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Editors

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# Re-imagining Spaces and Places. Spatial Imaginary Methods: The Creative Process and Iconographic Circulation

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**Abstract.** In the field of architecture training, studies on the perception of shape and spatial conception play a key role, especially for the education aspects focused on acquiring awareness of the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of spaces, as well as on their transformation governed by design creativity. This educational process is extensively based on the use of images, following a dual path of figural elaboration and reception; at the same time, the intensive use of icons acts as an interface in the creation of a spatial imaginary that goes beyond technical-specialist training and reaches the cultural and creative sphere, specific to an era. Therefore, spatial imaginary is rooted in a solid instrumental and geometric-configurational foundation, which shapes buildings and spaces, also resorting to the figurative world and to the creative and cultural sensitivity that the subject draws from society. However, the spatial imaginary of an architecture does not concern solely the construction of the work, since in turn it generates new images and feeds different and transdisciplinary imaginaries. Cultural and physical contexts, such as cities, places or buildings, can be evoked, interpreted or represented in artistic or literary works, thus triggering the possibility of re-imagining space. The article attempts to explore the different levels of spatial imaginary, referencing a case study, and to identify the innovative elements introduced into the iconic-spatial process by recent digital technologies for processing images and their circulation on the web.

**Keywords:** Architectural education · Perception/form · Image · Communication · Circulation studies

The educational process in the field of architecture covers a broad range of knowledge and skills including technical, formal, historical and social components, rooted in the cultural sphere of each era with its specific salient and characteristic aspects.

In this complex process, a crucial role is played by individual creativity, fed by both subjective and social imaginary, nowadays clearly stimulated by new digital media, and by an increased flow of images, therefore able to reach beyond institutional academic boundaries, contaminating social web channels.

By referring to an iconic building – Renzo Piano’s “The Shard” (2001–2013) – this paper aims to explore the dynamics of the origin and transformation of the architectural spatial imaginary that, downstream of the concrete construction, can be a catalyst for

the production and be a catalyst of images through recent digital technologies within everyone's reach, primarily using smartphone photos.

## 1 Imagining the Space of Design and Construction

Whereas architecture is an act based on the ability to imagine space, to visualise the possible future of a built-up space, spatial imagination is essential to envision the shape of new buildings, as they develop over time, participating in the cultural expression of a place or era.

Therefore, a fundamental issue concerns the representation methods used to shape the thought and at the same time the constructed shape: they interpret and crystallize the complex interplay between perception and shape, the complex dialogue between what is "seen" or "fore-seen" and the actual dimensions of the objects that interact with the places, and the quality and quantity that define the real and designed space. In reminding us that architecture is the skilful, correct, and magnificent interplay of volumes assembled under light, Le Corbusier accompanied his visual thinking with a design in which the urban context dialogues with the "primary volumes" that have represented milestones in the history of architecture (Fig. 1).

