



# **Bossom Lecture – Building for learning**

Manifesto Challenge: Fostering Resilient Communities

Speaker                    **Professor William Alsop**  
Principal of Alsop & Partners and Chairman of the Architecture Foundation

Chaired by:            **Jack Pringle**  
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**Jack Pringle:** A word or two about Alfred Bossom first - he was an extraordinary man. He graduated in architecture at the Royal Academy just up the road here, and in 1906 went off to America where he was involved in building a whole number of projects, but principally developing the skyscraper. He worked there for 20 years and had a very successful career but decided that he didn't want to educate his family in North America (including Sir Clive), and brought the whole family back in the 20's. He did not resume a career in architecture; he became a politician, eventually representing Maidstone for 28 years. He became very involved with the war effort, including looking at modular buildings and estates for Winston Churchill and was chair of this organisation, the Royal Society of Arts, and indeed endowed this lecture series. So he was a man of huge energy and industry, not unlike Will Alsop in that respect.

Will was born in Northampton, educated at the Architectural Association in the late sixties and early seventies, in its hey day, with the likes of Zaha Hadid, Peter Cook, Daniel Libeskind – an extraordinary generation. Graduated in 1973, worked with Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew and Cedric Price, that great lateral think that we all miss, who recently died, and I suspect Cedric influenced Will enormously. He taught at the AA, he has also taught sculpture at Central St Martins, he is a professor at the Technical University in Vienna and has other visiting professorships in Hanover, Bremen, Melbourne, New Orleans, San Francisco, Indiana. He has 22 architectural awards to his name, including the prestigious Stirling Prize. He has five competition wins. He has been the subject of 26 exhibitions - featured in numerous books. He has offices in London, he is represented in Toronto, Singapore, Shanghai – he used to have an office in Russia and has an office, and I think a home in Sherringham, where he enjoys painting under the big Norfolk skies. He has practiced as Alsop and Lyall with John Lyall, as Alsop and Stormer with Jan Stormer and now as Alsop Architects. Will Alsop has a lot of energy.

I prefer the version of English history which has it that our national character was formed, in some part, in the first Elizabethan Age, before that, at best, we were, according to this version, wool barons, but after Elizabeth we became much more outward-looking, pioneering, buccaneering even and the thought that Sir Francis Drake was as much a pirate as a naval officer aka privateer, doesn't worry me at all and I have to say I see Will Alsop in this great tradition of English buccaneers. He will go anywhere that there is an opportunity to design an interesting building and he will take us, with his work, into new areas of architecture that we haven't been to before. In that respect I think it's appropriate that he too is an Elizabethan. Not for Will the quiet polishing of the modernist style, he's looking for new ground. Will can be very amusing.

I had the good fortune to work with Will on two projects recently. Week after week he would present new designs, painstakingly taking on board the difficulties of a very challenging site and also the comments of a huge raft of advisors and developing his own design work in a torrent of creativity.

One week the building would be clad in rusting steel. Another week the building would be clad in patinated copper. The following week the building would be a stealth bomber in matt slate and finally an extraordinary object was presented. The client said, 'What on earth's this?' and Will fixed him with a stare and said, 'Well some people think I do boxes, other people think I do blobs. You're lucky you've got a box with a blob on it.'

There was a moment's silence and the holy trinity of the project manager, the quantity surveyor and the builder had a sharp intake of breath and the client said, 'Great, what's it made of?' Another silence, 'Leather.' The holy trinity took another intake of breath. 'Brilliant,' said the client, 'Can it be black leather with studs on it?' 'Don't be ridiculous,' said Will. 'This isn't punk rock.' So I think that showed in part

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how well Will had judged his client, but actually vice versa how well the client had judged him. But Will can also be profound and very serious.

I think that the Peckham Library is his masterpiece and it does an extraordinarily good job in providing underprivileged kids with a magnet to come and use that library, and a covered piazza in the neighbourhood. I also think that his analysis of how our northern towns work, as a disaggregated great city where people use different bits of it, is an extraordinary piece of insight. I think that was brilliant. Will never gives out lecture notes so I don't know exactly what he is going to speak on, except that it's entitled 'Building for Learning' and with his background I think Will is very well qualified for that. Ladies and Gentlemen – Will Alsop.

**Will Alsop:** Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to be here tonight. I did have to ask somebody from the RSA, 'why me?' and I'm not sure that I got an answer. Anyway here I am. I know it's to do with Buildings and Learning and I've done one or two but thought about it a lot more and one of the things that we will be looking at tonight is the work we did for Schools for the Future which was a Government initiative set to, I can't remember how many architects but perhaps 12 or 15, to look at different schools from inner city to edge of city to slightly more rural and smaller towns and at different levels of education to see how they might evolve. I can't help but feel a more apt title, as we were controlled very much by Civil Servants, would have been or should have been Schools for the Very Near Future. Because certainly you can build what we proposed and we worked very closely with some school children and school teachers and the headmaster, who were based in Manchester, for a site which was actually in London, but nonetheless, we all know that we are at the beginning but it's slightly more than the beginning, of actually building a whole range of new schools and educational facilities throughout the country. Of course, one reason we had to build so many is that we haven't spent any money on schools for years and

years and if you have a very large estate and I can't remember how many hundreds of millions of pounds it's worth and you don't spend it, there is a sum of money, there is a formula as to how much you have to spend every year in order to maintain that estate. Well, clearly, as a country, we've not spent that money and therefore they have gone into disrepair but that's not the only reason. The other reason, of course, is there has been huge mobility, huge growth of people, influx of people into the South and different ways in which people live. I'm often astounded in my hometown of Northampton to find that everyone lives there but no-one works there and they make an option that their choice is to live there because it's near to everywhere. You could reverse that and say it's actually quite a long way from everywhere too, but nonetheless it is in the heart of the country and those children, their children, are educated in or around Northampton. So Northampton has grown, certainly more than doubled in size since I left and has educational needs.

A good question which is being asked, is: 'what is a school? What is this opportunity?' and that was the whole point of Schools for the Future, which we will look at a little bit later.

