

London love story

The go-ahead for London Bridge Tower consummated a long flirtation between Renzo Piano and the capital. He tells Karen Glaser how he wants to build the Shard 'with love'. Portrait by Guy Drayton

"He waited a very long time for that call," said one of Renzo Piano's staff at his firm's Paris office. "England has always been very closed to European architects so, yes, he jumped at the chance."

The call came on a September morning in Berlin three years ago. The architecturally-progressive borough of Southwark was interested in Broadway Malyan's proposal to build a 300m tower over London Bridge station, but felt that a scheme of such scale needed some big-name gravitas behind it. Who could developer Irvine Sellar suggest? The Sellar Properties chief went away and gave the matter some thought. A few days and much parleying later, he had a name. How about Italy's greatest living architect, the modern Renaissance man who designs museums and cities across the globe, but who had never built on England's shores?

It proved an inspired choice. Renzo Piano's "shard of glass" has finally got the go-ahead (*News* November 21) and, if all goes to schedule, should be scratching the capital's skyline by 2009.

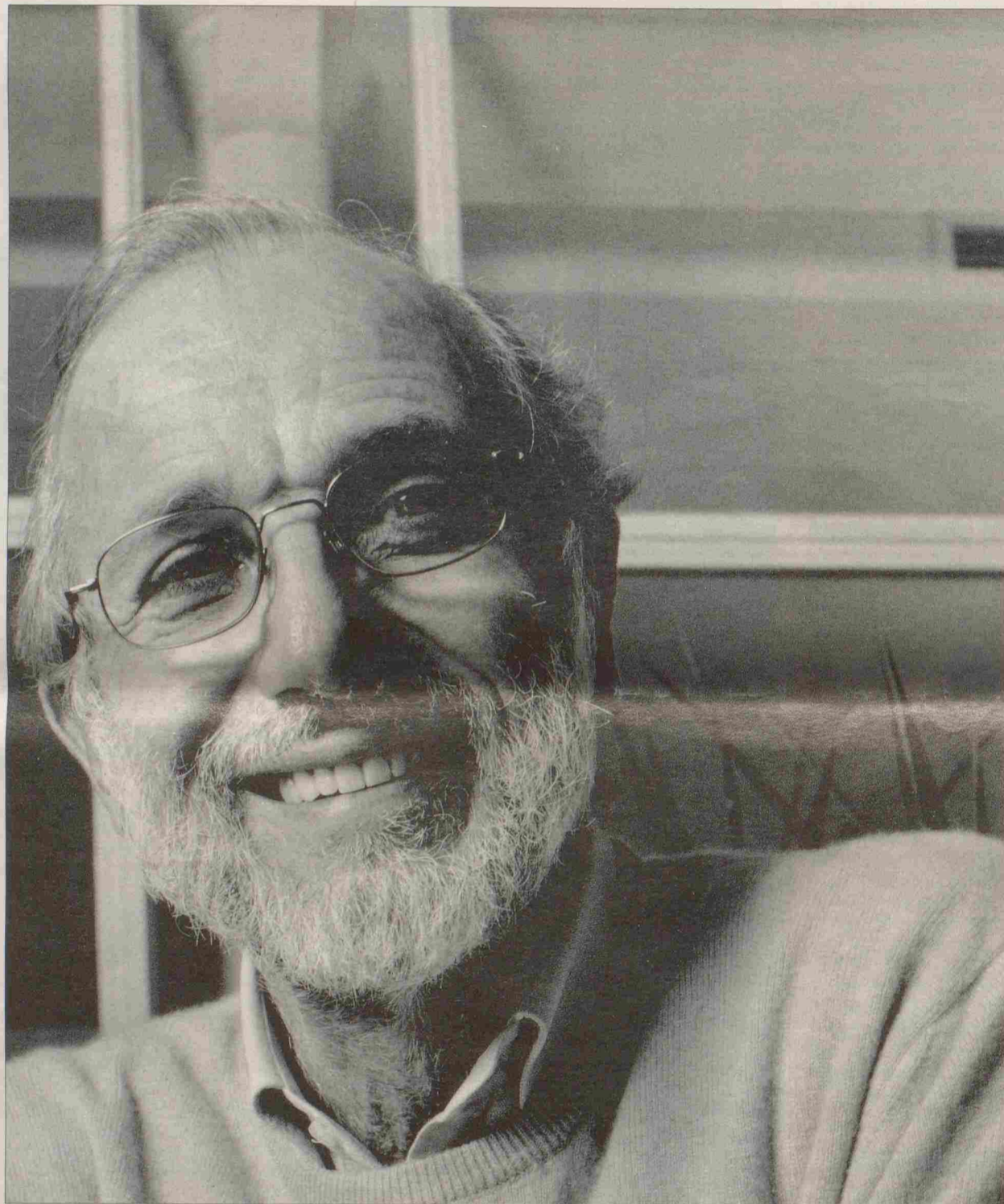
It's a major and very public victory for the power of good architecture and a personal, fairly major one for Piano. The Italian architect has wanted to return to London ever since he taught at the AA in the late 1960s. He thought his moment might have come in 1994 with the Tate Modern and was reportedly pretty upset when it turned out to be Herzog & de Meuron's moment instead. Not because he is niggardly or even, for a world-class designer, particularly competitive, but because when Renzo takes on a project it is because he has fallen in love and simply cannot bear "for the bride to go off with someone else. That's why I don't really enter competitions."

