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## TERRY FARRELL KK100 SHENZHEN

A PERSONAL TOUR OF THE TALLEST  
BUILDING BY A UK ARCHITECT





# ONWARD & UPWARD

FROM ANTI-MODERNIST VIA POSTMODERNIST HERO AND SUPREME MASTERPLANNER TO LEADER OF A GLOBAL DESIGN POWERHOUSE AND MEMBER OF THE ELITE SUPERTALL BUILDING CLUB, **TERRY FARRELL** IS STILL AWESTRUCK BY HIS LATEST PROJECT, THE **KK100 TOWER** IN SHENZHEN, SAYS *HERBERT WRIGHT*  
*KK100 PHOTOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN LEIJONHUFVUD*



'100 bloody storeys! My god!' exclaims Sir Terry Farrell, full of pride, craning his neck to take in the full 442m height of the just-completed KK100 tower in Shenzhen, China. 'When something is finished, it takes a while to take it in, particularly when so many don't get built. Is it real, is it there?' he muses. The sleek, sculptural office and hotel structure is most definitely real – not just as the world's eighth or ninth tallest skyscraper (depending on whether Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Towers are counted as one or two), but as the latest achievement of his Hong Kong office, which celebrated its 20th anniversary at the end of 2011.

It's a long way from Farrell's first built project, the Blackwall Tunnel ventilation buildings, designed when he worked for the London County Council 50 years ago. Yet they share a graceful curvature absolutely apart from buildings around them. The now-listed ventilation structures have neighbours that include Rogers' Reuters Building, the Smithsons' Robin Hood Gardens and Goldfinger's Balfron Tower: 'Buildings that look mechanical are occupied by people; only the industrial building is soft,' notes Farrell.

Similarly, KK100 is very different to

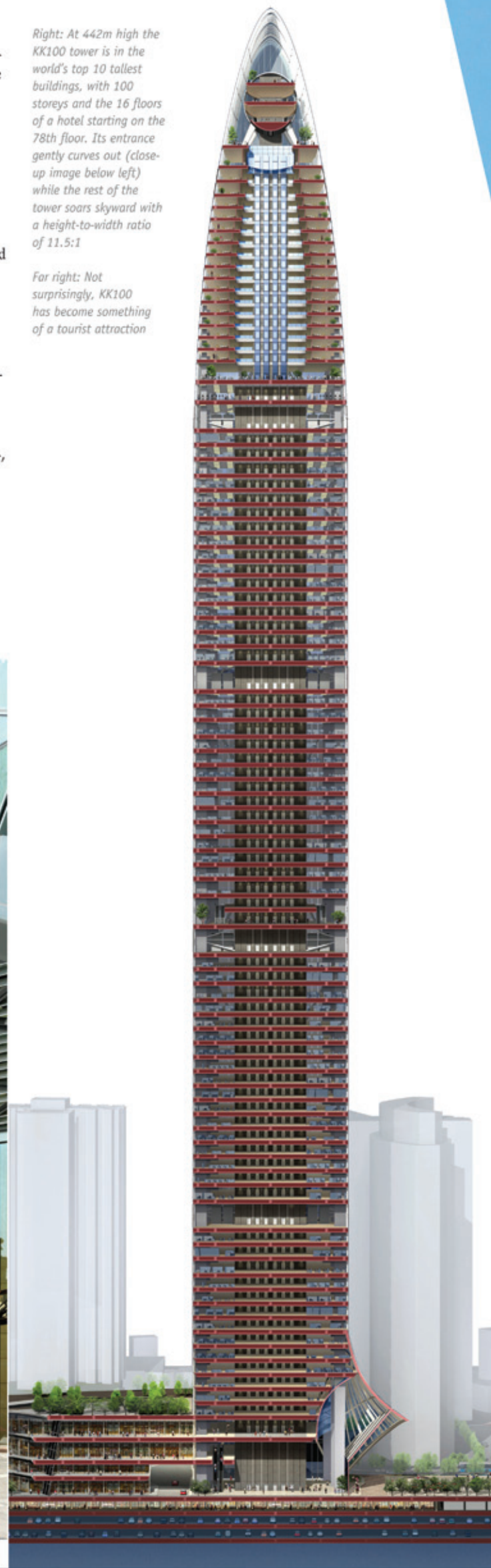
anything else in Luohu, the heart of Shenzhen, host to a horde of colourful retro-futuristic postmodernist towers, such as the KC Cheung-designed Shun Hing Square tower, a Flash Gordon fantasy that in 1996 was the tallest skyscraper outside of the USA. KK100's form evokes a waterfall or a fountain. 'It is not intrusive,' says Farrell. 'I think simplicity is a natural thing to do with a skyscraper.'

