

Jay A. Pritzker 1998 Laureate Renzo Piano Ceremony Speech

This, indeed, is a very special occasion for us. Not only is it a celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, but also it is a ceremony to bestow the prize on Renzo Piano of Italy. And in a setting that is truly the zenith of many such occasions over the past two decades. By moving this event each year, we have been striving to pay homage to significant people and places of architectural history, from Todai-Ji in Japan to the Palace of Versailles in France. There have been numerous other spectacular sites, not the least of which was right here in Washington—Dumbarton Oaks, The National Building Museum and the National Gallery of Art. It's always difficult to say who is honoring whom when the ceremony locations are of such distinction. This year, there is no question that we are honored to be the guests of President and Mrs. Clinton here at The White House. We are grateful for your generous hospitality. Holding these ceremonies at outstanding sites has been planned to make the prize as prominent as possible, so that we can be effective in calling attention to good architecture—which is after all, the purpose of the Prize. Two years ago, we were in a tent at the construction site of the new Getty Center in Los Angeles. If you haven't seen that, it's certainly worth a trip to Los Angeles. Last year, we were in another work-in-progress, the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Both of these sites gave everyone attending some feeling of how a building comes to reality.

Tonight, the excitement comes from the sense of the White House as a symbol of freedom and democracy, but we ought not to lose sight of the fact that it was designed by a young Irish immigrant named James Hoban (a fact which I didn't know until this evening). He's one of many virtually unknown architects throughout history who have designed many world-renowned structures. With this prize calling attention to architecture of excellence, perhaps there'll be fewer unknowns.

We want to acknowledge our gratitude to the guiding lights of the prize, the members of the jury, led by J. Carter Brown. As a matter of fact, I've always felt that whatever success this prize has achieved is directly attributable to the quality of the jury. Some of the previous Laureates are here as well, seven of whom have been chosen from the United States and fourteen from eleven other countries. That international tradition continues tonight.

Renzo Piano was born into a family of builders in Genoa, Italy in 1937. His father, grandfather and four uncles and an older brother were all contractors. Similarly, in my family we were all lawyers. There may even be a few here tonight who think that is hardly as noble a tradition. And I include my brother, an engineer, in that category. Renzo was 17 when he approached his father with the notion that he wanted to go to architecture school. His father's never-to-be-forgotten response was, "Why do you want to be just an architect? You can be a builder." Through his projects, as well as words, Piano has answered, "The architect has the finest job in the world because on a small planet where everything has already been discovered, designing is still one of the greatest adventures possible." Mr. Piano has described it further as "a job on the frontier, walking a knife edge between art and science, between originality and memory, between the daring of the modern and the caution of tradition."

With his own philosophy thus defined, it is not surprising that the Pritzker Jury elected Renzo Piano for, and I quote: "architecture that reflects that rare melding of art, architecture and engineering in a truly remarkable synthesis ... embracing the most current technology of this era with his roots in classic Italian philosophy and tradition."

Jay A. Pritzker, 1998 Laureate Renzo Piano (continued)

By choosing a career as an architect rather than a contractor, he may have broken with a family tradition in one sense, but he has enhanced that tradition in ways his forebears could only have imagined. Please join me, Renzo.

For your restlessness and inventiveness ... for over three decades of searching for new dimensions ... for your versatility ... and for your many successes, we are delighted to present to you the Pritzker Architecture Prize of 1998.

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