Will Alsop, the British architect who recently topped Fast Company magazine’s 10 most creative people in architecture, returns to Toronto to start his position as distinguished visiting practitioner at Ryerson University. He started it all off on Tuesday night, with a lecture to a full house of mostly students and faculty, about Preparing for Practice. While geared to those entering a career in architecture, there are things Toronto can learn, from this often controversial figure, about designing in this city of ours. He admits, during his first visit to Toronto, he “didn’t like it!” It felt like an unloved and uncherished city, but during the last ten years, it has changed for the better, a “sense it has woken up.”

Although Alsop’s OCAD building is obviously a large statement in Toronto, he says, “it’s not always the big things you do in cities or towns, it’s also the small things that you have the influence on.” He urged students to have a healthy irreverence, question everything and “try to think what the opposite is of what you’re being told.” He lives by the words “individualism, diversity and naughtiness”, which are written on a bracelet around his wrist.

He believes the 80’s generation of architects are too conforming and are unfortunately in positions of power and unwilling to take risks, explaining that risk ”is not about money, it’s allowing people to work, play and live in a different environment.” He uses words like curiosity, perseverance and humour as key elements in preparing for a career in architecture, but these ideas can be transferred to designers, planners and city builders currently in practice.

When asked about his future in Toronto, he mentions Keele and Finch, the two new subway stations he has been hired to design and says he hopes to “contribute to the city and other parts of Canada.” Whatever one might think of Alsop, personally or professionally, he might just be what Toronto needs to inspire its current and future designers.

Photo by John Vetterli