

THE ARCHITECT OF LIGHT

"Changes are never easy to swallow. Changes are making trouble. If architecture is a mirror to that change, we can't expect that to be approved immediately by everybody."

- Renzo Piano

If you've never heard of the internationally acclaimed architect Renzo Piano, the above effectively summarises the individual, his work and philosophy. From the much debated Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, to the avantgarde Kansai International Airport in Osaka, the unconventional Museum of the Beyeler Foundation in Basel and more, the Italian architect is famous for not shying away from "change," rather he grounds his work in it.

But why are we so interested in getting to know Renzo Piano?

The Renzo Piano Building Workshop (RPBW), the namesake's architectural firm, is currently working on the new design of the Toronto Courthouse. The building will be RPBW's first development in Canada, as well as our chance to get to know the architect that will permanently place his signature on our city's skyline.

Descendant of a family of builders Piano never forgot his roots, in fact the word "Building" in his firm's name (The Renzo Piano Building Workshop) is an homage to his late father as well as his upbringing. Born in Genoa on September 14th of 1937, Piano always felt a pull to the family trade and he followed that calling all the way to the Polytechnic University in Milan, from which he graduated in 1964. Today the internationally acclaimed architect has offices in his native Genoa, Paris and New York, but at heart he still is the little boy who marvelled at buildings.

Nel mio carattere c'è la luce.

(In my personality there is light)

Dubbed "The Architect of Light," Piano masterfully marries his work with the surrounding elements. Natural light, flexibility and transparency are common themes found across his work. But don't let this fool you, surrounding elements does not mean surrounding infrastructure. Starting with the project that landed him on the international scene, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, Piano chose to set his creations apart from the surrounding architecture. Built between 1971 and 1977 the Centre Georges Pompidou was made to look like an "urban machine," colourful air ducts and elevators alongside the building's exoskeleton give the overall structure a unique and playful appearance. Piano's philosophy on architecture is as apparent on this design as the disjointment of the Centre Georges Pompidou with the surrounding historic neighbourhood. In fact, it sparked a heated debate within the architectural community; does the Centre Georges Pompidou belong in the heart of Paris beside structures like the Louvre and Notre-Dame Cathedral, or is it too futuristic for its location? Although experts have yet to reach a consensus on this matter, we can say with confidence that it delivered on the objectives set forth by its founders. It brought about change as well as a much needed revitalization of the deteriorated area of the Beaubourg quarter.

Today the Centre Georges Pompidou is an internationally renowned landmark that draws in millions of tourists and aspiring architects year over year. One building revitalised a whole quarter.

Following in the footsteps of the Pompidou, the Shard also known as the Shard London Bridge, faced a similar fate. Completed in 2012, the Shard is a 72-storey pyramidal tower located beside London Bridge Station. This light-filled, glass structure houses offices, restaurants, public spaces, a hotel halfway through the building and private residences at the top. Eight sloping “extra-white” glass facades (the “shards”) rise 787 ft above street level and disappear into the London skyline, making this building the tallest in England as well as western Europe. The development was met with adamant criticism by the English Heritage who claimed the building would be “a shard of glass through the heart of historic London.” To the critics credit, the building is indeed a shard of glass piercing through the heart of the city. To Piano’s credit, it’s an innovative piece of architecture that once again proposes change. Unlike the surrounding landscape the Shard is a “living” structure that reflects back upon London elements. Whether it’s sun-filled skies or rainy days, the expressive façades of angled glass panes will live and breathe those elements alongside the London community. Once again, Piano charges ahead with his unconventional creations.

Although the unorthodox motivates much of his work, not all RPBW designs are controversial. That is the case of the Beyeler Foundation Museum in Basel Switzerland, where the architect’s love for nature, art and architecture culminated in a structure that is seamlessly immersed into the surrounding greenery. Art dealers Hildy and Ernst Beyeler, commissioned Piano to design a gallery where they could showcase their private collection of modern and tribal art. Having visited the proposed development site, the gorgeous Berowerpark, Piano decided to create a structure that was one-with-nature. Glass, reinforced concrete and red porphyry stone from Patagonia seamlessly compound to deliver the perfect marriage of edifice and landscape. Vast glass windows connect the indoors with the outside, allowing for an unimpeded view of the artwork if standing outside and an unobstructed view of the surrounding greenery while inside. The walls are of differing heights, with the entrance walls being the lowest as if lowering to “meet and welcome” visitors into the museum. Four supporting porphyry walls and columns stand tall both framing each section of the building as well as melting into the surrounding landscape. Uncontroversial? Yes. Unoriginal? Not by a long shot.

In looking at all Renzo Piano creations, none seem to embody his design style as much as the Kansai International Airport in Osaka. Once again light, transparency, and innovation all come together to give way to the world’s longest airport. Located on a mile long, man-made island, the airport was conceived as an organic complex fueled by the circulatory flows of passengers and air. One of the most impressive architectural structures of its time, the airport features one the largest solar farms of any airport in Asia, hydrogen-powered vehicles as well as sustainable heating/cooling technology derived from landing and departing aircrafts.

Regardless of the many international accolades, Piano never strayed too far from his native Genoa. Following the heartbreaking collapse of the Morandi Overpass in August of 2018 which resulted in the death of 43 people, Piano pledged to build his city a brand new bridge for free out of a sense of civic spirit.

"It will be a beautiful bridge," he said "A very Genoese bridge. Simple but not trivial. A steel bridge, safe and durable. Because bridges do not have to collapse."

As a consequence of the great tragedy that was the collapse of the Morandi Bridge, the desire to rebuild and restart immediately was met with a wider objective; that of building a new bridge capable of representing the real driving force behind the transformation of the entire area of Val Polcevera. The construction of the bridge is in fact set to be accompanied by calls for tenders for public competitions with the aim of implementing works of urban, social and environmental regeneration. In particular, a new public park will be created that will, by way of a memorial, commemorate the victims of the collapse and restore the fragile natural ecosystem of Val Polcevera.

From the internationally acclaimed architect, to the honourable man that gives back to his community, Toronto is lucky to receive a Renzo Piano original and I for one cannot wait to see what he has in store for us.

Other Renzo Piano Notable Work: San Nicola Football Stadium Bari, Italy. The Jean Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Nouméa, New Caledonia. The Potsdamer Platz reconstruction, Berlin. California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco. The Whitney Museum, New York and many more.