

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Fumihiko Maki 1993 Laureate Acceptance Speech

First, I would like to express my many thanks to Mr. Jay Pritzker, the members of The Hyatt Foundation, and the jury members of the Award Committee, without whose support I would not have been here in the first place. I am truly grateful for the honor that you are bestowing on me tonight, which seems to validate and encourage the kind of interests and endeavors I have been pursuing over nearly 40 years of work in architecture. I am also acutely aware that there are many other deserving candidates for this prize, and therefore it truly came as a surprise to be picked from among such esteemed peers and colleagues. In receiving this award, I want to acknowledge the mutual support and shared ideals amongst this expanding group of friends, whose collaboration, criticism, and camaraderie have made my work in architecture so personally rewarding.

I want to extend my deepest appreciation to all of you—friends, family, peers and supporters—who have come to Prague Castle to share with me in the award celebration this evening, and in particular I want to say how honored I am that President Havel has taken time out from his busy schedule to be here with us.

The opportunity to hold this ceremony in the city that to me is most beloved in Europe is really quite a moving experience. And as I think about the fact that we are here gathered from various parts of the world, representing so many different cities, I am moved to say something about cities and their role in inspiring not only architecture, but life and culture in general. In retrospect, my whole life, both privately and professionally, has been and still is continuously interwoven with the lives of various cities, each with its own lessons or messages. In my acceptance speech tonight I would like to talk briefly on three cities that have made profound impact on my thinking about architecture. In other words, this is a “tale of three cities.”

The first city I would like to speak of is Tokyo where I was born and raised, and where I still live with my family and practice architecture today. In the early 30s, the time of my childhood years, Tokyo had much of the ambience and the physical appearance that it had inherited from the previous century. In the Yamanote, or “upper town,” where I lived, streets were often shadowed by big trees and were dark in evenings. Small streets and narrow alleys were unpaved. After it rained, the smell of the earth and vegetation permeated the air. Those streets where today we find heavy vehicular traffic in those days were for people strolling and bicycling. In the summer, the people came out of their houses and stores to get a bit of the cool air and watched children playing with fireworks, whose sound could be heard even from quite a distance away. These scenes were still reminiscent of the city that nearly two-hundred years earlier had already become the biggest metropolis in the world and was also at that time arguably the world’s greatest garden city.

The buildings of Tokyo in the 30s were mostly low in scale and subdued in color and texture. Most residential houses had clay-tile roofs and wooden finishes on the walls, sometimes cemented over on the street front. Public buildings, banks and some important commercial structures such as department stores were styled according to Western Neo-Classicism.

The same 30s did, however, witness the emergence of the first modern architecture here and there. I still remember vividly those occasions when I visited with my parents their friend’s houses and small exhibition places and tea parlors in public parks. Their very articulated cubic forms, whiteness, floating interior spaces and thin metal railings were my first introduction to modern architecture, and they made a strong impression on me, although I’d never thought to become an architect at that time. Later, these fantastic visual images had begun gradually to overlap with images of boats and airplanes, the very symbols of modernity for children like myself at that time.

Much has been changed since then. Today the city of Tokyo may be called the world’s largest assemblage of industrially produced artifacts (in materials such as metal, glass, concrete, etc.). Having witnessed personally this transformation from a garden city to an industrialized city within the span of a mere fifty years, Tokyo presents for me a rich mental landscape at an almost surrealistic level.

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Tokyo, because of its capacity to meet all kinds of external demands and pressures for change, is continuously a seductive and exciting place for the creation of something new. The city simply excites the minds of architects and artists. At the same time, however, Tokyo stands as a sober reminder of what one would not do and should not. So many changes have been enacted in the name of progress but at the expense of the city's rich cultural legacy. Tokyo, in this respect, continues to serve me as example and teacher for the navigation of a future course.

Next, I would like to move on to my second city, Chicago. Following my graduation from the University of Tokyo in the early 50s, I decided to pursue further graduate study in the U.S. Although I have never lived in Chicago, throughout those years I spent in the United States, the city always symbolized for me a city of architectural dreams. No city possessed a richer collection of what one might call the genuine heritage of American architecture. The great works of Richardson, Sullivan, Burnham and Root, and Wright offer a rich panoramic view of American Modernism of that period. Even to the eyes of a foreigner like myself, the sturdy, masculine facades of Chicago architecture instantly seemed a mirror of the fierce, proud individualism that is deeply rooted in American tradition.

