Montreal native and McGill graduate Adam Caruso and his partner Peter St John have emerged as premier forces in the contemporary European architectural conversation. Their London-based practice comprises an extremely diverse and sometimes seemingly conflicting set of theoretical underpinnings and references. The manner and techniques with which they bring these forces together could be seen as analogous to the postmodern music phenomenon of sampling and remixing. However, unlike Puff Daddy’s banal and cynical reworking of The Police’s Every Breath You Take or Fatboy Slim’s airy, good-time The Rockafeller Skank, Caruso St John sample and remix with the earnest intention of establishing structures for critical resistance.

Critical and Conceptual Practice

Caruso St John propose a vision of architectural practice which is both critical and conceptual, one that straddles a difficult line between ontological and conceptual art practice values. For some, this marriage of positions presents confusing questions. Some consider it too cerebral. Some consider it too formalistic, while others consider it not formalistic enough. For others still, and for myself, it is representative of the richness of intention to be found in their highly accomplished work to date.

As leading figures in London’s contemporary architectural wars, they have been particularly averse to the cynicism inherent in what they variously refer to as “opportunistic, neofunctionalist, guilt-free or descriptive practice. This critique finds its roots in the writings of Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, and more recently in the “critical regionalism” of Kenneth Frampton. For Caruso St John, this type of practice is represented by, amongst others, Rem Koolhaas and fellow millennium ‘wave surfers’ such as MVRDV and Foreign Office Architects.

Their antipathy with the production of these architects is intriguing in that their own work sometimes shares a family resemblance to the objects of their criticism. This is because, in spite of their distaste for the laissez-faire political implications of ‘surfing the wave’ as described by Koolhaas, each of these practices shares a taste for the aesthetics of folding, wrapping and other related formal devices. At the same time, OMA and MVRDV regularly engage the world of the ordinary and the banal with a spirit of subtle irony and invention. Caruso St John also work within this world, but, contrastingly, with a heartfelt sense of resistance to the forces that would dehumanize us. This is not to say that their work lacks wit. To paraphrase Peter St John, theirs is a dry, very English wit—but not especially funny, and certainly not ironic.

However, it is this will to resist that drives the manner in which they sample and remix this and other architectural themes. It also lives alongside the reasonable view that aesthetic engagement must be part of an ongoing cultural dialogue. While the latter position balances their builderly concerns and places them in what might be thought of as a middle ground, it paradoxically distances them from the fundamentalist discourse of Frampton, one of architecture’s most vocal proponents of the idea of ‘resistance’. On the other hand, the former position and the success with which they have argued for discretion regarding ‘when to be interesting’ has drawn defensive fire from, amongst others, Peter Cook (of Archigram fame), Britain’s still-influential godfather of radical form-giving.

The Shape of the Everyday

Caruso St John believe in engaging the world as it exists. They therefore reject the concept of radical newness as naive and politically conservative. Sampling is the natural result of this viewpoint. Within this world, they seek to make an architecture of visceral, experiential content. Because they see
The role of vernacular constructions—whether urban, rural, or industrial—as vessels within which such content is located, they will tend to focus on a given context of form as their creative springboard.

In their Lincolnshire residence of 1994, a concrete tiled roof sits upon a compact configuration of (mostly) brick walls, like those of many of the neighbouring houses. However, this roof is composed as an asymmetrical, three-sided pyramid which establishes four surprisingly different elevations and scales. This simple yet ingenious device orders the home’s section around a hall-like living space. It also gently deforms the shape of the region’s vernacular, setting the tone for a quality of experience which makes the home feel (like The Rockafeller Skank) simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, old and new. The architects see this manner of form making as being linked to the “architecture of inclusion” described by Robert Venturi in Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture.

Finding Entropy, Building Entropy

Caruso St John’s will to engage things as they are also often means leaving things as much as possible as they are. This approach finds particular resonance in how they tend to intervene within the context of existing buildings. For instance, in Caruso’s own London studio house of 1994, the imperfect physicality of a pre-existing abattoir is acknowledged as having value through the preservation of its timeworn painted masonry walls and painted wooden sub-floor structure. At the same time, they rigorously limit the number of partition walls and doors that they add, for both spatial and budgetary reasons.

Freezing the building’s existing construction within the entropic process of exfoliation becomes the basis for another series of decisions which recall Frank Gehry’s Gordon Matta-Clark-inspired period of constructing entropy in the late ’70s and early ’80s. Like Gehry, Caruso St John employ unpainted drywall panels with taped joints bluntly presented. Where timber stud construction is used, it too is plainly expressed in front of windows, or more ambiguously and hazily, behind interior translucent partitions. Gehry developed these and other strategies for construction as a means to both describe the messy regional context of building in Los Angeles and to work within the limitations of the meagre craft skills and severe budget limitations imposed upon him at the time. Caruso St John’s interpretation of these strategies is, by contrast, very calm, carefully crafted, and highly compositional—in essence, more European in intention.

