Will Alsop

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By Nick Jones

To lose three major projects, 50 staff and go into receivership in one year could finish many an architect, but for this man it’s simply a new beginning. He talks to us about his plans for the renamed Alsop & Partners.

2004 was not, all things considered, a particularly good year for Will Alsop. Three landmark projects, the Fourth Grace in Liverpool, the Millennium complex in Bangkok and a mixed-use scheme for developer Isis in east Manchester were cancelled, and further schemes in London and Middlehaven were dogged by delay. As the cash began to dry up, the ebullient architect’s firm said goodbye to 50 staff, including three directors. Finally, in October, the eponymous Alsop Architects was forced into receivership, becoming the slightly-less-eponymous Alsop & Partners after venture capitalist R Capital parachuted in to take a 40% stake in the company.

All of which makes Alsop a current favourite of architect-watchers everywhere, eager to know which way the man who once proposed remodelling the town of Barnsley as a Tuscan hill fort will turn next. They also want to see whether, with an army of venture capitalists peering over his drawing board, he will be forced to tone down his more colourful ideas.

Chewing over the answers to such questions would cause palpitations of anxiety in lesser men, but Alsop seems perfectly relaxed as he settles back in a black leather armchair at his south London studio. If he wasn’t sombrely dressed all in black and wasn’t clearly concerned about what time his lunch was arriving, you could almost say he looked happy. But then, Alsop tends to view such questions of architectural control in a fairly clear-cut manner. “It’s a free country,” he grins. “I’ll think what I like. It’s got nothing to do with money.” No? “No.” Right then.

It is fair to say that Alsop seems to have dusted himself down and carried on regardless, with recent projects showing plenty of trademark irreverence. Chief among these has been the SuperCity exhibition in Manchester, a typically Alsopian vision that would turn the M62 from Liverpool to Hull into the high street of a giant metropolis, complete with multistorey vertical farms, high-rise villages for 5000 people and, apparently, teddy bears the size of large buildings. “It has probably had more coverage and more interest from all sorts of media than most other things I’ve done,” Alsop says. He seems particularly pleased that the reaction has extended beyond the media village to the public at large, many of whom are clearly intrigued by the plans this London-based architect has hatched for their neck of the woods. “It’s been a real mixed bag,” he says. “Some people think you’re mad and some think you’re OK. But I’d rather absolute love or absolute hatred than absolute indifference.”

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Alsop has never claimed to be a whizz with finances. It is intriguing to learn that, despite the delayed and cancelled projects and the rapidly diminishing staff, the realisation last autumn that he was going to have to call in outside investment was “fairly rapid – over a short period of time really”. As he points out though, while lighting up a cigarette: “I never personally managed financial affairs in the past. If I did, I couldn’t do the other things that I do.” He then adds elusively: “Certainly I trusted someone I shouldn’t.”

Alsop clearly blames last year’s travails on a lack of financial acumen within the firm. He says: “When I was in the position of having to look for some form of investment, it wasn’t through lack of work or anything else. It was basically through bad financial management – although the Fourth Grace didn’t help.”

This concession is hardly surprising. The landmark scheme that would have been Alsop’s crowning glory had it not been pulled from beneath him last summer (for reasons that he still finds “a bit obscure”) had a price tag in the hundreds of millions. The hitherto relaxed and laconic Alsop is understandably hesitant to comment on the latest plans for the site. The thin white line of cigarette smoke that describes every hand gesture settles into a single, steadily rising column. “I don’t want to say anything about the design. I just think it was sad that some architects entered the competition. Architects shoot themselves, and others, in the foot all the time. I remember when Zaha [Hadid] had her winning design for the opera house...
in Cardiff and it wasn’t done – no self-respecting architect would have entered that competition the second time round. I think it was sad in Liverpool that a few people I really would have expected not to, did.” (For the record, the shortlist for the retendered Fourth Grace included Zaha Hadid, David Chipperfield, Austin Smith-Lord, Daniel Libeskind and the eventual winner Danish firm 3XN.)

“I never personally managed financial affairs in the past. I certainly trusted someone I shouldn’t” restored as he turns to the future of the Cloud, the design that he provided for the Fourth Grace site and that is tipped to be built in different world locations, from Birkenhead to Toronto, on a weekly basis. “I would like to build that building somewhere, but inevitably you can be criticised because you can’t just dump a building somewhere else. On the other hand, if you take the Cloud bit without the housing behind, you could put that in a number of places. Toronto waterfront is one because of the scale and robustness of what’s already there.”

Alsop is clearly taken with the Canadian capital and, with an office of Alsop & Partners now installed in the city, it is one of three main focuses for the new-look Alsop outfit, the others being London and Shanghai. Indeed, Shanghai is also being considered for the Cloud design. “We’re under construction in Shanghai right now, but it’s too late for that particular project to use it. But we’re in Shanghai, we’ve got lots in Shanghai and we intend to stay in Shanghai,” he says.

Wherever the Cloud finally settles, Alsop seems to have plenty to keep himself occupied. Two weeks ago Reg Marsh, the firm’s newly appointed managing director, business turnaround specialist, expressed plans to expand the business by one-third. Alsop says: “We’re just working towards a period where we will be taking on some guys and girls.”

In the meantime, the SuperCity exhibition continues until May and there are always plans to hatch for Toronto, Shanghai and, of course, this country. Indeed, one of his next schemes will see him return to the site of one of his finest hours, Peckham, to redevelop the square in front of his Stirling Prize-winning library. The plans involve one idea that will doubtless win him plenty of attention – a 10-m high public lavatory. “I thought there should be one iconic bit and that would be the lavatory – a lavatory with a view, but the view is up. So you’re sitting there and if you’re very lucky you might see an aeroplane pass over.” All in all, a very typical Alsop conceit: to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, even when he’s on the toilet, he’s looking up at the stars.