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in Lennon Airport, take on a position like Sheffield? The answer lies in the former Finningley RAF base, near Doncaster, which is the subject of a continuing public inquiry into Peel's planning application to use it as a commercial airport. A plan that has brought angry opposition from many local people and environment groups.

Peel says it would operate both as a regional and a niche airport, a city-to-city operation, business-to-business and smaller flights, but Finningley would be a different business, and both ports would help each other," says Peel. He agrees with Mellor that Sheffield has been unduly restricted by the physical limitations caused by the siting of the airport. But, he says, the scheme will only be implemented if Peel gets the planning go-ahead for Sheffield. If Peel doesn't get the nod, he pulls out of Sheffield, then South Yorkshire does not have a working commercial airport.

Being without direct links to an international air network is something that cannot be tolerated, claims Peel. Sharp, an expert on regional economics who is a former civil servant and now economic adviser to the Sheffield council.

International companies who want to have a major British base will be attracted to being close to the air corridor. Heathrow is the biggest

influence on their decision. This, Sharp argues, shows how the lack of air links can be a major stumbling block in attempting to attract business and investment to a region. He says: "The point about kick-starting more regional air links by some form of subsidy until demand builds up is often mentioned in discussions with the government, but this is not allowed by EU competition policy."

Yet if there is no change in European thinking over subsidising air links in regeneration areas such as South Yorkshire, then, says Sharp, the actions of pouring billions of pounds into these regions will be futile. Under "objective one" funding, £700m has been earmarked for South Yorkshire. This will lever in a similar sum from other government initiatives and a further £3m to £4m is expected from the private sector, giving the region nearly £2bn raised under objective one.

Sharp says: "If Finningley doesn't get the go-ahead, then the government has to consider allowing some of this regeneration funding to be used to subsidise Sheffield airport, which of course is against EU policy."

"If you don't have the connections to the international air network, you may as well pour it all down the drain. It would all have been wasted — and this is a lot of money to waste. Some important decisions are going to have to be made."

Profile Will Alsop, bringing architecture to its users

Urban space man

Jane Hughes

Will Alsop's designs often start life as paintings. So it is perhaps not surprising that this former teacher of sculpture, who has taken over as chair of the Architecture Foundation, is creating some of our most inventive and artistic public buildings. His award-winning Peckham library in south London is an inverted L, raised on spindly legs and topped with an orange "beret" roof. A new design for a medical school in Whitechapel, in the East End, has glass walls and suspended pod meeting rooms, reflecting the staff's desire for transparency.

Far from being alarmed by Alsop's creations, people seem to get a kick out of their daring. In Peckham, the number of regular library users has increased more than 3,000 in the first year. At the nearby Aylesbury estate, where Alsop's firm has drawn up a masterplan for redevelopment, residents said they wanted to be "unlike anywhere else".

For Alsop, 53, this indicates a hunger for excitement in an urban environment characterised by "uninspiring, unambitious" buildings. As his work in the public arena has expanded, he has become increasingly interested in making people part of a "collective creativity". It is this, in particular, that he wants to build on in his new role.

"The Architecture Foundation was set up to promote strong public debate about architecture and it has been very successful in doing this in its first 10 years," he says. "I think we need to continue the process of broadening consultation about what kind of built environment people want to live in."

"If you get people to describe and draw what they would like, architects can respond to that. It becomes not a question of designing, but of discovering the architecture." This is about as far as is possible from questionnaire consultation.

Alsop blames a collusion of bad commercial architects, developers and planners for the banality of much of our cityscapes today. "Investors will hire extremely tedious architects because they think they will do as they are told and respect the wishes of local authorities, and get planning permission quickly."

But if the planners think they are acting in the public's best interest, Alsop has news for them. His practice is currently working on an arts complex in West Bromwich, where consultation yielded some interesting results. "We did lots of painting and drawing with different interest groups and, when we thought we had a building we would like, we asked the planner in. He started to say the things that planners normally say and one of the local chaps got up and said: 'This is our town and our money and our building. Who are you protecting?'"



Pop artist: Will Alsop asks people to draw what they want Photo: Sheila Burnett

Alsop admits that this way of working is not always resistance-free. "Sometimes people have been messed about for years and they don't want some middle-class snob coming in," he says. "But once they start thinking about what they would like, they spur each other on."

Alsop is passionate about the need for a stronger public realm. Designing a masterplan for a major urban development on the continent would be worth £1m or more; here the figure is more likely to be £100,000. "In Britain, a masterplan is seen as a necessary evil. People want to divide it up into bite-sized chunks to sell and there's a lack of commitment to the bigger picture," he says.

He would like to see councils encouraging investors to use good architects by being more flexible in what they allow to be built. More controversially, he'd also like an end to the kind of height limits that have created a "relentless wall" of building on the Thames. "Once you set a limit, every developer builds up to it, yet there are plenty of things that determine height — the right to light, and the economy, for instance — and I think the city fabric should respond to them."

You sense that if Alsop had his way, our cities would be a riot of colour and weird and wonderful sculptural forms. Not surprisingly, he thinks architecture can be the

worst enemy of architects. An example, he says, is the minimalist landscaping scheme for Tate Modern, the low point of an otherwise "excellent and varied walk" designed by Southwark council. "The opportunity to engage people and give them respite from the wind has been sacrificed for the sake of an idea. I just think it should be more messy."

Alsop had always wanted to be an architect, but he hated school so much that he left after his O-levels and did A-levels at night school. From there he went to art school and on to the Architectural Association school. He has undertaken major projects all over Europe and yet it is only in recent years that he has been seen as an inspiration, rather than a risk, at home.

It is this environment that Alsop would like the Architecture Foundation — which has always championed young architects — to challenge, too. However, he senses change is already in the air. "The good thing now is that there is no predominant style in architecture. You can do anything you like — and that means we concentrate on the real role of an architect, which is to make life better."

The Architecture Foundation is celebrating its 10th anniversary with Calling London, a series of events about the future of the capital, running to December 8. Details at www.architecturefoundation.org.uk

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