

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Christian de Portzamparc 1994 Laureate Biography

Christian de Portzamparc will be celebrating his fiftieth birthday on May 5 (1994), an anniversary that will be made even more memorable by the fact that he has just been named the 1994 Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate. He is the seventeenth person and the sixth European to be so honored since The Hyatt Foundation established the award in 1979.

Highly respected by architectural cognoscente throughout the world, this relatively young French architect explains that he was "a designer who painted before he decided to study architecture." While he still paints, he says, "I am not a painter or sculptor, yet." He is however a frequent lecturer and author. Although he has no built works in the United States, he was one of the finalists in the competition for Chicago's new Museum of Contemporary Art and an Art Museum for Omaha. Most recently he has gained recognition in Japan where he designed apartment buildings for the city of Fukuoka.

Most of his completed projects are in France, perhaps the most visible being the City of Music, a group of structures situated on the edge of the La Villette suburban park in Paris. The project actually has two phases. The first part, housing the National Conservatory of Music and Dance was completed in 1990. The second part with public spaces for concerts will open next January. Portzamparc says when he began work on the City of Music in 1984, his thoughts were carried back to a house in Brittany, the first thing he ever built, "In that design, each room was like a separate little house," he says. "I have discovered that each new project is the sum of all my previous works. No new work springs to life without some relationship to past inspiration."

President Mitterrand is credited with stimulating an architectural renaissance in France with his international competitions for new buildings in his country. He has made his position clear with the oft-quoted statement, "I believe that a people are great when their architecture is great." Perhaps one of the most widely publicized of the Grands Projets has been the addition to the Louvre Museum by the 1983 Pritzker Laureate, Ieoh Ming Pei.

City of Music, known throughout Europe as one of the Grands Projets, has been praised in the architectural press around the world. Spain's Interior Architecture and Design (*Diseño Interior*) magazine said of City of Music: "A building with lyric qualities, full of whiteness and opacity, it is the antithesis of the ethereal transparencies and other technological approaches so typical of the new French academicism." The formal opening is scheduled for early in 1995.

When the City of Music project was just beginning, another of Portzamparc's important projects was being completed and hailed as one of the best examples of contextualism in the city. It was the Erik Satie Conservatory of Music and Elderly Housing. This project, which he began in 1981 after winning a competition, has been described as being Post Modern, but the architect himself prefers not to be categorized, and he calls attention to his subsequent commissions as evidence of a much more personal style.

"When I was about 13, I had already become interested in art. But I remember seeing some sketches by Le Corbusier," says Portzamparc, "and this stimulated my interests not only in art, but it started my thinking about architecture." It is not surprising that this most famous of French architects has been an influence on a great many architects around the world, including some prior Pritzker Laureates, including Richard Meier and Kenzo Tange, who both cited Le Corbusier as their most important early influence.

Portzamparc began studying architecture in 1962 at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris, first under Eugène Beaudouin who encouraged his taste for formal expressionism, and then later under George Candilis who emphasized systematic work on grids and networks.

While still in school in 1966, he had second thoughts about a career in architecture. "Architecture seemed to me to be too bureaucratic, and not free enough compared to art; and the modernistic ideals which I worshiped before, seemed to me unable to reach the richness of real life. I also began to

Christian de Portzamparc, 1994 Laureate (continued)

criticize my first influences like Le Corbusier.” During this time of reassessment, he traveled to New York. He spent nine months in the city, living in Greenwich Village, enjoying the artist’s life, mingling with writers, poets and other artists. “I read and wrote and met people,” he says, “I was fascinated by New York.”

When he finished his degree in 1969, he still did not start working as an architect immediately. “I became involved with a group that was studying how people interact with their neighborhoods, doing interviews and studying the buildings and why people liked to live in them and why they didn’t. These sociologists and psycho-sociologists suffered with the hundreds of people they were interviewing. I got a realistic idea of a concrete way to understand architecture as a social responsibility. This was after three years of political discussion about ‘architecture as an obsolete subject—a discipline unable to change the world.’ I came to realize that architecture might not be able to create utopia, but as an architect, I could help change things for the better.”

He continued the story, “So I quit my vanguard position of the sixties to try to work modestly on what appeared to me to be the great task of architecture: to make a small neighborhood successful, which seemed to be impossible after twenty years of reconstruction in Europe.” Even now, I always consider a building as a part of the whole, a piece which creates a collective performance, which is the city. At the same time, the building must also be a response to a client or user’s needs.”

Portzamparc, in describing his philosophy of design, explains, “I don’t necessarily believe that an object is interesting in itself. The voids around the object can be as important, or even much more important than the object itself. Architecture and the voids created by it can produce movement, but it must all be seen in context, not isolated parts. This is why I insist on the void between buildings. I criticized Le Corbusier’s vision of the city as being made up of isolated parts. I criticized the modern urbanism in its pretention to demolish most of Paris, a common idea in the sixties for renewing the city and making it modern. My view was to embrace the richness of the city as a phenomenon which contains the past (in many different epochs), the present, and the changes for the future.”

He continues, “All of these many different architectures coexist in the city today, but they have evolved slowly throughout history. Our modern era is a violent event in comparison. We must remain conscious that the city (collectively) is more important than each building, but each building can contribute much to create or transform the city. This is what guides me as an architect.”

He opened his first office in 1970, executing his first commission in the following year. It was a water tower for Marne-la-Vallee, based on the Tower of Babel. Placed at the center of a crossroads, the water tower has an outer skin of fine mesh open trellis work covered with climbing plants. It is a monumental symbol giving what had been a non-descript expanse a visual center.

