

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Thom Mayne 2005 Laureate Biography

"We will hold to that which is difficult, because it is difficult ... and by its difficulty is worthwhile." That's a quote from architect Thom Mayne in a monograph about his firm, Morphosis, which he founded in 1972 in Los Angeles. The thought expressed is rather typical of a man who has achieved distinction throughout the world as a theorist, author, teacher, and last, but by no means least, as an architect. His stature is even more enhanced as the recipient of the 2005 Pritzker Architecture Prize.

As stated in the Pritzker Jury's citation, "Mayne's approach toward architecture and his philosophy is not derived from European modernism, Asian influences, or even from American precedents of the last century. He has sought throughout his career to create an original architecture, one that is truly representative of the unique, somewhat rootless, culture of Southern California, especially the architecturally rich city of Los Angeles. Like the Eameses, Neutra, Schindler, and Gehry before him, Thom Mayne is an authentic addition to the tradition of innovative, exciting architectural talent that flourishes on the West Coast."

When Mayne received the call on his cell phone from the Pritzker Prize executive director, Bill Lacy, he was in a cab crossing the Triborough Bridge in New York on his way to the airport." When he told me I had been selected as the 2005 Laureate, I was speechless. This is such a big deal, and due to certain aspects of my upbringing, it is not in my nature to think about being the one who prevails. For my whole life I've always seen myself as an outsider." That hardly sounds like the man that some in the media have called "a bad boy of architecture," so an exploration of that "upbringing" is in order.

Thom Mayne was born in Waterbury, Connecticut in 1944. His family moved to Gary, Indiana when he was an infant where his mother and father subsequently divorced. When he was ten, his mother moved the family to an area south of Whittier, California where he and his younger brother could be nearer to his maternal grandmother. He characterized the place as "the middle of nowhere with orange groves and avocado trees." Economically, the family was quite poor. "My mother, whose father was a Methodist minister, had studied in Chicago and Paris," he explains, "She was a pianist, and had actually appeared with her sister in recital at Carnegie Hall, but then she got married and gave up her musical life to focus on her children. When the separation came, she was not equipped to support a family ... she was a creative person, a person with a musician's temperament. She tried teaching, but that didn't work so she went to work in a series of support jobs in various fields."

Mayne continues, "But my mother was completely cultured. I grew up on classical music, and reproductions of great art. As a result, I grew up as a city kid in the suburbs, not an athlete, not a joiner. Anyway, I was completely out of place in Whittier. My first day of school, my bike and jacket were taken and I was beaten up. I was arranging flowers at ten, re-working the landscape of our house at twelve. The aesthetic stuff was definitely not what boys did. As a result, I became kind of a loner, and aloof. I didn't really have a family then because my mom was never around. Now, I have a lovely family. My wife is so, really luscious. She really knows me, and understands completely that I can be an extremely self-critical person because of all the challenges in my life. We both get that the self-critical part is also the engine that drives the creativity ..." His family includes three sons, one (Richard Mayne) by a previous marriage who is grown and has a family of his own, and two younger children, Sam aged 21 and Cooper 17.

According to Mayne, he managed to survive high school in Whittier. When he headed off to college initially, it was by bus to Cal Poly in Pomona. By his account, "When I got off the bus, the first people I saw were three girls riding by on horses. I was shocked. The city boy in me really came out, and I got right back on the bus to LA, and went over to USC. They had an accomplished group of practitioners in the architecture school then, Craig Ellwood, Gregory Ain, Ray Kappe, Ralph Knowles and others. I had won a competition for a house I designed in my Architectural Drafting class in High School so I had an attraction to the field of architecture ... but not much of a clue what it meant to practice. Anyway, they accepted me, and for the first time I found a world that seemed to fit."

Thom Mayne, 2005 Laureate (continued)

And the rest is history, or at least one could jump to that conclusion based on the preponderance of commissions awarded to Morphosis in the last few years. But there is more to the story of Thom Mayne.

When he finished USC, he went to work as a planner for Victor Gruen for two years. Then he started teaching at Pomona, but soon he and six of his colleagues, including the director, were fired. "We were young, committed and convinced that we could re-think where architecture was headed so when we got fired, we decided to start our own school. We sensed that it was the right time to initiate a radical alternative to the conventional educational system," Mayne recounts. That was the genesis of the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc). They took forty of the students from Pomona with them and started the school. "We made no money, we worked for nothing," says Mayne, "I was working ten hours a day teaching, doing little gigs on the side, consulting, to survive. And I was living in Venice, over a bait and tackle shop, maybe \$100 a month rent. You could live really simply then. All of a sudden, four years of my life had gone by, and I'm running a graduate program. Eventually, in 1978 I took a sabbatical and entered the graduate program at Harvard."