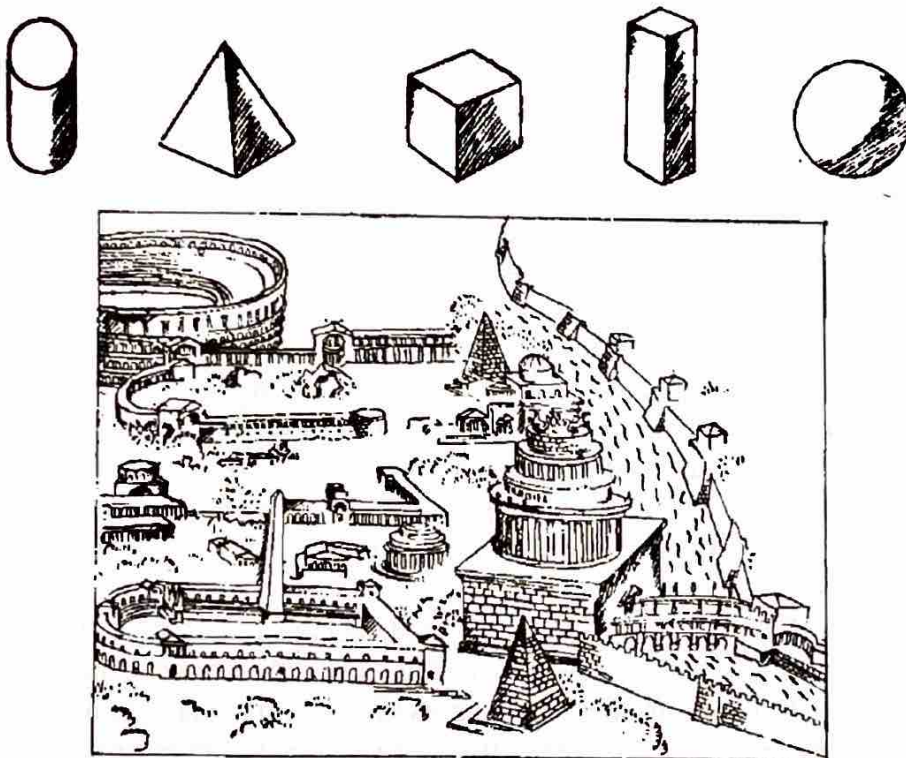


Fig. 1. The Basic Shapes in Architecture, from Le Corbusier, 1966, it. ed., *Verso un'architettura*, Milano: Longanesi, p. 128

For centuries, in fact, geometry has described the regulatory process that accompanies the transformation of an idea into a vision, by using drawings and models that, alone or combined, facilitate the understanding and expression of an existing space or



the explanation of an idea for a project for a new space, the communication of design ideas or architectural memories, and ultimately the ability to exercise a control function over the individual project phases.

While most books on architectural design illustrate what can be shown using sketches, plans, sections, elevations, as relate to the sphere of ideas and meanings, these forms of representation must be combined with the analysis of other qualities.

In addition, the way images are composed, put in a certain order or sequence is also important in design work: explaining a project in a synthetic shape, capable of conveying its logical foundation, makes it possible to convey the key ideas and the details of the analysis and creativity that are implicit in an initial outline.

However, we must focus on the link between images and space, between spatial transformation and design creativity that, particularly concerning the perspective visual structure, has long governed this relationship in Western culture.

Perspective, due to its similarity to human eyesight, has for centuries been a parameter for controlling architectural space, playing on the ambiguity of a fixed, monocular vision, plotting the illusion of the third dimension on the two-dimensionality of paper.

It has been well known for some time that this "perspective hinge" – as defined by Alberto Perez-Gomez and Louise Pelletier [1] – has lost its central role, at least since the "doubling" of vision achieved in stereoscopic images had brought an effective representation of the three-dimensionality of space.

The interesting observations made by Crary [2] on the change introduced in vision techniques by the stereoscope at the beginning of the 19th century, shifting from a geometric dimension to a physiological one, give us the opportunity to examine the importance of this device in the relationship between space and image.

Recently, Megan Panzano, in an interesting article dedicated to John Soane on image-building, also revisited this topic, stating that the traditional distinction between architecture – as built-up space – and image, has been "compromised" since the building designed by the English architect as a house-museum in London, became an image itself [3]. By breaking down a traditional image and translating its constituent parts into a concrete building, Soane was able to achieve a non-conventional architecture capable of generating infinite images of its shape and space. The dissolution of the single, fixed point of view of monocular vision, characteristic of perspective, as opposed to a space conceived instead as a plurality of views, prompts us to examine how images can influence concrete construction, and raise new questions about what we see, how we see, and the consequences of both issues.

As in the period during which Soane designed his house-museum, we are now grappling with a new visual shift and new dimensions of imagery: Soane's perspectives and design procedures bring out from images the architectural language of a new organization of space, its material properties and effects, driving in the direction of its translation into technological terms.

But beyond the epistemological considerations that underlie the complex relationship between images, space and new technologies, we must not forget the importance of the empirical research that enables the visual expression of design ideas, which architects carry out by interpreting the site of the future building, drawing its visual image and rendering its relevant principles: the images that make up the outcome of this process end

up travelling far from their original scenario, making themselves potentially available to new interpretations and applications in different contexts and times [4].

## 2 Re-imagining and Circulating

As far as the design process is concerned, therefore, the well-established fields of geometric forms of representation are very close to socio-semiotic theory thanks to the role that images play in the building of a place, helping to shed light on both their creative process and their consumption.

This leads to the undisputed crucial role of images, of how they are produced, exchanged, and received in the practice of designing the construction of a place: images, therefore, are not just vehicles that *passively* convey some generic meaning, rather, they play an active role in the communication process.

Lee and LiPuma assert that the circulation of cultural facts – in our specific case “images” – amounts to a real process with specific forms of abstraction and evaluation and that it presupposes the existence of interpretative communities with their own forms of assessment [5].

