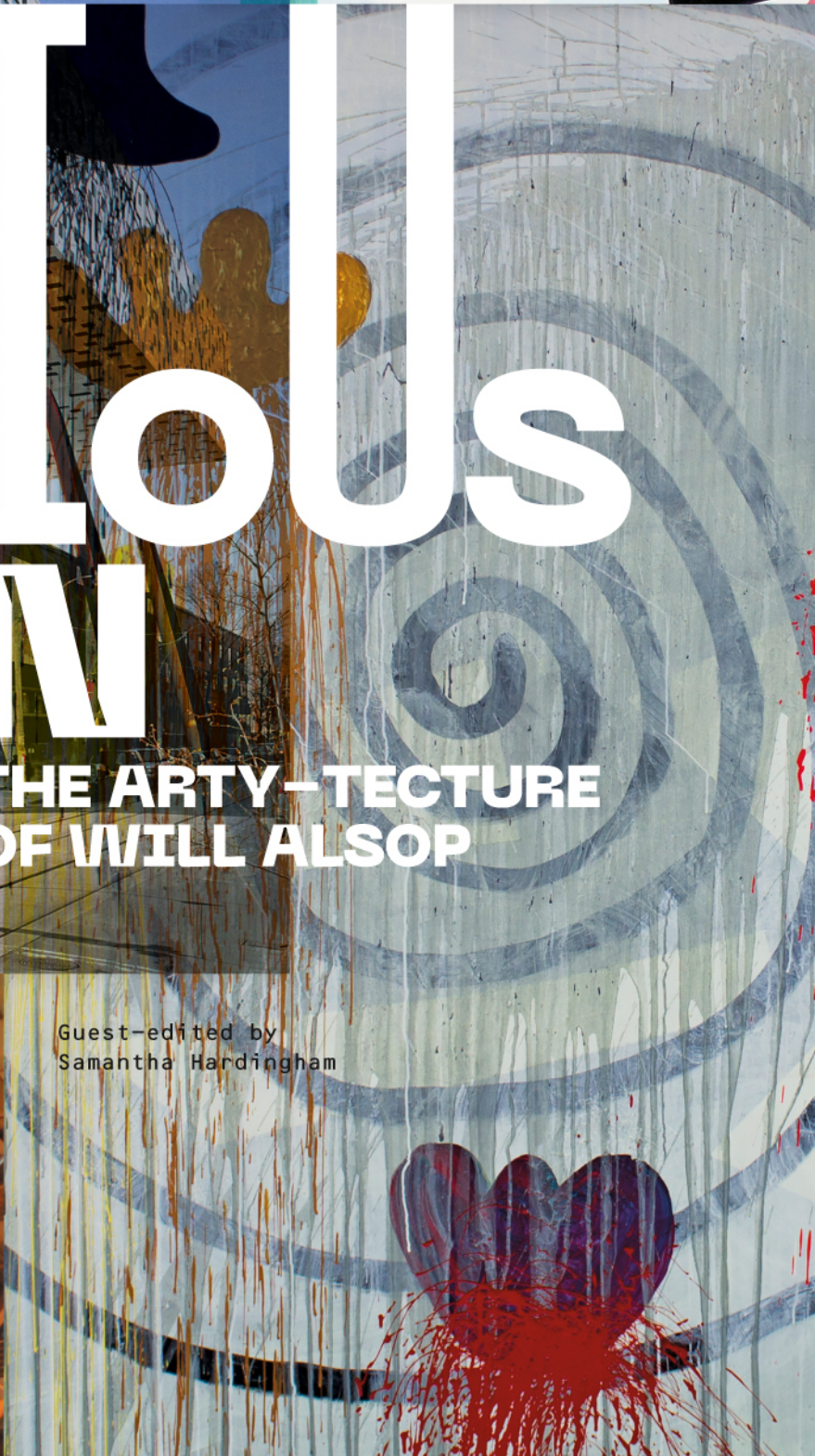




SERIOUS FUN

THE ARTY-TECTURE OF WILL ALSOP

Guest-edited by
Samantha Hardingham





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Samantha Hardingham

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OF WILL ALSOP





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‘Where so much architecture is focused on known targets – the canon if you will – Alsop had his sights on the unknowns, or what he called “creative noise” and the ability “to go beyond what he knows”.’

