

On the Edge of Ordinary, Two Houses by Caruso St John

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Whether the long post-war golden age of British architecture ended with the boom of the 1980's or the bust of the 1990's, historians some day will tell. One thing is already clear, British architects are now looking for new directions. There is currently no single issue, no major controversy, no particular style that motivates creative action. The optimism of modernists and the nostalgia of traditionalists have been assimilated in the kind of compromise that is England's atavistic and loveable virtue. But considering that the government is about to spend substantial amounts of National Lottery money on building projects, the lack of nerve and the intellectual rout that presently affect the profession could hardly be more untimely. In this context, clear ideas and novel sensibilities, matched with the ambition to build, are greeted with a sense of excitement and relief.

In the smart circles of the early 1980's the demands placed upon architecture by inhabitation appeared trivial—that is, unless they could involve a crime or the stripping bare of a bride—and the newly conquered autonomy of form was the order of the day. Adam Caruso and Peter St John witnessed first hand, at McGill University in Montreal and at the AA School in London respectively, this upsurge of formalism. In these circumstances, the reality itself of architecture could seem problematic and intractable. As they came into contact with the constraints of practice, notably in the offices of Arup Associates and Florian Beigel, questions concerning the relationship between building and everyday life became charged with something like urgency, and are central to Caruso and St John's teaching activities at University of North London.

Realism

In this quest they were encouraged by a friend of the practice, Tony Fretton (best known for his design of the Lisson Gallery) to articulate and give a first answer to these preoccupations. If a new realism there must be, then Fretton is its most eloquent advocate, now as in the mid 1980's. His sensibility towards the city at first recalls that of contemporary European modernists, drifters of the freeways and urban wastelands. Under closer examination, it is at once less visionary and more complex; it brings in the same frame the anonymity of the metropolis with the intimacy of domestic details. The appearance of the modern city can be deceptive, even unsettling in its surfeit of reality. But beneath it is a humane concern that finds virtue in the humble and value in what commonly remains unseen or discarded.

This may seem a digression. But Fretton is an important source of Caruso St John's work. Like him, the two architects cultivate the approach—an odd one when it comes to building—that consists in seeing things as they are. Accordingly, there is for them no good or bad site: 'No matter how unpromising a situation', says St John, 'there is no such thing as an uninteresting site: you just add.' And 'I find it difficult to justify demolition today.' One interpretation of this part involves composition: in their work, the site is conceived as a 'ground', in both a physical and a painterly sense, upon which building takes place.

The architects' studio provides a vivid illustration of this approach. In the ordinary warehouse, not only were existing floors and walls preserved wherever feasible, with their old paint, warts and all: even the marks left by builders in the course of their work, like the taped joints of the plasterboard panels, were retained. This is one up on the Brutalists of the 1950's, whose authenticity has been elevated to the level of fine art. This is one up on Fretton too, who has so far preferred meticulous finished surfaces. Nevertheless, there are more than traces of the Lisson Gallery in the composition of the entrance facade. Here, panels are shifted to either meet or avoid existing elements, like a cornice or a street lamp, making one aware of their ordinary presence.

Organic architecture

Another source of Caruso St John's work, one that is more profound if less pronounced, is organic architecture. It is surprising that, among the English for whom empiricism is an essential virtue, organic tendencies in design have never been more than marginal. Frank Lloyd Wright for example never had an influence in England comparable to that which he had elsewhere in Europe. When in the late 1950's the authority of CIAM and Le Corbusier came to be challenged, organic sympathies were directed towards Scandinavia and Aalto in particular-and not, for obvious reasons, towards Germany. When a few years later, America's influence became predominant, it was once again not Wright, but Mies, his friends and his pupils who were emulated. It was not until the arrival of Florian Beigel in the 1970's that a minority generation of architects, taught or, like Adam Caruso and Peter St John, employed by him came into contact with the real thing: Walter Segal, Günter Benisch, Frei Otto and Hans Scharoun.

Take Caruso St John's 1992 competition entry for the Nara Convention Hall (awarded a Special Prize). As in Scharoun's Municipal Theatre at Wolfsburg, the volumes of the auditoria break above the taut horizontal of the building, in a lyrical evocation of the nearby landscape. But this is only on the surface. What they retained from the German architect is the pivotal importance ascribed to the site as a means of creating form. Peter St John explains: 'What is interesting about the Scharoun houses, for example the Schminke house, is not their actual spaces, but the way in which they bring different aspects of the site around them together: the building becomes a kind of spatial pivot. They are conceptually quite transparent, not in the common twentieth century sense that relies on the provision of more glazing, but in the way they connect different places around them, put different parts of the site in touch with each other.'

As St John justly observes, this became even more effective in the later houses upon which the Nazi regime imposed a vernacular exterior. Paradoxically, it was this last constraint that helped Scharoun free himself from the conventions of 1920's white architecture, and make works that were less predictable and more relaxed.

This account bears directly upon the house designed by Caruso St John for a site in Lincolnshire, with one proviso: the discipline of the vernacular, by which the architects mean no more than the way buildings are currently put together in a given region, is in this case self-imposed. What is vernacular in this polder area of Lincolnshire is largely a matter of interpretation. For Caruso St John, it is a quality that addresses itself to sensitive, often photographic observations before it does to rational understanding. The realist tendencies described above converge here with an organic approach as the vernacular is seen to reside in the way in which modest speculative houses, plain farm buildings or hay stacks break into the horizon of the open landscape.

