



Defining Distinction, or Four Good Reasons for Success

The Extraordinary Career of Renzo Piano



For 30 years, Renzo Piano has been producing distinguished buildings and delighting the world with his innovation and sensitivity. Here, Livio Sacchi attempts to tease out some of the reasons behind Piano's sustained success. Having gained an almost unparalleled international profile during the last couple of decades, a period that has been notoriously difficult for Italian architects, Piano's career has an almost mythic quality. It boasts one of the most unlikely competition wins of all time that ceded one of the most prestigious sites in the world, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, to two completely unknown architects in their late 20s.

Renzo Piano's success can be attributed to a number of different reasons. First it must be said that his success is even more noteworthy precisely because he is an Italian architect who grew up in a country whose architectural culture has had considerable difficulties in affirming itself over the course of the 20th century, notwithstanding some exceptional projects whose only fault was that of not being easy to relate to principal trends. As the reference for an elevated level of trustworthiness at the international level, and the only Italian to have received the Pritzker Prize, Piano is now the only fully recognised architect in Italy and one who has realised important works in the principal countries around the globe.

The first reason for his success is probably to be found in the exceptional act of having begun his career with such a rare debut: the construction of the Centre Pompidou, the result of a fruitful partnership with a young Richard Rogers (also partly Italian). The true icon of the new, technological season of contemporary architecture, the Beaubourg owes much of its fascination to its violent contrast with the historical centre of Paris, a contrast that would not have been tolerated in Italy, certainly not in those years. Piano thus debuted internationally, beginning a lengthy season of architecture spectacle that has lasted, in the midst of a great many discussions, to this day. It is an inaugural gesture that coincides, however, with an immediate stepping back: no other building of his has ever sought such a visual shock, that figural recognisability that, more than anything else, seems to construct the invariable character of much of the production of the contemporary star system.

The second reason can be found in the constant attention to technological innovation, united with the unusual ability to join the old and the new, to root each built invention in the images that we inherit from history. A worthy example can be found in Piano's use of brick. One of the first projects to explore the possibilities offered by the coupling of a relatively traditional material with supports that are derived, instead, from the most advanced technologies, is the addition to the IRCAM in Paris. I am speaking, in particular, about the building that overlooks the Place Stravinsky, in direct visual connection with the Centre Pompidou. Here the cladding is composed of panels held up by baked enamel finished steel or stainless-steel frames, reinforced with steel profiles. These frames are then filled with dry-laid, solid brick masonry, anchored to a system of neoprene gaskets on steel rods fixed to the frames; the latter are then invisibly anchored to the reinforced concrete building structure.

Such experimentation is part of the attention Piano has always paid to more traditional materials – his work with wood, stone, and so on – with the explicit objective of increasing the range of contemporary construction techniques. It is patient

Renzo Piano Building Workshop, New York Times Tower, New York, 2000–
The new midtown Manhattan landmark tower is possibly the first, smart example of a new generation of high-rise sustainable office buildings. In a panorama crowded with lots of debatable, recently built examples, the New York Times Tower will stand as a quiet and almost classical architectural statement.



Renzo Piano Building Workshop, London Bridge Tower, London, 2000-
 The London Bridge Tower is a powerful, elegant and sleek landmark whose spire – much taller than any of the many remaining Wren spires in the city – is intended to represent the vanishing point of a breathtaking perspective view. It is likely the building will overshadow any other in the increasingly exciting London skyline. Its shape is completely different from that of any other of the world's tall buildings, yet reminiscent of famous historical skyscrapers such as the John Hancock Building in Chicago. In a way also similar to its powerful American predecessor, the London Bridge Tower will almost certainly appear much taller than it actually is when viewed from the narrow, overcrowded streets below.

research which, through 'minor' projects – such as the housing complex in rue de Meaux, once again in Paris, or the headquarters of the Banca Popolare di Lodi in Milan (both 1991) – led Piano to the colossal intervention in Potsdamer/Leipziger Platz in Berlin. Here, terracotta elements in the form of drawn narrow tubes were specially built for the project and create uniform fields or alternating patterns similar to the effect of a Venetian blind. Where necessary, Piano also uses panels, once again in terracotta, to enclose or protect the bearing structure. The whole creates a true 'perforated skin': vibratile, breathing walls with light steel structural supports and a reassuring and substantial backdrop.

