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BOOKMARK

ADAM CARUSO



'ARCHITECTURE ISN'T REAL'

ACCORDING TO ADAM CARUSO,
LITERATURE ENGAGES US WITH
THE WORLD – AND THAT'S
SOMETHING ARCHITECTURE
DOESN'T DO OFTEN ENOUGH.

TEXT GRANT GIBSON
PHOTOS ADAM CARUSO

WHAT YOU NEED TO REMEMBER WHEN you interview Adam Caruso, one half of the young(ish) British-based architecture practice Caruso St John, is to bring plenty of tape. We meet on a Friday at 9 a.m. in the firm's East London studio. Caruso has a cold, is tired and overworked – the keenly anticipated revamp of the V&A's Museum of Childhood (located around the corner from the office) is due to open its doors to the public any day, and he's been busy lecturing abroad – but as soon as the light on my recorder glows green, he clicks into gear. To describe Caruso as loquacious does not do him justice. You don't so much ask him questions as offer prompts before sitting back to enjoy the ride. It isn't that he's verbose, but just that his conversation is incredibly dense. Ideas rub up against each other like lap dancers looking for a tip. Our interview at one point lurches from the cultural importance of Elvis and Britain during the punk era to the problems of relativism and the significance of Tolstoy. His frame of reference is, frankly, enormous, but there's no pretension behind any of it. He doesn't try to bamboozle or to complicate his ideas with 'architecture' speak. Over the years, both he and partner Peter St John have written, as well as taught, extensively, contributing to the likes of *Blueprint* and *AA Files*, as well as to various books and their own monograph, *As Built*, which was published in 2005 by A+T. On paper his style is typically North American – punchy, honest and opinionated – without drifting into polemic. He obviously loves the written word and is vaguely intrigued by *Mark's* Bookmark section, although with certain reservations. As I sit down, he jokes that the slot must have been created 'to show how pretentious architects can be', and with a photocopy of the magazine's recent Steven Holl interview on the table in front of us – which includes the words 'phenomenological', 'porosity' and 'heuristic' in the opening paragraph – it's an analysis that's kind of difficult to refute. Handily, though, it also opens the door to my first question.

Do you feel the architecture profession shrouds itself in mysterious language?

[Pause]
Er...

Sorry. I know it's early in the morning to have to think about the mysteries of life.

I think every profession has its private language. It's inevitable. Scientists have one. Philosophers... But the private language of architecture seems to have as much to do with obfuscation as with any need to get more precise. Because, actually,

architecture production isn't verbally based. You do need to communicate verbally, obviously, but good buildings are incredibly communicative, aren't they? That's one thing which is so amazing about architecture – the author becomes irrelevant, and it means all these different things. Over time the meaning of buildings and the way they work socially and functionally changes. For me, that's the really interesting thing about architecture. Art is hung in a gallery, and a lot of the power of art comes from being slightly insulated from reality. Artists don't talk as much as architects, but that's because they don't sell ideas. I think there are two languages in this profession. There's the language that isn't actually bullshit, because, you know, it's really quite straightforward – big commercial architects talking the language of their corporate client and adopting the language of efficiency and management culture.

'ARTISTS DON'T TALK AS MUCH AS ARCHITECTS, BUT THAT'S BECAUSE THEY DON'T SELL IDEAS'

Selling themselves as a brand...

I guess, yes, that's a slightly more depressing part. But then I think there's another kind of discourse that started in the '70s, when there was this idea that you could appropriate philosophical positions, like those of Derrida. It was this idea – very American – of good, intellectual, ambitious architects not really building very much. And there's a parallel sort of architecture that's engaging with philosophical discourse and then making architecture that comes out of it. I can't remember who wrote it, but a critic commenting on this said that all good architectural theory came after the architecture from Palladio to Loos. Really good writing is always, in the end, a rationalization of a reality. That's so true. If you look at Eisenman working with Derrida to make an architecture that comes out of poststructuralist writing – that's absurd. It's *absurd!*

Language? I think architects like Norman Foster – think of the very successful tradition of big firms in Britain now – made it by being rather inarticulate...by talking about being on time, on budget, about efficiency, about the new management process. I've heard of interviews with clients who mentioned that some famous English architect or another 'was almost bumbling, but we can tell he'd really taken our project to heart'. That's the problem with Peter

and me; we seem to be too articulate, but I hope not in a bullshit way. We actually have some ideas on why we're doing something.

How did you set your brief for your own monograph?

We'd resisted doing anything like that. That project started as a more limited thing, and in the end A+T, the publishers, made it rather larger than we thought it was going to be. In a way, it was a very straightforward, didactic publication about our work. We did some new writing for the book. I've always written about our position, but I enjoy writing about other things more. I don't know why, but it's a way of engaging with people in the arts community, say, or with other sorts of people for whom language is a primary way of communicating. We're now working on a book that's much more ambitious, where we have a structure that allows us to show all the different strands of our work – because some of them are historical, some are technical, some are cultural, and some are very, very purely architectural. The idea is that there are a number of discourses – some by us, some by other people. Some of these discussions try in an honest way to reveal all the disparate influences.

'REALLY GOOD WRITING IS ALWAYS, IN THE END, A RATIONALIZATION OF A REALITY'

The other funny thing about both the architectural discourses we're talking about – the professional English one and the more pseudo-intellectual American one – is that they kind of insist on a singular path. You know – 'We have this way. It's proven. It works.' I find that boring. We're very happy being eclectic. Architecture is so rich, and there are so many different types of architecture. If people can do things that look like bicycle helmets, why can't we also look at Gothic architecture, early Renaissance architecture or 1930s modernism and make architecture which uses those as well?

Obviously, some architects have made their reputations through publishing. How important is a book to a practice like yours?

