

Renzo Piano 1998 Laureate Essay

The Architecture of Renzo Piano—A Triumph of Continuing Creativity

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It was modern architecture itself that was honored at the White House in Washington, D.C. on June 17, 1998. The twentieth anniversary of the Pritzker Prize and the presentation of the prestigious award to Renzo Piano made for an extraordinary event. Piano's quiet character and almost solemn, bearded appearance brought an atmosphere of serious, contemporary creativity to the glamorous event. The great gardens and the classical salons of the White House were filled with the flower of the world's architectural talent including the majority of the laureates of the previous twenty years. But perhaps the most significant aspect of the splendid event was the opportunity it gave for an overview of the recent past of architecture at the very heart of the capital of the world's most powerful country. It was rather as though King Louis XIV had invited all the greatest creative architects of the day to a grand dinner at Versailles. In Imperial Washington the entire globe gathered to pay tribute to the very art of architecture itself.

Renzo Piano was not overwhelmed by the brilliance of the occasion, on the contrary he seized his opportunity to tell the world about the nature of his work. In his own words, he firmly explained that architecture is a serious business being both art and a service. Those are perhaps two of the best words to describe Renzo Piano's work. He was honored by the Pritzker jury because his work has achieved a balance between art and function. It has also always succeeded in being humane, intelligent and resourceful.

Building is in Piano's blood. He is the true scion of a male line of builders his grandfather, father and brother were all involved in construction as were his four uncles. He is also Italian—a member of that nation that brought Western architecture to utter maturity. As Piano said at the White House any architect born in Italy is literally, "swimming in tradition." But there was never any question of Piano drowning—he is after all a good and practical Genoese sailor) but he is as interested in invention as in observing architectural convention.

Piano's Italian roots are very key in understanding his work. In Italy it is easier than in many countries for architects and engineers to be closely involved in the construction process and to become developers. His family in Genoa were constructors and his decision to become an architect and to train professionally in Milan could have separated him from the daily realities of construction. In fact there was no chance of that because the joy of building had been bred into him from childhood. Piano still talks warmly of his youthful visits to his father's building sites where he saw the entire process of building as something of a miraculous event. He was born in 1937 and so his formative years were spent seeing a country reconstruct itself after the war. It was not just the buildings that were being replaced or renewed it was, what Renzo Piano calls "the re-establishment of a normal life."

I think that this idea of the normal is a very important one in relation to Piano's career. He has been original but not revolutionary. His design solutions are the result of analysis and research and are the best, practical answers to specific problems. There is a sense in all his works of a problem solved — sometimes in a way that is aesthetically thrilling or even strange- but always you know that he just wants to make the building work as well as it possibly can. He may try an experiment to solve the problem but he will not build anything that is not an intelligent solution.

Renzo Piano became famous at a relatively young age for an architect. He was only 35 when he won, with Richard Rogers, the competition in 1971 to build the Pompidou centre in Paris. One of his original ideas for the Centre had been to build a giant inverted pyramid but his clear belief in functionality and

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logic led him and Rogers to opt for the clarity of the giant rectangle of a city block. The Pompidou has been very controversial but it has become during its lifetime exactly what Piano and Rogers wanted it to be — “a joyful urban machine.” Interestingly Piano gets very annoyed if the Pompidou Centre is described as High Tech. Instead he sees it as a parody of the technological obsessions of our times. One of the most important results of the winning of the competition was the meeting between Renzo Piano and the engineer Peter Rice of Ove Arup and Partners. There was instant rapport between this brilliantly inventive British engineer and the young Italian architect, and Peter Rice was to be Piano’s engineer until his premature death in 1992.

There was to be a curious time after the Pompidou Centre opened in 1977. Piano felt a sense of exhaustion and fatigue. It had been an enormous lesson in both architecture and life and a triumph for teamwork and constructional innovation. It must have seemed to the young architect that this would never be repeated. In some ways he would have been right. He was never to build with Richard Rogers again and he was to abandon the kind of colourful anarchy of the sixties that infused the Pompidou.

