

Carbuncles, Classicism, and a Decorated Shed: Trafalgar Square in 1980

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Introduction

In 1980, London saw the beginning of an intense public struggle between Modernist architects and the champions of traditional architecture. The issues of the dispute have now receded from immediate view, but their influence can still be seen upon close inspection. The conflict arose because there was a pressing need to extend the National Art Gallery in London and a Modernist design was proposed as an extension to this classical building. This raised the question of how to provide for the greatly increased use of a very prominent National Art Gallery while respecting heritage values. Additionally, there were difficulties in adding a wing to what is regarded as a less-than-perfect classical building without further degrading its aesthetics. To the architects of 1989, these questions presented what seemed to be an impossible problem. The first solution seemed to lie in approving an extension in a modern architectural style. However, this was attacked by Prince Charles, who activated public sentiment against the proposal and at the same time attacked the entire architectural profession. The gallery's needs became subordinated to this unprecedented royal intervention, which led to an intense public, ideological struggle between two totally opposed positions. However, a compromise was eventually found, which was surprising in its general acceptance by the public, most architects, and Historic England, the public authority for heritage classification in England.

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Background

In the UK in 1918, the architectural sector was in a very low state following the extreme dislocation of the World War I. The virtual disappearance of the wealthy private client meant that architects searching for work had to look first to civic authorities, and to private-sector executives. With the rise of a stately family home in the prosperous, settled Edwardian period, there had been invariably been a discussion between the architect and the client about style preferences. More often than not the client had definite views about what they wanted, and this was normally based on local and classical influences. Normally this meant building in the classical Greek, Roman or Italianate styles.¹ From around 1930 the government and corporate sector made up the new client stock and increasingly left design matters, and all responsibility, to the architects. By 1950, this tendency resulted in the architect's expectations of greater control over building style being met, at the same time as International Modernism was becoming the design orthodoxy.

By the 1980s, the standard process governing commercial and civic design had become prescriptive on the part of the architects. The architect tended to present a Modernist concept to the corporate or institutional client with very little discussion regarding alternatives. Architectural education supported only the Modernist ideal; other options, such as revived classical, were not offered. Client briefings became focused on matters of the budget, and the expected use of parts of the structure. Aesthetics faded from the foreground. This was the background to what occurred in Trafalgar Square in 1980.²

At this time, the gulf was deepest between the two groups: the classical historicist was opposed to the functional, and the modern, the international. Classical columns were pitted against plate glass and concrete: The Prince of Wales, with a small band of supporters, promoted the traditional, what was seen as English. The architectural profession as a whole supported the modern, the International Style, as the only appropriate mode.

Founded in 1824, the National Gallery in London holds a collection of over 2,300 valuable paintings and works of art, dating from the thirteenth

¹ Paul Thompson, 'The Victory of the International Style' in *A History of English Architecture*, eds Peter Kidson, Peter Murray and Paul Thompson (London: Penguin, 1978), pp. 303-305.

² Thompson, 'Victory of the International Style', p. 305.

to the nineteenth century, excluding most of the twentieth century. It is regarded as one of the world's finest and most scholarly pre-modern art collections, designed by architect William Wilkins (1778-1839) and built between 1832 and 1838. The long frontage of the gallery forms the high side of Trafalgar Square and is a well-accepted part of the London scene with a central composition of a raised Corinthian temple front raised on an ashlar limestone faced podium flanked by steps. Above this there is a triangular pediment with a raking cornice set out according to a Roman order arrangement. However, the angle of pitch is Greek, at only ten degrees, not Roman at around 24 degrees, as one would expect.³ This is significant because in the nineteenth century the classical orders of architecture were canonical, and to a professional architect all the characteristics of the orders were well documented. Professional architects were assumed to have knowledge of the correct relationship between diameter and height of columns, as well as a correct setting out of the various parts.

