Canada's Alternative Design Magazine

ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN + LIFESTYLE + INTERNATIONAL

BEING
will alsop

INTERPRETING
william shatner

THE SOPRANO
renée fleming

RESPONDING TO
design

May/June 2007

BONUS :: SHATNER/ALSOP REMOVABLE ARTWORK // RED SEA SERENITY
MAESTRO OF HIS DOMAIN // FERRARI PRESIDENT EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
ORGANIC MINIMALISM // GOING BRAZILIAN
editorial notes

THE MUCH OVERUSED PHRASE, 'an image is worth a thousand words' has gnawed at writer's cranial bits since the dawn of the Etch-a-Sketch. How does a qualified key puncher compete against 16 megapixels of SLR goodness?

Well, if you're Daniel Pink, author of 'A Whole New Mind,' you provide a rebuttal along the lines of 'A well placed metaphor is worth a thousand images.' Actually, I had been professing the same since last year, but I'll give Daniel equal billing on this one.

Pink's concept of re-awakening the right brain - the artistic, creative, inventive side of the noggin, long dormant in the face of corporate idealism - is not revolutionary, but has been rather neglected in favour of a mindset more pragmatic and linear. Arguing in favour of Pink's theory of the value of the 'Conceptual Age,' elemente has gathered a diverse group of designers, artists, architects and visionaries for this May/June issue. William Alsop, William Shatner, Renee Fleming, Marc Boutin, Dale Chihuly, Alison Brooks, Julien de Smedt, Anna Simone, Hamilton Aguira and Robert Parlato of Ferrari form a strong collective of right characters.

Will Alsop, to whom I affectionately refer as the 'Marlon Brando of architecture,' puts to the test the artist's role as an architect, and conversely, the architect's role as an artist. elemente spoke with Alsop about his indefinable style, artistic works, and his concern for the human factor in his projects. Will also generously created an exclusive, removable art piece for elemente. Check the featured Alsop article for the detachable art piece and look for your chance to win tickets to an 'Evening with Alsop,' a fund raising event to take place this June with Mr. Alsop in the house to meet and greet guests over the course of the night. Following cocktails and tapas, the crowd will be invited to an intimate and exclusive talk by Will on the subjects of architecture, art, urbanism, and life in general in the comfort of the Grand Theatre.

There are the Sopranos and then there is 'The Soprano.' Renée Fleming, regarded as one of the greatest voices of modern day opera, graciously spoke with Soraya Roberts about her legendary voice, Il Divo, the art of practice, and growing up on Joni Mitchell. This 'golden standard of soprano' romanced by the likes of Rolex, Oscar de la Renta, and dessert deity Daniel Boulud, offers insight into the changing world of opera, the acute awareness of her own limits, and why her heart lies with the music of the fin de siècle.

Adding to the mix, we were lucky to secure fifteen minutes with Maurizio Parlato, president of Ferrari North America. Piero Facchin was on hand to assist in celebrating the prancing horse's 60th Anniversary tour through Montreal this past month. Parlato offers his insight into the philosophy behind the success of the much venerated marque, the future, and the rumour of a Calgary/Ferrari arrangement.

And of course what issue wouldn't be complete without 77 artist's interpretation of William Shatner, with removable art page. Anyone with even the remotest memory of Kirk doing battle with Lizard Man will appreciate this one.

I hope you enjoy the issue and our revised look. We want your thoughts on the magazine. Write to us at editor@elementemag.com and let us know how we're doing.

Cheers,

Angus MacKenzie

For ma & pa / dusty & roy
the will to be
ENIGMATIC UK ARCHITECT WILL ALSOP QUESTIONS THE VERY MEANING OF ARCHITECTURE

AT TIMES SURPRISING, AT TIMES QUITE CRUDE and straightforward, but genuinely concerned and caring about the human factor in his projects, internationally renowned UK architectural personality, Will Alsop, is a truly original breed of architect. Frankly, Will is a true breath of fresh air in a world of planners who all too often are concerned with studies commandeered by bureaucrats with political agendas.

It takes guts and self-assurance to confront certain decisional authorities and Alsop does this not out of arrogance but by pure intellectual questioning of the very meaning of architecture within our society: “What is the architect’s role?” and “Who does he serve?” All this while he himself has a certain duty to himself as an artist – an artist of spatial composition, an artist of materials and an artist of technology – and how to express all this in a cohesive whole that, in the end, forms his projects.

