Diamond Rock Stars and the People Who Watch Them

The Shard as we know it now, indivisible from the Southwark skyline is a both a sign of the times and not. The most telling aspect of the building may not be the construction or layout but how it simultaneously orients and divides the profession of architecture. From conception to critique, it is both a fore-runner of possible trends and the beginning of the end for a particular kind of architectural persona. The building makes a defining statement about what it means to be ‘corporate’ in a media-savvy and somewhat tech-oppressive environment. Indeed more than any other of Renzo Piano’s work or even Irvine Sellar’s (the man behind Sellar Property Group) investments, the Shard requires something more to be successful: the Shard needs both love and envy. This neediness is due mostly to the structure’s frankly enormous scale and its subsequent pretensions to become a London icon. Yet to achieve these twin goals, the building has to mean something beyond its gargantuan size. In its raw ambition, the Shard wants to be as photo-friendly as any other tourist spot in London, however there are elements that are preventing the architecture achieving this, elements that boil down to how the Shard is viewed from within, from without and by comparison.¹

According to Sellar, during initial discussions the architect expressed a strong dislike for "tall buildings" and sketched a few fluid strokes hinting at what was known in 2001 as the "London Bridge Tower". As Piano dogmatically stated: “Tall buildings are often phallic symbols, a symbol of the desire to show how powerful you are”. Given the Shard as it is now, this seems like a highly hypocritical assessment. Especially as the Shard is over three times the height of the site's former building, The Southwark Towers, and by 16 feet, has become the tallest building in Western Europe.

Though to Piano’s credit, the Southwark Towers were indeed “Tall”. The Towers appear to have been designed as a monument to finance; boastful, intimidating and nothing else. This single-mindedness ultimately limited the Towers’ appeal. Indeed it seems that the earlier structure’s real redeemable feature was that it held a spectacular view from the top floors. That view, which the Shard now possesses, has become its top-selling feature. In advertisements, the "View from the Shard" is the chance to get a glimpse at the glamorous life. As

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3 Amanda Hall, City Profile: Sellar’s Towering Ambition, The Telegraph Online http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/4486928/City-Profile-Sellars-towering-ambition.html (March 25th 2001)
5 The next tallest building in Western Europe is the Commerzbank Tower in Frankfurt, Germany designed by Foster and Partners. “Commerzbank Towers”, The Official of Foster and Partners © 2013 Foster and Partners Last Viewed March 14th, 2013 <http://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/commerzbank-headquarters/> 
6 In this case “Tall” can be overly simplified as the exact opposite of what Rem Koolhaas would refer to as "Bigness" Koolhaas, Rem & Bruce Mau S,M,L,XL, The Monacelli Press, New York, NY 1995
8 Images on page 2 courtesy of the R.I.B.A. Archive and the author, respectively “Southwark Towers” Photograph. Date Unknown. London Photo Files, Royal Institute of British Architects, London UK
9 The View from the Shard”, The Official Website of the View from the London Shard © 2013 The View Last Viewed March 14th, 2012 http://www.therviewfromtheshard.com/
10 The View from the Shard”, The Official Website of the View from the London Shard © 2013 The View Last Viewed March 14th, 2012 http://www.therviewfromtheshard.com/
one commercial states “Rise Above it All”\(^\text{11}\) as Bus statements implore “Stop Staring Up, Start Looking Down”.\(^\text{12}\)


\(^{12}\) Images on page 3 courtesy of the author
While this could be seen as a marketing technique to try and get 25£ a pop (100£ if you have not reserved a ticket)\(^\text{13}\) from a novelty-loving public, this campaign may also have the effect of presenting the Shard as a fashionable event rather than a building: temporary and fun rather than oppressive and permanent. As Tom Sutcliffe from the Saturday Review for BBC Radio 4 noted, it seems similar to the Eiffel Tower when it was completed in 1889, particularly in Guy de Maupassant’s claims of the top being "the only place [in Paris] where I don’t have it see it."\(^\text{14}\)

Yet while the Eiffel Tower has extensive parks on all sides, the Shard just kind of happens next to a train station. One might argue that this has to do with the differences between the two structures (one being an exhibition piece and the other being a business machine), yet through this gesture the Shard becomes both inescapable from a distance and yet inaccessible from close range. The closer one gets the less real it becomes. So if Maupassant’s comment is to be re-invented, it might be along the lines of “The entrance to the Shard is the only place where I don’t have to worry about it.” For visitors to “The View” the entry is actually under the main lobby and, by comparison, feels earthier, more industrial, and poorer. Comparing the two entrances is telling of the Shard's actual intent.

