

Will Alsop on Southwark

Despite his practice's recent and well documented financial difficulties, architect Will Alsop is still very much in business. Winner of the Stirling Prize for Peckham Library and architect of Palestra, the 27,800 square metre speculative office development on Blackfriars Road, the Alsop & Partners director shares his thoughts on Southwark, designing Palestra and being labelled a maverick.

At what moment did you decide to be an architect?

I can't remember ever wanting to be anything else. I've always wanted to be an architect.

If you weren't an architect, what would you be?

A sculptor. I used to teach sculpture at St Martin's College a long time ago.

How do you feel about being termed an architectural maverick?

Not very good really. The label comes partly from lazy journalists. It also comes from other architects. I haven't produced a huge number of buildings but my work seems to get lots of publicity, so perhaps there is an element of jealousy. Some people have the attitude that you can't have a good time with architecture and must stick to a strict set of rules. I don't think you can define architecture in that way.

You've said a lot of positive things about Southwark. What is special about the borough?

My experience of working in Southwark has been good. I have had a positive relationship with the politicians and council officers. This sounds obvious and it should be. It's also why Manchester has been so successful. Everyone in the council shares the same vision and is always pushing the architect to do better.

With Peckham Library, location was one of the things that intrigued me. We put the main body of the library on the fourth floor from where you can see St Paul's Cathedral. I think it's important that people in Peckham see themselves as part of central London and not some distant suburb. I said in my RIBA acceptance speech that if a poor borough like Southwark could put so much time and effort into a public building, why couldn't Kensington and Chelsea, where I live, do the same? Poverty in the north of that borough is just as bad as any in Southwark.

What do you think is the most impressive architectural work in Southwark, by someone else?

It's tempting to say the Tate Modern but I'm not sure that it is very successful as a work of architecture. The Peckham Pulse is good – I like to go swimming there. I also like Kingsdale School.

What operational changes might the council introduce to encourage more fine architecture?

If I worked for the council and I wasn't an architect but understood its importance, I would identify half a dozen urbanists and make them my best friends. This group would meet on a regular basis and build a trusting relationship. Trust can be built over the course of a project but that relationship will end when the project is over. I sit on (regional development agency) Yorkshire Forward's Urban Renaissance Panel. We were awarded the Barnsley regeneration commission through this forum.

What project (real or imagined) in Southwark would you most like to work on next?

Some years ago, we were involved in the plans to regenerate the Aylesbury Estate. We left that process, and, ultimately,

the scheme failed. During our public consultation the residents were really keen to contribute and engage with us, so I'd like to have another go at the Aylesbury.

How did you approach the design for Palestra? Did the speculative aspect affect it?

In London, the size and configuration of floorplates is the overriding factor in office design. We spent days and days addressing this to ensure that the building could be flexible. It is more difficult to design speculatively as one has to anticipate the needs of the eventual occupants. For me the challenge is: can we achieve this and produce a building that is also interesting? I believe we have.

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