Will Alsop speaks at the Universities as City Builders discussion at the Design Exchange. Photo by Dario Ruberto/Ryerson University.

Let's get this out of the way right off the top: Will Alsop doesn't like Rob Ford.
And, before we get to that, one more important thing about this story: it's not really a story at all. There's a premise, sure-four architects walk into a room—but there's no conflict, no beginning, middle or end, not even a discernible punchline. Instead, this is just an extended retelling of an interesting idea, posed by an architect over a glass of wine: Toronto could be better. At least, it could if we believe in the importance of lifelong education.

If you're still following, let's go back to last Wednesday night and the panel discussion at the Design Exchange called Universities as City Builders. There, these architects sat in front of a roomful of students and architecture aficionados to discuss the ways universities and cities interact. And how that's a good thing.

"Universities are full of people doing peculiar things," says Alsop, the British starchitect and Toronto-phile of love-it-or-hate-it OCADU stilt box fame. "They have to start exposing themselves to the world. They should be contributing to life in the city."

Discussing just how this might be possible was a who's who of Toronto institutional architecture. Along with Alsop was Eb Zeidler, senior partner at Zeidler Partnership Architects and the man who brought you the Eaton Centre, amongst fifty years' worth of other buildings; Creig Dykers of Norway's Snøhetta, whose work includes the brand new Alexandria Library in Egypt and who is currently working on the Student Learning Centre at the old Sarn the Record Man corner; and Sheldon Levy, president and vice-chancellor of Ryerson University.

So after a lingering hour of celery and dip, the evening began with with moderator Ken Greenberg, member of the master planning team for both Ryerson and York, expostulating Alsop's belief that through architecture, universities can become much more than isolated barns of thinking.

And before we go any further, another pause for one last caveat: those expecting an outcome or resolve will be sorely disappointed. All questions posed remained merely questions, despite a series of slides showing Ryerson building plans and Greenberg's adamance that the discussion was "not an abstract one." It was very much an abstract discussion.

Except, of course, for Sheldon Levy. He was there to insist that Ryerson, which hosted the evening along with the Design Exchange, is in the midst of great-end actual-change. And he's not wrong. The downtown university is building fast and big, and with three major buildings currently in the works it might just be the institution most likely to change the face of downtown Toronto in the coming years.

"Dream big," Levy implored, quoting his favourite Chicagoan urbanist, Daniel Burnham. "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will not themselves be realized."

So what do those big plans mean, theoretically, for Toronto universities in the eyes of architects?

"We can no longer afford to insulate ourselves," proclaimed Dykers, who took a rhetorical jackhammer to the ivory tower and vowed to build glass-walled cubes in its place. Indeed, the Scandinavia-based architect implored the democratization of learning itself, promising to make the Student Learning Centre open to the city's Yonge Street lifeline.
And as we, the patient audience of like-minded individuals, sat and watched Eb Zeidler walk us through projected images of the Ted Rogers School of Management building, whose makeshift concrete quadrangle and classroom space sits isolated above a Best Buy and Canadian Tire on Dundas Street, Dykers’ final words reverberated through the room.

"Avoid the politics of control"

Or, in Will Alsop's less Marxist verbiage, "You’re not really going to vote for Ford, are you?"

And this is how a discussion of grand ideas and intellectual possibility can get mired in the dirt of municipal politics.

For all the good ideas that arose from the evening’s questions-building universities more open to the street, more accessible to the public, more focused on higher learning not just for students but for the city, too—there was also the ominous electoral cloud creeping over the art-deco murals on the Design Exchange ceiling, the foreboding feeling that none of these big dreams may ever truly be realized.

Hanging in the air Wednesday night was the knowledge that, not far from the Design Exchange at the AGO, the four mayoral candidates were debating the future of the arts in Toronto, but in this room four architects and intellectuals were debating the future of the city itself.

And the future could be a bright one. For Alsop it is, anyway, if Torontonians embrace the plethora of ideas—many of them big-floating unseen through the city.

"It could be a city of learning," said Alsop earlier in the day over the telephone, while drinking a glass of wine. "That would be great. Right now it's a city of commerce. But every other city in the world is trying to do that. There's nowhere to grow."

And it wouldn't take a lot. Just a rearranging of priorities, a re-imagining of city life.

"We could just change things," said Alsop. "The campus would be the street. So the university would be the city."

And Toronto would be a better place.

Just a thought.

Get more municipal election coverage from Torontoist here (www.torontoist.com>).


