

## **Alsop's Progress**

Christoph Egret

Stirling Prize-winning Peckham Library as well as North Greenwich Jubilee Line station has put Alsop Architects firmly on the metropolitan map. Will Alsop is now in mid-career and his projects are an important indication of where leading edge architecture could take us. Addressing Art and Architecture some years ago when working on Le Grand Bleu, the government building in Marseilles, he showed the abstract, expressionist paintings which underlay - and still underlie - his designs; was delightfully open about who he felt were the dead hands on architecture; and opined that collaboration was best begun in bar or bed.

On the latest occasion, Director of Alsop Architects, Christoph Egret talked on the work of the much-enlarged practice and evidently much of the anti-establishment, anti-mainstream attitudes survive.

Peckham Library is an exception to Alsop's style - Egret claims the office has no style so, let's call it the Alsop look, which is sometimes on stilts, sometimes insect-like, usually with parabolic curves, asymmetry and areas of glass and colour on shapes best described as blobs when they are not cigars. For nearly three thousand years architecture has been obsessed with the classical orders which have worked quite well to give proportion, scale, structure and visual sense, if sometimes, as with the Gothic style and the Modern Movement, in hidden ways, to Western architecture. Along comes Will and lo! It's as if these subtle rules of rhythm and geometry never existed. His work is probably easiest to enjoy if one has never looked at older architecture.

He has designed a local landmark to appeal to local residents and they have taken it to their hearts, confirming his contention that institutions prevent the creation of the adventurous buildings the public really wants. In his analysis the problem is schoolboy snitches who grow up to be middle managers averse to risk and imagination who run things such as the Dome. "Two hundred artists given £250,000 each would have produced a wonderful experience". British architects have misunderstood modernism, which they have boiled down to a style, shrugging off their true responsibilities. Extravagant high tech detail is not architecture. Architecture is the exploration of the world we inhabit. On the street, are people who are empowered with prosperity never seen before. Browsing, zapping and choosing are part of our everyday experience, reflected in the club culture and the 24-hour city.

Peckham Library cost £4.5 million of a big regeneration grant, which with European help has consequently produced £45 million, mainly for housing but also to bring new life to the adjacent

square. Alsop's whipping boy is the imposing symmetrical entrance and this he certainly avoids. The building has the shape of an inverted book end, the elevated area is supported by steel columns at odd angles with open space underneath, the north elevation is entirely glazed with different colours representing activities within, giving a Mondrian effect. The greenish south facade is crowned with a 'cheeky beret' red overflying roof and a large 'Library' sign, the whole floodlit at night.

Raising the library gives locals a fine view of the City. Libraries, for Alsop are lively, noisy and busy with training and one-stop council 'shops', so flying pods were introduced into the double height space for silent study (the writer tried to design such for the RCA Library decades ago but that was fantasy architecture). Silence has however gone out of the asymmetrical windows - a privilege of the rich that's not on offer - one pod is for meetings, one a children's activity pod and another an 'afro-American centre'. Natural light and ventilation have been carefully thought out. Fancy light fittings and furniture cohere with the simple finishes of the mellifluous interior.

The design is not about agreeing with context in colour and style, says Egret, because the surroundings are impossibly varied, but was arrived at by asking people what they wanted and creating a context for the future.

Southwark planner, Fred Manson, laughed when asked about Alsop's public consultation processes; Egret is equally convinced that they listened carefully. There is no doubt that Peckham has an Alsop building, but just as clearly locals feel that it has taken them seriously.

For Middlesborough, Alsop's master plan for regeneration does not lack the trademark buildings on stilts and vertical and horizontal cigars but more unusually, instead of hoping for call centres and Japanese manufacturers, he suggests that it should become the capital of sustainability, covered in glass to grow vegetables all the year round. A new vision for a city that was but a single

farmhouse on the Tees in 1830 and by 1880 a town of 50,000 persons that grew on iron and steel and lost its way. It is also divided by an elevated motorway, so Will splashes on two axis and a cultural centre at the intersection, including elevated allotments, a museum of art where the artists develop with the museum, and a park of unusual wall games. There should moments of delight with little gems that glow like apricots such as a 300-metre wall for people who want to paint big pictures. Round the cultural cross, the city develops in a doughnut shape with further doughnuts with centres of covered glass following the river valley west.

For the community arts organisation C/Plex, part of Jubilee Arts, they have designed a large S arts centre to be built in West Bromwich. As Egret puts it, the architects are the orchestrators. Squiggles from C/Plex were answered by squiggles from Will and they're still developing. Some images recur, he is interested in tables, with space for tucking things under it and other on top and features coming out of the ground, hence the legs, then the idea of the envelope with every part wrapped in a soft crinoline-like enclosure and thirdly transparency, the use of glass in various forms. Jubilee Arts has been organising arts related projects in the area for 20 years and the building in the centre of West Bromwich on the site of a bus station will be a powerful force for regeneration in the area. In addition to an arts centre, the design includes a series of artist's studios as well as exhibition space, video and multi media. A high street on level five with shops at the top of the building related to the arts, a tattoo saloon maybe, and there is space for the Art Truck, a mobile gallery.