It was that year at Harvard that gave him time to reassess his career. "By that time it had become clear to me that my interests were leading me away from planning ... it just wasn't tangible enough ... toward architecture. By the end of '79, I got back to Los Angeles, and boom, boom, I started receiving residential commissions. I realized what a unique city LA is for practicing architecture (Frank Gehry had just finished his house), how open it is to experimentation. Unbeknownst to all of us, the Los Angeles architecture scene was becoming interesting at a global level."

Morphosis came into being in 1972 during the first year of SCI-Arc's history. "It really wasn't an office, it was an idea," says Mayne. "We had no work. We didn't think of having work, it had to do with an interdisciplinary collective practice ... of starting a group of people who would work with graphics, interior design objects, furniture, architecture and urban design. We had a studio downtown. We sat around and talked. We'd do a little graphic thing here and there to make some money. We couldn't get architecture. It was all very counter culture."

It was at that time that his son was going to a school in Pasadena that Mayne describes as "completely radical, but fabulous." Parent meetings evolved into a first project for Morphosis, designing a new school, the Sequoyah Educational Research Center, which subsequently won the firm its first Progressive Architecture award in 1974. "That was the beginning," Mayne explains, "the PA award led to inquiries from other publications around the world, wanting to publish this and that, suddenly we had an existence."

Mayne continued, "After doing a lot of remodels in Venice, the Lawrence Residence project came along and that's when everything started breaking loose for us, getting published in LA, and we became part of a group. We, as younger architects, were definitely taking over, it was a real shift in the context of architecture."

It was at this time, when he was emerging as a public figure that somehow or other, various journalists began to characterize Mayne as "an angry young man." He takes exception: "No doubt about it, I'm a complicated guy, but the bad boy description comes from, I think, a reaction to my being relentlessly tenacious and to having an independent voice. I have a long attention span, and when I grab on to something, I stick with it ... I was nicknamed "pointer dog" by my former partner. If anything, I think this award, the Pritzker Prize, acknowledges the necessity to act on one's beliefs, to have the conviction of one's beliefs, and to sometimes pay whatever it costs to see the work through with integrity."

Today, Morphosis is home to forty architects and designers, and Thom Mayne is firmly committed to the practice of architecture as a collective enterprise. Mayne elaborates, "An architect operates, finally, more as a director does than as a painter or a sculptor. They have to focus the energy of a large group of people on a common obsession. The architect has to know a little bit about everything ... it's a generalist discipline not a discipline for the specialist. "Not surprisingly, the products of his practice

Thom Mayne, 2005 Laureate (continued)

range from designs for watches and teapots to homes to large-scale civic buildings and other urban design and planning schemes that aim to reshape entire cities.

Some of those recent commissions include a federal office building in San Francisco, a satellite operation control facility for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration near Washington, D.C. , and a courthouse in Eugene, Oregon. Mayne says that it was real kick to have won the last two major competitions in New York City—one being a building to house the Albert Nerken School of Engineering of the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, and the other, an Olympic Village for the 2012 games, to be built whether or not the Olympics come to New York in that year.

The multi-purpose Student Recreation Center at the University of Cincinnati, a project being completed later this year, includes athletic facilities, food facilities, student housing and classroom space. The building is one of the key components of the University's new campus master plan and helps to tie together, like a Chinese puzzle, many of the disparate conditions that exist in the center of the campus. Just as this Pritzker Prize announcement was being prepared, Mayne was notified that his firm's recent design for a new Alaska State Capitol had been awarded first prize in an international design competition.

Scheduled for completion in 2007 is the Palenque at JVC, a 6250 seat open-air multi-use arena for Guadalajara, Mexico, that is situated to function as a gateway to a larger campus consisting of ten distinguished building projects inaugurated to revitalize the city. In Madrid, Morphosis is creating a public housing block consisting of 165 two-, three-, and four- bedroom units totaling 10,000 square meters of built area.

One of his more important projects is the recently completed Caltrans District 7 Headquarters in Los Angeles. The design of this building goes beyond merely providing functional spaces. It seeks in every way to actively engage the city and people while blurring the distinction between outside and inside, with the objective of creating a government bureau that works as a truly public building. The internationally acclaimed artist, Keith Sonnier, collaborated closely with Morphosis to create a fully integrated art piece that activates the outdoor lobby with half a mile of neon and argon tubes arranged in horizontal bands of red and blue light that mimic the ribbons of headlights and taillights on the freeways of California. Notably, Sonnier's piece gives Los Angeles its largest public art installation.