The building can only really be seen from far away, perfect, dangerous and powerful: A synthetic mountain. Its presentation banks its charm, as so many lead guitarists and wannabe poets have done before, on being edgy and aloof yet just interested enough: you can look, but you can’t touch. This notion of secluded crystal perfection would be fine, except that the otherwise definitive statement is contradicted by two means: firstly that the materiality and design origins attempt to blend with the environment. Secondly that the advertising makes definitive statement about the kind of people who can afford it and claims that anyone can be one of them. One of the contradictions is physical, the other is not.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^\text{15}\) All Images on page 4 courtesy of the author
Recalculating...

According to Piano, the Shard's form was derived from the spires of the surrounding gothic churches but while the end result is questionably, the materiality seems less so. The tinted blue, hi-tech look can be visually tied to the Norman Foster forms which sit at its base. Piano interprets elements of the local environment and his doing this he is intending to blend with its immediate surroundings, but to still be on top. Given this desire to be both domineering and included, the critical responses have been varied. Charles Jenks refuted Piano's impressions of London spires and instead calls the form a “clustered icicle”. Amanda Levitt labelled it as a perfect one-liner stating: "The Shard stands like a proud grandfather overlooking an infant St. Paul's Cathedral nesting below." Owen Hatherly called it "Sleek, well-made, and evil", claiming that the tower physically shadows the council housing below. Simon Jenkins referred to the building as “a big single finger gesture” to the Southwark historical council.

Depending on perspective, the Shard could be seen as a “vertical village” that comes from the nightmares of 1927 - or - as a masterpiece of an architectural darling. So which is it: all-consuming tower dedicated to greed or focus for a fragmented city?

The critiques show that how one views this project says something about how one views most corporate endeavours. Further, that subscribing to the Shard's potential requires a specific leap of faith: that it will establish (or maintain, depending on your position).

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17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 *Metropolis.* Dir. Fritz Lang Perf. Alfred Abel, Brigitte Helm, Gustav Fröhlich, Rudolf Klein-Rogge UFA (UFA FILMS) 1927. Film.
23 All images on page 5 courtesy of the author
London as the centre of the financial world. As Simon Allport\(^\text{24}\) has suggested, it is as if the building is a re-envisioning of Greenwich Meantime, seeking to dominate, without apology and without sensitivity. Sellar confirms Allport’s assessment stating: “The Shard at London Bridge Quarter will redefine London’s skyline and become a symbol for the capital, recognisable throughout the world”.\(^\text{25}\) So the final pitch becomes “Let me rule you and I will be yours” or as Piano more eloquently put it: “The building will be adopted because it will be public...I think people will start to love it more and more.”\(^\text{26}\) But if exception was the goal, then why would have Piano designed the exterior to blend with its surroundings? If it was indeed to make it “public”, then it is a redefinition of what “public” means; you can view it from anywhere, but don’t breathe on the glass. Like a museum artefact marked “do not touch.”

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\(^{24}\) Skylines: Opinions on Renzo Piano’s Shard, London Architectural Review Online, July 24th, 2012
<http://www.architectural-review.com/skylines-opinions-on-renzo-pianos-shard-london/8633386.article> (March 14th, 2013)

<http://the-shard.com/shard>

\(^{26}\) Herbert Wright, Renzo Piano Talks about the Shard Blueprint Magazine Online July 12th, 2012
http://www.blueprintmagazine.co.uk/index.php/architecture/renzo-piano-talks-about-the-shard/ (March 14th 2013)
While the rhetoric coming from Sellar is common for business-magazine hype, when the Shard opened it created a constant reminder of its own existence beyond the usual degree: Busses to tube stops, radio to television, simultaneously controlling the skyline and public awareness, all of this done while having the constant hum of two distinct words: “exclusive” and “world-class”, two words which appear no less than 6 times on their website.

In describing the offices:

“The Shard is an inspirational workplace that provides an exceptional working environment in a world-class address”

In describing the hotel:

“Shangri-La is one of the world’s most opulent and exclusive hotel brands...With breathtaking views, the 200 luxuriously appointed rooms will offer guests the signature 5-star service...”

In describing the residences:

“The Shard will have an exclusive collection of apartments. The highest residences in the UK with unrestricted views across the capital.”

Further, the “View from the Shard” tickets reminds the public that while the average income may not be able to afford living or

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27 Images on page 6 courtesy of the author
29 ibid.
30 ibid.
renting space in the Shard, it can be yours, for a limited time, and a price. Yet when questioned about these notions, Piano stated:

“There is a lot of distortion, with the idea about the building being for rich people. There will be 5,000 people working in the offices, and there is no reason to think that these people will be very rich. There will be 1,000 people per day going to restaurants at mid-rise, and there are 200 or 300 restaurants at the same price level in London. There will be thousands more visiting the viewing gallery and other parts of the building. The other idea is that there is something wrong with the money for the Shard coming from Qatar. I never understood this idea, as if there is money that smells, or money that has a perfume. I found it a bit moralistic.”

