

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Zaha Hadid 2004 Laureate Acceptance Speech

Dear Cindy Pritzker, Tom Pritzker and Pritzker Family, dear members of the jury, friends and colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, this is a great honor, and to be honest ... it is a delicious pleasure to receive this very special award.

We all have to thank the Pritzkers for promoting innovative architecture in this special way.

When I met Jay and Cindy Pritzker with the Palumbos at Mies's Farnsworth House seven years ago I had no idea that I myself would one day be able to enjoy their generous sponsorship of architecture.

The honor of this prize comes at a very busy time, and affords me a welcome break for reflection.

I would like to take this moment as an opportunity—I guess long overdue—to thank my family, friends, teachers, students, collaborators and clients—who supported me for so many years, who share my passion for architecture, and who continue to encourage me in my ambitions. Thank you all—I really appreciate this.

There are some names I should mention in particular: Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis have been crucial as my teachers. Their understanding and enthusiasm for architecture first ignited my ambition and their encouragement taught me to trust even my strangest intuitions.

The late Alvin Boyarsky—the fantastic chairman of the Architectural Association during my student years and years as teacher—offered me my first platform to expose my ideas. He cut a clearing into the professional world of architecture—to erect a platform for experimentation.

The late Peter Rice deserves acknowledgement as a brilliant engineer who gave me his weighty support and encouragement early on, at a time when my work seemed difficult to build.

I would like to thank Rolf Fehlbaum for his commitment and faith as the client who granted me the time and artistic freedom to cast my vision of space into concrete for the first time.

Naturally my oeuvre is the work of many talents and many more hard working hands.

As the work expands one of the prime tasks is to forge a group of inspired collaborators: Michael Wolfson and Brian Ma Siy at the beginning, Markus Dochantschi, as well. Currently my team leaders include among others: Graham Modlen, Woody Yao, Jim Heverin, Christos Passas, Stephane Hof, Sarah Klomps, Gianluca Racana, Paola Cattarin, Ken Bostock and Jan Hübener.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the tremendous contribution of Patrik Schumacher. As a congenial collaborator for many years and years to come, he brings a substantial influence to the work. There are many more people who have a share in the efforts which have been awarded with this great prize. Many of those are here today. Thank you all!

Before I outline my current ambitions, I would like to reflect upon some formative influences in the development of my career. The first thing I might mention is my secular modern upbringing in Iraq. I have to thank my parents for their enlightened open-mindedness and selfless support.

As in so many places in the developing world at the time there was an unbroken belief in progress and a great sense of optimism about the potential of constructing a better world. Although the historical momentum of this period could not be sustained, I never lost this underlying sense of optimism.

It seemed my elder brothers shared this spirit. I wonder which clues inspired them when they suggested that I should become Iraq's first woman astronaut, or study architecture in Russia.

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The spirit of adventure to embrace the new and the incredible belief in the power of invention indeed attracted me to the Russian Avant-Garde. This was when I joined Rem and Elia's studio at the AA in London in the mid-seventies.

Studying the revolutionary Russian work I realized how Modern architecture built upon the breakthrough achieved by abstract art as the conquest of a previously unimaginable realm of creative freedom. Art used to be re-presentation rather than creation. Abstraction opened the possibility of unfettered invention.

The engagement with Malevitch and El Lissitzky in my early work at the AA allowed me to relive this exhilarating historical moment. It was important to go back to this original fountain of energy that had inspired modern architecture. In fact, here was an unbelievable enthusiasm and an unexpected diversity of approaches. (I very much hope that these treasures of the early avant-garde architecture can survive the current surge of economic expansion we are witnessing in Russia today.)

One concrete result of my fascination with Malevitch in particular was that I took up painting as a design tool. This medium became my first domain of spatial invention. I felt limited by the poverty of the traditional system of drawing in architecture and was searching for new means of representation.

The obsessive use of isometric and perspective projection led to the idea that space itself might be warped and distorted to gain in dynamism and complexity without losing its coherence and continuity. Despite its abstractness—this work was always aimed at architectural reality and real life.

One of the tasks I set for myself was the continuation of the unfinished project of modernism, in the experimental spirit of the early avant-garde—radicalizing some of its compositional techniques like fragmentation and layering.

The meaning of fragmentation is to open the hermetic volumes, to offer porosity instead of fortification.

I have always been concerned with the animation of the ground condition. The ground has the highest urban potential and has been neglected by traditional architecture. The ground plane should open up and multiply. I use the concept of artificial landscape and topography as a means to impregnate the ground with activities without losing the fluidity and seamlessness of the urban geometry. Ultimately architecture is all about the creation of pleasant and stimulating settings for all aspects of social life. However, contemporary society is not standing still. Spatial arrangements evolve with the patterns of life.

As Mies van der Rohe said: "Architecture is the will of an epoch, living, changing, new." I think what is new in our epoch is a new level of social complexity. There are no simple formulae anymore. No global solutions and little repetition.

I believe that the complexities and the dynamism of contemporary life cannot be cast into the simple platonic forms provided by the classical canon, nor does the modern style afford enough means of articulation. We have to deal with social diagrams that are more complex and layered when compared with the social programs of the early modern period.

My work therefore has been concerned with the expansion of the compositional repertoire available to urbanists and designers to cope with this increase in complexity. This includes the attempt to organize and express dynamic processes within a spatial and tectonic construct.

This ambition operates on many scales: from the organization of whole urban fields, via various building scales, down to the interior spaces.

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The initial sense of abstractness and strangeness is unavoidable and not a sign of personal willfulness. My primary concern has always been with organization rather than with expression.

At the same time as a restless society pushes architecture by posing a new set of characteristic problems, the new digital design tools pull architecture into an uncharted territory of opportunity.

This is one of my current preoccupations: the development of an organic language of architecture, based on these new tools, which allow us to integrate highly complex forms into a fluid and seamless whole.

The exciting thing is that these ambitions have since moved from the canvas onto various construction sites. And I hope this milestone of the Pritzker Prize will give me a further push in this direction.

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