

Foster and Partners: 30 St Mary Axe, London

London's first ecological tall building and an instantly recognisable addition to the city's skyline, 30 St Mary Axe is rooted in a radical approach - technically, architecturally, socially and spatially. Commissioned by Swiss Re, one of the world's leading reinsurance companies, it rises forty-one storeys and provides 76,400 square metres of accommodation, including offices and a shopping arcade accessed from a newly created public plaza. At the very top of the building - London's highest occupied floor - is a club room that offers a spectacular 360-degree panorama across the capital.

Generated by a radial plan, with a circular perimeter, the building widens in profile as it rises and tapers towards its apex. This distinctive form responds to the constraints of the site: the building appears more slender than a rectangular block of equivalent size; reflections are reduced and transparency is improved; and the slimming of its profile towards the base maximises the public realm at ground level. Environmentally, its profile reduces the amount of wind deflected to the ground compared with a rectilinear tower of similar size, helping to maintain pedestrian comfort at street level, and creates external pressure differentials that are exploited to drive a unique system of natural ventilation.

Conceptually the tower develops ideas explored in the Commerzbank and before that in the Climatoffice, a theoretical project with Buckminster Fuller that suggested a new rapport between nature and the workplace, its energy-conscious enclosure resolving walls and roof into a continuous triangulated skin. Here, the tower's diagonally braced structural envelope allows column-free floor space and a fully glazed facade, which opens up the building to light and views. Atria between the radiating fingers of each floor link together vertically to form a series of informal break-out spaces that spiral up the building. These spaces are a natural social focus - places for refreshment points and meeting areas - and function as the building's 'lungs', distributing fresh air drawn in through opening panels in the facade. This system reduces the tower's reliance on air conditioning and together with other sustainable measures, means that the building is expected to use up to half the energy consumed by air-conditioned office towers.

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About Foster and Partners

Foster and Partners is an international studio for architecture, planning and design led by founder and Chairman, Norman Foster and a group of Senior Partners. The scope of its work includes masterplans for cities, the design of buildings, interior and product design, graphics and exhibitions. These can be found throughout the world, from Britain, Europe and Scandinavia to the United States, Hong Kong, Japan, China, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Australia. The studio has established an international reputation with buildings such as the Swiss Re Headquarters in London, the new German Parliament in the Reichstag, Berlin, and The Great Court for the British Museum. The central concern of the practice is design excellence, achieved through active collaboration with clients and specialists - from structural and environmental engineers to cost consultants.

Driven by the pursuit of quality, Foster and Partners believes that our surroundings directly influence the quality of our lives, whether in the work place, at home or in the public spaces in between. This emphasis on the social dimension is fundamental to the practice philosophy, which takes as its starting point the acknowledgement that architecture is generated by the needs of people - and that these needs may be spiritual as well as material. The quest for quality equally addresses the global impact of a building or project, and embraces the physical and environmental performance of buildings - how do they endure in a world subject to volatile change? Foster projects have always anticipated these trends, pioneering design solutions that use totally renewable sources of energy and offer dramatic reductions in CO2 emissions. Some projects explore new sources of fuel and seek inspiration from the very newest technologies; others harness vernacular traditions to achieve equally effective, passive reductions in energy use and the long-term cost of a building.

Established as Foster Associates in 1967 the practice, now known as Foster and Partners, has project offices world wide with its main studio in London. The practice has worked in 55 countries and currently has projects across 22 countries. Since its inception it has received over 300 awards and citations for excellence and has won more than 60 national and international competitions. Norman Foster was Knighted in 1990, appointed by the Queen to the Order of Merit in 1997 and in 1999 was honoured with a Life Peerage, taking the title Lord Foster of Thames Bank.

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