Alsop, a true ‘Indiana Jones/Marlon Brando’ mix of the architectural world, is constantly seeking out new ways to discover and grow. Will, generously took time from his hectic schedule to share his thoughts and visions with elemente...
Q: Mr Alsop – Will – your work seems to be quite sculptural. Can we agree that it isn’t your standard modernist approach?

A: No, it is not. I’ve been known to be called a precursor. One is that architecture today, not everywhere in the world but in many places, is a much looser exercise than it used to be, and by that I mean that there is no predominant style or methodology or manners, or whatever… it’s much more open, perhaps more than it has ever been in the whole of architectural history. I welcome that, I think that’s really good.

Q: Do you think that this is because you have more of an artist’s approach to architecture? Because the architect has always been known to be an artist but probably lost that somewhere along the way.

A: Yes, I think that there was something along that way in the sixties where there was a big debate that shifted those things a little bit but I think that fundamentally it [architecture] is an art with little bits of science attached. I think it’s that way around and I think that in the sixties they felt that it was more of a science with a little bit of art attached. I do think, though, that we are getting back to where we need to be. I don’t set out to create something that is particularly sculptural in any way, shape or form. That’s not my style at all.

Q: But you do start your conceptual process with paintings.

A: Oh, yes. Not always, but usually. And I do that because painting is just a sort of surprise. What we are trying to do is to get rid of all that cultural baggage that we all drag along behind us. We discover something rather fresher or newer, or something that might be appropriate, which is also why I quite like working with the local community. They say things, and talking with them – getting them to draw and to paint and to explore their dreams – is exactly the same act as painting for me when I’m alone.

Q: This makes sense because architecture is a form of social art. When you are talking to the community, and you have no choice because you are working for human habitat in general, you have to consider what they say.

A: Absolutely! And what I discovered, which I find particularly interesting, is that if you work with the general public, very often their dreams, their aspirations are much more challenging and exciting than, say, the planners or the politicians would give them credit for.

Q: So do you think that these people (politicians and planners) tend to underestimate the public in general?

A: I think that bureaucrats make incredible assumptions. What’s really annoying, often acquired, is advice given to them by architects – that there is a right way of doing things and of course many business practices have been introduced into architecture. So we get those two terrible words that get together, which some call “best practice.” That means that you’ve identified what you believe to be best practice, so you do one of those. Invention or making places unique is, I think, a very important part of what we do. Only, again, coming back to the people that live in these areas, the more and more I do it, the more I hear, “I want the place that I live in to have some identity and I want that identity to be different from anywhere else in the world.” So it’s a return to civic pride, really, which I think is good, come to think of it, it’s great and you (in Canada) haven’t got one of these (polite laughter). We are bringing it down to the basic level but why not – there’s nothing wrong with that.

Q: No, absolutely not. You mentioned the key words: it’s about civic pride that the politicians tend to underestimate. Although when they do have a project, as in the last ten years, more and more architects, as planners and as individual artists, give expression the new urban fabric as well as the existing one. If we take Bilbao, for example, who even knew about this city before Gehry did what he did?

A: To be quite honest, you wouldn’t want another Bilbao. Too much going on… (laughter)

Q: Architecture does give a sense of identity, and more and more people are sensitive to that.

A: Absolutely, and if you want to reduce it to pure financial gain, it’s good business.
Q.: Speaking from a business point of view, in your case, with the projects that you’ve done, what’s the challenge like to convince a client to embark on a journey with, say, “Starship Alsp?” It must be quite a task.

A.: You know, we don’t learn much in our lives but we do learn a few things, and what I have observed is that if everyone is smiling all the way through the process, you actually end up with something that is actually worth doing. If you behave like an accountant or a lawyer where everything becomes a grind, the resulting project will be so not interesting and no one really loves it. It’s all about love, really. We are simple beings, you know.

Q.: I guess it really comes down to the expression, “thinking outside the box,” which becomes a kind of “modus operandi” for Alsp. . . ?

A.: I think that is absolutely right! And if you have to go back into the box because you’ve been outside of it for so long, that’s fine, too.

Q.: It becomes a back-and-forth operation then, no? Into the box—out of the box . . .

A.: I agree. I have no real agenda, actually. Apart from designing buildings or projects, it’s about discovering what they might want to be. This doesn’t exclude something that might want to be quite conventional if that seems to be the discovery that you’ve made. Usually it doesn’t, but sometimes it does.

