OUTSTANDING IN HIS FIELD

After selling his practice, where to next for Will Alsop?
Alsop’s Reinvention or Swan Song?

Despite the recent prominence of practices that clearly march to their own beat, like for example FAT, the notion that architecture is all about playing it safe was brutally reinforced recently with the news that Will Alsop was allegedly forced to sell his practice. Interview by Denise Maguire

Over the past few weeks, the architectural grapevine has been quietly buzzing with rumour concerning Alsop Design’s attempts to stay afloat. There was a sense of the inevitable about the rumour following a tumultuous couple of years for the architect that saw losses recorded and commissions lost. Yet however believable, the idea that such an iconic, award-winning figure was setting up shop was hard to digest. Before the news broke, I spoke to Alsop in an interview that focused on how his buildings are perceived by the public and by other architects, and on criticism in general in the UK.

Architects are a funny lot. There’s always that sinking feeling before an interview begins when you wonder if you’ve caught them on a bad day on if they will actually deign to speak to you. There was no such illusions of grandeur here though, as Will Alsop is a pleasure to interview – a disarming genuine and down to earth individual who’s passionate about his craft. I asked him how he feels about his celebrity persona: “I really don’t like the idea of being a pre-madonna. I like being among the people and having an open mind, discovering what a building wants to be. I go to my shed at the bottom of my garden and work on projects. I’m not quite sure if being perceived as a celebrity has helped or hindered my career, probably both.”

I asked him what he thought about Irish architecture: “Ireland is a bit of a mystery. The Glucksman looked very good though, to be honest. Dublin is really off the map. London is great as its opened doors to everyone. It’s very difficult for an English person to get projects in Scotland for some reason.”

Alsop is an architect who’s not afraid to take risks, however risk-taking is not a sport very often practised in UK architecture. Of course, innovation is encouraged, just as long as you’re not having a laugh while doing so, and equally important, as long as the public don’t enjoy your building too much. He said, “A lot of my work tends to gather a lot of criticism, but they appear very popular with the public. Criticism comes from other architects, very often from architects I don’t respect.”

The very nature of Alsop’s ethos maintains that above all else, buildings should be “fun” to create, fun to build, and above all else, fun to be in. He told me: “If you have any measure of success in the UK it can be enormously frustrating, you just can’t win.

There’s a school of thought there that if architecture is fun it’s suspect, I think that in all walks of life you should aim to have fun.” However much exuberance an Alsop building elicits, married with that is its workability. Alsop buildings work, a fact that probably irritates his critics. The care with which he thinks about what his buildings are for, and how people could use them in a more interesting way than usual, is evident. That’s why the Pecham Library in south-east London won him the Stirling Prize. It’s graceful and classy, it opens up new possibilities, and above all else, it works. That’s also why the Fawood Children’s Centre in London was shortlisted for the Stirling Prize last year. Alsop enclosed all of the available space in a large mesh cage with a corrugated metal and polycarbonate pitched roof, creating space that is sheltered and secure but essentially open air. The potential problem of having shivering, blue-faced kids running about on cold days was solved by

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with its own separate func. such as meeting rooms, a mini-museum. Most of the critics write on the pro have been positive, but this has been many, perhaps of Alsop’s impending fall for grace.

In what must have been to the award-winning architect Alsop Design was purchase SMG Group last month, a hodgepodge of little-known commercial architectural practices for £1.8 million. SMG got based in Battersea, south London will now be known as SMG. The very spirit that transfigured him into one of Britain’s leading architects was the thing that Alsop to sell up. He has all of spoken of his desire to build school or hospital, but after backside of the SMG Group Alsop complained of being from designing schools anc hospitales in Britain. I asked was there any particular ho held like design: “I’d like really good secondary scho
this is very hard – the cost per square metre for building a secondary school is exorbitantly high. Additional square metres are seen as additional money. You just need space, flexible space not over designed.’

When asked if he would have preferred to have remained independent, he told the Guardian in a recent interview: ‘In an ideal world that may be the case, but this has been the best thing to do for me and my staff. Of all the countries in the world, the UK is the most risk-averse group of people there is. In North America we are doing very well and in the Far East we are doing well. I want to work in the UK, it’s my home. In London we are not being blinded to design the office buildings we should because of a perception we are a risk and might not get planning permission. The Olympics is a good example [of the UK’s risk aversion]. We are not putting our name forward because I don’t think we are going to get anything there.’ He also said he had been refused commissions to design office buildings in London because of fears that his designs would be disagreeable to planners and too risky to build. His design for Barnley, which would have transformed it into a Tuscan hill town, drew gasps from traditionalism as did his proposal for a multi-use building in the shape of a blob called the Cloud next to the historic Three Graces buildings on Liverpool’s pierhead.

Alsop himself has insisted he will retain creative control of the business but use the extra clout provided by a group of SMC’s size to take on large PFI projects and compete with larger practices such as Foster & Partners, thus re-establishing himself as an architect to be reckoned with. If the ethos of Foster and Rogers appeal to a practical streak in the British approach to architecture, then Alsop appeals to the romantic side, where logic gives way to intuition and the imagination is allowed to wander. Perhaps Alsop’s decision to sell up, forced or not, will turn out to be the best he has ever made.
La teatralità dello spazio
Fawood Children's Centre