

CARUSO ST JOHN/ COVER VERSIONS



From left to right: Adam Caruso, Peter St John and Hugh Pearman

FOR THEM, IT IS CHEATING TO MUCK AROUND WITH ALGORITHMS AND MAPPING PROGRAMS TO GENERATE FACADE DETAILS, AS SOME MODISH ARCHITECTS DO

By Hugh Pearman. Photography by Oliver Godow

Adam Caruso and Peter St John sprang to prominence in the mid 1990s with their competition-winning entry for Walsall's new art gallery. It was a rare opportunity for a young practice – established in 1990 after both had worked for Florian Beigel and Arup Associates – previously known mainly for domestic work. Recently completed projects include Brick House in Westbourne Grove, which has virtually no elevations, and new classroom blocks at Denys Lasdun's Hallfield School in Paddington. The practice's current workload includes a Centre for Contemporary Art in Nottingham, a Damien Hirst museum in Lambeth and a landscaped estate of 500 houses near Bordeaux. An exhibition entitled 'Caruso St John – Cover Versions' is at the Architectural Association gallery from 8 October to 3 November.

An interesting thing has started to happen to Caruso St John's architecture. Put crudely, they have rediscovered ornament, something very apparent in their polychromatic masonry designs for an extension to the V&A's Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green, exhibited in the British pavilion at the last Venice Architecture Biennale. Of course this was no Damascene conversion – the historic and textural interest has always been there – and of course they were and are not alone. Everyone from Herzog & de Meuron to Foreign Office Architects by way of Future Systems seems to have been playing around with the idea of ornament. What sets Caruso St John apart, perhaps, is the way they openly acknowledge its debts to their forebears.

The title of their exhibition, 'Cover Versions', presents a firm of broadly Modernist architects that is willing to place itself

in a historical continuum – especially, but not exclusively, the Arts and Crafts tradition. True, plenty of architects cite influences. Plenty like to ignore the relatively recent past and instead point to the wonders of engineering or nature or art or swimwear. In contrast, Caruso St John name names: the names of other architects. In the show, clusters of their work are organised around reference material – much of it gleaned from the RIBA's drawings collection – by some of those who have been this way before: among them Louis Sullivan, Philip Webb, Owen Jones and Frederick Law Olmsted of Central Park fame.

We gather round the cluttered meeting table, and Caruso pulls down drawings and working models to explain the layout of the AA exhibition. You might not, at first glance, associate their Brick House with the work of the Arts and Crafts master Philip Webb, but he is the pin-up they want to acknowledge. Photos and study models of Brick House – an infill project with a noble, raw, irregularly domed main space – form part of the display, but so too do working drawings for it, interspersed with Webb's working drawings for Standen, his virtuoso freestyle house of 1891–4, and the earlier Clouds house in Wiltshire, which is freer still. The link here is an extraordinary level of attention to detail. Caruso assures me that every single brick in Brick House was drawn in its rightful place. How he can do this and still turn a profit baffles me.

'Who knew more about architecture than Webb?' asks Caruso. 'He was a great architect. It's to do with construction and the way that construction holds cultural information. That was



