

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Norman Foster 1999 Laureate Acceptance Speech

Mr. President, Mr. Mayor, My Lords, Mrs. Pritzker, ladies and gentlemen. As individuals, we're all shaped by the diversity of our background, our history, influences, education, experience. Both personally and professionally, I continue to be so fortunate to have that many generous colleagues and collaborators, patrons and clients, and above all, wonderful parents. In that sense, the Pritzker Prize is widely shared. Because like the production of any architectural project, there are many parties involved. And tonight, I would like to try to pay tribute to them.

I have very special debts to America and to Europe, which probably started when I was a teenager. Because through my local library, I discovered the very different worlds of Frank Lloyd Wright, of Le Corbusier. Imagine the contrast of a home on the prairie with a villa and a Paris boulevard. And yet, I remember being equally fascinated by both of them. Ten years later as a graduate student at Yale, those pages were to come alive through one of the several, great teachers that I've been privileged to learn from. It was the insights of Vincent Scully that opened my eyes to the interaction between the old world and the new. He made more meaningful those European cities whose urban spaces and modern works I'd studied on my travels as a student at Manchester. A vital part of the Yale experience was the total immersion in the work of great and talented designers, across the breadth of America from coast to coast.

Architects learn from architects, past and present. But the two other dominant teachers at Yale polarize for me the cultures of America and Europe. Paul Rudolph had created a studio atmosphere of fevered activity, highly competitive, and fueled by a succession of visiting luminaries. The crypts were open and accessible and often combative. And it was a can-do approach in which concepts could be shredded one day to be reborn overnight.

But the only criteria was the quality of the work presented; the architecture of the drawings and the models. There was no room for excuses. No substitute of rhetoric.

The emphasis on tangible results in the studio summed up an American world in which everything was possible if you were willing to try hard enough. For me, that was a breath of fresh air. I felt less like the loner who'd left Britain. America gave me a sense of confidence, freedom and self-discovery.

My timing of Yale in 1961 was more fortunate than I could ever have foreseen, because it marked a change of leadership from Paul Rudolph to Serge Chermayeff. So we had half the year of one and half the year of the other. He was as European as Rudolph was American, not just in dress or manner, but deeply rooted differences in philosophy.

For Chermayeff, debate and theory took precedence over imagery. Questioning was to the fore, analysis dominated action. But I really warm to this approach because Manchester had been more about the tools of the trade, the disciplines of drawing, of putting materials together. There was little time for conversation, let alone debate.

Incidentally, I remain grateful for the grounding in the basics. Chermayeff opened me up to his researches with Christopher Alexander on community and privacy. And at his invitation, I was tempted with an academic career at Yale helping to pursue city planning studies, a subject which is still very close to my heart. Of course, the relationships are really more complex. In some ways, I went to Yale to discover a European heritage because America had embraced those émigrés such as Gropius who taught Rudolph at Harvard, and was for Rudolph, I quote, his "point of reference" in the same classes with I.M. Pei, Harry Seidler, Ed Barnes, a list of a whole generation of American architects coming out of that European tradition.

But looking back with the perspective of nearly forty years, I can see that our practice has been inspired by these polarities of action and research, which means trying to ask the right questions with an insatiable curiosity about how things work, whether they're organizations or mechanical systems.

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A belief in the social context that buildings are generated by people and their needs, and those needs are spiritual as well as material. Never taking anything for granted, always trying to probe deeper, to access the inner workings behind the many branches of human activity for which we, as architects, are charged to explore and respond to.

So it is the marriage of analysis with action that is at the core of our studio. And I'm deeply grateful to my partners who have helped me develop the roots of this approach over the past twenty-five or thirty years: Spencer Gray, David Nelson, Graham Phillips, Ken Shuttleworth, and more recently Barry Cook. But all of us have a very special debt to my late wife, Wendy. Because together we formed the basis of the present practice in 1967. For a brief period, Michael Hopkins joined us as a partner. He's still a kindred spirit and I'm very grateful for his support then as now. Wendy instigated the move to our present studio at Riverside on the Thames. It's a powerhouse of youthful energy with an average age of just over thirty, and commanding as many languages. It's spirit in so many ways is similar to that Yale studio. Sadly, Wendy never lived to see its realization. But for her, for me, her memory lives on in my sons.

If 1967 was the start of our practice, then it also marked the end of a brief but intense and inspirational period, nearly four years which Wendy and I shared with my former Yale classmate, Richard Rogers, under the title of Team IV. Richard is still a dear friend, and it's wonderful to share so many of those same values more than thirty years later.

Thinking back to those Yale days, I recall that Vincent Scully's lectures were dominated by a vast audience of undergraduates. Imagine the positive influence at this grassroots level on future civic and industrial leaders. Because buildings cannot happen without those who commission, you could say that's self-evident, but perhaps less evident is the creative contribution of clients. Of course, any architect could name the exceptions. But so often, a building is as good as the client. There certainly is a very strong relationship between the quality of the end architecture and that of the decision-making process which leads up to it. Like any of my architect colleagues, I'm grateful for those special clients, several of whom are here this evening.

