

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Christian de Portzamparc 1994 Laureate Acceptance Speech

Today is a great day in my life, and I am an extremely happy man. To join the list of architects this prize has honored, when only yesterday I still felt personally that every project was for me a new experiment, has brought me a strange mixture of excitement and serenity, while at the same time facing me with a great responsibility: I can no longer afford to make any mistakes. I have a duty of excellence towards you, and as we never know where that lies, I shall never be able to stop.

I see the concern already on the face of Elizabeth, my wife, who, as well as designing her own furniture, supports me so marvelously in my work. It is a wonderful profession to be in, but it is often an uphill struggle.

Architecture is an art, but a public art. More often than not, the public does not choose architecture as it would a museum to visit. Instead, architecture is imposed on us, in our daily life, our homes and our places of work. And for this reason, the architect-artist is accountable for his work; he owes an explanation. We are asked to express ourselves all the time. And it's normal.

And because architecture is a public art, architects, unlike other artists, do not enjoy complete personal creative freedom. They are expected to impart a sort of legitimacy to their work by providing the right answers to the needs of a particular era.

I have often felt, in this respect, that I am following a very personal path, and perhaps more than others, I have had my doubts at times. Of course, there was always support from friends, clients, decision-makers and publications. But until now, in the face of doubt, I have only known a few real moments of truth, times when I felt my objective was truly at my fingertips; those moments when the users, the inhabitants of the Hautes Formes, the teachers and students at the Opera School of Dance or the National Music Conservatory expressed their enthusiasm at living in the buildings I made.

But the honor of the Pritzker Prize is a confirmation of a different kind, from people who have seen, experienced, felt and analyzed the best buildings in the world, of our times.

So I should like to express my gratitude to the members of the jury, and my pride at having been chosen by them, especially at a time when architecture in France is so full of vitality.

I am proud to think that, through me, my country has been honored for twenty years of effort in favor of architecture. I should like in particular to thank Jacques Toubon, the French Minister of Culture, and Catherine Bersani, Director of Architecture for the Ministry of Infrastructures, for being here today at Columbus on this very special occasion. Jacques Toubon is also the Mayor of a district in Paris where I built my first houses twenty years ago, and together we are currently engaging in a very exciting new project, to rehabilitate a complex of slabs built in the 1960s.

The numerous messages of joy and congratulations I have received from my colleagues, and the numerous articles published recently in connection with the prize, have shown us that the prestige of the Pritzker encourages architecture through all the different partners involved; not only architects, but also decision-makers, clients, builders. And in our world, architecture is something, very frail. Tomorrow it could fall into oblivion. So I should like to express my gratitude in the name of the joyous messages I have received, to the Pritzker family, to Jay Pritzker, to The Hyatt Foundation, for this tremendous boost, this burst of energy they give us every year by attracting attention to architecture with their famous prize.

I should also like to thank all those who are at the origin of my work, and who have helped me along the way. Some are here this evening. Friends from the early days, stimulating colleagues, architects on my team, and engineers who have worked on my buildings. I am moved that my parents are here, my sister. And my parents, who without knowing it, steered me towards this profession. My

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sons, too, who wisely look on from the sidelines. And Elizabeth, who has shared the whole adventure with me.

I was thinking to myself only yesterday that it is always a special experience to find myself back in the United States, even if getting through customs takes longer than in other countries. A special experience because a certain dream of America, with its multiple facets, marked our childhood, and to a certain extent, helped to make us what we are today. Myths are made to last, and the myth of the "new world" has made an indelible mark on history and on our planet.

I remember it was only after a long stay in the United States, after the joy of discovering the great cities of America, that I finally came to understand Europe, and the treasures of its cities, stretched between the past and the future. It was in 1966. I was a student then, beginning to wonder about the legitimacy of the modern theory; and Louis Kahn and Robert Venturi were sending out new glimmers of light from the United States.

It was then that, in this contrast between New York and Paris, when I forgot for a while that I wanted to be an architect, the modern theory of city planning that was spreading clumsily to every city in Europe suddenly struck me as simplistic, even dangerous. The idea at that time was to destroy two thirds of Paris and make it a clean, modern, homogenous city, and we looked forward to it with relish.

In fact, one of the major events of this century was this sudden, unexpected arrival of the theory of the modern movement in the history of architecture and city planning in the 1920s, and its widespread dissemination after the war. For centuries, indeed for thousands of years, cities had grown slowly, gradually, in the same basic way with only one or two styles every century, when suddenly everything was turned upside down, and all the habits of the past were thrown out, lock, stock and barrel. There is no equivalent to such a giant leap in any other field, and such a radical erasing of history, except perhaps for the Russian Revolution!

My generation is the generation that inherited, when beginning to work, the great problematical legacy of this Modern Movement:

On the one hand, it has been a humanist ethic of building, and an extraordinary new architectural sensitivity, accorded to our time, that marked the century. And on the other hand, a failure to comprehend the wealth of the urban phenomenon, its history and its future.

So this was a great architectural vision in a way, which supported a poor urban vision in another way. This is the way it appeared to us in Europe. And I know it's probably very different here. The universal grid of all American cities has been able to welcome easily every change in architectural forms. But as you know, if you have been in Europe, it has been completely different. Our cities are so marked by history. Each piece of the territory has a special form, which is narrated from centuries, and the arrival in the modern world has been a violent event.

I discovered architecture through the drawings of Le Corbusier with enthusiasm. And ten years later, I remember, it was a time when our cities had been surrounded by many new urban developments. As I was watching man's first step on the moon in 1969, I felt that we were yet dreaming to live somewhere else in the space, and I thought to myself that mankind no longer knew how to build a city, or even a tiny part of a city, something that had been always so natural.

I had the impression that this modern energy of our age, this technical and economical logic, which seems to govern all human activity, was turning the earth into one immense production unit, dictating everywhere the same landscape of usefulness. Architecture seemed almost like something coming from another era, for me at that moment.

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This is facing all that, at this time, that I realized exactly why I wanted to build. And forgetting lessons and theories, I began to experiment how a modern architecture could drive to a new urban vision, accorded to our time, not coming back to the past.

Ever since, my work has always considered buildings as providing outside and inside places rather than as objects, even beautiful, providing places. This is what everybody needs and feels. And everybody feels it sometime, even if they are not prepared to appreciate architecture.

So it is a bit like if I was always working on interiors: outside interiors, inside interiors. I wonder if this approach that I never expressed this way before, is not another reason we understand so well with Elizabeth.

I see the outside, the city, as a vast collective interior, to be given a rhythm, transformed, and lived in. I think that we, all architects, have to answer to the crisis in urban thinking that characterized our day and age. I am sure that this prize will help me a lot to be more convincing on this subject. Thank you very much.

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