Gunning for the style police

Will Alsop tells Anne Davey Orr why

Behold the new $30 million Ontario College of Art and Design classroom and studio building by British architect Will Alsop - a tottenized retro-futurist coffee table joined umbilically to its Soviet-style predecessor below. The message, apparently: art and design are nothing but fun fun fun. Nothing to get serious about. A playful spirit of induced hazard will keep students wondering when the chucked(ish) box might wobble free of its cute, waffle-stick legs and come crushing down on their heads. This exercise in hyper-entropic avant-garde faggery is so cutting edge that it is already out of date. The only question: which of the two conjoined buildings is more crudely ridiculous? So wrote James Howard Kunstler on an Archiweek Discussion Forums blog in June 2005.

Blogger Algonguinn writes: this is the best thing to happen to architecture recently. It is a simple, brilliant gesture. Having the addition over the existing school solves all the space issues, and makes a bold statement. It’s (ish) miasing is something to be experienced at street level.

The building itself exemplifies the question of ‘what is art?’ What is a building? Is this beautiful, or vulgar? The controversy this building has attracted could not be more appropriate for a school such as OCAD. And isn’t that the most important thing?

So many people bitch about its context, how it ruins the street. These people have no clue...this building MAKES the street...

...the best time to observe this building is at night. The brightly painted windows glow their colours...it’s very nice.

The interior is bland, but the windows are great for sitting in...and you actually do feel like you’re floating above the city. Very cool.

The ‘tabletop’ is, I believe 15 ‘storeys’ above the ground.

As well as ‘the tabletop’, the OCAD building has also been likened to a block of mousy cheese, such is the opprobrium in which it is held by some critics. The comments are typical of the kind that English architect Will Alsop attracts. Now he is scheduled to speak in Cork on 17th October in the Creating a Cultural City Lecture Series run by Cork City Council’s Arts Office.

When I spoke to Will Alsop about his Cork lecture he said he didn’t know
what he would talk about, he hadn't really thought about it.
To book a slot with him was difficult. He jet sets to projects in New York, Toronto and China and lectures internationally. He hadn't had lunch, he complained about places where he can't smoke but all in all he was sanguine about his personal publicity and seemed calm about the take over of his practice by the SMC Group earlier this year. He was gunging, however, for the 'style police' whom he feels have stifled architectural creativity in Britain.

"I suppose the main theme of my talk in Cork will be that 2006 is a great time to be an architect," he said.
"Generally speaking there is no predominant style – you can do what you like. Architecture has gone beyond rules. Most rules, in any case were laid down by architects. Now there is a deeper and deeper interest in architecture by the public." He is interested in how people engage with architecture. "People are much more creative than they are given credit for. If you give them a pencil it is interesting to see what they come up with." He would ban the words 'best practice'. "Those two words discourage what a design could be. They encourage architects to follow what has gone before."

The publicity blur for Alpso's Cork lecture describes his practice as an international operation guided by the principle that architecture is both a vehicle and symbol of social change and renewal. This philosophy, according to the blur, extends from the design of individual buildings to embrace broader principles of urbanism and city development. In February the Guardian hailed Alpso as one of Britain's most celebrated architects. He made his name with a series of controversial buildings and city plans, most outrageously, in the eyes of his critics, in his proposal for a blob called the Cloud to sit next Liverpool's historic Three Graces. Earning him the sobriquet Mr. Blobby, these criticisms roll off him easily, perhaps because he is wedded to forces of creativity and sees art and architecture as one and the same thing.

He works with Bruce McLean, a sculptor from the Slade School of Art, for a couple of weeks at a farm in Spain each year in what can only be described as a creative exploration.

"We get up at 7.30am and work until 10.00 pm. We might buy a load of wood or whatever. One year we started to play with shadows."

Three years ago they showed some of the resulting drawings at a gallery in Milton Keynes.

"We don't go with the idea of making a work of art. It is an intense process that can be applied to urbanism." Alpso was a tutor of sculpture at Central St. Martins College of Art and Design for several years and his paintings have been exhibited alongside his architectural projects in various galleries including Sir John Soane's Museum, Cube Gallery, Manchester and the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennial.

This process feeds nicely into his summary of how architecture stands today. "We are beyond style. I love it that how buildings turn out can not be predicted."

Gehry's Guggenheim building is a case in point.
"Bilbao is a magnificent building. And you know Gehry's work up until the age of 55 was banal. Then he did his own house and the flood gates opened."

When I praised the burgers of Bilbao for actually building the Guggenheim Allop agreed with the rider: "Bilbao are up for a lot of exciting things. In a way Gehry was pushing at an open door with them and in that way he was lucky."

Allop's experience with his highly original concepts for buildings and spaces has not been so positively received - particularly in Britain.

"This is the most risk-averse country in which to work." He is quoted in The Guardian citing the Olympics as a case in point - one project SMC Allop will not be doing for because he feels they wouldn't get anywhere there.

