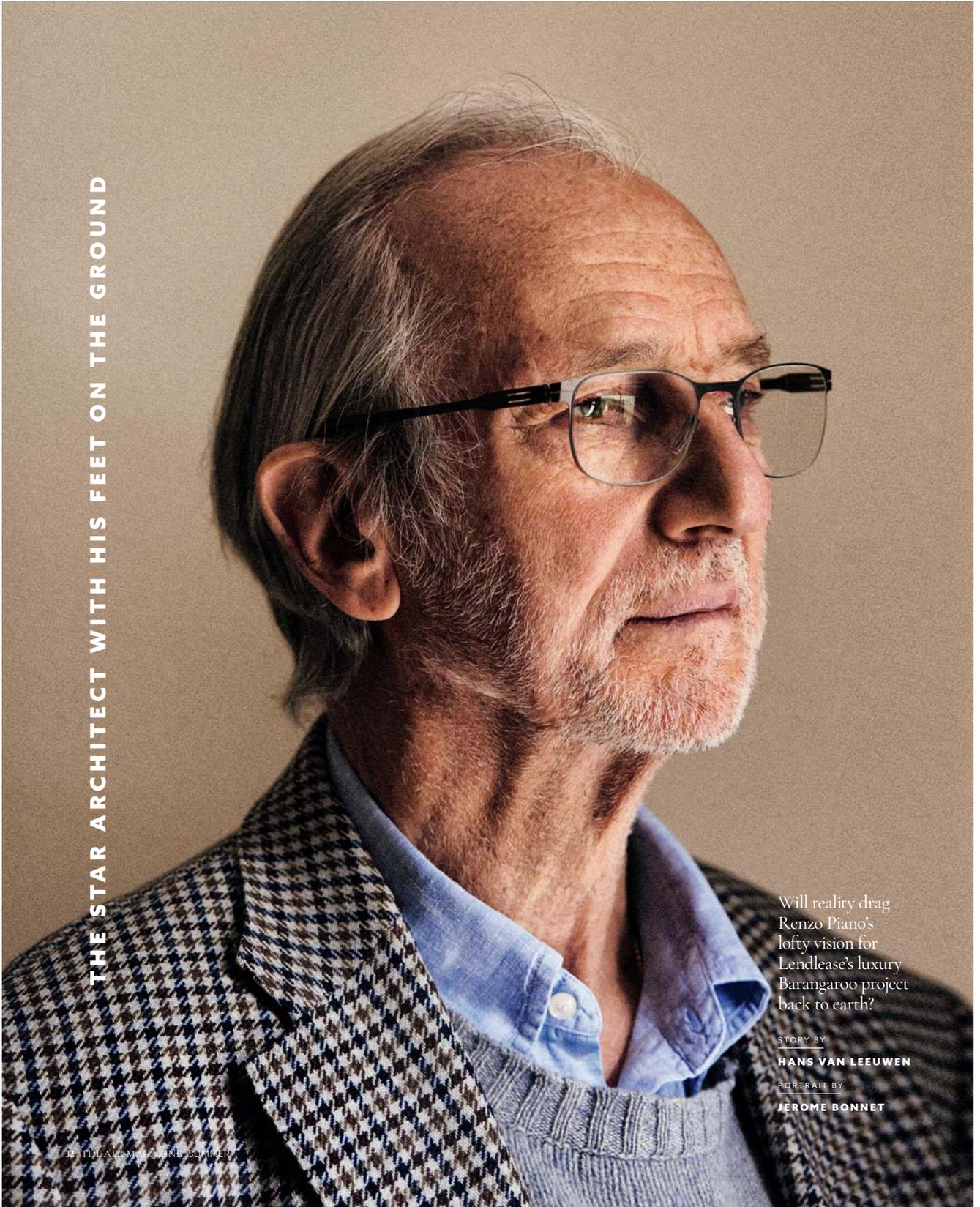


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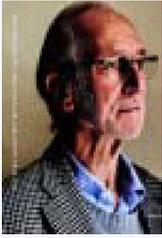


THE STAR ARCHITECT WITH HIS FEET ON THE GROUND

Will reality drag Renzo Piano's lofty vision for Lendlease's luxury Barangaroo project back to earth?

