

Statement
on
Proposed Alterations to the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery of Art, London

Society of Architectural Historians
Heritage Conservation Committee

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), the oldest and largest scholarly organization devoted to studying the history of the built environment, joins with eight past presidents of the Royal Institute for British Architecture (RIBA), Historic England, The 20th century Society, Historic Buildings and Places, and many others to strongly oppose the proposed alterations to the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery of Art, London.

In preparation for the bicentenary of the National Gallery, alterations to the Sainsbury Wing were approved by Westminster city council subcommittee in a 29 November 2022 meeting attended by just four councilors. The £35 million proposal radically alters the entrance of the Sainsbury Wing, a building granted Grade-1 listed status by Historic England. When listed in 2018, Historic England's citation described it as "a highly individual design, achieving a balance of old and new in the display of early Renaissance art," noting its "lack of alteration and legibility of the overarching concept" as a reason for its designation. The Sainsbury Wing, a landmark of postmodern architecture, was designed by US architects Denise Scott Brown and the late Robert Venturi, of Venturi Scott Brown & Associates. New York-based architectural firm Selldorf Architects was selected in July 2021 to design the proposed alterations, which were dubbed "insensitive" by a review panel of eight former RIBA presidents.

The plan relocates the main entrance from William Wilkins' portico, a central feature of Trafalgar Square, to the Sainsbury Wing, designed to be a secondary entrance to the gallery. A secondary entrance that is known as the Hampton Site has been an issue since at least 1958, when the *Sunday Times* sponsored a competition for a new entrance there. The architecture firm Ahrends, Burton and Koralek produced a design in 1982, famously dismissed by King Charles as a "monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much loved and elegant friend," and a further competition in 1984 resulted in an impasse. The impasse was resolved by the engagement of Venturi Scott Brown and Associates in 1986, with the selected design presenting the Hampton site entrance as a secondary one. In recent years, National Gallery staff have been using the Sainsbury Wing as a de facto main entrance, resulting in issues for security, crown management, and retail concerns that were not contemplated in its original design.

The most recent Selldorf Architects plans, released in October 2022, substantially remodel the wing's interior, including the gallery's front gate and the ground floor entrance, stairs, and lobby. The distinctive Egyptian-style columns would be relocated to make room for new retail space, and portions of the ceiling would be removed to admit more natural light. The eight former RIBA presidents who considered the October revisions of Selldorf's original plans found them "even more ill-judged" than the previous version.

The proposed changes destroy the carefully designed sequence of spaces developed by Venturi and Scott

Brown by removing substantial portions of the first floor and its elevation addressing the main stair, as well as sweeping away most of the architectural details such as the crypt-like character of the entrance with its substantial Egyptian-inspired columns. In addition to stripping much of the ornament in this space, the proposed elevation undermines the extensive thought that went into Venturi's design of the stair; the treatment of the wall and stair undermines the connection to Jubilee Walk, and the stair is reduced to an open connection from outside instead of a room unto itself. For Venturi, who long studied the stairs at the Laurentian Library in Rome and the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the stairs were their own room. The experience of moving through the spaces, from relative darkness into light, will be lost. By opening this wall, the proposed design destroys this relationship in a fundamental understanding of the Venturi design. These changes are not reversible, which is inconsistent with preservation practices. Fundamentally, the new design seeks to transform the Sainsbury Wing, designed as a secondary entrance, into the gallery's primary entrance, with disastrous consequences.

These proposed alterations to the Sainsbury Wing are unnecessary and ill-advised and will fundamentally compromise the design intent and function of a much-loved historic landmark; SAH believes that every effort should be made to protect the Sainsbury Wing.

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