THE SKY LINE

THE COLORIST

The playful world of Will Alsop.

by Paul Goldberger

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It must be tough to be a British architect these days if your name isn't Norman Foster or Richard Rogers. The most famous British architects since Christopher Wren are filling the world with so many sleek glass-and-steel buildings that it can be hard for their compatriots to get noticed. All the more reason to enjoy the rise, in recent years, of Will Alsop. Alsop, now fifty-nine, is the anti-Foster. His buildings are startling, but also whimsical, gentle, colorful, and modest. Alsop's playfulness makes him unusual—wit is in short supply among architects today—but his work, on closer inspection, is just as notable for the commonsensical attitudes it embodies.

The building that has done most to establish Alsop as an international figure is a bizarre structure in Toronto, the Sharp Center for Design, at the Ontario College of Art & Design. It is a slab, two hundred and seventy feet long and raised nine stories into the air on huge, slanted legs. The legs—red and yellow and black and blue and purple and white—look like a bunch of gigantic colored pencils, or pick-up sticks mid-fall. The slab, which accommodates two floors of classrooms, studios, and offices, is covered in white corrugated metal and decorated with black squares. The building as a whole looks like a crossword puzzle on stilts. It seems to float above its surroundings, and locals have taken to calling it the Tabletop.

The most remarkable thing about the Sharp Center, however, isn't how strange it looks but how natural it begins to seem once you have spent some time with it. Alsop isn't trying to be cute, and there is logic to his zaniness. The college is housed in a row of low, undistinguished brick buildings, mostly from the nineteen-fifties and sixties, on a pleasant
street in downtown Toronto, with a park behind it, a parking lot beside it, and an apartment block across the street. The new building was to occupy the parking lot, but the neighbors in the apartment block objected to losing their park views and the college was eager to avoid confrontation. Alsop met with the neighbors and someone suggested lifting the addition into the air to allow views under it. "I don't want to sound like some Communist here, but ordinary people do have some good ideas," he told me recently. "Architects left on their own can't break away from their preconceived notions."

To design a building that resembles a fancifully decorated tabletop but doesn't look ridiculous is no small accomplishment. Alsop's shrewdest move is the seemingly chaotic slant of the legs. These not only give the whole composition a sense of rhythmic movement but are also more efficient than vertical columns—which would have required extra bracing and might have made the slab seem dull and oppressive in a brutalist sort of way. Alsop has also taken care to relate the building to its neighbors. The elevated slab overhangs a portion of the old building as well as the former parking lot, where it serves as the roof over a new outdoor piazza for the school. ("We have built the world's most expensive umbrella," Gregory Woods, who manages Alsop's office in Toronto, told me.) The underside is covered with the same pattern of black and white squares as the sides. This is a crucial touch, engaging viewers with the mass above them: in a sense, the building's underbelly becomes its most important façade. Walking underneath, you feel as if you're in the presence of a gargantuan but benign Dalmatian.

The Sharp Center has upped the ante for architecture in Toronto, which has more often been defined by bland efficiency than by stylistic invention. Since Alsop's building opened, Toronto has got a new museum expansion by Daniel Libeskind, and another, by Frank Gehry, is on the way. Alsop, who had never been to Toronto until he was interviewed for the Sharp job, now has so many other projects there that he has opened a branch office. Not since Philip Johnson's Pennzoil Place transformed Houston, more than thirty years ago, has a single building so invigorated the architectural culture of a city.

Until recently, Alsop had been considered something of a court jester among British architects. One London critic has accused him of "churning out dolly-mixture masterplans" and "crude indicative building designs in the form of a giant teddy bear or Marge Simpson's blue beehive hairdo," and occasionally the unconventional forms do start to seem over the top: the recent Blizzard Building at Queen Mary, part of the University of London, features a two-story orange blob (containing a learning center) suspended in midair. But in 2000 Alsop won the Stirling Prize, Britain's most prestigious award for a new building, with a library of green glass in Peckham, South London, a portion of which, like the Sharp Center, is lifted high on thin, slanted columns. The award had the effect of validating Alsop's apparent eccentricity, making him appear as an heir to a great tradition of English mavericks—Nicholas Hawksmoor, John Soane, Edwin Lutyens—whose unconventional forms made for architecture of real humanity and emotional resonance.

Despite his fanciful tendencies, Alsop has no problem with constraints, and seems to work best when the limits of budgets and functional demands can serve as a counterweight to his hyperactive imagination. His second completed project in Toronto is a very modest one: a sales pavilion for a condominium developer. Alsop produced a three-story plywood box whose sides are punctuated by amoeoba-shaped windows with frames in green, orange, yellow, white, black, and pink. These walls do double duty as giant billboards, with huge letters advertising lofts at nine hundred and ninety dollars a month. Slid into the big box like a car into a garage is the smaller box of the salesroom itself, which has a glass front, decorated with zig-zag stripes in black and white. Alsop, at heart, loves simple structures and likes to doll them up. His latest Toronto project, Filmport—the flagship building for a film-studio complex near the waterfront—is simply a

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long rectangle, but it curls up and forward like a wave. The front wall is glass and the back one, made of bright-red metal, has horizontal slots for windows. The end walls are dotted with more of the amoeba-shaped windows that are fast becoming an Alsop trademark.

ILLUSTRATION: JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME

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