I think that, while I am on this – it's a bit of a moan, we'll brighten up a bit later but while we're on that, I had lunch with a young architect, youngish architect the other day, who I have a huge admiration for, I like his work a lot and the reason I like his work is that it actually surprises me. I never know quite what he's going to do and I think there should be that quality there within, not just educational buildings but others, but he was complaining that he had tried to get on the list – the dreaded list of framework agreements or whatever, to design schools and when he questioned why he hadn't been successful in a number of cases they said, 'well we like the work, you clearly have sufficient experience to carry out a project, up to a certain size. That was fine, he was happy with that he's not looking to build the whole world, and it all sounded rather

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marvellous and he said 'but why am I not on the list?' 'Because you have never built a school.'

Now this is not the first time, or indeed the only area of endeavour that this situation occurs and certainly because of lack of track record when I was younger that's why I had to go to Germany. They never really asked me what I had done before. Isn't that refreshing. They were interested in the ideas. They wanted to know that you had the ability to deliver but they never asked you what you had done. So where on earth do the younger architects, or indeed some slightly older architects get the experience to actually contribute to this particular situation that we're in at the moment of having to build enough schools.

It's worse than that. I also hear that there are insufficient designers and architects to deliver the programme of the new schools and then, of course, you come to the next level which is the PFI.

Now I can't really see, I've got nothing against contractors and builders but I can't see how it transpired that PFI merchants are essentially builders who have given up building. They still suffer from 'builder's bum'. They understand the building bit and fail, I'm sure they don't actually, but I'm being a bit insulting here. They do understand the financial bit and the whole programme that they have to deliver and everything else but on the other hand when it comes to the building, it doesn't matter whether it's a school or a hospital, they're looking for cheap - and quality tends to go to one side. At the same time we have some institutions in this country who are there to protect quality, I'm thinking of organisations like CABE. They might protect quality to a certain extent and they do complain and there are huge complaints about Skanska's bid for the London Hospital for example, not too far from here, quite rightly, and they succeeded in getting some considerable improvements to that and the project is going ahead, which is fine, but nonetheless, why was it bad in the first place?

Of course, the whole PFI system, and this is also true for schools, means they are bidding against a number of other people and it's a very expensive process for the poor old PFI merchant and particularly when it comes to schools but, of course, we all know, in this room, that to design well is not a singular activity. It's a team effort and a part of that team, particularly when it comes to learning environments, are the people that use the learning environment – the parents, the governors, the teachers most importantly. Of course, at the end of the day, if you include all those people, they don't have time to talk to all these different people bidding because they are busy people and they suffer from 'consultation fatigue'.

It would be much better to appoint a good team who can deliver a building, or a series of buildings backed up by a good architect, designer, design team, and say, 'just do it, just do it.' And the difference in price – the sort of money that one assumes is being saved is insignificant compared to the damage that is being done to our young people and I think it's a sin and I think it's horrible, but nonetheless, we are free aren't we? We are free. I've done some buildings for the very young and some tertiary education. I have not succeeded to actually break into secondary education at all, because I'm not on the list. This is learning and that's not learning.

I'm going to start in at an oblique angle here. This actual picture is my own personal office, which has a bar in it – that is the bar. That's computers and you can project and you can draw and there are three or four particular assistants that work with me in this space and the thing that I like about it, and this has a lot to do with learning, is that everyone can see what everyone else is doing and I think that that's a very important quality and we'll return to that quality later on when we are looking at a couple of further examples. It's that visual connection, people learn from each other in spite of their teachers and I think that that's absolutely vital.

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So that's why I don't lock myself away in a room. I am a little bit separate from the main studio, which I find is necessary, particularly when you are at the beginnings of a project, when you are trying to imagine, but I also need a space where you can invite, sometimes the client or in this particular subject tonight, some of the pupils, around, to also work in this space and to paint and to draw and to use the computers. The manner in which one consults is very important. It is nothing to do with clipboards or asking questions or canvassing opinions because they are, in my experience, worthless.

But let me broaden the scope of this because I think, particularly in London or it could be Manchester, or some of our larger cities – Birmingham – that the possibility exists not to consider a school as a site, in itself – as a singular site with a fence round it. You know that schools, in one sense, are indeed prisons and its there, you could argue, to keep people in. We all know that the fences there are to keep a certain type of person out, but if a prison was a street—I'm sorry if a school was a street, that could be quite interesting. Perhaps it could be the Holloway Road (Will Alsop shows a video).

They point is if you, and fortunately we're all more interested in public space than we were, start to clear up public space to make it safer, to make it accessible, to have it well-lit, to have places which are outside where you could actually interact with the internet and other systems and networks, you can begin to consider routes as a part of school so that as a pupil you would actually use the public space to go from location to location. There is the obvious possibility of the interaction between existing businesses within those various neighbourhoods and areas and the school and building up those linkages. It seems to me there is another model for a school that could be achieved.

It has no fence, but of course, there are, indeed, many people on the street and that's where the safety feature is sorted out. Of course, if you have two routes and the

crossing point and each route is notionally a school, you have an area of high energy.

So when you come down to south of the river there are some very rich, either emerging, or partially emerging areas south of the river. We all know that Elephant and Castle is a serious issue, hopefully soon to be addressed. We know that Peckham, and I'll talk about Peckham a bit later, is there, but you take that route say, from Vauxhall through Oval, just a little bit of cricket there I believe, Camberwell, there's the School of Art, there's the South London Gallery, in fact there are several buildings there, a short walk to Peckham Library and other things to come there and then on to New Cross – New Cross Gate and then on to Goldsmiths and again other activities, there's the Bubble Theatre which is going to be built in Peckham and so one can begin to extend this notion, and that's just on the creative facilities – you could tell the same story for businesses and all sorts of other activities along that route. But they are not solving it; by and large they are invisible.

So South London could become linked in an extremely interesting way around the theme of learning and education and generally speaking it is not, but the bones, the skeleton of that, is there. Going straight in to New Cross Gate and going nearer to Goldsmiths, but in order to win this job which was by competition through an interview and I might say that I think, as one of five or six architects that were considered for the project for the new Arts building on the campus, that I only told a story where all the students were featured as dogs, except there is one cat, who was the really clever student of course, about how they might occupy the campus. I didn't know what building we were going to do and there was certainly no real design. But very quickly it was important to develop an idea of a master plan because the campus of Goldsmiths is actually rather interesting. There is the old Naval College, which is here. There is a marvellous green space here and some parts of this are actually quite ordinary streets with terraced houses that you could find in most

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places in South London – two up two down, that sort of thing. The Old Town Hall, which is a part of the college now, a very fine building indeed, a rotten row of shops along here, some prefabs along here and the site generally for the Arts building here.

