



Invisible Touch

Caruso St John prioritise cultural endeavour over commerce

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Few contemporary architectural practices are described as modest, appropriate and intelligent in how they work, but London-based Caruso St John is one. Established by Adam Caruso and Peter St John in the late 1980's, they came to prominence in 2000 with the New Art Gallery in Walsall, England. From origins in the visual arts, the practice has gained international recognition. Its clients include Tate Britain [4], the V&A Museum, Swiss National Railways [1] and the Gagosian Gallery. *ISBN* spoke with Adam Caruso about the soon-to-open Gagosian gallery in Hong Kong [2] and the state of today's overly-sensational architecture.

How did Gagosian happen?

We were invited to a competition in Rome in 2000, for what became the MAXXI Museum [Zaha Hadid]. It had several prestigious members on the jury, including Richard Gluckman, who had done the Gagosian Chelsea. We didn't win the competition, but later that year Gagosian decided they wanted to establish a base in Europe. Richard Gluckman recommended us and they asked us to do the Heddon Street gallery.

How is Larry Gagosian as client?

He's very, very sharp in terms of what the gallery should feel like. The architecture should never be very present, it's about the artist not the architect.

They are very demanding about the quality of their spaces; the services are always invisible; the quality of the flooring and the lighting is perfect. The permutation varies a little. In Paris, we did a limestone floor; Britannia is a very special concrete floor. Pedder will have a very fine oak floor, planks, but organised in a very structured way.

You control your branding very carefully it seems.

We are careful. You could say our brand is a non-brand. For example, we're very careful about how it's photographed and presented. We have a 20-year-long relationship with Hélène Binet [Swiss-French photographer]. It's a nice way to look at the work.

What's the greatest challenge facing architecture today?

A lot of architecture now, its most powerful iteration is the photograph in the press or on the Web. There's also something deeply problematic when every speculative office building wants to be spectacular. A lot of projects shouldn't have that degree of presence. These are the ordinary buildings that the city is made out of. Maybe public buildings should have more presence, but even then you've got to be careful.

Is that still Bilbao syndrome?

Absolutely. And the problem is that you can't put Bilbao's next to each other. They cancel each other out. I'm a huge fan of Frank Gehry, the Guggenheim is a great building, but the problem is having more than one. The Middle East and the Far East have many places where they try to do that and I don't think it's working. It's less of a problem in Europe, more problematic in emerging cities, where I don't know what they should be doing. One of the reasons I don't feel qualified to work in this context, is a kind of cultural imperialism or colonialism, the idea that one can come from Old Europe and do what's right in China, is not necessarily the case.

Caruso St John seem decidedly anti-glamour.

We're more interested in architecture as a cultural endeavour than just a commercial endeavour. Most of our clients think they're getting very good value because they appreciate that.

Yet your Nottingham Contemporary has some gold, a bit Gehry.

That was slightly vulgar glamour. The whole building is on the edge of vulgarity. A lot of contemporary art is like that. You have this edge between popular and communicative but not being superficial. We're trying to connect with the tradition of architecture; when it speaks through its physical presence. We don't try and build like in the 16th or 19th centuries, but we are interested in that architecture. It's so moving. We make buildings which

have some of those qualities. And there's no reason why you can't, it's just about being interested and making the effort. It's not just the one image and it's not just a circus, it's something that has to go very deep. When you make a building there's a whole series of experiences within the interior. It's not this idea that the exterior and the interior are the same. A lot of contemporary buildings unfortunately are like that. They are very uni-dimensional. Nineteenth-century buildings were nothing like that. There was a sense of propriety; some rooms more public, some a more private realm.

What influences you now?

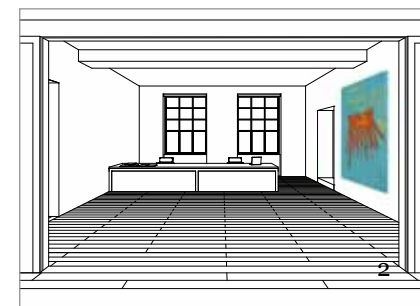
One real point of interest for my research is the second half of 19th-century Chicago, a golden age of architecture, with a huge German intellectual influence and the production of people like Sullivan and Adler's Guaranty Building [1894] and Burnham & Root. It was fabulous. As a practice, we look at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries as a period of globalisation, with new typologies, social upheaval, yet somehow culture grew. I wonder what we can learn now when it seems culture is a disposable by-product - in architecture at least. It's more a commodity, less a cultural endeavour.

Chiswick House couldn't have been more cultured as a project?

We did that building because Chiswick [3] is a kind of epicenter, the first neo-palladium building in England, with really the first English landscape garden by William Kent [1730]. It's an incredible concentration of important developments in architecture and landscape. We demolished the café which had been built in the 60s and created another. It's very popular.

What's next for Caruso St John?

The Tate starts on site in March. Building for Swiss Railways, now in drawing phase, starts in the autumn. And we're doing a project in Lambeth for Damien Hirst, a gallery for him to show his collection and for his friends.



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