Ours is an era unfettered by architectural taboo. There aren’t many modes of expression capable of testing our laissez-faire sensibility.

However, judging from the response in BD’s letters page over recent weeks, Caruso St John’s winning scheme in the Nottingham Centre for Visual and Live Art competition appears to have struck a nerve. The proposal for a patterned façade that references Nottingham’s lace trade clearly put the project beyond the pale for many readers.

The architect is at pains to point out that the scheme is still in the early stages of development, but what is clear is that the design is indicative of a new-found interest in decoration that has influenced a number of the practice’s recent projects. For the King’s Cross Central development, it designed an office block with facades of structural concrete fins, each of which would be cast to incorporate a decorative motif drawn from a 15th Century Venetian church.

Recently, permission has been secured for the practice’s new entrance block for the Museum of Childhood in London’s Bethnal Green, featuring a façade of richly patterned inlaid granite panels. Over the past year I have been assisting Adam Caruso and Peter St John in teaching a diploma course at the University of Bath focusing on the subject of decoration.

Last week, I met up with St John to discuss the practice’s concern with the subject and his belief that working with found imagery represents a more radical strategy that inventing afresh.

EW: In the past, your work has been characterised by an interest in using materials “as found”. Do you see the exploration of decorative treatments in these recent projects as a radical departure?

PS: This interest in decoration feels like an extension of an interest we have always had in making facades. The idea of decoration is just another technique in addition to the choice of the materials that you use and in addition to the techniques of construction that you use to make facades that have a beautiful texture to them.

We have never made buildings where the facades clearly show or represent their interiors. We are interested in buildings where there is a very big difference between interior quality and external appearance. In exploring the use of decoration, we’ve perhaps become bolder, but it doesn’t feel like a radical step.

EW: I remember when we began teaching last year, the students initially struggled with the question of where a contemporary decorative architecture might draw its imagery from. Does it come from fractals? Does it come from pop imagery? Eventually the guilt wore off and they started drawing on existing sources, but adjusting the reading of that imagery through changes of scale or surface treatment. That has also been your mode of operation. The decoration you employ is found.

PS: Well, ultimately everything is judged on whether it works. We don’t and never will have the training that architects used to have. So you have to find it in books and choose things that achieve the effect that you’re interested in. I don’t find that a problem and I don’t feel the need to invent it specially.

I’ve always felt the notion that you work with found things to be a way of making buildings that are very communicative. You try to make buildings that remind you of things, that form rhymes with things that you are familiar with but are subtly changed. That, for us, is something that can be very affecting; perhaps more communicative than attempting to do something that is totally unfamiliar and new.
EW: For many people, this kind of strategy will raise the spectre of postmodern classicism and the sense of apology for the present that much of that work embodied. How do you deal with the question of contemporaneity?

PS: We feel no moral imperative to make buildings that are obviously modern in their appearance. We find that kind of position difficult to understand. We are just as interested in old buildings as we are in new architecture.

To me, the kind of neo-modernism that you see prevalent in British architecture — very curvy, glassy buildings or a square window artfully placed in a big blank facade — those kind of modernist references we find boring in the British architectural scene. We don’t feel this fear of experimenting with architecture that is more ambiguous in its reference, that is looking for character and presence wherever it lies.

EW: You have been working at the Museum of Childhood for three years now, but the new entrance block will represent the first major external change to the existing 19th century building. How did the existing architecture inform the new design?

PS: We are working with an extraordinary Victorian building built at the time of architects such as Butterfield and Street. That suggested making a piece of contemporary architecture that was in some way as exotic as the way in which they used polychromy and hard faceted forms.

The existing museum building has an extraordinary history. It was first built in 1857 on the site of what is now the V&A, when it was an iron frame clad in corrugated metal, painted in green and white stripes. It was moved in 1873 to Bethnal Green as part of the Victorian programme of social improvement to the suburbs, when it was given this new brick coat by JW Wild.

Wild was a real eclectic and was working against the flow of taste at the time, which was predominately gothic. He was making buildings that were more obviously classical. He was an authority on Middle Eastern and medieval Italianate architectures. We were looking at facades of the early Renaissance: church facades such as San Miniato in Florence by Alberti and Santa Maria dei Miracoli in Venice by Pietro Lombardo; buildings where the marble facades are very flat and smooth, and the decoration is precise and minimal.

The new facades present a colonnaded pattern, making reference to the classical architecture that influenced Wild, but they will be very smooth and flush. They will be made of very thin red granites, cut by computer-controlled water jet and probably glued to an aluminium honeycomb.

The big sheets of glass in the window openings are flush with the surface of the stone. That flatness is set against the apparent depth that comes from the colonnaded composition and from the fact that you can see into the building. We have also employed a decorative infill panel that has a kind of optical depth.

EW: Your project for the Fellow’s dining room at Downing College, Cambridge, has involved designing new interiors that are straightforwardly classical in expression, within a 19th century shell. There are other projects in your office where decoration is not a theme at all. When Schinkel was practising, the idea that an architect might switch between a gothic and a classical manner as the job dictated was understood. Today, architects tend to pursue a single vocabulary and abandon it at the risk of damaging their brand identity. Is your office actively trying to maintain a range of different expressions?

PS: I think if one is able to be convincing about different projects that have fundamentally different characters, then that would be a very interesting thing to achieve. I’m not sure that we are achieving that because I have a feeling that our buildings have a very consistent character to them, which people probably recognise. But that kind of diversity sounds very appealing, and I think we are striving towards it.

You absolutely don’t want a formal language for which you are known. Even with architects one greatly admires, such as Gehry, it has become boring. One is interested in having a diverse repertoire. I hesitate to say we have used an overtly classical vocabulary. Downing is a grade I listed building that we are fundamentally restoring. We haven’t done anything in full-blooded classicism yet. Maybe that will come.