He reveals that the tower 'began life as a design for a tall building at Kowloon, based on a blade of grass'. Farrell's asymmetric 110-storey tower, above the vast Kowloon transport-orientated development that Farrell masterplanned in 1998 for land reclaimed from Victoria Harbour, wasn't built. Developers plumped instead for a 118-storey KPF design, in a ring of office and residential towers. 'The architecture's fairly horrendous, isn't it?' he asks rhetorically.

Farrell first came to Hong Kong in 1964, returning from his masters degree at Pennsylvania University on a RIBA-sponsored study trip that also took him to Tokyo, Bangkok and India. He recalls Hong Kong then as 'a colonial town in many ways. I remember them playing cricket, probably where [IM Pei's] Bank of China

Right: At 442m high the KK100 tower is in the world's top 10 tallest buildings, with 100 storeys and the 16 floors of a hotel starting on the 78th floor. Its entrance gently curves out (close-up image below left) while the rest of the tower soars skyward with a height-to-width ratio of 11.5:1

Far right: Not surprisingly, KK100 has become something of a tourist attraction



Building is now. Then I came again in 1980 and was astonished by how much had been built, and how it was changing.' In 1990, Farrell returned to establish the local practice, now called TFP Farrells.

By that time the Farrell name was synonymous with British postmodernism, established with bright, game-changing projects such as buildings for Clifton's Nursery in Covent Garden and TV-am in Camden. But he had also always been fascinated by spatial complexity and particularly 'the effect of railway and bus stations and centrality, and complex three-dimensional urbanism'.

The transformation of London's Charing Cross Station led to the Kowloon Station hub commission, which in turn led to the recent vast stations in Beijing and then Guangzhou, the biggest in Asia. It also led to projects further afield, including the Ground Transportation Center at Incheon Airport, a great airy curving structure complete with idyllic internal gardens, which can handle 50 million travellers yearly. In the pipeline is a redevelopment of New Delhi Station, linking a huge structure filled with light and colour with Luytens' Connaught Place in a masterplan

that cuts a swathe of green across the city.

Farrell started off not so much as a postmodernist as an antimodernist. Whilst a student in Pennsylvania, he absorbed the ideas of urban planning activist Jane Jacobs and the visual impact of pop art, and he hung out with Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi. He noted the latter's seminal Vana Venturi House, and the works of Frank Lloyd Wright. All this sowed doubts about modernism and shaped his ideas about place-making and urbanism.

'All architecture begins with the context of people and time,' says Farrell. 'Le Corbusier and Mies [van der Rohe] never got to grips with the city.' He dismisses the former's Ville Radieuse as having 'no sense of place or time, and perhaps no personality', likening it to 2001: A Space Odyssey, and unlike Blade Runner with its intense urbanism and compressed time.