Moreover, how we perceive our surroundings through new technologies and new forms of media is becoming increasingly important, particularly how we see the world through photography, which to paraphrase McLuhan, has become an ‘extension of man’ [6]. Whereas technology also influences the way we view reality, the subject is certainly not idle: as individuals and as members of a culture more broadly, we give rise to technological forms that can redefine our relationships with the environment; hence a focus on the “reconfiguration practices” by which users view their habitat through technologies [7].

Looking more closely, what is occurring today includes a widespread iconic “re-production”, primarily photographic, which accompanies the exploration of places by people who, by sharing the experience of a place, or an architecture, simultaneously set in motion new aspects, new attributions of meaning.

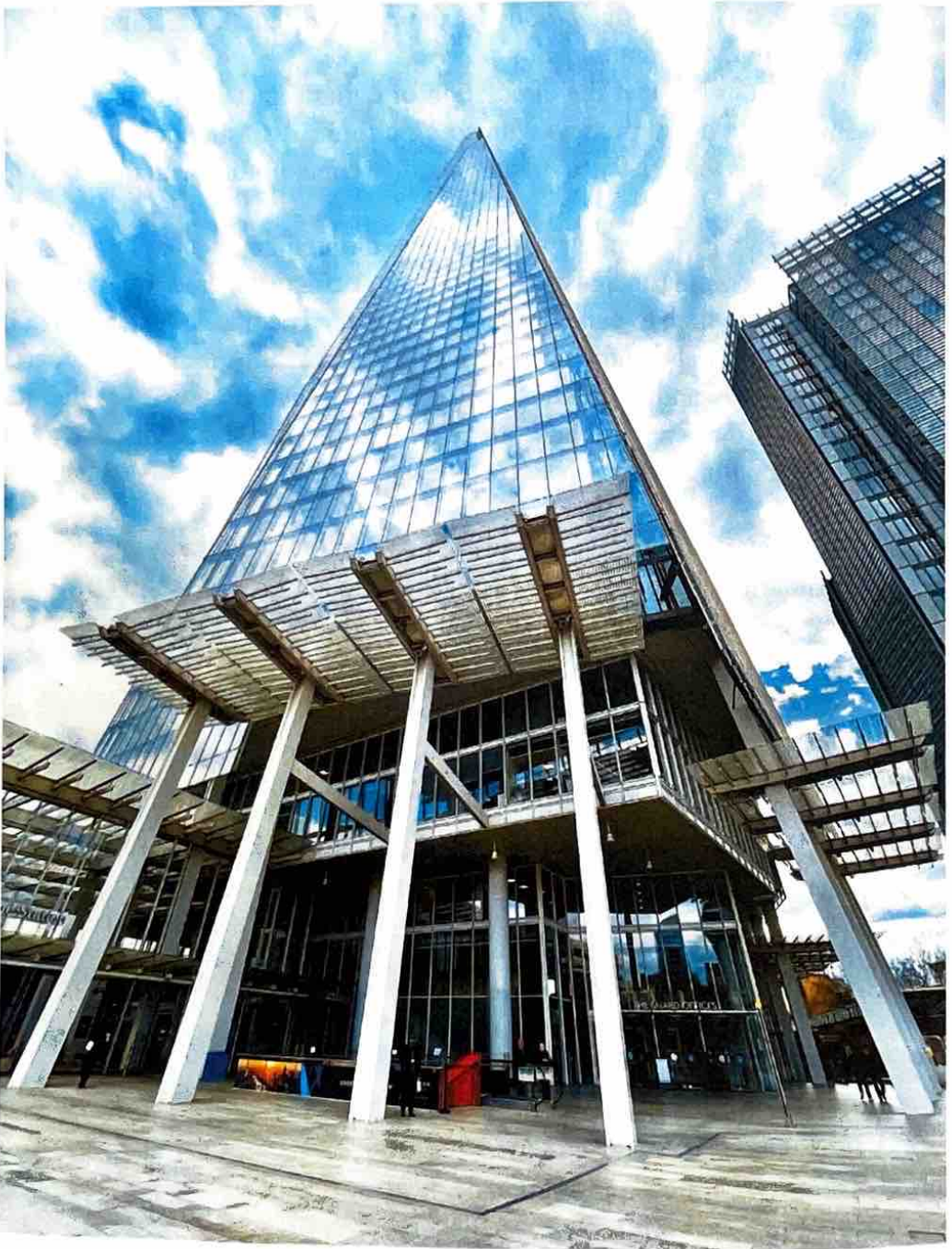
As Rose noted, over the past thirty years, we have seen profound changes in the practices and processes of cultural production, particularly in the circulation and display of cultural objects, with a broad participatory implication. Interfaces that incorporate textual, sound, and iconic content fuel social practices that build meaning [8]. Large numbers of images are characteristic of many contemporary forms of digital cultural activities, for which one speaks of a ‘culture of convergence’, i.e. a paradigm shift from content in a specific medium to content flowing through multiple media and communication systems, towards complex top-down media relations and a bottom-up participatory culture.