So our first approach was to begin to look at what you had to do to the master plan, because our building will certainly not be the last building that they produce at Goldsmiths on the campus and what is the view of this and you can liken this to the campus of the London Hospital.

What I like about the London Hospital, you suddenly find yourself in the hospital environment without knowing you've crossed any threshold and maybe that's a real opportunity and, in part, it is already happening on at Goldsmiths insofar as you could be wandering around this place and suddenly you'll find that you are in the college because you think that you are actually in a fairly domestic environment and I think that's something that the college can, and I think will, build upon in the future and to open up some of this access, to change the alleys because this can be perceived, it's not, but it could be perceived as being quite dangerous, this field at the back, particularly after dark.

So hang back and focuss in on this corner, this is a phased project; this is an L-shaped building and the other thing, which I think is very important, is to actually create a street off New Cross Road coming in to bring the general public as far as this. This has not happened as yet but is certainly in their minds for phase two and that these yellow things are elements related to the fine arts and design, and you must remember that the campus as a whole is dealing with many different subjects, much of which is teaching of course, and not just the arts, but there is the inevitably that people come here and enrol at the college and they live within the area and it's not a particularly beautiful area but after three years or sometimes four years of studying here they make friends, they get used to the area.

I remember, my wife and I, when I was a student, we lived in Croydon. Now I don't

recommend living in Croydon at all but we lived there because the rent was four and sixpence a week, in fact it was so absurdly cheap that we sort of never got round to paying it really. It didn't ever seem worth it until it built up for a bit, but it was a very ugly street and it was next to a factory but after six months you begin to observe details of your environment and suddenly it becomes beautiful.

That's one of the greatest threats to a lot of the work that we do, not only in education but also in regeneration and planning and architecture itself. Our job is to try and make life better in whatever way we can.

So these students, they get used to being in this area and they think it's rather beautiful, and I'm sure they have a beautiful experience and then they leave and clearly there is this sort of period, this buffer period between having obtained your degree in whatever, and starting out in the world, some people have the bones of business – so could there be a street the elements of showroom and workshop – things that are actually of interest to the general public to actually bring them forward, at least this far, and then it would become – and then look and see if we can bring them all the way through – possibly somebody else's task and opening up in this direction as well and I think that's very important because you're doing two things;- a) you're bringing the public in and b) you're actually creating facilities and the college is well aware of this, to actually try and persuade some of those students to stay, by giving them relatively cheap facilities, a step on in terms of establishing a business of one sort or another, and more importantly, keeping them in the area and keeping them in the area is the key element, particularly in the environment around here.

So we started to work in looking at Phase two with these things underneath it and it's a covered street and back to Phase one.

Now Phase one, I think we learned last week when I went to the opening or in

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the dedication of this building to Ben Pimlott who was in effect our client, but sadly died while we were building the building and this is now called the Ben Pimlott building. I learned that it's actually the most inexpensive tertiary education building to have been built on a square metre basis. I wish they had told me that, I'd have spent a bit more but I didn't know that until last week. There are one or two things, which I think are important. A simple building facing north here – one can afford to use all glass. It's also important to have this terrace because one of the things I had learnt from doing Peckham Library and I didn't know it at the time of doing Peckham Library, that by placing the main body of the library in effect on the fourth floor, which is in fact relatively high for Peckham, is that in there the members of the public could actually see St Paul's Cathedral and it didn't look very far away and I thought that in terms of regeneration we probably did more for the perception of the people that live in Peckham, as they realised they weren't lost in the midst of south London boroughs, they were actually a part of central London because you could see St Paul's Cathedral and you could pinpoint where you were and actually it looks closer than it is, and you think that you could walk there. I think those perceptions of where you live are very important.

Now with regard to Goldsmiths and particularly in the fine arts department, which has an extraordinary reputation globally - it attracts a lot of overseas students, who would like to study here. Some do their due diligence. They come, or came to visit Goldsmiths and they see this is not London. This is their perception. They are somewhere again lost in the midst of somewhere which is not London and, of course, like all good students, like we all know, there are actually 61,000 students that actually go to Manchester University – it's a terrible university of course - but they go because there are lots of clubs and bars. I mean you choose the place as well as the course and that's human instinct to a certain extent. And they would arrive here and because of that they would then go off to another country to study or indeed another

college. And that's why with this large terrace, a lot of people thought that, because they know that I like to smoke, that this was a smoking terrace and that this was the smoke. But that's not true. This clearly gives you a sense of enclosure when you are on the terrace, but from this terrace - I'd urge any of you that haven't been there to go, it's the most extraordinary view because you are somewhat higher than Peckham here. You're already on a hill and you can see right across from the Houses of Parliament, right through the City and then down across to the East to the Dome and beyond, as indeed you can see that from this level up, in the studios.

We made the studios and it's a fairly rough, tough building and I think that in order to carry out these types of activities it should be rough and tough it shouldn't be an over-designed building because then students and others alike find that inhibiting. It should feel that it's capable of being damaged without destroying the whole architectural intent. In fact sometimes I think that architectural intent is responsible for some of our worst buildings, but that's another story. You can see it's a highly contextual building. It fits in well with its neighbours.

The other thing that interested me - this is the south side, very few windows on the south side, deliberately. There's no air-conditioning in this building – absolutely naturally done. We don't like air-conditioning, but thought by having this heavy relief and these elements here, that they cast shadows and of course all those thoughts really come from the time that I spend with my great friend Bruce McClean, very often in Spain - not exclusively in Spain, just painting and drawing and doing other projects apropos of nothing. The last two years we have just dealt with shadows, so it's natural that those things tend to find their way into the building.