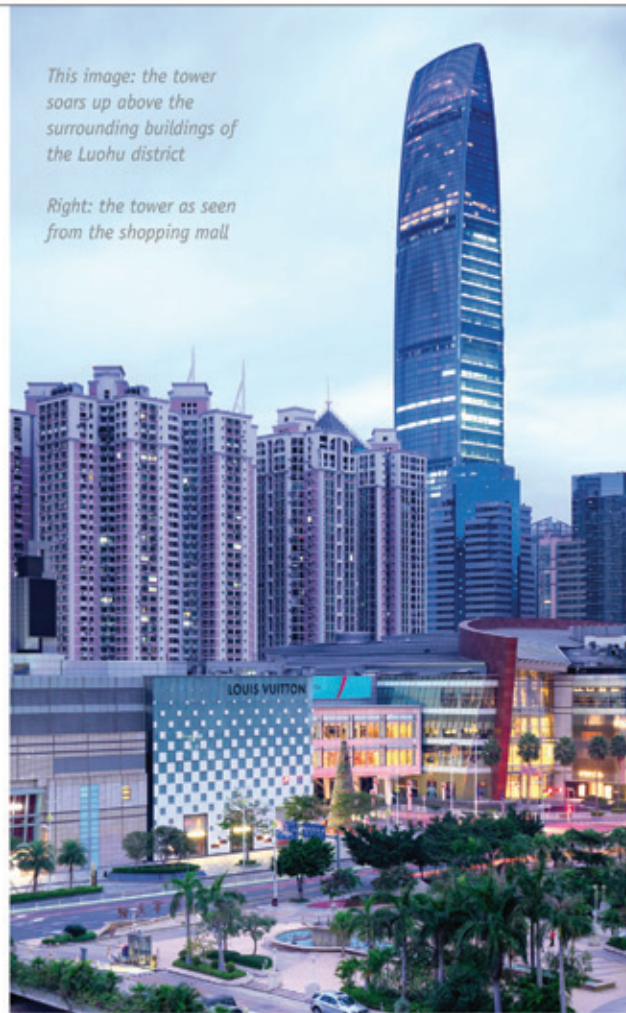
Back in London in the Sixties, he went into practice with Nicholas Grimshaw. The celebrated Herman Miller factory in Bath was Grimshaw's work, done while Farrell was designing a housing scheme of 'mass-produced but suburban houses, with different expression from building to building'. Farrell was 'beginning to think >>



much more about urbanism and building strategies, rather than buildings as technological objects, like chic industrial design, which is what Nick was into. I just felt that it wasn't interested in legacy or people or urbanism or all that.' He continues: 'It had become so narrow by the end of the Seventies. Milton Keynes and the sheds of Grimshaw and the narcissism of Mies van der Rohe followers; it was all very rigid. It was about construction and about technology and technique. It was more and more reductive; there was no fun, no variety and no reference to the city and the place.'

But he is unconvinced that postmodernism was a style, and if it was 'it didn't have a lot of endurance. For me, it was just liberating architecture again.' He sees its true inheritors as 'architects who you don't think of being postmodernist at the time, like Will Alsop and Frank Gehry. I think it made possible Zaha Hadid.'

Two Nineties' Hong Kong buildings match the refreshing playfulness of Farrell's work in London. The Peak Tower, a leisure centre and funicular railway terminus perched high above Central's skyscrapers, cuts a symbolic profile on Hong Kong's Ridgeline, referencing traditional Chinese roof eaves. Across the bay is the Kowloon Ventilation Building with its bright yellow funnel towers, 'like the Peak Tower, turned

