

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Robert Venturi 1991 Laureate Acceptance Speech

My thanks to Jay Pritzker for his most gracious and generous introduction this evening.

My thanks also to President Salinas de Gortari and those officials of the government of Mexico, young and creative, who were our gracious hosts today, and to Ricardo Legorreta for his kindness to me, and from all of us here our gratitude to him for the restoration of this Palacio de Iturbide with its exquisite aesthetic, bold and delicate at once.

Frank Lloyd Wright said architects should design from the inside out. But we now accept within our more complex view of things, as we acknowledge context as an important determinant of design, that we design from the inside out and the outside in, and—as I said a long time ago—this act can create valid tensions where the wall, the line of change between inside and out, is acknowledged to become a spatial record—in the end, an essential architectural event.

And as a building is designed from the inside out and the outside in, so, one can say, is an architect designed in that way—that is, his own development as an artist can work through his development inside—through his intuition, ordered by means of analysis and discipline, but also through his development outside, via the influence of persons and places. As I refer to persons and places I borrow from George Santayana's title of his biographical essays, but I shall include as well in this description of an architect's development from without, persons, places and institutions.

At this moment I feel a special obligation to acknowledge the need—the need, psychological and material—for support, for appreciation and encouragement—this need, as significant for artists as for children in their development. No matter how sublime your intuition as an artist might be, and how disciplined and acute your own cultivation of that intuition inside, your need for appreciation and recognition from the outside is crucial: as growing children need loving parents and supportive home and school environments, so do artists need their supporters—trusting patrons and encouraging mentors, the latter sometimes in the historical form of the work of artists of the past.

And so I appropriately and sincerely express at this moment my gratitude to the sponsors of the Pritzker Prize as persons, and to The Hyatt Foundation as institution, for their acknowledgement of good design in architecture and their support, via recognition of architects—and then to the selection committee of the Pritzker Prize that is particularly and signally honoring me today. But I like to acknowledge here as well, as I've said, those persons, places, and institutions who and which, very simply, have meant much to me as a growing artist—and I shall focus on them as well at this moment.

I trust, as I satisfy this need to enumerate particular persons, places, and institutions, that I shall appear not egotistical, but rather the opposite in emphasizing my indebtedness to outside influences; also as I speak I might enlighten younger architects via the example of my particular experiences as these younger architects choose paths of their own as they work.

First—chronologically and perhaps substantively—come my parents without whose intellect, integrity, aesthetic sense, and love I would not have become me, my parents who supplied me with lots of blocks to build with when I was little, and with whom I lived among beautiful objects and good books. And with whom I could share their love of architecture. I remember vividly on one of my first trips to New York City—maybe I was 10 years old—my father's impulsively instructing the cab driver to pull over and wait as we approached the old Penn station on Seventh Avenue, and then conducting me down the gallery that overlooked the great hall based on the Baths of Caracalla. I shall never forget the breath-taking revelation of that monumental civic space bathed in ambient light from the clerestories above. And then my mother, whose sound but unorthodox positions, socialist and pacifist, worked to prepare me to feel almost all right as an outsider. And again my father through whose hard work I was left a modest inheritance that allowed me to be braver and more independent as a young thinking architect.

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Princeton University where as an undergraduate in a beautiful environment I walked on air as I could discover multitudes of things within many disciplines hitherto not dreamt of in my philosophy; where Jean Labatut whose vivid and creative historical analogies in his drafting room critiques worked to enrich and expand my outlook; where Donald Drew Egbert, who later became my closest mentor, described the glories of Modern architecture, but always within the context of history, history employed to discover and enlighten, never to justify or promote—history that implicitly acknowledged architectural Modernism as a valid direction for that time, but a Modernism we students could evolve out of—not a modernism as an end of history, as an ideology: at Princeton I was truly a student and not a seminarian—one who receives the word that was to be universally disseminated. At Princeton we students of architecture were encouraged to go beyond.

Fellow students in that college community, especially my roommate, Everett de Golyer who revealed to me by his example the attributes of grace, wit, and understanding—and whose widow, my friend Helen de Golyer, it moves me to say is here tonight.

Rome, as I first saw that city that Sunday in August, 1948, as I walked on air—this time in a place rather than an institution -discovering unimagined pedestrian spaces and richness of forms bathed in the “golden air of Rome.”

The American Academy in Rome, as a Fellow where within its community, headed by its easy and supportive hosts, the director and his spouse, Laurance and Isabel Roberts, and by means of its location, I might exist every day in architectural heaven, and learn new lessons via Michelangelo, Borromini, Brasini, hilltowns, and other historical mentors and places, and where I discovered the validity of Mannerism in art for our time, and from whose perspective as an expatriate I could better perceive my own country and the genius of its everyday phenomena, to see the Piazza Navona and Main Street.

Louis Kahn, profound teacher of mine, and ultimately, in some ways, as all teachers become, a student of mine—I trust now I can acknowledge how my son informs me through his sensibility as I simultaneously guide him.

Philip Finkelpearl, college friend and best friend, who as dedicated scholar and born teacher appreciated me all along and instructed me in mannerism as a quality in arts other than architecture and as a dimension of criticism.

Revelations via the enigmatic architecture of Frank Furness, where I learned among other things the vivid lesson you can change your mind in matters of taste.

