

Roderick Gradidge's proposals for extending the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square by altering the original William Wilkins building (right) have provoked an interesting response from readers since appearing in the AJ two weeks ago. Below we publish a selection of letters.

## GALLERY VIEWS

### From Gavin Stamp

Sir: Doctrinaire Modernists like to accuse those they dismiss as 'conservationists' as being opposed to all change. This is not so, and the responsible preservation societies have always tried to establish standards for judgment of old buildings; by these, Wilkins should not be sacrosanct.

I have never liked the National Gallery. It is not a good building and Wilkins was not a very good architect: he was a Cambridge pedant pushed too far by influential friends. Would that Cockerell had got the job; Wilkins' design is not worthy of the square, nor up to the standard of the surrounding buildings. A version of Schinkel's Berlin Museum would look marvellous on the site—a great range of columns rising above Barry's terrace. Wilkins provided a portico of second-hand columns (nothing wrong with that) insufficient for the building's length. Why did he not make more columns? Instead the rest of the elevation is feeble and confused. The building is not high enough and fails to dominate Trafalgar Square. The dome is appalling. The only good things about the building were the interiors, and they have been spoiled by successive directors.

Normally one resists change in the certain knowledge that a new building will be worse than even the mediocre of the past, but Roderick Gradidge shows how Wilkins can be greatly improved on and how the shortcomings (from the point of view of the gallery) of the Hampton site extension schemes can be obviated. The New Delhi dome (or is it Neopolitan?) will dominate the square and provide a suitable termination to the vista down Pall Mall. The new upper basilican galleries ought to provide all the space needed (actually the National Gallery, like all London museums, is quite big enough for comfort and pleasure—it is only the megalomaniac competitiveness of museum directors which demands expansion) and be practical and well lit. But perhaps the space below should be an open colonnade, so as not to lose the view of the portico of St Martin-in-the-Fields from Wilkins' entrance portico. And the new big windows are

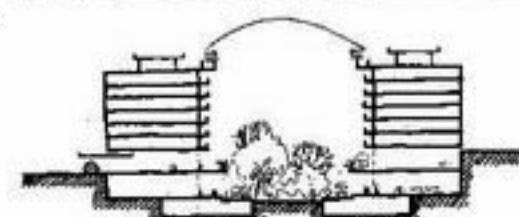
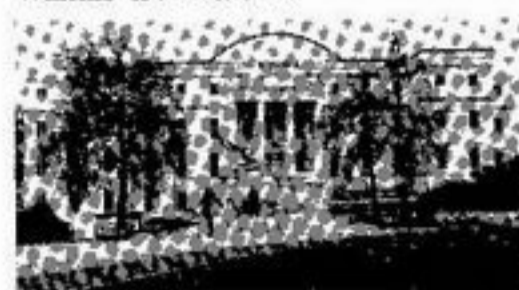
too bland. But the essential idea of the design is sound.

The Hampton site can be a complete, coherent office building and not schizophrenic. But not neo-Baker, please; I would even rather have the Arup design.

### From Terry Farrell

Sir: I strongly approve of Roderick Gradidge's scheme for the National Gallery. Many historic buildings are incomplete or unresolved architecturally, and considerations of how to build next to them might well, as at the National Gallery, be best resolved by rethinking the original design. I would like to see whether Gradidge's design was developed beyond the drawing shown—in plan and section. From the sketch it looked as if a very imaginative, exciting solution is possible—far superior to any of the schemes proposed in response to the original competition for the site.

As a matter of interest, two years ago we presented to Grosvenor Estates a scheme for extending St George's Hospital at Hyde Park Corner by creating one single formal building with the adjoining street frontages extending in Wilkinsesque fashion and the extra bulk of accommodation being achieved by deep planning of the 3 acre site around a high domed central space symmetrically placed in relation to Wilkins' front facade.



Some of Terry Farrell's drawings and photomontages for St George's Hospital. Top left, a view of the elevation showing 'the minimum intrusion of the central dome over

### From Michael Manser

Sir: Roderick Gradidge's suggestion of extending the National Gallery is well worth consideration. The adjoining site could certainly be redeveloped in a more relaxed way, without the inhibition of incorporating gallery space, and the administrative problems of an attenuated gallery are obviously undesirable.