Accordingly, the house stands proud and compact, as far from the southern boundary of the site as the village perimeter building line allowed. In this way, it could also benefit from a generous south facing prospect. Like the shell of the adjoining barn that was retained, and in the manner of local bungalows, it is clad in brick. That is as far as the vernacular goes. The architects eschewed the planted borders of suburbia which often protect accommodation against the openness of the landscape. An effective transition between the house and the village road is nevertheless achieved with the car port and the entrance porch to the east. The black stained plywood with which they are clad stands neatly on the gravel, while the flashings of their roofs cut a sharp stainless steel line against the sky. In every other respect, the house sits plumb like a paper weight on 'the table of the land'. In time, a meadow will reach northwards, in a gesture commensurate with the view, and will join the more protected garden to the south without formal transition. The house presents a stark face, a kind of bulwark against the surge of the landscape from the north, that also answers the gable of the adjoining barn. The contrast between this windswept side and the more hospitable south is resolved in the building itself, notably in the low gradient of the roof that falls gently towards the garden and the porch.

There is little about the house that does not contribute to create new relationships on the site, or to re-establish old ones, like an edge to the village. Ultimately, the building is more organic than vernacular. Recently revived together with other ideas current in the 1950's, the notion of the vernacular is a precarious one in the increasingly globalised late twentieth century. The brick pavilions that dot the fens have at least as much in common with traditional forms of community as they do with the suburbs that now reach across Britain. As envisaged by Caruso St John, they participate in a rhetoric of the real, and help define an ordinary situation within which architecture can be inscribed 'transparently'. To

date, this particular vernacular has cohabited well enough in their work with organic sympathies. But if for architects like the Smithsons, there could seem to be no essential conflict between modernity and a desire to 'connect', the modern environment is now perceived as a source of alienation, and is best appreciated through passive contemplation or *dérive*. What Wim Wenders' characters submit in film, Jean Nouvel and Rem Koolhaas experience in real life: the contradiction of modernity are, we are told, inevitable and pleasurable.

Caruso St John share these premises to a degree. But their formal strategies are essentially different, even opposed: rather than cultivating fragmentation, collage and the like, they seek instead to weave deliberate, meaningful relationships that are specific to a site. As a result, they are faced with two options: either they succeed in finding in the modern landscape meaning instead of alienation, or their interventions within it become less transparent, more openly political.

Space

Whatever the possibilities for contradiction in such organic realism, there is in their work another, perhaps more pressing intention, which they sometimes describe as 'making space'. Since the late 1950's, British architects have discussed architecture in terms of form and stylistic precedents, or alternatively, in terms of programmes and technical processes. However inclined, space and plasticity were out. For Caruso and St John, the return to space as a prime constituent of architecture is overlaid with political and social allusions. In their vocabulary, space is often described as generous, relaxed, flexible, public and open, and is attributed with remotely metaphysical overtones. It enables them to reach beyond the dominant conception of buildings as objects, and puts back on the agenda the open city dreamt by Team 10-one in which buildings and settlements come somehow spontaneously into existence, and connect with a particular situation. Such is the 'inclusive urbanism' proposed for the Nara Convention Hall, in which the distribution of circulation and services aims in some sense to recreate the conditions necessary for the extension of the 'vernacular' city inside the building.

In practice, this return to space starts with the recognition of the spatial qualities of a particular site. It is upon this 'ground', be it the existing brick shell of a warehouse or the earth of the fens, that the 'landscape of the interior' acquires with the help of models (often at scale 1:20) a distinct 'topography', shaped by 'layers' and 'elements'. The architects illustrate this procedure with Rietveld's Schröder House, in which a powerful spatial aesthetic was knitted with great ingenuity with a lifestyle.

This last comparison is not merely incidental. It informs the 'slipping-sliding' technique that applies to the layout of spatial units, for example to the relationship of rooms to walkways in the Nara project, or to the overlapping layers of the building fabric, as in the naked plasterboard and the glazing fitting bark-like onto the brickwork of the architects' office. In the house in Lincolnshire that seems so much of a piece, at once seamless and solid, appearances are deceptive. Caruso describes its brickwork as being stretched around the building like fabric. Flush glazing and casements standing proud of the wall face conceal the depth of the material, and the black stained plywood is fixed to the structure like a veneer. The rooms themselves-the kitchen to the south-east and the wall of bedrooms to the west-are said to participate in this foliation of the envelop.

In the work of Caruso St John, space is not simply a quantity that can be added, like some Corbusian surplus of plasticity and art, to the bare bones of life. Nor is it merely a means to articulate a building with its landscape. Rather it is characterised by a quality that is essential to experience, and which Peter St John, like the Smithsons, recognises in the Eames House: 'The house may consist of a grid, inset with screens in a Mondrian-like pattern. Yet one does not think of the building in terms of its plan or its elevations...instead one always thinks of the objects that are in it: the rugs, the pictures, the pots...They are not just contents: they are participating in a field of elements that are not dissimilar in scale to the dimensions of the columns. It is a very delicate way of making space".

This description points to the awareness of a complex, even fragile relationship between domesticity and the environment, and the need on the part of the architect for a sensitivity to match it. It points to the extension of Caruso St John's inclusive urbanism within architecture itself. It suggests at first that what is at issue is how the experience of domesticity can find a place within architecture. But the work of the architect evokes precisely the opposite: a genuine concern about the means by which architecture can find its rightful place, can be included within the field of experience. The distinction is a subtle one. It is also one that has profound consequences.