– **Samantha Hardingham**

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Clockwise from top right:
Will Alsop, *Yubei*, 2016; Will
Alsop, *Spiral*, 2015; aLL Design,
Shanghai International Cruise
Terminal 'Gao Yang', Shanghai,
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Will Alsop, *Untitled*, 1999.
Image courtesy of the Marco
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ABOUT THE
GUEST-EDITOR

SAMANTHA HARDINGHAM



Samantha Hardingham is an independent designer, writer, curator and scholar in the field of experimental architectural practice. Her work across all disciplines focuses on developing new and relevant formats whether for talks, publications or building proposals, each responding to the context with the aim of engaging new audiences. She studied at the Architectural Association (AA) in London (1987–93). Having been introduced to the late Will Alsop by a mutual friend, he gave her some advice on preparing a portfolio for the school and encouraged her to apply. She later led a design unit there for almost 10 years with Archigram member David Greene, who had been Will's tutor at the AA in the 1970s. The unit developed a methodology of search (not research) and 'film-as-sketchbook' to generate time-based design responses as a by-product of an internet-based culture. She was also the school's Interim Director from 2017 to 2018.

During a five-year appointment as a senior research fellow in the Experimental Practice Research Group at the University of Westminster (2003–08), she devised and launched the Supercrit series of events and publications with colleague Kester Rattenbury. Following a short period in design practice, developing new experiential entertainment formats, she is currently Academic Director of the London School of Architecture (LSA). The school was founded in 2012 as a new model of postgraduate architectural education that seeks to widen access and participation across all disciplines that make the built environment, and to challenge related teaching methodologies.

Her publications include several editions of *London: A Guide to Recent Architecture* and *England: A Guide to Recent Architecture* that launched the innovative ellipsis guidebook series in 1994, as well as *Cedric Price Opera* (Wiley, 2003) and *Cedric Price Retriever* (INIVA, 2005).

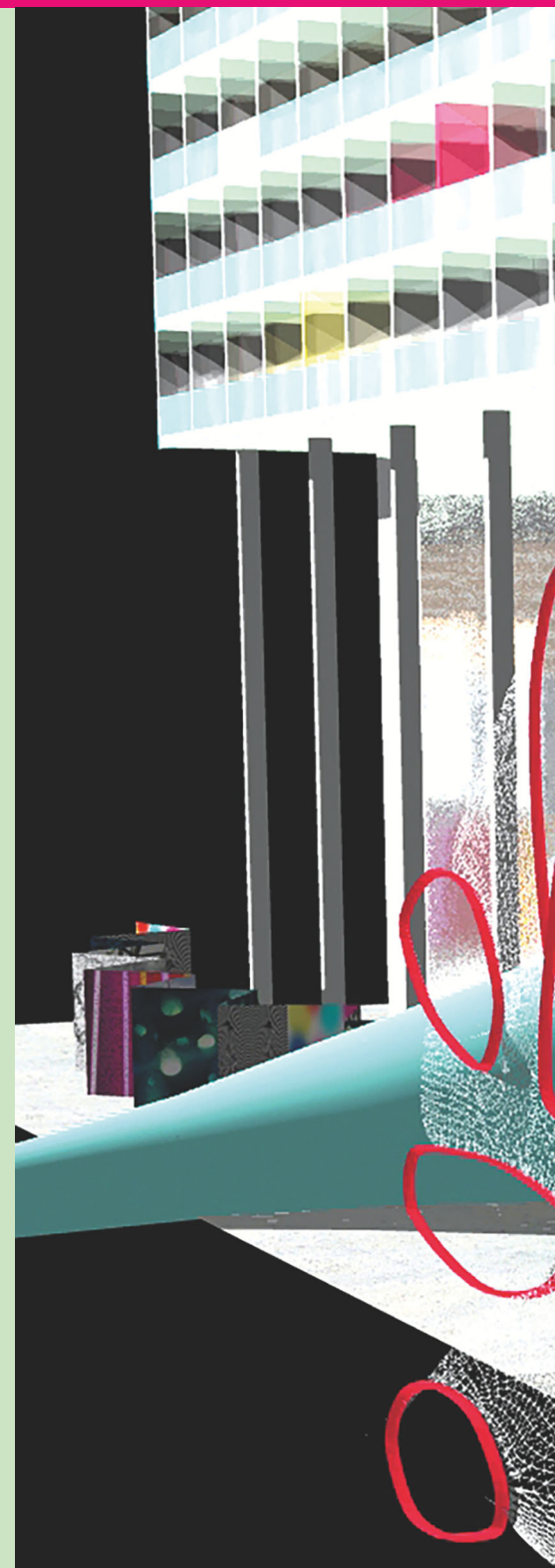
Her most notable work is a 10-year research project that became the two-volume *Cedric Price Works 1954–2003: A Forward-Minded Retrospective* (AA Publications/ Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2016) and led to a number of associated exhibitions including commissions for the AA (London, 2012), Bureau-Europa national architecture museum (Maastricht, 2014) and the Venice Architecture Biennale (2016). ▾