Will Alsop sees colour in Toronto

Britain’s bad-boy architect weighs in on city’s streetscapes

CBC.CA Arts
British architect Will Alsop is shown speaking at Ryerson University on Sept. 30. He likes the new ROM but has harsh words for Toronto condos. (Ryerson University)

From the terrace of his hotel in central Toronto, British architect Will Alsop says he can see a building with a dash of orange, and at night, a wash of blue light — the latter being Varsity Stadium, which belongs to the University of Toronto.

Splashes of colour are among the things Alsop likes about Toronto, the city with which he now has a firm connection, as distinguished visiting practitioner in architecture at Ryerson University.

One of Britain's most famous architects, Alsop is known for the use of colour in his buildings, including the red, yellow and blue pencils that hold up his iconic Toronto building, the Sharp Centre for Design.

Alsop's native London features three of his most vivid creations: the celebrated Peckham Library, which is cast in a rich marine colour; the Blizard Building, which has a bold streak of red; and the Fawood Children's Centre, with its columns in greens, golds and reds.

"[Colour] is refreshing. It aerates the city. I think if you look at a city, there isn't much colour out there, whether it's London or Toronto or whatever," Alsop said in a recent interview.

"And why not? When you think about Moscow — Moscow was full of colour before the Revolution. It doesn't get much sunlight. It was built in the wrong place, basically. Under the czar, they introduced colour by painting the buildings vibrant colours. I don't know what it is about communism, but they build grey boxes."

Officials in any city tend to be "nervous" about colour, he said. "It's not rational, it's just habit. Cities don't have colour, therefore it's a dangerous thing to propose."
Nervous or not, officials continue to hire Alsop for public works projects. He is slated to design Toronto Transit Commission stations for Finch and Steeles avenues as the city's Spadina subway line is extended.

He is also designing buildings for Shanghai, Beijing and Chongqing, a city of 30 million in western China that the central government is keen to develop. This a rather full slate for a guy who, in August 2009, swore that he'd given up architecture. He recently turned around and opened a new architectural practice in London called RMJM, which has a staff of about 60 and growing.

Alsop sold his old firm, Alsop Architects, in 2004 for financial reasons but remained working for it. After the takeover, however, he wasn't happy there.

When asked about his so-called retirement from architecture, Alsop says, "I didn't like the company that I was with, so I left. As far as settling up, it was easier to say I'm abandoning design and taking up painting."

Alsop keeps a painting studio in the British countryside, but he admits creating art often overlaps with his design work.

"The act of painting helps me discover what a piece of architecture might be," Alsop said.

He often works on very large canvases, although he also designs on the computer. "When I get thinking of things, it's great to have others in the same room and sometimes they add to the painting and slowly we work out what we're going to do."

Alsop first came to Toronto in 2000, when he designed the Sharp Centre for Ontario College of Art and Design, and said he's been watching the changes in the city ever since.

He feels the cultural renaissance has transformed the city for the better — he likes Frank Gehry's revamp of the Art Gallery of Ontario and some of Toronto architect Bruce Kuwabara's projects, which include the National Ballet School and the Gardiner Museum. Alsop even likes the controversial crystal at the Royal Ontario Museum, designed by Daniel Libeskind.

'Missed opportunity'

"I'm a bit jealous, actually. It did have the title one year of being the ugliest building in the world. I thought, there's an aspiration — I missed out on that," he said, displaying some of the bad-boy attitude that has characterized his work.

He's not so keen, however, on Jack Diamond's Four Seasons Performing Arts Centre.

"I don't like the opera house. It doesn't give much back to the street. It's a missed opportunity," he said. "They shouldn't advertise cars on the main floor — it looks like a car showroom."

While he applauds Toronto's efforts to build housing downtown, he thinks the city is making mistakes in its rapid condominium development. Alsop was burned personally by a Toronto condo development. The developer leveraged Alsop's name to get planning approvals, but ended up passing the job on to another architect.
"There are a lot of condominium buildings put up that are highly undistinguished. There's no real personality to them. There are people living in the centre of town, which is quite good practice. On the other hand, there's little individuality and virtually none of [the buildings] are done by any serious designer or architect," Alsop said.

"I think that's very sad, and it's something that the city and also the province should be demanding, because the people that build them make a lot of money."

