Will Alsop quits architecture for painting

Will Alsop, the Stirling prize-winning architect who carved a reputation as the professor's enfant terrible for his blob-shaped buildings and disdain for conservative planning, today quits his practice to spend more time painting.

At an age when most architects are entering their most productive years, Alsop, 61, announced plans to walk away from day-to-day architecture and launch a "serious inquiry into painting." Instead he said his decision was partly the result of opposition to his style of architecture within parts of the establishment.

The surprise decision by the Royal Academician follows a controversial career which has veered between critical success and financial frailty. In 2000 Alsop scopped the Royal Institute for British Architects building of the year award for Peckham library, a typically exuberant turquoise and yellow structure. Four years later he was forced to sell his firm to venture capitalists after it entered administration.

"I love architecture but one of the things that gets up my nose, particularly in London, is doing anything that's like pulling teeth," he said.

"There are so many hungers on and architectural advisers who know nothing and it gets in the way. For example I am doing nothing for the London 2012 Olympics and it has got to the point where I don't feel like asking so I don't give them the satisfaction of saying no."

Alsop has often rubbed up against the establishment. He used his televised victory speech after receiving the Stirling prize to berate one of London's most conservative planning authorities. "Fuck the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, but thank God for all those imaginative boroughs that know that the way out of their problems is architecture."

He now intends to spend at least two days a week painting, time which until now he has used mostly to sketch his early ideas for buildings.

"I don't know if it's any good, but people tell me they like it and I want to give it some time to see how far I can go," he said. "I think you can carry on changing in life, whatever your age. If something's not right, you need to change it."

"His architecture has always looked like sculptural painting," said Tom Bloxham, the chairman of Urban Splash, a developer for whom Alsop has designed several schemes. "It was always big swirls of the brush and big gestures."

Alsop's friends include the artist Bruce McLean, with whom he shares painting holidays in Norfolk. At his architecture studio in south London Alsop has a room where he sketches with thick brushes and bright colours on wall-sized sheets of paper. During the 1990s and the early part of this decade Alsop became known as the leading light in an architectural sub-genre known jokingly as "blobitecture" for its fusion of space-age curved forms with straight-edged modernism.

Alsop has used mostly to sketch his early ideas for buildings. His style seemed to be catching on when he beat Richard Rogers and Norman Foster to design a "fourth grace" for Liverpool's pierhead, but the building, which looked like a floating cloud, was never built. Alsop plans to act as a consultant to his former firm and has not ruled out a return to designing buildings.

Will Alsop works on a sketch in his trademark colours at this offices in Battersea, south London. Photograph: Sarah Lee

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