It has been the same story with the London Bridge Tower. "It's a three-year relationship which I have always been very positive about, but when my team and Irvine called me in New York last week it was a very joyful moment. That's a natural, instinctive reaction, isn't it?"

It is, and also one that is very typical of Piano. He is an instinctive rather than intellectual designer, one who has an idiosyncratic, highly emotional approach to his craft. For this most Italian of Italians, architecture is "about building emotion. It's about love... about this childish, innocent and candid desire to change the world."

The world is a big place to try to change, but when it soars into the firmament this £350 million tower will certainly change the face of London. Mindful of this responsibility and, maybe, because like many passionate souls he can be just a little bit possessive, the affable Piano wants to be there for every step of this journey. So despite almost having another London scheme on the books – new offices behind Centrepoint for insurance firm Legal & General – it looks unlikely that the Renzo Piano Building Workshop will work with a partner practice in Britain's capital. Neither does he plan to set up shop here.

"Paris and London, they are almost like one city now, aren't they?" he says. "The first thing my wife and four-year-old son Giorgio said to me when they heard the news was 'great, so we will spend more time in London'. And, you know, I agree, that will be lovely and



means that I can really spend the time required on this difficult and delicate project."

Setting up a practice in London would also, of course, mean employing more staff and, like delegation, that too would go against the Piano grain. Between his Geneva and Paris offices he employs just 100 people, who, he reveals after some goading, get to work on no more than 1% of the commissions offered to the office. "I know everyone's name and what he or she is good at. I don't care about money or the number of projects we do. This is the most dangerous profession in the world; if we get it wrong people live with our buildings for a very long time. I want to do it properly, to do it with love."

Doing it with love has certainly borne varied architectural fruit: Piano's portfolio is arguably more diverse than any other star architect working today. He is best known, of course, for designing the Pompidou Centre between 1971 and 1978 with Richard Rogers, with whom

he talks every week. Its boisterous tangle of exposed ducts, gantries and escalators was the ultimate expression of the building as a machine, but since then the hi-tech label with which Piano has been popularly saddled has not always been appropriate. There has been the Kansai Airport in Osaka with its asymmetrical steel roof, but there has also been the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, the San Giovanni Rotondo church in southern Italy built from local stone, the clapboard Menil museum and the curved, wooden ribs of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre on the South Pacific island of New Caledonia. And now, of course, there is the 66-floor Shard.

Piano chafes at the idea of having a signature style: "Worrying about style is like being one of those people who looks at their reflection in shop windows and asks 'am I beautiful?' It's almost narcissism." But he still thinks the firm's work is recognisable and that pleases him. The critics say it is his exquisite marriage of technology and craftsmanship,

his humanist architecture that merges art with science.

There is no doubt that he takes delight in the evolving construction process. He comes from a long line of Genoese builders, whose family firm he was expected to join, and his Paris office is a visible homage to their craftsmanship. On display from the street is the workshop, where among the rows of tools and computer images, visitors can sit at long, maple tables and look through endless models and mock-ups of building components.

Piano agrees that it is important for him to make "well-crafted" buildings, but says if anything unifies his work it is a "sense of lightness. I don't want to say too much about it, it's a bit irrational, but I suppose I like putting air in buildings." It's not really irrational to strive for architectural lightness, but it's a mark of this architect's diffidence that he thinks it might be. Piano considers many of his thoughts and positions a "bit irrational" and he doesn't sound

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affected or coy when he says so, just a little earnest – a dreamer who suspects that the rest of the world is a bit more sensible than he is.

When it comes to the Shard, Piano thinks the world was eminently sensible. "I really enjoyed the inquiry," he says, with what appears to be genuine enthusiasm. "I liked all the conversations about the public realm, and I think it's very civilised and right that in such a big job as this, where the public realm is so important, that there is confrontation and challenge. You talk to Cabe, you talk to the GLA, it's a very British way of approaching things. For an Italian, it's very refreshing."

The only part of the inquiry Piano says he didn't find as engaging was the discussion about the Tower of London and whether his tower would spoil its views. "I thought that was a bit abstract, like looking at a still instead of the whole movie." Sounds like the Italian architect may have missed the point and importance of a very live London debate.