The Ali G of urban planning

With his bombastic, cartoon-like designs, media darling wants to make cities playful

"Our aim is to change the narrative of the Tees Valley," said Tees Valley Regeneration's 34-year-old chief executive, Joe Docherty, last week. His architect, William Allen Alsop RA OBE, is a big, bear-like and highly voluble 56-year-old, born in Northamptonshire, trained at the Pop-influenced Architectural Association school in London and, ever since, one of the most colourful and narrative-changing members of his once-sober profession.

Alsop is a media darling. Rubbed up the wrong way, he can, say friends and enemies alike, be a bit of a bully, yet he is normally a chummy, boozy, provocative, well-wicked sort of fellow who knows how to talk rude, get down with the kids and appeal to journalists who, otherwise, might find architecture rather too earnest a topic to cover.

Widely known as architecture's Mr Blobby because of his proclivity for buildings that take the form of big, colourful and headline-stealing amoebas, he is also a hugely energetic purveyor of his own ideas, sitting heavily on weighty committees, holding forth entertainingly at the lectern, ...
bustling between radio studios and television locations. Since 1995, Alsop has also been professor of architecture at the technical university of Vienna. And, in the gaps in his hectic timetable, he has been redesigning a slew of under-achieving English towns.

The regeneration of Middlesbrough is only part of Alsop's boisterous and less than secret plan to divert development and cultural activity away from London. He is busily working on "visioning studies" for Bradford, Halifax, Stoke-on-Trent and Barnsley.

Middlesbrough will no longer be known for its heroic Transporter bridge, its industrial cranes and cooling towers, but, in Alsop's words, for "a landscape fit for the 20th century and inhabited by 21st-century icons". Like? Like "a primary school in the shape of a giant spelling block, a Rubik's cube cinema, even a 10-storey office block affectionately nicknamed Marge Simpson's Hair". Blimey. That'll tell smug, metropolitan arty-smarties down in London where to get off.

Not everyone, though, will want Middlesbrough to look like a toddler's brightly coloured play centre. And Alsop's most outrageous scheme to date, the Fourth Grace, aka The Cloud, the mother, father, uncle and aunt of all blobs, designed to spin Liverpool's Pier Head into a frenzy, was rejected last week. It is easy to imagine the Three Graces - the Liver, Cunard and Port of Liverpool Authority buildings - breathing a collective sigh of relief.

Equally, though, there are those who find Alsop's wilfully bombastic, cartoon-like designs a relief from received notions of good taste and architectural manners. We live in an increasingly come-as-you-are culture, so why shouldn't our new architecture reflect this, rather than pretend that we are still heirs to crusty, civil-minded civic culture and boring old humanist architecture? Alsop, the Ali G of urban planning, aims to keep it real.

He has always liked to make a splash. His studies were riven with ideas culled from sci-fi, comic books and pop culture. When he was at the Architectural Association, it was in thrall to Archigram, a kind of architectural pop group fronted by Peter Cook, not the noted satirist, but the mastermind of blobism and the architect of one of the best blobs, the new, blue art gallery in Graz, Austria, which opened last year.

Archigram talked a gospel of fun, freedom and play, and Alsop has taken its lessons to heart. His other great influence was the late Cedric Price, an enigmatic, cigar-chomping architect who believed that his fellow professionals needed to learn how to say no to buildings that we didn't really need. Or want.

Alsop, however, has a huge appetite for town plans and new buildings. Perhaps it was starting a practice in London with John Lyall, in the 1970s (when commissions were thin on the ground for British architects), that has nurtured his hunger. When he did get to build on a large scale, it was impossible to miss his larger-than-life imprint. The Hotel du Department in Marseilles, known locally as Le Grand Bleu, was completed in 1994. It is a huge, dramatic, wave-like, Yves Klein-blue sofa of regional government. Charismatic and eventful, it attracts a million visitors a year who gawp at it in much the same way as tourists gawp at Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim.

In London, Alsop's North Greenwich Jubilee Line tube station is an Yves Klein-blue folie-de-grandeur, strutting its underground stuff with
immense aplomb, but which, since the Millennium Experience at the nearby Dome closed, has been as quiet as the sort of country station Dr Beeching liked to fell with his axe in the fun-loving 1960s.

Peckham library is Alsop's most-liked British building, a parrot-green box propped up by spindly stilts on one side and planted inside with the architect's trademark pods that serve as reading and rumpus rooms for a new generation of computer-age readers. The library is meant to make reading and gleaning information a barrel of fun. Alsop believes that places intended to be fun need to be surrounded and characterised by playful buildings.

There are, of course, many contrary places to play in the world's cities, where the architecture is perfectly ordinary and even - ssshhh - a little drab. Alsop's playful architecture is, though, aside from being an extension of his own big personality, a form of urban branding. Hey, look at how bright and colourful our city centre is, folks.

Alsop's plan to turn part of Bradford's city centre into a lake for paddling and fishing (his favourite hobby), is one such look-at-me urban adventure. Like it or not, such playfulness does get attention. Alsop is keen to point out that, even if he doesn't get to build all he'd like to in northern towns, he has brought them the kind of media attention and developers' cheque books that they might not otherwise have expected.

Enigmatic, contradictory and colourful, Alsop and his designs add to the gaiety of the nation. Whether or not we really want to see blocks of flats in the guise of Prada skirts or a hotel shaped like Kerplunk is another matter.