Going Public: Will Alsop

To an Antipodean eye, Will Alsop's The Public looks like the wilder sibling of Melbourne's Federation Square: all punky angles, oddball apertures and shattered-looking glass. And like Federation Square – and I.M. Pei's Louvre Pyramid for that matter – The Public was brought into the world to mixed reviews. The British press and global online design community have labelled it everything from "beautiful" and "pure genius" to "incoherent" and "out of touch". But just as Federation Square has found a place in our hearts, it is only a matter of time before the locals (and the wider architecture community) take ownership of this architectural wild child. The Public will always have its enemies, but people will be popping off to "The Pub" before you know it.

Conceived from the idea that architecture can be a catalyst for social and cultural renaissance, The Public is a starting point for the eventual rebirth of Central England's West Bromwich, and the wider Black Country in general. But when The Public finally arrived, it was overdue and a rumoured £20 million over budget: the delivery had been drawn out and complicated. The project is widely referred to as Will Alsop's The Public, and Alsop Architects did breathe first life into it in 1998. In 2004 Flannery & de la Pole took up the reigns of Associate Architect, and DCA Consultancy Ltd stepped in as Project Directors. Since 1998 the role of client has been passed from Jubilee Arts to G-Plex (1999-2003), to The Public Building Limited (2003-06) and finally to Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council for the completion stage. And in a way, The Public is still in the neonate ward: while it awaits an emergency injection of funds to secure basic operation costs, the doors remain closed to paying customers, albeit with free events over the British summer to give the exhibits a 'test-run'.

The Public is as much the public's baby as it is Alsop's. It was built on Lottery, European Union and other local funding. It draws on a dynamic public consultation process. And of course, its underlying purpose is to serve as an inspiration and catalyst for personal as well as regional renaissance, by delivering down-to-earth public access to art, education, facilities, events and community space. It was designed to encourage its users – the public – to visit with one purpose, and stay for many others.

At 113 metres long, and more than 20 metres high and deep, The Public's box form is nothing short of immense. A commanding, ink-dark monolith, punctured by a scattering of jelly bean-shaped windows edged in vivid lolly pink. In actual fact The Public is a 'Box of Delights', and inside...
THE PUBLIC

With lolly pink jelly bean-shaped windows, Will Alsop's new landmark project is a 'Box of Delights' offering visitors a taste of the arts.
that kooky exterior shell is a series of discrete multi-purpose "entities", their external surfaces fully independent of the aluminium casing that conceals them. These internal organs are organically shaped according to their distinctive purposes, resulting in names like The Pod, The Rock, The Pebble, The Sock, The Cave, The Ramp and several Lily Pads. The jelly bean windows are just punctures in the outer façade, serving both as windows into the various units inside, and rose-rimmed lenses for peering outside when within.

Heading inside at Ground Level means passing through pink steel sliding doors and following the downward slope from a permanent projection installation work past The Pebble, its bulbous form cleverly disguising the main public toilets, plant rooms and stores. Beyond is The Theatre, a 450-capacity space designed to hold everything from performances, gigs and films, to conferences and banquets. In audio-visual terms, The Theatre is designed for intimacy, which can be enhanced by the use of an acoustic screen, splitting the space into two discrete rooms.

The heart of the building is a magenta box, suspended at Level 1, and peppered with small circular windows, scribbles, and zig-zag lighting. Inside are the administrative offices that keep The Public running, and the acoustically isolated Production Suite which includes publicly accessible recording studios.

Plans are underway to turn Level 2 into individual community education and learning spaces. But it is Level 3 that provides access to the core of The Public. Entering here, visitors are confronted with the various elements of the centre – and a stand of tubular steel trees by Ben Kelly Design, which incorporates a mass of displays, lights, projectors and decorative panels, each responding to each visitor's personal Radio Frequency Identification Tag.

After that, The Sock isn't so surprising, with its brooding, black sculptural form rising through three storeys to enclose two temporary exhibition galleries: one white, one black, both subverting the stereotypical 'museum' space, with a paucity of vertical walls designed to coax creativity from the artist.

Next stop is The Cave, a darkened space containing projection artworks, and visitors to the Guggenheim in Bilbao or the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris will be familiar with The Ramp concept that follows. Descending at a gradient of 1 in 20, The Ramp is supported by cantilevered ribs along a tubular spine beam, spiralling twice around The Sock, before flying across the entrance hall and tailing off at the Ground Floor. Mesh balustrades along one side of the ramp turn the architectural element into a multimedia multi-panel display space.

Level 4 is divided into three areas: a conventional open plan space, the top of The Sock, and the Lily Pads taking centre stage in between. There are fifteen of these dish-shaped workspaces, in two sizes, suspended by circular hangers from the roof structure above. Clad in glossy white GRP, they are vibrantly coloured within, and are interconnected by a network of lightweight bridges, some in yellow GRP, some in steel and glass. It is this area more than any other that should serve as the launch pad for the economic regeneration of West Bromwich, bringing together business, creativity and talent.

In the end, it doesn't matter what the critics say. Once the people of West Bromwich start saying "see you at The Pub", it's a success.+

1. The Public takes its place as the new geographical and symbolic heart of West Bromwich: the catalytic starting point for a county-wide cultural regeneration.
2. Punk-rock angles and gleaming heavy-metal are the perfect foil to those organic window apertures, aiming to give the project – and the community – a burst of edgy, youthful inspiration.
3. Inside, exhibition spaces break free of the traditional gallery layout, as art and architecture become one. Here, The Ramp's "spine" can be seen running along at ceiling level, above a pathway of art display boxes (foreground), and the cluster of Ben Kelly's "trees" (middle distance).
4. Floating just below ceiling level, fifteen Lily Pads (foreground) work double-time as a series of multi-purpose workspaces, as well as a constant source of visual stimulation for visitors circulating below.