WILL ALSOP

Before joining forces with international powerhouse RMJM, Will Alsop was already turning heads the world over with innovative buildings, inspired students and envious colleagues. He tells *hinge* how he plans to conquer the world, but leave some time for his potting shed.
WAT - You really have no desire to specialise in anything but as a result of that there is a lot we agree about. There are some things we've never done. Maybe we shouldn't do... But remember when I was a student at the AA, I was taught by every member of Architectural Association and when I was finished I went to work at Cedric Price so that sort of gave you a certain grounding. And I was very happy with that because I was interested in what they represented. Cedric was a very interesting man. And he was so free of style that he was full of style; a man of opposites. And he was full of contradictions and great stories and great thought. I used to spend nights trying to figure out what he meant... by drawing. It was like a second course in architecture. I had the opportunity in '79 to begin my own practice. I had no idea really what I would do... Before that I had designed some things, had some success in competitions and things like that. But... what was I really going to do? And at that time I was also supplementing my income as professor of Sculpture at St. Martin's School of Art. In London for a couple of days in a week and I think that was really important to me.

H - I'm wondering how thin you can spread yourself? Does it lead to constantly being on an airplane? Even if you like all your 'branch' places... does it mean you spend proportionally more of your time in the world? For all sorts of reasons. Toronto, which I've just mentioned and we're going to re-establish Shanghai. I feel comfortable in Shanghai.

WAT - So you've got three continents covered...

WAT - That's right and then of course behind that we've got all the other RMIA offices as infrastructure. We're doing some work in the Middle East for example.

H - So that was the geography of your expansion... but what about the kind of aesthetic or formal evolution of the company? Was there a masterplan or was it simply responding to opportunities as they arose?

WAT - As I say, we have no desire to specialise in anything but as a result of that there is a lot we agree about. There are some things we've never done. Maybe we shouldn't do... But remember when I was a student at the AA, I was taught by every member of Architectural Association and when I was finished I went to work at Cedric Price so that sort of gave you a certain grounding. And I was very happy with that because I was interested in what they represented. Cedric was a very interesting man. And he was so free of style that he was full of style; a man of opposites. And he was full of contradictions and great stories and great thought. I used to spend nights trying to figure out what he meant... by drawing. It was like a second course in architecture. I had the opportunity in '79 to begin my own practice. I had no idea really what I would do... Before that I had designed some things, had some success in competitions and things like that. But... what was I really going to do? And at that time I was also supplementing my income as professor of Sculpture at St. Martin's School of Art. In London for a couple of days a week and I think that was really important to me.

H - That's coming from a part of your education!

WAT - Yes, I'd studied sculpture before architecture. That was like having a rest from architecture. I thought I'm going to art school now to loosen up. And then I went to the AA.

H - As a student of sculpture - even if temporarily - can you see that having a significant effect on your work?

WAT - I spent a long time just drawing buildings, quite abstract drawings. I spent three months doing one or two finished drawings - some good, some not so good - every day. At the end of those months, I'd pin them all up on the wall and take down the ones that were no good. That left me with, let's say a dozen that had something in them. It was all hand drawn, very simple. I learned an important lesson there... I mean looking at things and this, I think, comes from the sculpture... From the outside comes something else. That was very interesting. It was not programmed. Because then you'd be more confident to question.
We agree to compromise and actually that's what we do. So I can honestly say that some of the more extreme - or what some people might perceive as the more extreme - examples of things that we have done actually come out of agreement, out of the local people, the client or a combination of the two. And that's what we build.

h - Still to this day, does the sort of artistic or intuitive vibe lead you into the projects, or do you have a different kind of methodology now?
WA - As I've gotten older I'm more comfortable with having no idea at all. You should relax and realise that's actually the right thing to do so you can absorb things and work in any way you wish. There is no methodology, of course there is but you don't have to think about it. You have a much better time, that's for sure.

h - But difficult to teach that to students, or to lead office teams that way.
WA - Well, you do it by example. We have a big wall with a 10m canvas up and we draw and mould something into existence. So they are part of it, you're not telling them what to do, they're working alongside you.

h - But that can also inspire the observer or student to say, 'Oh it's because he's the artist, the genius, so I have to wait for him to do this and then tell me when I can start drawing up floor plans.'
WA - And what's wrong with that? [laughs]

h - Absolutely nothing... for you?
WA - Some are comfortable and once you're in production drawing, seeing that it's a whole process, and so it's so managed carefully and very professionally they are there with me, doing, talking, tailoring a piece of charcoal, even working the computer, I mean it's a combination, it's about making a lot of sense basically. And sometimes depending on the project we get, we work with members of the general public in workshop, to get them to paint, to do what we do, to experience things and to express things... To write poetry... It doesn't matter what it is as long as it's just progressing towards actually understanding the possibility of a direction.

h - Hearing this makes me wonder if that artistic approach has played a big part in the buildings that you have created, which are quite unique.
WA - A lot of them are very simple at the moment, actually.

h - Yes but unconventional in many ways...
WA - Sure, it's about not being afraid, isn't it? Particularly when you get to my age, just being naughty, it's sort of interesting. Coming back to a question - it is difficult to teach. If you've got nothing to teach, what do you teach? That's the whole point. You can put students into very worrying situations...

h - How do you react to critics or observers of your buildings who might say the forms are unusual for the sake of it? I'm sure I'm not the first to say this, but you open yourself to the assumption that your building looks like this because you're simply after impact.
WA - They do say that. I'm fully aware of it. Particularly in London. London is the most blobby.

