Catering to basic human needs—food, fuel, shelter and so on—is usually the work of those who are, often literally, down to earth. And few industries deal as directly with the concrete as the building trade. It's odd, then, that architects frequently give the impression of having their heads in the clouds. Indeed, one of the exhibits at last year's Architecture Biennale in Venice was a cloud.

Few resolve this apparent contradiction as successfully as Will Alsop. A longstanding favorite of the avant-garde and winner of the Stirling Prize in 2000, he is now probably, after Lords Rogers and Foster, the best-known and best-regarded British architect. Yet although Mr. Alsop's buildings, which often feature unusual structures and bright primary colors, aren't without their critics (the satirical magazine Private Eye has twice chosen his work for its award for Worst Building of the Year), they possess a relatively rare quality in modern architecture: they are, for the most part, extremely popular with the people who use and live next to them.

It is a quality that has made him very busy: when I speak to him the day after the opening of a small show at London's Royal Academy, he is in Canada. By the time I call him a couple of days later, he is in China.

Contained in Burlington House's Architecture Space—really a passageway behind the main staircase—the exhibition, entitled "En Route: Proper Behaviour in the Park" (until March 13), comprises large, splashy, colorful paintings produced in response to drawings by students from Ontario College of Art & Design University in Canada, re-imagining Grange Park in Toronto. It offers some clues as to how Mr. Alsop resolves the apparent discrepancy between the abstract thinking of contemporary architecture and the production of physical spaces that the public actually enjoys.
"The students' job was to make a lot of noise, really, performing the role that members of the public have for previous work," he says. "Of course, they're skillful artists; I'm a big fan of art students and OCA, as I still call it. It used just to be Ontario College of Art, then they added Design, then University. I mean, whatever next, one wonders." Mr. Alsop's association with the university originally came through his commission for the Sharp Center for Design, adjacent to the park.

"It was the main point of concern and worry for the people who live around it when I was commissioned to do that building. So I've spent a long time looking at it and thinking about it," he says. "On one level, it's designed, if it was designed, to be a park—I mean, the idea of a park. But there's this tremendous gap between the English landscape tradition set against what people actually do in the park: Tae kwon do, children milling about, one particular place where people seem to sit and knit and observe the world, places to recreate—dreadful word—and rollerblading."

Mr. Alsop is a famously convivial figure whose well-upholstered frame suggests that restaurants and sofas loom larger on his recreational agenda than rollerblading and tae kwon do. Though there is a bicycle, the prominent images in his paintings for "En Route" are glasses, bottles, coffee cups, books, a sandwich and an armchair, as well as a discarded bra. "I suspect there's quite a lot of sex in the park that we don't know about," he laughs. "But if you were asked to design a park, you might ask what it is actually for. There's got to be room for things you wouldn't do, for example, in the street. Something for the casual stroller, the more active sort of person, community, performances, music. Current notions about public space have been institutionalized, often by landscape architects, who in my experience often don't know the names of trees, but see themselves as social engineers. Horrible concept."

Mr. Alsop couldn't be accused of that. He agrees enthusiastically with the suggestion that somewhere to smoke is an important part of outdoor space nowadays—"I'm smoking as we speak," he says—and when he began remodeling part of the run-down Ancoats estate in Manchester, he immediately reinstated the local pub. "People said they would like to sit down and look at water with a cup of coffee or a beer," he says.

But how does he progress from these paintings at the Royal Academy, a cross between colorful Abstract Expressionism and commercial magazine illustration, to buildings, such as his celebrated library in Peckham, southeast London, which was expected to deal with 12,000 people a month, but is so popular that three times that number use it?

"That's a good question, and I'm not sure that the answer I'll give is the right one, but it's the only one I can give, because it's about what I suspect rather than what I know," he says. "I'm delighted that Peckham Library is so popular, though it's not good for the carpets. But taking it and one or two other buildings of mine that people seem to like, I can say that I like to imagine through the act of painting. But these pictures often come out of a number of workshops in which I get other people to do what I do: paint and draw and explore the process of what something might be. It's a springboard to feed my own imagination and to take account of what they say and draw, and not have preconceptions about what something might be.

"It may be that there are no conclusions to be drawn, but it's a way of exploring the possibilities," he continues. "The response in the paintings at the RA is that one of the great things to do is just to sit and look around. One of the good things about this space, with a very low ceiling framing the picture, is that you can observe behavior in the park, which is almost enough in itself." He would have liked a seat next to his pictures, but cheers up at the thought that they are on the way into the restaurant.

"It's rather appropriate," he says. "You are en route, after all. One thing I did do with Grange Park was extend it under the OCA building, which acts as a sort of umbrella. The simple act of keeping the rain off makes a difference. It's about simple matters of human comfort, really."

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