

Jean Nouvel 2008 Laureate Acceptance Speech

“My speech seems too long and a bit strange but tradition needs to be respected. My two friends Frank and Renzo explained to me that every year they have to check and approve the acceptance speech of the laureate. They cancelled part, modified and added others but I appreciate that they kept some of my original ideas....”

As 2008's laureate I would like to thank you, Mrs. Cindy Pritzker, for your warmth in welcoming me to the foundation you created with your husband Jay Pritzker. I would also like to thank you Margot and Tom Pritzker for the Foundation that has allowed architecture to take its luminous place in today's culture.

Thank you to the members of the jury for acknowledging, or rather identifying me, and for understanding that, behind the man with a hundred different faces—there is only one architect. I would like to thank Frank Gehry for always putting forward and supporting my candidacy too early and for too long, and for being eventually proven right today. Many thanks to all of you for attending the thirty-year anniversary celebrations, here in Washington.

Well, here I am before you tonight. I know why: let's make it clear: I am mad, mad about architecture ... But, I suspect many of my friends and heroes who have preceded me on this stage suffer from the same affliction. But me, I am here by mistake. My parents, both teachers wanted me to become a teacher. I wanted to be a visual artist, a painter. My parents were against this, considering it too risky. A compromise was called for: I began studying architecture at l'Ecole des Beaux Arts with the intention to go back to visual arts as soon as possible ... but passion came in the way. Very early on, I started working for Claude Parent and Paul Virilio, the former enthralled me, and the latter enrolled me. I became an architect. It is the reason why I am here tonight. My father is a doctor in history and geography, and lives with my mother in the Perigord region of France. They taught me to look, to read, to think and to express what I think. I am grateful to them for my presence here tonight, as much as I am indebted to them for my ability to question teaching at the Beaux Arts, and projects with no sense of context. It was because of them that I criticized international style, and the first universal models that were imposed on cities across the main continents. And they are also the reason why I handed in a typewritten architectural project instead of the large drawings expected of me, and stayed for six months more at the school.

That is also why I was curious enough to start reading Michel Foucault. He is probably “the greatest skeptic of our times,” believing only in the truth that lies in myriad historical facts, not in ideologies. «The theorist of dispersion and singularity», an empirical anthropologist, his work is rooted in critique. Thank you Michel Foucault, you are also a reason why I am here tonight. It is also because of you that, towards the end of the seventies, I exposed ideologies in architecture with a capital A as irrelevant, and wrote the text *The future of architecture is not Architectural*. It denied the idea that architecture was an autonomous discipline, and asserted the need to look outside the architectural field for the future of architecture. That is why I am here tonight, to hear from the jury that I may have contributed to the widening of this field.

I completed many projects at that time, lost many competitions, and used each project to draw up formative rules; I listed what should be done, and I listed what should not be done. The best way to resolve contradictions might be brainstorming meetings. I decided to surround myself with advisers: Jacques Le Marquet, stage-designer and author, Olivier Boissière, architecture critic and writer, Hubert Tonka, philosopher and publisher and José Miguel Iribas, sociologist. Thanks to these teams, these advisers, difficult syntheses came to life; my projects followed one after the other, always different. In no way they were the same: the method in itself calls for singularity. Thanks to them, my advisers.

It is because no two projects have resembled one another, and never will do, that I am here tonight. For each project, each achievement, I looked at the poetics of the situation. I read Gilles Deleuze, and tried to determine—through displacement—what a concept in architecture would be. I met with Jean

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Baudrillard and, fatally, did come across the pitfalls of fatality. In the early nineties, I gave a lecture at the Pompidou centre, "After the architectural mists have cleared". It acknowledged the necessary acceptance of urban chaos on a planetary scale, the scale of the nebulous urban sprawl, that new historical and geographical layer encompassing the area around cities. It was the discovery of a new poetics for tracks, punctuated landscapes, networks and lights. It was a time of friendship with Wim Wenders, the realization that architecture, whatever the scale, could only, from then onwards, be modification, mutation. I now think in terms of the planet as a whole. I combine an outside and an inside perspective on the cities I work in. That is why I am here tonight.

An exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, which later toured Europe and Japan, was an opportunity for me to show the virtues of situational, contextual architecture, also as a moment of culture frozen in time. But the galloping globalization, discouraged me and then, came the emotional shock caused by the architecture of the Louisiana Museum in Denmark. Once again, I decided to speak out, express my opposition and put forward ideas.