His next major work was in the center of Paris, a housing project called Hautes-Formes completed in 1979. Where two towers were originally planned, Portzamparc has placed an arcade, a small square, and seven residential buildings containing 210 apartments. Jacques Lucan, in *A+U*, described the project: “...Portzamparc opened up a cramped irregular site by means of a pedestrian thoroughfare and a centrally placed square indispensable for dense housing developments. The housing blocks ... soar in a dynamic vertical gesture; their mutually echoing facades mark the limits of a universe which is both open and enclosed, unified and fragmentary ... he conferred a degree of autonomy on each of the operation’s constituent elements.”

Portzamparc comments on Hautes-Formes, saying, “With this project, I tried to find a way to work with the modern conceptual heritage of architecture, and to create with it, a feeling of urban conviviality. To enter in the irregular traditional urban network. Then it is easy to understand that I was far from my first student influence (Le Corbusier). But my vision was coming from a work that criticized his statement on urbanism, and respecting his vision on the architectural object.”

Christian de Portzamparc, 1994 Laureate (continued)

He continues, "In order to create a new understanding between architecture and the city, I always refused to be trapped in the past. This would not work. I believe we must re-think and adapt to a changing world."

Another of his major works is the Dance School of the Paris Opera in Nanterre awarded to him in competition in 1983. The project actually consists of three buildings, one each for teaching, lodgings, and dance studios. Predominately white, the project is set in a natural hollow that completely encloses the complex in greenery. Pritzker Prize juror Ada Louise Huxtable, writing in the *New York Review* in 1992 described it, "...a series of luminous studio levels wrap around a circular central stair for a continuous sequence of visual and participatory experiences. The dormitory curves off in its own undulating wing. Small lounges make physical and social connections. The landscape is enclosed and revealed with grace."

Two more recent projects include the Cafe Beaubourg and Ungaro Boutiques. The latter is a retail store which Portzamparc designed with bright colors and sculptural fixtures. The Cafe Beaubourg is on a corner plaza site that formerly housed three small restaurants. Portzamparc redesigned the space to create a two-story, chic, comfortable atmosphere. He also designed the furnishings and painted a mural on one wall.

Born in Casablanca, he is indeed, French, making his home in Paris with his wife, Elizabeth, and two sons, Serge and Philip, aged 11 and 8 respectively. That exotic birthplace came about because his parents were living there in 1944, his father being an officer in the French Army. The family moved to Marseille just a few months after his birth.

The family's roots are in Brittany where his parents still live. His father is an engineer for the water development department. He has two brothers, one a banker and another a psychoanalyst, and three sisters, one of whom is an urban sociologist.

His wife Elizabeth came to France from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil when she was 18. They met when they were both involved in urban workshops and discussions groups on design and architecture. That was in 1981, and their mutual interests led to romance and marriage. She designs furniture, and managed her own gallery which became known for many innovative exhibitions of furnishings by artists, designers, and architects, including her husband and herself. Her own furniture designs can be seen in such buildings as the National Assembly and in the collections of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

Portzamparc's atelier employs anywhere from 15 to 30 people over a given period of time, and is located in a five story structure that was formerly an artist's studio, complete with skylight. "It is an old building, but in comparison to most in the city, it is modern, from the thirties, very plain and white," he explains, "of the style esprit nouveau, which was of course inspired by Le Corbusier." His personal space is approximately 16 x 14 feet, with drawing board and surfaces piled high with books, sketch books, models, and what would appear to be years of accumulated work. He explains, "I do most of my work moving all around the offices, not just in my small space."

Described by some of his clients and associates, the consensus is that his good looks, boyish charm, and a youthful enthusiasm that will undoubtedly survive into old age, make Portzamparc an ideal candidate for film directors casting the role of an architect—a rare instance of reality being what one might fantasize.

Chantal Beret, writing in the *Encyclopedie Universalis*, said: "In his works, Portzamparc creates tension, transforming the void into matter, brilliantly resolving a subtle and dynamic dialectic of fundamental contraries: symmetry and dissymmetry, stability and movement, figure and background, 'focal object and finite void, totem and clearing, the two basic modes defining space;' in his most recent projects, an unbridled subjectivity makes for a rare freedom of interpretation."

Christian de Portzamparc, 1994 Laureate (continued)

In a speech before an architectural symposium in France, Portzamparc quoted Victor Hugo as saying, “Books will kill buildings.” He went on to explain that Hugo believed architecture would disappear because it was an inferior way of communicating.

“Yet,” Portzamparc continued, “architecture has not disappeared ... because in my view, it is not language, and that is architecture’s virtue. That is why it has been so powerful throughout history; it asserts legitimacy without recourse to ideology, to text. Architecture cannot be contradicted, it is there. It may perhaps be laughed at, and quite a few of us find some of it laughable, but as an urban phenomenon, as a symptom of civilization, it is something that becomes a presence. And this seems to indicate that architecture is thought without language—a fact that raises the possibility that language is not the only means of articulating thought.”

The point made is part of his concept that a new monumentality is emerging in architecture, one that is not based on the mass of a structure, but on the concept of space, form and voids between. Architecture is being taken apart and put back together again—using resources available today for research that would have been inconceivable before now.

In the seventies, says Portzamparc, “It was fashionable again (along with McLuhan) to believe that architecture was obsolete in the coming era of telecommunication. But on the contrary, the place, the space on our planet will continue to be necessary as the subject of the best human thought on making the world livable.”

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