STORY BY
HANS VAN LEEUWEN
PORTRAIT BY
JEROME BONNET

32 THE AFR MAGAZINE SUMMER



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The Shard, London's tallest tower, is one of the most extraordinary buildings on the planet. Driving into the capital from the north-east, you see the crystal arrowhead soaring above the city, its identity shimmering somewhere between futuristic space-port and medieval cathedral spire.

Seen up close, its reflective glass captures the English sky – whether a cloud-scuffed summer's day, a leaden winter afternoon, or a polychrome autumn sunset – and concentrates the celestial colours into pure essence. Unlike most towers, it is more delicate than it is phallic, achieving its height and substance without being monolithic or bulky.

It's a building that summarises the genius of Renzo Piano, the Italian architect who for five decades has roamed the six inhabited continents creating buildings that are at once breathtaking feats of engineering, homages to place and history, aesthetic wonders of industrial chic, and temples of light.

Even among this Pritzker prize-winning and literally dazzling array of civic and corporate edifices – which began with the revolutionary Pompidou Centre in Paris in the early 1970s – the Shard may well be his masterpiece.

And yet, it hasn't lacked bilious detractors, who have castigated it as an out-of-place eyesore and an unedifying altar to the excesses of late capitalism.

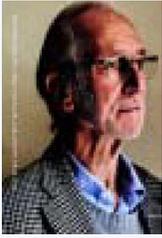
As much as it is extraordinary, the Shard has become a defining symbol of the dangerous tightrope Piano often walks. In every urban project he does, he must choose when to make a bold, idiosyncratic statement and when to blend in.

"In the end, when you make a good building it's also because you make a better city. It's about quality, quality of spaces, it's about civic life," Piano says, talking to *AFR Magazine* in his light-filled Genoa studio.

"The city is making that miracle, that place where people stay together. They share values. That's why I believe that everything starts from a public space – a piazza, a garden or something – a space where you meet other people."

Right now he's on that tightrope once again, and this time it's strung in Sydney. He's joined on the wire by the big Australian developer Lendlease, which in 2014 commissioned him to design One Sydney Harbour – a trio of deluxe residential towers near the top end of Sydney's slowly unfolding Barangaroo district, built on former wharves, adjacent to the CBD. They share a common goal, but with differing balancing acts to manage.

Whereas Piano tries to juggle aesthetics and actuality, Lendlease has to pull off a tricky two-carder. With one hand, maximise a site's commercial potential and turn a profit; with the other, appease a suspicious public, who see communal spaces in peril, traditional neighbourhoods being gentrified, and commerce trumping community.



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The stepped design of Piano's Genoa studio gives each employee a view to the sea. On one floor, carpenters create miniature versions of each project.



Things are simmering at One Sydney Harbour. There's the trenchant opposition of Sydney City Council, as well as court battles over harbour views. More headlines came in October when the marquee penthouse sold for \$140 million – making it the most expensive piece of residential real estate in Australian history. The identity of the purchaser is, at the time of print, unknown. “Certainly we were aiming to make sure that this was a great addition to Sydney and not just a luxury ghetto,” says Lendlease chief executive Steve McCann. “But it’s a lot of work.”

It is also likely to be 82-year-old Piano's last Australian project. His Aurora Place, opened amid the optimism of 2000 with curves evoking the Opera House, reshaped the Sydney CBD skyline when viewed from the east. One Sydney Harbour may do the same when the city is viewed from the west.

Can Piano and his client cram this site with 800 luxury apartments, where even a one-bedroom off-the-plan unit will set you back \$3 million, yet still conjure a precinct, a community, a civic space? Will this be a living, organic neighbourhood? Or does the lack of a fourth floor – an unlucky number in China – suggest a darkened tower of absentee owners, overlooking a decorative but sterile park, sandwiched between office blocks and a casino?

The answer to this question lies with McCann, the bean counter turned Lendlease boss whose C-suite is just down the road from the excavation cavity that will become One Sydney Harbour; and also with the venerated starchitect, in his far-off Italian eyrie.