Q.: So all this is about an anthropological approach, too?

A.: That’s correct. And that’s where I think we belong. I’m very happy with that. I’m not peddling a thing called an “Alsp style.” Some people say that you can recognize an Alsp project but if you can then I’ve probably failed. (laughter)

Q.: What about the West Bromwich project? How did that project get along?

A.: Originally, I was among five or six architects being considered for the project. It was done not by producing designs but by talking to the people and talking to the client. And surely they kept calling me back and in the end I had to say, “Look, this is the fifth time that you’ve met me, now I’m beginning to draw stuff and talking with you . . . just give me the f---ing bloody job!” He obviously liked me or else he wouldn’t have called me back. So I spent an enormous amount of time working, not only with the client but also with the people of West Bromwich because what I liked about that project, and it is a very special project, is that they’re trying to invent something which actually doesn’t exist and that’s always got to be interesting. It’s a community art center but it is much more than that. It’s a point of civic pride, which we touched on; it’s a catalyst for re-generation, and it touches people at an educational level, at a social level and just in terms of pure fun as well.

Q.: So this was not part of the original program?

A.: Well, no. That’s something that we discovered and that’s what I liked about it— they didn’t really know what it was. It’s a bit like OCAD in Toronto. When I went in for the interview on that job I didn’t produce a design, which all the other architects did, which is a sad mistake. I said to them, after reading the brief, that I wasn’t very impressed by it, and I asked the panel, “Do you all believe in this brief?” No one put their hand up so I tore it up and I said, “This is how we are going to do it . . .” And they were foolish enough to give me the job. (laughter)

Q.: That’s quite an “exploit” but most of all it’s nice and refreshing to see that you put into question the original brief or programming of what is asked by, as we said earlier, the bureaucrats or people that have a small idea about what their planning agendas are.

A.: Well, you know, part of our job is to put into question things and to make people, if necessary, feel a bit uncomfortable but in a comfortable kind of way, to ask those difficult questions, if not only of the client or the community, but of yourself as well. It’s surprising though that there are a huge number of clients out there that will not choose you because they know that you are going to ask the questions that they don’t want to be asked.

Q.: That’s because they lack the confidence to see things in a more open way.

A.: Not all, but some people like to feel that they are always in control. They don’t want to be challenged.
Q.: With respect to OCAD, when you presented the first design briefs and sketches, what was the reaction?
A.: Ah well, it depends who you are talking to [laughter]. You know, I had no idea that we would end up doing a flying table which came out of the process, particularly concentrating on the people living on the other side of the street. They said that if you put a building on the south parking lot, we could bring the park through to the street and it was something that I had some sympathy for. I said, "OK, well we could do that," and they asked, "Where would you put the building?" I said, "On the roof." But then the guys on the middle floors said that this would block their view of the park, so I said, "OK, we'll start at your roof level and you'll all get a view of the park. It might be a bit different but you will all get the view." They agreed to that. Now the client not only liked it, but said that they could not afford it. So we went on to prove that they actually could afford it and we did not increase the budget, I assure you.

Q.: That's quite a feat! To stay within budget like that... .
A.: In the end we added a million and a half dollars: a) it was not a big amount and b) this was to achieve certain things which they later added into the brief.

Q.: They were so convinced that it would work that they agreed to add the extras. And again, we are speaking about identity and giving a very distinct character to an area of Toronto.
A.: It worked there and it was worth it according to the mayor David Miller, on the calculation that he says that tourism in the city has gone up 2.9% only because of that building, and it's only a modest building you know. Certainly the number of kids that want to go play there has shot up enormously.

Q.: Children have a very honest opinion about things and we tend to lose our youthful way of thinking. It's always nice to keep that in mind and that is what makes one think outside the box — to have the creativity that is needed to mark a project or to mark something within a city.
A.: It's an educational project and it has been successful but you know when you come into offices which we've just completed on a pretty large block here in London for which my client very bravely sought out as speculative office space, there was no prelap. By the time we were finished he had prelapped the lot and people wanted to be there because there were some simple things which I had to fight for, like external terraces. You can't expect people to sit and stare at a computer screen all day and we all have to remember that in this place of work, people, for about forty per cent of the day are not working. They are staring out the window, smelling their own armpits, I don't know. We spend so much time at these places, so you should design a place of work where people feel comfortable.

