

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Philip Johnson 1979 Laureate Acceptance Speech

The practice of architecture is the most delightful of all pursuits. Also, next to agriculture, it is the most necessary to man. One must eat, one must have shelter. Next to religious worship itself, it is the spiritual handmaiden of our deepest convictions. Who among us, I would ask, does not feel more religious after experiencing Chartres Cathedral, the Friday Mosque in Isfahan, or Ryoanji Garden in Kyoto? Even more important than painting and sculpture, it is *the* primary art of our or any other culture.

At the same time, the pursuit of architecture comprises a host of delicious occupations. It is the necessary expression of all social considerations—no new society without new kinds of buildings. All reformers, the Fabian socialist as well as Franklin Roosevelt, always commissioned new architecture. Next, there is a myriad of new technologies all expressed in building techniques and, therefore, in architecture: the elevator; the steel cage; and long before, the balloon frame; and long, long before that, the beautiful brick of Assyria and Rome. Great technologies breed great architecture. There are no visionary utopias in the minds of philosophers that do not enter the realm of architecture.

It is also the most difficult of all the arts. How often I have envied my colleagues who write, paint, or compose music. They live where they like, they work when they want—no recalcitrant materials, no leaky roofs, no stopped-up sewers. They tear up their mistakes.

And yet, what thrill can be as great as a design carried through, a building created in three dimensions, partaking of painting in color and detail, partaking of sculpture in shape and mass. A building for people, people other than oneself, who can rejoice together over the creation.

It is no wonder to me that whole civilizations are remembered by their buildings; indeed some only by their buildings. I think specifically of Teotihuacan in Mexico, a people whose very name is lost, who had no wheel, who wrote no books, who had no iron or bronze tools, no donkeys, no horses. Yet they flourished for more than a thousand years and built a great and unforgettable city. It was a religious city with pyramids that outclass the Egyptian, with a ceremonial avenue wider than Park Avenue. This was a pedestrian causeway with many stairs crossing the processional and lined by religious pavilions; a neolithic monumental congeries of structures that have defied time and science; courtyards and pathways and sloping walls that spoke to us a thousand years after the Teotihuacan people disappeared from the earth without a trace. The art of architecture is the only human activity that can produce that miracle.

The ghost city of Fatehpur-Sikri in India also comes to mind; built of red sandstone in fifteen years by the sixteenth century ruler, Akbar the Great, and deserted by Akbar thirty years later. A city without street but build of contiguous courts, colonnades, terraces, pavilions endlessly unfolding. Preserved as if built yesterday, it was a sacred and ceremonial city built for a saint. Only the art of architecture could create this wonder for Akbar.

But today architecture is not often acknowledged as basic to human activity. Industry and science take up our energies. Our thinking is dominated by the word—in prose or in poetry. Our philosophy is semantic, our metaphysics irreligious. Our values beautifully inherited from Calvin and John Stuart Mill are utilitarian, our hopes consumerist, materialistic; our way of thinking non-mythic, rationalistic, pragmatic. We eschew old-fashioned words like God, soul, aesthetics, glory, monumentality, beauty. We like practical words like cost-effective, businesslike, profitable.

Architecture tends in our times to serve these ends. An unprofitable skyscraper simply would not be built. An un-businesslike drafting office would soon destroy an architect's practice. Architects no longer build Taj Mahals, Versailles, or even extravaganzas like the Grand Central Station ... they would cost too much.

Yet *ars longa vita brevis*. Values can change. Art, myth, religions can bloom once again. We may, for example, want to rebuild America. We surely can if we want to. We can do anything. We have the

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skill, the materials, the labor force. Heaven knows, we have the need: our ugly surroundings, our inadequate housing, our sad slums are testimony. We can, if we but will; architecture, as in all the world's history, could be the art that saves.

But things can change; architects are ready. Here in the West we are blessed with a great artistic heritage. In this century alone, we have Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Lutyens, Mies van der Rohe, and our young architects may be better than them. They have the good fortune to work in a period of great change, a change in direction upsetting all the presuppositions of the last century. New understandings are sweeping the art. New breezes are blowing. The atmosphere is electric.

It is at this moment that The Pritzker Architecture Prize is founded. What a symbol of impending change! Our Pulitzer Prizes and our Nobel Prizes are never granted to a visual artist of any kind, much less an architect. Up until tonight, we artists have felt we were second-class participants in society. Scientists, writers, medical doctors are all important people held in high regard in our society. Up to this night, we were not; from now on, architects can feel prouder.

I, for one, realize the Prize is not for me; the Prize is for the art of architecture, the art we used to call the mother of the arts. Within our purview are the great arts of design, decoration, ornament as well as social housing, city planning and structural design. Maybe we can, as in other centuries, join painting and sculpture once more to enhance our lives.

The effect of the inauguration of this Prize might be a chain reaction toward the type of Renaissance of which our world is capable but is, up until now, wanting. Let us rebuild our dwellings, our buildings, closer to our hearts' desires; let us shape our surroundings in a way that this generation will be remembered, as others have been, as great builders.

In the name of all the architects of the world, may I thank The Hyatt Foundation for this Prize to our art which will give us hope that we will be able to create human surroundings fitting to a great world.

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