Moving on and I think this is stretching the educational point to a degree, but at Queen Mary's which was just recently finished, which is on the London Hospital campus, these are research laboratories

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connected to Queen Mary's College. It's a highly complex building in terms of its servicing and the conditioning of the environment inside and one has to pay attention to that, but of course on all those things you can learn what's involved and you have other consultants to assist you, who obviously knew and know a lot more than I did at the beginning of this project. But I spent a considerable amount of time with the various research people, the directors of research, some scientists and clinicians, in talking about the sort of building that they wanted, getting them to draw and to paint. I have to say that they were the most difficult group of people that I have ever met in my life, very nice, but difficult when it came to try and open up their imagination into the possibilities of what this building could be and of course that put me in mind of the PFI hospitals. You know that if, there is precious little time for any architectural team, or indeed anyone else for that matter, to spend any time with the clinicians in those hospitals. They have no time and if you did have sufficient time, you needed a lot of time. But in this particular instance we did have a lot of time. We had already won the job. We were not in competition and therefore they knew they weren't wasting their time by spending time with me, and my team and that was a very important thing. And of course you had to have these workshops at 6, 6.30pm in the evening. I found that they are much better if you ply them with red wine, it relaxes them a bit, and me, but they kept drawing, or describing, the building that they were currently occupying all the time. So basically cellular space, there were laboratories and you retreat into essentially your own office, depending on your status, or a shared office, but essentially a box, to write up what you found from your various experiments.

It seemed to me that that was not good enough and that actually wasted an opportunity, but you can't tell them that and you struggle on and I did this many times until they all managed to draw, more or less simultaneously, and then agree that what they wanted to do, they felt they could work in a garden and they started drawing gardens and I

thought that that was a marvellous thing that one could work with.

So the notion of a greenhouse with plants, albeit artificial, in it, is okay. So that here on the right hand side is the main body of the Research laboratories. There are some very specialist areas, which do have to be separated from this. But from this space, and it comes back to the point that I made at the very beginning, to be able to see what other people are doing is part of the process. To be able to have places where you can sit down comfortably and have that possibly of talking to somebody or just find the chance remark, which might trigger something in your mind, is important, or just to have a rest.

I think an important part of all learning environments, or indeed any working environments, are places to do nothing. Even in our public spaces, have you noticed, it's as though we are almost obliged to do something all the time. Now Winnie the Pooh would never have had that, 'sometimes I sits and thinks and sometimes I just sits.' I think that's quite important, really.

But floating above this space, it's all very high, are a number of objects – the orange object on the left, which isn't open yet, but it will be in October, is a visitors' facility for children, or indeed any other interested groups, to go and find out what is happening in these laboratories and they are doing some very interesting things and some very valuable work. This ranges from their contributions to cancer research, to stem cell research and all the rest of it and also dealing with some particular issues in the local environment there, of which, there is a higher incidence of tuberculosis in East London than any other place in the whole country.

So it's a very complex place and it's dealing in part with the possibilities of huge delight and it's also dealing with some elements of doom and gloom and I thought that the place that they worked in, and I took their drawings of the notion of the garden, that it should be a joyous place.

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So that, here, the comfortable sofas are not there - in this sort of red glove, there is an external space. On the other side of that external space is a café, which is bright orange, so again they can actually get virtually out of the building altogether, in order to escape what they are doing and these various pods house different things. That particular one; there are two small seminar rooms and the stretchy black one at the end, that you can see, is a room for doing, on a slightly smaller scale, what we are doing right now, and hanging over the red glove is this halo of light so that they all feel virtuous.

But you will notice on the right and left, these are all the write-up spaces, and they are all open and from where you're writing up you can see where the research is being done.

So there is much visual contact between the various activities going on in this building as we could possibly achieve. In fact, some of the more specialised research laboratories go back under the courtyard and you can just see the light escaping from this particular roof light.

We are working really on one area, which is the FE College, which is the poor relation of all education. They have the lowest budgets and I think they do some of the most important jobs and this is the Principal of Norwich City College, together with some of his colleagues, actually in my studio. I think that's a bottle of whisky in the foreground and I put the map of the whole campus out and I just asked them one question as to where the heart of the campus was and you can see the chap on the left with the tie is looking decidedly bored ... but here he is feeling much better.

I didn't have to say anything I just took notes because they had never asked themselves that question and they went through a large debate without actually coming to a conclusion. The only conclusion you could come to is that there was no heart to the campus and if they couldn't decide what it was, as they all worked there and for some time, then how would any student know where to go and where to gather? So we said, 'well we'll

need to do a heart,' and this is the heart, this will be the new entrance to the building.

What I like about the FE College, there's a huge range of ages there, doing a huge range of things, from bricklaying, car repairs, hairdressing to PhD's in Philosophy - a strange mix. And you think well, could you create a heart, of a new building which is actually all those different things, and there's many more things that they do which all contribute to the entrance to the building. So could you indeed have the building, one part of the building could have all the different wonderful sort of things made of the brickwork by the current incumbents there, but it is very special brickwork but no-one else will ask them to do that because no-one else can afford it, but we could afford it if they'd do it.

You have the second-hand car showroom syndrome. They have a fashion department so you have a catwalk. Members of the public could come in and have their hair cut at the hairdressers. There is fine dining so there can be a restaurant and a café in here and indeed a bar. So you mix all of these things together and of course what you end up with is a city and it's what our cities should be and going back to the AI street, the street could be exactly what I'm trying to do with this space.

That's the campus as it is at the moment and I have to say and this is a short walk of downtown Norwich and the 'pinky' building here is the original building, and it's the only good building on the whole campus. Everything else has been built badly, shoddily, cheaply and it feels that way. There are one or two reasonably pleasant spaces, but that's all and clearly one can only come to the recommendation that actually it all needs to go, except the original building which is a 1950's building, which is built rather well. It still feels good and has minimal problems in terms of servicing, and the cost of running that particular part of the building is much lower than the other, particularly the building that goes across the three fingers, which costs, out of the measly budget that they

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have, a fortune to heat in winter and is unusable in the summer. So it's a programme of works. You can't do everything at once. But the budgets for building in the FE sector are pathetic.

People love to go to university if they can – to Oxford or Cambridge – it's all rather beautiful, beautiful spaces, good quality buildings, there is an historic dimension, I must admit, which has its own certain appeal. But why would you ever want to go to university in Leicester? You wouldn't really; you wouldn't choose to go there, would you? Well maybe you would. I've got nothing against Leicester, I have to say, that was just a random sample, but we could all name a number of universities and these, remember, they have larger budgets than FE Colleges, which you wouldn't want to go to.

