MD We have our beginning architecture students analyze the entry spaces of the Sackler. It was interesting because the most successful drawings were frontal axonometrics; perspectives did not yield the same sense of the building. The students were initially perplexed, trying to figure out the absence of resolution of the joints—resolution in the Classic sense—and the lack of exact alignment of the parts.

JS You’re right, perspective drawings might not mean too much for you in the Sackler except depict an atmosphere. In some parts I hope there is the quality of ambiguity that you sometimes see in Soane (who devised ceilings that float and introduced light from mysterious sources). For instance, in the Ancient Greek gallery, when looking back to where you entered from the entrance, you cannot see the recessed door. People will just appear in the gallery, as it were from the mist of the wall; alternatively, when you leave, they will be the same. But when you look again, they have disappeared without a trace.

MD In your work seems to involve the juxtaposition of ideas, both in concept and in detail. People generally notice, I think, small things like the bright green trim on the exterior and the different handrails on either side of the main stair, but the shocking or surprising aspects of the building are there of a larger and at a more conceptual level as well.

JS I see the building in some ways as very unshocking; for instance, the conventional arrangement of the staff/curatorial rooms and corridors. The galleries are intended to have a more public though not monumental persona, to have an ambiance verging on the domestic, especially when the ancient, Islamic and oriental objects are installed in the galleries, and if arranged with the charm and slightly idiosynchratic layout I associate with the Fogg, the domestic character should be reinforced. The galleries will, I hope, be more personal, more like these other annexes of grand houses which display the owner’s private collection than galleries in a public institution.

MD Fifteen or 20 years ago, there was a great penchant for flexibility and open-plan exhibition spaces. Louis Kahn, for example, made an open-plan museum on Yale. But nowadays, there has been something of a return to the idea of traditional rooms, and your preference for that type of exhibition space represents this change in attitude.

JS But, as the Sackler does have rooms, but not always with an explicit relationship to each other; some have two openings per wall, so you may experience some ambiguity as to the type of room you are overlooking the front of the National Gallery, and a proposed extension to the National Gallery (with linking bridge) on the opposite corner of Trafalgar Square could face also sideways towards the Gallery.

MD You don’t mean the bridge in the mind or the bridge in reality?

JS Yes. I mean the gallery in the mind or the bridge in reality?

MD I realise you had to allow for the possibilities of both, but do you think that the bridge is crucial—not to the functioning of the museum—but to the sequential idea of the two buildings, or the two buildings becoming one building?

JS I don’t think the bridge is fundamental to the existence of the Sackler. However, it was there as a long gallery and not an airport glass tube, it would be very practical and beneficial to both museums. But I don’t think it’s necessary as a formal or aesthetic element. In a way the gesture is made, the flanking columns support an imagined structure and the entrance focuses towards the Fogg. The big window suggests in the mind where you would make the leap, and I think the termination of the galleries at that window is how you connect back, not only to the Pagg, but to Harvard itself.

JS And its mind that the composition, or perhaps the beginning, is the courtyard of the Fogg itself.

MD That’s right.

JS That’s right.

MD I think myself in a dilemma about that because, functionally, the bridge would be a great asset, on the other hand, it would drastically alter the facade. To come out of the Yard into the enclosed space in front of Sever Hall, facing the Fogg, and to see two modern buildings—Le Corbusier’s and yours, on the diagonal, or one of the Fogg—a strong image idea. The fact that your facade is facing that ensemble makes it more visible, I’m sure.

JS There are precedents. In London the Gibbs Church faces sideways...