There is no doubt that the next building that, chronologically, Piano was to build for the arts was to be altogether more serious and more modern than Paris’s Pompidou. The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas is undoubtedly one of the best and most original museum buildings in America. It owes its success to the client, the late Mme. Dominique de Menil’s intense involvement in the design of the setting for her collections and her successful rapport with her architect. It also, in my view, demonstrates the essence of what Piano is about. He was asked to design a museum in a low scale residential area in Houston that is not monumental and yet houses some of the finest works of art in the world. He was asked to avoid the neutrality of the usual modern gallery spaces. He was asked to provide changing “natural” light while ensuring that the works of art were appropriately protected, secure and conserved. His response was, with his engineer, Peter Rice to solve these challenges in such away that he designed a unique, beautiful and restrained museum. The lightweight concrete “leaves” that form the roof were designed to divert the Texan sun, the timber clad walls are practical in cooling the interior while being contextual with the surrounding clapboard houses. He has varied the finishes and scale of the galleries in such a way that it is possible to see “primitive” art against the planted courts and large scale abstract paintings in big cool spaces. But the most memorable element of this Texan treasure house is the light. And it is light that always fascinates Piano. It is what he calls “an element of construction that is not touchable,” and yet it is what he uses best, as a core component of his architecture.

The Menil collections have gone on growing since the Houston museum opened in 1986 and Piano completed as recently as 1995 a special small pavilion to house the collection of subtle drawings and paintings by Cy Twombly. This simple, concretefaced square set of top-lit galleries stands like a modest temple at the foot of the Parthenon of the main museum. The low light levels within make a calm and composed setting and an elegant one.

Renzo Piano himself is a far cry from the dogmatic architects of early modernism. He is keen to explain how buildings are made and to convey to others the thrill he felt when he spent time as a child on the building site. In the late seventies he both made television programmes and conducted public participation town planning exercises that were highly successful and enjoyable. There is never any question of mere lip-service—Piano means it when he says that the great themes for an architect today are: 1. the quality of the domestic environment 2. the rehabilitation of derelict areas of cities and 3. especially in Europe—the reclamation of historic buildings.

In his television series he revealed a very romantic side of his nature when he spoke of the incredible construction feats achieved in the building of the medieval cathedrals. Using models he showed the wonders of both medieval fabrication and celebrated the involvement of the whole community in the creation of the giant works of art and praise.

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Giant buildings are not strange today to Renzo Piano—the scale of his achievement by the Millennium will be extraordinary. The Kansai Airport at Osaka, Japan; the Padre Pio Pilgrimage church at Foggia, Italy; the reconstruction of the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, Germany; the National Centre for Science and Technology in Amsterdam, Holland; the auditorium in Rome, Italy; the two hundred metre tower for Sydney, Australia. These are only the highlights, and each one is of great importance. But I have always felt that what makes Piano unique is that he and his teams of collaborators in Genoa or Paris working in the Renzo Piano Building Workshop are as inspired, and sometimes more so, by the special problems of unique and small projects. From the work that goes into these “seeds” grow the skills and innovative ideas that flower and develop on a larger scale. These workshops are remarkable places—democratic, collaborative and inspiring.

At Punta Nave on the Ligurian coast looking across to the active sea lanes of the harbour at Genoa Piano has designed and built his own workshop in collaboration with UNESCO. Following on from researches into the properties of plant fibres for architecture that he began in Senegal, Piano and his brother Ermanno’s firm collaborated with UNESCO to build a plant research station and the workshop on the steep cliff between the mountains and the sea. Looking like a giant glass butterfly that has delicately landed on the cliff—this is the terraced studio that is part of the land and the sea. UNESCO scientists are growing bamboo and agave and cane on the ancient man made terrain and every one working in the studio is close to greenery and conscious, because of the glass and louvre roofs, of the changing quality of natural light. Although the studio environment is experimental it is also the safe harbour to which the adventurous architects and engineers return from their world-wide wanderings. Because of the continual advances in the technology of communication the workshop is in touch with the world. What Piano has called “technological ubiquity” makes the world smaller and simultaneously allows the possibilities of working close to nature.

It was from this cliff side in Italy that one of the workshop’s most remarkable creations was designed for a site on the other side of the world. The workshop won an international competition in 1991 to design the Tjibaou Cultural Center in Noumea—a Pacific island territory in New Caledonia. These French colonies are peacefully gaining independence and the French government is building this centre named after the late Jean Marie Tjibaou. To record and exhibit the culture of the Kanak peoples. The island site is incredibly beautiful—pine covered hillsides on Pacific lagoons at the well named Magenta Bay. The winning design is a series of ten timber huts arranged in village groupings among the pines. The tall conical huts are completely traditional in shape—but they are built in a contemporary way. They are tall timber structures that use the vernacular ways of climate control—the Pacific breezes blow through adjustable skylights and making a strange and authentic sound. Piano has captured the wind as well as the light of the Pacific.

