Free up prison design — that’s Will Alsop’s message, says Hugh Pearman

I was talking to a designer type who had been to see Will Alsop’s The Creative Prison exhibition. Good houses, good clothes, a general air of youthful right-on-ness about him. You’d have had him down as the target audience for such an exercise: the concerned, liberal seeker of solutions to society’s problems. Except that he wasn’t. I asked what he thought of the show. He pondered for a moment: “Trouble is,” he replied, “it started to bring out the Daily Mail reader in me.”

Yup — look ‘em up and throw away the key. The very idea that a prison might be useful and tolerable, if not actively enjoyable, is a hard one for us. Prison is meant to be a place of punishment, where justice takes its course and the middle classes exact their revenge on their tormentors. So, if you’re caught, you pay your dues, you are released — and then what? Chances are, you will quickly reoffend. Because prison has taught you to do nothing else. And so the prisons fill up to capacity, and the problems get worse. This is where Alsop comes in.

Alsop has, to my knowledge, declared any political preference. He enjoys the good things in life: good food, good wine, holidays, politically incorrect cars. He sees no reason why everybody shouldn’t have a better time of it, and that includes prisoners, if it means they will go straight as a consequence. Needless to say, the House Office has had absolutely no input in the exercise. So, it’s down to Alsop to get tough on the causes of crime — specifically, the crime-engendering condition of being in prison.

When I go to meet Alsop in his Battersea studio, I’m reassured to find him chain-smoking, with two bottles of wine in front of him. Drawings are scattered all over the table. There has been a design meeting. Alsop appears to be redesigning Croydon. “The developers are gathering round like wasps. The investors and chain stores have been ringing me. There are billions of pounds lining up. Croydon is pregnant with opportunity.” Given his reputation for lacking about (he has in the past suggested buildings in the shape of a giant teddy bear and Marge Simpson’s bimbo hairdo), just to get people to sit up and take notice, there is the ever-present danger that a wine stain on a dressing may evolve into some huge, red, crescent-shaped Croydon building. What the hell, we pull the cork, splash the wine into the glasses and settle down to an inebriated discussion.

Alsop, it’s fair to say, is not overenthusiastic about the business side of architecture. High profile though he is, his firm has had to be pulled out before now, and is currently lodged within Britain’s biggest and most acquisitive design group, SMC. His role, it appears, is to sprinkle the magic dust of high design over the commercial offices in the group, to get on with his colourfully eccentric buildings and masterplanners (Croydon follows Burnley, Bradford, Walsall and the “urban village” of New Islington, Manchester, which is now being built), and, if he wishes, to do some personal projects that yield no money at all. Such as the Creative Prison.

Alsop believes in populist people research. Commissioned for the job by the arts rehabilitation group Redec, alongside the artists Shona Illingworth and John Feild, Alsop promptly went to jail. Namely, HM Prison Gatwick, which has murderers in it. He talked to the lifers (“They’re seriously saucy boys”), he talked to the guards. “I’d never been to a prison before, and I asked to be locked in a cell,” he says. “I was in there for 10 minutes. I was happy to get out.” He was puzzled that the beds were so needlessly short, and that the place was so badly built that it froze in winter and steamed in summer; and he found, to his surprise, that the food was quite palatable. But the thing that struck him most strongly was that there was almost nothing — apart from the odd pottery class and menial jobs — for the inmates to do. Some of the pottery he observes, is up to art-school standard. But there’s nowhere to display it. “What they really want,” he says, “is to learn a job — plumbing, carpentry, whatever — so they have a skill when they’re released.”

For Alsop, there is an essential confusion in most people’s attitudes to prison. “It’s the idea of punishment heaped upon punishment. The punishment is to be taken out of society. That’s fine. But even the prisoners complain about that. They know they’re there; they accept that. But then they’re punished further…” The showers are appalling. It’s where a lot of nasty things happen. Why can’t they have a shower in their cell?”

So, the idea of the Creative Prison emerged: instead of large blocks, a village of smaller buildings, each self-contained. You have your own key to your cell — to protect you from the other inmates — but you can’t get out. There are shared kitchens, workshops, allotments. Instead of a security wall or fence, the prison is ringed with equally impermeable lower buildings that act as an interface with the outside world — a kind of halfway house. In other words, it is made clear that there is no escape strategy other than learn to be useful.

