

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Jean Nouvel 2008 Laureate Ceremony Speech

The Lord Palumbo

Chairman of the Jury
The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Monday, the second of June 2008 will be remembered as a major landmark event in the annals of the Pritzker Prize for Architecture, whose 30th Anniversary we celebrate this evening with the Award of this year's Prize to Jean Nouvel, against the historic and stunningly beautiful backdrop of the Library of Congress in this great nation's capital City. In itself, this is a signal tribute to the Pritzker family and the Prize; and a measure of the esteem in which they are held. The Pritzker, as it is universally and affectionately known, was the brainchild of Cindy Pritzker, and her late husband, Jay, to whom the architectural community the world over owes a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid, as it does to Cindy's son, Tom, who assumed his late father's mantle, with such distinction, at all times, and in all places.

Now then, many years ago, a grand Panjandrum of the British Broadcasting Corporation, Stephen Hearst, undertook a lecture tour of the United States; and upon his return to London, he was asked to identify, in a single sentence—which is a tough assignment—his overriding impression of America. After a pause, he replied 'It is the vitality of a nation, sparking across a country, like unearthed electric current'. The same words might be used to describe Jean Nouvel, for he is, quite simply, a force of nature, a phenomenon, as dazzling, as unpredictable, and as impossible to tether, as a whirlwind!

As a child, he demonstrated his independence of mind, his determination, resourcefulness and ingenuity, by running the gauntlet of his parents strict veto on the reading of comic books, and attending the local movie house in Sarlat in south-western France, where they lived, by smuggling the former into the house, and then hiding them under his bed; and by sneaking into the latter just after the film had begun, and leaving just before it finished! Who knows what influences were at play with this early staple diet of banned substances; or what impact they made on an imagination that was able, subsequently, to juggle many disparate strands of the creative processes of our times, by incorporating into his architecture such diverse and unlikely elements as medical research, television, cinema, advertising, shoes, and arms—as in armaments. We may guess, but we will never know for certain, the answers to these questions.

Two facts, however, are beyond dispute: The first is that the inspiration of his restless, inventive, and endlessly curious mind, knows no bounds: The second, that Jean Nouvel is a singular, highly unconventional, free spirit, who is fascinated by experimentation, and the challenge presented by dogma and accepted norms, which bring him to places that other architects do not visit.

Jean Nouvel summarized his philosophy, and his particular creative process in a remarkable interview published in 1984 in the magazine *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. This is an excerpt of what he said.

"One must be talkative, solitary, and a good sleeper, to create architecture. I begin with the dream. My preferred workplace—the most efficient one—is the bed. There, the jumble of images that I have accumulated, is constantly subjected to a conscious, or unconscious, sorting process. I am always gathering images: My work as an architect will never leave me in peace. I try to detach myself—to talk about other things, to go to a film, to read a book, to listen to my friends talking about their interests—but soon, I am trapped by the atmosphere of the film set, the theme of the book, or my friends ideas, and immediately start to envisage the transposition into architecture. I lie awake in bed, dreaming drawing in the dark, a spectator of the film in my mind. This is the ideal moment for me to let my imagination run riot. I gather together my creative instincts, and off we go. Every now and then, a chord is struck, and suggestions come bubbling forth, most are either silly, unrealistic, or obscene: But as no one else shares my architectural contemplations, I pay attention, and occasionally, I follow my confidant's counsel.'

Speech by The Lord Palumbo (continued)

With Jean Nouvel, though, one rule is sacrosanct: He is always involved with the present rather than the past. His architecture is not aligned with the continuity of historical reference. 'I am not a 'paper' architect' he has said, 'I mistrust drawings as fixing things too early in the creative process, whilst words liberate'. And again, 'I am interested in glass, projected images, transparency, and the opaque. I think that the colored lights and signs of commercial streets are one of the most astonishing architectural spectacles. Every image makes an impression on my brain in the photographic sense of the term. On the basis of this material, I can begin to imagine. I can do things now I could not have dreamed of doing 30 years ago. For that reason, I am not going to create something using things that were themselves invented 30 years ago'.