INTRODUCTION

SAMANTHA HARDINGHAM

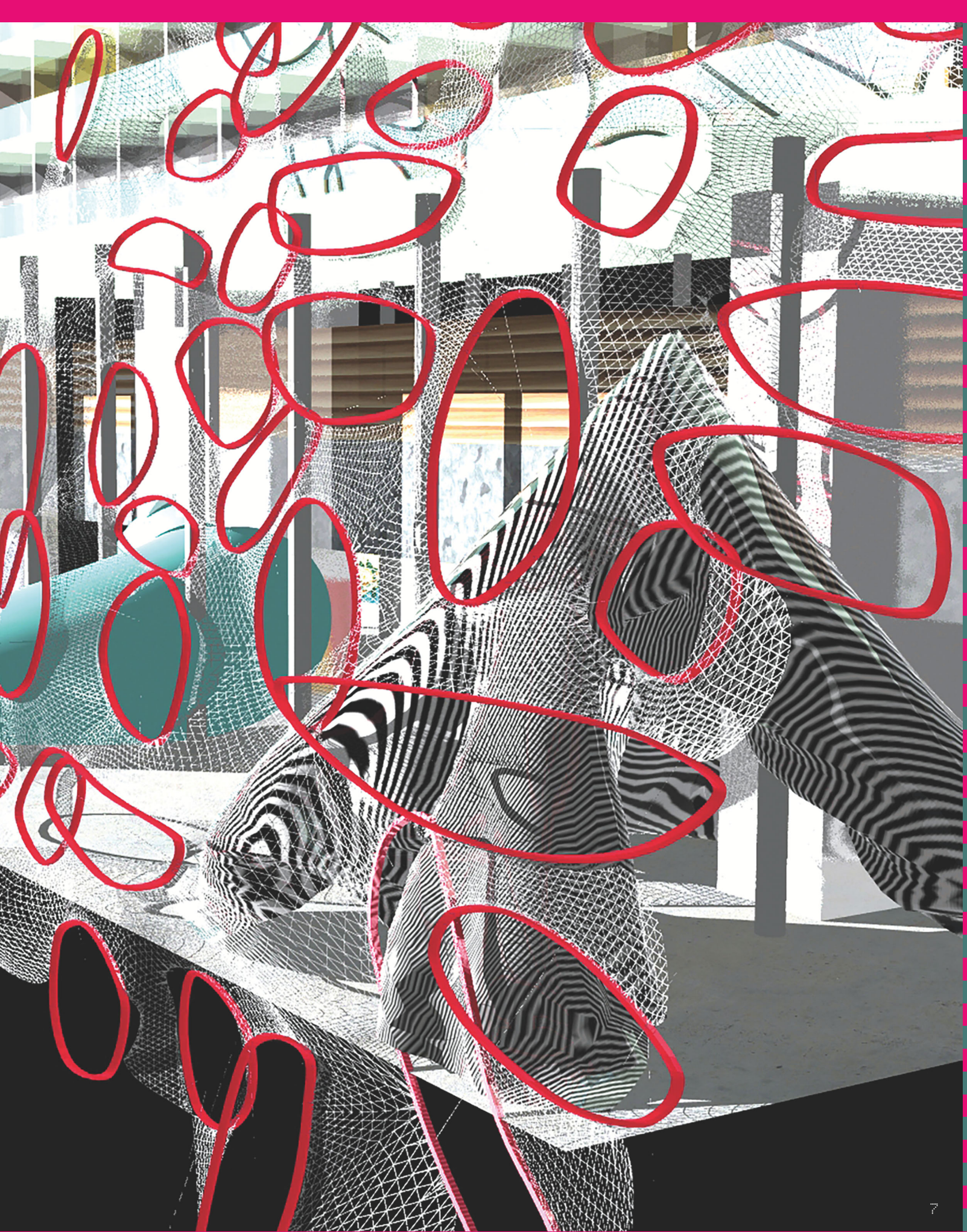
On the Visible Spectrum

Welcome to the extraordinarily colourful life and work of British architect Will Alsop (1947–2018). His architecture was aimed at allowing ‘beautiful resolutions to emerge truthfully from the actual condition of our towns and cities’¹ and replacing ‘a little misery in the world with a little joy and delight’, and he did this with style and showmanship – with what he called ‘creative noise’. Alsop consistently worked around, over and above and beyond what the conventions of the architectural canon could chart.² In the words of his hero, English architect Cedric Price (1934–2003), he engaged in the serious fun of ‘aiming to miss’.³ Price used the following analogy in a talk to assembled architects in 1975 to describe the activity of design as he saw it: ‘If you try and fire in a fairground between moving ducks you are far less interested in the size of the ducks [than] you are in the speed of them. You are still watching the target. You are aiming to miss.’⁴ He demanded that design take on the mess, the mistakes and perceptibly inadequate, imperfect conditions and unwanted by-products of a situation: calculating waste, usefulness of shadows, aspirations for short-term occupancy and similarly unknown quantities. Serious fun is the practice of designing for these conditions that are approximate and that change over time.



SMC Alsop,
Westside Sales Centre,
Toronto, Canada,
2008

An initial digital concept drawing-cum-collage explores layers of primary structure and an envelope with irregular-shaped openings that is then developed across sketch models and full-scale building cassettes.



Price answered these questions in his own design practice by thinking about the processes of construction, engaging phased design solutions, and building in obsolescence and multiple targets so clients had the capacity to change their minds in time. The approach required a wholesale questioning of all aspects of a brief, starting with the client's intentions for seeking an architect in the first place.

Alsop would have attended this talk – he was a young architect embarking on his career, and was working for Price, so it is not disingenuous to assume the idea clearly made a big impression and something of the thinking rubbed off. Alsop went on to refine a method over 50 years that took on the part about questioning what the client thinks they want in their architect and making sure that he was included in the answer – aiming to miss one target and in the process hitting many more. Whilst Price designed a structure and framework – let's call it 'how to source a few well-chosen ingredients and prepare a recipe for a hearty dish to be assembled as and when required' – Alsop chose to design the ultimate kitchen in which to collectively produce a variety of dishes for any and all to feast on. It says much about their generational differences and the contexts in which they were both practising.

