“You can’t find a natural landscape in Birmingham,” says Adam Caruso. “That’s what’s so nice about it.”

This could be the first time anyone has called Birmingham “nice”, but then Caruso and his partner Peter St. John like plenty of things not often thought charming. They like Stratford, east London, and a 1950s building there which they are making into a local authority advice centre. They like naked fluorescent tubes, decrepit brickwork and the wobbly paint stripes with which builders cover the taped joints in plasterboard walls.

These last items, along with unpainted MDF, a torn scrap of floral wallpaper and translucent plastic, are the materials of Caruso’s new house in Highbury, the conversion of a crumbled mews building with previous lives as a wallpaper warehouse and a slaughterhouse. The materials are assembled with a looseness and with blunt meetings of decay and newness that echo, in miniature, the blitzscapes of Birmingham and Stratford. The combined effect, however, is extremely nice.

One label for the house might be “minimal”. There is nothing that cannot justify its presence and there is a minimum of paint, trim and boxing-in. There are only two internal doors, to a store and the bathroom, and elements are fixed as simply as possible. A monkish austerity comes from the studied poverty of the materials and the limiting, with obscure glass, of views out.

But this is not minimalism as it has come to be understood. It is not the simple reflection, as in some architects’ work, of obsessive control, nor is it one of those beautiful but uptight spaces which can only deteriorate from the day it is photographed. Instead the house is accepting and accommodating, a place that responds to the circumstances of its making and use. The sizes of its parts grow simply from the demands of setting and purpose and the bare plasterboard bears the marks and stains of the building site. By preserving both the old brickwork and the traces of construction, the house presents its own history and that of its conversion.

Although the absence of doors and a void in the first floor make the house into a single piece of flowing space, each place within it, whether for eating, working or sleeping, has its own quality. The play of these qualities gives the house a richness out of proportion to its size.

Above all, the space accepts light in a spectacular way. Falling on to rough, smooth, matt and reflective surfaces, through opening’s of different sizes and at different heights, and through clear and obscure glass, it continuously animates the interior. Buildings across the street cast a shadow onto the obscure glass facade which then becomes a mysterious and shifting part of the internal space. Not all these events are predicted, but they come from an approach that is open to accident.

Caruso is fond of saying “it is what it is”, in relation to almost any object or event. He also says that “anything can be a valid subject for art”. This accounts for Caruso St. John’s love of industrial landscapes and industrially produced building materials and an architecture that disguises neither. Thus their project for the Architecture Foundation’s foyer competition treated a brick viaduct next to its Birmingham site (part of what is “nice” about Birmingham) as an inspiration not a problem. In Adam Caruso’s house, plasterboard and MDF, their edges exposed, are revealed as thin cladding rather than would-be masonry.

This almost makes Caruso St. John functionalists, but not quite. What really interests them is what they call “the secret life of most of the world around us”. Following architectural artists, of whom Gordon Matta Clark is the one they mention most, they seek to reveal this “secret life” by presenting the normal oddly. In Caruso St. John’s work, site and materials acquire the quality of found objects and their coming together that of an installation. Ordinary things become strange: a plasterboard wall is not the
substantial thing you thought it was; an unusually sized door throws your sense of scale.

The house has other qualities. It shows a love of ruins that owes more to eighteenth-century gardens than anything else. Light penetrates through interlocking spaces in a way which, if there were fluffy clouds and cherubs rather than MDF, would be called baroque. For all its acceptance of its messy surroundings, the house’s interior achieves a monastic air of seclusion.

But what makes the house, to use Caruso’s critical term, really nice, is the way it both responds to the life about it and reveals something unexpected about that life. It does so without appealing to non-existent classical unity or spurious technological imperatives, but by reacting to things as they are. As things are not entirely orderly and stable, neither is Caruso St. John’s architecture.

Reacting creatively to life is really what architecture is but while Gehry, Koolhaas and others have followed similar instincts to Caruso St. John’s, their approach is not taken by established British architects. Domestic, fragile and small as it is, Caruso’s house shows how British architecture might rise from the rubble of the 1980s style wars, from which it has still not wholly emerged, and rediscover a sense of purpose.