In the best teams behind a building, the individuals spark off each other, the opposite of the architect designing a building and parceling it out for others to structure or to cost. Perhaps, this is another example of analysis and action, the exploration of multiple directions and the quest for the optimum solution or to innovate.

Such an approach is certainly more demanding on all concerned and calls for exceptional consultants, particularly engineers and quantity surveyors. Tonight is a good opportunity to express my appreciation for the highly creative contributions in the past, and I know that will continue into the future.

I am always surprised by how much little emphasis schools of architecture, and indeed, many architects, place on the process of the mating of a building. And I'm deeply suspicious of the class division between those who design and those who construct because in the past, they were very closely bonded. Surely, the means informs the end.

Building sites are hazardous places to work, even if they are more and more the point of assembly for prefabricated components. All the more important surely for architects to go to the factories, to penetrate the points of production, not only to learn, and therefore to design on a basis of knowledge, but also to appreciate and pay tribute to those who turn dreams into reality.

Asia has provided us with the opportunity to realize dreams on an epic scale. No land, no problem. Make an island. Expand an airport? No. Change it to a new one overnight. This scale of thinking is probably the global shift for the future, more out of necessity than choice. In free thinking, we all have our mentors. And I was privileged to work with the late Buckminster Fuller, a true master of

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high technology in the tradition of those nineteenth century heroes like Paxton. But he was also the essence of a moral conscience forever preaching about the fragility of the planet, with a global awareness of ecology which is still ahead of its time. He remains a guiding spirit, as does the late Otl Aicher from Germany best known as a graphic designer, but in reality a philosopher for whom the correct peeling and slicing of an onion assumed the same significance of designing a building, and he was exceedingly good at both.

It's interesting how the theme of America with Bucky and Europe with Otl weaves its way throughout. Even this evening celebrates a prize which originates in America and takes place in this most European of cities. A measure of the degree of Germany's Europeaness is the fact that as architects from the United Kingdom, we could be given the responsibility for the new Parliament here in Berlin. Significantly, it has provided the opportunity to stretch the boundaries on two issues, which I believe are particularly important in the future growth of cities: The role of public spaces and the quest for more ecologically responsible architecture. With my colleagues, I've been given many creative opportunities in Europe—Germany, France, Italy and Spain. But my ultimate personal prize is not architecture, although it could not have happened without our Barcelona tower. It was to win my wife, Elaina, from Spain. I'd like to say thank you to Elaina. *Renaissance* has a new and very profound meaning for me.

Returning to the subject of architectural prizes, I benefited from several foundations, especially the Henry Fellowship that enabled me to go to Yale University. Inspired by that and similar examples, I have with my colleagues, recently established a foundation to further educational research. We are very grateful for the funds from the Pritzker Prize this evening, which will make a substantial contribution to that cause.

It is a great honor to receive the Pritzker Prize and to share it with so many architect peers, whose work I have so long admired and respected. And I am delighted that so many of them are here this evening. In a tradition which dates from the first award in 1979, I would like to join with my predecessors in thanking the members of the jury for their tireless efforts in promoting the ideals behind the prize.

I would like to thank the Pritzker family, and especially the late Jay Pritzker, for their enlightened patronage. The award is, indeed, a celebration of architecture, architecture in the widest sense.

But as we approach the challenges of the next millennium, I cannot help wondering what architecture in the widest sense might mean. Where are the boundaries drawn between those who speak for the design professions, the politician and industry? Where are the divisions between conscience, provocation and action? The challenges are awesome. We can already see the growth of a new generation of mega-cities, urban conurbations of more than twenty-five million are now predicted in the next fifteen years.

Not long ago, I went to a cultural event in Mexico City. It was about interventions in historic cities. I came away with a haunting image, haunting images of a suburb called Chalco. Chalco as a suburb is the size of a European city, three and a half million people, but with a significant difference. There was no infrastructure, no drainage, no mains water, no sewage systems, no gas, no electricity or paved roads. In one sense, you could argue that they're lucky. One hundred million people have no homes at all. This brings to the light the estimate that two of the 5.9 billion inhabitants of the planet do not have access to energy except through burning natural material such as wood or animal waste.

Elsewhere in the world half of our energy is consumed by buildings. The remainder is divided between transportation and industry, with all the associated problems of pollution. So what happens when the rest of the world catches up?

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A world that's expected to double in population over the next fifty years? If those were not challenges enough to the design profession, then surely it is a paradox that we have rapid responses to war, but no rapid responses to the consequences that follow. Surely, the needs of instant shelter for the victims of war, repression or tornadoes, should be high on the agenda. However we might divide the responsibilities, we could surely do better than the tented cities which fill the pages of our newspapers, let alone the Chalcos of the future. These, I think, are some of the challenges for architecture, architecture in the widest sense for the coming millennium. Thank you.

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