At the head of Park Street, Walsall, in a place of prominence where the Victorians planned to build a town hall, there stands a Woolworths store. It is red brick, with some stripes, a gable, an arch and a fanciful turret, as if to evoke a castle. Next to it is a British Home Stores of the same 1990s vintage, also red brick and turreted. The ground rises towards them, then slopes more gently as it passes through the narrow slot between to reveal a slice of sky nudged at the bottom by a shed-like pub.

Past the slot the paving changes, into broad stripes of black and beige asphalt that you have never seen in a public place before, where conventional street lights are substituted by three tall galvanised steel masts bearing lights usually used for sports stadia. You are in a ragged agora that sits relative to the two stores in the place where you might expect a car park, but whose loose planning and civic significance are distantly reminiscent of the public spaces of ancient Greece.

The space is suggested rather than defined, and seeps at its corners into the low-intensity periphery of a middle-sized Midlands working town that doesn't work as much as it would like to. To the left of the pub is a canal basin with workshops beyond, to the right a scrap of street and a few shops. There are also the windowless flank walls of the BHS and Woolworths. By now, however, you are aware of a far more powerful presence, the 37m high tower of the New Art Gallery.

It is massive, but not overbearing. You see it in sharp perspective and its high prow is set towards you to increase its effect. It is dotted with windows which are domestic in proportion and small in relation to the whole, almost unsettlingly so. Apart from some stainless steel panels at ground level it is entirely clad in a single material, pinkish-beige terracotta tiles that diminish in size as they ascend the building and vary slightly in tone. Terracotta is highly processed mud and, while the tiles have the sharp precision of a high-tech building, they also carry with them a memory of the earth. Being tiles, they make you think of roofs, and with it the cosy thought that this potentially forbidding building is one big roof.

Being thin and looking fragile they bring delicacy to the tower, which nonetheless still appears satisfyingly solid. It manages to be many contradictory things at once, to seem hewn from a single stone, wrapped in stiff paper, and made up of many components. The next-door stores, with their bricks and arches and towers, evoke heavy masonry yet look flimsy. What you see of the gallery, conversely, is its cladding of thin tiles, yet it looks solid.

The stainless steel at ground level reflects the flow of passers-by into the body of the gallery. Reflective to the tiles' matt, it dematerialises the building at the place where you would expect it to be most substantial, where in a classical building there would be heavily rusticated stones. The structure is more literally dematerialised where the corner is cut away beneath the gallery’s highest point, in such a way that it would tip over towards you if invisible engineering were not tying it down. The effect, as with the cladding, is both to accentuate and undercut the tower’s mass. It looks as impossible as a pebble on water.

The cut-away corner makes a porch that contains a glass lobby through which you enter a big concrete space, darker than is fashionable in contemporary architecture, and as solemn as a Romanesque church. Spaces open off it like shops off a town square, but disproportionate to the big room’s scale: an education space, a library up the big flight of stairs, from where most of the light is coming, some lifts, cloakrooms, a coffee bar and shop. To the side you glimpse the canal basin through subsidiary spaces, its reflective water barely lower than the reflective concrete floor inside.

Where you go next is up to you, as there is no single prescribed route. What’s more, while the exterior is unified, and the detail both inside and out is consistently rectangular and plain, the interior
compresses as great a variety of spaces as could be expected into the simple envelope. It is like a vertical garden or, to use the architects’ favourite image, a big rambling house.

You could take the lift, one wall of which is glass, and enjoy the view of the canal pointing axially to the horizon, like the water feature of a stately home. You could go to the temporary exhibition galleries on the 3rd floor, ample, calm, white-walled, hard-floored spaces with light falling from clerestories above, or through the occasional window at lower level. You could go up the stairs to see the intimate works of the Garman Ryan Collection: drawings, small bronzes and oil paintings showing children, friends, informal nudes, trees, flowers and the occasional landscape. These are in two wood-lined storeys with domestic-scaled rooms opening off a double-height hall. Here the windows are all portrait-format rectangles, like the windows of an ordinary house.

Employees of the gallery might go to the 2nd floor offices and guests of some private function to the conference rooms on the top floor. All visitors might wish to go to the top floor restaurant, a high-ceilinged room that occupies the tower’s oblong pinnacle. As they approach the restaurant from the lift or the stairhead they will see, through glass walls, an L-shaped roof terrace, beyond which is laid out the turbid cityscape from which they have come.

On the lower floors they will have glimpsed pieces of this view through the gallery’s windows, which reconnect the art spaces with the town outside. They may have sensed a companionship of towers, a Black Country San Gimignano made up of the tower they are in, the Edwardian town hall, and the unloved, stubby office and housing blocks of the 1960s and 1970s.