However, as in Gehry’s work of this period, this house was built on a restrictive budget. The result is an enveloping, almost womb-like ensemble for a restful and casual lifestyle.

From Agglomeration to Seamlessness

Caruso St John’s strategy for intervening in existing buildings can also be understood in terms of what they call ‘agglomeration’. This terminology derives from their reading of the powerful experiential impact resulting from the manner in which humble vernacular constructions evolve additively over time, unselfconsciously incorporating social changes and technological advances. Interpretation of such accumulation is clearly evident on the main facade of Caruso’s home. Here a smooth skin of translucent Okalux panels and opaque, mostly operable Eternit panels sit on projecting galvanized steel shelves that are applied and expressed proud of an existing brick wall.

In St John’s transformation of his mews home in 1998, agglomeration is treated in a vertical gradation. The ground floor remains fundamentally untouched. The second floor accommodates some variation including the removal of its roof to accommodate a new third floor. The expression of this condition is most evident in the street facade. Here a new zinc-clad top floor with a picture window and a geometrically inventive rooftop surmounts the home’s pre-existing London stock brick end walls. Within these walls, the original vertical filigree of fenestration has been reconfigured as a massive pair of wooden sliding windows between rendered concrete block. Below, the ground level configuration remains untouched as a combination of London stock brick and glass block. It almost appears as if there have been three stages of construction and not simply two. Here, agglomeration moves from an expression of fact towards a rhetoric of potential.

Recently, however, with their short-listed scheme for the Centre for Contemporary Art in Rome, the architects have made a foray into what they term a painterly approach to intervening in existing buildings. They write, “This project does not exaggerate the difference between old and new
constructions. Instead, the diversity of scale and the difference in age of its parts are bound together through a painterly handling of form and material surfaces. Volumetrically, the new structures resemble the old but their scale and geometry are distorted to make new connections and new kinds of space. This approach also recalls the technique of Matta-Clark, whose dynamic cuttings of typologically familiar buildings revealed architectural structure beyond.

This painterly method emerges from their notion of agglomeration insofar as each strategy is related to what they term “a powerful environmental imperative to reuse existing constructions when they are spatially generous and structurally sound.” At the same time, in the Rome project the results of this painterly approach are more fluid, representing a conscious attempt to blur physical relationships between the old and the new.

A recent discussion with the architects indicated that their work is shifting toward a territory of ideas that has been a particular fascination of mine since the early 1990s. They revealed that, should an appropriate project present itself, their sense of creative restlessness might lead them into a conceptual world where the new and the old are even more ambiguously related. It would therefore seem that their long-held interest with the distortion of familiar architectural form could soon merge with a materially seamless and therefore even more ambiguous relationship between the intervention and the pre-existing building. Within such a strategy, the architect could be said to intervene in the manner of an undercover agent performing plastic surgery.

Continuing this line of analogy, it could be presumed that the spy’s discretion allows the architect to infiltrate the body of convention unnoticed. But once inside, the forces of convention are turned upon themselves and rendered oddly unfamiliar. Then, employing the plastic surgeon’s craft, precise epidermal transformations wrap the union of old and newly generated bodies under a continuous unblemished skin. Interventions of this kind could be said to seamlessly disrupt the familiar.

The Space of Connection

Space is a subject of primary importance in the work of Caruso St John. When they begin developing a project, instead of first drawing up an overall idea about a building in plan, they ‘work from the middle outwards’. They develop ideas about space and form via model studies. They then test the idea in plan, making the corresponding corrections to the model. This focus is made evident by the fact that they tend to prepare rather schematic plan diagrams for their competition presentations, while building elaborate 1:50 sectional models complete with allusions to materials and structural layout.

This methodology tends to be translated through a quasi-organic sensibility. In fact, they claim a debt to the organic architecture of Hans Scharoun in terms of the way he established spatial pivots that make connections with various parts of a site. However, in their work this will to connect does not find literal formal analogy with the explosive box-breaking oeuvre of Scharoun. To date they have preferred to create consciously maladroit deformations of compact, boxy volumes. This derives from a preference for the casual and for a studied awkwardness. These deformations occur, as the London critic Irénée Scalbert has noted, in the form of “slippages”: that is, fragments of volume that are added to or subtracted from a platonic figure in order to weave the desired connection into the site or internal configuration.