h - Maybe because it's your hometown.
WA - There's some people, who remain nameless, and they actually get up and make quite inflammatory speeches, some of which is at my expense. I don't notice much at all, in America. Not exclusively but most of my work comes out of this sort of process I've been describing. I suppose that's why I say the word 'compromise' is a word most architects think is a disaster. I think it's wonderful. Because compromise implies agreement. We agree to compromise and actually that's what we do. And that's actually the nature of culture anyway. So I can honestly say that some of the more extreme - or what some people might perceive as the more extreme - examples of things that we have done actually come out of agreement, out of the local people, the client or a combination of the two. And that's what we build.

h - There is currently something of a modern backlash against so-called iconic architecture. Is that a discussion you find irrelevant?
WA - Yeah, I think it's very uninteresting, because I know that a lot of things we do people really enjoy. You know, the people, I'm not building for other architects or architectural critics, I'm building for the people that use it, live in, go past it or come visit it sometimes. And if you produce a place where people are very comfortable and are happy to stay... I'm happy with that. Because I've never understood this idea that buildings should just be the background - that old modernism principle. What did that produce? A whole range of buildings that they've been knocking down because they didn't work. Modernism created wonderful pieces of work but once it was corrupted by commercialism Modernism wasn't very good.

h - Do you encounter clients who come to you because they think you can give them an iconic building and that's all they're after?
WA - That does happen.

h - How would you react to that?
WA - We don't decide to design an 'iconic' building; it's the way it is absorbed by the local culture. They decide whether it's iconic or not. I mean... take the OCAD building in Toronto. Within twelve months the number of student applications rose by 300 per cent, and I know from the mayor that tourism also increased by 2.5 per cent.

h - But you didn't know that beforehand. Nor did the mayor...
WA - No. I wasn't aiming to do that.

h - Exactly. And the client didn't hire you to do that.
WA - Well, I think they were rather hoping, No, I meant it was faith. Simple as that. What I want to say is... I know it's a slight when my building appears on the Johnny Walker advert for whisky or when I arrive at the airport and there is a big photograph of my building. That suits me.

h - Okay, but does the Aaloo name now create expectations for a surprising building?
b - Why this merger or partnership with RMJM? It's somewhat unusual situation.
WA - Well because what RMJM was talking about was really interesting... It was basically opening a global practice and giving me the support to do whatever we wanted to do. Being able to use my name and their infrastructure and depth.

h - So how does it work?
WA - We're a new practice. Based in Toronto, London and Shanghai... and then of course we've got the whole infrastructure of RMJM in other places as well.

b - RMJM has gone through a worldwide expansion. Do they call you and say 'your latest project assignment is this, be in this country office next Monday... type of thing'
WA - Yes.

b - You have a name and a reputation. Some people might wonder why join a large international firm. If you wished to part from your previous partners, you could have opened a new, small shop instead, with plenty of interested clients.
WA - What you say is absolutely true. But you know, in a way I had already done that several times over and in different occasions. I know that needs a certain amount of energy I'm not thirty years old anymore. I'm also realistic enough to know that to have half the chance to do some of the world's most interesting projects you can't do it from your shed at the end of the garden. You've got to have the infrastructure and you've got to have global reach these days and RMJM certainly has that.

b - And joining a large, existing structure didn't give you pause that you might become a cog in the machine, or that you might face a situation where you might lose a bit of design freedom because there are now other directors to answer to?
WA - No, I think we are growing something which is worthwhile, and it's a nice team, it's not perfect, I mean nothing is perfect, but it's quite good.

b - And what percentage of RMJM work will you be leading?
WA - In Europe we'll do everything, it's really on a case by case basis.

b - China is a big market for everybody. Do you think you guys will be involved quite a bit?
WA - Oh yeah, we'll be back in three and half weeks....

b - Will RMJM add other well-known architects to run studios within it?
WA - I'll encourage it. I mean if they had Jean Nouvel for example, I'd be very happy. I love Jean, he's a good friend. Not that it would happen.

b - Are there types of projects that by joining RMJM you might gain access to?
WA - One building that I'd like to have done is a general hospital. Schools are interesting, and also prisons. Those are three building types where the occupants don't really want to be there.

b - Image being at RMJM you'll probably have a chance to do a hospital sometime...
WA - Well, they certainly have a lot of experience in healthcare... That would be nice.

b - What do you do other than architecture, to relax or get away from it?
WA - I paint a lot, but painting is a part of my process anyway. Sometimes I paint just to paint. I have a house by the sea in Norfolk. I like swimming in the sea. Simple, and I have a studio in the garden. I spend a lot of time there. I spend a lot of time in the garden.

b - What do you think of Hong Kong, and what would you change about it if you could?
WA - I'm very fond of Hong Kong. It's one of the few - and I'm not just making this up - cities in the world where I've thought, if I wasn't in London, I could live here.

b - Really?
WA - Yes. I like the fact that it is very contained, obviously the water and the harbour, there are lots of places where you can watch ships... I think the dangers to Hong Kong are that some of the new buildings don't actually respond to the physically that is there. So you take shopping malls, for example, and you know, they could be anywhere. But imagine having a shopping mall where you could actually see the harbour and some of those malls are in places where you could do that and yet they ignore it. But it's a beautiful place; a nice mix of people from different countries. That's what London also has, it's a cosmopolitan place. So I'm very positive.

b - If you could have one commission in this city?
WA - I'd like to do the waterfront.

b - Something on the waterfront?
WA - No, I'd like to do the waterfront. Not everywhere - there is quite a lot of it - but an element of that, because I think that's where a lot of projects have failed, you can get somewhere near the water, but you can't quite get there. I'm not talking about swimming, but just being able to sit there with a glass of something and be at the level of the water, with your favourite city behind you. It would be really good.