

## ROME, ITALY

# Caruso meets Demand

Freddie Phillipson

Previously the 'Mother of the Arts', Architecture's traditional role as the underlying structure that unified available forms of representation into a single coherent vehicle of meaning now seems distant from contemporary understandings of creative practices. We can no longer aspire to the seductive fiction of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, in which architecture establishes the framework within which sculpture, painting, and even live performance purportedly acquire their broader relevance.

In the process of dissolving this relationship, we have perhaps been able to realise more distinctly what conceptual territory each creative discipline can command for itself. At the same time, we necessarily accept the continual challenge of understanding the benefits, or otherwise, of these very distinctions. Ever greater emphasis is placed on the processes employed to realise work in each discipline. For the engaged practitioner this appears to be occurring at a time when aspects of architectural thinking are adopted, subverted or indeed destabilised by the very disciplines whose contributions architects both endeavour to serve, and often draw on in the development of their own work.

It is therefore particularly timely that a substantial programme should revolve around the issue of collaboration between architects and other creative practitioners. *Meeting Architecture: Architecture and the Creative Process*, curated by Marina Engel for the British School at Rome, sets out to do just this. In partnership with the Royal College of Art, which will also host the same events in London, this ambitious framework is intended to explore these questions over

several years through discussions and accompanying exhibitions.

It is especially informative that the series should be launched by a collaboration between an artist and an architect which focuses not on the incorporation of 'art' as artefact into an otherwise independent, completed building, but on a much more nuanced and perhaps elusive process of creation. The study-exhibition centred on the working relationship between Thomas Demand and Caruso St John Architects, which opened at the British School on 29 October, has been succinctly curated by Engel in a thought-provoking manner belying the modest dimensions of the room itself, and was accompanied on the opening night by a discussion between Demand and Adam Caruso, chaired by the critic and curator Mario Codognato.

The exhibition is organised in a series of pairings. Demand's *Haltestelle* (2009) faces a wall occupied by photographs of his own house, the so-called 'Hellmühle', a lakeside villa located north-east of Berlin which has been recently adapted and refurbished by Caruso St John. The *Haltestelle*, Demand's full scale recreation in paper of a rural German bus shelter where the band Tokio Hotel once waited for their school bus, is perhaps emblematic here of the artist's best known work, in which photographs of locations which enter the collective imagination are re-staged, only for the full size maquette to be destroyed after the photograph has been taken. It also specifically invokes the exhibition of Demand's work at the Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 2009, where the *Haltestelle* was one of the works displayed against a backdrop of heavy fabric 'curtains' (walls of fabric, not hanging but stayed to the ceiling) which established territories within Mies van der Rohe's monumental temple-pavilion.

The curtains are re-presented here as wallpaper, against which



Collaborations between Thomas Demand and Caruso St John are exhibited in Rome

float historic postcards of the Hellmühle and Hélène Binet's photographs.

There are also various representations of the competition design developed jointly by Demand and Caruso St John for the Nagelhaus (2007-10), two small buildings housing a Chinese restaurant and a kiosk which were to be located under the viaduct at Escher Wyss Platz in Zurich. This cluster is divided between two-dimensional and three-dimensional works, including a further pairing of films displayed on adjacent monitors. One shows Chinese television footage covering the dramatic case of the house which Madame Wu declined to sell to developers of a shopping mall in Chongqing, resulting in the house becoming a free-standing object within a four-storey deep excavation. Demand and Caruso St John suggested re-creating the house in Zurich. The physical isolation of the original house, and its proposed transposition from one form of collective consciousness into another, are complemented by the accompanying slideshow of 'Chinese' pavilions, apparently Western garden follies in the 'orientalist' tradition.

The Nagelhaus in particular makes clear that this is a relatively long-standing collaboration based on mutual

trust, in which, as Engel puts it, the point of contact is conceptual. As such the relationship is perhaps unique: it does not require the incorporation of art into a building as artefact, or as 'decoration'. Indeed, Caruso explained how the exhibition design for the Palazzo Pitti in Florence reverses this relationship, such that the practice were providing the 'supporting architecture' for the art work. Demand and Caruso, in both their exhibition texts and in conversation, provided a compelling account of the working roles adopted in a range of exhibition projects and the Nagelhaus, where the architect acts as 'explainer-facilitator'.