Up on the roof terrace the glimpses become a panorama of a conurbation, with large patches of building laid like cloud shadows across the land, the boundaries indeterminate between town and country, or between municipalities like Walsall, Dudley, Wolverhampton, Sandwell or Birmingham, which at ground level are well aware of their separateness. There are the masts of football grounds, pylons, mosques and churches, a humming motorway, chimneys, houses, tower blocks, hills and valleys, new building and dereliction, ugliness and beauty. But the most powerful feeling is one of connectedness. You feel that what seems disjointed at ground level now makes sense, by virtue of the journey you have just made through art and architecture and from street to roof.

The New Art Gallery, Walsall, opened in February 2000 to an enthusiastic response from press and public. It was widely seen as a model project of the British National Lottery: it answered a need, that of creating a proper home for the Garman Ryan Collection, while boosting a town suffering from industrial decline. It was ambitious without being hubristic, and its commissioning of architects and artists was both innovative and astute. Yet it only came about through the sustained hard work of a very few individuals, who had little or no experience of large building projects.

The gallery’s director Peter Jenkinson, appointed for his skills as an arts curator and manager, had to make himself an expert in architecture, construction and politics. To raise the project’s £21m cost he had to guide it through the complexities and sometimes eccentricities of local, national and European government funding and of the National Lottery. As these sources of funding are always changing their conditions, and as the lottery was a completely new invention, there was no map for finding a way through them, just intuition and the advice of others. In the process of conceiving, developing, funding and constructing the building, it came close to disaster several times. That this confident structure now stands is due only to infectious enthusiasm, extreme dedication, political skill, luck, risk-taking and the occasional bending of rules.

The New Art Gallery’s origins go back to the 14th December 1891, when a special report of Walsall council’s parks committee for a municipal art gallery and museum. Such an institution opened the following year, as a single room within the Walsall Free Library, its improving purpose articulated by Alderman Brownhill, the Mayor of Walsall: “if the Art Gallery is successful in its purpose we will see that the manners of the people will become softer and less uncouth than they are at present, for they cannot see pictures and mix with others as they will do in this room without being cheered and instructed and lifted to a higher level.”

As a building and a collection the museum remained a modest affair for several decades, attracting private donations of Wedgwood plaques; ferns and mosses; 160 specimens of birds’ eggs and nests; bits, spurs and stirrups; Maundy money, some of which was later stolen; arrow heads; and souvenirs of
the local heroine Sister Dora. In 1951 a presentation key and axe belonging to the late Alderman Ingram was donated, in 1954 "The Unemployed Man" by the late Gordon Herickx, valued at 70 guineas. In 1961 Miss R. Stokes gave a Cup Winners' Medal won by her grandfather as a member of the Walsall Swifts team in the Birmingham District Football Association Cup. The entire collection was valued in 1968 at £2705.

In 1973 the Walsall Art Gallery and Museum was transformed, when Kathleen Garman donated her collection of art. Born in the nearby town of Wednesbury, she was the mistress and eventually second wife of Sir Jacob Epstein, and her collection was built up both during her life with Epstein and, after his death, with the American sculptor Sally Ryan. It is varied and personal, consisting of over 350 mostly small-scale works. At its core are 43 works by Epstein himself and it is predominantly European and post-renaissance, but it also includes classical, pre-Columbian, Egyptian and other African art.

It includes paintings by Degas, Renoir, Monet, Pisarro, Bonnard and Constable, and drawings or prints by Picasso, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cezanne, Matisse, Rembrandt, Goya and Durer. It is also closely linked to Jacob Epstein's life, with a Modigliani drawing given him by the artist, family portraits by Epstein himself, and a portrait of his daughter, Kitty, by her first husband Lucian Freud. There is no historic or theoretical logic to the collection beyond the personal judgment of Kathleen Garman. All the works are figurative, with a preference for portraiture, figure studies and landscapes.

George Melly called it “marvellous” and “extraordinary”, the Daily Telegraph “the finest personal art collection outside London to be assembled in the twentieth century”, yet it was housed in an upstairs room of the public library, with no air conditioning or disabled access. During the twentieth century there were four separate attempts to build a new art gallery, but only the last was to prove successful.

In 1989 Peter Jenkinson, then aged 30, became the director of the gallery, having previously worked in museums in London and Birmingham. His primary objective was to fund and build a proper home for the Garman Ryan collection, a task that would take him eleven years. For much of this period he was working only with his assistant Micheline Clarke, and for many years he was working 300 hours a month and without holidays, sometimes with severe effects on their health. As the project developed and the gallery’s team grew, others also put in long hours of hard work.