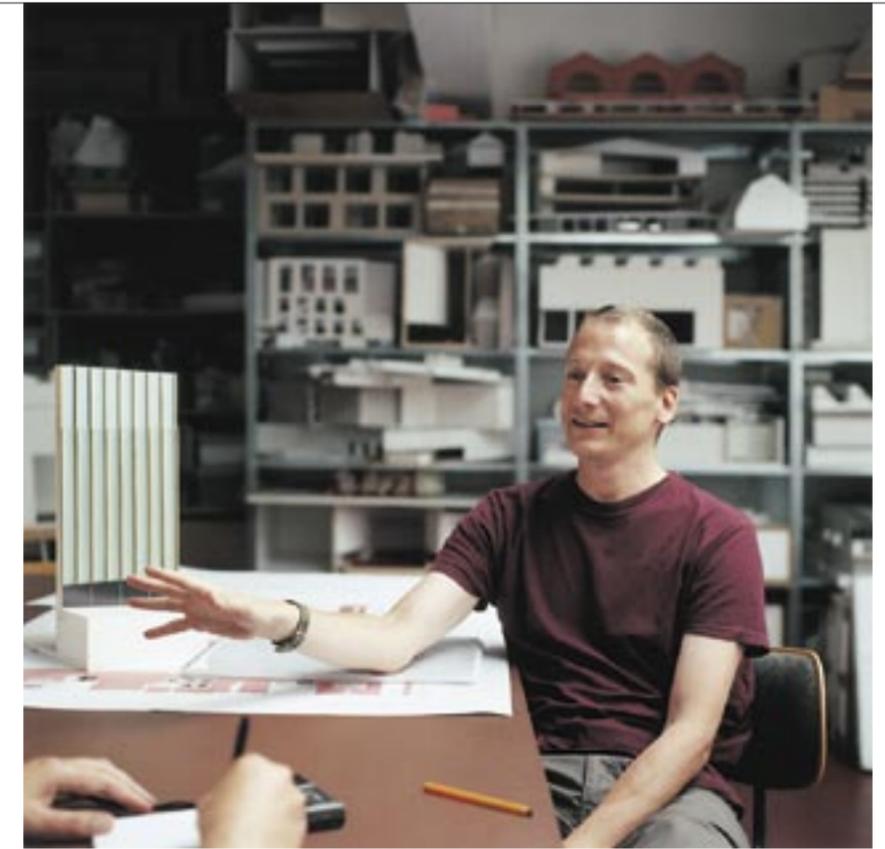
1. Work in progress, including a project to remodel and extend the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green (top left corner), a fragment of the facade of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Nottingham, and a scheme for a low-density landscaped estate of 500 houses in Bordeaux



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2. Model of the 'Cover Versions' exhibition at the Architectural Association, which opens on 8 October
3. Caruso St John's office
4. Adam Caruso

something that was central to his practice, and it's something that we're very interested in. Looking at his drawings, it's amazing. They seem very familiar. Every single thing was drawn, unlike Lutyens. Standen has 150 working drawings, which was a lot for those days.'

Similarly, an assonance is declared between the decorative stone screens of the Museum of Childhood job – there will be a full-scale prototype – and the richly ornamental facade detail of both Adler and Sullivan's 1894-5 Guaranty building in Buffalo and plates from Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament*. Likewise, an Olmsted landscape is put in the context of the *rus-in-urbe* designs of Hallfield School and the Bordeaux housing. Such comparisons might seem invidious – how dare these boys set themselves alongside the masters? – but that is not the intention. The problems of architecture never change much. In the early 21st rather than the late 19th century, Caruso St John are looking at the way people succeeded in the past and see nothing wrong with coming up with their own versions of the classics.

Ornament plays a key role in their design for the £11m Centre for Contemporary Art, to be built on a steeply sloping site in Nottingham's Lace Market area, that will combine galleries for visual and performance art. Nottingham's lace was largely machine made and this replicability forms the basis of a 'textile facade'. A sample of lace will be scanned, turned into a 3D computer model and moulded into the pigmented precast concrete panels forming the elevations of the centre. 'With this technology,'

observes Caruso, 'you can do very intricate ornament again.' Sullivan and Wright live on. As does Berlage – his Holland House, right behind Foster's Gherkin in the City of London, is 'a constant reference'. Caruso St John regard this kind of thing as real ornament. For them, it is cheating to muck around with algorithms and mapping programs to generate facade details, as some modish architects do. 'Why go to that kind of incredible contrivance to get an articulation which in the end is always very reduced?' ponders Caruso.

So: it's tradition all the way. 'We're trying to start to express more formally the idea that interpretation is a very powerful thing. Interpretation of tradition has always been how you made art and architecture,' Caruso says. 'It's only really since the 1950s that this idea of pure invention intruded. And it's only got really silly in the last 20 years or so. If you make pure invention, how can it possibly have any density, compared with something that has hundreds or thousands of years feeding into it? So, in a way, we are trying to celebrate the eclecticism of our current work, but we're also trying to make explicit connections.'