Wilkins' building was very much a compromise design, even if Gradidge's description of it as 'a facade of quite astonishing naivety' is somewhat brusque. Why, then, does he suggest extensions in continuing naivety?

Whatever its architectural quality, the original building will not be improved by pastiche additions. The only way an older building can be extended sympathetically is to add to it in a manner explicitly representative of today. The old can be enjoyed for what it was and the new for what it is.

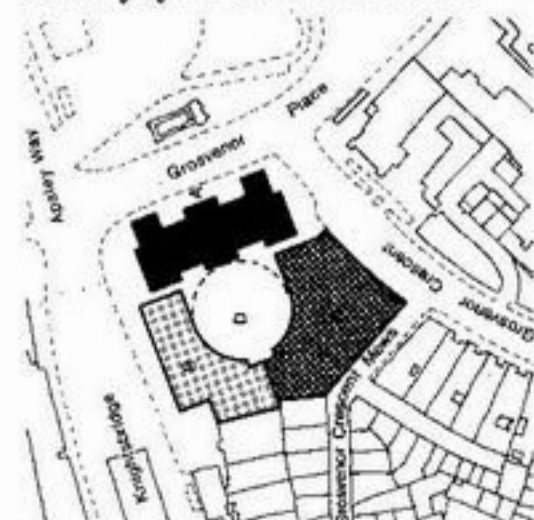
### From Derek Abbott

Sir: Roddy's National Gallery design proposals are certainly fresh and provoking, but even in this post-post-modern era, how seriously should we take them? As a fellow student of Roderick Gradidge, I have great affection for his particular form of British eccentricity, even if I disagree with his views and outlook. However, the gigantic Neo-classical scale of his National Gallery proposals strike me as totally un-British, and much more what I would expect to see in East Berlin, Leningrad, Washington or Paris, but not London.

The saving grace of London is its relatively small architectural scale compared with other world capitals. Surely the challenge of Trafalgar Square is far more subtle than Roddy and many other competitors realised? Since no one has yet come up with the right answer, why not an AJ sketch design competition for this site?

### From Ed Gouge, chairman of the GLC, Planning Committee

Sir: Any comments I make on Roderick Gradidge's scheme can only be personal because such a proposition, if one ever were to materialise as a real proposal, would need to be considered formally by the GLC's committees.



the atrium'. Above left, section through scheme showing dome-covered atrium. Right, plan of scheme: A restored hospital, B offices C hotel, D covered atrium.

It does seem clear that the suggestion for a new building, apparently wholly devoted to offices, on the Hampton site would conflict in principle with our general approach to new offices in central London. The suggestion that it be used to finance the gallery extension is interesting but it does not seem right that a basically unacceptable user should be supported because Government is unable to provide the necessary funds to improve conditions in the gallery.

So far as the massive changes to the skyline of the gallery are concerned, assuming that the trustees would contemplate anything like them, and whatever the historic view about Wilkins' original design, the existing building has been a well known feature of London for well over a century. The GLC would, I am sure, certainly wish for the widest public and professional debate on any such suggestions before it would consider the issue.