Story: [www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/story/2010/10/04/will-alsop.html](http://www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/story/2010/10/04/will-alsop.html)

**Oct. 4, 2010**

Video by IO Media

Part 1 Universities As City Builders

http://www.veoh.com/browse/videos/category/educational_and_howto/watch/v20478228PBsPMgf3

Part 2

http://www.veoh.com/browse/videos/category/educational_and_howto/watch/v20478229yh4d7CPC

http://www.video.ca/video.php?id=58206904

**Oct. 1, 2010**

Universities as City Builders

Panel of top architects, president discuss how universities can play transformative urban role

Ryerson Today

By Antoniette Marcurio
Ryerson has embraced its role as a city builder and made known its intention to enhance its community through its Master Plan.

A standing room only crowd of students, faculty and industry professionals came out to hear from top architects, and Ryerson's president, about how universities can be city builders.

The event was presented by Ryerson's Department of Architectural Science and held at the Design Exchange in downtown Toronto. The high-profile panel featured Sheldon Levy, president of Ryerson; Will Alsop, internationally renowned architect and recent distinguished visiting practitioner in architecture at Ryerson; Craig Dykers, principal architect and co-founder, Snøhetta architects; and Eb Zeidler, senior partner, Zeidler Partnership Architects. Ken Greenberg, principal of Greenberg Consultants Inc. and a member of Ryerson's Master Planning team, moderated the discussion.

All of the architects on the panel have a close connection to Ryerson. Snøhetta is co-architect with Zeidler on the planned Ryerson Student Learning Centre (SLC), to be located on prime real estate at Yonge and Gould Streets. The SLC will be a transformative building for the university and the city, Levy has said, serving as the university's gateway onto Yonge Street and providing the opportunity to play a key role in redeveloping Toronto's main thoroughfare and downtown core.

In response to a question about how design can contribute to city building, Levy said: "We're building to be the very best we can be. Clever architecture that is sympathetic to the university and the needs of the students, faculty and staff, while at the same time providing outstanding design for the community and the city, is possible. To do this, you sometimes have to stir things up - that's city building."

Ryerson has embraced its role as a city builder and made known its intention to enhance its community through its Master Plan. Ryerson's Master Plan is a bold undertaking, a flexible framework to revitalize the campus and act as a catalyst for change and renewal in the unique downtown community surrounding the university.

Greenberg said it was appropriate that Ryerson would host a discussion on city building because the university "is in its prime right now. They took their weakness of being in the downtown core and turned it into their greatest strength."
Ryerson is engaged in a number of projects that are playing a part in transforming downtown. In addition to the SLC, the university is undertaking the Image Arts & New Media Building Renewal project, building the Ryerson Gallery and Research Centre as well as the new Ryerson University Sports and Recreation Centre at Maple Leaf Gardens. And in a major move that has proven instantly popular with the campus community, the city recently closed Gould Street to vehicular traffic, providing a pedestrian-friendly thoroughfare in the heart of the campus.

Levy credited the support of the City of Toronto as an important factor in Ryerson having an impact on its community. "The city gave back to the university a street, they gave us density, they worked quickly and lent talent to us. If you don't have a city that wants to develop with you, you will have problems," Levy said. "Having a good relationship with the city is critical. It's a partnership and I don't use the word lightly."

The discussion at the Design Exchange coincided with its exhibit on Alsop. Will Alsop: New York. The Best is Yet to Come is on display until Oct. 18 and offers a glimpse into Alsop's approach to design. The exhibit is presented and funded by Ryerson's Department of Architectural Science.

"For a university to give back more than it takes, it has to expose itself. It's the university's responsibility to make the invisible visible," Alsop said. "People have an idea of what a university and city are and the true role of a university is to redefine what those things are. It's about having a sense of individuality."


Sept 29, 2010

cbc radio Two

HERE & NOW (HR3) | CBL-FM, Toronto, 29 Sep 2010, Length: 00:07:06, Ref # 15F59F9-4, Time: 05:21pm

Reporter: ROBIN BROWN | Reach: 95,000

BUT REGARDLESS OF WHICH SIDE YOU WERE ON, TODAY IT IS A TORONTO LANDMARK AS MUCH A PART OF THE CITY AS IT IS THE UNIVERSITY. TONIGHT, ALSOP IS BACK IN TORONTO, TALKING ABOUT HOW ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS CAN MAKE THEIR ARCHITECTURAL MARKS IN A CITY. HE IS PART OF A CONVERSATION AT THE DESIGN EXCHANGE WITH TWO OTHER VETERANS OF URBAN MAKEOVER ARCHITECT EB ZEIDLER AND RYERSON UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT SHELDON LEVY.