Caruso St John are, in a sense, unashamedly elitist. Their stated aim is to do high architecture. There is not much commercial work, though an accomplished speculative office block for developer Argent at King's Cross is still pending. They are obviously known for arts spaces, and have a seam of work in private outlets such as London's Gagosian and Stephen Friedman galleries. They increasingly find themselves on illustrious international shortlists:

now they select only those competitions where the shortlists really are realistically short. A competition entry was in the office the day I visited, almost ready for dispatch: the Herning Kunstmuseum in Denmark, which has the world's largest collection of Piero Manzoni. The new building is to be for music as well as art.

Caruso and St John work closely together: this is not one of your bilaterally split firms where partners jealously guard their own jobs. 'It's slightly unusual, our practice,' St John concedes. 'It is a collaboration of designers rather than a partnership. That came from the very earliest days, collaborating as teachers. It's continued as a conversation during the long-term progress of our practice. I might bring something that I'm interested in, so might Adam, and what has to happen is that we collectively sort it and arrange it and re-present it. We decide together what's interesting and appropriate.'

And that might well mean deciding to turn work down. For St John, the people who struck the right balance are the likes of Lasdun, Álvaro Siza (a great hero) and Peter Zumthor, all architects who work or worked at their own pace rather than having the pace dictated by endless economic expansion. 'It's globalisation, and it's terrible for architecture,' says Caruso, to which St John quietly adds: 'You don't have to do very many good buildings to have a satisfying career. We've got to the point now where we feel we have the ability to build complicated buildings really well. It would be so satisfying to be working at a much bigger scale.'

BRICK HOUSE

'In this design, the accidental but wildly spatial shape of the site has been used to form the living spaces. The interior plan is completely separate from the typologies of the London town house or inner-city loft, while still retaining a strong sense of dwelling at the heart of the city. The exterior form of the house is incomprehensible from within. Instead, the form appears unbound and soft, as if an internal force is pressing the walls and roof out against the buildings around it. The floors and walls of the house are built of brick, inside and out. The use of one material binds the whole building into an enveloping body, emphasising a skin-like character over any tectonic expression. The arrangement of the bricks within the mortar shifts as surfaces stretch, bend and twist, making them appear elastic. The ceiling of the upper floor is cast concrete and adopts different levels to make particular spaces within the overall deep plan. A flat ceiling appears to press down over the dining table, and a domed profile forms the high ceiling over the main living space.'

