Why hot potato Alsop can be found down at the dairy

Peter Bill

Will Alsop is to architecture what Tracy Emin is to art: someone thought slightly barmy by the mainstream, but: someone being drawn towards respectability by the passage of time.

The 62-year-old designer of Peckham Library is putting up a good fight.

The latest move in a financially up-and-down career has him semi-attached from this month to a respectable firm of architects called RMJM.

But last night he held a much-less-than-respectable party in an old dairy in Battersea, at which sculptor and performance artist Bruce Mclean put on a show entitled A Hot Potato Against a Very Dark Background.

Let's hope RMJM staff at the bash did not take this as a coded insult to their handling of Alsop's contractual arrangements.

The offices of his new firm Alsop at RMJM are now in this old dairy, which lies down the street, but one social light year, from RMJM's office.

Nevertheless, the firm that employs more than 1000 staff in 18 spots around the world is keen to embrace Alsop; much the same way perhaps as Selfridges lets high-fashion brands trade from inside the store. It's worked for Selfridges...
What will work for Alsop? Let's start with a 30-minute conversation with the man himself.

This took place on a park bench on the seafront in Cannes last week during the Mipim property show, as men in striped blue suits and tight knotted ties streamed past fixated on their Blackberries.

Alsop is a relaxed and artfully dishevelled character, who wears a trademark knotted scarf and puffs defiantly away while talking.

He effortlessly cruises the narrows between architecture, fashion and art, firing off ideas at random. “We're talking in detail to Jeremy Clarkson about a project. We have so much to learn from each other. Why not have car lifts in blocks of flats."

"Imagine having your car outside the door of your 12th-floor apartment. The car can become a piece of furniture."

He talks of his new offices, which sit over Testbed 1, the name given to the 100 feet square basement in which the party was held.

In attendance was fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, who has a studio next door.

“We will hold events, exhibitions, art shows and experiments. Vivienne can hold fashion shows in the place. It is a place for testing new ideas."

Some of Alsop's ideas have been big hits. You don’t get to employ 50 staff and win a chestful of architectural medals, including the 2000 Stirling Prize for Peckham Library, without being a highly imaginative architect.

His style is more punkish Westwood than svelte Armani. But he can do straight, nearly: that large, slightly tilted, blue office block on the south bank is one of Alsop's.

But Alsop and his team, led by Scott Lawrie and staff from 20 different countries, prefer to imagine the more exuberant forms of architecture that flourish in warmer climates, places where there is plenty of space and fewer men in striped suits sitting tut-tutting on planning committees.

The practice is currently drawing up plans for a steel-ribbed museum in Greece in the shape of a praying mantis and a “rough-luxe” hotel in Spain in which the bedroom suites will be housed in “tree house” style pods. Somewhere for Alsop to dream.