



PIANO (by Philip Jodidio; Taschen, rrp £69.99) Architecture books are getting bigger and bigger. A few years ago I wrote one that weighed in at 3.5kg, considered top whack at the time. Now, it seems featherlight in comparison with books such as this. *Piano* is a big book about a very big-cheese architect. It is the size and weight of a top-of-the-range world atlas. All this, for just one man.

Renzo Piano is certainly worth the attention. Now 68, there are signs that he is starting to lose his touch a little, but that touch was so sure from the mid-1960s to the turn of the 21st century. He designed and built some of the most significant buildings of the period. He is one of the modern greats. And the best thing about him is that he has no house style. You would not necessarily recognise a Piano building in the way you would, say, a Frank Gehry building. There is no build-by-numbers Piano formula. He retains the ability to surprise.

Just because this is a big book, however, does not mean it is packed with interesting writing, let alone original critical analysis. Quite the reverse. Jodidio is house writer to publishers Taschen, churning out monographs and compilations by the score. Taschen likes its architecture books to have absolutely minimal text in three languages, accompanied by maximum-impact images. It applies this formula to books small, medium and large. There is no particular reason why this book has to be this size: it's just a fashion of the moment, a market segment.

A statement such as 'the Georges Pompidou Centre is in many ways a seminal structure' is about as profound as this book is going to get. So forget the words, and look at the images instead. These are very good, and of course very big. The largest one – a fold-out of the masterly series of timber boat-shields that form Piano's Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Nouméa, New Caledonia – measures 1.2m long. Others, such as a vast interior shot of his outrageously original Padre Pio Pilgrimage Church in Foggia, are scarcely less awesome. There are even several huge photos of Piano's own racing yacht, which he had a hand in designing.

This, then, is a pictorial summation of an extraordinary career. The Pompidou Centre, which Piano designed along with Richard Rogers, changed the course of architecture. Piano went on reinventing architecture, from airports to art galleries, shops to skyscrapers. Today, being an internationally in-demand 'signature architect', he seems to be spreading himself a bit thin. It's an occupational hazard. But never mind: all the best stuff is here.

Serious students would do better to buy the in-depth 'complete works' by Peter Buchanan, published by Phaidon. But if it's big glorious images you're after, this beast of a book certainly shows off some great buildings to good effect. You will need a minimum shelf height of 40cm, and stout wall fixings, to accommodate it ■ HUGH PEARMAN is the architecture and design critic of the *'Sunday Times'* ▷

To order *Piano* for £62.99 (plus £3.50 UK p&p), ring the *World of Interiors* Bookshop on 0870 727 4147