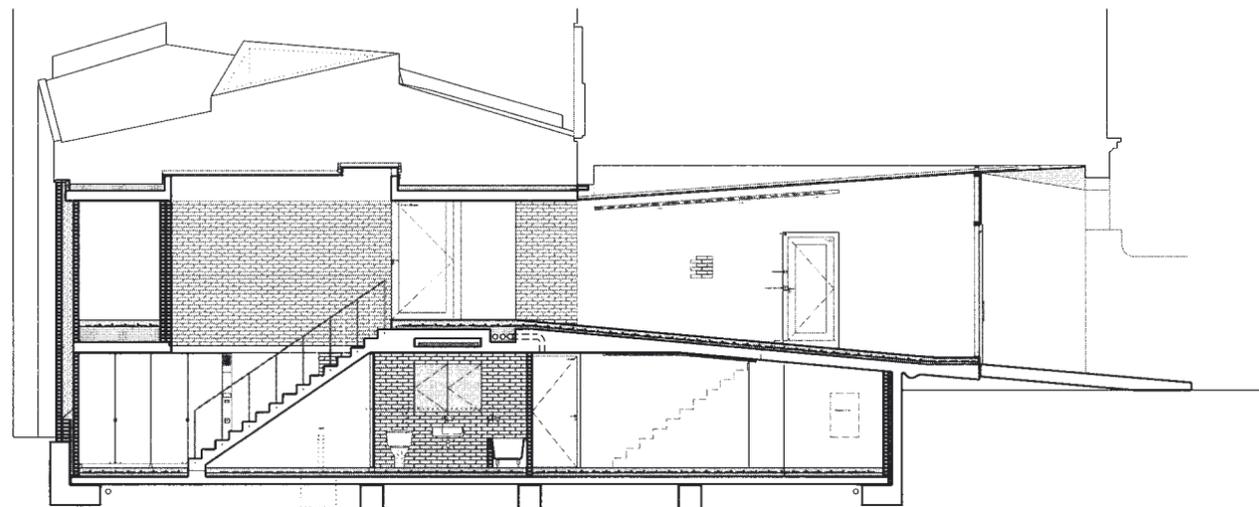
Caruso St John



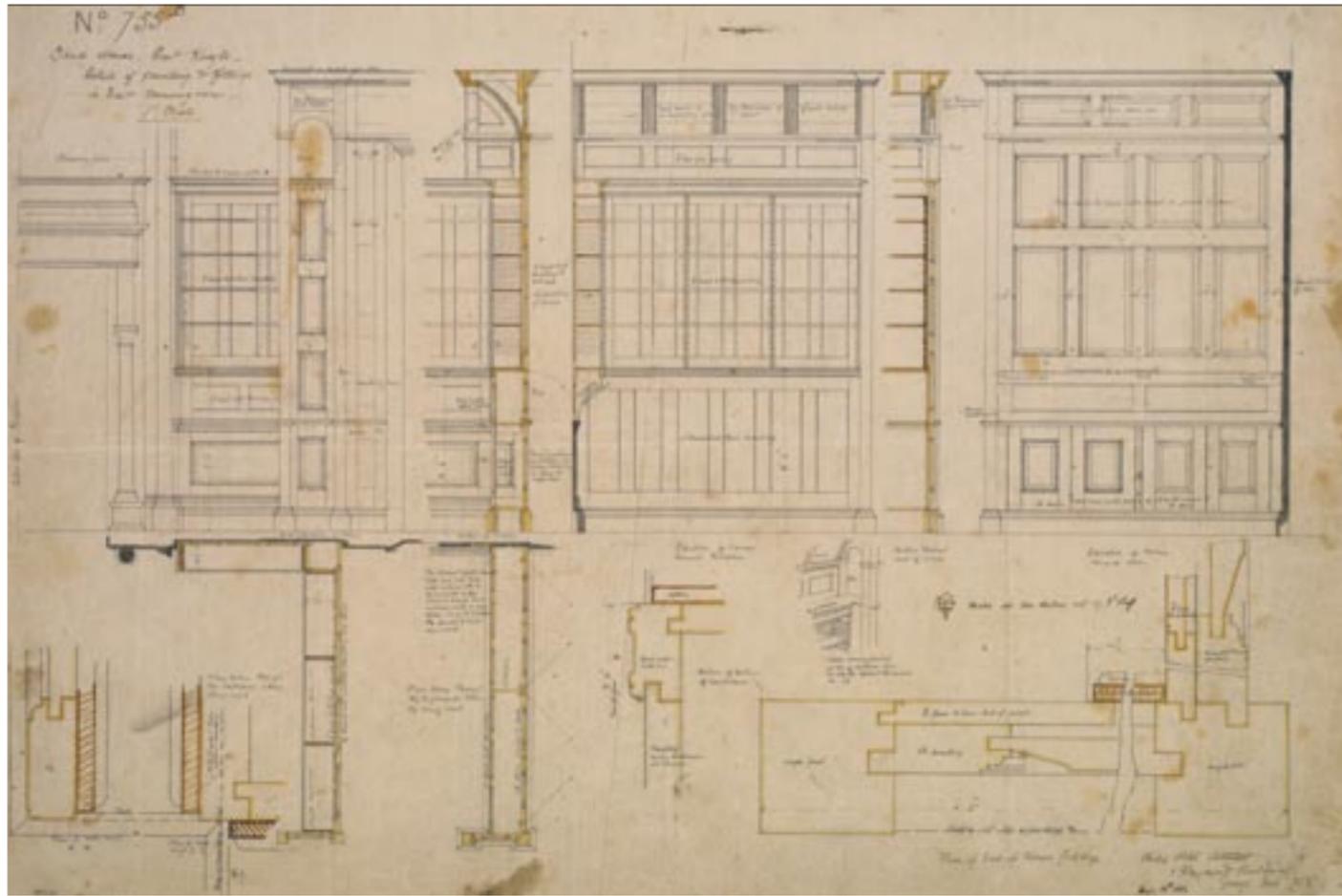
5. Site plan



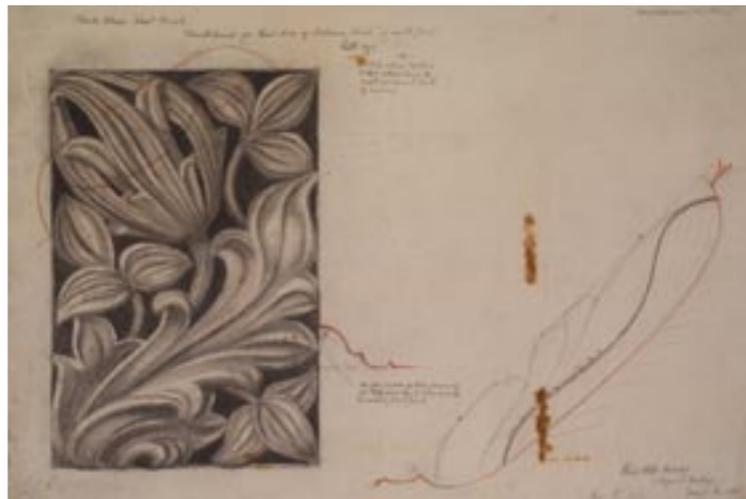
7. Models exploring the form of Brick House



6. Section



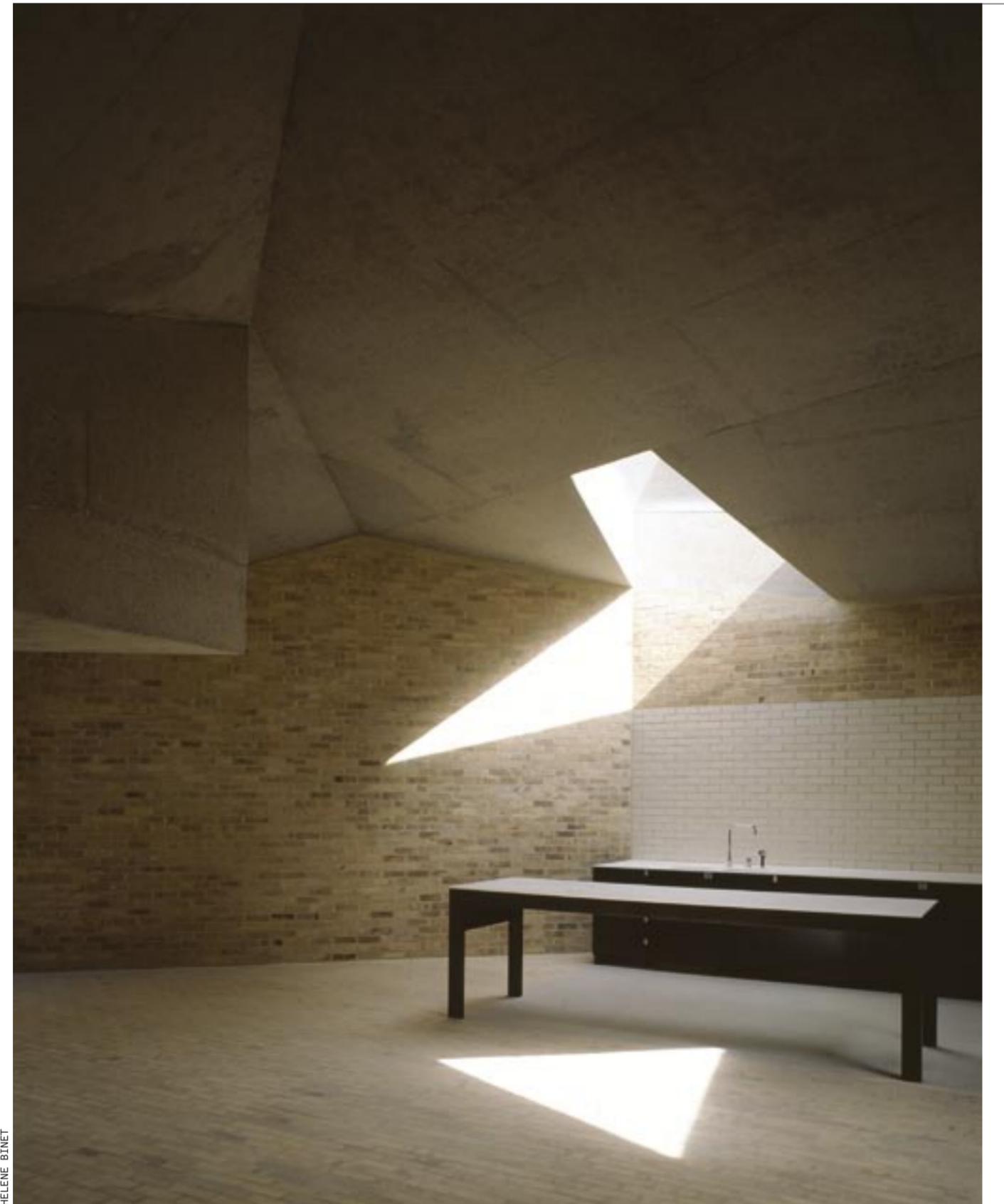
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8 & 9. Sketches for Philip Webb's Clouds house, East Knoyle, 1879-80. Webb is not an obvious inspiration for Caruso St John's Brick House, but he is the one they choose to acknowledge, citing his attitude to construction and attention to detail

