

Joost Moolhuijzen (1960) was born in Amstelveen, the Netherlands. He studied architecture at TU Delft. After working for Michael Squire in London (1987–1990), he joined the RPBW Paris office in 1990, and worked as lead architect on Potsdamer Platz, Berlin. Since becoming a partner in 1997, Moolhuijzen has been in charge of many projects, including Rotterdam's KPN Tower, the Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago, the London Bridge Quarter (including The Shard) and Columbia University, New York.



It's rare that an architect has the opportunity to explain his own project on CNN, but just that happened to Joost Moolhuijzen in 2012. You may not remember his name, but the name of his latest project is certainly familiar: The Shard. As senior partner at Renzo Piano Building Workshop (RPBW), Moolhuijzen was responsible for this remarkable London skyscraper. Despite not having his own practice, it seems his being willing to pay the price of never becoming well known publicly has its benefits.

The piano player

FRANCE — TEXT: INDIRA VAN 'T KLOOSTER, ILLUSTRATION: KLAUSTOON

While many young architects dream of creating famous buildings the world over following graduation, some of them actually do it. Joost Moolhuijzen joined RPBW at the age of 30 and became partner at the age of 37, after he had successfully headed the Debis Building, part of the Daimler-Benz project at Berlin's Potsdamer Platz. We meet in a café on a rainy day in Amsterdam. He and his wife, who also works at RPBW, are in town for a short family visit. Moolhuijzen begins explaining how the ideas of Piano have gradually become his own. Also, we're talking different scales than are usually seen in A10 magazine. 'Once we were 150 people, but our natural size is 100, like we are now,' says Moolhuijzen. 'That means we're still small enough to be picky in the projects we accept, and big enough to deal with the larger projects.'

So RPBW is critical in which projects to take on, or not?

'Definitely,' assures Moolhuijzen, 'we do not simply follow the money in Dubai, China or Korea. We seek jobs that contribute to urban sustainability. We once had a job just outside Paris, but gradually it became clear that the project had too little in terms of urban capacity. New buildings should improve the existing situation with regard to public transport, housing and public space.'

The Shard, sometimes criticized as an autistic high-rise funded by sheikhs from Qatar, he actually finds to be an improvement for the district. 'The underlying station was rebuilt, while more and varied functions appeared on the ground floor. People have benefited from it. We preferably build on brownfields rather than greenfields. That is ultimately more sustainable.'

Yet in Beijing, you're now working on a masterplan on virgin territory.

'It's only 22 acres, and there is indeed still nothing there. But the advantage is that no small villages need to be bulldozed. Moreover, I believe that our client, a businesswoman from Beijing, really wants to approach it differently. In China, they do also now see that a more sustainable approach is needed. When it's finished in five years – which is the current plan at least – we will have realized a mixed-use design after the European model, with offices in smaller units than normal and in higher density, where craftsmen are situated in small workshops between the eco-offices and urban green. In this way, we combine the best of the European city with hypermodern means.'

Didn't you say earlier you wouldn't be part of this 'rat race' in the East?

Moolhuijzen looks a little rueful. 'It's inevitable. But it will indeed not be easy, for example, to monitor the quality of construction, or to stay involved after the final design for the project, as I'm used to.'

RPBW likes to build on long-term relationships with small, local practices. Will that be possible in China?

'Hardly. We are looking for agencies that are not affiliated with the local political networks, but that is very difficult in China.'

How do you select these architectural offices?

'We search the Internet, we inquire with relations. If we've found a partner, we make that office part of our offer. The Shard had such complex procedures that it took us six years before we subcontracted another office. England is also relatively close by, so we've done a lot ourselves there. In Chicago, we worked with a very small firm of only seven people. That's quite a risk for us to take on, but it worked really well.'

The first project that fell under your responsibility was Potsdamer Platz. You were then 31 years old. Now the project is being renovated. What have you learned since?

'Those were wild years. I was there at just the right moment. There were so many opportunities for young architects. It was big business, with huge amounts brought in and spent. With Daimler-Benz we tried there, in that no-man's-land, to make a piece of city. We had at the time a tremendous amount of discussion about how Berlin should develop. We found the scale of the project too big, and fought for more detail, a smaller scale and to give the project more urban functions.'

As it stands now, are you satisfied?

'In hindsight, you can say that it still remains too much of an island, isolated from the rest of the square. I learned a lot there that later came in handy at The Shard and at Columbia University. The university has a campus in Manhattanville (West Harlem), which is also actually a very European project.'

Why?

'The choice of the university was to move out of the city or stay in Manhattan. They asked us to create a masterplan. In it, we consciously chose for the urban model.'

Only then can you contribute to the development of the city, getting a mix between students and local economy and population. It is the intention that the entire site remains accessible to the public, but that is quite rare in America.'

How does such a project get to you?

'In the case of Columbia University, it was a direct assignment to RPBW. Renzo Piano and myself went there to meet the new client. We design together, and we keep talking about the project during the whole process, but I took over the project coordination in a very early stage.'

On what kind of things do you disagree with Renzo?

'If we disagree it is usually on how we should present preliminary designs. Clients demand computer-generated images and Renzo hates them, because they suggest that the project is in a far more advanced stage than it actually is. This might prevent both the architect and the client to continue to think about improving the project. Maquettes are better tools to stimulate imagination, he says. Also, clients want Renzo to be there, which is not always possible.'

Have you ever thought of starting your own practice?

'Well, I might have for a while after finishing Potsdamer Platz, but then there were other very interesting projects and I was offered a partnership. The confidence in young architects was so much bigger then than it is now. All the projects I worked on were a young architect's dream. It was a unique experience. Now I'm so interwoven with the office that starting for myself is no longer likely.'

What happens after Renzo retires?

'Actually, we are discussing this at great length at the office. The structure of a board and partners offers a solid framework to continue the work. But at the moment this is not at stake. He is very healthy and very active.'

How might you define RPBW, now and in the future?

'The speed with which buildings come about is unprecedented. This has affected the quality of architecture and the moral values of architects. The crisis was not entirely bad. It brought us new awareness on the role of architecture in society. It's difficult to be critical about oneself, but I think RPBW has been more careful and less profit-minded than many other global architectural practices.'