Across The Universe_Will Alsop – by Alessandra Orlandoni

The film “Across The Universe” by Julie Taymor was released in Italian theatres last winter. Chaotic, psychedelic and chromatically pop, it captures the mood of the Sixties, the high spirits, enthusiasm and confidence about changing the world – filtered by typical British humour and creativity – that turned England’s capital into “swinging London”. At the time Will Alsop was a student at London’s Architectural Association, a school that more than any other saw architecture as a socio-creative discipline where buildings were just the tip – or as Will would say – the bottom of the iceberg.

Today, new technologies and materials make possible what was unthinkable 30 years ago, and a wide range of interesting architects are now able to express with greater ease and immediacy what the Sixties’ generation had anticipated but was prevented from realising by the ubiquitous...
the sixties generation had anticipated but was prevented from realising by the ubiquitous multinationals, concerned only with building ugly copies of modernist buildings, repetitive architectures that lack any soul or individuality.

Will Alsop’s current architectural style is very different from his early designs. His first works include the Hotel du Département des Bouches du Rhône in Marseilles, better known as Le Grand Bleu, a competition he was adjudicated ahead of Norman Foster, and the Cardiff Bay Visitors’ Centre. The Marseilles office building was made to last whereas the Cardiff Centre, initially intended as a temporary structure, became permanent following its huge public success. While their frame and tensile structures pay tribute to Archigram theories and they remain valid architectural proposals in advance of their times, the buildings now appear somewhat dated, not true expressions of Alsop’s real personality.
Today, just turned 60, Will is a poetic, romantic figure, blessed with a fine sense of irony, playfulness and infectious enthusiasm. He is a strenuous champion of an individualism devoid of presumption or one-upmanship, aimed rather at increasing freedom of personal expression and de-dramatising the complex discipline of architecture to make it pleasurable, unpredictable, experimentally pop, in short, understandable for all.

Alsop dislikes codified theories and manifestos. He begins a project “thinking of nothing” – not to be mistaken for “not thinking”, which is something entirely different. Thinking of nothing means creating a tabula rasa in one’s head to allow unencumbered thoughts that can then be captured in sketches and sometimes be turned into buildings. For Will’s approach to the architectural project is pictorial. His paintings, drawings and sketches are all “visual diaries”, works of art in their own right, however, not architectural representations turned into another art form. They express the mood of a building rather than its outward shape through a mix of signs, colours, notes, and splotches of several fluids – often wine, Will’s favourite nectar.
A medley of inspiration, thought, gesture and chance references, these visual diaries are sometimes reprocessed on the computer, given 3-D form, blown up and translated into surprising, often improbable architectural forms. Whatever the end result, they reveal a determination to intervene on the environment in a way that is unshackled by historical references or formal, pre-constituted rules. For Alsop’s architectures destabilise, in the positive sense of the word. They deliberately trigger socio-economic reactions, never indifference. Loved or hated, they are always the focus of strong emotions. Yet isn’t this the very purpose of Architecture?

Alsop’s buildings exude a profound, deeply democratic, elegance. While they might not replicate their surrounding context, they do not overwhelm it, rather suggest another direction. His buildings are never gratuitously formal, nor do they overwork the underlying idea. Unlike most architecture, which embodies a rigidity or monumentality that is typically male, Alsop’s architectures are joyful, welcoming, sensual, elegant and fun. Although conceived by a male mind they exude a subtle female fascination.

Alsop has often been defined by the British and American press as a “blob architect”, in the sense that his architecture smacks of computer generation. As Alsop himself claims though, he is rather a “box” architect. His boxes have a distinctive feature: they overturn the spare essentiality and purism that is modernism, blurring forms with artistic inputs. The formal sobriety of modernism is overlaid with elements of dissonance: soft forms (“pods” in his terminology) and highly improbable looking struts and pillars. On closer examination, the apparent add-ons turn out to be carefully calculated structures that are not in the least redundant. As well as their haphazard appearance, resembling the construction of an imaginative child rather than well thought out architectural design, what makes Alsop’s creations unique, unrepeatable and outside any school of architectural design, what is the use of colour to transform, enhance or de-materialise simple geometrical forms.

Colour adds an essential “plus” to Alsop’s architecture: energy. Never transgressive or in-your-face, neither aggressive or structurally imposing, Alsop’s architecture does not amaze for its technical prowess. Yet it contains and communicates – often completely unexpectedly – the energy of the artistic gesture, a vitality of emotion you sometimes glimpse in a work of art and which is so difficult to describe.

Even more than art, architecture should be seen in real life. This is especially the case for Alsop’s work that vibrates in the light. The intensity of colour and brilliance of the materials inevitably change with the type of light and time of day. In his film “Empire State Building”, Andy Warhol aimed