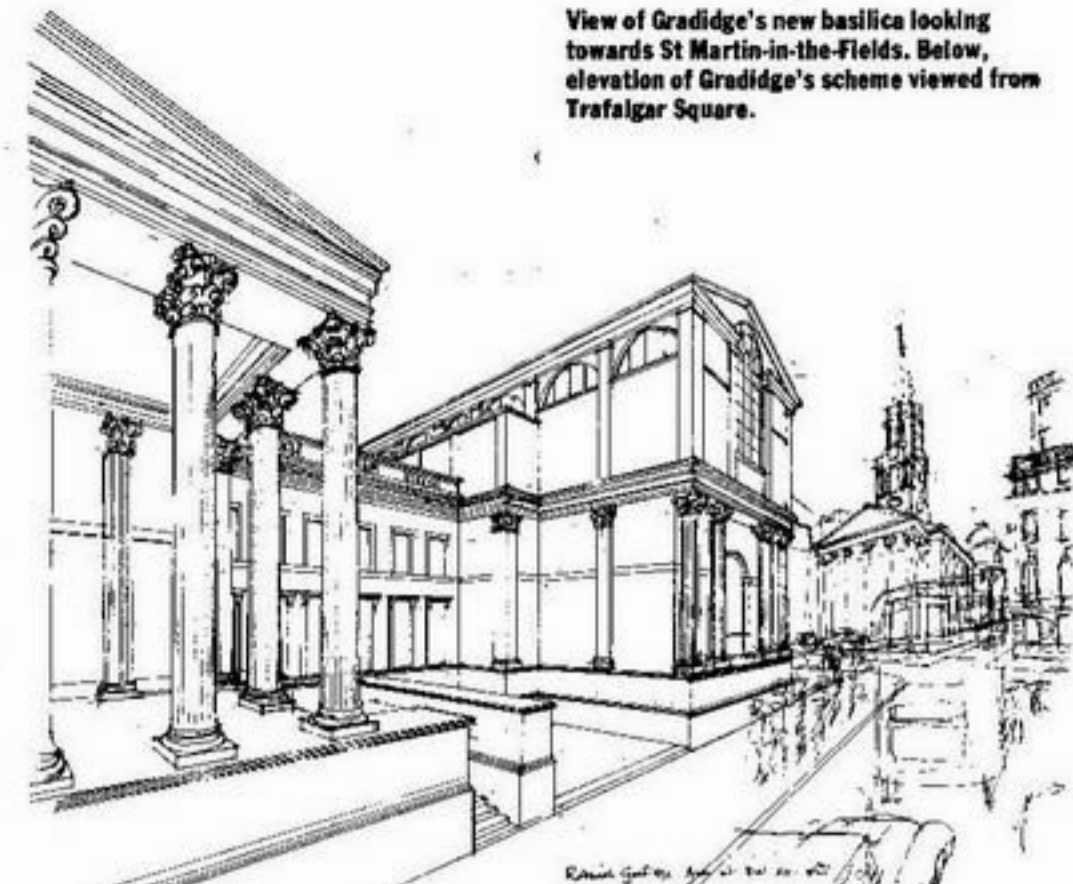
### From Graham White, student

Sir: Roderick Gradidge's fresh proposal for the National Gallery extension is not merely another proposal. His classical/symmetrical scheme shows a completely different understanding of the problems posed by extending such a building, namely what is the nature of the building and its site? All previous schemes read the building in an urban context as just any urban form, so designs have just been any old or new urban form.