FOR AN OCTOGENARIAN, RENZO PIANO IS A BUSY man. He spends about a third of the time in Genoa, his birthplace, where he has a world-famous studio, a farmhouse and a charitable foundation, clustered on the steep Ligurian hillside overlooking the Mediterranean. Another third of his life is in Paris, where he has a second home and where his

Renzo Piano Building Workshop has a larger office. And the final third is on the road, visiting his project sites, pitching for work, and – quietly – revisiting old projects, looking at how people use the piazzas he has created, how his buildings “dialogue” with the streets around them.

His Genoa studio is separated from the pounding sea only by a curving coast road, the sort you always imagine was built primarily for James Bond to race along in a fast Italian car. The building is some way up the hill, and you can either climb 400 steps, or you can take the quirky Piano-designed funicular. It's such a nice touch: practical but fun; you sense an almost childlike, hobbyist's delight in the bygone age of industrial machinery. Inside the cosy cabin, two of his signature jaunty red deck chairs face the glorious sea view.

The largely wood and glass atelier is etched into the terraced hillside in the manner of a Ligurian greenhouse. The office is open plan but stepped, with each architect or employee able to look up from their workbench through the inclined glass roof and take in the sea. On the lowest tier is the modelling workshop, where carpenters make elaborate miniature versions of the projects on which Piano and his team are working. It's quietly industrious yet calm; snug yet airy. The yin-yang perfection of it makes you long to sit down at a desk, start work, and never leave. While waiting for our appointment, I see Piano in the background sauntering about: having a meeting, leaning over a colleague's desk to chat, then later deep in conversation in the modelling workshop.

Casually dressed, for a European anyway, he looks relaxed even while almost constantly on the move. The office ostensibly feels relaxed too; but even though he's on our periphery, as I talk with his colleagues I notice they always seem to have a slightly wary corner of their eye trained on him and his

whereabouts. Eventually, he joins me and the members of his team working on the Sydney project at a round table in a corner of the lowest level, overlooking the funicular and the sea.

I ask him whether he's in it for the art or the money. “I don't know that we make much money,” he responds. “We make enough money to be able to run this little family, this place.”

“It looks very simple but it's not that simple to run. Our office is not a big office but it's not a small office – we are 160 to 170 people – when you are that size you need to be quite careful about what you do. We have a freedom to decide what to do, let's put it that way. I don't want to look arrogant but we are not obliged to do everything. We are quite careful.”

Piano says that with a good client, there's an affinity, and the dynamic is positive – even when there's a clash between the imperatives of art and the dictates of commerce.

“Some people believe that total freedom is essential. Freedom in mental and physical terms is fine, but to be completely free from obligation is actually quite a difficult situation. A good client is not somebody saying freedom, total freedom. It's somebody telling you what is the need.”

Softly spoken in a way that seems almost shy, he takes his time over answers. Although, like any public figure, he has a time-honed store of ready-made views and anecdotes from which he draws, he genuinely seems to be weighing up my questions and carefully measuring out his responses. He has



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The Shard, London's tallest building, and (below) the Pompidou Centre, which Piano co-designed in 1971.

that inimitable European capacity for grand abstraction, but is always ready to puncture it with a lighthearted anecdote. He's clearly a workaholic – and I'm told later he has no intention of ever retiring – but he appears unshuffled and at ease.

If he feels relaxed anywhere, it should be here. He was born in Genoa in 1937 to a family of local builders. The fascination with engineering and construction comes from this heritage – normal in a good architect, but taken into the bloodstream with Piano. His older brother, an engineer, took over the family firm while Piano went to Milan to study, then teach and practise, architecture. Said the judges of the Pritzker Prize, who awarded him architecture's highest offer in 1998: "By choosing a career as an architect rather than a contractor, he may have broken with a family tradition in one sense, but in fact he has enhanced that tradition in ways his forebears could only have imagined."

His first major project was the Italian industry pavilion for the 1970 World Expo in Tokyo. It caught the eye of rising British architect Richard Rogers, and they formed a commercial partnership. In 1971 came the big break. The two men, still relatively unknown and inexperienced, took the architectural world by uncomfortable surprise when they beat 681 other entrants to win the public competition for the design of a new modern art museum, the Centre Georges Pompidou in the heart of Paris.

It was a building unlike any seen before; and despite the ire of traditionalists and the penny-pinching of politicians at the time, it has become an icon. It was the moment when stuffy old Paris embraced modernity.