Q.: So can we say that there is a change in attitude with respect to the people who are giving out work? They seem to be more open to doing things in a new way.
A.: I certainly think that it's going in that direction, pretty much worldwide. I worry about architects that have theories, I worry about ideas actually. Part of our time is spent knocking down somebody else's theory. So you think that there must be something else, right?

Q.: As far as the idea factor, pretty much everyone has an idea. On the other hand, I think we have to be wary of "ideal-ists".
A.: [mischievous laughter] I'd agree with that! If you look at the Toronto waterfront, it's a disaster. It was built on very rigid urban principles. What was that all about?

Q.: Unlike your Cardiff project. Where did the challenge come from on this one?
A.: It was mainly an economic argument, therefore a very tangible one, one that could be dealt with. That's fine though and there was never any doubt that they'd want to do it.

Q.: So the will was there... .
A.: Exactly.

Q.: . . . and the "Will" is there!
A.: How true, how true...
you’re invited to an evening with will alsop

Join internationally renowned UK architect Will Alsop for an evening of art & inspiration. As part of Will Alsop painting will be auctioned Live! Proceeds go toward ACAD Scholarships

Friday, June 8th, 2007
Cocktails & hors d’oeuvres
Copies of elemente to be signed by Will Alsop
Will Alsop’ anecdotes on art and the business of architecture
Live Auction of Will Alsop Original Painting

Tickets $100 each or two for $180

FOR TICKETS CALL :: 403-338-1731 or email alsop@elementemag.com
visit us online at www.elementemag.com

a new shade of gray
JENNIFER GRAY JOINS ELEMENTE AS EDITOR, ARCHITECTURE/DESIGN FOR WESTERN CANADA

Many Calgarians will recognize the face, the name, and the editor known simply as Jennifer Gray. elemente is extremely honoured to see Jennifer join the publication in the capacity of Architecture/Design Editor. Gray comes to elemente having worked as a writer/producer for such entities as The Life Network, CBC Newsword as well as handling communications for The Calgary International Film Festival, Theatre Junction and key architectural firms. Upon leaving Avenue as Editor in Chief, Jenn now has found her bliss by bringing her talents and devoted appreciation of architecture/design, along with the art of storytelling to these pages. elemente is proud to welcome this new shade of gray...

- Angus MacKenzie, Editor in Chief
architecture+

2ª SUSTAINABLE OASIS
:: Gateway midtown project runs the green light

4ª PROMOTING GLOBAL HARMONY THROUGH GREAT DESIGN
:: How Calgary architect Marc Boutin became the Fifth Canadian to take home the 54th Annual Progressive Architecture Award

9ª MAESTRO OF HIS DOMAIN
:: Marc Boutin weaves his artistry through a modern home rooted in the prairie vernacular and brings a young family out of their 1910 Victorian into a modern-day masterpiece

design+

1ª SWEET TWEET
:: Arcoma's designer bird houses satisfy even the most discerning flyer

2ª WE SHALL CALL IT THE GREGORY
:: Frames West's seductively modular Gregory sofa

2ª ORGANIC MINIMALISM
:: Clear Form Designs modernist take on architecturally influenced furniture

2ª JAGUAR REVOLUTION
:: Saving the cat from extinction

3ª THE FUSE OF MUSE
:: Glass master, Dale Chihuly's alchemist mix of art & science

5ª RESPONDING TO DESIGN
:: Elemente hears from leading edge designers - Patricia Urquiola, Yves Behar, Julien de Smedt & Anna Simone on where they've been & where they going.

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3ª GOING BRAZILIAN
:: the compelling foil ed works of Brazilian artist Hamilton Aguiar

4ª IN STEP WITH THE PRANCING HORSE
:: Celebrating 60 years of design, performance & the Cavallino Rampante, with Ferrari North American president, Maurizio Parlato

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:: 77 artists interpretations of popculture-icon, William Shatner

8ª THE SOPRANO
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10ª RUN FOR THE ROTHSCHILD
:: The Marathon du Medoc - Grab the 'Cab and go!

10ª COSTUMES OF THE SUN
:: Cirque du Soleil's chief Costume Designer Michel Robidas speaks to the experience

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5ª RED SEA SERENITY
:: The Serenia Project :: The ultimate waterside address

7ª THE WILL TO BE
:: Enigmatic UK architect Will Alsop questions the very meaning of architecture

8ª IDENTITY MINING
:: Architect Alison Brooks, creating identity in the built environment