South Point is a commercial re-development next to Southwark Underground station made possible by the increasing land values in the area.

[n return for height, much of the ground level is given over to the public. The wall is patterned to conceal the 12 individual office floor levels and make a more interesting design. The height is divided Alsop Architects I Middlesbro into three sections to break up volumes and make it seem less overpowerng, despite overhang on the upper and topmost parts, which are angled to create the covered ground level. The glass is patterned with colour and abstract images with a new ceramic paint that bonds with the glass outside while leaving unobstructed viewing from inside. The uppermost section is painted with cloud pattern to create a trompe l'oeil effect with shadow on sunny days and a cloudscape on grey days.

Curved perimeter walls are a feature of the Stonebridge Health centre, part of a scheme to provide new facilities "on 60's/70's estates that included schemes for Neasden and Wembley. The Stone bridge project consists of a Health centre combined with a Community and Youth centre, a supermarket and convenience stores and some housing but none of this is given away by the puff shaped envelope.

The expression of function would in any case be a problem now that mixed-use has become part of the design creed, ostensibly because of the self-policing, security advantage in always having people on site but surely also because it provided a friendlier environment and gives a sense of involvement to the inhabitants. Alsop has been working with artist Kate Dineen, previously involved at Coin Street to think about colour and textures from the earliest stages.

The roof of the health centre will be suitable for 5-a-side football and other sports, Keeping kids out of boredom and trouble was one of the main needs voiced in the consultation exercise.

The design, Egret emphasises, was developed with wide consultation not dictated by the ego of the architect. People are upset that after only 30 years the estates have to be demolished because architects did not deliver what people wanted. By making a closer match with people's needs, building can improve lives and achieve more long-lived success. For instance, tower blocks can make good homes for suitable people when services such as a concierges are provided but they did not match the needs of the people who were decanted into them.

Through consultation, the architects discovered that people felt that three small car parks would be less threatening than one big one like an empty waste-land. They wanted curves instead of corners to cut out hiding places. They wanted the building to be prominent and close to the main street - if it was hidden away at the back of the site they feared Brent Council would neglect it.

Alsop is pitching for several London projects. As clients, Egret said, people were not hostile to the new. Even though many architects wrongly thought so. The process should go beyond consultation to participation, and the architect, however strong his personality, must listen. His role is like the conductor of an orchestra who listens to the strings and knows how to lift them to the higher level of art - and architecture. They have no objection to odd shapes provided cleaning has been considered. Their major concerns are with balconies, window size, and the number of flats to each entrance hall. But then, architects must know how to take their concerns and make a beautiful building. For that, the concept comes first, then the form. The materials are less important.

One of the major groups on council estates is a preponderance of poorly educated manually employed people. Architects must recognise that diversity is the key to making life better on the estates and an instrument for improvement must be the encouragement of opportunities for more diverse population and one way of doing so is by creating beautiful buildings.

The practice now devotes a section to 'Big Architecture' by which Alsop means to combine the hitherto separate trade of planner with an architectural approach. They are working on master plans for Kidbrook, Chatham Maritime, Aylesbury Estate and Lewisham. Normally urban planners set out the overall pattern with a variety of zones and fixed traffic routes and then the architect has to try and prettify his section. The separation has had terrible effects because it results in divergent aims, which 'Big Architecture' tries to remedy. The same detailed :are should be given to the district as is given to the house - its just a

bigger unit and thus the potential social and management crisis of built form can be dealt with.

Asked about the philosophy of the practice Egret replied that from the outside it might look very formalistic but from the inside not so. "I never feel we are dealing with form. The form is secondary to the idea for fulfilling the needs of the client, we don't fall in love with our forms and are not worried by shape. Peckham Library was designed with five possible shapes, any of the five could have been built and any shape is OK as long as it is strong and colourful, straight edges versus curves etc. are not crucial."

The Alsop design process is the opposite of the architect refining his shape and making references to the architecture of the past. "People like our structures, - Form swallows Function - you can make any form work, it's not linked with function." Any function can work in any built form. The curved line is now close in cost to the straight line. There is a newfound freedom in the construction industries. Architecture is now able to use fewer straight forms and achieve greater sensuality through curves, but like Gaudi this is non-style, outside style.

"We are creating an authentic architecture that is not dependent on an obsession with detail. High tech is based on the Darwinian belief that things develop/evolve from atoms to molecules to object - rather like putting Meccano together, on the proposition that if the detail is OK then the finished product will be. But this misses a noble view of how architecture can change the way people behave. If you build an art school you want it to be a place where the artists working, there can show their art to advantage. Creating a library in Peckham you want a building that give the most opportunities to the younger generation - not the beautiful cladding and the high tech stairs.

We care about detail but in a different way, we don't believe in polite modernism, the sort of approach typified by white walls, glass, an atrium, a bit of, public space."

Alsop's is a new Modernism with asymmetry and eye interest more important than scale and proportion.

Hans Brill 1930-2001

This was the last article by Hans who was editor of Art & Architecture 1991-2001