friendship with the client. We borrowed its section for the major gallery sequence, and its light and space gave the paintings the ambience they need. Daylight seems to be all around and the changes of rainy London register through the monitors, yet conservation standards are met. And although visitors at the opening ceremony thought the paintings had been cleaned, most were merely well lit.

The new spaces are grand but less so than those of Wilkins, and their sequences contain no violent jumps of scale. They wear their history lightly, suggesting that underneath is a modern gallery with non-structural walls.

While planning we asked: “What allowed palazzos to start as family homes and convert to public institutions, and how do they manage the phalanxes that throng European museums on Sundays?” And we designed concourse-like main spaces to take major crowds, with side rooms that provide a more intimate experience, overflow space, and alternative routes when the large galleries are full. North–south routes follow national schools; east–west give cross access and views of relationships. The plan helps visitors take their own directions through the collection. Its broader aim was to help individuals relate personally to the art, despite the crowds and the difficulty they posed to the viewing of intimately scaled paintings – mother (Madonna) and child portraits, for example.

Source: David Grandorge

At ground level, the shop front and columnettes continue the 19th century reference and, directly above, stocky windows serve second–floor conference rooms

We planned spaces for people to sit, some facing paintings, others with vistas out. The stair windows open into the eastern galleries. From their window seats, walls of paintings, the stair and the square are visible. But because they are internal no sunlight falls on the art. We fought for a similar internal window at the Pall Mall end of the main gallery, but lost. Screened from the sun yet mysteriously lit, it was to substitute for an axial hang in a collection whose paintings – even the largest – are not scaled to so long a view. It would, we felt, augment the “magic” of the art. And only from close up would you see the city below, looking like a “faeryland forlorn”. The client gave permission to include structure for the window in the wall, and preservationist friends have promised to try to retrieve it one day.

In the basement, the temporary galleries were to be non-allusive, suggesting elegance but leaving opportunity for different types of show. However, Edwardian skirting and door trims were soon added “for a special show” and left there. The remaining floors must achieve dignity despite their low ceilings. Views of Trafalgar Square augment the upper mezzanine. The lower must depend on its detail.

Balancing contextualism



design of the Sainsbury Wing responds to architectural ancestors ancient and modern, and defines its context broadly to include much more than the physical environment. Frank Lloyd Wright's observation that a building should bring charm to its landscape was important to us, and we believe buildings and context define each other and will continue to pulsate together, though not always in sync, for as long as they exist. Yet the wing is both in and out of context; that is part of the fun. To be not-at-all contextual is to be a boor; to be only contextual is to be a bore.

And amid the influences, among the mirrors and veils, where is the artist? Is there one at all, or only a clever sponger? This is like asking Mies, "why does your building look like a factory?"

Answer is: because creative people think by analogy. There are multiple influences in all buildings, although some may show more than others, but the architecture that comes from the motley is our client's and ours. Where is the artist? Another answer is: at the office. Henry James said:

"Of the artist in triumph we should see only the back he turns to us as he bends over his work." But, for architecture today this should be in the plural.

Denise Scott Brown reflects on the building two decades on

I wrote the preceding piece in 1990 but decided not to publish my comments on changes to the design. Since then, I have updated it to include further changes and describe some aspects of the design beyond influences, especially issues of function and context. But this is far from a complete survey of our thought while designing. There is nothing, for example, on costs, though frugality was a value we all shared, as an architectural precept.

National Gallery director Neil MacGregor, Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi at the



opening of the Sainsbury Wing in 1991.

Since 1990, interest in post-modernism has died and rekindled, as evidenced by the show opening in September 2011 at the Victoria & Albert Museum. In describing our work for the catalogue, I tried to distinguish between our “PM” and Philip Johnson’s “pomo,” suggesting that their origins were different – that post-war and 1960s social movements were sombre clouds in our background and Las Vegas their neon lining. Sadly, the exhibition does not show what our PM eventually became, but we hope the V&A’s reassessment will throw light on the first decades of the Sainsbury Wing.

‘If a building can survive its first phase, it may be in it for the long haul’

The complex life cycles of institutional buildings arise from their much longer lives than, say, commercial buildings. Loved in the first years, they fall out of fashion, often in parallel with change in the needs they must fulfill. This combination means that the first set of physical changes, although legitimately required, are often implemented by users who scorn their surroundings as outdated. Heartlessly chopped spaces, scraped decorations, and unthinking encrustations of the paraphernalia for a new era result. But the buildings themselves may contribute. Some are more changeable than others. The least so, or the most worn by use, become candidates for demolition. If a building can survive this first phase, it may be in for the long haul, and may find loving sponsors who consider new demands and existing structure in parallel. And if it has sturdiness and amplitude and its rehabilitators know how to plan for change that can’t be predicted (this is possible) there is a chance of avoiding threats in the future. But preservation that does not meet these standards may be a pyrrhic victory. We sincerely hope that the Sainsbury Wing, at its 20th anniversary, has survived the first dangers and will find loving and knowing renewal.

Change responds to inner needs of the organisation but also to context. Context is neither permanent nor passive, nor is it purely physical, and design decisions must be made within cultural, social and economic contexts. On Trafalgar Square, apart from immediate encrustations such as the pylons, there have been systemic changes that profoundly affect the National Gallery. The closing of Pall Mall East is

one. More pervasively, the social and cultural context is changing. Even the Free Mandela group is miraculously no longer needed, although our facade has served as civic backdrop to other protests. Renewal must understand the complexly shifting relations and parallel but different pulsations of environment and building.

And where are the artists in eras of change, especially those who lurk behind curtains of reference? Parallels in the veils and mirrors of language suggest that, if words deceive, then buildings too may hide messages, perhaps until times of rethinking. Is this one? Can a sympathetic public, can users and architects, dodge colonnades, enjoy the humour of a turned corner, or understand how a waif window, though hidden, will be in their eyes as they walk the gallery? Can people see what they don't see, in an ancient-modern mannerism that veils what it reveals and suggests what it conceals?

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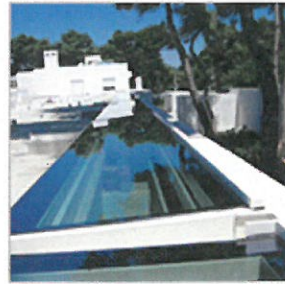
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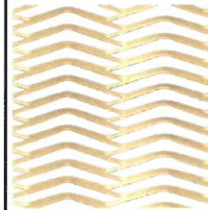
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