As an educator himself, Mayne has always been concerned with the culture of learning and the pedagogical impact of architecture. All of his educational projects have explored and continue to explore this territory and as a result have yielded several exceptionally innovative projects. The Science Center School, completed in 2004, was a unique joint venture between the California Science Center and the Los Angeles Unified School District. Sited on historic Exposition Park, the project is surrounded by the Rose Garden, the Gehry designed Aerospace Museum, and Exposition Boulevard, which separates the project from the University of Southern California. Sculpted berms of earth buffer the project from heavy traffic of the street. The work encompassed upgrading and renovating a historic armory along with some new construction.

The International Elementary School, completed in 1999 in Long Beach, California, provided the school district with an innovative space saving plan that allowed them to accommodate their program on a tight urban site. Classrooms are organized around a central courtyard and program areas are stacked to increase the overall compactness of the project. Stairs lead up to roof top playground, which provides students with a protected recreational environment and views to their surrounding community.

Mayne's most celebrated school project to date is the Diamond Ranch High School for the Pomona Unified School District. Completed in 1999, the high school's goals of educational flexibility and social interaction between students, teachers and administration are expressed in a thoughtful and heterogeneous design. Accommodating 1200 students, the design blurs the distinction between

Thom Mayne, 2005 Laureate (continued)

building and landscape. Two rows of fragmented forms of the structure are set tightly on either side of a “canyon” or sidewalk that cuts through the face of the hillside, making clear the vision of the campus as a reinterpreted landscape.

In Klagenfurt, Austria, a project with 250,000 square feet of commercial office space, retail space, parking and a kindergarten was completed in 2002 for the Hypo Alpe-Adria Bank Carinthia. Morphosis describes this project as follows: “The structure integrates itself into its surroundings and emerges from the ground as ‘reconfigured earth.’ Like the seismic shifting of tectonic plates, the bank headquarters itself erupts out of this pregnant, expectant form clad in sheet metal, declaring its status as a major cultural and civic institution and connecting the public forum with the street.”

Citizens of Los Angeles would recognize several of Mayne’s projects on the west side: Two office structures for Salick Healthcare within a block of each other on Beverly Boulevard. Kate Mantilini is a popular restaurant at the corner of Doheny Drive and Wilshire Boulevard. Until recently, the store front of Hennessy & Ingalls bookstore in the Third Street Mall of Santa Monica was a Morphosis creation from its very earliest days. The bookstore recently moved to another location close by. Also, until just a few months ago, the sprawling Cedars Sinai Hospital had a Comprehensive Cancer Center designed by Mayne. A multi-story addition to the main hospital building has superseded that structure. In West Hollywood, another restaurant, Angeli, has the Morphosis touch.

That touch has reached all the way to the Far East. In Seoul, Korea, a retail office building called Sun Tower was built with two owners acting in concert. The project, which includes five floors of retail (including two in the basement) and penthouse offices for an international clothing manufacturing corporation, provides an early example of Mayne’s long-standing interest in creating innovative and high performing building skins in which the arts of architecture and engineering are fully integrated. Conceptually, this project allowed Mayne to explore formal ideas that he has since further developed as they have found their way into subsequent projects including his design for a major installation at the Netherlands Architecture Institute, a move-able stage set for the Charleroi Dance Group, and the Federal Office Building in San Francisco. Also located in Asia and designed by the firm is the ASE Design and Visitors Center in Taipei, Taiwan, completed in 1997.

Among his earliest works are several innovative residential projects: 2-4-6-8, Venice III, Sedlack, and Delmer, all in Venice, California; as well as the Lawrence residence in Hermosa Beach, California. Mayne acknowledges influence for some of these projects from Robert Venturi, the late Aldo Rossi, and the late James Stirling—all past Pritzker Laureates. By the mid-90’s Mayne had completed two additional influential residential projects: the Crawford residence and the Blades residence, both located in the Santa Barbara, California area.

Over the years, Mayne has written some of the most erudite essays and articles describing not only his work, but the theories behind his designs. In addition to his experiences with SCI-Arc, he now is a tenured professor at UCLA, teaching a graduate program in architecture. In closing this interview, Mayne says, “Architecture is a long distance sport. You put your mind to it, and stay with it for 30 years, and then you’re just getting started.”

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