For me, here was the living proof of a forgotten truth: architecture has the power to transcend. It can reveal geographies, histories, colors, qualities of light. Impertinent and natural, it is in the world. It lives. It is unique. It is a microcosm, a bubble. It is an expansion of our world at a time when that world is getting smaller.

The crucial historical clash is the one that—more insistently every day—sets a global architecture against an architecture of situations, generic architecture against an architecture of specificity. Modernity today should not only be the direct descendant of the modern movement of the 20th century, without any spirit of criticism. It should not only consist of parachuting solitary objects—*objets célibataires*—onto the planet. On the contrary, it should be looking for reasons, correspondences, harmonies, differences in order to propose an ad-hoc architecture, here and now....

Undoubtedly this confrontation runs deeper and is more complex than the issue of local against global. Specificity is linked to the actualization of knowledge. Travel is an essential element in the cultivation of any builder. The Louisiana Museum is the result of a journey to California: the fruit of information gathered from afar and the interpretation of a unique location by Jørgen Bo and Vilhelm Wohlert.

In the name of the pleasure of living on this Earth, we must resist the urbanism of zones, networks and grids, the automatic rot that is obliterating the identity of the cities of all continents, in all climates, feeding on cloned offices, cloned dwellings, cloned shops, thirsting for the already thought, the already seen in order to avoid thinking and seeing. We must replace these generic rules with other ones, establish sensitive, poetic rules, approaches that will speak of colors, essences, characters, anomalies. Rules that will encourage a mutation, provoking a modification of the inherited chaos. Architecture means transformation, organizing the mutation of what is already there. It means to reveal, to give direction. It means prolonging lived history and its traces of past lives, listening to the breathing of a living place, to its pulsations, interpreting its rhythms in order to create.

This is surely a poetical task, since only poetry can produce "the metaphysics of the instant." To work at the limits of the possible—with the mysterious, the fragile, the natural. To anticipate the weathering of time, patina, materials that change, that age with character. To work with imperfection as a revelation of the limits of the accessible. The detail—like the totality—is an opportunity to invent, to dislocate, to enrich the world, to recompose, to reassemble, to provoke confrontations of textures, lights, of unlikely techniques.

For me, architecture has to create singularity in duality, invent it in the confrontation with a situation. Architecture means the adaptation of the condition of a place to a given time by the willpower, desire and knowledge of human beings. I could never do this alone. That's why I'm not here alone, but with many of the companions who have done this with me:

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Alain Dominique Perrin who invented the Cartier Foundation in Paris in ninety three. Thomas Held is the strategist who managed to built the cultural center in Lucerne in 2000. Stéphane Martin President of Quai Branly Museum, we built with Patrice Januel. David Penick and Jerry Karr for Hines and Goldman Sachs, we made on 40 Mercer in Soho together and are doing now the Tour de Verre to extend the MOMA exhibitions spaces. Santi Mercadé is the man who commissioned the Agbar tower in Barcelona. He is, along with José Ribas, my partner and friend from Catalonia, with whom I am currently building in Barcelona the Catalonia Hotel tower, the business center City Metropolitana and Juan Manuel Sanahuja who has commissioned it from us. Together we are all building the Signal tower, a multiuse tower in la Défense, Paris.

Joe Dowling and Peter Kitchack, together we built the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Alf Naman and Craig Wood for 100 Eleventh in Chelsea. Laurent Bayle is in charge of the management and the construction of the great philharmonic in Paris, with Patrice Januel. Bruce and Stephan Elieff, together we are building the Green Blade condominiums skyscrapers in L.A. Edmund Cheng, we are building condominiums towers in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Marc Pietri, together we are building a tower in the Marseille harbor. David and Jane Walentas who instructed me with my first project in Dumbo. And Tom Krens, we did exhibitions and studies museums. Robert Lion, we tried to build the endless tower.

I “architected” ideas with Marc Emery, former chief editor of *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*. I often “architected” light with Yann Kersale, artist of light. Gilbert Brownstone and Olivier Margot, they support me in every case, good or bad. And my team, my dream team represented here by Michel Péliissié, my partner and “brother”, the great organizer with whom I built every thing for the last fourteen years. Alain Trincal, director and Emmanuel Blamont, architect partner and by Charlotte Kruk who organized my ubiquitous architect’s life for the last nineteen years.