You could not imagine, UEA in Norwich is actually a rather good campus. It's a pity it happens to be on the edge of town but that is what they did and that was the decision taken a long time ago, but there is quality space and there is quality landscaping and the quality buildings are there, done, interestingly enough, by some rather good architects but a lot of building on our university campuses is done by builders, hardly an architect or a designer in site.

Plainly that is wrong and they are badly built, they don't last long and you have to rebuild it again in some period of time. We need flexibility in buildings. So in the first phase here, is a Digital Media Centre and then the new beam of learning because obviously there's a decanting process and then this sort of green and red area at the back which becomes the first part here of a decent piece of landscape because they don't have that on the campus at all but when they have their graduation ceremonies there is nowhere to go except the car park at the moment and of course there will be new courses in horticulture, combining their joint forces with the John Innes Centre at the UEA and therefore a series of gardens done by the students progressing along the Ipswich Road frontage. It'll be rather good.

And there goes in the new heart, the new entrance for everyone which incidentally - I won't bore you with the architecture but - is designed to be an optical illusion, you can't quite believe your eyes as to what you are entering. The beam can extend and then the explanation that they would like to have a hotel which they could run and other facilities and eventually you knock all the rest down, and this is way into the future, to have a library, some new halls of residence and some other facilities and completing the, sort of garden effect. We can afford to do the Digital Media Centre, a bit of the beam and the new heart but it will be difficult and challenging.

But schools, of course, and colleges can take many different forms. This is a slightly earlier version of what is now known as the Public and was known as C-plex in West Bromwich and it's a building, it's a community arts centre and I think it's one of the most interesting projects I've ever worked on because there's a group of people who have been working as artists in the community for rather a long period of time, not just West Bromwich but the region, but they were based in West Bromwich and, of course I don't know if you have ever been to West Bromwich, anyone been to West Bromwich? It's horrible isn't it? Oh, you come from West Bromwich, I see, I do beg your pardon, sir.

But the first time I went there, because of this project, I did say to the Chief Executive, he said 'what do you think of West Bromwich?' and I said, 'I think it's awful,' and the next time I saw him he said 'I've been thinking about that word – awful, it means full of awe, doesn't it?' I said 'no,' but there were two schools of thought and they still exist here and at one level. In the background here, that horrible turret thing, nothing to do with me, I have to say, is the regeneration of the town, and it does need regenerating, as many of these centres do - all the 'W's' – Walsall, Wednesbury, Wolverhampton – well Wolverhampton's doing quite well – West Bromwich, they are all connected and they all begin with 'W',

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which fascinates me, but that tower is the regeneration of these places by Tesco's. I think that is not regeneration because that certainly kills the existing High Street. The centre of town as it exists at the moment is celebrated by a zebra crossing, where people are frequently killed and this is a sort of point to me that there is nowhere in the town, if West Bromwich Albion ever did win the cup, for the locals to go and celebrate. But I don't think we need to worry about that particular lack of provision at the moment.

So to make a building, and originally they wanted to put the building on the edge of the downtown and I thought that was wrong, if this was going to be one of the main generators for the town you should put it in the very middle of the town and after a bit of investigation I realised they were going to take the bus station, which is, or used to be on this site, and build a new one a little bit further away. I don't think we should build bus stations ever but that's another story as well. Buses are supposed to move, not stop.

And therefore, much to my amazement, we were able to recommend and succeed in negotiating a site which could take the new building and create a public square and that combination of a building full of artists who are doing things, which I think are very interesting, and working with the local community, there alongside the public square to programme that square, to make it active, is a wonderful opportunity and the square I think is very important.

The relationship, the lower levels of this building are like the square, there is no difference in ground level between the square and the ground floor of the building so that you don't have to go up or down a step. I thought that when the Whitechapel Gallery was refurbished some years ago and they put a step in (not a very big one) it actually changed your idea of entering the gallery. I always liked the Whitechapel because you just seemed to fall in it without hardly thinking about it and I think that's an important quality and, of course, on a building of this nature, the whole side could open up so that in good weather the

ground floor is a part of the square, indeed, and of course, in bad weather it takes on a different role but it's still part of the square but you don't get rained on.

So there should be furniture in the square, in concrete. There should be, there could be interactions of really public art spaces outside where they can comment on what's going on inside the building.

I think that's interesting to create this notion of dialogue between programmed space and incidental activity, but of course the real magic is with Sylvia King and her team who run the Public, in order to create the ambience in the town centre where people feel uninhibited in doing those sorts of things and she certainly has that ability.

We started the building in many ways, designed it many times. The Arts Council changed the budget a number of times but so what? Often very late, but at the same time it was always enjoyable, the whole thing and it was enjoyable because we always worked with the young, the old, the business people, the policemen, the politicians, everyone, in order to find out what this building was.

It's easy to say Community Arts Centre, isn't it? What is a Community Arts Centre? What I like about it is that I don't know what it is, the Arts Council doesn't know what it is and neither does the client, but it's a building in which you can do many things and certainly I observed things in the very early days of this project before I knew anything that we were going to do at all. There were people coming in and talking to the artists, that quite frankly should have been talking to doctors. They find it easier to an artist than to a doctor. Well now you have to pay attention to that and that's a very important a notion of access. We had similar problems at Peckham Library that's why we created the one-stop shop to go in with your problems or indeed to pay taxes. You don't want to go through that imposing entrance at the Town Hall, Southwark Town Hall, but you would just pop into the library because it's a natural thing to do and I think the Social Services side of this Community Arts Centre

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is vital because if, through the provision and through training and a whole range of activities that will go on in this building, some by exceptionally well-known international artists and some by complete unknowns and some by people who don't even know they are artists.

A good level of staff, a good level of fun, we should never underestimate the fun and actually it's a sort of building where a lot of it is in the air, the ground floor is all public but enclosed, you can get a drink, you can have a cup of coffee, you can do whatever and you can go to a lecture or a dance or a disco or whatever within this space and then you embark on a circular tour.

It's a bit like the Guggenheim by Frank Lloyd Wright gone mad. The idea is that you can go up very quickly, as a visitor, to the top of the building where you can start to then work your way down a ramp and stop off at a number of interesting things, which will be programmed in a variety of ways.