"That was a special moment, it was only three years after May '68 – it was about rebellion, it was about something that had to happen at that time. It was the right time to do that," Piano tells me. "If you ask me whether today, in Paris, we could do the same thing we did with Beaubourg, the answer would be no, I don't think so," he says, "Beaubourg" being how Parisians refer to the Pompidou Centre. "Every day I go by, going to the office, going back home, I'm still surprised we were able to do that. We were young boys. I understand why we did it, but it was a miracle that we were asked to do it."

Afterwards, Piano moved back to Genoa and joined forces with Peter Rice, who had been engineering firm Arup's man on the Pompidou

project, and whose first big job as a civil engineer was to put the roof on the Sydney Opera House. Their collaboration, which lasted until Rice's death of a brain tumour at the age of 57 in 1992, exemplified Piano's striking commitment to the symbiosis of engineering and architecture.

Among their first big projects was the Menil Collection in Texas: utterly unlike the Pompidou Centre, it is an austere, simple building that showcases a different side of Piano's architectural personality.

You see this diversity time and again with Piano. One minute, it's the sweeping curves and evocative shapes of Osaka's Kansai Airport or the Nemo Science Centre in Amsterdam. The next it's the tight, sharp corners of the Fondation Beyeler in Switzerland or the PwC tower in Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, leavened with sharp glass panels that clad, jut out from, and/or define, the structure.

There's the mad originality of the Zentrum Paul Klee in Switzerland or the Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé Foundation in Paris, then the more functional Paris Courthouse. There's a riot of colour in London's Central St Giles, but a palette of greys at the Centro Botín in Santander.

Chris Wilkinson, one of Britain's leading architects, worked with Piano on an early project. He's also the designer of the Crown tower at Barangaroo, right next door to the One Sydney Harbour development. "Renzo's a very, very talented architect," Wilkinson says. "He is so innovative and creative, that's what I like about him. Basically he treats every project as new, he starts from scratch. He has a very diverse portfolio. And he takes such a humanist approach."

At a Royal Academy retrospective in London last year, there was a scale model of about one hundred of Piano's signature buildings, laid out together. A kind of imaginary Pianotropolis of ports, stadia, office blocks, cultural centres and apartments, with an airport at one end.

It's a bewildering display; a portfolio that is "staggering in scope and comprehensive in the diversity of scale, material, and form", as the Pritzker Prize judges put it. What propels this variety, this innovation?

"I will never forget that not long after we did Beaubourg, a lady came from Japan and she wanted to make another Beaubourg, a bit smaller, in Tokyo. And Richard Rogers and I, we asked her, 'are you joking? You cannot make the same building there'," Piano says. "People ask the singer to sing again the same song, but I think architecture is not like that. Because the town changes, the place changes – architecture is so rooted to the place."

As an example, we consider Sydney – and he has an unusual



take. Australians would call Melbourne the windy city, but for Piano it's the quintessence of Sydney. "It's a city of the breeze. I think the magic of Sydney is the natural setting, the presence of water everywhere; and also, I may be spoilt by being a sailor, but the breeze is also for me a part," he says.

It's one of the influences on One Sydney Harbour, whose three towers are triangulated into sharp-edged crystalline shards, and stand askew to each other. "The idea of the breeze going through those buildings. That's why in the corner we are trying to catch the breeze. And by [being able to] open the window. We've been working a lot on that, catching the breeze."

He later admits there's probably a reason the Sydney sea breeze has snagged his attention, and it dates back two decades to the Aurora Place project. "The first time we worked with Lendlease a long time ago, one day we signed an agreement about the design, and I added as a joke a little note saying 'every time I come to Sydney I want to be able to go sailing'. And we signed it. And then I was obliged to go sailing, even in the bad weather," he chuckles.

He turns to his colleague, who is sitting in: "You may remember, Musci, the day we went out from the heads and it was quite rough?" They laugh at the recollection. It can't have been too traumatic: his latest self-built yacht, moored in Genoa, is called Kiriibilli.

"I DON'T DISLIKE THE IDEA THAT SOMETIMES BUILDINGS ARE LIKE A SPACESHIP LANDING."

