

WILL
ALSOP
– THE TOM
NOISE PORTER

ROUTLEDGE 

WILL ALSOP – THE NOISE

Driven by his three tenets of architecture, Diversity, Individuality and Naughtiness, Will Alsop paints his way into architecture through a design process that acts as a conduit for the dreams and aspirations of others. Moving from public consultation to the privacy of his painting studio – it is here, born in the liquidity of paint, the flourish of line and the serendipity of collage, that Alsop disengages from cultural baggage, discards the tyranny of taste and opens up to a world of less predictable and more diverse solutions.

Whether the world approves of these designs or not does not devalue the artistic process which produces such rich, varied, challenging and extraordinary outcomes. Tom Porter traces and reveals the inclusive and more private phases of this unusual procedure, and in doing so uncovers a treasure trove of ideas for transforming the process of architectural design.

Whether a working architect or a student embarking on the first steps towards creating your own design process, this book offers an insight and example into how engaging with the public, before painting into architecture, can offer the most stimulating and inspirational solutions.

Tom Porter was an author, lecturer and colour consultant, and a Visiting Fellow at Oxford Brookes University, UK. He was also a Visiting Professor at Florida A&M University and Montana State University, USA.

Tom's international career included lecture tours, most notably at Harvard, and colour workshops in Norway and Switzerland. He formed close professional relationships that spanned 30 years with other internationally renowned colour experts such as Jean Philippe Lenclos and Giovanni Brino. He also collaborated with Robert Cumming for the BBC series *The Colour Eye*.

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For Andrée and Sheila.

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INTRODUCTION

As a fine art student in the late fifties, when I became interested in his Purism theory, Le Corbusier was initially known to me first and foremost as a painter. It was only later that I realized that the Purist rules, explored through the medium of paint on canvas in tandem with Amédée Ozenfant for refining and simplifying form and dispensing with ornamentation, were a rehearsal for Le Corbusier's ensuing and epic architectural contribution to Modernism and a machine-age aesthetic. However, I also came to learn that the relationship between his painting and architectural activities, like his reputed penchant for cross-dressing, was separated by a work regimen divided by the two halves of the day – Le Corbusier spending the morning painting, and dressing for the part, and the afternoon, assuming more formal garb and donning his trademark bow tie, working as an architect. On subsequently visiting his atelier atop the Molitor Building in the Porte d'Auteuil district of Paris I also realized that his double life was also reflected in the two clearly demarcated studios separated by a large central pivoting door – one custom-designed facing east and dedicated to painting and the other, facing west, specifically for designing architecture. Although I came to realize that Le Corbusier's persona embraced both the role of the artist and the architect – being considered by many as the epitome of the 'total artist' – the expression of this duality not only smacks of a split personality but it also reflects the schism that, despite the attempt at a full-blooded transfusion during the Baroque period, had caused the gradual separation of fine art and architecture into discrete disciplines. However, this schism had not always existed. According to the theory proposed by Op artist Victor Vasarely, this bifurcation results from two major influences that can be traced back to the Renaissance – the very period when the architect, the painter and the sculptor, equipped with an intelligence capable of multi-channelled expression, could be one and the same person. Firstly, the increasing separation and specialization of roles within art and science, and, secondly, the birth of the notion of the independence of the 'work of art' which, spurred on by the beginnings

of archaeology in the 1440s, was fuelled by increasing interest in the detached and surviving relics of the ancient Roman culture which became collectable as portable 'art' objects to be displayed and admired in their own right. However, it was during the mid-nineteenth century, when the separation of artists and architecture finally became compounded by the revolution in economic development caused by industrialization, the advent of Modernism and the implementation of capitalist economics. With capitalism came a shift of patronage from church and state which left the artist marginalized – literally cut adrift from society. Finding themselves alienated, impoverished and metaphorically 'homeless' within the culture of a capitalist society, artists saw themselves as 'Bohemians' – 'vagabonds' who actively opposed established authority and conventional wisdom. Bohemianism not only created the still-lingering stereotype of the starving artist, but it also spawned the notion of the 'avant-garde' and the primacy of an 'art for art's sake', i.e., exclusively concerned with itself and providing an 'aesthetic experience' that was essentially independent of any utilitarian or socio-cultural agenda. Moreover, the term 'avant-garde' as it is understood today emanates from this period and is found in the writings of Charles Baudelaire who clarified the position of the artist as a maverick intellectual and as self-alienated from the emerging bourgeois culture and changing nineteenth-century capitalist dynamic. A sad by-product of this legacy today is the occasional attempt to reintegrate the artist into the design process of the built environment – usually to bring a splash of colour to a façade or to embellish a space. There is also the tragedy of a so-called 'public art'. Occasionally portrayed as art escaping from the rarified atmosphere of the gallery and museum and into the public domain, it is equally derided. This is due to the casual dumping of third-rate and self-indulgent sculptures that, more often than not, are characterized as 'turds in the piazza'. Having personally crossed the divide from fine art into architectural education in the sixties, this writer later became aware of and excited by the early projects, both unbuilt and