These slippages create a form of figural leakage and ambiguity that imparts to their spaces a sense of the casual. This is a quality that the architects also see in Adolf Loos’ Raumplan houses, projects that bleed away a sense of the spatially determinate via the complex interweaving of split levels. Such figural leakage finds its first interpretation in AdamCaruso’s house. A rectangular volume is exacted from the first floor, creating an L-shaped section. This device brings natural light to the rear of a deep plan, and links the ground floor dining space with the living space above.

In Caruso St John’s most important project date, the new Art Gallery at Walsall, an almost amorphous ground floor plan—the result of additions to three sides of a square base and a subtraction from the fourth side organizes a series of pedestrian level urban connections. Above, the building solidifies into a cubic mass only to break up again at the top with a purposefully stumpy tower housing a restaurant and mechanical space above it. This last deformation of the cube is inspired by the representational function of towers in medieval Italian piazze such as Florence’s Palazzo Vecchio. More circumstantially,
it attempts to strike up an urban conversation with the tower of Walsall Town Hall and the spire of St. Matthew’s Church, the only other buildings in this small town with a clear vertical presence.

With regard to the building’s interior, Caruso St John establish an almost domestic quality of space. According to the architects, “By reducing the scale of the Art Gallery floors each major part of the program can be accommodated on its own floor. This allows the height, the structure and the lighting and servicing to be tailored to each kind of space.” Then, unusually (for new art spaces), they provide domestically-scaled windows to the outside in each gallery, thereby allowing gallery visitors to orient themselves both within the building and with respect to the city.

Surfaces of the Everyday

Choosing exquisite facades is a particular talent of Caruso St John. Sometimes, as with Caruso’s house, they recall the bold asymmetries of the great but little-known Spaniard Alejandro de la Sota (especially his Gobíerno Civil building in Tarragona) or Tony Fretton’s Lisson Gallery in London. Other times, as in their Lincolnshire house, Venturi’s methods for establishing ambiguous scale readings are adopted through the choreographed irregularity of large and small fenestration perforations. In their Walsall Art Gallery, these methods meet on a public scale, infusing this palazzo-like monolith a surprisingly edgy dynamism.

But more than composition, their approach to material selection and to the execution of detail tells more about their evolving oeuvre. Their preference is to work with humble, everyday materials in a manner that calls attention to the phenomenological properties of surfaces. They do this by avoiding fetish-istic detailing and by allowing the material to simply cloak its architectural body as if it were cling wrap.

This sensibility stems in part from their un-derstanding of the late works of the Swedish master Sigurd Lewerentz (1885-1975). In his churches of St. Peter in Klippan and St. Mark in Bjorkhagen, Lewerentz wraps floor, wall and ceiling surfaces in brick detailed with unusually massive yet flush mortar joints, calling attention to the harsh epidermal materiality and the enveloping spatiality that the brick engenders. At Klippan, this materially-driven construct is accentuated by the unceremonious clipping of unframed double glazed windows onto the brick walls. This layering of windows in front of these walls ultimately frustrates our attempts to read the depth of the brick and emphasizes the wall’s quality as a surface. Lewerentz’s method of additive layering finds analogy in Caruso St John’s agglomerative approach to intervening in existing settings, as in the skin applied proud of the existing brick wall in Adam Caruso’s house. In their Lincolnshire house, Lewerentz is reinterpreted on a modest budget, with the placement of simple steel windows slightly proud of a flush mortar jointed wall of reclaimed brick.

At the Walsall Art Gallery, Caruso St John filter Lewerentz’s architectonic harshness through an almost Swiss sense of craft sophistification. Lapped terra cotta tiles of natural sand-coloured clay and of receding scale allude to but abstract the manner in which many public buildings were clad in Victorian Britain. From within this skin, welded stainless steel boxes project proud of the tiles, accommodating flush structural glazing. This endows the glazing with a strikingly reflective object quality unattainable with normal recessed windows.

The treatment of this skin harbours a particularly dense concentrate of ideas and references that come together in Caruso St John’s thinking. Without recounting the long list of aforementioned references-nor several more not discussed—it seems clear that within this wall, and in their work in general, a surprising quality emerges. It is not heroic originality. Rather, it is a quality born of cultural literacy, a subtle yet restless formal intelligence and the political will to resist the cynical, laissez-faire contemporary forces that breed placelessness. In rejecting the modernist myth of originality, Caruso St John paradoxically free themselves to achieve that which they reject. Significantly, therefore, sampling and remixing a broad range of sources allows them to offer up a difficult yet still accessible model for widespread architectural practice of the highest calibre.