What the Creative Prison reminds me of most is not so much a holiday camp as a high-security university campus. The same tiny rooms, the same shared facilities, the same class of (you hope) stern but fair overseers — the difference being that this is a vocational campus, inhabited by dangerous people, that you emphatically won’t be able to stroll out of. It makes sense, the idea of the university evolved from that of the monastery, and what is a monk’s cell if not a prison cell? “It would obviously cost more, but not that much more,” Alsop says. “I’ve had a positive response from inmates and guards. Other experts in prisons have been interested. The hardest response has come from other architects. I was shocked by that.”

Shocked, but not, I think, surprised. Alsop is an architect who has managed to stay residually just outside the mainstream. He has never designed anything quite so provocative as a prison that looks interesting and might actually be useful. Because he can’t help designing buildings that look as though they might be fun, and we will always have a problem with the idea of prisoners having any kind of fun.

It’s worth a try, though. Alongside the nasty prefabricated害怕 arrangements built these days, which manage to make Victorian prisons seem close to humane, there ought to be room for one closely monitored Creative Prison. Would Alsop’s idea work? Would rates of reoffending fall? There is only one way to find out: build one. If it fails, you can always turn it over to students.

The Creative Prison exhibition runs at the Architecture Foundation’s Yard Gallery, E1, from Tuesday to Sunday:
www.architecturefoundation.org.uk

*The magic dust of design’s left, an exterior montage from the Creative Prison project, top, a computer-generated image of a cell interior.*
The show’s other fascinating quality is its portrayal of a celebrity on the other side of the transaction, interviewing rather than being grilled, and letting choice insights in the direction of other delusional soap operaing sessions be fraught. "There have been a lot of jokes about people I like, and I’ve said, ‘I’m not saying that. I try to be reasonably moral, but I also try to remember that it’s supposed to be fun and frivolous."

During the first series, it always seemed to be about Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan and Heather Mills. With the first two, I pretty much agreed with that, but that’s only from my reading about them. And I hope they want a knowing chuckle. "With Heather Mills, I started feeling really bad for her, but then the writers would say, ‘Well, apparently she’s been offered $25m and she’s not taking it. Don’t you think she’s a greedy bitch?’ You feel a bit better about it then."

The most infamous car-crash moment occurred when Church, for her customary show-closing duet, got up on stage with a seemingly sozzled Amy Winehouse to perform Michael Jackson’s ‘Beat It.’ Winehouse slurred her way through a rivetingly sham-bolic rendition, to the visible alarm of her co-singer. "The day before, at rehearsals, Church recalls, ‘I was a bit eccentric, but she didn’t seem drunk. I’d said, ‘Which hit do you want to sing?’ And she’d gone, ‘Whatever – it’s only a knees-up, innit?’ And she sang it a bit strange, but I thought, ‘She’ll tighten that up; she’s just being a bit stylistic.’ By showcase the following day, with two takes abandoned and the audience getting lively, Church was close to panic. ‘The director was going, ‘Okay, reset the camera’, and I was like, ‘F***ing hurry up, because if he hears what the audience is saying, she’s going to go, ‘F*** this, I’m off.’"

Church doesn’t relate this censoriously, but you get the strong impression that nights on the oyster and all, the woman who signed her first record deal aged 11, who dumped her manager when she was still a teen and who has again put off gaining access to her trust fund until she is 25 (‘What do I need it for? I have my allowance’) has an old and professional head on those young shoulders. Suddenly, the locks winful, as if aware of that weight, and returns to the subject of the skiing holiday. "We didn’t have a clue there was a reporter trailing us. We thought we’d got away with it – I booked the holiday on the Internet, under a different name."

Later, out of the blue, she says: ‘I still don’t know who I am, what I’m about. But I’m young, I’m still learning.’

Who tells her when she’s getting it wrong? ‘I’m not the type,’ she shrugs. ‘When I told her she was coming up to do this interview, she said, ‘Watch what you say then, Chas; I’m fed up reading about stuff.’"

‘Ami, Clive, will always say, ‘All right now, shhh, quiet time now.’ Can you imagine how Church reacts to that?"

The Charlotte Church Show begins on Channel 4 on February 23.