realized, of Will Alsop – an enthusiasm and source of inspiration shared by successive cohorts of both local and visiting Erasmus Diploma students. Here was an architect whose design work – often viewed as outrageous and controversial by the mainstream – had, it seemed, seamlessly and successfully transferred from the exuberant experimentation of his student days into the professional realm. Moreover, Alsop represents a new and singular breed of architect whose *métier* appears to close the breach between art and architecture by encapsulating sculpture, painting and building design in a single gesture. Indeed, for several years Alsop was a sculpture tutor at London's St Martins College of Art & Design, is an artist in his own right, a Royal Academician, a regular exhibitor and a curator of the 2009 Summer Exhibition. Apart from his Visiting Professorships in the architectural programmes at TU Vienna and Toronto's Ryerson University, he is also, of course, one of the leading generation of contemporary architects constantly in the glare of the international spotlight. In his impassioned quest for architectural diversity Alsop seems to constantly question the norm and the status quo. Implicit in his creative approach is the utter rejection of case-hardened theories and golden rules, of the tried and trusted and of 'best practice'. Citing such pedantic crutches as 'dangerous', he seems instead to invite us all to think and look afresh, to find out for ourselves and, specifically, to bend a sympathetic ear to the ideas and aspirations of Joe Public. However, most important for me is his design process and the goals and ideas that inform it. This approach has been described as less a matter of design per se and more a matter of living, i.e., getting inside the experience before it happens – before there is an architecture. Furthermore, his buildings have been described as the products of an imagination that takes the insights and intuitions of the artist into the complex and unpredictable world in which we live. The intention here is not to produce a biography or a monograph; rather to probe and track the thinking processes and practice – from inception to realization – that inform his work. Therefore, it is hoped, in a culture

in which the architect is seen as unique form-giver, that readers and, particularly, design students may gain some insight into an alternative design approach that actively seeks to remain free and open – one that isn't taught in educational institutions. The book falls into two basic parts. The first explores the influences, settings and processes that contribute to what Alsop describes as 'the noise', i.e., that special state of mind that has to be in existence and felt before his creative imagination is released. The second explores the range of work that emanates from this imagination. As we shall see, this is all-encompassing: from paintings to collages and sculpture, and from product design, exhibition design, interior design to building and urban design. The reader is invited to approach the ensuing chapters of this book as a kind of serial 'collage', i.e., as a sequence of narratives that explore the ideas, approach and modus operandi of a multi-faceted architect who has been variously described in the mainstream press as an '*enfant terrible*', the '*enfant prodige* of avant-garde architecture', the 'Ali G of urban design' and 'architect of the people'.



006
007

01

GENESIS

– TABULA

RASA

GENESIS

THE BEGINNINGS OF
EVERYTHING START WITH
A BLANK SHEET OF
PAPER, DON'T THEY?
WILL ALSOP

— TABULA

RASA

NOTHINGNESS — THE NO THING — IS THE STARTING POINT OF DESIGN: TABULA RASA IS WHERE IT BEGINS. WITH NO PRECONCEPTIONS. STARTING OFF THINKING THAT ONE IS GOING TO DESIGN SOMETHING CAN PUT UP BARRIERS TO BEING CREATIVE. BUT ONCE THE DECISION IS TAKEN ABOUT WHAT SHOULD BE DESIGNED, THEN A WHOLE RANGE OF IDEAS AND CONCEPTS ABOUT HOW DESIGN SHOULD BE DONE MAY COME INTO PLAY.

CONWAY LLOYD MORGAN

The moment an idea is transferred from a designer's mind into some external presence is a critical moment in the life of any design concept. This occurs when ideas become so complex that they have to be externalized for clarification, assessment and development. Their emergence can take different forms: ideas can become initially expressed by metaphor, a word or lines of prose; they can also be encapsulated in a scribble, sketch, an illustration or be rooted in a diagram. This manifestation process usually involves a language of abstraction in which the pictures in the mind begin to be mapped and processed using descriptive symbols or annotation that combine to chart the potential relationships between concept and reality. The resultant marks appear most useful in these critical moments for, often functioning as a constructive doodle, they are clearly more concerned with the essence of ideas than any premonition of appearance. Indeed, unlike objective drawing which decodes our impression of the perceived external visual world, conceptual drawing is an internal process that draws from our creative imagination which, in turn, is fed by our memory, past experience and, indeed, by our fantasies.

The tabula rasa is broken when a concept passes through its mental space to be translated into some form of descriptive external model which will allow the designer to experience the externalized nature of his or her idea. These newly represented marks then act as the basis for further development inspiring the creative imagination on to the externalization of successive mental images that, in turn, are realized for evaluation. This chain of representation – one newly emerging idea informing and leading to another – forms a two-way language of design. This is a continuous, cyclical dialogue between concept and mode of expression – the sequence alternating until the creative process is exhausted.