## 3 A Case in Point: The Shard

As a result of the above, images play a crucial role in the social process of communication, especially digital images.

Mike Biddulph, in the aforementioned 2014 article *Drawing and Thinking*, addresses this issue by borrowing the image of the Shard – the building designed by Renzo Piano – as connoting modernity, comparable to a metaphor of a ‘non-place’, noting how the image of this building, which many people have no direct experience of, is becoming the most representative notion of contemporary London.

The significance that this building, which has now become an icon (Figs. 2, 3, 4, and 5), has assumed arises from the mutual interaction of several factors: the individual’s ability to produce or read an image; the influence exerted by a professional graphic culture or by a broad socio-cultural milieu and at the same time by familiarity with representation forms and styles; the influence of a professional culture with regard to

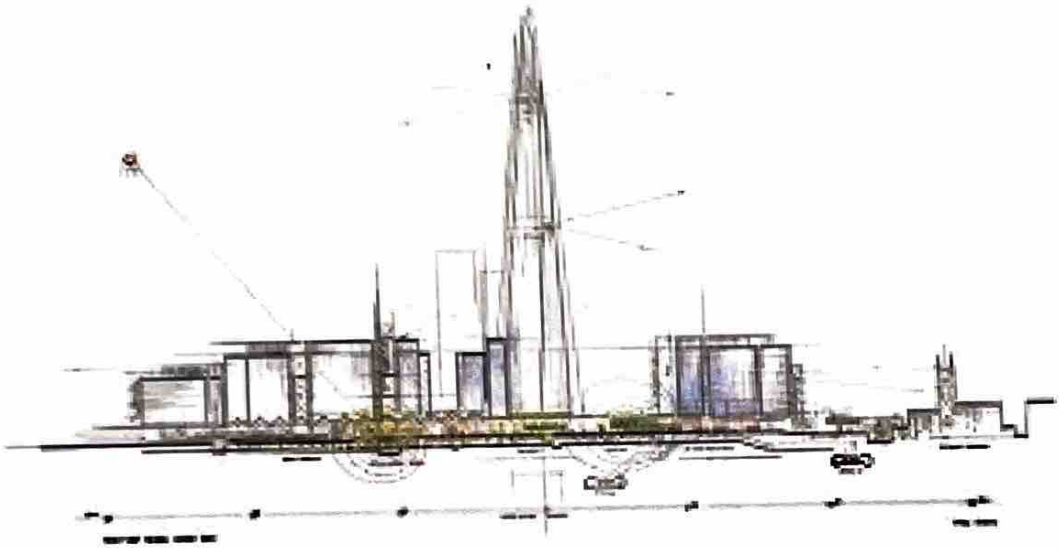


**Fig. 2.** The Shard, London, View from below, #theshard, Instagram, Foto and video\_files

priorities or theoretical connotations to be sought in the form and content of the image; an economic policy capable of recognizing that buildings are significant assets in terms of trade and symbolic value as forms of production and consumption; and lastly, the characteristics of the spaces and places conferred upon them by the social practices of the individuals [4].

These considerations enable us, on the one hand, to specify the broad range of topics, professionalism, and procedures that are involved in the construction of the image of a building, and, on the other, the methods and practices of reception that allow the image to “continue life” through media and communication systems.

In particular, the images of this London building are triggering a “myth-making” process akin to what occurred in New York with the endless reproduction of the Manhattan skyline (Fig. 6).