In the 50s, Chicago had also welcomed its new heroes from Europe Mies van der Rohe and Moholy-Nagy—and a new generation of native architects had emerged in the region. Since I was definitely a Miesian at that time, I was unforgettably enthralled by my first glimpse of the Lake Shore Drive Apartments (of Mies), seen against the fast-moving sky of clouds racing out over Lake Michigan. For my students at Washington University, I made a visit to Chicago for (at least) three days a prerequisite for passing my design studio. Every time I went to Chicago with them, I savored the moments of visiting those architectural masterpieces. They are in my opinion the very expression of collective individualism.

There might be no coincidence that the same spirited city has given the birth to the two greatest architectural foundations of our time: the Graham Foundation and The Hyatt Foundation. And by sheer luck, my architectural career has been blessed by both of these foundations.

1958 was the year when I was selected by the Graham Foundation to be the recipient of a grant for young architects and artists. The grant was so generous that I was able to spend the next two years mostly traveling over Japan, Southeast Asia, India, the Middle East and both northern and southern Europe. These were fantastic experiences for a young architect who wished to broaden his understanding on different cultures, cities and architectures, and to discover certain relationships between them. There were also a number of people I met during this time, whose friendship I still cherish today. Among them is my companion of over thirty years, my wife Misao, here this evening.

The honor given to me by The Hyatt Foundation this time seems to me again an encouragement to take another voyage to explore and investigate architecture, and I cannot help feeling the same excitement I had 35 years ago. How lucky I have been.

Lastly, I would like to talk about Prague as my third city. I visited the city in 1972, for the first time in my life. Spending a few days here was enough to be overwhelmed by the beauty of the city. But the strongest impression I received from the city was, however, not just one of beauty or powerful scenery; instead it was an impression of the rich layering of the city's history and culture, the presence of different times and civilizations manifest at the scale of towns and districts, approaching the ideal which the architectural historian Christian Norberg-Schulz has called "the culture of rich multi-layered complexity." Besides magnificent examples of architecture associated with different periods, the remarkable juxtaposition (or constellation) of Old Town, New Town, Small Town, and Hradčany—as well as contemporary districts—constitutes the whole city and its architectural culture. It is the very opposite of what Tokyo is today. If one of the most important roles of the city is to function as a memory apparatus for the people who inhabit and visit it, Prague would certainly represent an *ideal city*. This memory apparatus generates in people's minds both reflection on their culture and aspiration for its future.

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One of the most remarkable reflective remarks I have come across recently was in an interview with President Havel, given to *Time* magazine last year. It was subtitled “Bad Taste and Bad Politics”. According to him, when he entered Prague Castle, the former seat of Czechoslovakia’s Communist regime, he was astounded by the incredibly bad taste of their paintings on the walls and furnishings in the rooms. He immediately realized why their governing had been so bad. There he does not talk about bad or good taste as, let’s say, one’s ability to choose neckties to match their shirts in the morning. Instead, he calls good taste one’s capacity to understand what other people may think or feel—in other words, sensitivity to others’ feelings. Bad taste is the opposite; the lack of this sensitivity leads to bad politics.

I was so moved by his remarks that since then I have been quoting this passage whenever I have had the opportunity. As an architect, you may be able to say that bad taste leads to bad architecture. Of course, good taste in itself is not sufficient to determine the design of buildings and cities; so many other factors are involved, really. In the sense we are using here, taste has nothing to do with style or ideology, or even with choosing between two equivalent design strategies, for example. But as an ever-present guide to the thoughts of the designer, sensitivity to other human beings and human situations—or its lack—will be evident in the resulting architecture and will certainly influence whether it will be deemed good or bad.

I have now described my own involvement with those three cities; Tokyo, Chicago and Prague. I have found through my own small crystal ball three important messages behind them, which I repeat: child fantasy, collective individualism, and concern for humanity and history, respectively. And I wonder: aren’t these also the very essences of modernity? The further pursuit of this question is precisely my agenda.

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