10. Brick House

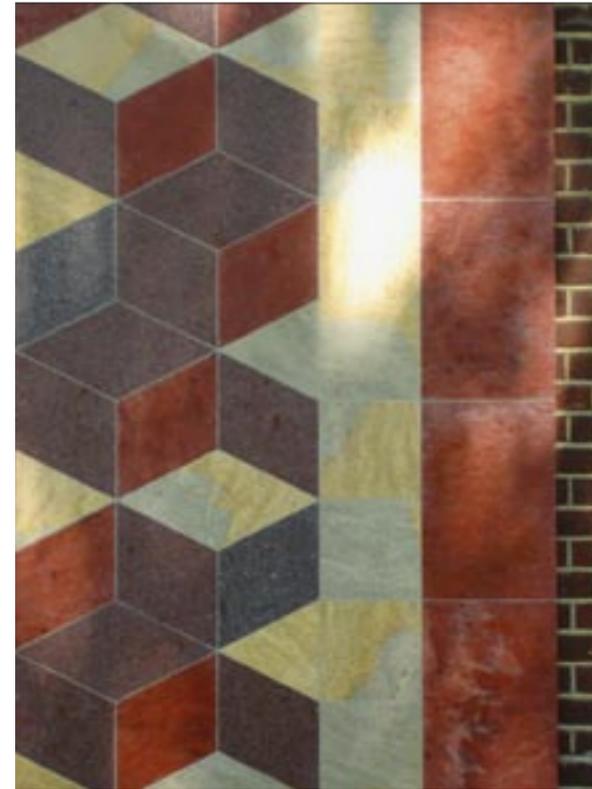


HÉLÈNE BINET

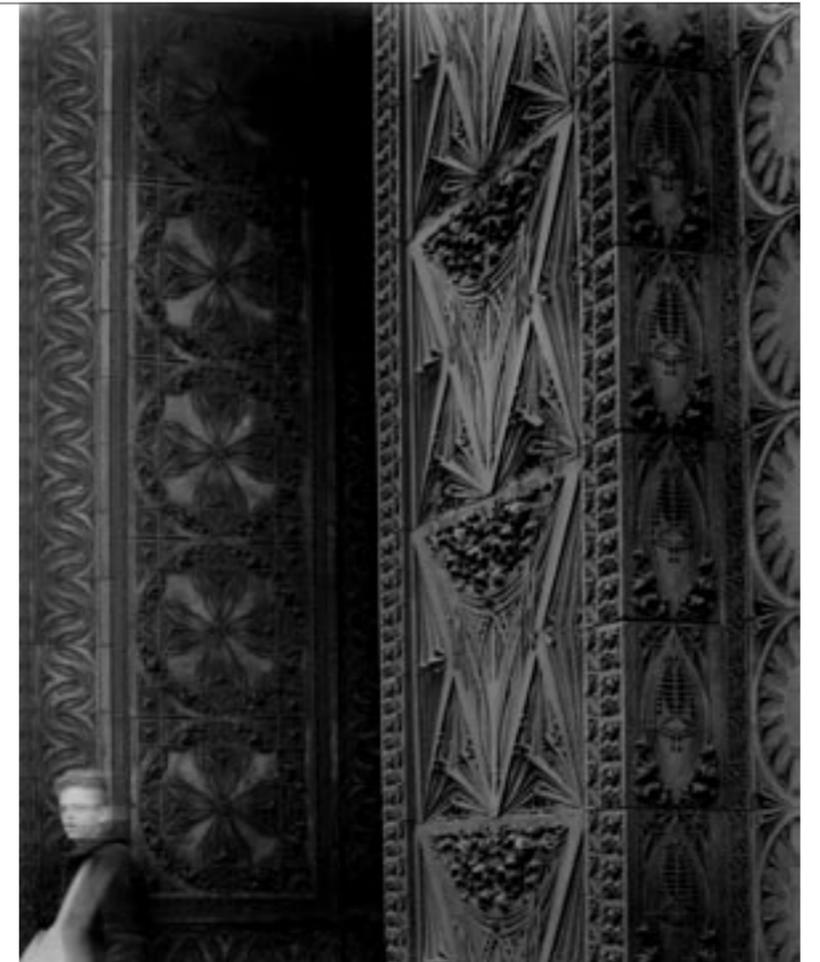
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11. Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green. As part of an ongoing programme of work Caruso St John have designed a new colonnade building that contains front-of-house facilities and provides the strong front that the museum has always lacked