The biggest problem with this, for me, was to get the client, or indeed anyone else, not just the client, to stop calling it a gallery, because a gallery immediately informs you of how to behave and about the people that are running it. It is not a gallery and also, if members of the public think it's a gallery and go there expecting to see a gallery – they will be disappointed. There is no need to disappoint people. We want people to come to this building because they don't know what they are going to find in it.

And this is slightly out of date but it's more or less what is well under construction today. There you can see the ramp and the ramp itself is a wonderful opportunity and Ben Kelly, the designer, has designed an interactive handrail, which I will have to go soon to have a look at. There are enclosures and the ramp; it's a very gentle ramp (one in twenty-two and a half) so that to actually walk up it, which is not really the intention, but you can if you wish, is no problem at all. Here it is today with the cladding going on, on one side, here's the other side. You will be able to eat very well here, which is always important. All good projects are very good for the stomach.

I like the local people there because before the windows went in, and it's a very inexpensive building this, all the locals were saying, 'oh, I think they're building another B & Q, that's good.' And then certain parts of the building break out of that B & Q container.

I think I have said everything I need to say about the library but on the other hand, again in view of the notion of the learning environment as route, then libraries certainly can contribute to that and could play a very important role and there are many, so why isn't the Library a part of the school, I'm sure it is affiliated to schools.

What I do notice in this Library that around about 4 or 4.30pm, when pupils come out of school, all the girls go into the library to do their homework, very diligent the girls. That does mean that all the boys go in to look at the girls. They might just become interested in a book, they might not, they might meet a very beautiful young lady and fall in love. It doesn't really matter.

The point is that you have a space and the point is really here you can create a space, which was a very loose brief from the Borough of Southwark that they should be able to facilitate 12,000 readers a month after five years, it's actually settled down at 36,000 readers a month. The building will become worn out but for all the right reasons and why do people go there, because they are certainly not all reading books? There's some training and some other activities going on. They go there because they like it. The power simply of beautiful space, in this case quite relaxing (not always) with some views, is very evocative, and you can't even get a cup of coffee in this library, let alone a glass of wine. I think that was an omission, really.

But that's what architects do that's why we charge more than builders and need to get paid more because we create that sort of value, I think, and that value can be added for the commercial sector, if it's housing or offices or whatever, or indeed public sectors and I think schools, in particular, and the learning environments. That's what we do.

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This is another library I've been looking at for somewhere else. It's a much larger library. The whole thing is actually a spiral ramp and you can again start at the top but you start off in this particular one with a meal, because you will need all the strength you can get to get down to the bottom and then these pods which are stuck on the outside, also giving shade to the façade, these are the reading rooms so you can actually disappear and spend some time to study or whatever, and again lifted off the ground to allow the public space to run through and to have an extraordinary view up the middle whether the library's closed or not.

I was going to go on to talk about the Orangery and the role of other types of Arts organisations. This is the Orangery in Wakefield, who require more space and their interaction again with the people of Wakefield and indeed right across South Yorkshire is quite interesting, I think. Again it's a project to look at how to extend their Grade I listed building – it started off with a weekend with probably about 25 or 30 people, all going daft and making models and hanging things in the trees, and everything else as an excuse to talk about what they need, because the client didn't know what they needed at all. They just knew they needed more space. Space, some of which was quite particular, learning spaces, lecture spaces, workshop spaces, dirty spaces etc. etc. and anyway we evolved a tree house and I won't bore you with that because that's something else.

This is the Culture Lab at Newcastle University, not the most, no, a marvellous city but I don't want to talk about this because I'd like to stop in about five minutes.

We'll move on to talk about this because this is a nursery school in Stonebridge in West London, it's not too far from Wembley and it's built on a problem estate, which has been certainly managed and is being transformed, as we speak. There is a significant amount of new housing and there is still some of the old housing, which is going to come down and it's been quite a long programme and there are other facilities that

are required, amongst which was, and is, a nursery school. I'm sorry that it's still sort of vaguely under construction here, but it is open, I assure you.

And one of the features about working on this is that every so often the budget would go down. Nothing to do with design or anything like that it was just that there was less money available to build the nursery school and the client rang me up one day and said, 'look we've got to cut the budget again. I think we'll have to cancel the project because you really can't, I don't think you can build it,' and, of course, the building that she has in mind was what I call, a pumped-up bungalow - the sort of thing that requires no young child's imagination whatsoever. It's just like the house that they left but a bit more chaotic, or not.

So I said, 'no, I don't think that you should do that. I think that we should look at the budget that you have, as long as it doesn't go down any further, and see what we could do.'

So by taking a standard steel portal frame, industrial roof, spending a little bit of money on colouring the underside of the roof, enclosing the whole thing in a stainless steel chainmail and then putting Plexiglas panels in the side to give some interest, and basically what you've got then is a secure umbrella and it fills the site, which I think is an important thing.

Then, of course, you can begin to address how the poor souls might feel a bit cold, so you then look at absolutely standard, cheap, prefabricated bits, like sea containers, I'm not sure what comes next. I'll just go on to this bit of the story. By having these Plexiglas panels as the sun circumnavigates this building you get coloured, cast shadows on the spaces in between the rooms and things inside. I think that was a very nice way of doing it. Again it goes back to Spain and the activities of Spain, which are apropos nothing at all.

So you have the pink shed - we all love a wooden hut, don't we? There's no

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one in this audience who hasn't dreamt of having a hut and you've probably all got one. It might not be pink, of course. The sea containers on the left and then the spaces in between which, in fact are outside, protected from the weather and in talking to the lady in charge of this nursery, a very nice lady - terrific, a very dedicated person. She was telling me the other day that in the winter period the number of bugs that the children suffered from, and colds, went down by 60 percent because they weren't contained within one environment the whole time. They had to go from in to out and I didn't know that, I wish I had, in fact I should have said, 'of course, I knew that would be the case and therefore applied that,' but I didn't know that. But that's how we learn by doing these things.

And there's the off-the-peg yurt, which is for story-telling and that's the only place where we spent a little bit of money, not on the yurt itself, which is inexpensive, but to have under-floor heating so that the children could actually curl up on the floor and be warm.

