

Alejandro Aravena 2021 Laureates Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal Ceremony Speech

How come did the Pritzker Prize go to two architects that when asked about intervening a square, their conclusion was to do nothing?

I made the math and at the time, Lacaton and Vassal were in their early 40s. This is a time when you would like to add as many projects as possible to your portfolio. Yet their attitude was that of being fair to the common good, to the big picture.

Their recommendation was to do a more frequent cleaning of the place and take more care of the trees, but not add any design.

The time they took to carefully study the question is one of the skills that the built environment requires. No wonder that over time, they have been consistently expanding the toolbox with which to improve people's quality of life.

Lacaton and Vassal in that sense are working towards a democratization of architecture: they have been trying to reach with a quality built environment, those that not necessarily get it.

They have been looking for low cost building systems but not for the sake of cost reduction. Their question instead seems to be, how can we deliver more square meters for the same limited budget so that we make architecture more accessible?

The times we are living require, more than ever, to work on leveling the field and building community. Be it for political, social or public health reasons, there is a need to build trust instead of fear in the collective. Their approach to sustainability in that sense not only refers to the built environment. The architecture of Lacaton and Vassal has identified and implemented projects that through civic programs, building methods, public uses and living spaces are addressing such growing need. Their architecture contributes in very concrete way to cool down not only the environmental but also the social warming that is affecting us.

One of the first projects that made them known to the world was their intervention of an old, deteriorated, social housing tower in the periphery of Paris. Society had assumed that such poor living standard was inevitable when dealing with social housing. In a time when the attitude was to treat them as waste, they said, what if instead of demolishing, we give this construction a second opportunity?

They started by identifying what exactly was wrong with them. They focused on the façade, but not for aesthetical reasons, but because it isolated the apartments from natural light, views and ventilation creating that boxy feeling that nobody wanted for a living space. Their alternative proposition was to wrap the building with terraces and balconies. Such a move not only improved the standard and enlarged the living surface of the tiny units, but it had consequences on the whole neighborhood; they transformed a stigmatized urban typology into a new sense of pride for the community.

The democratization of architecture though, regards not only the cost but the flexible and un-imposing nature of the spaces they create. Their signature is not to have a signature. Some may describe their buildings as "in your face." But this is far from arrogance; they build frames that support uses in an open way. Such unpretentious architectural language may be the reason why their buildings encourage unexpected instead of predefined functions.

To be humble does not mean to be shy. Actually, a rather bold and self-confident character is required for subtle operations. And this may be one of the most delicate balances that Lacaton and

Speech by Alejandro Aravena (continued)

Vassal's architecture has been able to achieve: their careful yet straightforward approach to the built environment.

For these among many reasons, Anne and Jean-Philippe, congratulations on being the recipients of the 2021 Pritzker Architecture Prize. Felicitaciones!

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