Facing Trafalgar Square, the façade of the gallery is set out in two vertical stages, divided by a continuous profiled band running under the upper floor windows. These are both opening and blind: in the blind windows the window the opening is filled in with masonry; however, the rhythm of window forms on the façade is preserved. On either side of the central installation, two lesser pavilions project forward toward the square, each with four Corinthian columns of a more slender diameter. Then further again, two more pavilion settings with pilasters in place of columns, on the left and right, project slightly from the façade wall. Column capitals, pilaster caps and the roofline frieze and cornice fit in with the scheme. Above the cornice, there is a balustraded parapet and one major and two minor domes of approximate Byzantine design at the skyline. The complex vertical division of the façade is significant: it amounts to no less than thirteen settings of individual elements. The material for all parts is Portland limestone, the tiles are Welsh slate.⁴

³ Robert Chitham, *The Classical Orders of Architecture* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2005), p. 34. For clear definitions of other traditional architectural terms, see Simon Bradley, ed., *Pevsner's Architectural Glossary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁴ British Listed Buildings, 'National Gallery', at <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-207259-national-gallery-greater-london-authorit/photos#.Vwy6lhN95gg>, accessed 12/12/2020.



Figure 2. Classical pediments compared: National Gallery and St Martin's in the Fields.



Figure 1. The National Gallery facing Trafalgar Square.

Surprisingly, the façade as a whole was later considered weak and ineffective by architectural historians. One of the earliest critics was Victorian Gothic architect Augustus Welby Pugin (1812-1852), who included a drawing of the gallery facade in the frontispiece of his parody of Victorian classicism, *Contrasts*.⁵ This publication was designed to tell a

⁵ Augustus Welby Pugin, *Contrasts or a Parallel between Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages* (Edinburgh: J. Grant, 1898).

story with a message about the inhumanity of classical architecture when compared to Pugin's obsessive vision for Gothic. Later, Sir John Summerson made these observations in his book *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*:

At the National Gallery which Wilkins started to build in 1833 a lack of experience is evident. The building stands on the site of the Royal Mews and something of Kent's staccato seems to have crept into its composition. As at University College London, the steps and portico are well handled but the dome, attended by a short attic to hide an awkward junction is an absurdity. Of the two kinds of pavilion which punctuate the façade one is based on Athenian themes but the other (incorporating the columns from the lately demolished Carlton House portico) is of a type introduced by Chambers. The general result is patchy and inadequate for so commanding a site. As represented by Sir Robert Smirke and Wilkins, the Greek Revival in England is an unsatisfactory interlude. Smirke's extremely limited vision and Wilkins' incapacity to handle anything much bigger than a single unit of design, place them in a category well below the masters of the eighteenth century. Scarcely a single building has either any striking excellence of plan or composition.⁶

American architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock agreed with Summerson; he stated that the Corinthian columns and entablature were not made in the correct Greek form, and the façade itself was "excessively episodic":

Wilkins largest and most conspicuous work and the one which ruined his reputation, is the National Gallery of 1838-9. The long façade of this extending across the top of Trafalgar Square is excessively episodic, and best seen in sharp perspective looking along Pall Mall ... The order is not Greek since the columns of the portico Henry Holland (1745-1806) erected in front of Carlton House were re-used, and the little dome behind the central pediment is almost Byzantine in character ... In Trafalgar Square the unified range of buildings built in 1824 on the west side that once housed the Union Club and later the College of Physicians, contrasts most strikingly with Wilkins' National Gallery. Heavy, dignified and immaculately correct in its Greek detailing, this block also shows considerable variety in the handling of standard Romantic Classical elements without any striving for Picturesque effect as is seen in the National Gallery.⁷

⁶ John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830* (London: Pelican, 1989), p. 514. See also J. Mordaunt Crook, *The Greek Revival* (London: John Murray 1972), p. 101.

⁷ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *The History English Architecture 1530-1830* (London: Pelican, 1980), p. 108.

The shortcomings of the façade composition may be attributed in large part to the constraints placed on his design by the government, as well as to Wilkins' evident misunderstanding of the status of the Greek Corinthian order. Although the first appearance of a proto-Corinthian column was recorded at the temple of Apollo, Bassae around 450 BCE, it was not widely used in temple construction until the arrival of the Romans in Greece after 170 BCE.⁸ According to classical architectural authority Robert Chitham, a canonical form of Greek Corinthian did not exist in nineteenth century England, and the Greek Corinthian order made only "a fleeting but tentative appearance in the architecture of ancient Greece."⁹ As a consequence its particulars were never settled into an agreed form. Effectively, the sole version of Corinthian in England in the nineteenth century was Roman. It is relevant that the Historic England record states that new columns were made for the central temple front; the columns from Henry Holland's demolished Carlton House had been intended for the portico but, in the end, only bases and reworked capitals from Carlton House were reused for the secondary porticoes in the wings.¹⁰

In what now appears to be a significant error, a Greek pediment angle with a very low pitch of only ten degrees was selected in a Roman scheme, thus increasing the flat, single level appearance of the entire façade. Lacking the central height necessary in such a long horizontal façade, its composition is indeed weak. The pilasters and the columns selected for use at the National Gallery were inspired by the arch of Hadrian in Athens; this was a Roman Corinthian triumphal arch built in honour of the Roman emperor Hadrian around 132 CE. The elements on this arch are documented in full detail in the Stuart and Revett text, *Antiquities of Athens*.¹¹ The distinctive pilaster capitals as used by Wilkins are clearly shown in this entry.

