Article: WILL AL SOP

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Images: Enclave Magazine
Will Alsop

An exclusive interview with one of the world’s true iconoclastic architects

By John Sobol

Marseille: Hotel du Département, 1994

“This is the regional government headquarters for Bouches-du-Rhône. The building is 100,000 sqm of offices and meeting and debating chambers. The building belongs to the public so we made a public square inside. The building is key to the regeneration of this northern part of Marseille. 10 years on, we can report that it has been successful.”
Englishman Will Alsop recently found himself in Calgary for a few days. Leaving his pleasant downtown hotel, the visionary British architect went for a walk. Or at least he tried to. “I felt trapped,” he recalls. “There was nowhere to escape to. The streets weren’t giving anything back.”

How many of us, struggling against harsh headwinds in Calgary’s bleak cement core, have felt the same?

However, Alsop was only in town to give a lecture, not to give Calgary an extreme urban makeover, as he is in the process of doing to both Bradford and Barnsley in northern England. And yet, one day perhaps...

“What interests me about Calgary,” muses Alsop some weeks later over the phone from his studio in London, “is that it has a river running through it, and it’s well situated and it has pretty good infrastructure, like I can get a direct flight from London, which is one measure. And it’s rich, which is interesting in the best sense. But there has been a lack of aspiration. Though when I was there I did detect the beginnings of a discussion where people are saying, ‘Look, we have all this oil, all this money, and we will have it for maybe the next 15 years. How do we invest in our city to make it attractive and sustainable for the future?’ My own view is that you take out the bottom three floors of every office tower and put something more interesting in there.”

“I have a simple proposition: tear down the crap. That leaves space to see good buildings and to build better ones between them.”
That’s the kind of radical suggestion the world has come to expect from Will Alsop, who is rapidly becoming an architectural adventurer with global influence. Here in Canada, Alsop is responsible for the Ontario College of Art and Design’s breathtaking new building, the Sharp Centre for Design. It’s a step forward for Toronto but pales in comparison to the scope of his work back home in England, where Alsop is redesigning entire chunks of major cities with the same fierce logic.

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“Of course”, continues Alsop, “in the UK these changes have been initiated by completely different dynamics than those in Canada. Manchester and Leeds and all these northern towns once grew very rapidly and were very wealthy due to the industrial revolution. But we live in post-industrial England. We don’t make anything anymore. Today these cities are worn out. Some people feel that they should be left to die. But there are too many people who care about them. And we’ve found that our efforts are restoring civic pride. People didn’t used to believe that a future was possible and now they do.”

England in the past decade has benefited from massive public investment in innovative urban design and new cultural infrastructure. One of the core ideas driving this multi-billion dollar cash influx has been the conviction that design adds value—not just social value but economic value. Richard Florida’s groundbreaking research on the economic power of the “Creative Class” further affirmed that investing in design excellence is among the most cost-effective means of increasing economic capacity within a given community. Alsop points out that “Leeds and Manchester have really turned the corner. The changes in the past ten or 12 years are amazing.”

Almere: 2003

“Its a complete city block in the new town of Almere. The hotel is raised to allow views of the lake. The public space sits on top of a car park and bowling alley. The original masterplan envisages this public space to be a service yard, we gave it back to the public.”
Will Alsop rates a variety of influences on his works:

Computers: I love them and hate them. 1 and 10
Bauhaus: I think the Bauhaus was very important. 7
Pop Art: 6
Punk: 8
Children: 6
Recreational Drugs: Oh dear…who do you write for again?…8
Japan: 7
China: Ah, it depends. Today it would be a 4 but it could be 9 in the future.
Stonehenge: That’s a 10!
Global Warming: That’s high on my list. 8 or 9.
The Written Word: I think the written word is terribly important, even if it’s not that important in my own practice. 9
Virtually the whole of this building is devoted to medical research which needs very sensitive environments. We managed to create an institute without walls, with the use of horizontal air curtains which allows all the clinicians and researchers visual contact to the work and to each other. We believe that chance encounters between the users might increase the possibility of finding cures to a variety of ailments, the cafe helps in this regard as well.
Alsop goes on to mention that “the number of students who are interested in attending OCAD (Ontario College of Art And Design) has about doubled” since the new building was erected. This is no doubt a satisfying outcome for OCAD, which was widely – if not uniformly – criticized when Alsop’s unconventional plan for the new building was unveiled. But interestingly, right next door to Alsop’s tessellated skybox, another major architectural retrofit is being planned – the Art Gallery of Ontario’s $175 million Frank Gehry renovation. How does Alsop feel about that ambitious addition to the neighbourhood? “Well, the OCAD building was built because the school desperately needed additional space. The facilities were appalling when I first visited. I didn’t go in with any preconceived ideas but I think we found an intelligent solution. Whereas the AGO is a statement largely funded by an individual making a monument to himself. That’s a different rationale, and not always the best one.”

Despite his growing fame and his compelling vision, Alsop retains a practical humility. “I have always said that we architects or designers or whatever you want to call us, are only as good as our clients, public or private. And fortunately here in the UK there are an increasing number of concerned bodies who are saying, ‘we can do better’. Whereas what I see in Canadian cities is private sector developers who are in it for the short term and who can get any kind of crappy condo approved, and what you end up with then is market-led development that does not give back to the city. There’s a need for people in Canada to turn the corner and think that something more interesting can produce more value. It’s a very simple message that you have to repeat over and over again and then you have to demonstrate it.”

Alsop is convinced that working in and with a community is one of the keys to architectural success. “If you start the consultation process then the process itself makes people feel better, as opposed to waiting for the final product. The process is half the fun. It’s life. People need to know that we are always willing to change our ideas and plans so long as it’s a change for the better. But don’t come here saying, ‘we don’t want you to build.’”

enclave.ca: Will Alsop
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OCAD: 2004
A unique “table top” structure which has quickly become one of the most exciting architectural landmarks in Toronto.

The Public: 2007
A community arts facility in the centre of West Bromwich which is in the Birmingham con-urbation. This building will house art experimentation, education and training as well as offering a whole variety of performance and conference events. It is under construction in the heart of the town in order to regenerate a place that never quite recovered from heavy bombing in the World War II.

Peckham Library: 2000 (Stirling Prize Winner, 2000)
This award-winning building was conceived as the first of a number of civic buildings around a square to regenerate Peckham. We are currently working on a theatre and cinema, together with a new neighbourhood counsel chamber. The library has been extremely successful and currently hosts 3 times the number of users per month than it was designed for.