At the outset no one knew that they were embarking on such an epic. It was decided to convert a listed 19th century merchant’s house and an architectural competition was organised. The winners were Levitt Bernstein, a practice best known for their Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, who would later form the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham out of a Victorian school. £3m of construction cost was committed by the Metropolitan Borough Council. Then, in late 1990, the Council decided that it could not after all afford the project, as its budgets were under severe pressure as a result of the Poll Tax.

"There was" as Peter Jenkinson now says "a lot of disappointment, but some key councillors, both Labour and Tory, wanted to keep it going." He cites one in particular, the Conservative Councillor Mike Bird, as “fantastic” and, in the middle of their despondency, “a knight rode to the rescue”. This was Walsall’s bid for money from the government’s City Challenge scheme for regenerating run-down areas, under which grants were awarded to partnerships of local authorities and private enterprise. Walsall identified an area where unemployment was running at 17%, with serious problems of crime and dereliction. It included Town Wharf, a run-down site at the edge of the town’s main shopping area, where it was proposed to build both new shops and a home for the Garman Ryan Collection. Some saw this as too remote from the civic centre of Walsall where the old gallery was sited, but this is where the New Art Gallery would eventually be built, although its design was to change from the neo-Victorian brick polygon that appears in watercolour perspectives drawn up by the developers Chartwell Land.

In 1993 the bid was awarded £37.5 million, its case helped by the inclusion of the proposed gallery. Peter Jenkinson then found himself working with politicians and developers, whose culture was radically different from that of art curators. Jenkinson appreciated the efficiency with which the private sector works, but “I saw my role as being an absolute bastard about the quality of design”. The gallery was given the site of lowest retail value, tucked away behind the planned new stores, and Chartwell appeared sceptical that it would ever happen, to the extent that they paid for paving on its site that was later removed. "They seemed to think that Walsall was a fish-and-chip town and would always have fish-and-chip solutions" says Jenkinson. Nonetheless, the brief for the new gallery was developed with Chartwell's support, and public consultation carried out.
Meanwhile two further sources of possible funding appeared, in the form of the European Regional Development Fund, which is aimed at deprived areas, and the National Lottery. First announced in 1992, and launched in 1995, the lottery was to fund cultural, sporting and charitable good causes, distributed through five bodies that included the Arts Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. It released unheard-of sums to an arts world long starved of capital, but its cash came with stringent rules attached.

In 1994 a fundraising report was commissioned to test the feasibility of raising the £4.8m which was then the projected budget for the new building. The report quoted authorities in the arts world who sucked their teeth and said ‘£4.8m is an awful lot of money; £1m would be nearer the target’ or “the proposed costs for the new art gallery are outrageous”. The report’s expert authors estimated that the £400-500,000 might come from the lottery. This sage advice was politely ignored by Jenkinson. He listened instead to the then Arts Council chairman Lord Gowrie, who, on a visit to Walsall, advised the town’s councillors to aim high, to think of a figure, in effect, and double it. Jenkinson kept pushing for the brief to be expanded “to the point where it became a joke”. In the end the total project cost was £21m, of which £15.75m came from the National Lottery.

One of the most difficult judgments facing any potential lottery project is choosing how high to aim. Too ambitious, and it falls flat on its face, with insufficient revenue and public interest to sustain it once built, as happened to lottery projects outside Doncaster and in Sheffield. Too modest, and it wastes an opportunity that may not come round again for a century. Worse, it might fail to attract the critical momentum of enthusiasm and support that it needs to happen at all.

The New Art Gallery is certainly ambitious. If the minimum requirement was to house the Garman Ryan collection, the gallery also has a temporary exhibition floor designed for art of international calibre, extensive education areas, a library and a café. It is a building that requires the institution it contains to expand into it, and future directors and curators to match the ambition that went into its creation. It is in part an act of faith that the art will rise to the architecture, and that the quality of the building will attract, for example, major, large scale Epstein sculptures to Walsall that have never been seen there before. Equally importantly, it would have to inspire funding bodies with the belief that its revenue costs should be supported.

It is also ambitious in its social and civic mission. The project’s mission was to raise the self-esteem of Walsall and its surroundings, and to involve the widest possible public with art from every period, including the present. This involvement was to be neither patronising on the gallery’s part, nor passive on the public’s. “Conventional wisdom”, as it would say in the brief issued in the architectural competition, “has it that ‘the Great British Public’ can only cope with flower paintings or animal prints. Experience at Walsall suggests that this prejudice is profoundly mistaken … Audiences have proved far more sophisticated, more responsive and more supportive of the broad range of contemporary visual arts than journalists, critics, politicians and even some curators would often allow.”