Vincent Scully, friend, scholar, critic, and ultimately artist who appreciated that first book and our work when to others in the establishment I was either out or outre.

My students over the years at Penn and Yale, whom I learned from, and for whom I wrote *Complexity and Contradiction*, somewhat as a subversive version of my course in theories of architecture.

Our office, composed of the most committed and gifted architects in the world who make our architecture truly collaborative and what it is.

Very significantly, our clients, of course, especially our understanding house clients in the early days who allowed us to work and therefore to be, including Peter and Sandy Brant for whom we designed three houses that were built, and our early institutional clients who were understanding and brave, like Richard Spear and Ellen Johnson at Oberlin College, and Sydney and Frances Lewis of Best Products who combine support and grace in their patronage and allowed us to test our ideas about the environment of commercial sprawl.

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Princeton again, this time not as incubator for and liberator of an eager artist-student, but via the trustees of that institution as ideal client- patron who have awarded us grand opportunities to work in many ways over many years at another beloved place for me, the Princeton campus.

And William Bowen and Neil Rudenstine, as, respectively, recent President and recent Provost of Princeton, who have been the Lorenzo de Medicis of our office as patrons who are full of grace—discerning and appreciative.

Those professional critics and editors who understand us rather than exploit us and thereby encourage us; and even those British critics who have amused us over the years with their literate venom—calling the facade of the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery, “Corinthian rash,” or “picturesque mediocre slime,” or “another vulgar American piece of Postmodern Mannerist pastiche”—the latter admirable for its rhythmic alliteration.

And those younger architects and critics who have learned from us and then gone beyond: what greater satisfaction can we attain than becoming not old fogies in their eyes? I mention the architect, Frederic Schwartz, and the historian and critic, Sylvia Lavin, who are here tonight.

British architecture, especially within its classical tradition, where the power and significance of its order exists not to be slavishly obeyed and consistently reapplied as manifestation of universality and timelessness, but rather works to evolve, to distort, as manifestations of its strength, for combining the timeless and the timely—as in the inspiring works of Smithson, Tones, Wren, Vanbrugh, Hawksmoor, Adam, Soane, Greek Thomson, Mackintosh, Webb, Lutyens.

Las Vegas, which I learned from via the perspective of Rome and through the eyes of Denise Scott Brown, where we could discover the validity and appreciate the vitality of the commercial strip and of urban sprawl, of the commercial sign whose scale accommodates to the moving car and whose symbolism illuminates an iconography of our time. And where we thereby could acknowledge the elements of symbol and mass culture as vital to architecture, and the genius of the everyday, and the commercial vernacular as inspirational as was the industrial vernacular in the early days of Modernism.

Beethoven as conducted by Toscanini, with ease and control —another phrase of Santayana’s which he attributed to an able dancer—a Beethoven, the classicist, interpreted not through hindsight as a Romantic composer, whose expression derives not from the conductor but from the music, and whose tension derives from the balance between the lyrical and the dissonant.

The traditional architecture of Kyoto as it reveals the elemental quality of architecture as shelter, as sublime background for the complexity and richness of life and its paraphernalia, which themselves evolve rich varieties of scales and patterns. And Tokyo, the city of today, as perhaps a valid manifestation of Deconstructionism, certainly of accepting juxtapositions of diverse cultures and taste cultures of varying scales ambiguously reflecting past urban configurations and boldly promoting present-day tours de force—with elan, joie de vivre, eu d’esprit, with a panache, that is incroyable. (French words seem appropriate for some reason.)

Akio Izutsu, as our hospitable friend and reticent instructor, introducing us to the architecture and civilization of Kyoto in a way that made our first day there the equivalent of that in Rome in its revelations.

And last, you will notice during this loosely chronological description I have used more and more the first person plural, that is, ‘we’—meaning Denise and I. All my experience representing appreciation, support, and learning from, would have been less than half as rich -without my partnership with my fellow artist, Denise Scott Brown. There would be significantly less dimension within the scope and quality of the work this award is acknowledging today—including dimensions theoretical, philosophical and perceptive, especially social and urban, pertaining to the vernacular, to mass culture, from

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decorative to regional design—and in the quality of our design where Denise’s input, creative and critical, is crucial.

At another level of detail, I could include other friends and clients who have been supportive, but in the interest of not going on and on, I shall cease. But also, I trust, this country, Mexico, with its layers of architectural splendor and its promise of social and economic progress today, will become a place significant for me in my growth as an architect.

I must end this celebration of an artist’s, or of these artists’ range of supporters, with my thanks again for this grand token of appreciation, the Pritzker Prize, and for these persons and places without which I, or we, could not have been real artists—artists whose innate sensibility inside has had to be heeded and exercised -within a context, stimulating, and civilized: Hurrah for support and self-reliance.

Now I trust this biographical enumeration has not turned out egocentric—or folksy—but I have not felt like pontificating about architecture on this occasion—or risking doing that—but rather like expressing gratitude as an artist who monitors his own intuitions, who trusts and evaluates his own sensibility, hunches, impulses, feelings, and thinks not necessarily the way he is supposed to, on the inside—while acknowledging at the same time the significance of these persons, places and institutions, on the outside.

Bernard Shaw’s Eliza Doolittle said: “To be a lady I must be treated like a lady.” All I’ve been saying is the same goes for artists, and thank you for treating me like an artist.

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