This role appears to have several aspects. In the exhibition context, the collaborations discussed all concerned cases where the existing space effectively had no available walls for display: in Jean Nouvel's Fondation Cartier and at the Nationalgalerie, because of the abundance of glass, and in the Palazzo Pitti because of the sensitivity about touching the 19th-century interior. The architects found ingenious solutions to these problems which both enriched and subtly subverted the order of the existing situation. Furthermore, Caruso St John clearly became advocates for the Nagelhaus to



**Nagelhaus is a proposal by the artist and architects to recreate a Chinese 'nail house' under the viaduct at Escher Wyss Platz in Zurich**

the outside world. As Caruso put it, the artist does not always 'want to be clear'. In turn, Demand generously describes 'the under-recognised role of an architect, the constant negotiation, the swallowing of dissent and finding compromises'.

Demand's sensitivity to architectural space is evident in his approaching the practice in the first place, not wanting to alter his art in deference to the architecture of the gallery but equally not seeking to obliterate that architecture. Nor does the art work seek to determine the architecture in the Nagelhaus: Demand is clear that this was not intended as a *gesamtkunstwerk*, emphasising that the buildings were meant to take an active role in urban life by not extending the 'art' to the interior, or the use of the architecture. In this respect the 'facilitating' role of the architect emerges in yet another light: the architect reinterprets the existing situation to enable the art work to have a sufficient and distinct presence in its new context. This is also to do with Demand's ambition to define clearly where the art work begins,

especially important given the themes and content of his work. Demand explained that, had he designed the exhibition architecture himself, there would be no need for his photographic recreations of architecture to be displayed; the line between the museum and the art work would have been irretrievably blurred.

In this way Demand positions the architect as 'someone in between' two realities, or two transpositions of found conditions: the movement from the given architectural context to a new spatial structure, and the architectural recollections of the photographs themselves. In both respects these collaborations show the power of acknowledging what has come before, not passively but through acts of interpretation which are both literate and provocative. Just as Demand's recreations edit aspects of the 'original' and make one see reality in a new way, the installation designs and the Escher Wyss Platz project gently destabilise a prior order, opening it to a wider range of possible meanings, 'a field of references'. The existing situation is charged

by the changes introduced, but not eradicated.

A question posed at the beginning of the discussion persists: how has the collaboration influenced the respective practices of artist and architect? Both parties set out their individual positions and joint working practices eloquently, but enigmatically allow this question to hover over the exhibition. This perhaps suggests that the depth of common ground evident in the work arises not in the simplistic manner of influential cause and effect, but through mutually enriching sensibilities, developed in parallel. The *Hellmühle* project is of course particularly interesting for architects in this respect. The uncomfortably 'Nazified' 1930s fabric of the house (Caruso's term) has, through requirements of a Monuments Committee, been retained and in part reinstated. However, the new work consistently tempers possible interpretations of the 'original'. Where heavy panelling and false beams had to be refurbished, these have been stained white,

muted and abstracted. A new portico constructed using in-situ concrete closely matches the stucco of the existing elevation. Its material ambivalence, oscillating between heaviness and thinness, is surely part of a much broader concern with the representational role of architecture, and architecture's dialogue with its own received forms of representation.

The portico, Caruso notes, is a reference to Demand's own work. Demand's photographic recollections can partly be seen as a comment on the architectural model. The relation with the practice's own large models, uncannily real when captured in photographs and yet just sufficiently abstract to be unsettling, suggests a conceptual dialogue which is not explicitly emphasised here.

However, this is perhaps because it is already inherent in the work, but more importantly because its latency in both creative practices points to more profound concerns: how it is that we perceive things in the first place, how we relate to what has come before us. In part I have in mind the highly literate understanding of architectural traditions evident in the architects' thinking, the awareness of a long history in which, as Caruso noted, internal and external appearances have been separate for all but approximately 20 years of the 20th century. In these conditions architecture creates a variety of territories and its treatment – even ornament – suggests the tone of each setting without necessarily enforcing any particular programme. However, I am also thinking of how this engagement with prior forms of collective order – that which, expressly or not, any creative work at some level 'represents' – has deep implications for our sense of individual consciousness. As Demand has phrased it elsewhere, 'recollection is a new construction every time'.