“Access” was one of the most bandied terms in 1990s cultural discussion, but the new art gallery would seek to realise it in the fullest possible way. The competition brief added that “it is now inadequate simply to talk about audiences and their access to art but more important to talk about the interplay between and interdependence of artists, audiences, buildings and collections; an interplay and interdependence that is immensely complex and extremely difficult to establish in precisely measurable terms.”

Even with the limited resources available on the gallery’s old site, Peter Jenkinson and his team put on a series of unorthodox and risk-taking exhibitions designed to engage the public. Start, the country’s first ever exhibition for 3 to 5 year olds, attracted 14,000 children in ten weeks. A series of “People’s Shows” brought together local people’s collections (model aeroplanes, coca-cola bottles, airline sick bags …) and put them in the context of the gallery.

With public involvement came some controversy, and an Independent Councillor, Melvin Pitt, was always keen to excoriate the gallery in the local papers. He, and several other correspondents, called a show on the theme of HIV “disgusting rubbish”. However, the exhibition succeeded in its aim of raising awareness, to the extent that AIDS tests in the area rose by 30% while it was on. It was also “tried” on the national television programme The People’s Verdict, where a jury of lay people voted in its favour.
Peter Jenkinson’s intention was that all these qualities – ambition, civic pride, public involvement, risk-taking - were to be embodied in the new building, but finding the architects to achieve this would not be easy. British architecture in the 1990s suffered from two major weaknesses, both linked to the lack of public patronage in the 1980s and early 90s. One was that young architects had been given very little encouragement, with the result that a few famous and established practices dominated. The other was that a generation had been schooled in the values of commercial commissions, such as delivering elegant or striking buildings efficiently, rather than in the more subtle and complex cultural concerns raised by a project such as The New Art Gallery.

Clients of lottery-funded projects had to choose between a big name, who might deliver a predictable variation on their previous work, or an untried practice, with the risk that they were unequal to the task. Tough lottery rules on budget, including the requirement that lottery grants should be matched by funds from other sources, and the need to demonstrate public support militated against adventurous commissioning. The New Art Gallery, however, had important advantages. Thanks to City Challenge and European grants it had no need for matching funding from the private sector beyond the contribution from Chartwell built into City Challenge. This allowed greater freedom in the design. And, while public consultation was conscientiously carried out on the principle of building an art gallery, and while its design would have to go through the normal process of securing planning permission, no attempt was made to divine an architecture acceptable to all tastes. If this seems paternalistic it is also practical, as architecture of real quality has rarely if ever been produced by opinion poll. “You have to respect people’s expertise”, as Peter Jenkinson puts it.

In March 1995, a competition to design The New Art Gallery was announced, sponsored by the developers Chartwell. It was to be in two stages, with practices initially being required to submit a portfolio of their previous work, two A1 sheets indicating their approach to the design of the new gallery, a concise report outlining their ideas and a single image summarising their submission. Up to six would be selected for the second stage, where they would be asked to develop their designs in more detail. Any qualified architect in the European Union was eligible to enter and, while previous experience was a factor, the format was also open to new ideas from untested practices. Following 157 formal registrations, 63 eligible submissions were received.

In the architectural competition as in so much else the gallery had no rule book to work to and little personal experience. Peter Jenkinson was “an architectural virgin: I didn’t know how to read plans, but through the process of the competition I became passionate about architecture.” He knew he wanted at least one senior architect on the competition jury, and an artist, and for there to be “a mix of local accountability and national significance”. The artist would be Bill Woodrow, who as assessor on the competition for the new Tate at Bankside had toured Europe’s new art galleries. For the architect assessors Jenkinson consulted Ricky Burdett, another member of the Bankside jury and then Director of the Architecture Foundation. Burdett recommended Jeremy Dixon, architect of the Royal Opera House and National Portrait Gallery extensions. Dixon accepted the invitation, and recommended David Chipperfield, whose many commissions include the master planning of the museum island in Berlin, and who has a sensitivity to the culture of contemporary art rare in British architecture.

As well as these professional assessors the competition brought together a foundry worker, in the person of the Walsall councillor Geoff MacManomy, with the Mistress of the Queen’s Bedchamber, Lady Airlie, who is also a relative of Sally Ryan and a former member of the British Rail Design Board. There was Michael Tooby, curator of the Tate Gallery St Ives; the Mayor of Walsall Cyril Leaker; David Carver, a member of the City Challenge board; and other councillors and officers of Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council. There was also a technical assessment panel of engineers and cost consultants.

