Will Alsop learns to read

Looked at sideways, this building is an inverted L. Far from usual, let's say. Its copper-clad cross-stroke appears to hang in the air - closer inspection reveals it is supported by spindly columns leaning at odd angles. Its underbelly is hung with skeins of stainless steel mesh. From the back - or is it the front? - it is completely different, a sheer Mondrianesque composition of panels of different-coloured glass. Its roof sports what looks like a giant protruding orange tongue. Also a pair of large illuminated signs, front and rear. They spell out the word LIBRARY. Fair enough: it helps to be told.

It seems that architect Will Alsop has been having fun again, in the rather unexpected setting of Peckham in South London. Unexpected because, things being the way they are in conservative Britain, Alsop tends to build his more extreme designs elsewhere in Europe. In France his Grand Bleu regional parliament building in Marseilles, an exuberant loose assemblage of disparate parts, is celebrated. The £4.5m Peckham library, while being much simpler, smaller and cheaper than its big French cousin, nonetheless manages to pack even more punch per square foot. Its size may be small but its scale is immense.

Public libraries used to have a mission. They used to be grand, clearly important civic buildings. Then they became rather mean things, underfunded, under threat. In an on-line age, people began to question the need for them. Cash-strapped councils looking to balance the books always eye up libraries for closure first. But Peckham represents a outright reversal of this trend. It takes the idea of a library by the scruff of its neck and holds it - quite literally - up in the air for us all to see. This library is not going to go quietly. On the contrary, it is going to arrive very noisily.

These are still early days. The builders are finishing the place off. Outside, the new landscaped plaza beneath the overhang of the upturned L is still being laid. Inside, the shelves are not yet arranged, let alone taking books. But now that it is complete on the outside, it is already working hard as a new London landmark. From the upper floors you get one of the best views of central London anywhere. Its field of vision stretches from Westminster to Greenwich, from the cranes of the impending 'London Eye' Millennium Wheel to the yellow masts of the Millennium Dome. Which means that, when you are riding your glassy gondola on the Wheel next year, you will be able to look south and see the parti-coloured Peckham Library, shining at you
like a beacon.
Will Alsop learns to read

For this its sponsoring council, the increasingly design-aware borough of Southwark, deserves praise. For the library is the latest piece in a new civic square laid out by the council on the long-lost terminus of a short canal leading to the Surrey Docks - now a green, linear park. The water should have been kept - what an asset to throw away in the parched inner city- but the new generation at Southwark has gone some way to atone for the mistake of its predecessors. After all, they could have allowed yet another superstore or multiplex cinema or dumb office complex or flats development here, for easy money: but they chose a more public-minded solution instead, on the back of government regeneration money granted to rebuild some notorious nearby housing estates. The first piece in this new space was an intriguing broad entrance archway, contributed by the young architect John McAslan a few years back as a statement of intent. A rather nondescript health club designed by the borough's architects then followed on one side, but the true ambition of the scheme only became apparent when Alsop was invited to design the library to face it.

At first glance, you might be forgiven for thinking that Alsop's library is an entirely arbitrary form, or one that could contain almost any activity. To an extent this is true. His working methods tend to be more those of the artist than the architect, and he would have you believe that his architecture tends to emerge from dribbly watercolours: design from the outside in, rather than - as is always the purist modern way - from the inside out. Alsop likes buildings on stilts, that start a long way up in the air and allow landscape to flow beneath. He also likes buildings that suddenly shoot off at right angles to themselves, and which contain sundry mysterious organic-shaped pods. He has explored these themes for years, mostly in unbuilt work such as - very appositely - an abandoned earlier scheme for a literary centre, a modern athenaeum, in Swansea. But is there anything in the Peckham scheme that is specific to the idea of being a library, as opposed to an office building or apartment block?

I suspect not. I think we can dismiss any fanciful notion that the shape is a bit like an open book, just in case anyone should think of suggesting that. But what I do know is that, having toured the red-carpeted interior, this building is going to work beautifully as a library, despite or maybe because of the inclusion of some modish other functions. Its narrow stem contains a suitably lofty entrance hall, with a local council office ("one-stop shop" in today's jargon) to one side. The next level brings you to an educational bit and some more jargon: an "open learning centre", whatever that means. But then you emerge onto the tall top floor housing the library proper, set in the cross-stroke of the L: and this is a fine space indeed. Not just for its views, though they are carefully considered: one window, for instance, eccentrically frames just a patch of sky, like something by the artist James Turrell. Not just for its exemplary indirect daylighting, which puts Alsop and his project director Christophe Egret on the list of architects indebted to John Soane, the Georgian master of the well-lit interior. No, there is something else, an appropriate sense of order and calm mingled with a dash of mischief that is wholly Alsop.

Instead of dull secondary cubicle-like rooms, there are three curvy pods set on more stilts, each clad in wafer-thin timber scales stitched together with copper wire. At one end, the pod is a beehive-like meeting room. In the centre is an open-platform, like a big coracle, acting as an Afro-Caribbean centre. The third pod, again enclosed, is for children. It contains a place to slap paint around (very Alsop), a little stage for performances or readings, mechanically-operated butterfly flaps to a skylight and, best of all, tiny tip-up timber shutters allowing children to peek at the adults on the main floor beneath, and no doubt occasionally flick pellets and giggle a lot. The two enclosed pods stick up through the flat roof like dinosaur eggs. As does the bright orange "tongue" - which turns out to be the sunshading cap for a Soanian circular lantern acting as a ventilator for the whole building, which eschews air-conditioning.
Will Alsop learns to read

So in the end, the form of the building is extraordinary but by no means irrelevant. The big overhang faces south, for instance, shading the façade as well as providing cover for the plaza beneath: the architects would like to see market stalls spring up here. This means that the coloured-glass façade sensibly faces north, where it won't heat up like a greenhouse. In fact there is only one thing that the place lacks to be truly successful as a cultural rendezvous, and that is a rooftop café to exploit the unrivalled views of London. If Southwark has any sense, it will find the money for that sooner rather than later.

For Alsop - who is in the slightly awkward position of being too young and "difficult" to be a big Establishment name, but too old to be considered a bright young rising star - the Peckham Library should pay dividends. It is not just clever, it is assured, mature. It is well thought through, from first to last, and

it is still fun. Welcome to the mainstream, Mr. Alsop. The New Monumentalism needs your wit and irreverence.

Declaratory architecture. Photo copyright Morley von Sternberg