Former National Gallery Head Keeper Gregory Martin has made a detailed study of the building process. Wilkins made many approaches to allow for relaxation of the site restrictions to do with height and set back but was refused at every turn. Wilkins was constrained in every way: the

⁸ A. W. Lawrence, *Greek Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 233.

⁹ Robert Chitham, *Classical Orders of Architecture* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2005), p. 34.

¹⁰ 'The National Gallery', *Historic England*, at <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1066236>, accessed 12/12/2020. Historic England is the government authority for heritage classification.

¹¹ James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, 'Of the Arch of Theseus, or of Hadrian', *The Antiquities of Athens* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).

“Committee of Gentlemen” controlling the project were most interested in detecting instances of waste of public money. A right-of-way was provided for the military moving from the barracks and stables behind the Royal Mews to the west, as well as the residents of Duke’s Court and Castle Street coming and going. The display of the national collection necessitated natural lighting and built not so far above ground level so that access to the paintings was tiring for the visitors. Two commitments specified as part of the contract came from recent public works: the columns from the portico of demolished Carlton House were to be incorporated, but this did not happen. The second obligation was to preserve the sightline with a view of the portico of St Martin in-the-Fields when it was seen from the end of Pall Mall.¹² The Parliamentary archive, Hansard, records that this was part of the Charing Cross Improvement scheme of 1826.¹³ Martin concludes that Wilkins’ ability to design proper projection and recession was limited, and to comply with the stipulated condition of “not tiring visitors” his ability to achieve imposing height at the main entrance appears to have been curtailed. As a result of this combination of design errors and the interference of the Committee, the National Gallery is ineffective in design, and as Robert Venturi has observed, its undersized columns now appear to be totally dominated by Nelson’s Column, also Corinthian, at the lower side of Trafalgar Square.¹⁴

In Martin’s article ‘Wilkins and the National Gallery’, he writes about Wilkins’ stormy dealings with government officials, setting out in detail his struggle to increase the height of the façade, and also to alter its orientation on Trafalgar Square. David Watkin agrees with this analysis but adds that Wilkins was an architect of no more than average ability, and in addition he did not have the necessary skills to negotiate with interested parties successfully.¹⁵

¹² Gregory Martin, ‘Wilkins and the National Gallery’, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 113 (1819), pp. 318-29.

¹³ UK Parliament, ‘House of Commons debates by date archive 1988-2016’, at www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/commons/by-date/, accessed 12/12/2020.

¹⁴ Robert Venturi, ‘From Invention to Convention’, *RSA Journal*, vol. 136, no. 5378 (1988), pp. 89-93.

¹⁵ David Watkin, ‘Review: William Wilkins 1778-1839 by R. W. Liscombe’, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 123, no. 938 (1981), pp. 316-317.

New Additions

By 1980, after two earlier extensions, the National Gallery was again in extreme need of an extension to provide badly needed additional facilities. The number of visitors to the Gallery has grown exponentially since the days of opening, to over six million visits in 2014, and a high proportion of these were overseas visitors. The gallery needed greatly expanded educational facilities, updated accessibility, and the maximum amount of natural light. A design competition was organised and there were many entries; it was won by a design submitted by the architectural practice Ahrends Burton Koralek. This was a modern design with no references to the existing building. It had a tower, and commercial letting space in accord with the design competition rules.¹⁶ Following a dramatic intervention by the Prince of Wales, no planning consent was awarded, and the design was rejected.¹⁷

On 30 May 1984 Prince Charles had used the platform given to him at the 150th anniversary of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to criticise modern architecture in general, and in particular, Peter Ahrends' scheme for the extension to the National Gallery. This drew attention to what he saw as a larger issue, the serious aesthetic failure of architecture in creating suitable settings for the general public: this was a prime example of an architect's unwillingness and inability to produce schemes to meet basic human needs, both psychological and functional.¹⁸