I love books. My mother was a librarian. I've worked in libraries. I used to have to read twice as much as I watched television. After a while, my parents didn't have to force me, because I loved

reading. I love books, and I love a beautiful book, but there's so much architecture publishing – it slightly kills it for me. There are so many books about certain architects. Why do we need another book? You know, you get exactly the same projects – plus one. And it becomes another branch of PR. A lot of architecture books are vanity press as well, which is something we've always said doesn't interest us. How many Caruso St John books are required? Of course, we have published a lot. People have found our work interesting from the beginning, and that's useful in a way. I don't know if we get work out of it. It's about finding this network of people whose work you respect.

What books do you read?

I love reading fiction. I'm really engaged by things that have an intensity, like a really great exhibition, a building, cities, a good meal. If one wants to be a good architect, I believe a great source of energy is a strong relationship with society. I'm very keen on popular culture, but obviously, at my advanced stage, my connection with it is more removed. I have a brother who's in an underground band in Vancouver, and I have some younger friends who keep me in touch.

I really love fiction, and the tremendous persistence of prose reinforces my belief that architecture doesn't always have to start from scratch. The novel is still a remarkably vital form. Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, for example, is an amazing book. I really love 19th-century fiction, but then another author that's amazed me in the last five years is Philip Roth, who's having a kind of second career. He's a fantastic writer but so scatological that he may have divided people to a point. But when I think of the books after *I Married a Communist* and the last book he wrote [*The Plot Against America*], about the alternative history of the States – I mean, he's over 60 and is writing these extremely mature novels. And, in terms of form, they're not so different. They're not playing with form especially. The subject matter is kind of early 20th century, and the force is so powerful.

I am interested in fiction that plays with form a bit, however. Who wrote *Invisible Cities* and *If on a winter's night a traveller?* Italo Calvino! He's an author who did play with the form of prose. *If on a winter's night a traveller* is so enjoyable and witty. It has a circular structure. The form and content of the book actually sustain each other, which is what any good artistic production should do. I'm North American, you know. There's that connection to Roth. I'm very much interested in Jewish American fiction. It's very direct.



Do you prefer the spareness of US prose to what you find in literature coming out of the UK?

I think Julian Barnes is a great writer. He's very interesting formally and has exceptionally wide-ranging subject matter. He's exactly precise and enjoyable to read. Salman Rushdie's first few books were very sharp, acerbic and completely engaged with the 19th-century novel.

'THAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH PETER AND ME; WE SEEM TO BE TOO ARTICULATE, BUT I HOPE NOT IN A BULLSHIT WAY'

Does what you read inform your work, or is it an escape from work?

I think 20th-century fiction is a way of understanding situations. Take Raymond Carver, who's a really great writer. There was a point about ten or 12 years ago when our work was all about the ordinary – trying to find beauty in very ordinary situations. You could call it a reaction to being hugely influenced by contemporary art practice. There seemed to be a thrilling potential in finding beauty, or in finding powerful situations or moments, in the area around our office in Bethnal Green. [He points in the general direction of the building site outside the window.] The skyline with those warehouses and geometrics, it's... it's amazing. Raymond Carver writes about that. We used some Carver text in an Architecture Foundation exhibition about a dream house. We took half of a suburban semi and inhabited it with these dreams from Raymond Carver. The connection was incredibly direct.

I like Paul Auster a lot. The situations that he describes – kind of moving from a sublime landscape to Manhattan. The mixing of truth and untruth, which a lot of my artist friends... well, it's the way they operate. They're the most truthful liars I know, and it's never irritating. For them, the lie is kind of true. It's necessary. And Auster's books are all about that – about deep engagement with real situations on the one hand and beautiful descriptions of them on the other. The exposure of the way you can contrive anything. Architecture's full of that. Architecture isn't real. Whether or not your façade is load bearing doesn't really make much difference. That it appears to be load bearing – that's the architecture. It's mostly about engaging you with the world. It's about keeping things real. So many architects are totally up their own arses. Hopping around on private jets, meeting each other at

airports. You wonder how they can possibly design anything except a luxury dwelling totally isolated from reality. It's a real problem.

Are you teaching much at the moment?

I'm teaching at the London School of Economics now. Not architects. I'm teaching on the Cities programme. And the first thing I did was to ban design.

What do your students read?

They read a lot, and I learn a lot about the reading that they've been doing in the other courses they take. It's so compressed; we don't have a lot of time. I have assigned certain literature to former architecture students. One of the things we do is use different types of description to really understand a place. You look at a room and say, 'Write a description.' I've done this, and my students have written four lines. I've written three pages, and I've only done the ceiling. And then they realize it's about the thrill of concrete reality and the infinite amount of information that concrete reality has. It's about how you engage with the world, and I think architecture doesn't do that enough – and that's something literature really does.

What about nonfiction?

I love Peter Guralnick [author of *Last Train to Memphis* and *Careless Love*], who wrote about Elvis. He's a great writer about R&B and American music. His are really well-written books about an extraordinary period and, in the case of Elvis, about an incredible person, a person who became like a paradigm – absorbing and reflecting all these amazing social events. And he became more than a symbol, like a nexus of all this energy. It's this idea of a positive take on relativism. Relativism is quite problematic, especially when social relativism turns into political policy. It doesn't work. In Britain, there's a very interesting discourse on multiculturalism now, and I don't know where it's going. In terms of music and literature it's very, very powerful. Pre-19th-century literature is a more difficult subject. But reading Tolstoy is amazing. His language has a sense of transparency. It's as vivid as something written today. That makes me confident in the sense that – why should architecture have to be so contemporary? You *are* contemporary, of course. You can't help it. You're working now – that's who you are. Why can't you try to seriously engage with the history of architecture?