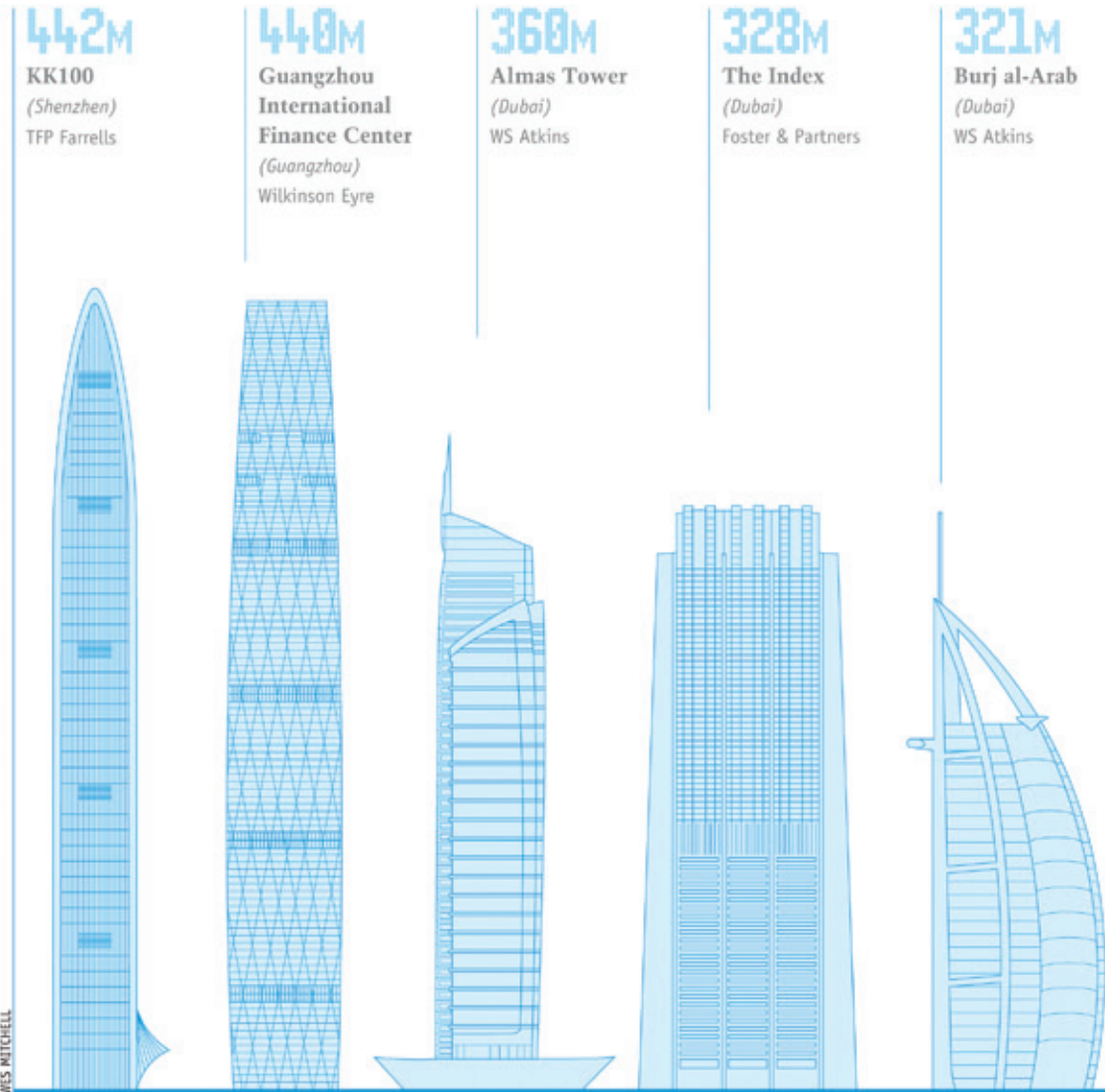


This image: the tower soars up above the surrounding buildings of the Luohu district

Right: the tower as seen from the shopping mall



FIVE TALLEST BUILDINGS BY BRITISH ARCHITECTS



up-side down,' notes Farrell. So, has the playfulness been lost in Farrell's bigger projects? 'A very tall building or a railway station in China are more serious,' he admits, but postmodernist allusion is still there. 'The Beijing South Station has many references to the big circular temples like the Temple of Heaven,' he offers, 'and the huge interiors of the China Petroleum Building are very monumental. It has agricultural and other references, which I quite like.'

Feng shui, a Hong Kong concern that doesn't extend to the mainland, doesn't worry Farrell. He recalls a client there who always called the feng shui man in after a project was built, 'because if you call them in beforehand, they want a percentage fee on the building. If he comes in afterwards, he was on time-charge!' And if the energy is flowing off in some bad direction, 'you just put a mirror there - it's cheaper than turning the building round.'