Ahrends Burton Koralek's winning entry was a mixed commercial and public development as the original brief had included provision for lettable space. Richard Rogers' firm was the runner up, with a more radical Modernist design. In the debate that followed, Rogers became the spokesperson for most of the architectural profession. Prince Charles' famous outburst is now considered a remarkable episode in recent cultural history:

What, then, are we doing to our capital city now? What have we done to it since the bombing during the war? What are we shortly to do to one of its most famous areas—Trafalgar Square? Instead of designing

¹⁶ HRH Prince of Wales, 'Build a Better Britain', in *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate* (London: Academy Editions, 1987), p. 32.

¹⁷ Diane Ghirado, *Architecture After Modernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), p. 72.

¹⁸ HRH Prince of Wales, 'A speech by HRH The Prince of Wales at the 150th anniversary of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), Royal Gala Evening at Hampton Court Palace' (30 May 1984), at <https://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speech/speech-hrh-prince-wales-150th-anniversary-royal-institute-british-architects-riba-royal-gala>, accessed 12/12/2020.

an extension to the elegant facade of the National Gallery which complements it and continues the concept of columns and domes, it looks as if we may be presented with a kind of municipal fire station, complete with the sort of tower that contains the siren. I would understand better this type of high-tech approach if you demolished the whole of Trafalgar Square and started again with a single architect responsible for the entire layout, but what is proposed is like a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend. Apart from anything else, it defeats me why anyone wishing to display the early Renaissance pictures belonging to the gallery should do so in a new gallery so manifestly at odds with the whole spirit of that age of astonishing proportion. Why can't we have those curves and arches that express feeling in design? What is wrong with them? Why has everything got to be vertical, straight, unbending, only at right angles—and functional?¹⁹

As reported by Simon Jenkins, after this outburst, the public response was overwhelmingly against the modern scheme.²⁰ Shortly after this, the Sainsbury family came forward as sponsors; this meant that the need for a commercial component was eliminated. The extension was named the Sainsbury Wing. The dramatic intervention made by the prince had caused a widespread public reaction and this forced the committee to withdraw the contract by refusing to grant planning permission. This was criticised by many architects; Charles Jencks wrote that it made all architectural contracts subject to uninformed public opinion. Jencks had invented the term and the theory of 'Post-Modernism'. This approached modern building design using historical references, sometimes in a playful, ironic, witty way.

Richard Rogers wrote a persuasive article in defense of Modernism, arguing for more adventurous modern architecture. Rogers complained about what he saw as an unfair process:

The rigid Classicism espoused by some revivalist architects and favoured by the Prince is particularly inappropriate for modern buildings. Classicism is based on Vitruvian principles stating that architecture is about creating a building of rational proportions, every bit of which has its fixed size and shape so that nothing can be added and or taken away without destroying the harmony of the whole. Thus the Classical style is quite unable to accommodate any alteration in the buildings form. But the use and form of modern buildings changes

¹⁹ HRH Prince of Wales, 'A speech by HRH'.

²⁰ Simon Jenkins, 'Such an onslaught but the Prince is right', *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate*, p. 70.

dramatically over short periods of time. And quite apart from the fact that buildings must be able to expand or contract and change their function a third of a modern office building is occupied with technology which will need to be replaced long before the building itself needs to be demolished. In contrast to the Prince of Wales historicist architects who are besotted with a past that never existed, I believe in the rich potential of modern industrial society and my own architecture has sought to respond to the needs of modern institutions by employing the most up to date scientific developments and exploiting the visual excitement that is inherent in them.²¹

The key issue which this difference had brought to the public realm was the allegation that architects in general were part of a ‘cultural clique’ who had become separated from the real needs and preferences of the general public. Modernism had effectively become an ideology, and architecture had now developed two quite different branches. One, a minority, was dedicated to a revival of traditional architecture, while the other, the overwhelming majority of architects, believed in Modernism as a type of “functional ideology.”²²

Following this seeming impasse, the trustees of the National Gallery went on an extended trip to the United States, looking at museum architecture and museum extensions. They became interested in the work of Louis Kahn, a architect with an impressive record of museum projects which had subtle historical allusions. As he was not available to submit a new design, they were referred to Venturi, one of his former pupils. A new competition was announced, restricted this time, and Venturi, working with his wife Denise Scott Brown, submitted a design. His architectural studies in Rome had included research into pre-modern building, particularly grand palaces with long frontages, such as Blenheim Palace and Holkham Hall. He had also taken a particular interest in the interiors of Renaissance churches seeing them as places in which important paintings were seen to their best effect.²³ In his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* he wrote about the idea of ‘architectural inflection’ that he had discerned at Blenheim Palace and Holkham Hall:

²¹ Richard Rogers, ‘Pulling Down the Prince’, *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate*, p. 66.