Jean Nouvel now has more than 200 buildings the world over to his credit. Arguably, one of the most famous, because it was the first to bring him to the forefront of public acclaim, is the Institut du Monde Arabe, built in Paris in 1987. It was an instant success, in the manner of the Centre Pompidou in Paris by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano a few years earlier; or of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, a few years later. Now, stories illustrating populist reaction to a particular building, new, or old, have always been of interest to me. The example that I have chosen for this evening, partly, I must confess, in deference to Jean Nouvel, took place not, as you might suppose, in the 20th, or the 21st century, nor even in the 19th, but at the very end of the 18th, two hundred and eleven years ago, in 1797, which was, of course, the year that Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt: And if you will, I would like you to imagine in your mind's eye, the following scene. A group of people are standing outside the great Temple of Karnak at dawn. Those with the keenest eyesight are just able to detect a small puff of dust on the horizon. After a while, the puff of dust turns into a plume, and then a cloud: Eventually it becomes apparent that a large column of French foot soldiers, led by a general on a brightly caparisoned horse, are marching purposefully along the bank of the Nile in the early morning light, in order to avoid the heat of the day. At last, the column reaches Karnak; and we are told from contemporary reports that without awaiting orders from their officers, the men—not a curator, an art-historian, an artist, or a critic amongst them as far as we know!—flung down their arms, with one accord, cheering and applauding the architecture before them, to the sound of fife and drum! And so it was with the Institut du Monde Arabe in the very different context and circumstances of 1987; and so it remains today!

Jean Nouvel's Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art in Paris in 1994; his Cultural and Convention Centre in Lucerne, Switzerland in 2000; his Aqbar Tower building in Barcelona, Spain in 2005; his Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota, one year later in 2006; and his recently completed Branly Museum in Paris, in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, together with a host of other buildings—commercial, domestic, cultural and judicial—many of them iconic, are testimony to the fact that his genius is burning as bright as ever.

I am indebted to my good friend, Rolf Fehlbaum, a member of our distinguished Jury, for drawing to my attention an essay written by the much loved, and sorely missed Isaiah Berlin, entitled 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', in which he cites the dictum of the Greek poet Archilodus, 'The Fox knows many things, but the Hedgehog knows one big thing', and uses these words to mark a major difference that divides writers and thinkers. 'For there exists', he says 'a great chasm between those who relate everything to a single, central vision, a single, universal, organizing principle, in terms of which alone, all that they are, and say, has significance: And, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated, and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle. These last lead lives, perform acts, and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal: Their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences, without seeking to fit them into any one unitary inner vision. The first kind of intellectual and artistic personality belongs to the hedgehogs, the second to the foxes; and we may say that Dante belongs to the first category, Shakespeare to the second; Plato, Lucretius, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Proust, are hedgehogs; whilst Herodotus, Aristotle, Montaigne, Erasmus, Moliere Goethe, Pushkin, Balzac, and Joyce, are foxes'.

Speech by The Lord Palumbo (continued)

As a fox, Jean Nouvel is interested in many things, and is influenced by different disciplines. His sense of being a contemporary, and of being aware of all emerging phenomena, is typical of a fox. As a fox, he has no defined style as every task demands a different strategy; for example a Palais de Justice is one of stern authority, as opposed to an airy building for emerging art like the Cartier Foundation. And it is typical of a fox that he is some sort of magician who works with illusion.

What will be of interest to future historians of architecture? Certainly the masterworks of the hedgehogs like Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Alvar Aalto, or Louis Kahn: But on the other hand, they will be excited by foxes like Le Corbusier, and Jean Nouvel, who push the envelope, try many things, take risks, occasionally fail, but come back with new ideas, and constantly enlarge the vocabulary of architecture.

For his brilliance and independence of mind and spirit: For his courage and perseverance, often in the face of adversity: For his creation of a fresh understanding, and a new beginning to the complexities and the wonderment of the noble art of architecture, Jean Nouvel stands in the Pantheon of Honour of contemporary architects, as a model, and as a beacon, whom we are proud and privileged to salute as an outstanding Laureate of the 2008 Award of the Pritzker Prize for Architecture.

It is my particular pleasure to invite Mr Tom Pritzker to speak, after which he will present to Jean Nouvel, on behalf of the Hyatt Foundation, the 2008 Award of the Pritzker Prize for Architecture.

©The Hyatt Foundation / The Pritzker Architecture Prize

For more information, please contact:

Edward Lifson
Director of Communications
The Pritzker Architecture Prize
edwardlifson@pritzkerprize.com
+1 312 919 1312