As for the more serious worries about a Chinese property bubble, he knows that 'having lived through several recessions they are very real things'. But he contrasts the situation with Dubai, where 'the actual population who have passports is probably the size of York' and the theory was famously: build it and they will come. 'The difference between Dubai and China is that they don't have to come, there's one and a quarter of a billion people there already!'

Although the idea of KK100's design started with Farrell's Kowloon tower and the design work began while he was in Hong Kong, he gives full credit to Munich-born Hong Kong partner Stephan Krummeck as the lead designer. Another great new skyscraper in the Pearl River Delta, Wilkinson Eyre's 440m-tall Guangzhou



International Finance Centre, has similarities - a British practice, structural engineering by Arup, and not least a very slender tapering form. But the Guangzhou tower started life much later, in 2004, and Farrell was unaware of it, so there's no aspect of competition between the two.

Both place a hotel above office floors, but that formula started with the Landmark Tower in Yokohama in 1993 and is a consequence of the concrete core disappearing towards the top.

What seemed contentious with KK100 was clearing the site for developer Kingkey's retail, residential and signature tower scheme. Caiwuwei Village was a warren of tenement housing, knocked up quickly to accommodate an exploding population as Shenzhen famously erupted from fishing villages into a megacity of 10 million souls in the mere three decades since Deng Xiaoping made it China's first special

economic zone. Many such neighbourhoods still remain, blocks packed so tight that merely a metre often separates them. Caiwuwei was ridden by crime and, unusually, Kingkey offered its residents not only a new flat on-site but a second one to give them a rental income. One couple held out, and parallel to an earlier case in Chongqing, became stranded in the otherwise cleared site in their 'Nail House'. In 2007, they accepted an offer of 12 million yuan (about £1.2m) but no flat, and are reported to have regretted holding out.

The Farrell masterplan for the site includes the KK100 Mall, shaped as fluidly as a Hadid design and full of high-end brands. Five curved high-rise residential towers and a smaller office tower rise above it. A direct link to the Grand Theatre Metro station will open in 2012. But the highlight, of course, is the KK100 tower.

It is indeed an unfeasibly slender beast,



Top: looking up through the central atrium of the hotel at the top of KK100

Top right: the shopping mall soon to be full of up-market brands

Above right: the KK100 hotel lobby area

Above: Stefan Krummeck, director of TFP Farrells Hong Kong and KK100 lead designer



with a rectangular footprint and a height to width ratio of 11.5:1 on its narrow, almost vertical east-west facades. Cross-bracing behind their dark glass is strangely reminiscent of Chicago's John Hancock Tower, which also tapers but with converging straight edges. The wide north and south facades switch seamlessly from elliptical curvature to vertical as they drop, but on the south facade, the curtain wall flares out above a plaza in a dramatic gesture to form an entrance canopy. This is the entrance to the monumental marble lobby for the tower's office floors on levels 5 to 72, totalling 173,000 sq m, including seven trading floors. Six double-decker lifts reach a single skylobby at levels 39/40.

With a classic tube-in-tube structure, perimeter columns share the load with the central concrete core, which ends above the offices, so the St Regis Hotel is within a steel frame. It is entered from the north, >>



JO FARRELL

opposite the mall, and four lifts whisk guests straight to the reception, unusually positioned above the rooms, at level 94. The 250 rooms encircle a 16-storey atrium. The decor, by upmarket hotel specialist practice ChengChung Design of Hong Kong, is discreet, all wood, mirrors, veined marble and minimal art. Being in the St Regis spa and swimming pool on level 75 feels like arriving in heaven with a clean platinum Amex card.

But the best is at the very top. Above the hotel reception is a 39m-high crystal palace formed by A-frames, and in the void is a multi-storey, egg-shaped pod. Here, you enter a three-dimensional maze of stairs and landings with nooks and sofas. Farrell says simply, 'It is fun.'

