The Fun Palace was a project by Cedric Price. Although never built, it remains a seminal concept for an extremely innovative type of multi-purpose cultural building whose key feature was its lack of formal design. The aim of the project was to make available a single, hands-on space whose diverse functions were interconnected episodes. It was to be a place where people would go not for any particular purpose but simply for the fun of the unexpected or the simple pleasure of a human experience.

"The activities designed for the site should be experimental, the place itself expendable and changeable. The organisation of space and the objects occupying it should, on the one hand, challenge the participants' mental and physical dexterity and, on the other, allow for a flow of space and time, in which passive and active pleasure is provoked". (1*)

Will Alsop’s THEpUBLIC building, inaugurated in June 2008 in West Bromwich, brings Price’s Fun Palace immediately to mind. It seems to be present as part of Alsop’s DNA.

In the career of every architect there are projects that for whatever complex and unexpected reasons have a significance that goes well beyond the building in question, triggering a creative process around it and beyond.

THEpUBLIC is a complex building, totally innovative and ahead of its time. It is the outcome of a long and intricate development process that produced a broad range of sketches and models, perhaps the most Will has ever produced for one single brief. The building was transformed as time and drawings went by, however the many ideas generated often went into other projects by Alsop’s practice. Like Price’s unrealised Fun Palace, THEpUBLIC can be considered Will Alsop’s seminal building.

West Bromwich in the West Midlands of England is a depressed, former industrial area with no cultural activities of note yet today the focus of a wide-reaching regeneration plan costing a total of around 700 million pounds. THEpUBLIC stands as the symbol of the whole scheme.

The idea of a new-concept arts venue was the brainchild of Sylvia King, who in 1974 set up the Jubilee Arts Trust, a community arts organisation headquartered initially in a double-decker bus that did the rounds of the local neighbourhoods. Later the Trust was housed in a modest building in West Bromwich until 1994 when Sylvia King met Will Alsop and suggested he devise a truly innovative site. It should not so much be a place for exhibiting works of art but one where art would be produced. The building itself should convey the fact that visitors were there to interact with their surrounds and produce art rather than contemplate it with detached indifference. It was, in a word, to be an interactive building.

In 1998 a competition was held. Unlike other architects, Will Alsop did not present drawings or a model because it was not clear what the project’s aim was. Rather he suggested the approach to adopt: interacting with the client and local population through workshops and public meetings so that the requirements of client, place and end users could be appropriately met. The result, he claimed, would be a hub of energy and arts, a place that would receive as well as irradiate, where art would not just be conserved but lived and regenerated continuously. Sylvia King was enthralled with the proposal and the process got
underway with the help too of Will Alsop’s longstanding friend, artist Bruce McLean. McLean worked on several installations to raise awareness and encourage local inhabitants to imagine an arts-led venue of their dreams that would allow them to express and increment those dreams. It was to be a building they should be proud to feel ownership for and not, as often happens, an imposition from above with no connection to the cultural life of the city. Originally the project was called Cplex. In 2000, a 5-metre model of it was exhibited at the British Pavilion of the "Less Aesthetics More Ethics" Venice Biennale directed by Massimiliano Fuksas.

After that, other institutions like the Arts Council, Advantage West Midlands, the European Regional Development Fund and the Lottery became players, and the project’s name was changed to THEpUBLIC.

The outward appearance is clear and simple: a 112x21x22 metres black box. The envelope is completely independent of the interior elements. The amoeba-shaped openings on the black box are framed with fuxia. It is a mysterious secret box visible from the motorway, which is also why the roof housing the plant and equipment has been designed to stand out as a landmark. Although its function is not necessarily obvious, the building’s singular appearance sets it apart from its surrounds.

All its complexity is kept within. The interior is a single space, a technologically sophisticated avant-garde arena populated and animated by elements with names like “Pod”, “Rock”, “Pebble”, “Lily-Pad” and “Sock”. They float like separate structures but although autonomous episodes, they never break the spatial continuity of the whole. Even if iconic, THEpUBLIC was designed with energy efficiency in mind. The interior is a “bio-climatic” environment: the pods ensure energy-efficient power supplies into spaces where people gather, and natural ventilation is employed wherever possible. This is especially apparent on mild days when the wide groundfloor apertures are thrown open to allow natural circulation of air.

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(1*) Cedric Price - “A Laboratory of Fun” - New Scientist, 14th May 1964)