“£25 is too much but in this town everything costs too much… I agree it is too expensive… But this is the normal price. If you go to the top of the Empire State building you spend more than that.” Though this is not strictly speaking true, as the Empire State Building costs $25 (about £16.50) to get to the 86th floor.
While it seems odd that the architect is being held responsible for the price of admission, in comparing the Shard to the Empire State Building, (which Piano had also done in response to criticisms of designing so large in a time of recession) he is choosing a very sophisticated defence, but maybe not a perfect one.

"Why The Whole World Will Pay to See This...the Eighth Wonder of the World."

The Empire State Building did advertise its view when it was completed in 1931 and to this day it’s extremely popular New York destination. Yet while the novelty is similar, the two buildings are treacherously different. Both buildings are effectively palaces to business and both had (or will have) the increasingly short-lived aspiration of being the tallest buildings in the city. Yet the notion of frontality is unavoidable when comparing the two. The Empire State Building’s, box-like form is predictably similar from every angle, while the Shard’s surprisingly complex form seems to wander around London changing personalities with the weather, sometimes threatening, sometimes inspiring. Walking from the west, it completes London’s composition, when

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viewed from the east; it serves as a great, hairy stalker reeking of body spray and corporate aggression.

Further, the business plans don't match up. The Shard’s presentation of withheld exclusivity seems sophisticated, but also cruel when compared to all the Empire State Building tchotchkes sold in the lobby. When the earlier structure was completed the intent was to get the space filled as soon as possible 41 and to achieve this, the owners made sure that images of the building became part of accessible mainstream media, most notably in King Kong (1933)42. Following suit, the Shard has appeared in a few pieces of media outside of advertising, including the 2012 animated sequel to The Snowman (1982)43, The Snowman and the Snowdog (2012)44. Though in the latter film the Shard appears for about 5 seconds, whereas in King Kong, the Empire State Building is the setting of the final climax. It shocked, it awed and it remained in the public consciousness. Though the Shard’s media persona in television and film is still being formed (in an upcoming episode of Dr. Who for example, the famous alien will ride an anti-gravity motorcycle to the top, which one might joke is the cheapest way to get there)45 if the current advertising trend continues, it seems that its portrayal might be a little less “Sleepless in Seattle” and a little more “Keeping up with the Kardashians.”46

43 *The Snowman* Dir. Dianne Jackson, Per. Animated. Channel 4 Universal Pictures 1982. Film
Finally there is the notion of precedent. In 1920s-30s New York, construction was about who could build bigger, not necessarily better.\textsuperscript{47} Whereas in the 2000s-10s the name of the architect almost means more than the end product. Gehry, Hadid, Koolhaas, Meier, it’s a collector’s game. So from an attention and investment standpoint, there is no need for the Shard to be as tall as it is. The Empire State Building needed to be tall, because that was the whole point, and the simplicity of that goal proved to be surprisingly populist.\textsuperscript{48} Yet when the Shard attempted something similar, it received accusations that the building devalues the city by giving its profits to “absentee investors” rather than “most Londoners”, which has yet to be proven.\textsuperscript{49} In comparing the Shard to the Empire State Building, Piano may have made his case for construction and cost but he also may have also proven that vanity and happiness are incompatible.\textsuperscript{50}

\textbf{Starchitecture and a Visit from the Goon Squad}

The Shard is controversial, not only in scale but in marketing. It is torn between being the public art piece the architect wants and the vertical palace the developer wants. In a fiscally conservative environment, this kind of Starchitecture (though Piano has never fit comfortably into the term) is in a battle between visual grandeur and a more conservative kind of practicality. When compared to its contemporaries [50] the Shard seems almost like a brand

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{48} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Editorial \textit{The Shard: View for a Few} The Guardian Observer Online <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jan/31/the-shard-view-for-a-few> (January 13th, 2013) Last Viewed: March 14th, 2013
\item \textsuperscript{50} Choderlos De Laclos \textit{Dangerous Liaisons (Les Liaisons Dangereuses)} Trans. Ernest Dowson, Olympia Press 2012. (original printing 1782)
\item \textsuperscript{51} Images on page 11 courtesy of Bloomberg online & the Independent online, respectively.
\end{itemize}
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that was bailed out and shifted towards a more upscale clientele to save the investment. But if that was true, it would only change the intent, not the product. Shouldn’t design speak for itself? The knee-jerk answer is “yes” but in something as possibly influential as the Shard, opinions are constructed on more than that, particularly for the general public 52[51]. As viewers, we consume the images, marketing and personalities of architecture long before we may ever see the actual structure, if not intentionally, then by peripheral affiliation. The Shard’s media thus far absolutely presents ”world-class” exclusivity but Piano doesn’t. In interviews he comes off as charming but sincere, well tailored but handy, so criticizing the Shard as a bully is much more painful because it’s true. The Shard may be a premier example of the kind of structure where the architect is not in control of how the icon appears, just how it’s made.

53 Images on page 12 courtesy of author
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