Will Alsop starts over, again

18 August, 2011

As Will Alsop unveils the name and plans for his new one-stop-shop design studio with Scott Lawrie, he argues for a playful approach to architecture, reports Richard Waite

‘How do you think your latest move will be perceived by the industry?’ I ask Will Alsop, who has just officially announced his departure from RMJM after months of speculation.

‘Like shit,’ confesses the 63-year-old, who sits drinking red wine next to new business partner Scott Lawrie on the terrace outside Ransome’s Dock in Battersea, south London.

Alsop’s latest venture, ALL Design, is the Stirling Prize-winner’s sixth ‘home’ since setting up his own practice in 1979. This independence lasted for more than 25 years until 2006, when financial troubles led him to sell his practice to the SMC (now Ingenium) Group. It wasn’t a happy marriage and in summer 2009, Alsop said he was leaving architecture to take up painting – a genuine life-long love.

The tale was not as genuine as it appeared. It was a smokescreen for an eyebrow-raising move to a big-hitter, RMJM. Now just two years later, the enfant terrible of UK architecture has broken free of the megacorp with the help of a mysterious band of ‘partners’ from the ‘creative industry’.

Alsop is excited about his latest enterprise. It will be a one-stop-shop design studio, working on ‘teaspoons to cities and everything in between’.

He says: ‘There’s a joy in making your own decisions, though there was a genuine desire to make it work with RMJM. For me it’s been six and a half years out in the corporate world, and I’ve had difficult times in the 21st century. But I’ve learned from the uncomfortable moments.’

Alsop’s new partner Lawrie (pictured right with Alsop) is a savvy Scot, who formerly worked for Foster + Partners and PRP, and joined Will Alsop at RMJM in 2009.

Lawrie, 43, says: ‘This is not something we’ve done lightly. We enjoyed working together and share a similar sense of humour.’

The pair intends to grow the experimental Testbed exhibition and event space beneath ALL’s Battersea studios, which includes a bar and a kitchen.

As for workload, talks continue with RMJM about the final split of projects. But the 15-20 strong studio will be taking forward schemes in London, China and Canada, with more in the pipeline in Europe and the Far East.

Alsop says: ‘We’re working on a range of projects, from the quite small up to those worth several hundreds of millions.

‘When you are attached to a large organisation, you are perceived as if you don’t want to work on the smaller jobs. But we are now in charge of our destiny.’

In response to questions over how much work was brought in at RMJM, Alsop answers firmly: ‘We arrived when there was one project on the books of London’s RMJM office, at one of the most difficult times for the industry.

‘We had a remit to go and look at international projects and they were always going to take time.’

Alsop is shocked when I tell him a former RMJM colleague has described him as ‘a complex character who is up for a fight with everyone – even clients’.

Lawrie says: ‘That seems way off the mark in my experience.’ But Alsop admits: ‘We can be quite strong with clients.’

Neither Lawrie nor Alsop is prepared ‘to start throwing mud about RMJM’, with whom they may yet collaborate again. Their focus is on the future and a new wave of developer clients.

Unsurprisingly, Alsop believes it is time to re-examine the notion of practice and to kick back at the media obsession with austerity.

He adds: ‘Recent talk of the new austerity is of no help to emerging new practices – it is strangling them at birth.’
'Good architects are magicians who lighten up the austere. Fun is a decreasing currency and the ones who suffer are the public.'

Related Jobs

Sign in to see the latest jobs relevant to you!

- Graphic Designer - New Year London Contract
  £15 - £25 per hour
- Communications Manager
  Up to £35k pro-rata
- Healthcare Architect
  Negotiable
- Architect / Associate (Education)
  Negotiable
- Architectural Revit Technician
  Depending upon experience
- Revit Champion
  Negotiable

Find more jobs