Of course, I do like a hut. This is a hut I built earlier in Cardiff Bay. I always like to make reference to that. The pink hut, I think is alright with the yurt and then Janet Turner did the lighting scheme for it which I think works very well, so that it can work as long as the children want to be there. And, of course, again the lady in charge is saying, 'actually, they don't want to go home at the end of the day,' and also you get a gathering of parents in here, who also like to be in this space and they chat and they gather because they enjoy it. Again it comes back to a very simple thing, which is often overlooked in what we do - it's because it's an unusual space, it's like it lies outside their experience. They want to be there and I suppose there aren't that many things we learn but what I have learned, particularly working at the larger scale with people in Barnsley, like all of it, and Bradford, and some other places is, that if you work with the people; a) they're made in a very interesting way; b) they want their town, city, street, public facilities to be unlike anywhere else because the people of Barnsley want to make the people of

Doncaster jealous. It's as simple as that. But they want to be proud of it.

There is a return, I feel at the very grass roots level to the notion of civic pride, because once we've been through that loop of not moving to where the work is, but deciding where you live, and that's your root into the earth and then you'll travel wherever the work is, is then you've decided on the place, not your employer, but you have decided where you want to live. Presumably there are some pragmatic issues which help you decide of course, on the other hand, the quality of life in that space and the public space and also the facilities are important, not least of which is the learning environment and I think I will stop there. Thank you.

**Jack Pringle:** Wonderful, Will, wonderful. We're going to throw questions open to the floor in just one second but while you're gathering your thoughts I'd just like to ask one question that Will might answer, quite quickly I think.

At the beginning of your talk you mentioned some things which struck a real resonance with me, and one is the over-value of specialisation and people finding it difficult to get into work that they don't have experience in and the other is the importance of working with clients and the sort of barriers that particularly PFI is throwing up to working with clients and we're about to spend about £20bn rebuilding a public estate on PFI, so it seems to be a pretty important question at this time.

I just wonder if you'd like to say just what sort of value you'd get out of that direct access to clients and if there is a barrier to it how much you think the projects necessarily lose.

**Will Alsop:** It's the other way round - I think the projects gain. The most dangerous thing, I think for architecture, in the purest sense of the word, is having an idea about architecture.

You know, I think, that for the first time in possibly in architectural history, there is no predominant style or method. We are

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enjoying a whole range of materials, often with some new ones, builders charge you extra even though it's cheaper, but that's another story, and we have IT and there are all sorts of things - ranges of things that we can look at and you will do it one way and I will do it another and this gentleman will do it in another way. I might hate the way he does it but as long as he does it with intent, I think that's fine because the three of us together, cheek by jowl, actually create a quality to the environment, which I think is very important. The people who don't have an idea or apply rules and again you see it in hospitals, the PFI, because they come from a building background, because it's very cost-sensitive, and there's nothing wrong with that. I mean, I have never found money really to be a problem, unless it's an absurdly stupid amount of money but it's not in hospitals. These people apply what they call the wall-to-floor-ratio so you want to enclose as much space as possible with as little wall as possible because that, by definition, will save money.

The fact that you might, as a patient, be lying in bed without a view, seems to be immaterial and the fact that that well known area of research that always gets quoted that if you have a view - and actually the better the view the quicker this happens - is that on average, you will get out of bed 20 percent more quickly.

So at the same time, the Government and many others are saying, 'we'll we need to get people through the hospital system as fast as possible,' and yet we are building buildings, which don't do that, and I think that that's very sad and we can see how there are many things that more imaginative architects than many of those working could do. A lot of them, and this is nothing against American architects at all, but a lot of them are American, and the reason that they are American is because we didn't build any hospitals for ages and the only people with the relevant experience, because they had been building hospitals, happened to be American architects.

**Jack Pringle:** Sure, we had twenty years of under-investment. Now can we go to the floor for questions?

**Neil Etchells:** I've got a confession to make, I'm a builder actually. I work in schools and we look after servicing schools and I love your buildings, they are very inspirational and I like a lot of the new academies that are going up, but given that the school day for eleven- to sixteen- year old children, is an over-manifestation of the Serengeti Plain, and most teachers, because I am a governor of a school, want the command and control of the spaces, one of the things that I think is an element which is lacking in some of the more modern establishments is, as you say, is a heart.

Unfortunately the heart of the average eleven and sixteen year old is a kitchen/restaurant facility and I think some of the fundamentals of doors that don't, sort of, fall off hinges after six months are probably lost, as you say, in these PFI deals. I think that the envelopes that you build are superb but I just feel as though the heart needs to be put back into the schools and we need to concentrate, as I say, on the children and maybe the command and control issues because we know that 80 percent of students are reluctant candidates, anyway, and I think that that element is not always thought about.

**Jack Pringle:** Nearer a statement than a question, but welcome all the same.

**Will Alsop:** Well I'd like to respond to that, if I may Mr Chairman. It goes back to my point that we could look at the very form of schools that don't have to be single points, in my opinion. That has to be tested of course, but I did notice, because I have children as well, so I've been through it. I went to school and now have children at school and you look at schools and I remember going to see Chiswick Community School and I was very impressed.

There was one class I went into and there was a child and their mother and their father and they were all learning French

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together at about two o'clock in the afternoon, or whatever it was, and I thought that was very interesting and the headmistress there was saying that the learning environment is far better by having the presence of some elders, not just in terms of discipline but it actually sets the standard because generally the middle aged or young middle aged, whatever they are, the young parents, will actually get on with it. But they weren't open just to the parents, many people could go and make use of those facilities and I didn't get around to showing you the short film on the Schools of the Future. We might just finish up with that after the questions, because it only takes two or three minutes, but there the whole emphasis is how you can open up the school campus to give it a longer life, still open at 7.30 in the morning and close at 11 o'clock at night. A lot of people say twenty-four hours but I think that's, you have to sleep sometimes.

**Piers Masterson:** I've been involved with Spaces for Sports and the Arts because you were talking about Schools for the Future and there have been three or four rounds of these new designs for schools and I was just wondering if, because of the problems about the lack of design quality especially with Spaces for Sports and the Arts, if there was more that some of the statutory bodies, like CABE or Arts Council England as a funder behind them, could be doing, in your view, to ensure design quality?

