

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Maestro of the urban skys

Emma Jacobs



The craftsman: Renzo Piano is disdainful of dependence on design software, preferring conventional methods and tools

As Renzo Piano walks from his workshop to his office in the fashionable Marais district of Paris, a young Azeri architecture student rushes over. “Mr Piano, Mr Piano, I so admire you. Please can I ask you some questions?” The architect declines, moving back from the fan who stands just a few centimetres from his face. He is already late for his daily lunch break with his wife and 14-year-old son, at their home in the elegant Place des Vosges, whose residents have included novelist Victor Hugo and Cardinal Richelieu.

It is a bit like being with a rock star – albeit a polite, 75-year-old one. Long after Mr Piano has departed, a cluster of students lurks, breathlessly asking if they can pay to spend time with him.

Celebrity is problematic for the Genoan architect whose most recent high-profile design is London’s Shard, the EU’s tallest skyscraper with a height of 309.6 metres. “The star architect system has been very bad,” he says. “It’s been pushing architecture towards [being seen as] a fashion. Fashion is celebrating the moment.”

Architecture needs a longer view, he says. To judge a building’s worth requires time. Or, as he puts it, “architecture is a bit like a river, like the forest, like cities. It’s a long thing.” Such flowery metaphors are typical. Leaning back in his chair, he veers into dreamy diversions, peppering his speech with “desire”, “love” and the occasional “stupid”.

Fame is a difficult game for an architect, he says. While it helps get him work it also puts him in danger of losing touch with reality. “When you are young, everybody tells you the truth. When you age, there’s a certain degree of success. People take you seriously, even when you probably

don't deserve [it]. Very few people tell you the truth." The exception, he says, are "free thinkers", a group that includes his wife, his children, a few friends, some architecture critics and sometimes himself. There are moments, he adds, when he looks in the mirror and says: "What am I doing? This is stupid."

Stupid or not, Mr Piano is busy. Revenues for Renzo Piano Building Workshop, his firm, are holding up despite the recession, which has led architects such as Lord Foster and Lord Rogers to cut their workforces. Last year turnover was €36.5m and profits were €760,000, down from 2011 revenues of €41.2m. Such figures are modest compared with the global machine of Foster and Partners' £159.3m.

He believes the maximum size for an architectural practice should be 100 employees. "That's my theory," he says. Actually, he employs 150, which is still quite small – Lord Foster has almost 1,000.

Size is important because he likes an intimate atmosphere at work. He refers to the firm as his "wider family", the international students doing apprenticeships as "children". "They are young, they watch you with big eyes."

His own children from his first marriage are older (48, 45 and 40). His second wife, Milly, is an architect at the firm. She is patiently waiting for him so they can have lunch. Would she not prefer her husband, who travels so much (once a month he will have a week overseas, typically Tel Aviv to New York to Los Angeles to Sydney) to retire and stay at home? "Work is such a passion that it's far better to go on," she says.

He concurs. "I will never retire. How can you retire? I enjoy life, I'm happy. I can't do anything else."

Fizzing with life, it is indelicate and also impossible to pin him down on succession plans. Unlike Lord Rogers, who added partners Graham Stirk and Ivan Harbour to his company's masthead, only Renzo Piano's name is on his. Some partners and associates have worked with him for 40 years but he has not named anyone to take over. "There are people that take a lot of responsibility," he says vaguely.

Despite these bouts of impenetrability, his office has a reputation for being on budget and on time. "I'm not a manager but I have good sense," he says. "I have common sense. I feel when something's wrong."

A privilege of Mr Piano's profile is that he can afford to turn down jobs, balancing big profitable projects with smaller ones. He is working on a small lossmaking emergency hospital in Uganda and also the House of Justice for Paris, with a budget of €600m.

His office is suffused with light and has a huge fig tree with long roots coming through the tiled floor. He picks up a model of the Los Angeles Academy Museum of Motion Pictures museum, a see-through globe. He takes off the top to display tiny figurines. Craftsmen create his prototypes – he is disdainful of architects' overdependence on computer-assisted drawing.

This preference for the tangible is rooted in his family trade, building. His grandfather, father, four uncles and brother were builders and he worked on building sites while studying at Milan's Politecnico university. Why did he not enter the family profession? "Rebellion. When you are 16, 17, 18, the [easiest] way to find yourself is rebellion."

After graduating, he worked for the American architect Louis Kahn in the US, famed for his monumental modernist style, before moving to London. Here he met Lord Rogers and together they produced the Georges Pompidou Centre, visible from Mr Piano's Paris headquarters. Their relationship is invaluable to Mr Piano, professionally and personally. "Richard is like a brother to me. We talk every week. We share values, we spend time together, he's a member of the family."

The Genoan shares the ethics of the left-leaning Lord Rogers, whose written manifesto commits his firm to socially responsible projects. Does he too have a manifesto? "We have an implicit manifesto," he smiles.

The Pompidou is so integral to Paris's cultural landscape that it is easy to forget how shocking it was at the time. Lord Rogers nearly quit architecture as a result of the hostility. But Mr Piano says the factory-like appearance of the building, which opened in 1977, was a deliberate attempt to democratise culture.

"Museums were dusty and boring," he says. "[We wanted to] inject curiosity, instead of intimidation . . . We were very young, bad boys." An architect's role, he adds, is "not to change the world [but] to materialise [social] change" through buildings. He has not sought trouble, but by reflecting cultural changes in his buildings he has ended up "always being a bit in trouble".

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The Shard, which opened at the start of the year, has also come in for fierce criticism. Funded by the Qatari royal family's gas fortunes, it has been denigrated as a vulgar monument to wealth and power. Mr Piano once described skyscrapers as "aggressive phallic fortresses". What does he think of it?

"It's good. It will take a little while to become [accepted]. The [Pompidou] took 10 years to become popular and to be adopted by the city, loved. The Shard will take much less." He disagrees with Zaha Hadid, the British-Iraqi architect, who brands London as conservative. Paris, he says, is far stuffier, and Italy is even worse. He shrugs.

The Shard is not, he says, a symbol of elitism, despite the fact that the building's flats are among the most expensive in London – expected to cost about £4,000 per square foot. "That building is highly public. The restaurant, the viewing gallery, the hotel, the offices. It's like a little vertical city."

He speaks highly of the former mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, who was keen for the South Bank to provide a counterbalance to the energy of the City of London.

The ideal client is one that "has a vision and a clear desire", says Mr Piano. "You have to listen but you don't have to be obedient. The client is essential. In the ping pong [of discussion], you need the pong."