Shard is the highest climber on Stirling prize shortlist

Oliver Wainwright

A soaring glass tower goes head to head with a swooping grey stingray in the race for the best building of the year, as the Shard squares up to London’s Olympic swimming pool. These bombastic signature buildings, by Pritzker Prize-winning architects Renzo Piano and Zaha Hadid, are in the running against Birmingham’s vast new public library, a theatre in Liverpool and two higher-education buildings, in a shortlist that sees the return of familiar names from previous years’ Stirling prizes.

With odds of 2-1, the £2bn Shard is the bookies’ favourite, but the tallest building in the EU has divided critics and public alike. It has garnered acclaim, with Will Self describing its jagged presence as being “as exhilarating as Niagara”. Others see it as a monument to a city in thrall to international capital.

Zaha Hadid’s €250m Aquatics Centre in Stratford’s Olympic Park, is the second-favourite at 5-2. Its sinuous style was cramped for the Games by two huge seating strands, which made it look as though scaffolding was still in place; it was only entered for the prize once the stands had been removed.

Previous Stirling winners Felden Clegg Bradley’s understated extension to Manchester School of Art is a surprising but welcome inclusion, standing for the imaginative potential of refurbishment, rather than building anew, our cities’ postwar structures.

Birmingham’s 1970s brutalist central library is one such megastructure facing the wrecking ball now the £90m new library is open, a sparkling cruise liner of a building by Dutch practice Mecanoo. Its loud costume and glittering interiors stand in contrast to Haworth Tompkins’ Everyman theatre in Liverpool, which summons the informal spirit of the previous theatre on the site, crafting interiors of a rare tactile quality.

Such attention to the craftsmanship of building reaches its peak with O’Donnell and Tuomey’s new student centre for the London School of Economics, a handmade brick mountain that contains a beguiling sequence of interior spaces within its origami folds. The Stirling prize winner will be announced in October.