



Nominees for this year's Stirling prize include, clockwise from left, Zaha Hadid's London Aquatics Centre; Haworth Tompkins rebuilding of the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool; and the London School of Economics student centre by Saw Swee Hock

Philip Vile/View



City blockbusters feature in Stirling Prize shortlist

Architecture

By Edwin Heathcote

The shortlist for the Stirling Prize, Britain's most prestigious architecture award, was announced today – and is more impressive than it has been for years.

The list consists of a skyscraper, two educational institutions, two civic buildings and, oddly, a pool built for the 2012 Olympics. It is almost certainly the shortlist with the most recognisable buildings in the prize's 19-year history.

The most visible candidate is the 308m Shard, western Europe's tallest tower. Designed by Renzo Piano, it is a

building that has radically altered London's skyline, shifting focus south of the City's cluster of towers.

Piano's tower is joined on the list by the London School of Economics' Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, a curious, complex, faceted and folded brick building embedded in the dense fabric of London's Holborn.

Designed by Irish architects O'Donnell + Tuomey it is a finely considered response to a difficult site but also a distinctive building that has given the students' social centre a strong urban identity. The other educational building is Feilden Clegg Bradley's austere extension to Manchester School of Art.

Staying in northwest England, the shortlist also

includes Haworth Tompkins excellent rebuilding of Liverpool's Everyman Theatre. This pivotal local institution, once languishing in the ramshackle remains of a chapel and its surroundings, has been rehoused in a functional but elegant structure.

The Midlands is represented by one of the highest profile British public buildings of recent years, the £186m Library of Birmingham.

Zaha Hadid could win award for a third time, with her public pool

Designed by Dutch architects Mecanoo and clad in a lace of interlocking rings it was designed as an instant landmark and has been well-used. But the library also faced embarrassment, when it was revealed that thousands of books stored on high shelves were out of reach because of a lack of steps.

The final contender is the London Aquatics Centre by Zaha Hadid Architects. It might seem surprising that a building completed

so long ago appears on the list only now but it has been transformed since the Olympic Games finished. It is now being judged in its new and final state as Britain's most glamorous municipal swimming pool.

The prize was won last year by Witherford Watson Mann's small, careful and exquisite reimagining of the ruined Astley Castle in Warwickshire. This year appears to see a return to the blockbusters.

Zaha Hadid has won the prize twice before, in 2010 and 2011, with the MAXXI Museum in Rome and a school in Brixton. Feilden Clegg Bradley won in 2008 as part of the team that built the Accordia housing development in Cambridge. Piano and Mecanoo are based in Paris and Delft

respectively, which may cause controversy if they win the British architecture prize.

The candidates appear to demonstrate that despite spending cuts, Britain's city centres continue to undergo radical changes, though perhaps the edges of those cities are faring less well. The glacial pace of construction means that most of these buildings were commissioned before the crash. Encouragingly, they suggest that Britain's heterogeneous architectural culture, spanning the skyscraper and stadium megastructure to the sophisticated ad hoc local theatre, is alive and kicking.

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