12. The facade will be clad in a thin veneer of coloured quartzites and porphyries

13. Adler and Sullivan's 1894-5 Guaranty building in Buffalo, New York, is a key reference



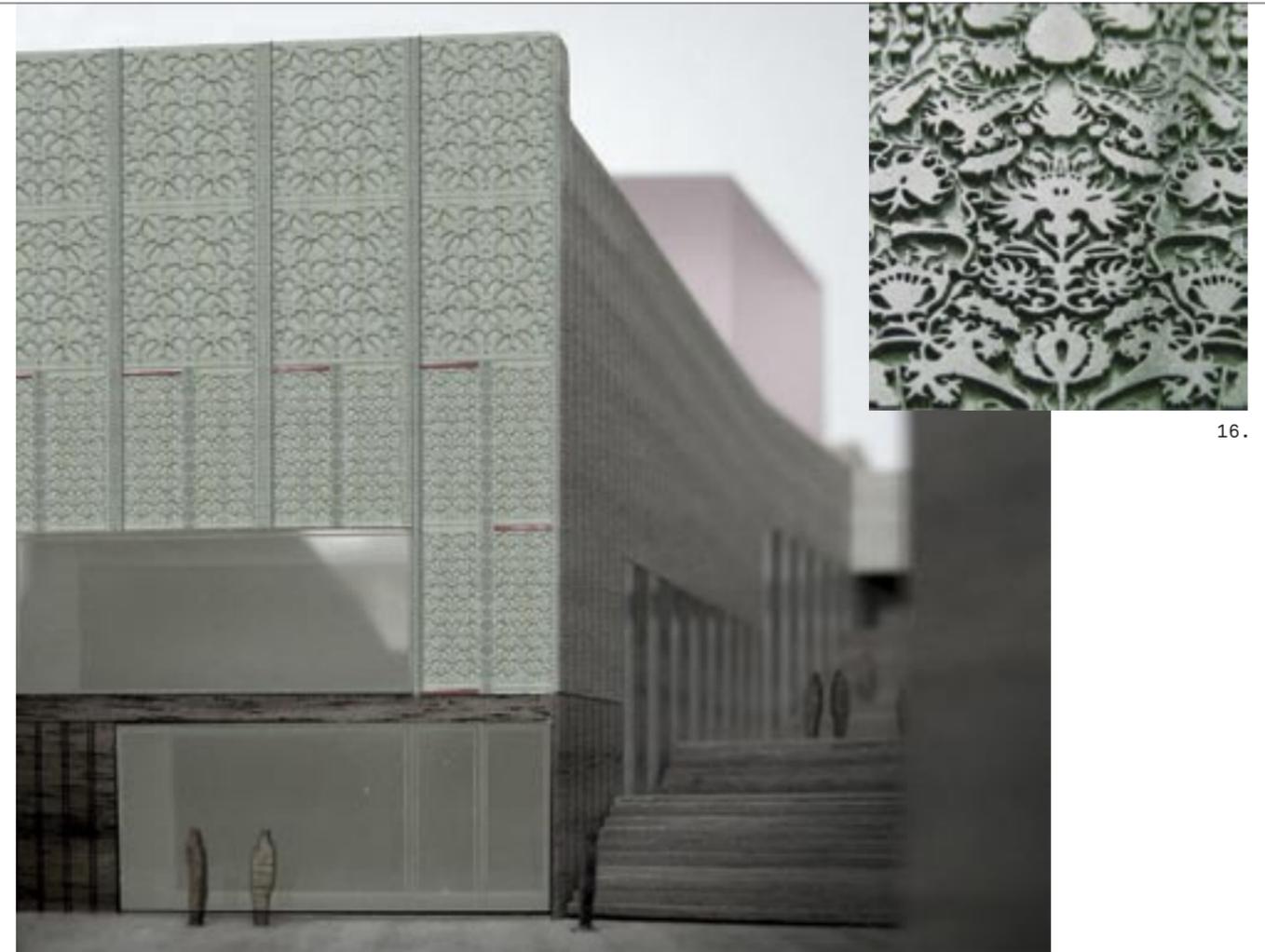
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14. Work in progress including a facade detail of the Centre for Contemporary Art, Nottingham, which is due for completion in 2008