²² Robert Adam, John Melvin, and Karen Phillips, ‘The Tate Discussion About Architecture’, *Prince Charles and the Architectural Debate*, pp. 30-31.

²³ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: MOMA, 2001), p. 90.

Inflection in architecture is the way in which the whole is implied by exploiting the nature of its individual parts, rather than their position or number ... Inflection is a means of distinguishing diverse parts while implying continuity... A comparison of the entrance fronts of Blenheim Palace and Holkham Hall illustrates the use of inflection on the exterior. Holkham Hall achieves an extensive whole through the addition of similar wholes which are always independent: most of its bays are pedimented pavilions which could stand alone as individual buildings ... Blenheim achieves a complex whole through fragmental parts separate but inflected. The last two bays of the central block when taken alone are dualities complete in themselves, but in relation to the whole they become inflected terminations to the central pavilion and a conformation of the pedimented centre of the whole composition.²⁴

Venturi was selected to create a new design for the extension. He was not a classicist; he was if anything a Post-Modernist, having come from the ranks of the modern movement. Post-Modernism allowed for some historical references in modern buildings.²⁵ It could be speculated that he was awarded the commission because of his intermediate position: he offered the possibility of a compromise between what was Classical and what was Modern. As well as classical design, he had studied contemporary vernacular architecture and published what became an important cult book: *Learning from Las Vegas*, about the chaos of the Las Vegas street. This somehow produced its own valid idea of order, and its own interesting, if eccentric aesthetic rationale. One of the metaphors mentioned in this book was “the decorated shed.” This was his description of a building where “systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently.”²⁶ Venturi’s firm had overseen similar extensions to Art Galleries in the United States and had a reputation for innovation and original conceptual design. In his text *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, he argued that modern and historic facades could be deconstructed using the same visual logic.²⁷

²⁴ Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, pp. 87-9.

²⁵ Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 222.

²⁶ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1972).

²⁷ Venturi on Blenheim Palace Holkham Hall in Venturi, *Complexity Contradiction*, p. 90.



Figure 3. The new Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery, 2017.



Figure 4. 'Bunches' of Corinthian entablature elements on the Sainsbury Façade.

Jencks described Venturi's skill as the ability to use everyday elements in a fresh and interesting new way, plus a willingness to include elements from unexpected sources. He called himself a "modern mannerist."²⁸ 'Mannerism' is a term that can be defined in several ways,

²⁸ Charles Jencks, 'Postmodern and late Modern: The Essential Definitions',

however an appropriate definition in this case would be understanding the architectural canon and playing with it, using correctly formed classical elements in unexpected ways and intentionally breaking established rules. The Sainsbury Centre has been seen as distinctly theatrical and even humorous in its search for unusual and striking combinations, visual rhythms and the imaginative placement of parts. Architect Paul Goldberger outlined the problems Venturi had encountered in satisfying the brief:

The extension would have to have sufficient presence to be an element of its own in Trafalgar Square, yet it would also have to contribute something toward pulling the mix of buildings on the square together. And it would have to relate comfortably to the original National Gallery building without either dominating it or being dominated by it.²⁹

After some deliberation, Venturi and Scott Brown decided that the extension could be a so-called “decorated shed.” All symbolic, classical ornament would be applied to the surface skin of a modern structure. In the end, Venturi did not worry too much about what was seen as the “weak” main façade. If he had learnt anything from the visual chaos he saw at Las Vegas, he would accept the National Gallery as it was. To him, it was “part of the street,” and the possibility of injecting some life and some modern quirky spirit into the perimeter of a famous Georgian square was an irresistible challenge. Venturi’s guiding theoretical principles in considering the historic façade were “inflection, hierarchy and obligation.” An inflected part of a façade would defer, in size and in detail, to the larger centre. Venturi’s rules would bridge the gap between the historical and the modern. The “obligation to the difficult whole” was what he was determined to satisfy. The extension would “inflect” to the centre of the composition.³⁰

The Sainsbury Wing extension is faced with Portland limestone the same material as was used on the existing building. In the façade section closest to the 1820 building, the neo-Greek pilaster elements are bunched together in what appears to be a tightly packed bundle. All the details are identical to those on the old façade and the bunching repeats the combination of forms when seen from an oblique angle of view. As the eye moves to the left across the façade, elements are omitted and the rhythm of the classical

Chicago Review, vol. 35, no. 4 (1987), pp. 31-58.

