

Manning the barricades

Having moved seamlessly through the ranks of architectural education, Jeremy Till is swapping architecture for art. But as head of Central St Martins his days as a rabble-rouser are far from over

Illustration by Jacqui Oakley

A few months ago, Jeremy Till gave a lecture on the steps of St Paul's to the anti-capitalism protesters in the churchyard. It was a classic Till moment. Although he described the experience as "incredibly nerve-wracking" his talk on scarcity was ambitious, provocative and peppered with revolutionary fervour.

Given his ultra establishment background — Eton followed by Cambridge — Till's Marxist sympathies generally meet with wry amusement. When he curated the British Pavilion at the 2006 Venice Biennale with a show about Sheffield (where he was head of architecture at the time), he wanted to replace the big engraved "Gran Bretagna" on the front of the pavilion with a steel "Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire". In the end he made visitors enter through the back of the building on the grounds that the people of Sheffield would have a problem going in by the front door. It was an extraordinarily self-indulgent thing to do — as was the show itself, which was savaged.

But the Venice Biennale has proved to be a rare low point in his glittering academic career (the other was losing out to Brett Steele as AA chairman in 2005), which is documented in a 12-page CV that lists his achievements in laborious detail. This desire to be taken seriously, coupled with a slight ecclesiastical demeanour is not surprising. His father is an Anglican priest who went on to run the adult education institute Morley College, and one of his siblings, Nick, is professor of opera and music at Sussex University.

To his friends and colleagues his swift climb through academia simply proves how good he is not just as an administrator — "the best in architectural education", according to one — but in having a vision beyond "the 1980s AA model of the creative genius" as another former colleague puts it.

In all the academic posts he has held, from the Bartlett where he became sub-dean, to Sheffield where he was head of school and finally to Westminster, he has not only ticked the right boxes, upping the research points and, at Sheffield particularly, linking the school more closely with the community, he's also established himself as one of the few academics trying to recalibrate what architectural

education means.

Yet the leap from Westminster with 2,000 students and 200 staff to Central St Martins, which has double both numbers, is a huge one. He is unknown in fashion circles and his new employer has a reputation as the world's number-one fashion school.

More than that, he arrives at a difficult time when art, even more than architecture, is under government scrutiny. University of the Arts London, of which Central St Martins is part, is set to lose more than £50 million in funding by 2015. And the college needs to justify spending £200 million on its building which, though popular with architecture critics, has led students and even the staff to wonder if the creative buzz that attracted the likes of Alexander McQueen, Rifat Ozbek and John Galiano can remain as strong.

Till would be the first to admit that he's not fashionable, although he did have a period of wearing loud checked trousers. It was a look that made him stand out from his black-clad colleagues, and was surely deliberate. Despite spending more than half his life among architects (he is now in his mid-50s), he has made no secret of his dislike of the profession, and indeed most architecture. This was the thrust of his book *Architecture Depends*, published in 2009, which was also an attempt to save the profession from itself by pointing out that it was becoming increasingly irrelevant to the construction process. Flora Samuel who succeeded Till at Sheffield described it as a "brave, enjoyable, affirming and important book".

The few architects that make it on to his approval list include Penoyre & Prasad, Feilden Clegg Bradley, and BDP "when it remembers its socialist roots". You can't help feeling that he'd prefer to be based in the festering warren of studios that Central St Martins vacated rather than the gleaming new building behind King's Cross station. Though one advantage is that it's in walking distance of his house, which he designed and shares with his partner, architect Sarah Wigglesworth. Like all Till's projects this house, made from straw-bales, was much talked about before, during and after construction. It was featured on an early episode of *Grand*



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Designs, where we also learnt a great deal about the Till/Wigglesworth lifestyle — they ride a tandem, kept chickens (until they were lost to the local foxes) and have a vegetable garden that allows them to be self-sufficient for six months of the year despite living five minutes from Waitrose.

And while there's something almost smug about Till — he is very well connected and has his fingers in lots of pies — he is full of surprises, including his new love of Twitter, which he says is "a new avenue to gather opposition". Central St Martins may think they're hiring a safe pair of hands to guide them through education's choppy waters but they could find he's got other plans.

WHAT HE SAYS

"As the occupiers [at St Paul's] shouting, 'We are the 99%', challenge the inequalities of that equation, so architects need to question the values of the 1%, which are so uncritically perpetuated... This is where we can learn from the occupiers, not from the way they look, but from the resilience and brilliance of their organisational structures, and from their overall critique of the structures of power." **Jeremy Till in the AR November 2011**

WHAT OTHERS SAY

"Jeremy has a tremendous track record as a creative practitioner and as an academic leader. He knows our sector well and has been working very successfully in the tough environment in which all universities now find themselves. Most importantly, he is filled with enthusiasm and admiration for CSM and relishes the prospect of working with its staff and students." **Nigel Carrington, Rector of University of the Arts London, speaking last week**