**Will Alsop:** A short answer to that is use better architects.

What CABE can do? I don't want to rise to that. I do think there is, I can never get it out of my mind, that in the end the best thing for education, however wonderful the building, however appropriate it is, almost irrespective of the quality in a way, is the quality of the head teacher and again that comes from my own experience of seeing my eldest son going to school and there was a jolly good head teacher. My daughter, who then went to the same school, and that head teacher left, it went down, not gradually – instantly, because the replacement head teacher was not very good.

I also think that we waste a lot of money. My youngest son went to Hill House and I was very interested in the Colonel who ran it. He wasn't very interested, he only seemed to like mothers and fathers once they were popular, but that's something else, and I was interested because you never had to make an appointment to go and see him, just turned up, that was public knowledge.

When he took your child on in the school he gave the mother a single sheet of paper A4 and said, 'everything you need to know is on that sheet of paper.' He didn't have a secretary. He gathered all the staff, I think it was on Monday evening at 5 o'clockish and talked to them for exactly 25 minutes or half an hour. He had a big alarm clock that went off and he would stop mid-sentence.

His overheads, in terms of administration were virtually zero and after his wife died, he started to sleep in his office because he gave up the rest of his living quarters to more space for the children. He was a dedicated man, as you can imagine.

He had one over-riding idea, which is that every child is good at something and his job was to find out what it was and to create that condition. Now if you had as many head teachers as you need throughout the land, all of that calibre and imagination and with the freedom to deliver the course that they wanted to, in my opinion, you could have schools, fantastic schools, in just rather beautiful sheds, almost of industrial quality. I don't think that matters. I'm now talking against myself to a certain extent but then having got to that point, then you can actually work with that and then it becomes even better.

My interest is in redefining what the school is and how it integrates into the urban environment, as well as the object itself. I didn't really answer your question, did I? Sorry.

**Steven Salinger:** Given the real world constraints with regard to PFI and BSF that the Government wants to invest in

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infrastructure and doesn't want to increase public sector borrowing and this is the only way that it's going to be able to do it and given that we're not going to be able to realistically change the European Union rules on procurement, what can we do to improve the PFI process?

**Will Alsop:** Can I ask you what you do?

**Steven Sallinger:** I work for an education design consultancy.

**Will Alsop:** Okay, well you're not one of the bad guys. Let me start with the OJEC thing first because I've done a lot of work in Germany and Holland and the way that we apply OJEC rules in this country are unbelievable. Unbelievable in the way that they are interpreted. We over-interpret them. Sometimes I think it's because there are consultants who advise clients on how to apply them and if they were more liberal, they wouldn't have a job.

It is extraordinary; certainly my experience of working in Rotterdam is that you are given a job for a master plan. You do it and you say, 'well I suppose I'm going to have to re-tender on UK standards or be re-interviewed and you have to re-advertise for the architecture and they said, 'no, why would we do that? We've got a good relationship with you. We like what you've done. We believe that you can deliver us a rather beautiful building. So why on earth would we change horses at this stage?'

Now this gets misused in the country all the time and somebody referred to the quality of the academies, you sir, which I think, by and large, are very good, but the ones that I suspect that you like, are the ones which were done by architects which were not on the original framework agreement. And the reason they were not on the original framework agreement is because no one saw, because I've seen the list of those architects who are on that agreement, and what's most notable about it is that all the architects that I would respect and I'm sure that we would share that respect, are not on the list and I

know some of those and is say, 'well, why weren't you on the list?' 'For the same reason that we never saw the advertisement.' Isn't that odd? We're rather good at that, as many of the others are. We're rather good at picking up those things. Why didn't we see that? And it is scandalous.

The system doesn't work – all those checks and balances. So on OJEC notices, we can change if we have a will to change, but I suspect that we don't, because the Local Authority person, who happens to be a Local Authority officer will go and ask the Legal Department and the Legal Department will say, 'oh, you should go and OJEC it.' There is no intelligence applied to it at all.

I can't remember the first part of your question – oh PFI's, no PFI's could be terrific and if that's the way that we are going to deliver some of the things that we actually need to contribute to the infrastructure of this country, that's wonderful but they do need to be more open and I think that you need to take some of the expense away from the people who are bidding because it's a very expensive process, to actually make the decision on who you are going to run with at a much earlier stage, to allow the design team and others to go through the proper processes of working with the public or the clinicians, if it's a hospital, in a meaningful way and it's understandable that that doesn't happen at the moment and you have to get planning permission for something that hasn't really been designed. That's why it's not very good.

**Jack Pringle:** Will, we've come to the end of our time and I'm afraid that we're going to miss your film and it just remains for me to sum up and thank you for this lecture. I didn't realise that this was going to stray onto territory which is very close to my heart, which is PFI and one of the things that I'm going to be working on over the next two years, is trying to modify the existing PFI system, so that you can get that client relationship with the architect in a much closer way. I don't think that the budgets are too bad. I think the poor thing about PFI are

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the relationships that it sets up and the relationships that it puts barriers between but I do think that there are ways of solving that. We've got three models for looking at RIBA, we're going to consult on them very shortly and take them to the Treasury, but I found your presentation absolutely riveting.

I was fascinated with the way you whole-heartedly engaged with some really challenging problems that you have with low budgets, difficult sites, community engagements, a lot of conversation with clients, the buildings that you have produced – the Peckham Library, I think, is absolutely stunning, Goldsmiths, very much in the same part of town, the Research building, completely stunning internally, and I think very appropriate to the type of work that it's doing in its iconography and I think in the end the Nursery is the one that I was left with, because of how you made a building out of something that could have been a failed project and, you know, a key message there is that good architecture doesn't have to have big budgets, good architecture can be produced on ordinary buildings with ordinary budgets, with an enormous amount of imagination and creativity and I think that's the most interesting thing that I'm going to take away from your presentation.

The subject was 'Buildings for Learning', but I think in a funny way, most of your buildings are buildings for learning, because, whether they are educational or not, in that they tend to challenge our preconceptions about what buildings should look like and what is a logical result from a brief and I know that I tend to look at a lot of your building and say, 'what is going on here, how is that an appropriate response?' and the more you look at them the more you find there is sound research, sound logic underpinning them.

I think the Peckham Library is a classic example of that, very unlikely form that produces a magnificent piece of urban space which is extremely practical and very useful. So those are the things that I will take away from tonight's lecture and I would like you all

to give Will a very good hand for his presentation.