"There are too many committees - mainly manned by non-architects taking decisions. For instance, why is Stuart Lipson, a non-architect, in charge of CABE? Architects should be given responsibility for architecture. This committee decision making leads to the lowest common denominator. The consequence is that talented young architects are doing nothing. I am talking mainly about the greater London area here because it is different in other places such as Liverpool and Manchester." Yes it is believed that it was his inspirational proposals for a number of northern towns which attracted most unfair criticism to him.

He derides what he calls the farce of public procurement and considers its administration an incredible waste of time. "Practices get a project to do, say, for a plan of a town - then - they have to go through a further process of bidding - an enormous waste of time."


Allop's book SuperCity was controversial and was the subject of a Channel 4 documentary and an exhibition at the Urban museum in Manchester. The book describes his vision of a futuristic conurbation stretching along the M62 corridor from Liverpool to Hull. However he has been accused of taking a highly global stance and ignoring the needs of those who cannot afford to travel. A global stance is not surprising given his sphere of work.

Of the press criticism he draws he says, "Papers need to see pain. Art (and in that he includes architecture) is the only profession that deals with joy. All the other professions deal with misery."

The greatest influence on his architecture he maintains was Cedric Price for whom he worked for three and a half years.

"He was clever and human. He questioned everything. I learnt from him that architectural style is a habit." He also worked for the influential Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew.

Allop's work completion rate has been compared, I believe unfavourably, with that of Zaha Hadid. His built work includes Hamburg Ferry Terminal, Cardiff Bay Visitor Centre, Peckham Library for which he won the Stirling Prize for architecture in 2000, North Greenwich Tube Station, the Ben Pinlool Building at Goldsmiths College, New Cross, Fawood Children's Centre, London which was nominated for the Stirling Prize in 2005, Hotel du Department Des Bouches du Rhone, Marseilles and, of course, the OCAD building in Toronto.

SMC Allop, as the practice is now known, is undoubtedly the star of a stable of lesser-known practices. While he would have preferred to remain independent, he believes that it is the best solution for both himself and his staff.
"The UK is my country and I want to work here. We are doing well in North America, and the Far East. There are, particularly in England, people with an architectural and planning agenda, who are responsible for young and creative architects not getting work. There is a lot of disappointment." His joining the bigger SMC Group suits him because it will allow him to concentrate on what is his passion — architecture.

As he kicks at the door of 60 years he maintains that architecture is an older person's game. "My best work has to come," he said. "Cocciusic's sketch book from his later years showed that it would have been his best work. Look at Gehry."

He likes working in Hong Kong and Shanghai. "There is a lot of variety and you can get things done." He also likes working in Germany. "You go slower but you never go back — and they like quality."

Surprisingly for an iconoclast, he likes the fact the Prince Charles has an interest in architecture. "Before Charles there were few architecture critics working in the national dailies — now they all have them. That is directly as a result of his interest."

Many years ago under the Allop and Lyall banner Will Allop prepared a generic scheme for Belfast City Council which was designed to be adapted to a number of sites. It never got off the ground partly because of an adverse reaction from the profession locally and, of course, a lack of faith in the city because of "The Troubles". If my memory serves me well, it involved a tented structure which could be adapted to cover a number of streets. With a newly rejuvenated Belfast it would be interesting to revisit those designs and compare what has happened to what might have been.

In April this year the Planning committee of Wakefield council came out in support of SMC Allop's designs for an extension to the Grade 2 listed Orangery in Wakefield. They include a glazed rear ground floor extension and an angled aerial pavilion floating (not surprisingly) above the original buildings. They are working on a major commission for the REMI Corporation in the USA to design a residential and museum development overlooking the Hudson River in Yonkers, NY. The project will pioneer various innovations in prefabricated construction, with self-sufficient energy production, including a wind turbine on the tower roof. It is scheduled for completion in 2008. In Singapore Allop is working on a dramatic redevelopment of the riverfront district of Clarke Quay being developed by CapitaLand. A sophisticated shading/cooling system embedded in the roof is used to manipulate the site's microclimate. Phase 1 was completed in March this year resulting in a four-fold increase in foot traffic.

For a man whose CV runs to four tightly spaced pages listing qualifications (many), honorary positions (extensive), academic appointments (numerous), awards (impressive), exhibitions (widespread), publications (too many to list), panel appointments (prestigious) his ambition for himself is simple. I asked Will Allop what he would like to be doing in ten year's time.

"Sitting down with a gin and tonic," was his immediate reply. More seriously he believes that there is a lot of work to be done on towns and cities to encourage developers and contractors and to engage with the public. "If I could achieve a position, in terms of architecture, that you could not predict how it would turn out, I would be very proud."

Will Allop will speak at the Millennium Hall, Cork on Tuesday 17 October 2006 at 7.00pm. The lecture is free. Should be good fun. That's what Allop is all about.

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