Two exterior elements complete KK100's spectacle. Kingsun Optoelectronics of Guangzhou uses LED strips on the wide facades' vertical mullions to present a spectacular kinetic colour light show at night, constantly changing with themes such as falling water and expanding ripples. And all around the block street-furniture lightposts by Kan and Lau in the shape of KK100 add a crisp, human-scale touch, although one post rises to about 12m.

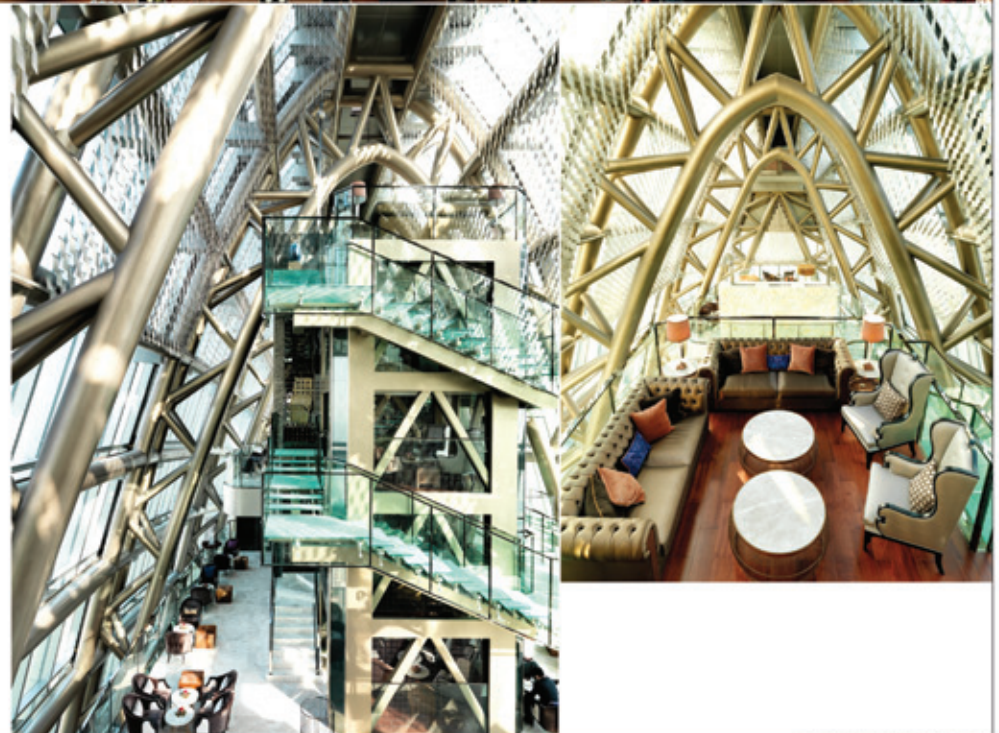
KK100 will not long remain Shenzhen's tallest building. A 648m-high tower by KFP is underway and TFP Farrells is in the running for another 600m-high tower. In Beijing's new Chaoyang business zone, masterplanned by Farrell, it has won five commissions to design towers, including the 520m-high Z15. Farrell is philosophical about joining the elite supertall designer club. His 2003 plan for South Kensington Station included a six-storey element dubbed The Tower. 'The clients were Huchison Whampoa,' he recalls. Their reaction was "Where is the tower?"

One suspects that Farrell's evolution from antimodernist, via postmodernist hero and supreme masterplanner to leader of a global design powerhouse is a story with much more to come. As he says of KK100, 'it's an extraordinary thing!' »



Top left, Terry Farrell on top of the world and very high up KK100

Other images this page, the restaurant and lounge at the very top of the building





## TERRY FARRELL

**1938** Born in Sale, Greater Manchester

**1961** Graduates from Newcastle University. Final year design thesis was 'The Climatron, a concept inspired by Bucky Fuller, several years before Archigram and hi-tech brigade discover him. Blackpool Tower and the Winter Gardens were designed as Victorian versions of climatrons. I replaced Blackpool Tower's buildings at the bottom and put them on an island out to sea, accessible by mini shuttle train from the tower.'

