WILL ALSOP: “THERE ARE TOO MAN`FUCKING EXPERTS AROUND AND NO ENOUGH ARTISTS”

Strelka Magazine met up with the Sterling Prize winner, OBE and true rebel Will Alsop to discuss modern youth, 1960s England and how to always be your own boss.

On 2 July Alsop will deliver a lecture “Supercity and bureaucracy in architecture” as a part of Strelka Summer Program.

— Could you tell us what it was like being a young architect in 1960s England?

— Sex, drugs and rock-n-roll!

— Could you elaborate on that a bit?

— In the 1960s there were many youth subcultures: for example, the beatniks or the Teddy Boys with their greasy hair combed back with a curl, very tight trousers, long jackets and creeper shoes. Both were the product of American
influence on British culture. That was really the beginning of a new generation — young people who felt that they needed to make some sort of expression of their own, to find out who they were. None of them were involved with the war itself, so they didn’t want to look back, only forward. They wanted to be rebellious and do things their own way. And, of course, the rock’n’roll and drugs were a part of that — you really wanted to be different from your parents. When suddenly The Beatles and later The Rolling Stones came onto the scene everything changed.

I didn’t go to study architecture until 1968, when I got into AA School of Architecture. Cedric Price, members of Archigram — they were all teaching there at the time. And it was a very open environment and you could do anything. It was good. See, unlike the youth of today who are very obedient and well behaved, doing just what they are told, for us misbehavior was a part of what we were doing. And we honestly believed that we could do anything. — And what about today? Why do you think the younger generation is not as rebellious?

— Maybe I’m wrong, maybe they are just as naughty and wonderful as I hope they are. But when talking about Britain it should not be forgotten that a whole generation grew up during the reign of Mrs Thatcher. And then who was she? In comparison to the politicians of today, she seems quite far to the left. In 1980s though she seemed extreme right. Everything was regulated back then as people feared capitalism was getting out of hand. The idea of competition which is at the core of capitalism was introduced into every sphere: schools of architecture, grammar schools, hospitals – now all have to report on their performance. And within business itself there’s venture capital and takeovers of smaller companies by bigger ones. When these companies become huge they just have to introduce rules in order to have at least some control over their numerous employees. So if you want to keep your job, you have to behave. It’s a terrible generalization, but the employees today have no loyalty because they’re not receiving loyalty from the employer. Your job lasts only a medium term or even shorter and there’s always somebody else to take your place. Not a good feeling. It was not like that in the 1960s.

— When was the last time you visited Moscow? Have you noticed any changes in the city, for example the consequences of increased attention to public space in urban policy?

— The last visit was probably 2 or 3 years ago. It’s a little bit different. You’re
right, I’ve noticed some changes. I’m also well aware that in Moscow there’s an interest in public spaces, along with every other city in the world. It’s fashionable, we have to remember that. The big difference in Moscow and many other cities in the world is that in winter it’s bloody cold and there’s lots of snow, whereas public space is primarily about human comfort. So I cannot comment on whether in Moscow this is taken into account. What you really need is some protection to make it feel like a resort. It’s similar to what we (aLL Design) have done in Singapore and are currently doing in the Middle East. There our job is to create public space that would cool down. In Moscow it’s the reverse. My worry about public space in general, as a trend is that it all looks the same. Birch trees, funny seats, not enough seats, granite cobbles to walk on. Public space is much more than that. It’s how you use it. Often it’s the undesigned, ugly spaces that people find comfortable. So I think there’s too many fucking experts around. And not enough artists.

In the 1990s I did a few projects in Moscow and it seemed that back then there were not so many rules around. Or rather the rules were imposed by the architects themselves. It was a time of newfound freedom, rediscovery of some of the architects from the immediate post-revolutionary period like Melnikov and others. The only problem was that each head architect of any given part of Moscow had an idea about what architecture was or should be. And it was difficult for me and other foreign specialists who came to Moscow in those years, because we wanted to realise fresh ideas. But it was an interesting discussion. And although the things that I’ve built in Moscow are not my best things it was still exciting to be here in the 1990s.

— You often say that you do not consider yourself a fashionable architect and you don’t follow trends. Would you call yourself a trendsetter then?

— I wouldn’t call myself anything. I have done things that others copied and imitated, so maybe I have been a trendsetter. I haven’t been talking to the press about the projects I’m working on right now, so people don’t really know. But I think as you get older, you become more open to other things. And so if you asked me today about what I like and dislike in architecture I would say that I want to keep more existing buildings than 30 years ago.

— In 2004 you published a book called Supercity. And in that book you described a utopian vision of interconnected space where the rural merges with the urban. 10 years on, has your vision of the utopian city changed?