Renzo Piano

PIANO IS NOT JUST BACK IN SYDNEY after 20 years. He's also back facing the same kind of challenge he encountered in London 10 years ago. The furore and

controversy that enveloped the Shard may yet resonate with his new venture Down Under. As the tower imposingly took shape over the London skyline in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the critics loaded their slingshots. They said it was out of kilter with the Thames' low-rise southern shore. It was just too tall, too bold, too shiny.

"The Shard has slashed the face of London forever," wrote columnist and then chairman of the National Trust, Simon Jenkins, when it opened. No, countered local council leader Peter John a few days later: the building "announced the long-overdue rebalancing of London's economy" and "the people who live and work here will reap the benefits".

Piano simply shrugs at the fracas; he prefaces work on a building by spending time at the site. He absorbs the place and its stories, and pays heed to the emotions that strike him. In so doing, he finds that some places, some projects, demand an edifice that's all harmony and concordance with its environment. Others just don't.

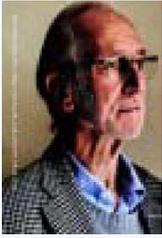
"I don't dislike the idea that sometimes buildings are like a spaceship landing," he says. "Cathedrals, a long time ago, were like a spaceship landing. In the little medieval town, a cathedral was completely out of scale, completely out of context. Sometimes a city needs that. A city is a place of surprise."

The Shard, while it was a surprise, has defied its critics – much as the Pompidou Centre did in Paris four decades before – and become knitted into London's fabric. Your eye lingers on, and savours, this incontrovertible emblem of the city's cosmopolitan, worldly character.

And not only is the Shard of the city, Piano says, it is a city.

"It never shuts in 24 hours, because you have a mix of everything there, it's like a little city. That building is not a skyscraper, it's a little vertical city, with offices, with restaurants, with a hotel, with the observation deck up there on top," he says.

Maybe. But a city for whom? The cheapest



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ticket to the observation deck is more than £27, the Shangri-La hotel charges £600 for a night's stay, and an apartment would have set you back at least £30 million. Little wonder that in post-GFC London, naysayers also decried it as a monument to social and economic privilege and financial excess – a deracinated docking point for the global uber-rich.

That said, of course, you don't have to go inside a building or monument to feel a sense of pride or ownership of it. A Sydneysider might never go to a concert in the Sydney Opera House, but that doesn't diminish their affection for it.

The Shard is also intimately connected to the city's arteries. It sits on top of London Bridge, one of the capital's busiest transport hubs; tens of thousands of people pass through it every day. For Piano, this is important: it's what happens at ground level that matters. As an Italian, the piazza or public forum is paramount.

Even if you're thinking about a skyscraper, you start not at the top but at the bottom. "It's particularly important when you make a tall building; what happens is that sometimes they are quite interesting, but when you touch ground it's quite a disaster. It's a bit of a European attitude, the idea that a building belongs to the street, a building has a dialogue with the street. It's not just European of course, it's just a civic way to think of building."

But will it be enough? That's where Lendlease comes in. Coincidentally, it, too, has had its share of flak in London.

A mile to the south of the Shard is Elephant Park, a £2.3 billion, 9.71-hectare redevelopment in which Lendlease has torn down a particularly blighted collection of public housing blocks to build a greener, sleeker neighbourhood in its place. The project was bedevilled, in what is now the customary London way, with accusations of "social cleansing", as the local council swapped out a large public housing estate for a new development with far less affordable and social housing.

In a speech in London recently, McCann described the early phase of the Elephant project as "difficult" and rattled off a long list of lessons learnt.

IT'S AS TRICKY TO GET TIME IN McCANN'S DIARY AS IT is in Piano's: he's running a \$10.9 billion company that has had a testing few years. Its floundering engineering division took a \$350 million writedown in 2018 that wiped \$2.7 billion off the company's value in a single day. That business will be sold off, but the losses will be in the order of \$1 billion. In February McCann had to front the market with tidings of a \$1 billion slump in revenue and a two-third cut in the dividend. The full-year result in August wasn't much better. At the annual general meeting in November, the remuneration report attracted a 38 per cent protest vote.

