Among silos, sheds, signs and soot

In the competition for the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Rome, one can imagine that no other entry resembles Caruso St John’s. A large shed rises behind the old barracks, its roof vault being neither steep, to indicate a direction, nor as flat as it could be, to clarify a volume. Other new shed types fill out the gaps within the complex, joining up with the existing buildings in the manner warehouses would - by simply extending the fabric and without dramatising the connections. It is all clad in corrugated steel.

These seemingly brutal moves momentarily leave the viewer, especially when looking from Via Guido Reni, with the same question that once confronted the first audience of an abstract painting: ‘Yes, but where is the achievement? What makes it into art?’ The abstract painting did not follow the idea of art as an honorific predicate, as the confirmation that something is well achieved according to a fixed set of criteria. The abstract painting broke the standards of mimesis and classical composition, the subjects of ancient crafts. The art world has gone beyond these questions now, while the architecture world is still dealing with architecture as an honorific predicate. When well known international architects are called upon to put cities and institutions back on the map, they seem to be ruled by a new kind of rhetoric. While the traditional rhetoric was that a building should explain the building’s use, the rhetoric of modernism was to promote an idea of a new and better world. The rhetoric of today, whether it is reusing traditional elements or searching for new forms, is to say Architecture, in an obvious and spectacular sense.

If bewilderment is the initial reaction when faced by a work of Caruso St John, excitement takes over when you look again. The sheet cladding for the proposed buildings in Rome is finely corrugated mill finished stainless steel, which is also applied to the existing roofs. This waving, shimmering landscape nestles its way in and around the whole conglomeration, setting out an overall character for the Centre. Local differentiation is achieved by varying degrees of polishing, and shot-blasting of the stainless steel. The shot-blasted surfaces resemble areas of dark stucco within the existing facades. A large part of the cladding of the main building’s north facade is ripped off. The resulting glass partition wall is out of scale and would have a stunning effect from the court yard space, as it reveals the comfort of the interior. Volumes at different scales containing auditoriums and bookstacks are clad in silk. What at first appear to be applied industrial conventions, are stretched and played with on a spectrum from the commonplace to the luxurious.

Caruso St John’s proposed assembly of buildings in Rome does not experiment in new building types, nor is it searching for a compositional drama between new and old. Instead it shifts focus towards the specific conditions of the site as it is, space by space, and onto the distinct materiality of the buildings. For Caruso St John all materials are considered equal. It is what the material means for the space and its relationship with the existing fabric that matters. Existing buildings are approached with the same attitude. All things are at first valued equally, filled with potential. Old and new, large and small, high and low are seen as a continuous fabric. The project then settles in, adding, creating new relationships and shifting hierarchies. Instead of clearing the site, Caruso St John gradually remove what they do not need. One would think this is a timid tendency, but it is actually a bold statement.

This sequential approach of levelling, selecting and adding is based on the idea that the world is more intriguing as found than as designed. It is an aesthetic which is drawn more towards the city’s forgotten areas of odd juxtapositions, than to the controlled land of the theme park. This is the beginning of a balancing act for the architect, who is being hired to design. ‘Our work is about doing almost nothing’, says Adam Caruso, emphasising almost. ‘Doing nothing’ is not the model for the ultimate achievement. The things they do instead come out of pragmatic needs and ideas about how to amplify given situations. Their approach is economical, Caruso suggests, in financial terms as well as architectural
means. The richness in the resulting schemes is of a kind, which cannot be designed. It is partly the result of chance, using the layers of time and the historical and social connotations that exist within every situation. The operation of selecting what to keep is not being made with a conservationist's agenda however, but rather the with builder's, it makes use of the useful. What could lead many of us into a neurotic state of keeping and saving, Caruso St John handle with an incredible boldness and ease used in a paradoxical combination.