At the first stage the discussion between these diverse assessors went on until 11 o'clock at night at a hotel on Junction 7 of the M6. Despite the potential for discord Jenkinson describes them as “amazing, with a real shared commitment”. Six practices were shortlisted: Alsop and Stromer, Pierre d’Avoine Architects, Caruso St John, Shay Cleary Architects, Tony Fretton and MUF. Of these the best known name was Alsop and Stromer, famous for the Hotel du Departement in Marseilles. Others, including Caruso St John and MUF, were included on the basis of their potential rather than their experience. It was an imaginative list notable for breaking the predictable mould of competitions for some other potential lottery projects.
At the second stage the choice came down to Tony Fretton or Caruso St John. Fretton had designed the Lisson Gallery, the most admired and successful contemporary art space to be built in London in the 1990s. Caruso St John had built no more than some small projects that showed a special and unusual sensibility, but demonstrated a real knowledge of and passion for art, and they charmed the jury with their enthusiasm. Fretton proposed an exquisite glass box that offered flexibility. Caruso St John’s design was more fixed, with a stronger civic presence. According to Jenkinson “their solution for housing the collection was really inspiring and they weren’t snooty about the site.”

There was a long discussion, in which, for the purpose of clarifying differences, Jeremy Dixon and David Chipperfield took opposite sides. Eventually what Jenkinson calls “the terrible moment” came, “when they said it’s your decision. I’d already made my mind up but I came out in a hot sweat. I asked if we could postpone but they said no. So I said Caruso St John.”

Adam Caruso was born in 1962 in Canada and studied at McGill University, Montreal. Peter St John, born in 1959, is English, studied at the Bartlett in London and worked for Jeremy Dixon in the early stages of the Royal Opera House project. Both worked for Florian Beigel and Arup Associates, and they set up practice together in 1990 and taught at the University of North London from 1990. At the time of the Walsall competition they were known for some competition entries and a few small projects, including houses for themselves, but had been exhibited and published and attracted critical attention for the thoughtfulness of their work.

Unlike most of their generation, they stand outside the British tradition of high-tech architecture, or the pragmatic, commercially-driven modernism that grew up in the 1980s. They look more to continental architects like the Swiss Diener and Diener, Herzog and de Meuron and Peter Zumthor and, early in their career, to the Dutch Rem Koolhaas. Like these architects they base their work in the wider culture, both social and artistic, in which it is built, while stressing the importance of architectural means, such as light, material, planning and detail. They are inspired by contemporary art, without wishing to blur the boundaries between art and architecture.

Where other architects give primacy to technology, or the image of modernity, or a single style or range of materials, or abstract form-making, the consistency of Caruso St John’s work is in the attitudes behind it. They have no predisposition to modern or traditional building techniques, just whatever is appropriate at a particular moment in space and time. They have an attachment to the ordinary, to the vagaries of a particular situation, while seeking to find extraordinary qualities within it. Adam Caruso’s own house in London is notable as much for what he left of a crumbling old workshop as for the new architecture he added.

When the Walsall competition was advertised Caruso St John were, they say, “getting dubious about competitions”, too many of which seem set up to reach a pre-ordained result. As small young practices rarely make much money they also had to consider whether the cost of duplicating slides and making up display panels could be justified. But they were attracted by the brief, the choice of assessors, the signs that less established architects were welcome. When they saw the drawings of the future British Home Stores and Woolworths they “experienced a long moment of doubt”, but pressed on. Peter St John went to Walsall and in “an incredibly intense four day period” they produced and drew a design remarkably similar to the building that now stands.

“Everything was derelict” recalls St. John “and it didn’t look inviting” but he walked up to St Matthews, the medieval church at the opposite end of Park Street to the site “and things seemed more optimistic.” It was “a strong piece of structure in the town” and from this came the idea that the gallery should be a contemporary equivalent of the church, a marker, a fix for the town’s identity. Both church and gallery are on rises in the ground that answer each other across the shallow valley that holds the centre of the town. Running against their predisposition to build horizontally, they conceived a tower. This also broke with the assumption implicit in the site’s planning, that the art gallery would complete a square courtyard suggested by the side walls of the two stores.