The bright spot has been the urban development pipeline, which is fattening with new deals to build luxury high-rises and mixed-use precincts around the world. McCann is keen to talk about this growing part of his business, and once he starts on the topic of urban regeneration, it's hard to stop him.

Our interview reflects the complexity of his Barangaroo challenge. One minute the conversation zooms up the 72-storey tower to talk about the luxurious fit-out that will reel in the global elite's discerning sybarites. The next we plunge downwards to consider the parkland, the waterfront walkways, and the broader precinct's restaurants and shops. McCann says Lendlease chose Piano because of the need to bring it all together. "The Renzo team is very good at getting the internal and external design to work together very well," he says. "When you're delivering luxury residential there's significant



A render of how One Sydney Harbour at Barangaroo will look, once completed in 2021. The third of the three towers, designed by Renzo Piano (left) is just out of view; Crown Sydney is to the left.

focus on design excellence within the building and the internal layout ... you are also thinking about the place creation, you're thinking about how to curate that place and make it somewhere people want to go. A lot of work has gone into that, the whole precinct is about 50 per cent public space."

One issue he hasn't had to contend with is the accessibility-versus-luxury question that rears up in most developments in London, which is in the grip of an affordability crisis and gentrification controversy. "Those challenges are much further advanced in London and therefore much higher profile in London than they are yet in Australia. But I would say that they will get there," he says.

Still, Sydney has bowed up its share of critics, led by the City of Sydney council. Lord Mayor Clover Moore was relegated to the sidelines by the NSW government's designation of the three towers – along with the rest of Barangaroo – as a State Significant Development. But she has critiqued the podium size and building density.

Kathlyn Losebey, president of the NSW chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects, says while the Barangaroo precinct has a fine-grain street pattern with busy frontages that make it enjoyable, it has big flaws. "The primary characteristic of all earlier iterations of the Barangaroo

Master Plan, from the design competition on, was a clearly defined built-edge with a foreshore parkland. That is not what was delivered and it is disappointing," she says. "The public domain and foreshore walk is now drowned by the massive apartment building and casino." And construction has only just begun.

WITH ALL THIS BUBBLING AROUND HIM, CAN PIANO weave his magic again, creating a tower that rises above the street-fights over public access and civic virtue? Will the

building itself be one of those that captures a city's essence, and reflects the city to itself – like the Pompidou and the Shard? If he does, it will surely come down to his ability as a sculptor of light. Sydney's searing light is one of its defining characteristics; the ability to harness light is Piano's signature.

He has a particular way with glass – both aesthetic and structural. He performs extraordinary feats of engineering to clad his buildings in glass, refract light and make it sing – and, these days, keep things energy-efficient. And then, somehow, with the secret wiles of the master craftsman, he lures in that mysterious, subjective quality, which he calls "emotion".

"If you are a musician, you create emotion by music; if you are a filmmaker you create emotion by the movie; if you are a writer, by writing, a poet by poems; if you are an architect you build emotion by creating spaces or by using the light," he explains. "The light is probably the most immaterial of all the materials of architecture, but it's probably the most important because it's very much about atmosphere."

It's a captivating paradox: light is momentary and formless, but a building can capture and refract it, and give it shape and permanence. Light is transparent, yet it can colour and infuse. In the same way, beauty is amorphous yet eternal.

"There's a famous story of the prince in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, he used to say that beauty will change the world, will save the world," he says. "Beauty will save the world? I don't know, it might not save the world, but it can change people."

"I'm not talking about aesthetic beauty, I'm talking about real beauty. The quality of things. Writing, making movies, making scientific research, medical research, architecture or whatever. To do something good, it makes people better people. And it remains."

Piano is wary of any talk of legacy, with its implications of mortality. But perhaps he's offered me his legacy anyway: create beauty, and it will remain. Immaterial becomes material. Light takes shape. Edifice becomes emotion.

Can he achieve it in Sydney? Time will tell. Back in London, the Shard strives silently, opaquely heavenwards. It rises above the debate and controversy that accompanied its creation – which may yet find echoes on the shores of Barangaroo as his career draws nearer to its close.

It's tempting to describe Piano's London masterpiece as a kind of epitaph, or headstone. Instead, let's call it a beacon, transmitting his message: behold, the emotion of light. ●