In Southwark, the area around the new Tate Gallery in London, Caruso St John won the competition for a public signage system. Their idea was to rearrange the signs so that the visual cacophony of names and imperatives varies in different situations, like site specific installations, finding their way through the city. The arrangement of existing signs is being rationalised, unnecessary signs are removed and others currently spread out at random, will be clustered together. The new signs are attached to walls and gain their character from adjacent textures and surfaces, some signs are cast into the pavement and important circulation nodes might get Supergraphic, storey high letters. The cacophony, which is part of a contemporary urbanity, is not being silenced, only re-orchestrated in the manner of John Cage. A similar soft touch of rearrangement has guided the refurbishment on Northburgh Street in Clerkenwell. The building is from the 1960’s and has a modest status. Normally a developer would not hesitate to jazz it up by applying a new facade which imparts a new image. Instead, Caruso St John suggested enhancing the character of the volumetric topography by treating the brick gable walls with soot, a very English substance indeed. In the end they settled on staining those areas with black organic stain. Against this, a white and clean interior, bursting with fluorescent lights, sets up a modern atmosphere. The building is now full of advertising firms and web designers.

A building, which digs deeper into the soil of physical life, is the new Gallery for the Garman Ryan Collection in Walsall, which just is being completed. For the post-industrial town of 250 000 inhabitants it has the potential to make a difference in the urban life, as an institution with an open and generous character. If the project for Rome plays with the notions of the commonplace and the luxurious, the Walsall Gallery operates within varying degrees of public-ness and private-ness. The commission was the result of a competition and Caruso St John pursued clear objectives with their proposal. The rooms for the collection have a domestic character, thus the windows with a view, the skirting and the relatively low ceiling height. The spaces for temporary exhibitions have larger dimensions and a tougher character with exposed concrete joists and clerestory windows.

In their teaching Caruso and St John have become advocates for a methodology where the development of space is simultaneous with the choice of material. The idea of soot in the Clerkenwell project is extreme, and it reveals something about Caruso St John’s focus on the surface’s role in the production of space. This has become a forgotten territory since the introduction of the white space. White can be powerful, but not always. In Walsall, linings are used as an element that bridges between the public and the private. In the entrance foyer linings of douglas fir boards cover part of the concrete walls. The boards of the concrete formwork have the same dimension as the boards of the lining. The result is a continuous texture, as a layer over the two materials. The balustrade of the stair is in fact the lining folding its way upward. On the first floor the same timber lining creates a warm atmosphere for the central hall that leads to the collection’s domestic spaces.

The idea for the organisation of the building was rooms stacked on top of each other, forming a tower. In this way the Gallery establishes a relationship with other prominent features in the town, the church, the town hall and the sixties housing blocks. As a characterisation, rather than tower, the less slender proportions of a silo come into mind. The author recalls Peter St John lifting an eyebrow as the train passed a silo construction on the Swedish countryside, on a rainy November day. Caruso St John take pleasure in the oddities of utilitarian buildings, but there is also a more profound interpretation of their benefits. Here, the ideas of a direct construction, looseness in spatial organisation, and an ordinariness that has to do with our way of life.

Raymond Ryan has called this ‘the baggy architecture of Caruso St John’. At the same time, and this might be a paradox, the buildings are finely detailed. Mies meets the local bungalow salesman. The exterior of Walsall Gallery is clad in tiles of terracotta, reminding one of the surrounding tiled roofs. The windows in turn, are well-engineered boxes clad stainless steel and flush glazing. The dimension of the tiles gets smaller the higher up they are, to make the building appear taller than it actually is, or as an allusion to traditional tiles roofs. This is a condition the dimension of the windows have to meet, as they line up with the horizontal edges of the tiles - leading to a multiplicity of window types. The play with
similarities in material fabrics is a recurrent theme, but also the affirmation of difference, by juxtaposition of scales, types and characteristics.

Few architects are so clear about their objectives as Caruso St John. To some extent this must be the result of being part of the academic scene of London and the early mentorships of Florian Beigel and Tony Fretton. Since the publication of the Swan Yard Studio, Hélène Binet has been documenting Caruso St John’s work. The strongest photographs here, are not the abstract compositions, as in the case with her documentation of Peter Zumthor’s work, but those that capture the whole scene. It may be the open fenlands in Lincolnshire with a chubby bungalow on the horizon; a townscape picture of London with nothing much more than a hutch peaking out on one of the terraces; or the fenced-in industrial estates in Walsall with a hairy character rising above, unmowed grass in the foreground. What the photographs detect is the idea of an architecture that engages with the surroundings in a direct and physical way.

Roger Spetz is a practicing architect, associate editor of MAMA (magazine for modern architecture) and teaches at KTH, Stockholm