The gallery was to be both a civic tower, like the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, and a big house appropriate to the domestic collection it housed, where the public would be welcome. It had something about it of an Elizabethan country house, like Hardwick Hall, where “there are amazing rooms on top and inside”, and a lot about it of Adolf Loos, the early twentieth century Viennese architect who built mute, cubic houses, within which are compacted three-dimensional labyrinths of large and small rooms.
Externally it would form part of a loose assemblage that included the new pub, the revenue from which was an essential part of the gallery’s financial planning, the existing buildings and, a remodelled canal basin, a decision that was to cause protracted discussions with British Waterways. The pub, designed by Sergison Bates, is low-lying, pitched-roofed and predominantly timber, the formal and material antithesis of the gallery tower, yet complementary and sympathetic to it. Sergison Bates have a similar outlook to Caruso St John, shunning the forced or rhetorical gesture, and preferring to let the building’s structure and materials, and the intelligence of its organisation, speak for themselves. It is a place both sociable and calm, its glass walls opening it to the weather and the life of the town, its timber lining giving it warmth. Reflections bounce off the basin onto its sloping boarded ceiling, and shoppers stream past on their way to Park Street. It is informal and simple, yet it raises the spirits.

In the finished complex the whole would be bound together by the broad asphalt bands of the landscape created by the artist Richard Wentworth which, extending up the towpath of the canal, would connect the gallery with the hinterland. The breadth of the bands, combined with the bigness of the gallery, the littleness of the pub and three tall stadium lights, create a paradoxical sense of scale, both grand and intimate, and unstable and reassuring. At the time of the competition, however, all this was no more than a potential, not a worked-out proposal.

Internally Caruso St John thought of the gallery as “a ridiculously varied warehouse” in which a wide range of rooms – large, small, light, dark, vertical, horizontal, each proportioned to suit their use as a space for art or for children, a café or a library - were compressed into a simple exterior. “The point was that it had many centres” says Peter St John “They were pushed together to make one thing but they keep their independence. We did not want a single experience that encompassed the whole, more of a field of different experiences.”

This “warehouse” would have “linings inside and a gauze-like outside” which translated into the solid concrete shell of the finished building, with timber and plaster in selected areas, and the thin external layer of terracotta tiles. From the outset Caruso St John took a rigorous approach to construction and detail, in which the building’s structure and lining are used to define the character and scale of different parts of the building. In the completed gallery the largest and most public rooms are formed by the concrete structure, which is left exposed, whereas the small, domestic scale of the Garman Ryan galleries is created by its lining of vertical Douglas Fir boards. At the same time there is an affinity between the two types of construction: the concrete floor joists are closely spaced, “like the timber ceiling of a medieval hall”, and Douglas Fir shuttering was used to form the exposed concrete walls, leaving board marks whose rhythm and pattern echo those of the timber lining.

Thus the constructional logic of the building – its need for a primary structure, a cladding to keep the rain off, and linings to conceal its electrical, ventilating and other services – becomes the means by which the different “experiences” that Peter St John talks of are created. There is a mutually reinforcing tension here between the austerity of the means, heightened by the limited range of finishes and a hard won consistency of detail, and the richness of the effects.

Both inside and out, although a forceful and distinctive structure, the gallery does not attempt to be complete in itself. It is rather something that it is completed by the art it exhibits, by its visitors and its context, and by the commissioned art such as Richard Wentworth’s landscape and Catherine Yass’s photographic images projected in a giant window by the entrance. Despite its powerful presence, it sits easily within its variegated surroundings. It does not outsmart its neighbours with glamour, or “show them up” as Peter St John puts it, but includes them in a collective enhancement of the town. “This idea that it makes Walsall new was never articulated” says Adam Caruso “but maybe it is one of the most significant events.”

The first time Peter St John and Adam Caruso met Peter Jenkinson was when they delivered the model for the second stage of the competition. They thought him “a bit young and slightly crazed.” After winning they took him to see some of their inspirations, the work of Herzog and de Meuron and Diener and Diener in Basel, and gave him a “concrete tour” of London, in order to demonstrate the many forms the material can take. A relationship of mutual respect and understanding rapidly developed between client and architect. Such an understanding would be needed.

An intense year followed the announcement of the competition result in October 1995. In order to receive a grant from the European Regional Development Fund a building contract had to be in place by
the end of 1996 and a price agreed with contractors, an arbitrary rule that was to cause serious trouble. In the course of these twelve months the design was to be developed, further public consultation to be carried out, a lottery bid submitted complete with business plan and other supporting documents, funding secured, the building’s engineering and details worked out and specified, and tenders sought, received and evaluated from contractors.

The architects, engineers and client team went to the Lousiana Museum in Copenhagen to study the light levels of its successful exhibition galleries, and to Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge, which like the Garman Ryan houses a domestically-scaled collection of twentieth century art. There they established that floors in Douglas fir worked well with such a collection. They went to Tate St Ives to talk to Michael Tooby and met Peter Wilson the Tate Gallery’s director of buildings. From them they learnt technical, back of house requirements, “what to do and what not to do”.

