

Thomas J. Pritzker 2008 Laureate Jean Nouvel Ceremony Speech

Lord Palumbo, members of the Pritzker jury, Pritzker laureates, ladies and gentlemen, as has been mentioned, today we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Pritzker Architectural Prize, first presented here in our nation's capital at Dumbarton Oaks, the site was well suited to the inauguration of this international prize that honors architects and architecture.

For the first couple of years, we stayed close to Dumbarton Oaks, but then our prize began to venture out and eventually became bold enough to travel the globe. In the course of those travels, we've been to four continents and some remarkable venues. It's been a great journey, and now we're honored to be here in the Library of Congress, an institution devoted to the highest democratic ideals. Established in 1800, its contents were burned by the invading British in 1814. I should note that my wife is British and this is still a bone of contention between us. Within a month of that event, Thomas Jefferson stepped up and offered his personal collection which he had collected for more than 50 years. It's Jefferson's collection that forms the core of this great Library of Congress.

Amongst Jefferson's many talents, he was, of course, the architect of Monticello, but he was also one of the founders of our Democratic system. In many ways, it was Jefferson who, early in our history, established an appreciation that democracy requires an architecture that would express its ideals of freedom, service to humanity, equality, and openness. The active, learned mind was central to Jefferson's concept of government and democracy. Jefferson believed that self-government depended on the free, unhampered pursuit of truth by an informed and involved citizenry. Today's Library of Congress expresses Jefferson's faith in learning and his practical determination to make democracy work. There is a deep link between democracy and architecture. Architecture, after all, is the most public of arts, and in the pursuit of the art, it married itself to the sciences and to engineering. No other art form partakes as many disciplines as architecture and no other art form serves and envelops as many people.

This year's laureate, Jean Nouvel, is nothing if not a democratic architect. An architect is like a visitor to a great location, and visitors are usually either tourists or they're pilgrims. Tourists and pilgrims both come to see that which was and that which is. The difference between them is the tourist asks the question about the site, and the pilgrim lets the site ask him the questions.

An architect comes to a site not to see the past, but to imagine the future. In imagining the future, Jean approaches the site like a pilgrim and not a tourist. He lets the location, its geography, its climate, its purposes, and its people ask him the questions. He looks upon each new project with a special freshness. As the jury noted in its citation, for Nouvel in architecture, there is no a priori style.

Each architectural challenge is interpreted in its broadest sense, including culture, location, program, client purpose, and utility. This provokes in him a thoroughly fresh spirit to develop the unique strategy in a different art form. Occasionally, his buildings seemed to mimic the very nature of the ever-changing democratic society.

One of the first buildings to bring him international acclaim, the Arab World Institute in '87 in Paris, was designed with adjustable metal lenses embedded in its south-facing glass facade to control the light of its interior—a modern twist on traditional medieval Arab latticework. His proposal for the Endless Tower, the winning entry of 1989 competition, is a vision of democratic society itself. The building's skin changes materials as it progresses upward. Nouvel, like democratic society, is an experimenter.

Thomas J. Pritzker, 2008 Laureate Jean Nouvel (continued)

Jean Nouvel describes his intellectual approach to every project by saying I tried to find what I call the missing piece of the puzzle, the right building in the right place. For him, each place has its unique demand for the right building. In Paris, the Fondation Cartier's magical glass façade allows for one to look out and, at the same time, it engages an elaborate play with the reflection of the trees and surrounding city life on the glass. It's a glass and steel classic. In the North American heartland of Minneapolis, he brought this approach to the Guthrie Theater, which resulted in an exuberant building whose theatricality is as exciting as the entertainment of its stage.

Ladies and gentlemen, here in Washington, D.C., in the Library of Congress, we celebrate tonight's laureate, whose inquisitive spirit, whose boldness that regularly births experimentation is an embodiment of the democratic spirit translated in the buildings themselves. Jean, will you come up? It's with, with great pleasure I present you with the Pritzker Prize.

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