**1961/2** Working for the LCC, he designs his first built project, Blackwall Tunnel ventilation buildings, completed 1964

**1962/4** Masters degree in urban planning and architecture from University of Pennsylvania under Louis Kahn. 'I met tutor Denise Scott Brown and Bob Venturi a lot as friends.'

**1964** Visits Far East and India. 'I went to Delhi to see Lutyens and to Chandigarh to see Corbusier. I felt the former was brilliant, the latter was arrogant and displaced.'

**1964** 'I went into partnership with Nicholas Grimshaw. We designed the aluminium-clad 'Spin-Dryer' flats [125 Park Road, Regent's Park]. I lived there between 1970 and 1973.'

**1976** 'Charles Jencks asks me to formulate views and lecture on buildings as a resource, first at the AA then at RIBA.'

**1980** Solo practice established in London. 'Clifton Nursery buildings in Bayswater and Covent Garden, immediately established an independent identity.'

**1983** TV-am headquarters, Camden. The egg-cups on the converted garage roof become a symbol of London postmodernism.

**1986** Comyn Ching Triangle – rehabilitation of a small Covent Garden Georgian quarter demonstrates that conservation can be vibrant and cool. 'Over a period of 15 years we progressively renewed and regenerated these properties.'

**1990** Embankment Place/Charing Cross, London – not just a postmodernist icon, but a massive example of 'gateway iconography'.

**1991** Newcastle Quayside masterplan was the blueprint for the transformative regeneration of the inner-city Tyne into a world-class cultural stretch. The masterplan of Birmingham's Brindley Place also 'established post industrial landmarks in masterplan regeneration'.

**1991** 'We win the Peak Tower competition and open the office in Hong Kong.'

**1993** MI6 Building, Vauxhall. 'A riverside palazzo' which 'proved that groundscrapers can contain as much floor space as towers'.

**1997** Peak Tower 'designed with iconography in mind', and the British Consulate open in Hong Kong.

**1998** Kowloon Station. Perhaps the world's largest 3D masterplan, with the station below a public square on reclaimed land.

**2002** Incheon International Airport. 1996 competition-winning entry for the

ground transportation at what was voted the best airport in the world.

**2006** Green Building, a cylindrical apartment block in Manchester, wins the Sustainable Civic Trust Award.

**2008** Shaping London published, addressing 'the patterns and forms that make the metropolis' from historical development to contemporary transport issues. Dan Cruikshank called it 'the most important and inspirational London book of the decade'.

**2008/9** Beijing South and Guangzhou railway stations. 'The Beijing project takes all its clues from the city's great geometry... from the Imperial Palace to ringroads, radiating like ripples from the very centre.'

**2008** London Mayor Boris Johnson appoints Farrell as design adviser for Outer London and London high streets.

**2008–2011** Appointed as the government's Planning Leader for Thames Gateway. The Thames Estuary Masterplan is followed by Thames Estuary Parklands Masterplan. In 2011, Farrell advocates a high-speed rail hub at Old Oak Common that places five airports within 30 minutes reach.

**2010** Earls Court Masterplan. 'I can't say Earls Court is a good masterplan until one walks around it one day! It's down to others to do it.'

**2011** KK100 Shenzhen completed, Shanghai office opens. New plan for Battersea Power Station announced. ■

*This page features a selection of other TFP Farrell projects. Clockwise from top left: China National Petroleum Building interior – entrance and elevated walkways, opened 2008; an illustration of the 1998 Kowloon Station Masterplan, including the concept proposal for the 'Blade of Grass' skyscraper, the original idea that evolved into KK100; Peak Building, Hong Kong, opened in 1997 as a visitor complex at the terminus of Peak Tram funicular railway; Kowloon Ventilation Building; Beijing South Railway Station references the city's 600-year-old Temple of Heaven*