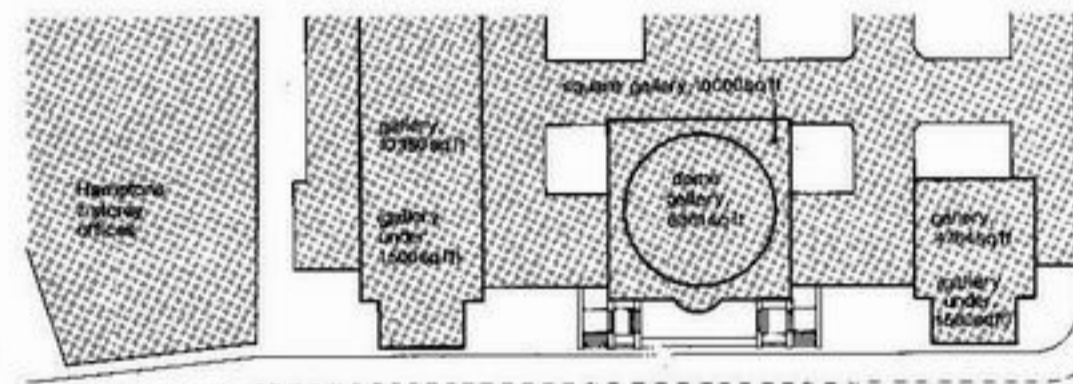
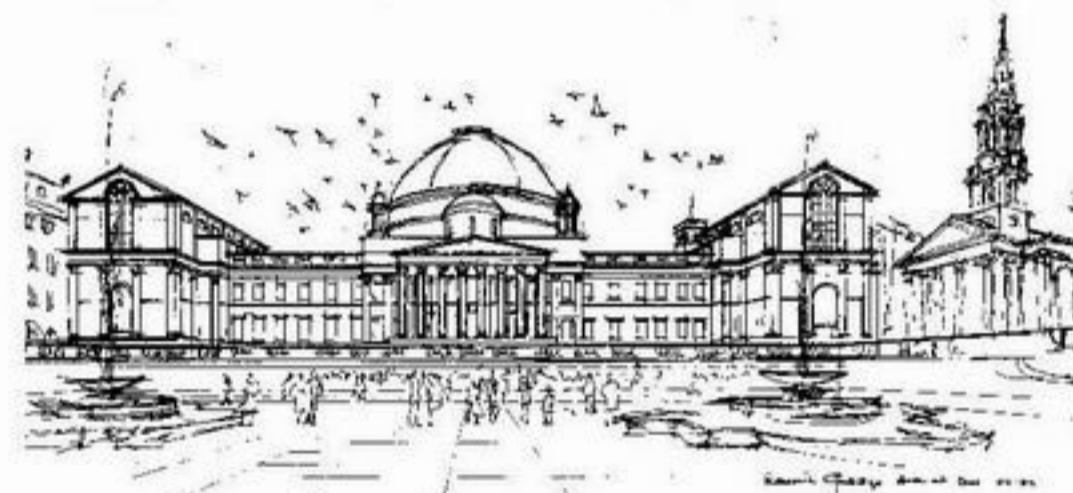
Gradidge takes an intellectual stride for a man and a leap forward for London by recognising the gallery as a monument and treating it as such, thereby freeing the Hampton site for just any urban building.

### From John Martin Robinson, committee member, Georgian Group

Sir: William Wilkins' National Gallery building is, in my opinion, much maligned. While everybody is agreed that, seen from the front, it lacks coherence and 'punch', this does not mean that it does not have other equally desirable qualities, and I would be sorry to see it mucked around with in the manner proposed. The facade in its existing form provides a perfectly decent Neo-classical backdrop to Trafalgar Square and has many small scale beauties including the triumphal arches which Roderick Gradidge proposes to remove. The Corinthian order throughout (whether Henry Holland's re-used from Carlton House or Wilkins' own) is among the most beautiful in London, sumptuously detailed and exquisitely carved. This in itself is no mean achievement as anyone who has tried to supervise a mason carving a capital—even simple Ionic let alone Corinthian—will appreciate. The great strength of the existing gallery facade, however, is the way it composes in perspective and defers to St Martin-in-the-Fields when seen from the west as one walks from Pall Mall. In my view, this more than compensates for the weaknesses of the



View of Gradidge's new basilica looking towards St Martin-in-the-Fields. Below, elevation of Gradidge's scheme viewed from Trafalgar Square.



Plan of Gradidge's scheme showing amount of new gallery space.

building when seen full on. Wilkins obviously gave careful thought to this aspect of his design. And it is this which Gradidge's scheme would destroy. The way the ends of the gallery, for instance, are quietly recessed while the main flanking accents—the triumphal arches—are set into the middle of the flanking wings is very carefully managed so as not to obtrude on the portico of St-Martin-in-the-Fields. Gradidge's proposal would ruin this sensitive arrangement by removing the triumphal arches and enlarging and advancing the end wings.

On the other hand, it is difficult to disagree with his general argument that it should be possible to provide for

the growth of the collection within the existing buildings. For example, double hanging the pictures would not only make room for many more but would also help to restore the visual balance of the Victorian galleries; the present gnome's eye level hang being detrimental to the architectural character of the rooms. The terrible shop could also be cleared out of the central axial gallery (and sited in the basement storey) so that Italian pictures could once more hang there. And why can't all the old spaces, lightwells and courtyards in between the existing galleries be converted into display space? One suspects that the only reason is that that would not be spectacular enough.