William Alsop

William Alsop hails from Northampton, Northamptonshire, England, he was born on 12 December 1947. He always wanted to be an architect, even before he really knew what architects did; when he was six years old, he designed a house for his mother to live in – its most striking specification was that it had to be built in New Zealand. When he was 16 his father, an accountant, died, and being bored with school he left to work for an architect, doing his A-levels at evening classes.

He was greatly influenced by his drawing tutor, Henry Bird while at foundation course at Northampton Art School. He recalled how he was taught to draw by him.

Alsop then studied at the Architectural Association School of Architecture where at 23 he entered the competition to design the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and came second to the eventual winners, Richard Rogers & Renzo Piano. He worked briefly for Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, a couple who had been instrumental in introducing modernism to Britain in the 1930s, then joined Cedric Price for four years.

After a short period with Roderick Ham, in 1981 Alsop set up a practice, Alsop & Lyall, with his classmate John Lyall in Hammersmith. Jan Störmer later joined the practice and a decade later, in 1991, the practice was renamed Alsop & Störmer after Lyall's departure. Alsop's first real commission was a swimming pool for Sheringham in Norfolk in 1984, followed by a visitor centre for Cardiff Bay. Thereafter he worked on a number of projects in Germany, including the Hamburg Ferry Terminal, before beating Norman Foster in the competition to design the Hôtel du Département des Bouches-du-Rhône (seat of the regional government) in Marseille, France (the building has been nicknamed Le Grand Bleu – “The Big Blue” – and “The Whale” by the locals), in 1994 Alsop and Störmer divided into separate practices in 2000, Alsop forming Alsop Architects.

In early 2006, Alsop sold his practice to a design conglomerate called the SMC Group to concentrate on architecture.

After leaving ARCHIAL (formerly Alsop Architects, then SMC Alsop), he joined RMJM's London Headquarters as International Principal on 1 October 2009. The office’s name was “Will Alsop at RMJM”. Alsop's current practice is called aLL Design and has practices in London and Chongqing. Alsop's London office is located in Battersea in a building which was once a local dairy. The building complex is now called Testbed and is both a temporary arts venue and home to a collection of creative companies and designers including Vivienne Westwood. Testbed has a bar at its centre called the Doodle Bar that allows patrons to draw all over its walls.

Alsop was a tutor of sculpture at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London for several years, and has held many other academic posts, among others at the Vienna University of Technology, Universities of London and Hannover, and actively promotes the artistic contribution to built environments.

Alsop has been made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE), and was elected to the Royal Academy on
18 May 2000.

Alsop regards as his architectural heroes Le Corbusier, Sir John Soane and Mies van der Rohe. His avant-garde, modernist buildings are usually distinguished by their vibrant use of bright colour and unusual forms. Before Alsop begins to work on a new project, he uses painting to clear his mind, think freely and create an uncontaminated design approach.

"One of the reasons for painting is that you are not really in control of what you are doing - and that interests me a lot. Instead of having a specific starting point, which perhaps, in architectural terms, would lead through to a series of logical thoughts working towards a designed building, you can start anywhere."

For him, the act of painting together with working closely with the client and the local community are necessary ingredients in urban design and architecture.

In 2004, Alsop published a book entitled Supercity which elicited much debate. It was the subject of a Channel 4 television documentary and an exhibition at the Urbis museum in Manchester. This book described his vision of a "Supercity" – a futuroistic conurbation – stretching along the M62 corridor from Liverpool to Hull. It included a discussion of how the increasing interconnectivity of the cities along this corridor is changing the concepts of a "city", and how they can be developed to merge the idea of the rural and urban. It also included a number of architectural ideas of possible buildings and communities in this city. Although there was some political support for his ideas, with The Times claiming that former British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott was a supporter, the Supercity has its critics.

Alsop's architectural talents may be the subject of controversy but he has managed to build up an international reputation and a certain degree of fame – he has been called "number three in the hierarchy of British architects after Lords Rogers and Foster". Notwithstanding this, like fellow avantgardist Zaha Hadid, he has actualised relatively few buildings from his designs. Alsop has estimated that only about 10% of his designs have been built. However, this does not worry him because he enjoys designing buildings even when he has no particular commission or competition in mind. "It's like tennis – you have to keep doing it all the time, whether you have a client or not. I believe that absolutely. You can speculate in your sketchbook – you're allowed to think about anything, with or without a client."

In April 2007, The Observer commented that Alsop's approach to architecture could broadly be defined by his statement: "I like people. I hope it shows."