There was a real danger that a western architect could have presented a scheme that was a kitsch rendering of traditional styles. Piano and his colleagues were more than aware of this possible pitfall and it is a tribute to their approach that their design appears indigenous while being contemporary. This unique project is a pure and lovely demonstration of the skills of Piano and his workshops. The center is of such delicacy and tactful beauty that the vulnerable islands are genuinely enhanced by its presence. The care that has been taken is infinite and these ten huts grouped among the pine trees are possibly Piano’s most typical and successful buildings. They demonstrate his approach—he won the competition because he did not arrive in the islands with any luggage—just the skills to create buildings that learn from their surroundings.

Another example of the unique way of working that has been developed by the workshop is the new great church and pilgrimage centre near Foggia in Puglia, Italy that will commemorate the sacred life of the Capuchin monk, Padre Pio. Initially Piano was reluctant to accept this commission but was persuaded by the daily fax messages from the priests urging him with Biblical quotations. The result

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of these Divine urgings has been a building that returns to the roots of stone construction and will centre on a domed church supported on a fifty metre stone arch, which is the longest supporting span ever built from stone. The roof and the pavements will also be made of stone so that the entire building will seem to be part of the landscape. There is something very moving about the idea of a highly contemporary architect being asked to design for a new church for the Millennium that commemorates the life of a monk marked by the stigmata of Christ, who is about to be canonised as a twentieth century saint. To mark this Renzo Piano returns to his enthusiasm for the Gothic—not in this case just as a teacher but as a constructor and what he has said is his perpetual desire to find out “what can be done with stone today”.

This curiosity to extend materials and engineering solutions to their practical limits is the driving force of his workshops. But this is not done for any wish merely to demonstrate virtuosity but as a continuing exercise in creativity. Piano rises to any challenge in a positive way. When he was taken to see the site of the new Kansai airport in Japan—he was not fazed by the fact that to get there he had to taken out in a boat from Osaka harbor. When it was explained to him that there was no site and that an artificial island was to be made on piles driven into the seabed he was not disturbed. Instead he reacted in a very “Piano way.” He seems to find it easy to transfer his thoughts into the heart of the problem. In this case he became a plane and his first drawing was of a large glider landing neatly on the new island. This aeroplane became the airport. The fuselage is the main hall and the wings are stretched out to welcome the landing aircraft and their passengers. It is a brilliant design coup that has produced one of the largest buildings ever constructed. It was the last structure to be engineered by Renzo Piano’s great collaborator—sadly he did not live to see it completed and opened in 1994.

In Berlin the challenges are not simply ones of scale and size but also of time. Time is what makes cities what they are—products of growth and decay, peace and war, love and hate. All of these emotions and qualities are magnified a thousandfold in Berlin as it prepares to become the new capital of a united Germany. Piano has only five years (started in 1996) to build a huge quarter of the city around the Potsdamer Platz. Some six hundred thousand square metres of land are involved and on completion some forty thousand people will be working and living there. A spherical Imax cinema will loom over the development like a great glass moon but the key to the success of such a large-scale development in the new square between Alte Potsdammerstrasse and the Kulturforum. A crescent of canal side buildings will culminate in the high tower for Daimler Benz clad in terra cotta—a material that Renzo Piano has been reviving with considerable success and which will be widely used as a unifying element throughout the Potsdamer Platz project.

The remarkable scope of Piano’s work makes him a truly international architect. Is it possible to detect some unity in the diversity of his work? The jury of the Pritzker Prize commended him for his, “restlessness and inventiveness” and for his “searching for new dimensions and his versatility”. They also appreciated the rare synthesis in all his work of art and engineering. There is no doubt that it is the maturing of that synthesis that makes him a renaissance character in our time. In the journey from the Pompidou Centre in Paris to the winter garden of the Beyeler Foundation Museum in Basel is one from youthful pioneering experiment to elegant contemplative creativity. Renzo Piano is an outstanding, independent force in architecture today. His father, who first took him to the construction site, would be proud of him today, both as an architect and a master builder. But it would be wrong to ignore the incredible team that he has built up in his studios. He does run an international workshop that is as influential as any craftsman’s workshop of the renaissance. He is always the first to acknowledge the help of his team and his innate modesty is completely refreshing in an architectural world where egotism is not exactly unknown. Piano’s legacy is a corpus of invention—that inspires all who build and all who have the pleasure of using his buildings—in both hemispheres of the world.

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