Architect Will Alsop on coloured blobs, tilted stilts and ditching the 'master plan'

Famed for his OCAD 'Tabletop', he will soon be leaving his mark on more of Toronto

Mike Doherty, National Post
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Engraved on a bracelet around Will Alsop’s left wrist are what he calls “the three tenets of architecture”: DIVERSITY, INDIVIDUALITY and NAUGHTINESS. As a distinguished visiting practitioner in architecture at Ryerson this academic year, Alsop is working in a city that flaunts its embrace of the first tenet - but has much to learn about the second two.

"On the whole, Torontonians are very polite, very nice, very pleasant people,” he observes, sipping coffee in the Ryerson Architecture building. But the lips of the English starchitect, who has a Falstaffian presence and an air of perpetual amusement, turn up with the trace of a smirk. "On the other hand,” he says, "there’s a sense that everyone can have a say. Too much democracy can prevent things happening. I'd prefer people to be proactive, and I'm not sure that Torontonians are good at that - they're good at just saying no."

Alsop knows whereof he speaks. Since winning the commission to design the Sharp Centre at the Ontario College of Art and Design in 2000, he has returned to the city frequently, and even though his rectangle-on-pencil-crayon-stilts building is now a much-loved local landmark, he has also encountered setbacks in his work. His funky Westside sales centre on Queen West was built, in part, to showcase a nearby loft tower that has since been scuppered; a condo building intended for King Street was also cancelled. The conglomerate Archial, which acquired his practice in 2006, closed his Toronto office shortly thereafter to cut costs.

This summer, Alsop brought his naughtiness to the fore when he declared he was quitting architecture altogether in order to devote himself to painting. The Guardian concluded that this announcement was "just a ruse to throw his previous employers, Archial, off the scent, while he did some behind-the-scenes manoeuvring" in order to switch over to his current firm, RMJM.

When asked to corroborate this, Alsop, ever the individualist, avers: "I've never felt as though I've been employed by anyone, ever. But the truth is, I wanted to leave what I'd originally set up." His voice drops to a conspiratorial near-whisper: "And it was a ruse, yeah."

All the better for Toronto: Alsop plans to open a new office here with RMJM around March, and is currently designing the Finch West and Steeles West subway stops for the 2015 Spadina extension. His plans for Steeles West, with their characteristic Alsopian visionary whimsy, were approved last month by the TTC, expect to see warped-eggshell shapes aboveground with openings that allow light to flood into platform level.

Alsop does favour certain design features - among them bold, vibrant colours; blob-shaped holes cut into flat surfaces, and those tilted stilts - but he won’t admit to having a particular style. Style, he says, leads to obsolescence: To continue to consider