

THE SHARD - LONDON BRIDGE TOWER

2000 – 2012 London, United Kingdom

Located in Southwark, not far from London Bridge, the Shard is a glowing 310-meter-high glass splinter that pierces the London sky. Inspired by principles of sustainability, the tower incorporates offices, bars and restaurants, residences, a hotel and spa, standing out as a true vertical city.

The site acquired by the client Irvine Sellar (1934-2017) appeared rather narrow and stretched partly over London Bridge station, overlooking St. Thomas Street, one of the oldest London streets, giving privileged access to London Bridge. The delicacy of the site imposed a strong urban connotation at the base of the tower. The overlapping of different glass canopies at various heights cuts out spaces on the human scale and binds the tall tower to the surrounding buildings. In keeping with the guidelines of then mayor Ken Livingstone, car parking has been reduced to a minimum – 48 parking spaces for a building that hosts an average of 8,000 people – given the proximity of London Bridge station, with the accesses and routes being redesigned.

The tower is immediately recognizable in the panorama of London skyscrapers by its characteristic splinter shape. Its footprint is 4,000 m² at ground level, but the platform at the top covers less than 350 m². In between there are 87 floors containing offices at the base; bars, restaurants, a hotel and spa in the middle; residences and panoramic observatories in the upper part. Although unusual among London skyscrapers, this functional mix was a design choice shared by RPBW architects and the client, convinced that it was strategic to insert a veritable “city within the city” to repair a frayed strip of Southwark.

The façades of the tower are irregular, shredded at the corners and tilted at different angles so that the building's profile changes from every point of view. At the top the glass shards do not converge: they remain open like blades cutting the clouds, dispersing the impressive bulk of the tower in the sky. A double ventilated skin, with roll-up drapes in the cavity that open and close automatically depending on solar irradiation, helps reduce the building's energy use and minimizes air conditioning. The choice of extra-white glass gives the Shard a crystalline appearance. The envelope of the tower reflects the sky, multiplying the passing clouds, refracting the colour of the light that changes through the day and the seasons.