When comparing the informal jottings of artists and scientists in his book *Visualizations*, Martin Kemp suggests that while the rough sketches of fine artists have always attracted attention and been treasured since the Renaissance, it is only comparatively recently that the doodled visualizations of scientists have become preserved as precious insights into the creative process. He writes: 'The rapid act of graphic visualization, the "thinking" doodle, the schematic thought experiment, the improvised diagram, the scribbled solution, are now familiar to us through the publication of scientists' private papers. The informed fragments seem to bring us closer to the workings of the inventive mind'. Similarly, in the world of architectural design, the role of the conceptual diagram in mapping thought processes has over recent decades assumed a new-found status. Indeed, such drawings have now become collectable, enjoy prominence in prestigious exhibitions and, especially when bearing witness to the influx of new ideas, provide external evidence of a private design discourse. Indeed, they also play crucial roles across architectural presentations – especially when launching design concepts to others.

Conceptual drawings represent initial, intuitive responses that are invaluable as they usually indicate an underlying logic, to be pursued and understood. Every architectural design has started with a tabula rasa, that is, a blankness whose intimidation is only usurped when marks appear in the form of scribbles, words or lines. Often concepts will emerge so quickly that in order to seize the moment they have to be recorded with whatever is at hand. For instance, Joseph Paxton's initial concept for his Crystal Palace began as a prophetic, rapid sketch on a telegraph blotting pad made following a train journey in 1850, and the late Charles Moore would, in the manner of Picasso, doodle initial design ideas over a meal on table napkins. Back in the eighties, when introducing Oscar Neimeyer at a lecture presented at Oxford University, the author asked if the legend was true that he designed the primary forms of the assembly buildings for his design of the capital city of Brazilia on the proverbial back of an envelope. His reply was emphatic: 'No, this is incorrect, I sketched them on the back of a cigarette packet.'

Such marks begin what Robert A.M. Stern has described as the highly personal and idiosyncratic 'objective/conceptual drawing stage' that advances the process of an idea. We tend to think of such gestures as casual and incidental, but these first impressions of an emerging design concept can be prognostic and represent an architecture at its most basic and pure. For example, Louis Kahn described these initial marks as representing the 'design seed' – a robust concept capable of withstanding the knocks of criticism and being fundamental to the success of an executed design. Will Alsop's generative design ideas are similarly born, but *in the juxtaposition of painted shapes and collages* – often incorporating found images – or purely in the liquidity of paint amid the splashes, dribbles, brushstrokes and wax resists of his large inaugural canvases. Often involving a recycling process, i.e., new paintings or huge collages assembled from the residue of marks from previous drawings and paintings, this process often sees Alsop decamped from his London-based practice to the privacy of his garden studio in Sheringham, Norfolk for a sequence of intensive painting sessions **01.1**

Although one could describe this approach as unique, there is one other architect who also uses painting as an overture to architectural design. This is Steven Holl – but his use of the painting medium is employed in a different way. Religiously worked in watercolour on a small 12.5 x 17.5cm format as part of his self-imposed daily and early morning regimen, Holl's paintings represent exploratory conceptual abstractions which are then carefully catalogued and archived to provide a repository of ideas that, often remaining dormant for long periods, can re-emerge to be drawn upon later and adapted into one of his current projects. Meanwhile, Alsop's work is much more direct and confrontational in dealing with a preoccupying design question. Painting is *the* direct means of questioning and finding solutions. While Holl's miniature watercolour paintings accumulate an archive of ideas for future reference, Alsop's generative paintings, as we shall see, are inspired by the dreams of others.



01.1
Will Alsop painting in his
Sheringham studio

When about to begin work on a new project, and faced with what the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard described as the 'great universe' of the blank sheet of paper or canvas, the actual tabula rasa is, of course, inside Alsop's mind. This mental 'blank canvas' is only achieved when his thinking is completely free from any thoughts of precedent, codified theories or predictive ideas. For Alsop, when faced with a new project, this is an important and, indeed, required state and one that he has worked hard throughout his professional life to achieve and maintain. It relies on a determined attempt at the outset to offload all the associated architectural cultural baggage, to clear the mind and, as far as possible, create a totally unencumbered and uncontaminated design approach. Indeed, by painting at a furious speed and thinking about nothing – which has not to be confused with 'not thinking' (an entirely different matter) – is an approach that runs counter to student design approaches encouraged in schools of architecture. It is one that, inducing a dreamlike state, transports him beyond predetermination and into the realm of free exploration. This is where Alsop experiences the 'noise' – a frame of mind in which he confronts the essence of a project. Haig Beck and Jackie Cooper once described this frame of mind as a means of dreaming the essence of the project. They observe that this process is one that unfolds 'in much the same way as dreams unfold; and you never know where dreams will take you'.