

The reawakening of Sheffield is to be highlighted in Venice at Europe's most prestigious architecture event. David Bocking met the university professor leading the way

European eyes on 'Echo City'

YOU can get a pretty good view of the rebuilding of Sheffield from the 14th floor of Sheffield University Arts Tower.

This is the eyrie of Jeremy Till, the university's professor of architecture. "My ambition," says Prof Till, looking out at the building sites unleashed by the city's regeneration agencies, "would be for them to raise their ambition".

As is often the case with born again Sheffields who spent their early years south of Watford, Jeremy Till is enthusiastic about the virtues of his adopted city.

So much so that he's using Sheffield as inspiration for his presentation at Europe's most prestigious architecture event this summer.

The Venice Biennale is the world's biggest architecture show, he says, and this is the first time that a single city has been the representative of Britain at a show which attracts 150,000 visitors from all over Europe.

"It's a major opportunity for a city going through a reawakening to be on a prominent international stage. We want to get away from all those old clichés of Sheffield and say there's something vibrant and interesting going on here. People will get an awareness of Sheffield as a European city implanted in their consciousness."

Prof Till won a national competition to represent Britain at this year's Biennale and he's assembled a team of vibrant and interesting Sheffields and ex-Sheffields for his presentation: Ian Anderson from The Designers Republic, Tim Etchells and Hugo Glendinning from the Forced Entertainment theatre group and sound designer Martin Ware, formerly of Heaven 17 and the Human League. He'll also be joined by fellow architecture professor Sarah Wigglesworth.

"You'd be hard-pressed to put a team as strong as that together in any other European city," he says, untroubled by any suggestion of provincial false modesty.

The presentation, he warns, will not be a PR promotion for Sheffield. "That would be cheesy beyond belief."

Instead it will be a mixed media show with objects, photos, models, virtual guided walks and sounds collected to give an impression of how Sheffields see their city.

An important element will be a collection of responses left by Sheffields on Prof Till's answering machine. Call 0845 227 00 55 now with your answer to the query: "Please tell us what one thing would make



Prof Jeremy Till in his office in the Sheffield University Arts Tower. 'We want to get away from all those old clichés of Sheffield and say there's something vibrant and interesting going on here'

your city better." (Local rates apply, questions may differ to the one currently advertised).

In Prof Till's case, his response might well be: "stop building boring buildings before it's too late."

Some types of buildings can kill cities, he

says. "Like the awful mediocre buildings all down The Moor. Sometimes it's difficult to say no to developers but if you are an ambitious city, you should be able to say no. You should be able to raise the stakes."

The Venice presentation will be called 'Echo City', a term inspired by the decoy

city of light planned for the outskirts of Sheffield to attract bombers during the last war, says Prof Till. (The idea of the light city, involving theatre designers, was eventually rejected in favour of several smaller light installations around Sheffield, he adds).

"So we'll be building an echo city of Sheffield in Venice."

The theme of this year's Biennale is cities and the Echo City presentation will use Sheffield as inspiration for other cities, Jeremy says, and will feature three local projects:

The new Fox Hill housing development by Dutch firm Mecanoo (images on Prof Till's Apple Mac show herds of sheep wandering through flowers and shrubs by a series of stone rendered apartments with huge balcony windows looking out at views of the distant hillsides). "Modern vernacular" is how he describes this development. "It's not endless little semi-detached Noddy houses and it tries to relate to the landscape."

Then there's the Anglo-German design for the Jessop hospital site, a new university building, which will "wrap around" and "disguise" the old hospital and the new grey building next to it. (This is the first UK building by the company in question, Sauerbruch Hutton, he says).

And then finally there's Park Hill, where Prof Till lived for a time.

He gives short shrift to the detractors of the proposed scheme by Urban Splash. "We should be incredibly grateful that the city has had the vision to appoint such a visionary set of developers. It's an amazing opportunity."

Opposition to the scheme, given that otherwise Park Hill would just "sit there" is, says Prof Till, "just stupid".

The idea that ambitious architecture should be built on the aspirations of the people it will serve seems to be the message and that's why the Echo City project will aim to find out what people make of their own city.

"There's something about Sheffield that's much more than its physicality," he says, by which he means the city's "weird topography" visible from his 14th storey office, the mixture of urban and natural, industrial and domestic, as he puts it.

"And then there's the old cliché about community spirit that still survives here. I get on a tram out there and get called "love" and then I get off the train at St Pancras and I feel like an alien.

"It sounds corny but there's a sense of belonging here that you don't get in other cities, a sense of loyalty."

There's something special here, he says, and we should be more confident about letting the world know about it.

●The Echo City team makes a presentation at the Showroom Cinema on Thursday.