Will Alsop's new condominium is distinctly him

Is there danger in designing similar buildings?

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Published: Saturday, October 14, 2006

Will Alsop, the architect of the iconic Ontario College of Art/Sharp Centre for Design, has recently designed a condo in Toronto -- it's called the Will Alsop Collection at King Towns. As the marketing material describes it, it's "a unique eight-unit building in the King Towns development near Dufferin and King streets ... This is Will Alsop's first residential project in Canada." Along with Philippe Starck, who is lending his brand to a hip condo in different part of town, Daniel Libeskind at the Hummingbird Centre and Robert Stern at One St. Thomas and others, the race is on to get a designer stamp on projects to help make them distinctive and not just, well, another condo.

Will Alsop is an experienced and original architect and has a track record of several notable buildings to prove it. And he's got a recognizable style. To my eyes, his new Toronto condo is reminiscent of OCAD. It has bold colours and over-scaled elements, such as the front door and rooftop landscape of shapes that enclose mechanicals, that appear to share OCAD's DNA. It's a distinctive building and, more important from a marketing perspective, it looks like a Will Alsop building.

This is a good thing because no one wants to hire a brand-name architect and have him or her produce something out of character. Think of the problem the AGO has with those who think its new building doesn't look Frank Gehry enough. What these people mean, of course, is that it doesn't look like his most famous works, the Guggenheim Bilbao or the Disney Concert Hall, although it's just as clever a design. AGO detractors don't want to look back a decade or more when Gehry produced many buildings that didn't have sloping roofs covered in titanium but gritty, urban projects with chain link or strong statements like the Chiat Day offices in Los Angeles that were almost pop art in their approach.

There are many artists who have suffered a similar fate: deviate from the style that's made you famous and no one will buy your work. For instance, Giorgio de Chirico, circa 1900, became famous for painting empty urban landscapes in what is often called a pre-surrealist style. However, he began to forge his own works by painting in a style that he had abandoned decades before because once he stopped painting this kind of image, few wanted to buy his work. His crime was that he back-dated these paintings, although they were still his paintings. Will Gehry or Libeskind, for instance, be forced by clients to keep creating the same style of building over and over again because being too creative puts them out of business?

I asked Will Alsop if he thought his condos looked like OCAD. He laughed and said, "It's not on stilts, is it?" I suppose this was a "no." I asked about his use of colours, and
he admitted that both buildings used some strong colours. He eventually confessed there were simple, elemental shapes in both designs. We couldn’t seem to agree he had a recognizable style and that this is what made him a saleable commodity. But then again, I don’t think, as someone trained as an architect, I’d want to come to be pigeonholed as producer of a style either. But, unfortunately, consistency is crucial to creating a brand.