The third reason for Piano's success lies in his unexpected ability to engage in transcultural dialogue: one of the most heartfelt themes of the contemporary condition, but also, in general, one of the least happily resolved by architects. The most interesting building in this sense is the JM Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Nouméa, New Caledonia: an example of how design quality can be achieved through the hybridisation of typologies, technologies, function and style when it is accompanied by a deep understanding of diversity. The project is the result of a competition run by the French government of New Caledonia during the peace conference held after a series of revolts that took place between 1984 and 1988, culminating in 1989 with the murder of the Kanak leader Jean Marie Tjibaou.

The building, which occupies a site of extraordinary beauty, is modulated by a curvilinear path which, not unlike that which can be found in any Kanak settlement, constitutes the unifying element of a succession of otherwise disconnected episodes. Three recognisable nuclei thus contain, among other things, an amphitheatre, library, mediatheque, various display spaces and a series of didactic laboratories. The geometries of the various blocks, composed primarily of one level above ground and a basement service level, are based on the repetition of rectilinear buildings on the concave side of the curve, towards the lagoon, and curved elements on the convex side, towards the sea. The first present a simple, flat metal roof, while the second propose a typology based on a suggestive system of double screens – cylindrical on the inside and with a double curve on the exterior – specially designed in laminated wood and steel. These creatively reinterpret a relatively



Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Renovation and expansion of the Morgan Library, New York, 2006

The recently opened Morgan Library addition is a subtle and understated building that tactfully respects the celebrated New York City Beaux Arts masterpiece. The new wing appears almost invisible in the densely built-up neighbourhood of Murray Hill, neutrally and elegantly leaving the scene to the elaborate classical decoration of the stylish McKim, Mead and White American Renaissance historical example. Its author clearly demonstrates here that, in confrontation with classicism, less is certainly more.





Renzo Piano Building Workshop, New Team Luna Rossa base, Valencia, Spain, 2006

For the Luna Rossa building, Piano masterfully explores the eye-catching values of the fashionable wrapping technique in a relaxed, easy and appropriate way. The architect seems at ease with a relatively small, practical building, though not forgetting that it may eventually become the architectural backdrop of an international symbol: an America's Cup-winning vessel sponsored by a major Italian fashion designer.





This 'high-tech, soft-touch' approach manages to unite Western rationality and local tradition, set against the backdrop of an authentic respect for the natural environment.

widespread technology in the Pacific that captures the prevailing light winds to create an effective system of natural ventilation, while at the same time resisting strong winds and even typhoons. On the inside of this shell, highly indulgent to local culture, one discovers contemporary and minimally serene spaces, careful detailing, sober colours that match the tones of the materials (wood and steel), calibrated levels of natural and artificial light and a notable sense of museum design. This 'high-tech, soft-touch' approach manages to unite Western rationality and local tradition, set against the backdrop of an authentic respect for the natural environment.

We could go on, finding other reasons to take an interest in the work of this office. However, in summary the success of

Renzo Piano appears above all to be the result of a level of quality that is extremely rare among the contemporary stars: an ability to work using a 'basic' language. That Piano is perhaps capable of operating so well in these terms was quickly made clear in the sober and contextual De Menil Museum in Houston (1986), accurately measured against the scale of a calm residential neighbourhood, and later demonstrated in countless, more recent projects – such as the Maison Hermès in Tokyo (2001), which is elegantly transparent and almost imperceptible against the chaotic backdrop of Ginza, and the Auditorium Parco della Musica in Rome, a complex that has been widely applauded by the public. However, it is his New York Times Tower, currently under construction, and, above all, his addition to the Morgan Library, a project of taste and rare modesty, at the limits of the visible, in contact with one of the most sacred and sophisticated icons of the American Beaux Arts movement, that fully underline the extent of this superstar's ability. **D**

Translated from the Italian version into English by Paul David Blackmore

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