When he's not at the cutting edge of architecture, Will Alsop likes to relax under a palm tree in his Norfolk garden.

By Caroline Donald

Will Alsop OBE, the maverick architect and member of the Royal Academy (he is one of the selectors of this year's Summer Exhibition), has won many awards over his 61 years. There is one, however, that has so far eluded him: best front garden of the year in Sheringham, north Norfolk, where he and his wife, Sheila, 62, have had a holiday home for more than 25 years. "It would mean more to me than the Stirling prize," he has said.

Alsop is best known for modernist buildings such as Peckham library, in south London, where the upper floors are supported on spindly legs that look like skew-whiff knitting needles — for which he bagged the said Stirling prize in 2000. One of his most high-profile works in progress is Chips, a residential building in Manchester that resembles a neatly stacked pile of pommes frites.

So, it is something of a surprise to walk down the stone-set path of the long front garden in Norfolk, under the shade of a Giverny-style arbour, and arrive at a late-Victorian red-brick house filled with comfortable sofas, books, antique china and paintings. Where are the contemporary building materials, the modernist furniture, the wacky colours?

"It is not just my house, it is Sheila's as well. I concur with her taste," says the man sometimes known as Mr Blobby — surely for the splashes of colour on his buildings, rather than his cheerfully unkempt appearance, which comes wreathed in a fog of cigarette smoke.

"This is not a great art; the house has nothing to do with great design. Using a word that most architects don't use, it is 'cosy', and I am comfortable with that. Actually, as I get older, I try to incorporate that in my other work."

We sit in the glass-and-aluminium-walled dining room that Alsop added to the back of the house with materials left over from a project in France. The room, which replaced a conservatory and small terrace, is contemporary in feel, but hardly pushes the frontiers of design.

Beneath, in a series of terraces, is a narrow jungle of a garden, planted with ferns, phormiums, palms, and large pots of hostas and hydrangeas. You can just see the sea through the trees and over the top of the boundary wall. Goldfish swim in the small pond beneath the window.

There's a lunchtime bottle of red on the long maple table, which Alsop designed. He points to a sofa at the end of the room that catches the evening light. "If you really analyse both the house and garden, it is all about different places to sit," he says. "I like a bit of sitting. That's the gin-and-tonic sofa."

Another favourite G&T spot is an outdoor bench by the front door that benefits from the warmth captured by the red-brick wall behind it. Similar seats are dotted around the jungle garden for different parts of the day. There is even one by the barbecue, though, he says, "we try not to have barbecues — dangerous things. They are the quickest way to arguments". His role is to light the thing and eat the results: "If I cook, it is always burnt."

The couple bought the five-bedroom house in 1983. They wanted somewhere out of London for weekends and holidays (these come less frequently nowadays, as Alsop is often abroad on business; he has offices in Shanghai, Beijing, Toronto and Singapore, and is a professor of architecture in Vienna), and Sheila's parents lived nearby.

It is also a six-minute walk from the station, which was convenient, as Sheila didn't drive at the time. When their children, Oliver, now 31, Nancy, 29, and Peri, 24, were growing up, friends could be easily collected from the station.

Queen Victoria's visits to the nearby Sandringham estate, which she bought in 1863, popularised the area, but Sheringham is now a rather down-at-heel, old-fashioned kind of seaside resort. Although Alsop lives in Kensington, west London, he has no desire to join those neighbours from the capital who decamp in clannish clumps to smarter towns such as Burnham Market and Wells-next-the-Sea, to the west.

The town has several run-down hotels, a legacy from its Victorian glory days. "If someone wanted to invest, they could do something fantastic with these hotels, but they don't, so that is the end of it," says Alsop. His own house was once the stables for such a hotel; in the second world war, it was used by the military for maintaining motor vehicles. A local builder converted it in 1953, and it was pretty much unchanged when the Alsops bought it 30 years later from the estate of an old lady who had died. "The house was empty for six or nine months. Houses show that; you feel it when you go into them."

Just as he was unpacking the furniture, Alsop got a phone call. "This is really peculiar. It was North Norfolk district council, wanting me to build a swimming pool in Sheringham. I thought it was my business partner at the time, John Lyall, playing a joke on me. In the end, I said, 'I'm off, John', but then I realised it was a genuine inquiry. Alsop's unorthodox response to his first stand-alone commission didn't deter the council, and the pool, finished in 1987 and opened by Princess Diana, still exists. "Except that they have ruined it," he laments. "They have painted the outside blue and yellow to cheer it up. It is supposed to be stained timber!"

The project was a good way to spend
time in the town and get to know it. “I started to fiddle with the house, a bit here, a bit there; it just evolved.” As did the garden, which grew over the years from a narrow strip at the back of the house to encompass two extra areas bought from neighbours around the corner—visitors liken it to a Tardis.

“I would plant a few things, then come back, and suddenly they were in flower. You get this delayed joy; that is terrific. From that, I became more and more serious, and started to think about what I would like it to be.”

At the far end is Alsop’s studio, next to a paved patio with yet more seating. On the table is a thick pile of his paintings. He has one in the Royal Academy’s summer show of some flower-like shapes. Its title? I Wish My Garden Was Really Like This. In fact, the garden at the back of the house is more about greenery and strong shapes than a riot of floral abundance. He and Sheila “don’t go for lots of colour”.

Thanks to the mild seaside climate, they have pines, figs, a tamarisk, South African restios, potted shrubs and ivy-clad walls. Although the beach is only 10 minutes away—Alsop starts taking dips in the sea when it has warmed up in early July—it is not a place to sunbathe. A canopy of high branches covers much of the space in dappled shade. “It’s a high umbrella and a garden full of telegraph poles,” he jokes. Perhaps his garden is where he got his inspiration for Peckham library. The front garden is more formal, with a series of parallel lines created by the path, a long rectangular pond (or “short canal”, as Sheila calls it) and a row of agaves in long-term pots. Extending down the garden is a box parterre, in which olive trees are planted. They were pruned recently by Wayne Nolan, the gardener, who comes in once a week, and are looking rather the worse for wear. “He didn’t have a clue—and why would he?—how to prune them, and it isn’t like that,” says Alsop. “I learnt that in France last week.”

There is also an Indian chestnut tree near the street. Alsop had hoped its black nuts would be his secret weapon in the annual office conker championships. “They are not. They are pathetic.”

Away from the front garden’s formal structure, things are left pretty much to themselves. At this time of year, self-seeded hollyhocks and campanulas are happily flowering beneath the tunnel and in the gravel beside it. “An over-designed garden feels dead,” says Alsop.

His approach to his outdoor space is much the same as to his architecture—letting the other elements, whether they are plants, clients or local communities, play their part, and not being too precious about allowing their contributions. “In your twenties, you think reading the philosophers and indulging in theory is going to help,” he explains. “I can assure you that it doesn’t. By the time you get to your thirties, you down-grade it all to ‘concept’. At 40, that becomes, ‘Well, maybe the idea is all right.’ At 50, it’s a ‘notion’. At 60, not a ***ing clue’.

“It’s sort of liberating. I have become suspicious, whether it is a garden or whatever, when people start talking about the justification for their design. I don’t believe in the word ‘inspiration’. You just have to do it.”