Alsop Architects,
Studio 3,
Battersea, London,
2003

Studio 3 was the creative department of Alsop's architectural studio when it was based in Battersea Bridge Road. Here graphic designer Mark Boyce, a member of the studio, experiments with projection overlays of drawings and paintings onto wall-size book page layouts.

Both have been labelled mavericks. Price was comfortable with calling himself whatever he liked – he saw this as his right, and his alone – but rejected the imposition, considering it a slur on his intellect and architectural competencies. Alsop, on the other hand, embraced it as giving him permission to think bigger and experiment freely to change minds and enliven cities. He developed the kind of continuous and robust process of design experimentation required to help others make sense of their own noise, achieving this through drawing, talking, presenting, modelling, teaching, writing, performing, designing, and his own distinct method of painting. Neither Price nor Alsop were aiming to please and, as such, their lives and their architecture have infuriated and delighted many.

The contributions in this issue seek to ensure that Alsop remains on the visible spectrum of architectural discourse as amiable agent provocateur, and that his buildings are remembered as flashes of brilliance in an otherwise overwhelmingly subdued built environment. They are written by close friends and collaborators, with one or two exceptions where the writers have sought out first-hand material and accounts. Readers may fear the issue lacks criticality in this respect, but Alsop was no stranger to criticism during his lifetime. He is not long gone from this world, so this slim volume makes a moment of noisy silence, before history marches on to cut and shape future narratives.

On Learning

Alsop's career and philosophy of architecture was shaped by his education and those he encountered in schools and studios of art and architecture, most crucially the Architectural





SMC Alsop,
Façade treatment
for an apartment/
gallery block in
Toronto, Canada,
2008

Detail from one of a series of physical sketch models made to test different materials and the joining of an undulating surface with irregular-shaped openings. This model was made for a proposal to be sited on the same street as the Westside Sales Centre.

SMC Alsop,
Westside Sales Centre,
Toronto, Canada,
2008

Will Alsop poses in front of the completed Westside Sales Centre. Prefabricated timber cassettes make up the cladding, incorporating the irregular-shaped openings as developed out of earlier study models.