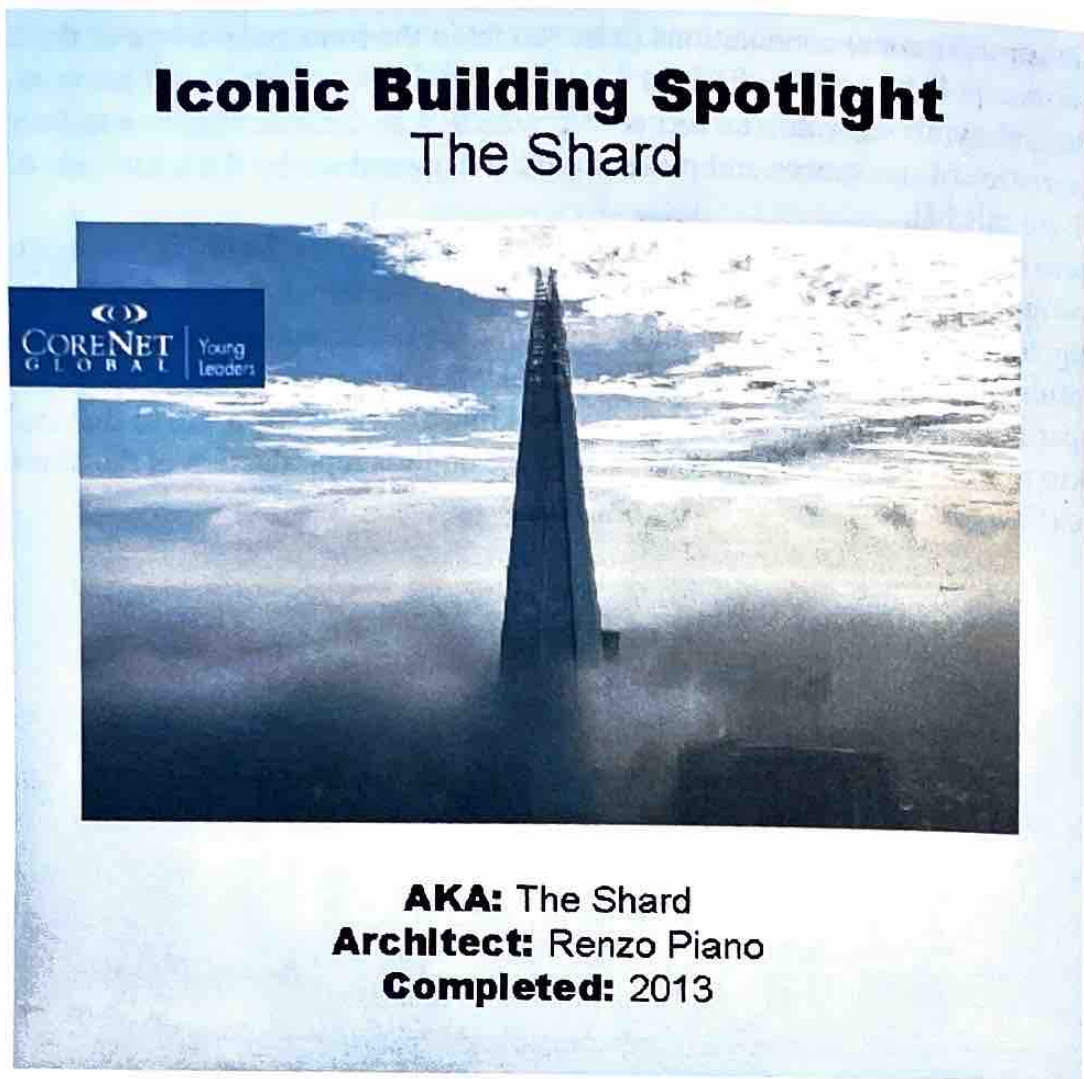


**Fig. 3.** Renzo Piano, Developing an Icon, sketch, from Sellar I., 2015, *Developing an Icon – The Story of the Shard*, <https://global.ctbuh.org/resources/papers/download/2450-developing-an-icon-the-story-of-the-shard.pdf>

Certainly such an impact was the intention of Irving Sellar, the development’s economic promoter: “We’ve created a modern marker for London – he said on the opening day of the Shard – a compass in our great city pointing towards a new financial era while serving as *an elegant and powerful symbol of hope and prosperity*. And Londoners will feel ownership of the Shard [...] *a new contour to London’s skyline*, a new mental geography, a way by which people relate to and interact with their city. As it has been said: *We shape our buildings – thereafter they shape us.*” [9].

Paradoxically, for many people who visit the building, the images preceded their direct experience and the resulting sense of place, and this circumstance leads to an interesting question about the real reception of the iconic message that the designers intended to convey.

In fact, images have a life of their own and are constantly re-contextualized when they are re-appropriated, reproduced, and re-presented in different contexts.



