In the studio with Will Alsop RA

By Fiona Maddocks

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Known for his colourful urban buildings, the Academician also retreats to paint in his Norfolk studio.

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Architects rarely live in the kind of buildings they design. The chance to test this assumption is part of the pleasure of visiting them in their own homes. Take Will Alsop RA, radical designer, abundant painter, creator of asymmetrical visions in glass, steel and colour from Marseilles to Toronto to south London. Think of his Peckham Library, which won the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2000 – a riot of red, orange, blue, lime green – and acted as a catalyst for urban regeneration of the whole area.

Accordingly, you proceed down the quiet, residential road where he lives, in the seaside town of Sheringham in Norfolk, looking for shock and bold statement. You find both, but not as you expect. Alsop’s long, narrow front garden is entirely occupied by an iron-arched tunnel of green and blue, foliage and flowers, ground cover and gravel. The impact is dramatic. The house is almost hidden from view. Arrival takes on a processional mood: like walking up the aisle, with Alsop himself, in nondescript white open-necked shirt and grey trousers, waiting at the end to greet you.

Apparently it’s a redbrick Victorian former stable block but I have to take his word for this. Orientation is not obvious. Where, in fact, is the front door? Dark rooms
run into one another, as in a warren. Then suddenly you step out into a glass dining area at the rear, one of Alsop’s few additions. It’s airy, elegant, lived in, with a view into a secret garden of huge architectural shrubs, exotic pines and tree ferns.

“You wouldn’t call Will a minimal architect,” observes his wife, Sheila, drily, from a narrow library room which used to be the garage. Large model biplanes are suspended from the ceiling. Every wall is covered with photographs, a collection of china jugs and plates, silver, books. Alsop himself embraces life with a devil-may-care wholeheartedness, smoking and drinking enthusiastically, giggling, doing cryptic crosswords at top speed.

Yet he works ferociously hard, as the pile of large, generously colourful, splashy paintings in his studio testify. He built the studio in a corner of his garden in the early 1980s. It has a pitched roof and full-height glass doors either end. A long room to the side is for reading and writing. The painting area is clear, but for well ordered trays and brushes, and drawers full of acrylic paint. “I like colour. I’m not afraid to use it,” he says.

Some of his paintings are abstract, others form the basis of architectural ideas. One, in the house, is a blaze of colour with a huge cactus in the middle. It makes you chuckle. Bluff, burly and slightly raffish – eyes laughing while keeping a straight face – Alsop’s exuberance extends to his buildings and paintings.

Together with fellow Academicians Ken Howard and David Mach, Alsop has just chosen his own colour range for the RA’s new wall paint range. His colours are inspired by Norfolk. “I was particularly taken with the sight of fishing boats reflected in the sea. I had fun mixing up colours I’d seen, some muted, some strong. Not all are inspired by Norfolk though; Nancy Rose, a pinkish colour, is named after my daughter.”

Alsop and his wife spend roughly half their time in Norfolk – they have another home in Kensington. The architect’s Battersea practice and studio, a stone’s throw from Norman Foster’s, is in a converted Victorian factory. On the ground floor of the building is Testbed1, an experimental art space, and the Doodle Bar – all designed by Alsop – where visitors can scribble on the walls.

“It’s not just that I enjoy a companionable drink,” he says. “A bar or pub is an important indicator of a community. It’s part of what makes east London so buzzing, in a way west London is not.” He currently has a big project underway which includes a hotel near the elevated section of the M4. “The dominance of the
east has taken its toll on the vibrancy of west London. It’s time for the west to fight back,” he says, half seriously.

How did Alsop end up on the remote north Norfolk coast? “Sheila’s parents lived in Sheringham so we knew the area. Sheila was pregnant when we first moved in and used to go to bed early, so I would go to the pub and have a quiet drink. I rather liked the fluorescent strip lighting and old lino. One of the first times I went, someone said, ‘You’re not from these parts?’ I said, ‘No, London,’ and he replied, ‘Ah, down Thetford way.’ I liked that. I thought we had come to the right place.”

- **Find out more** about the full range of Royal Academy paints, including Will Alsop RA’s colour range.

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