WE BUILT THIS CITY

On the eve of the Supercity exhibition, Phil Griffin talks to Will Alsop about his rise to prominence.

Will Alsop is like an architect only bigger. He smokes, drinks and tells the officers of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to 'F*ck off!' live on Channel 4. Unlike many of his professional colleagues, Will talks to ordinary people, mainly in their language, though spoken with a bit of a RP drawl. He's from Northampton, which in his personal narrative is a sweet for nowhere. The fact that his early life was spent in a nice place helps explain his passion for place-making ever since. He wanted to be an architect from being very young. "In fact I can only remember one time in my life when I didn't want to be an architect, which was when I first started to be one. So.Slowly I went to Art College for a while, so rekindle my enthusiasm!" For an architect Will Alsop has astonishing artistic tendencies.

Some part of most summers is spent on a farm in Menorca that belongs to his friend and collaborator the artist Bruce McLean. Mostly, they grow in big shoes, and paint. Of these squats there have come a number of buildings, or ideas for buildings, but these summer playgrounds seem mainly to sharpen Will's enthusiasm for paint. Bruce McLean, whose own father was an architect in Glasgow makes a point: "You don't have to be a good architect to be a great artist. But I think you have to be a good artist to be a great architect."

Will and Bruce first met in the bar of the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith in 1979. The refurbishment of Riverside Studios was an early Alsop commission; many throughout the '90s, opening offices in Rotterdam, Hamburg (in association with Jan Stormer) and Toronto. Despite considerable success he could never be mistaken for (or even comfortably associated with) BritArch noblesly, Foster, Rogers, Hopkins.

Alsop's studio at Battersea Bridge is within spitting distance of Norman Foster's. They couldn't be more different. Foster built his triple height opulent space and delights in in-house condon-bliss working lunches. As you walk in from the front door you want to rub your shoes up and down the back of your trousers. Alsop's entrance has a hanging rack for bikes, is hung with big paintings, and has overtowering stairways and wine glasses waiting to be washed. Will's own studio is sparser, 12 metre counter-high workbenches, bar stools. Mac's. The unbroken 15-metre wall is pinned with a full height unframed.

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canvas. Every now and then Will moves from behind the bench, rolls up a trolley loaded with dozens of squeegees of acrylic paint and adds and subtracts from the episodic painting, like a cave painter. The canvas is now installed in Urbis, as part of Will's SuperCity exhibition.

SuperCity, the show, evolved from a Channel 4 series that Will made two years ago. The idea is that the North, the towns and cities of the M62 corridor, from Liverpool to Hull, should properly be thought of as one super city, coast-to-coast, divided into different topographies and specialties, the subsections of a great urban population, inter-related but punctuated by dynamic landscapes.

"Why? Because we are too much intent on dividing people, dividing them into sprouts of noisy boxes. We should be thinking of new ways of drawing people together, forging connections we can make something of."

Which is all a bit 1960's isn't it? "Nothing wrong with 1960's thinking. It was just badly executed, physically and politically."

It's the Alsopian broad-brush big-picture painting that has won hearts and minds in Barnsley and Bradford. As master planner, or Framework Strategist, as he prefers to term it, he's painted Barnsley as a Tuscan Hill Town, and he's flooded the centre of Bradford for a lagoon. "It's to do with shaking them up, finding out what the architecture can do.

Alsop's always taught, from sculpture at St Martin's to architecture in Vienna. It's part of a mission to subvert. Who but Alsop would build a sex museum in Hamburg? Only he would win a competition to redevelop a canal side in Walsall with a scheme that includes a leather-clad hotel. Architects were the ones at school who wrapped their left arms around the exercise book so that neighbours never saw what they were writing. "Mean-minded little fuckers" Alsop calls them. He, on the other hand, passed his exercise book around, he was so pleased with it. He brings his diminished enthusiasm - detractors call it arrogance - to Urbis. The exhibition follows a torrid summer that began with him losing a big building commission, taking his practice into receivership and splitting with his long-time Design Director, Christophe Egret.

In 2002 Alsop won the competition (against Foster amongst others) to design the Fourth Grace for Liverpool Pier Head. His scheme was abandoned in July last year, amidst talk of spiralling costs. "Storey (Mike, Liverpool Council Leader) and Heneshaw (Sir David, Liverpool Chief Executive) simply were not telling the truth."

Whatever the truth is, Liverpool will not have an iconic Alsop building. "The best, I think, I've ever designed."

Goldsmiths College in London, on the other hand, got its new Alsop extension last week, and Queen Mary's Hospital, again in London, gets its new Alsop research labs later this year. Manchester Developer Urban Splash, a sponsor of the SuperCity exhibition, launches Alsop's first residential scheme in the UK. The building, of 145 one, two and three bed apartments is called "Chips". It's the first apartment building in the New Islington development in Ancoats, for which Alsop created the Strategic Framework. "It's three fat chips lying on top of each other on a plate. They're not quite straight, and they don't quite fit." Willful impressionism is another Alsop thing. "A lot of my architectural colleagues think that buildings should not stand out from their surroundings. Not me. I think we are surrounded by too many dull buildings. I just want people to say, 'What the fuck is that?' and they do. Two million people a year come to Grand Bleu just to look, which pisses off my client, because showing them around was never in the business plan."

A debate struck up last year, around the time of the abandonment of the Fourth Grace. A headline in one of the architectural journals posed the question, "Is this the end of Iconic Buildings?" Alsop's response? "Not in this fucking studio it isn't." Every generation of Architects needs a leverer, someone to humanise the profession. A generation earlier it was James "Big Jim" Stirling, who the Building of the Year prize is named after. Alsop won it in 2000 for Peckham Library. Much to the annoyance of his less gifted, meiserly mouthing colleagues, Will Alsop is a safe bet to win it again.