**Fig. 4.** Iconic Building Spotlight, 2013, Cornet Global Edition

In the case of the Shard, even a cursory reconnaissance of the main platforms that collect images posted by users, reveals some patterns: one, as mentioned above, reflects a new notion of London, the place where the tallest skyscraper in Europe stands (Fig. 7). This was most likely the intention of Piano himself who, more or less explicitly, seems to echo Frank Lloyd Wright's famous sketch for the mile-high skyscraper.

In any case, Irving Sellar's vision was to establish *A new global landmark – iconic* that, as such, is received not only in the endless images posted by visitors on social networks but also by the abundant graphic re-elaborations that from time to time compare it with the most representative buildings in London or place it in a series of silhouettes of the world's tallest skyscrapers (Fig. 8).



Fig. 5. The Shard, London, #theshard, Instagram, Foto and video\_files

#### 4 Conclusion

For a concluding remark, we shall return to the observations of William Whyte, who in his article *How Do Buildings Mean?* addresses the issue of the possible transpositions of architecture in terms of imagination and materiality, theory and reality, visible traditions



**Fig. 6.** London Skyline, <https://www.vecteezy.com/vector-art/135860-the-shard-vector>



**Fig. 7.** London Skyline, <https://www.vecteezy.com/vector-art/135860-the-shard-vector>

and unexpressed assumptions; White clearly highlights how cultural and physical contexts – cities, places, or buildings – can be evoked, interpreted or represented in artistic or literary works, triggering new and further possibilities to imagine space [10].

As far as our case study is concerned, history is yet to be written: besides the considerable iconic mass we have reported in this short piece, the image of the Shard is also beginning to be evoked in literature, at the moment in the fantasy genre, but there is reason to believe that we are only at the beginning and that the events will undoubtedly be interesting to follow in coming years [11].

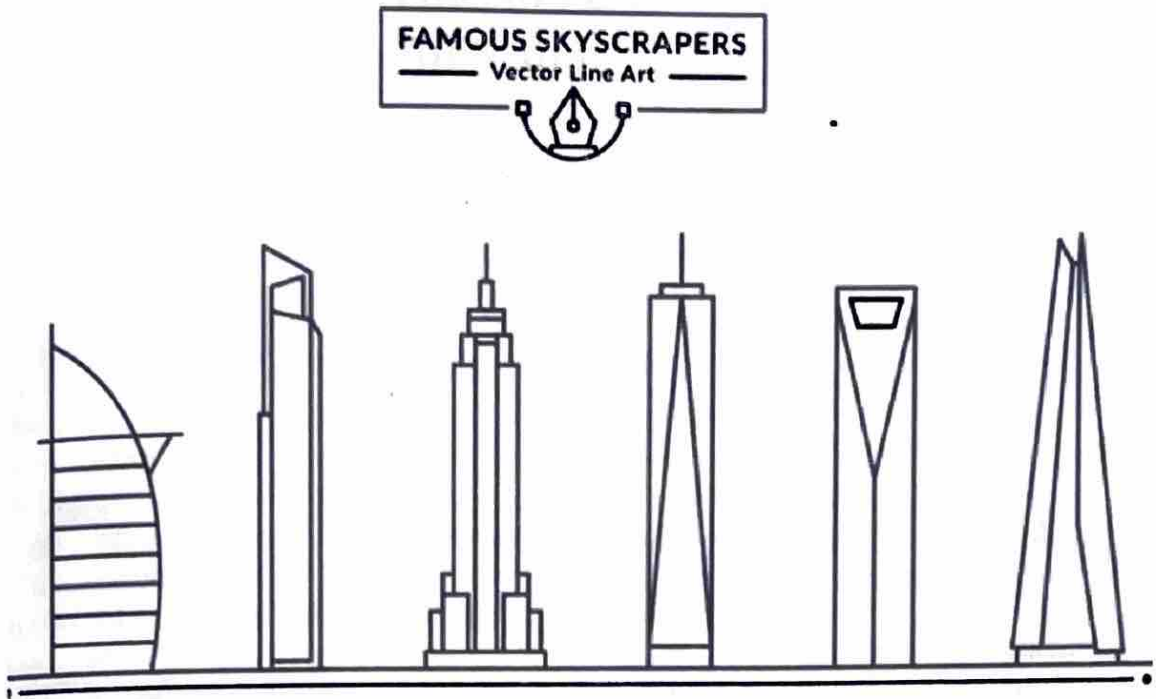


Fig. 8. Famous Skyscrapers, <https://www.vecteezy.com/vector-art/135860-the-shard-vector>

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