²⁹ Paul Goldberger, ‘Design for National Gallery in London’, *New Yorker Magazine* (16 April 1987), at <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/16/arts/architecture-design-for-national-gallery-in-london.html>, accessed 12/12/2020.

³⁰ Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, pp. 88-90.

and the historical is, one piece at a time, eliminated. There is an implied narrative of simplification. Openings appear under the pilasters with a functional purpose, so form is now following function. Metal columns with coloured Egyptian or Art Deco capitals appear in the ground floor register. Finally, at the extreme left on Pall Mall the façade is a plain white wall: just precise, dimensioned Portland limestone cladding. The Post-Modern label adds spice to a modern, eclectic London, where, in Venturi's words, the very old and the very new are frequently placed in what he called: "close superadjacency."

Venturi used the Renaissance innovation of false perspective to increase the sense of drama in successive galleries. Notable details of interior design included acoustic panels below the skylight panels, simple reduced skirting elements with no profile, modified architraves and door moldings, and stylised 'obese' Greek Doric-Tuscan hybrid columns. False perspectives have been created to provide a heightened sense of depth. The light grey colour of the walls makes the rooms appear far brighter, and the paintings have become the centre of attention. Diane Ghirado described the extension as a "museum as a shrine, in 1990s dress" and remarked on the use of Victorian railway station shapes for the aluminium arches over the staircase.³¹ The interior colour scheme is made up of quiet greys, with limestone trim and rendered walls, and the architectural dressings are in Florentine "pietra serena." The entrance hall is low and relatively dark suggesting the crypt of a Renaissance church. The stairway is faced in large, ashlar stone blocks, suggesting overscaled rustication. The shop has a glazed screen wall framed by paired colourful, quirky Art Deco shafts. The floor of the entrance hall is of grey patterned slate. The internal wall of the stairs is of stone ashlar with classically proportioned windows of six over four panes in plain openings, as if it were the external wall of an older building. On the wall is a monumental frieze, inscribed with the names of Italian Renaissance artists, by the traditional letter carver Michael Harvey.

Reception of the New

Before the arrival of Venturi, the Sainsbury Extension brief was seemingly impossible. Here is a selection of commentators that approved of Venturi's solution, compiled by writer and art historian Stanislaus von Moos in 1999: Simon Jenkins (*The Sunday Times*) wrote, "it was a triumph, a dazzling

³¹ Ghirado, *Architecture After Modernism*, p. 75.

display it revives architectural humanism.” Simon Jenkins again (*The Times*), “The Sainsbury Wing is a marvel, a building which both sustains a presence across a large square and fits comfortably into the adjacent streetscape.” Jencks wrote, “at home in the twentieth and the sixteenth centuries ... as relaxed with Mies as with Brunelleschi.” Andrew Graham Dixon wrote in *The Independent*, “a building that evokes the sacred spaces for which much of the art it houses were made.” Richard Dorment for the *Daily Telegraphy* wrote, “for once an architect has stepped back and placed his own ego second to the display of works of art,” adding, “it represents philanthropy, architecture and museum professionalism all working together in the service (first) of the pictures and then of the public.” On the other hand, writer and art historian von Moos also found a selection that were very critical: Gavin Stamp in *The Times* wrote, “it delights in perversity, irrationality and awkwardness ... an insult both to the National Gallery and London ... The National Gallery extension is the cruellest disappointment I have ever suffered as an architectural critic.”

However, nothing in this article conveys the average visitor’s experience in visiting the gallery in 2019. They are used to a cluttered, discordant, street environment replete with life, such as the buskers always busy in Trafalgar Square. The niceties of classical proportion are not at all relevant to them, and what could have been achieved in the older façade by the correct use of the orders is of little concern in today’s world. When entering through the main central portico or through the Sainsbury entrance climbing the stairs, the sense of arrival is exciting. The effective hanging and careful attention to lighting of the exceptional early Renaissance paintings seems to work well. The accommodation of greatly increased visitor numbers was the main reason for the extension and this continues as its prime justification. That the extension bridged an ideological divide so adroitly is a huge bonus. The inherent humour in the composition ‘lightens up’ and balances what today appears to many to be a somewhat pompous and self-important façade.