I always make architecture somewhere—certainly for someone, but always for everyone. I refuse to limit architecture to a stylistic field. I am an architect who doubts, who seeks without thinking I have found, I put myself at risk, I’m an empiricist who invents architecture while designing it, and it surprises even me.

I fell I have accomplished my work when I am sliding
from creation to modification,
from assertion to allusion,
from building-up to filling-in,
from construction to infiltration,
from positioning to super-positioning,
from clearness to nebulous,
from addition to deviation,
from calligraphy to etching ...

I love architectures, which know how to focus that are light, that help you read the topography, the depth of field that make you vibrate with the winds, skies, soils, waters, flavors, trees, grass ... that remembers the uses and customs of the place and at the same time connects with networks locally and globally. I love architectures, which reveal the soul of those who get access. Architecture is dated. I know it is mortal, precarious, I suspect it to be alive. I watch it emerging out of the darkness and imagine the day it will return. The architectures of situation, of the specific, weave links between past and future, mineral and vegetal, between instant and eternity, visible and invisible.

To me exploration is a duty, understanding an intense desire, questioning a condition of evolution. I think with my senses, I feel with my thoughts. But I also seek to harmonize the inanimate with the living. Harmony is not always soothing; it can be a source of unimaginable pleasure, of hope beyond hope, an exaltation of our imaginative.

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Architecture is a gift from the deepest part of one's self. It is the making of worlds, the invention of places, of micro pleasures, micro sensations, quick dips into reality. I denounce automatic architecture, the architecture of our mass production systems! I attack it! I engulf it! That arid architecture should be used as a support, a point of departure for odd, dislocated, exploded, inverted strategies.

To me, one of the missions of specific architecture is to complete, to re-orient, to diversify, to modify and to imagine what the generic architectures can never imagine: the lifetimes to which they will give shelter. Let us claim the poetics of the situation for architecture: from Petra to Sanaa, from Venice to Manhattan, from Chartres to Ronchamp, from fishermen's huts to the tents of the desert, from the favelas of Rio to the industrial ruins of the Ruhr, from Katsura to Louisiana....

All clashes of temporalities and illuminations, all poetic paradoxes. The miraculous paradoxes that Paul Valéry summed up in this simple verse: «Time sparkles and dreaming is knowledge».

On this Thirtieth Anniversary, I have a lot of images in my head : from Luis Barragan in the desert to the White House Richard Meier's on the Michigan Lake forest, from the Tadao Ando's Japanese mountains.

«Time sparkles and dreaming is knowledge».

To Glenn Murcutt's corrugated iron bush-houses, from Jørn Utzon's opera house in Sidney, to the brilliance of Bilbao's Guggenheim or to Frank Gehry's Disney Hall, it is clearer than ever how time sparkles and dreaming is knowledge.

It's also true from Paris to London with Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers or Norman Foster. From Seattle to Cincinnati, from Vienna to Napa Valley with Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid, Hans Hollein or Jacques Herzog & Pierre De Meuron and these are only a few eloquent examples to illustrate the incredible family of the Pritzker prizewinners.

I would like to close by thanking my family, who have always understood what kind of architecture maniac they had to live with, and who, to quote the poet, has always loved me and helped me develop my legitimate strangeness. Thank you Odile, thanks to our two sons: Bertrand, a genius in the field of discreetly rotating digital images, who has come here especially from Japan. My thoughts, and a great thank you, go out to Pierre, poetic maker of images and music, who is working on a play for the Opera house in Leipzig. I also want to thank Catherine, and our daughter Sarah, the most moving photographer I have ever met. And my tender gratitude goes out to Mia, my sweet companion and a talented architect: together we make time sparkle.

Finally, I want to celebrate the great Pritzker Prize family centenarian, Oscar Niemeyer. I last saw him two years ago; he was drawing sketches of his latest projects on his agency walls for me, and he confirmed my view that when you are young it's for the rest of your life. I've just read his acceptance speech again, from twenty years back, and will borrow his poetic quote: As Charles Baudelaire once said, "The unexpected, the irregular, the surprise, the amazing are an essential part and characteristic of beauty."

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For more information, please contact:

Martha Thorne, Executive Director
The Pritzker Architecture Prize
71 South Wacker Drive
Suite 4700
Chicago, Illinois 60606
email: marthathorne@pritzkerprize.com