

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Paulo Mendes da Rocha 2006 Laureate Ceremony Speech

Thomas J. Pritzker
President
The Hyatt Foundation

Thank you Lord Palumbo. Welcome. Right Honorable Prime Minister; Mr. Governor, Mr. Mayor, members of the Pritzker Jury; Ladies and Gentlemen.

As testimony to the power of architecture to serve and unite humanity, the Pritzker Architecture Prize has been awarded in cities bursting with history and great ideas where the visions of architects are made real and people flourish in buildings both new and old. Our Prize has been awarded in such cities as Chicago, St. Petersburg, Rome, Jerusalem, Mexico City, Nara, Japan and many others throughout the world. Now we have come to one of history's greatest cities: Istanbul. We have come here, inspired by the words of the Turkish poet Orhan Veli:

I am listening to Istanbul.
My eyes are closed.
At first there blows a gentle breeze...
The grand bazaar is serene and cool.
Mosque yards are brimful of pigeons...
I am listening to Istanbul.

Tonight, as we honor our newest Pritzker Laureate, Paulo Mendes da Rocha. I want to bring him and us to this place. We have both come here from the Americas, the New World, to the Republic of Turkey, modern and robust, but also heir to ancient and great civilizations that have made us who we are; the Hittites, who laid the foundation for international treaties; Anatolia, where Hellenic, Persian, and Roman culture met; and home to Judaism and early Christianity, nearly 2000 years ago. As Constantinople, it was the Eastern capital of the Roman Empire. When Rome was sacked and defeated, this city became capital to the Byzantine Empire. It soon became home to Islam, to its great civilization, and capital of the Ottoman Empire. We gather tonight in this glorious place, the Dolmabahçe Palace. Constructed in 1856, we celebrate its 150th anniversary this year. It was the first palace built in the new capital of the Ottoman Empire, on the very spot where the foundations of Istanbul were set in ancient times some 2,700 years ago. Is there another place on the continent that has been home and teacher to so many civilizations, philosophies, sciences, and art? As the Prime Minister himself has said, "Through the ages, Istanbul has symbolized the alliance of civilizations and given proof that people of different backgrounds could live in peace and harmony." Alliance of Civilizations, what a wonderful term and in today's world, a critical concept.

How do we acknowledge and celebrate such a city? Right Honorable Prime Minister, your wife, Emine Erdogan, has given us the answer. Just a few years ago she presented our First Lady, Laura Bush, with a book of poetry, the poetry of Rumi, a poet whose philosophy you emulate. Seen hundred years ago Rumi gave expression to what this Turkish land and this city have meant to civilizations and to peoples of differing social, political, and religious ideologies, a place of pluralism and tolerance, Rumi wrote:

Come, come, whoever you are.
Wonderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your vow
a thousand times
Come, yet again, come, come.

Speech by Thomas J. Pritzker (continued)

There are many, many reasons why the Pritzker Prize is awarded here in Istanbul, but if you listen to this poem, it captures it all. We have brought to Istanbul, to this caravan of hope, a man of the New World, Paulo Mendes da Rocha of Brazil.

He is the grandson of Italian immigrants. When he began his career, Brazil was not rich. It was not yet developed as it is today. A variety of materials were scarce. It lacked highly trained construction workers. So, Mendes da Rocha created buildings of simple form, with the most basic of materials. It was called Brutalism. And yet, his architecture was anything but brutal. Using the most basic available materials, he brought to them the engineering sciences so that Brutalism, which in other places was overbearing and domineering, took another form in his art. His name, da Rocha, means 'rock'. And he has caressed the hardest of materials into the warmest of habitats. As one scholar has observed, the ultimate test of a design is its social worth. If that has been met, then it should be reflected in its material character. Mendes da Rocha practices truth in materials. This can be seen most vividly in his use of concrete. Instead of camouflaging the materials, he uses them in the most expressive ways. Despite its power, his greatest structures seem to hover in mid-air. His architecture is huge and yet awe-inspiring. His curved, steel canopy that hovers over the Plaza in the center of São Paulo appears to float in air. As one architectural critic has written, "it is huge, it is massive, it is strong. Yet, it delicately is placed above this plaza informing that balance between function and poetry, the balance between intelligence and creativity." As Karen Stein, one of our jurors, explained: "Da Rocha is a generous artist who works with a modest palette. In his work there is no artifice, no accessory. He is an architect's architect, because his genius, as applied to the most elemental of materials, has given them a lightness that serves humanity. Early in his career, he placed emphasis on the ethical dimension in his work. He continues to be admired for his sense of responsibility to the residents of his buildings and to the society and community in which they stand. He delights in bringing huge structures to plazas, city centers, stadiums, and with a devotion to humanity he imbues them with a sense of lightness and wonder as they seem to play with the wind itself and to undulate with the landscape and orbit with the planet.

Tonight's Laureate has given to Brazil and to the world more than drawings and plans, more than buildings and structures; more than cities revitalized by the new ways in which people and traffic move about because of his structures. He is a practitioner of the noblest of professions. He is a teacher. He has served as professor at the School of Architecture at the University of São Paulo. He retired from teaching in 1998; and, he remains a faithful mentor to students and colleagues alike.

Ladies and gentlemen, here in Istanbul by the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus on this very bridge between East and West, the place in which the architecture of Islam was brought to Europe and the architecture of Greece and Rome was brought to Asia, we honor a man of Brazil who has risen to the challenges of serving humanity in a developing economy. Our laureate's architecture celebrates his homeland Brazil, and tonight the world celebrates him. Paulo Mendes da Rocha will you please come forward to receive the 2006 Pritzker Architecture Prize.

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