All aboard the fun palace

With its floating galleries, sloping walls and exhibits that talk back to you, Will Alsop’s daring new arts centre was worth all the wrangling. Steve Rose gets the first look inside

I have now built enough buildings that the public really enjoy,” says Will Alsop. “I have the facts and figures to back that up—and yet I still get slapped around the face by people who say, ‘It’s not architecture.’ If it’s not architecture, what the fuck is it?”

Alsop is talking about The Public, a troubled project that has given his reputation something of a battering. The Public was supposed to be a new kind of arts centre, a civic landmark that would leapfrog its home, West Bromwich, into a new cultural league and regenerate the entire region. And who better to design it than Alsop, the London-based architect who doesn’t so much think outside the box as paint the box a crazy colour and put it on wonky stilts several storeys above the street?

“We’re not quite sure what it is… The Public’s striking exterior

The Public is essentially a box, albeit a big black one with pink-trimmed jellybean windows that stands out in West Bromwich’s town centre like a Prada bag in an everything-for-a-pound shop. But before it could do any regenerating, The Public wound up having to regenerate itself. It was scheduled to open in 2005, but the budget leapt from £41m to £54m. The investors, primarily Arts

John Maybury: my messed up people Cyd Charisse: $2.5m per leg The red pepper house Nancy Banks-Smith sees a fight

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As for the art, The Public is boldly aiming to bypass the whole “paintings on white walls” game, providing instead a hi-tech, interactive experience that’s intended to be enlightening and engaging. Every visitor gets an electronic tag to wear, and the first thing they do on arrival is input some information, such as a voice sample, and pick some signature words, colours and textures. Then, as you go through the galleries, the exhibits “recognise” you. Your voice sample might be played back at you as a sound installation, or you’ll see your signature words joining a “data stream” running down wallpapers like as you draw near. It’s conceptual highbrow meets end-of-the-pier ghost train.

One permanent piece, Flypad, is like a communal arcade game. You control a computer-generated 3D avatar of yourself by standing on a floor pad. On a screen in front of you, your avatar flies around, colliding with those of other “players” and exchanging body parts with them. Constable’s Hay Wain this ain’t. “We’ve got a generation of artists who are working with audiences in a different way,” says Marlene Smith, The Public’s director. “It’s about enabling the participant to be creative.”

West Bromwich has seen better days. It’s a typical post-industrial ghost town with little to attract outsiders, not even a bookshop or a cinema. The Public should at least make the town a worthwhile destination. As well as the art, the building’s ground floor will function as a “covered square”, with a cafe and a venue for gigs and plays. But by encouraging artistic participation, The Public also hopes to motivate the community to play an active role in wider regeneration plans. Opposite the building, a new shopping centre, including a cinema, is due to begin construction. New apartment buildings, a college and better public spaces are also planned. Like its football team, West Bromwich could yet find the motivation to drag itself up a league.

All of which is what Alsop intended, he says. The blame for the project going into administration was jointly laid at the feet of Alsop and Sylvia King, the project’s chief instigator, who founded the local Jubilee Arts Trust in the 1970s and developed The Public.
What are galleries for?
The Public's director Marlene Smith on how artists got interactive blogs.guardian.co.uk/arts

The pink ladies … (above) the 'pebble', which houses the toilets; (right) free-floating 'lilypad' offices; (left) colourful interior walls

out of it. “Either of them, teamed with a more disciplined partner, might have made the project work,” wrote Deyan Sudjic in the Observer in 2006. “Putting the two together has stretched the experimental nature of the project too far.”

Naturally, Alsop resents the accusation. “I’m much more serious than that,” he says, insisting the cost overruns were nothing to do with the actual construction, only with the financial details of the project. According to him, King discovered a £3m “hole” in the business plan that was more down to accountancy errors than anything else. “I said to her, ‘You have to tell the funding bodies.’ She did and they put it into administration immediately – they panicked.” That’s not quite how Marlene Smith remembers it. She puts the cost overruns down to “a range of design and construction issues and delays”. But perhaps it no longer matters, now that there’s a new building with such wondrous potential standing in West Bromwich.

A project that springs to mind walking around The Public is Cedric Price’s Fun Palace. This scheme from the early 1960s proposed a flexible

“laboratory of fun”, something like a shipyard, in which, as Price put it, you could “choose what you want to do – or watch someone else doing it. Learn how to handle tools, paint, machinery, or just listen to your favourite tune.” Although never actually built, the Fun Palace was an eccentric yet influential project, credited as the inspiration for the Pompidou Centre. There’s more than a little of its “do what you please” populist philosophy in The Public. Alsop worked for Price in the mid-1970s, and is in many ways his successor on the British architecture scene. He inherited Price’s sentiment that architecture should be fun, that it should make people happy rather than simply fulfil its intended function. Of course, there comes a point where the playfulness has to be translated into boring old work, which is where the problems started. But whoever is to blame for The Public’s difficulties, West Bromwich surely has Alsop to thank for giving the town something of joy that will hopefully restore the fortunes of all concerned.

“The people who blindly follow rules and ‘best practice’ produce most of the dull architecture in this country,” says Alsop. “Their stuff is merely building. Architecture is building plus something. As I get older, I don’t want to explain what that something is – that would spoil it.”