

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Thom Mayne 2005 Laureate Acceptance Speech

From my childhood I have these wonderful memories of weekend trips to Chicago with my mother and my brother. It was through these early excursions that I was first initiated to, and forever intoxicated by the city. I can't imagine a better way to return to my first city ... here, on this occasion, *in* this Pavilion ... Frank, I know I speak for all of us when I say that we are filled with the optimism, the energy, the complete and total commitment of your artistic enterprise. For me, standing here at this moment, it feels as though your pavilion was made for this event.

I would like to thank Mayor Daley, Lord Palumbo, Tom and Cindy Pritzker, and the whole Pritzker family for your support of architecture ... your contributions elevate the entire field's power and visibility in this country and in the world; to the members of the jury for your faith in me; to my clients, who ... what can I say? ... Through your suspension of disbelief, you transported visions into realities ... and now you're all here trading stories. To my Morphosis colleagues, our work is a result of a collective engagement. I thank you all, and I receive this prize in honor of your commitment and energy—the 35 of you here this evening represent 200 years of collective work. To my friends, it means so much that you're here with me this evening, our relationships have shaped who I am and why I'm here today. To my family, my sons Richard, Sam, and Cooper, I'm proud to be your dad. And to my wife, Blythe, I met my match and more, you're everywhere in my life ... this prize we completely share.

Architecture is a way of seeing, thinking and questioning our world and our place in it. It requires a natural inquisitiveness, an openness in our observations, and a will to act in affirmation. The growth of an architect takes quite a bit of time. One thinks, constructs, assembles, thinks, repeats the process again and again, until a personal vision of reality emerges and becomes the basis of the work. The great power of architecture is to take that personal vision out of the realm of the private and into something immersed in the complexities, conflicts and tensions that define the human character and our communities. These connections and intersections are where the generative material, the DNA matter of the work exists for me. One begins intuitively, through a hunch, looking for some essential part of the problem that can be grasped and nurtured, teased into development.

I have no preconceived idea of what any of my projects will be. I need only a beginning embryonic impression which, when worked on in collaboration with other forces will develop in a unique way. The outcome of the process will be intensely specific to the project and its circumstances. This is the value in architecture that I most strive for.

Of course, there are inevitable similarities among my projects and buildings, characteristics that make them recognizable as the work of Morphosis. But that is not what interests me. I am engaged more by the process than by the result. I am captivated by what emerges and develops from the smallest piece of information as it absorbs the huge number of realities that come to impact it. In this process, the end cannot be known at the beginning. Like life, it is evolutionary, adapting, transforming, growing out of, but not enslaved by our profession's over-investment in history with its a priori solutions.

Which takes me back to the City; to me, the city is the most profound creation of humanity, continuously changing, evolving, mysterious and therefore in important ways unknowable. In its lack of fixity; in the unthinkable number of its random interactions, exchanges, encounters ... in the sheer magnitude of the variety of intelligences. Here rests the potential of a true creativity where serendipity and spontaneous combustion take place. This, I believe, is why cities are the stronghold of our liberal tradition in this country. Our cities are the location of continuous regeneration, places of infinite possibilities, demanding from us an attitude of expansiveness. Yet we seem to find ourselves, in this first decade of the twenty-first century, infused by fear, immobilized by the complexity of the realities that come with living in the present ... the now ... insisting instead on seeing our diverse society through a simplistic lens ... resistive to reality, demanding uniformity in the face of diversity.

And the refuge, as it always been within these cycles, is in nostalgia—a desire for an illusion of order, consistency and safety, qualities we last enjoyed in childhood.

Thom Mayne Acceptance Speech (continued)

This is temporary. I've lived during periods of great cultural expansion and optimism. I've felt the intoxication that happens when an entire generation decides to stop looking backward for its direction. I see in this pavilion, in the work of my peers a harbinger of better things, a fierce optimism about looking forward. Isn't it always this way? One looks to the artists to remind us that we are all moving forward, empowered and able.

I'm chasing an architecture that engages and demands inquiry. Architecture is not passive, not decorative. It is essential, it affects us directly and profoundly—it has the potential to impact behavior and the quality of everyday life.

As architects, our work is embedded with our values: we cannot escape society's layered problems. Early in our careers, we start with smaller work, which allows us to tune our artistic skills and hone our internal aesthetic. At this early point these values are implicit. As the work grows in magnitude and becomes directly engaged with a broader range of issues—for me this has happened in the past five years—the embedded values become more explicit, and the contribution to society, more substantial.

The Pritzker Prize recognizes the power of architecture to shape our lives and it helps empower not only its recipients, but all architects to impact society. In this way, it brings honor but more importantly responsibility. I am so deeply humbled to receive this prize, I accept it with huge happiness, with pride, and with a deep sense of responsibility. I am honored that my work has been deemed deserving of such recognition, and that my name will join others whom I so much admire.

You've given me this prize as a young architect. And herein lays my challenge: to bring honor to the Pritzker Prize in my future endeavors. That is exactly what I intend to do. Thank you.