Caruso St John took part in a two-day public consultation workshop, and the proposals were exhibited next to the escalators in the town’s main shopping centre. Further workshops were carried out with the gallery’s staff, and the results of both exercises were fed into the brief.

While the overall concept of the design changed little, some significant changes were made. The biggest was placing the temporary exhibition galleries above the Garman Ryan Collection rather than below, as they had been in the competition design, as the client felt it was preferable for the visitor first to experience the permanently accessible collection, rather than the temporary galleries which would be closed between exhibitions. The elevations took a long time to design. A proposal to silkscreen images of Epstein’s work onto them was dropped and much work went into the choice of materials and the detail of the windows, so that the desired effect was achieved of giving the glass and the terracotta cladding equal visual weight. To avoid excessive monotony the tiles were to be made in five shades, mixed into a random pattern.

The engineers Ove Arup worked out how exactly the building’s overhanging corner could be achieved, where structure is removed at precisely the point where it is most needed, and how to tie the building down so that it wouldn’t tip over. A further challenge was the fact that the concrete was exposed, and had to be constructed in 7m-high sections at one time. The complexity of the resulting reinforcement in the concrete walls meant that any changes to window positions had major structural implications, and working it all out was only possible with three-dimensional computer analysis. Meanwhile the cost consultants Hanscomb had to monitor and control the building’s budget, and in the Autumn of 1996 the project managers Bucknall Austin (now Citex) were appointed. Their job, according to Bucknall Austin’s Simon Whelan, “was to be a technical friend to a client who knew what they wanted, but had no idea how to get it. We had to deliver a building that met their aspirations.”

Before the lottery bid was submitted Peter Jenkinson had to negotiate a further political hurdle. The project was eligible for support from two different distributors of lottery money, the Arts Council and, because it involved works of historic importance, the Heritage Lottery Fund. That there is such a split between the two bodies reflects, in Peter Jenkinson’s view, “a stupid British distinction between old and new culture”, but at a late stage the Arts Council advised him that it would be diplomatic to put in a bid to the HLF, as in the early stages of the lottery the two bodies had not defined the boundary between their responsibilities.

Jenkinson was certain that he didn’t want the project jointly funded by two bodies, as contacts at the Tate Liverpool, where this had happened, had warned him of the resulting delays and arguments about who should pay for what. He knew that he wanted to be supported by the Arts Council, who had indicated that they viewed The New Art Gallery as a model project, by which the lottery would be remembered. He also knew that the gallery would need funding for its running costs once open, and that the Arts Council would be more inclined to contribute to these if it had funded the capital costs which, in the end, was exactly what happened. Jenkinson therefore conducted “a huge battle of talking quietly but vigorously to people on committees.” Spotting and negotiating these obstacles was once again a question of nous and the advice of others, not working to any established rules.

Jenkinson had to argue with quantity surveyors for the Government Office of the West Midlands, who said the building cost too much per square foot. “We said too much compared to what? To retail? To offices? Or to other galleries internationally?” The Arts Council’s architectural assessors also gave them an unexpectedly difficult two-and-a-half hours, apparently disconcerted by the design’s failure to
conform to the established canons of high-tech architecture. It lacked, for example, a soaring atrium. “All of us were in our mid-30s” says Jenkinson “and they seemed to see us as these toddler people. They kept saying ‘show us the route through’ and Peter and Adam kept saying ‘the whole point is that there is no single route. You can eat your pudding first if you like. You can explore.’”

Eventually a presentation was made to the Arts Council’s lottery board. The film producer David Puttnam, a member of the board, was supportive, but a question was posed on which the whole project, and with it the years of work of conceiving it, building a team, running the competition and developing the design, could have foundered. The chief executive of Walsall was asked whether the council would, if necessary, underwrite any shortfall in the gallery’s revenue budget. “No” would have been disastrous, but “yes” would stretch the truth, as he had no authority to set budgets more than a year in advance. He said yes.

After an agonising wait the Arts Council announced that they were awarding £15.75m to the project. The deadlines were met for tendering and ERDF funding of £4.5m was secured. A firm of contractors, Sir Robert McAlpine, were appointed. McAlpine were not the lowest tenderer, but their price was competitive and the gallery team felt they showed the best understanding of the building and would be the best to work with. Work started on site in January 1997, with completion of the construction scheduled for December 1998. The project, however, was still to come close to catastrophe.