— I’m sure it happened. There were big changes. But the principles remained the same. In that book I was talking about a particular stretch between the East and the West coast in the North of England, where there are many different cities, towns and villages all linked by M62 motorway. What I proposed was increased cooperation between these places, introduction of new settlements, improvement of transportation — it was a vision similar to the current idea of turning the North into a powerhouse. What interested me about publishing that book was also an exhibition and a television program made by Channel 4. In a way I’m quite proud that 10 years later it’s very high on the political agenda. It was not that way in 2004. So, maybe something will happen, and maybe I can even influence that.
— What do you think your contribution to architecture is?

— That’s a really big question – one’s contribution. It’s usually decided by other people not by me. I can only say what things I’m really proud of. I’m proud of my buildings that people continue to enjoy using. It means I must be doing something right. Very often, but not always, I’m working with people, the future users of these buildings. I get them to paint and draw, to think, to confront some things that we as architects have to confront. And they begin to understand these issues better. I also encourage them to dream a little bit more and enjoy the process. If you make everyone smile the chances of making a building or a series of buildings that they might enjoy at the end of the process is much higher. And I think that I can prove that with one or two of my projects.

But normally the office work is where everything becomes a grind – you have experts, you have panels, you have to check the right boxes. It takes all the sex out of it, all the excitement.

— You have designed everything from tube stations and terminals to libraries and campuses. What do you prefer: building spaces for thousands people to pass through or for people to work in and inhabit?

— I like designing both. Also there are two types of building which I haven’t done yet, but would like to. I’d like to do a hospital at some point and maybe a prison — although not in Russia, somewhere else. These buildings are very interesting because people don’t want to be there for one reason or another, there they feel at their most vulnerable. I think I could do something really quite extraordinary to help by means of architecture. The other type of building which I’ve never really designed is a single house for an individual. Except for one that I did just outside of Moscow — it was quite nice, actually, but so much fuss around the security system, my dear! I was never allowed back and if I tell you the location of the house they’d probably shoot me.
— In your career you had some of the best architects as your teachers, you have worked in several companies and as the head of your own studio. Which of these experiences you would call formative, crucial for you as an architect?

— After I finished studying at Architectural Association I worked with several architects — Cedric Price, Max Fry, Jane Drew. At the same time I was teaching sculpture at St. Martin's School of Art. The combination of these two activities was really important in my life. In 1981 I started my own practice and although in 2005 I had to sell it because of financial problems, now we’re back again as aLL Design, completely independent, of course. The thing is I never felt that I have worked for anyone else, ever. It’s very important. I’m not very good in a company’s service, I’m not interested in their rules and their funny methods of doing and recording things. It takes you away from thinking about architecture which is what I like to do best. There are many ways of making architecture, but one thing is true for everyone — concentration and immersion. Then you can do something. If you have to think about filling in forms and recording this and recording that, it just becomes nonsense.

— In one of your interviews you mentioned that you rarely visit the building site and don’t like to control the process of construction too much. Why is that?

— I think you slightly misunderstood what I was saying. I make sure the design goes as we planned it, and of course I have people in the office who deal with it more closely. But if there’s a serious threat to what we want to achieve — then of course I’ll come to the site. I just don’t think I enjoy being on a building site. I don’t like getting mud on my shoes, having to wear a helmet and a jacket — that’s just horrible. I like the opening parties though.

— What are you working on right now?

— A lot of things. A couple of projects in China, the one that interests me in particular is an Art and Agricultural Park with buildings in it right outside Chongqing. We’re also working on a mixed development complex between London and Heathrow airport, one of the gateways to the centre of London. It’s a combination of culture and residential buildings, a little bit of working space and a bus garage. I like these strange combinations.

— And what about teaching? Do you still give lectures regularly?

— I give lectures occasionally, but I have not done it regularly since 1996 when I was teaching at the Technical University in Vienna. I enjoy working with students very much, especially small groups, 6 to 8 people. They present their ideas, we discuss them and see where it goes. I have a very open attitude towards teaching and no particular methodology. I think it’s important for all architects to do some teaching, because it keeps you alive. You get to see what new, young, imaginative architects are thinking about. It can be interesting, and it can be very surprising, and it makes you think. But teaching is also the most exhausting thing you can do in the world, because you have to stay awake all the
time.

— And the last question: in your opinion, what shapes architecture today?

— The use of computers. They are just a tool, but they have influenced the way a lot of people think and create. Even if some architects can’t draw, they still feel they can do it on the computer. But you have to remember that when you press a certain button which has an effect on the image of your work, there’s probably a hundred thousand other architects in the world pressing the same button at the same time. That’s the problem with digital architecture. I can enjoy the images, but I’m not sure exactly what it means.

The materials have also become much more sophisticated, and there’s a greater choice than we had even within my lifetime. That inevitably has an effect. Understanding of engineering on the other hand hasn’t really affected what you can and what you cannot do. Today architecture is a much more multifaceted subject than it used to be. Which is ironic, because at the same time there are many architects who try to close it up and say “This is what architecture is”. I see this as a crime against society — these people should be killed.

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