

Why the Shard isn't a shoo-in

Ellis Woodman on the Riba Stirling architecture prize shortlist

It may be the most divisive building to have been built in Britain this century but, by including it on the 2014 Riba Stirling Prize shortlist, the Royal Institute of British Architects has declared the Shard one of the six best of the past year. No Londoner can have failed to form an opinion about this recent addition to their skyline: a building which, at 306m, is now the tallest inhabited structure in the EU.

Fans of Renzo Piano's design have acclaimed it as a work of thrilling sculptural expressivity and a confirmation of London's status as a world city. Sceptics – and I count myself among them – question whether the capital needed a structure of such height, let alone in a location outside the established clusters of tall buildings.

The new Library of Birmingham, by the Dutch architects Mecanoo, is another controversial inclusion on the shortlist. At a time when funding for public buildings is in short supply, the fact that the local authority has realised this £188 million facility is undoubtedly worthy of celebration.

So, too, is the building's remarkable Piranesian interior of stacked reading rooms linked by dramatically angled escalators. But how



The Shard: did London need such a tall building in this location?

unfortunate that its external appearance is quite so vulgar. Wrapped in a functionally redundant and visually inane lattice of aluminium hoops, it bears a resemblance to a pile of Louis Vuitton hat boxes. As a branding exercise this blingy appliqué may find success, but a major civic building intended to stand for decades demands more art and gravitas than this.

The Everyman Theatre in Liverpool by architects Haworth Tompkins and the extension to Manchester School of Art by Feilden Clegg Bradley are both more deserving shortlistees – although rather too unassuming to win, if the choices of past juries are anything to go by. A more obvious contender is the Zaha Hadid-designed

Aquatics Centre in London's Olympic Park. Hadid held off submitting the project for the Stirling until the removal of additional seating that was plugged on to the building for the Games. Shorn of these excrescences, the project has been revealed as one of her best.

But, ultimately, there is a clear front-runner for this year's prize: the London School of Economics' extraordinary Saw Swee Hock Student Centre.

Distributing facilities ranging from a nightclub to a multi-faith prayer centre over nine intricately planned storeys, this is a building that achieves the intensity of a city in miniature. It is a large intervention in a close-packed area of central London, and ensuring that it did not overshadow neighbours was a challenge. Its architects, O'Donnell and Tuomey, have responded with a crystalline design of faceted brick planes that, for all its exuberance, is precisely tailored to its context.

The firm has been shortlisted for the Stirling on four previous occasions but never taken the prize. With their most accomplished building to date in contention, this year they are more than deserve it. *The winner of the Riba Stirling Prize is announced in October*