In February McAlpine found rock in the ground, which delayed construction of the basement by two weeks. During the summer they had difficulties erecting the complex concrete structure, and by December they were claiming for a 20 week extension to the contract, with associated additional costs. A windy and wet winter caused further delay and in February 1998 McAlpine indicated that they would be making further claims for delay. A savings review was carried out to avert the threat of the project going over budget but within a month it was apparent that the capital budget was likely to be exceeded.

In the summer the failure to complete the structure on time was having a knock-on effect on the cladding contractors and other trades and in August McAlpine claimed for costs of £1.7m over the original budget, which were contested by the gallery’s consultants. At this point lawyers were consulted by both contractors and clients, and discussions held with QCs in London. By January 1999 the relationship between contractors and designers was at its most antagonistic and, on the advice of the project managers Bucknall Austin, independent reviews were carried out to establish what had gone wrong. In April McAlpine were predicting a completion date of late August, eight months later than the original date, and claiming for extra costs of over £3m.

McAlpine argued that the problems stemmed from inexperienced architects with an inadequate knowledge of the construction process. Caruso St John believe that McAlpine failed to understand the building properly at the outset and organise themselves accordingly. Simon Whelan, the project manager, broadly supports the architects’ view, while suggesting that their commitment to quality sometimes made them too inflexible in dealing with problems. All would agree that a major source of difficulty was the rush caused by the ERDF’s deadline. In order to meet it prices were sought from contractors when a large amount of the work was not yet fully detailed and specified, which created ample room for doubt and disagreement.

Simon Whelan, whose job was to manage the warring project impartially, also criticises the Arts Council’s policies. They favour traditional forms of building contract, which give architects a high level of influence, but which also carry a higher level of risk of overspend than more modern, contractor-led contracts. Yet they do not bear this risk themselves, refusing to consider applications for further grants when things go wrong. The Arts Council also reduced at the start the contingency sum Whelan believed would be necessary. “They have got to take a hard stance on money” he says “but they fiddle with projects without taking the responsibility.” Peter Jenkinson also observes that, where Walsall was flatly refused extra cash, some high profile London lottery projects, such as the Royal Court Theatre and, notoriously, the Millennium Dome, were bailed out of their difficulties.

Late, and possibly 25% over its construction budget, the project was in danger of being what Whelan calls “a disaster for Walsall, a disaster for the Arts Council, a disaster for everyone.” While a few luxuries, such as independently operated electric blinds, could be omitted, seriously compromising the quality was not an option. “If we had delivered averageness” he says “you can easily imagine what the press would have said. We would have wasted £21m and four years of effort.”
While Whelan was adjudicating the rights and wrongs of the case, and lawyers were being consulted, frantic efforts were made to find a peaceful solution and stay out of the courts. McAlpine’s main board in London were approached and the Chairman of the Gallery’s Development Trust David Owen pursued his contacts with McAlpine. The project, says Whelan, “was one or two meetings away from going completely pear-shaped when we got both sides to pull back.” In May 1999 a figure of £592,000 was agreed over the original contract sum in settlement of the McAlpine claim for over almost £4m. Construction was eventually completed in August, to be followed by fitting out and installation of the exhibits.

That projects like The New Art Gallery happen at all is extraordinary. That they avert major disasters in doing so is a miracle. That they also manage to be ambitious, imaginative and pioneering, and to sustain to completion the ideals with which they started is almost a defiance of the laws of nature.

The success of Walsall is due to a huge number of people: the Victorian worthies who conceived the first gallery, Kathleen Garman and Sally Ryan, the officers of Walsall’s council, councillors of all parties, the gallery’s staff, trustees and consultants, the competition assessors, the architects, project managers, engineers, quantity surveyors, artists, landscape architects and other experts, the Arts Council’s officers and assessors, the builders, the Walsall public who offered their opinions and support, the press, the friends of the project who gave their advice and experience.

All these people had to be enthused. As Peter Jenkinson says, “proselytising is a huge part of the project. No one who has got involved has done so half-heartedly.” What he doesn’t say this support has been generated by his own passion, energy, infectious enthusiasm and personal and political skills, his ability to spot rocks and reefs in the uncharted waters of public funding. People are converted by his openness and sincerity, his lack of a hidden agenda, his transparent desire to involve others. Adam Caruso says “he is like a boulder rolling down hill. He gets everyone involved”.

Even now, the future success of the gallery is not certain. It could indeed prove too ambitious, funding might dry up, a lacklustre future director might fail to rise to the job, visitor numbers might tail off, the world of art and museums might regard Walsall as too remote to favour with their interest and support, no matter how good the building. No public project worth having comes without the risk of failure. But the reward for risk is achieving something as extraordinary as The New Art Gallery, Walsall.