



TAKE SLAT

Left, Slat House in London, an extension designed and built by Turner Castle architects

Below left, the interior includes a concrete kitchen



buildings to be 'dynamic'. 'Architecture is physical and stable,' he says. 'Buildings don't move... there's a lot of empty rhetoric.' Brick House is designed to provide a psychological form of shelter, and a feeling of enclosure and calm from within was the intention throughout. Now, however, it is over to the clients. 'I'm not that interested in returning to projects,' says Caruso. 'When you hand a building over, it becomes a client's responsibility. Buildings become less and less about us as they're inhabited.'

The Caruso St John approach is to strive for a perfect state of architecture, and then let it evolve. 'Really good buildings are able to accommodate major shifts in the programme,' says Caruso, citing Georgian houses that become small offices, or factories recycled into flats – no longer a question of mere economic expedience, but an increasingly important way to conserve resources. 'What's required is just normal,' says Caruso, describing his work as the 'architecture of common sense', building on a British tradition of pragmatism.

In the past, 'normal' meant doing it yourself, and, before the profession of architecture existed, master builders and surveyors oversaw jobs, often in hands-on roles. Eventually, the position became formalised and detached from the physical aspects of the work. Today, the word 'bespoke' conjures up images of interiors with lashings of cherry wood built-in electronics and fittings that wouldn't look out of place in a super-yacht – a far cry from the everyday act of carefully building a staircase or a sash window. However, a new breed of architect-turned-contractor is bridging this long-standing divide between the professions.

Architects Carl Turner and Cassion Castle met at London's Royal College of Art, and founded their studio, Turner Castle, in 1999. Inspired by the autonomous attitude of their contemporaries in product and furniture design – 'they would just get things made,' says Castle – they built their first commissions themselves. 'We see ourselves as extensions of the design/maker tradition,' Castle says. 'Because we've got a better understanding

wooding cultural institutions around the world into commissioning architecture that wasn't merely new but looked new: bold statements that epitomised modernity. To get ahead, it seemed, you needed an architect, whether you were a progressive mayor, a cultivated curator or simply a businessman with an eye on creating a monument to his own largesse. While there appears to be no let-up in architectural grandiosity – witness Frank Gehry's proposals for Abu Dhabi – modesty and, dare we say it, common sense are all undergoing a revival.

London's Caruso St John Architects has long stood apart from the mainstream. To date, its highest profile UK building is the New Art Gallery in Walsall, a small masterpiece with a brutalist physicality, rigorous in its construction and robust enough to rebuff the criticism that more ephemeral cultural projects have attracted. 'We are very

interested in construction,' says Adam Caruso. The firm's latest private house, in Notting Hill, is a tour de force of subtlety and invention, a structure embedded in a difficult site that makes no bones about its lack of façade. Brick envelops the walls and floors and the ceiling is concrete, creating cave-like spaces with carefully modulated natural light. Such extensive use of brick means the finish has to be good. Caruso notes that, craftwise, 'there's a lot of real skill in Britain'. Nonetheless, 'finding good contractors is constantly on our mind'. What sets apart Brick House is the level of detail. 'The way our projects are described is "neurotically controlling" – it takes a huge amount of energy,' says Caruso.

Caruso describes the practice as 'at odds with what a lot of other people think of as architecture'; it eschews transience and the current fashion for



WILD WOOD

Above, a house in Dalston, east London, by Lynch Architects, which focuses on the importance of the right materials for a given space



TRAIL BLAZING

Above, a fire station designed and built by Alabama's Rural Studio, an Auburn University initiative

of the building process than some architects, we know what is achievable on a building site.' As the duo multi-task, experience has shown that tricky ideas are best left to others. 'We're not really into fussy detailing,' says Castle. With the company growing, both directors are becoming less hands-on, but the focus remains on creating small, simple spaces. 'We are "anti-big gesture",' Castle affirms. Recent projects include Slat House, a concrete and wood box-like addition to a nondescript semi-detached house in London – with the fixtures and furnishings designed and built by the architects. Other triumphs include a house refurbishment for the actor David Walliams and a studio-house for the installation artists Dunne & Raby.

Lynch Architects is another studio with an intellectual obsession with building well, choosing the right materials for the job and addressing unfashionable issues like architectural character and context. 'I'm interested in how certain spatial atmospheres derive from exposed material construction,' says Patrick Lynch, who runs the practice with his wife Claudia. Lynch doubts that craft and finish are really related in the modern world, what with the myriad ways of hiding bad workmanship behind layers of plasterboard and skim. Instead, he believes that the relationship of a particular material to place and atmosphere is far more important. 'I'm less bothered by fancy finishes that carry no meaning,' he says.

Above all, he believes that architects have a great responsibility. 'When we sense the hand of an architect at work, it should comfort us,' he says. 'It should be clear evidence of their care for us.' He cites the Italian architect Aldo Rossi's concern for 'projective spaces', buildings 'whose spaces are powerful enough to accept changes of inhabitation and use'. Lynch's work, as demonstrated in his own east London studio and a new house in Dalston, is about drawing attention to itself without resorting to what he terms 'architectural shock and awe'. 'It's architecture that offers material weight and architectural memories that move us,' he says. 'Architecture for the body, mind and soul.'

Not every country can call on an ultra-skilled workforce, and not all of us have access to high-quality materials, but new artisanal architecture need not be expensive. Perhaps a lesson can be learned from a small American programme that has achieved global recognition. The Rural Studio was established at Auburn University in 1993 by Dennis K Ruth and the late Samuel Mockbee, professors concerned with the need to improve the hands-on experience of their students and also the quality of housing in rural Alabama, one of the poorest parts of America. Now a burgeoning community building scheme, Rural Studio remains wedded to these ideas: students build what they design, and in doing so give back to the community. Even tight budgets haven't hampered the steady flow of striking buildings from the studio – proof that modesty may, after all, be the way forward. *Caruso St John Architects, 1 Coate Street, London SE17, tel: 44.20 7613 3161, www.carusostjohn.com. Turner Castle, 22 Iliffe Yard, Crampton Street, London SE17, tel: 44.20 7703 4716, www.turnercastle.co.uk. Lynch Architects, 147a Hoxton Street, London N1, tel: 44.20 7739 5790, www.lyncharchitects.co.uk. Rural Studio, Auburn, Alabama, tel: 1.334 844 5400, www.ruralstudio.com*