15. The facades are expressed as a continuous woven surface with a rich cast relief

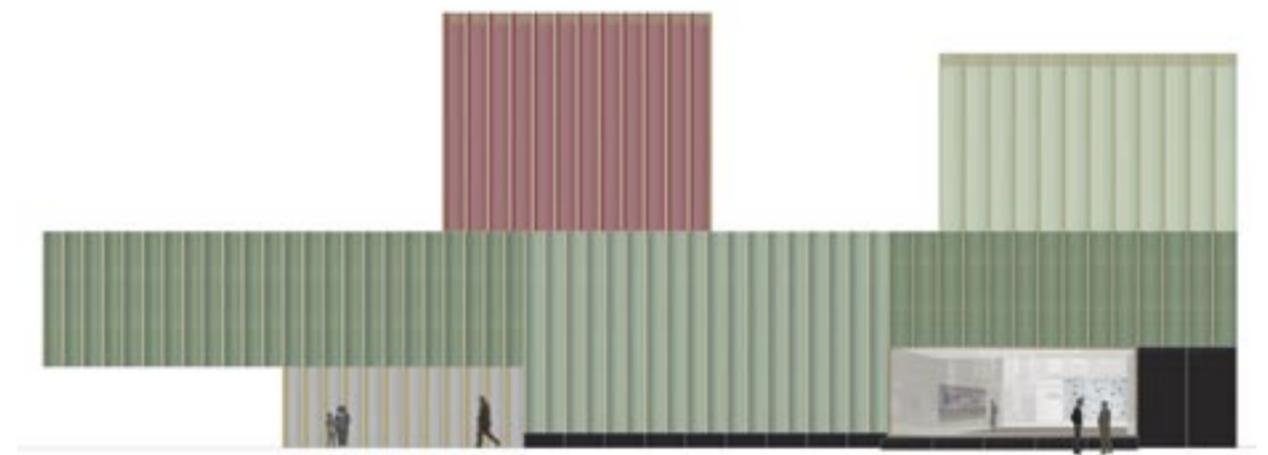
16. Facade detail. A sample of lace will be scanned, turned into a 3D computer model and moulded into pigmented precast concrete panels

17. The precision and rigour of the elevations is inspired by the 19th-century facades of Nottingham's Lace Market



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