Prince Charles, amongst other criticisms, did not see the point of the single Corinthian column attached to the façade as the final classical motif before the transition to the simpler scheme after the corner, as it did not serve a structural purpose. He betrayed his equivocal position by making the following carefully worded comment: “The debate will now rage, I am sure, about how good a building Mr Venturi has given us. I will leave that for others to decide—although I will say that I think the interiors very promising

as spaces to reflect upon art.”³² This indicates that he did not appreciate the full importance of the skillful compromise and would have preferred a straight, traditional design. Thus, the Sainsbury extension, which started out as a contentious contribution, has become, in its clever and witty solution, an accepted part of the contemporary London scene.



Figure 5. NAG frontage with Sainsbury Wing on left, 2020.

Conclusion

In 2011, Denise Scott Brown summed up the design intent: “In all, the 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.”³³ Importantly, neither Venturi nor Scott Brown were English; they were outsiders, not subject to the creative constraints which seem to have applied to English architects. However, the energy immanent in the existing work was been a key factor in the extension’s acceptance: it has been recognised, amplified and successfully reinvigorated.

The Sainsbury Wing was completed in 1991. It has been operating now for thirty years and the finer points arising from the controversy of its design have been forgotten by everyone, except historians. The extension has been complete for long enough to be assessed without the influence of its initial controversy; a number of questions have arisen about the original

³² Jeremiah Budin, ‘Prince Charles Doesn’t Really Get Postmodernism’, *Curbed* (6 May 2015), at <https://www.curbed.com/2015/5/6/9963454/prince-charles-doesnt-really-get-postmodernism>, accessed 12/12/2020.

³³ Phillippe Barriere, Sylvia Lavin, Denise Scott Brown, and Robert Venturi, ‘Architects. Process. Inspiration’, *Perspecta*, vol. 28 (1997), pp. 126-145.

concepts, and the most appropriate modification to serve the needs of a new age.

The Sainsbury Wing won the prestigious 25 Year Award in 2018 given by the American Institute for Architects.³⁴ This was the second award for the site. It is one of the most prominent examples of postmodern architecture in the UK. The building takes the forms and columns of the 19th-century neoclassical National Gallery, but slowly reduces and eliminates the classical elements. Importantly, in 2018 the extension was awarded the highest possible Grade I listing by Historic England, the government heritage authority. Their citation included the following comments:

A play on Italian Mannerism, the wing demonstrates the duo's sophisticated but ironic acknowledgement of modern conditions while thoroughly exploring classical architecture's conventions ... designed as an extension to Wilkins' Grade I-listed National Gallery of 1832-8, to which it is attached, to house the collection of Early Renaissance art, both of which it references ... in its Mannerist interpretation of classical form and symbolism and use of Post-Modern devices in its response to context, it is a highly individual design, achieving a balance of old and new in the display of Early Renaissance art; also the lack of unnecessary alteration and the legibility of the overarching concept qualify this development for a Grade One listing.³⁵

The final summation must be left to Robert Venturi:

The design of the 'Sainsbury Wing' evolved out of the existing National Gallery building next to it. A recent issue of the English Architectural Review referred to our facade on Trafalgar Square as 'picturesque mediocre slime', you just can't mind such eloquent criticism. The same magazine said in an earlier editorial: 'we are to be given a vulgar American piece of Postmodern Mannerist pastiche'. We are truly hard to place ideologically, and this makes our architecture hard to take. The Modernists, the Neo-Modernists, and the Deconstructivists don't like us because we're not modern, and the Traditionalists don't like us because we're not explicitly traditional. It's good to be in an ambiguous position, I think. It's nice to be not easy to place. It's good not to be ideological.³⁶

³⁴ 'The National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing Receives AIA's Twenty-five Year Award', *ALA* (8 January 2019), at <https://www.aia.org/press-releases/6093547-the-national-gallery-s-sainsbury-wing-recei>, accessed 12/12/2020.

³⁵ See comments on 'Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery', *Historic England*, at <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1451082>, accessed 12/12/2020.

³⁶ Phillippe Barriere, 'Interview with Denise Scott Brown and David Venturi', *Perspecta*, vol. 28 (1997), p. 134.