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*Front cover and property front cover by Rebecca Williams
www.rebeccawilliamsart.com*
Alsop's fables

Architect Will Alsop wants some more innovation in the Kensington & Chelsea 'skyline' as well as the smoking ban to be, well, banned. Rose Bateman met the enfant terrible of British architects to talk about bricks and mortar.

September 2000. Will Alsop has just been crowned the shock winner of The Stirling Award, British architecture's answer to the Oscars, and he is on rambunctious form. Bursting with characteristic joie de vivre, and buoyed by a hearty dosage of Chianti's finest, he takes the stage to retrieve his prize, conferred in recognition of his turquoise, upturned L-shaped library, located in the heart of Peckham. Immediately, and somewhat unexpectedly, he begins to scold. The cameras are rolling, the broadcast is live on Channel 4 and his vocabulary is definitely post-watershed stuff. The unfortunate object of his castigation is the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Seven years on, he stands by his lavish lambasting. 'What Kensington and Chelsea needs is some seriously good modern architecture to complement its very fine existing Victorian buildings, and somehow, they've just never managed it,' he maintains, in spite of the aftermath of criticism heaped on him by journalists once they discovered that Alsop actually lives in K&C, the press, true to form, hauled him up for such an apparently hypocritical outburst. What they didn't get was that he never said he didn't like the place. 'I wouldn't have lived here for the past 35 years if I didn't like it,' he counters. Rather, the point he was trying to make was that whereas traditionally under-privileged places like Peckham had begun to invest in broad-minded new building policy, Kensington and Chelsea remained crippling conservatively, resting on its stucco-fronted laurels. It is, he says, difficult to say off the top of his head, what he might do to improve the area — that is, before reeling off a list of changes he would make, given the chance. 'What the borough needs is a wonderful new square to provide a focal point — it is lacking a focal point. Oh, and Notting Hill Gate is literally uninteresting. It is the gateway to this amazing and incredibly well-known area and yet it's appalling — clogged up by traffic and by signage.' He's warming to his theme. 'I also would like to test out the Naked Street concept in Kensington.' Naked streets? 'Yes, having just one, uninterrupted surface from base of building to base of building — no signage, no clutter — and more trees!' Despite his gripes (which are many, and not confined to the short-comings of K&C — so myriad are they, and so vociferous is he, that he was once approached to become one of the professional lamenters on Grumpy Old Men), he likes the area very much. 'I enjoy the fact that you can walk to lots of places — the museums and Harrods, for example. And it always seems to be sunnier than everywhere else.'

Alsop might appear a contradiction; his grumpiness about things (at the moment the issue getting his goat is the imminent smoking ban — he blames it on 'busy-bodies') is balanced by a
Persevering, he designed her a house to live in that same year. His plans were modest, if specific. Its most notable condition was that it had to be built in New Zealand.

Since then the work he has turned his hands to has been less diffident, and in all probability, less specific — indeed, one of his most winning attributes is his adaptability of mind and ability to produce a superfluity of ideas to fit any space, any circumstance and, well, most budgets. Once famous for not being allowed to realise his designs, at least in the UK, he has nevertheless garnered impressive ‘number three’ status, behind the prolific and ubiquitous Lords Rogers and Foster — and his dogged perseverance is paying off; in the past decade (in London alone), he has delivered the aforementioned Peckham Library, a beautiful conversion of Bloomsbury Square’s Victoria House, North Greenwich’s impossibly oceanic tube station and Palestra, the multi-storey London Development Agency office in Southwark, the latter of which has persuaded more people to take him more seriously. A penchant for bright colours — especially orange — and pods has earned him the unbecoming nickname, Mr Blobby, but Palestra’s quirky understated证明 to the world that he can create more than just radical, improbable feats of structural engineering. Still to come is a skyscraper in Old Street, a mixed-use development in Putney, as well as a complete masterplan and regeneration scheme for Croydon. All this is in addition to jetting across the world to the international outposts of his studio — there are offices in Toronto, Singapore, Shanghai and Beijing — plus globetrotting to oversee work on-site, visit clients and draw in new commissions. But there remains a contingent that dismisses him simply as someone who enjoys the shock factor. Talies, for example Barnsley, the disadvantaged and shabby north Yorkshire countryside — back in 2003 he unveiled plans for its transformation into a Tuscan hill village by framing it with a ‘living wall’, thus halting urban sprawl and, and projecting a halo of light around its parameters. Critics sneered but, argues Alsop, ‘the people of Barnsley loved it’. Another example was when he outlined a solution to the dreaded urban spread, which involved joining up the M62 corridor so that the stretch from Liverpool to Hull would become one continuous city. The nimby's weren’t keen, and it aroused public debate, but you have to hand it to him, there is something in it. And, far from being shock tactics, he is deadly serious about his work, about urban planning and about starting debates that might just get people dreaming. And his philosophy dictates that daring to dream is fundamental to change. There is something about Alsop that is, whatever your stance on his output, engagingly charming. And to hazard a guess, it has something to do with the fact that he likes people. He likes talking to them, getting them involved in his design process, understanding what makes them tick, so that he can create public buildings that in turn make them tick. He likes the word ‘joy’ and thinks that we should make more time for it in our lives — which can only be a good thing. And he likes to paint. Which means that his shoes are, more often than not, splattered with remnants of his day’s brightly-coloured work and his fingers decorated with splodges, making him instantly and infinitely more likeable than the vast number of his contemporaries, with their designer glasses and be-polo necked uniforms. Alsop, by contrast, often ventures out of the house in his slippers, because they’re ‘jolly comfortable’.

Despite his conviviality, he is nonetheless always on the warpath about something. Though he still quietly broods about K&C’s lack of imagination as regards its immediate environment, he’s let that one go, just for now. His attentions have recently turned to the state of prison accommodation (inmates have received their punishment in being removed from society. Why should we heap further punishment on them by denying them a view, or making them sleep on stupidly short beds?). Smoking is another pressing concern (‘if they are not going to let us smoke anywhere, why don’t they just ban cigarettes? They never would because it’s such a good source of income. It’s all wrong’), while he also has a plan to curb flying emissions (‘I see no reason why we cannot have high speed trains ferrying us across Europe’). But perhaps we’ve rekindled in his tide against the Borough. So, if you hear news that there is going to be a bright pink, blobby instalment on stilts at Notting Hill Gate, you’ll know who to thank.

SMC Alsop, 41 Parkgate Road, SW11. 020 7978 7878.
www.alsoparchitects.com