Association (AA) in London (1969–73) with some years after engaged in tutoring there, and then in the offices of Cedric Price Architects (1973–77) as set out in my own article in this issue, ‘A Second Course in Architecture’. John Lyall’s recollections of a time spent experimenting and learning at the AA provides considerable insight into a pluralistic training shared under the influence of Tony Dugdale, Keith Critchlow, Archigram, Price and Buckminster Fuller, amongst others. A student partnership, under the guise of Match then Multimatch, was formalised as Alsop & Lyall in 1980. Peter Cook, ringmaster of the London (and now global) architectural scene since the 1960s, creates a vivid invocation of the atmosphere that coincided with Alsop’s early career years as one of creative and quick-witted mischief. Cook deftly sketches out a portrait of Will that touches on all his dimensions, from optimistic and open-minded educator to sagely confident and rakish architect/entertainer. Cook’s pace and choice of words pop along to the beat of those groovy times. This tune is also played out by Nigel Coates who extends a characterisation of Alsop through a description of his teaching methods in schools of architecture. In ‘Willie Wonky and the Arty-tecture Factory’, Coates depicts the architect as a great disrupter who liked a work-in and threw himself and everyone else into the deep end. In Alsop’s hands it was a means, as Coates puts it, to ‘nurture audacity’ amongst his student audiences in order to ‘think bigger, brighter and more courageously’. Coates’ title sums up so much of Alsop’s activity and method, so it seemed fitting to borrow it for the title of this issue too.

On Practising

Alsop's practices and partnerships took many forms and as such the trajectory was not always straightforward. Over the course of his career his practice adapted seven times: Alsop & Lyall became Alsop, Lyall & Störmer in 1990 (renamed to incorporate the German partner Jan Störmer), Alsop & Störmer from 1991 to 2000, Alsop Architects from 2000 to 2006, SMC Alsop from 2006 to 2009, Will Alsop at RMJM from 2009 to 2011, and finally aLL Design in 2011, which continues today. These changes are charted in this issue alongside the production of projects and buildings by editor and architectural journalist Paul Finch, who offers the perspective of one who closely followed Alsop's entire career through the pages of architectural magazines. He takes us on a fly-through tour of all the greatest hits, leaving us aghast at the number of landmark buildings built and that have precipitated social, economic and political change in the cities in which they have landed.

Structural engineer Neil Thomas was a collaborator on the Cardiff Bay Visitor Centre in Wales (1990), one of the first projects to bring the practice Alsop, Lyall & Störmer considerable public exposure. Thomas describes in his article how their working time together was a course of 'unexpected exploration' and acknowledges the extremes to which Alsop was able, and he himself was willing, to push both conceptual and technical architectural boundaries. Alsop was prolific, never holding on to one idea for too long – this was profound for Thomas and something that he continues to deploy in his own work in order to liberate design ideas.

Alsop's son, Ollie, offers a uniquely professional and personal account of his father's ties and design habits that again track this chronology (albeit starting from 1977 on his arrival into the world). For him, the early years of practice are a bit of a blur, but the neatly arranged drawing implements set out each day on the breakfast table are still crystal clear. Their later collaborations on films and creating venues were inspired. Ollie recalls with awe, smacked by tragedy, the live televised acceptance speech on winning the Stirling Prize for Peckham Library, London, in 2000, when Alsop took advantage of the platform to take a less than flattering pop at the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea – 'mortifying at the time ... But on reflection, I miss him for his controversy'.

Will Alsop at RMJM,
Museum proposal,
Edessa, Greece,
2009

Wall-sized painted sketches for a proposal for a museum located over an archaeological site. Alsop used these large paintings and drawings as a means to explore different aspects of an architectural project – in this instance, the development of an anthropomorphic architectural form.

On Painting

Bruce and Will McLean, Clare Hamman and Mark Garcia each take on that other messy subject – painting. Will McLean was a member of Alsop's office in the 1980s and 1990s and talks to his father, artist Bruce McLean, about his 40-year-long friendship and collaboration with Alsop. He is insistent and understated about their working method, as one which was not about the pursuit of making art for art's sake but rather one of testing and re-testing ideas that was alive, direct, visceral and often beautiful. Will McLean reflects on a collaborative practice that was highly spirited, and where the process of painting sat firmly in relation to all the subsequent stages of bringing about an architectural design, from their interpretation in models to conjuring spatial atmospheres. Hamman reinforces this perspective, describing how the paintings are foundational for each architectural project, serving to harness an atmosphere or essential characteristics. Garcia focuses on Alsop's words. These appeared in paintings and 'the multi media/transmedia nature of his outputs, where often word, art, architecture, text and image were blurred into total, immersive spaces of ideas', but they also found their way into more conventional communications such as articles, talks, TV presentations and film scripts.

opposite top: Physical sketch models were developed directly from paintings and drawings. The model, with a similar degree of immediacy to the paintings, starts to investigate rudimentary structure and skin.

opposite bottom: A digital model is developed from the physical sketch model to start to rationalise a system of structural panels for the main building envelope.

