

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Renzo Piano 1998 Laureate Acceptance Speech

Mr. President, Mrs. Clinton, Mr. and Mrs. Pritzker, it is naturally a great honor for me to be awarded the 1998 Pritzker Prize. And first of all I would like to thank the members of the jury. They have taken on a tremendous responsibility in opening the doors of the temple to someone like me who has always lived outside of it.

I am very happy, proud and grateful to have been nominated architect of the year—whatever that means. It does sound a bit odd, this year's best-seller, the season's hit, the record of the month. Does this mean that architects have a sell-by date; that you throw away the architect at the end of the year?

But what exactly is an architect? What is architecture? I have been in this trade for thirty years and I am only just beginning to understand what it is. Firstly, architecture is a service, in the most literal sense of the term. It is an art that produces things that serve a purpose. But it is also a socially dangerous art, because it is an imposed art. You can put down a bad book; you can avoid listening to bad music; but you cannot miss the ugly tower block opposite your house. Architecture imposes total immersion in ugliness; it does not give the user a chance. And this is a serious responsibility—for now and for future generations. And architecture is an ancient profession, perhaps the world's oldest; or the second oldest if you prefer, a little like hunting, fishing, farming, exploring the seas. These are man's original activities from which all others stem. Immediately after the search for food, we find the search for shelter; at a certain point, man was no longer content with the refuges offered by nature and became an architect.

Finally, architecture mixes things up: history and geography, anthropology and the environment, science and society. And it inevitably mirrors all of them.

Perhaps I can explain myself better with an image. Architecture is like an iceberg. Not in the sense of the Titanic, that will take you down if you bump into it, but in the sense that the rest is submerged and hidden. In the seven eighths of the iceberg that lie below water, we find the forces that push architecture up, that allow the tip to emerge: society, science and art.

Architecture is society, because it does not exist without people, without their hopes, aspirations and passion. Listening to people is important. And this is especially difficult for an architect. Because there is always the temptation to impose one's own design, one's own way of thinking or, even worse, one's own style. I believe, instead, that a light approach is needed. Light, but without abandoning the stubbornness that enables you to put forward your own ideas whilst being permeable to the ideas of others.

I am no boy scout, and my appeal to the sense of service is not intended as moralistic. It is, very simply, an appeal to the dignity of our profession. Without this dignity, we risk losing ourselves in the labyrinth of fads and fashions. Reading architecture as a service certainly means limiting its creative freedom, constraining it. Yet whoever said that creativity had to be free of any constraint? I would like to say more: the interpretation of society and its needs is the richness of architecture. Florence is beautiful because it is the image of Renaissance Italy, its artisans, its merchants, its patrons of the arts. Its streets, squares and palaces reflect Lorenzo de Medici's vision of society.

Architecture is science. To be a scientist, the architect has to be an explorer and must have a taste for adventure. He has to tackle reality with curiosity and courage to be able to understand it and change it. He has to be a "homo faber," in the Renaissance sense of the term. Think of Galileo: the telescope was invented to look out for ships, certainly not to study the movement of the stars. Theologians worried about the stars. He, instead, wanted to understand the heavens, and he fought against the most powerful lobby of his time to do it. This image represents a lot for me: a formidable lesson in curiosity for anything new, an independence of thought and courage in exploring the unknown.

Architects have to live on the frontier, and every so often they have to cross it, to see what is on the other side. They, too, use the telescope to look for what is not written in the sacred texts. Brunelleschi

Renzo Piano Acceptance Speech (continued)

did not just design buildings, but also the machines to build them. Antonio Manetti recounts how he studied the mechanism of the clock in order to apply it to a system of large counterweights: this was how the structure of the cupola was raised. This is a lovely example of how architecture is also research. And it makes us think about an important thing: all of those whom we look up to as "classics," were in their own time great innovators. They were the cutting edge. They found their way by experimenting and taking risks.

In explaining their reasoning in assigning this prize, the jury makes a reference to Brunelleschi which fills me with pride and embarrassment at the same time. He is a model that cannot be reached, but only approached. If I have to compare myself to someone, I prefer Robinson Crusoe, an explorer capable of surviving in foreign lands.

Architecture is an art. It uses technique to generate an emotion, and it does so with its own specific language, made up of space, proportions, light and materials (for an architect, matter is like sound for a musician or words for a poet). There is one theme that is very important for me: lightness (and obviously not in reference only to the physical mass of objects). At the time of my early works, it was a game, a rather naive challenge of shapeless spaces and weightless structures. Later, this became my way of being an architect. In my architecture, I try to use immaterial elements like transparency, lightness, the vibration of the light. I believe that they are as much a part of the composition as the shapes and volumes.

And like in all arts there are difficult moments. Creating means grasping in the dark, abandoning points of reference, facing the unknown. Tenaciously, insolently and stubbornly. Without this stubbornness, which I find sublime at times, you remain outside of things. The adventure of thought comes to an end and academia begins.

To be truly creative, the architect has to accept all the contradictions of his profession: discipline and freedom, memory and invention, nature and technology. There is no escape. If life is complicated, then art is even more so. Architecture is all of this: society, science and art. And like the iceberg, it is the result of stratification that lasts thousands of years. Like the iceberg, it is a continuously changing mass, with the ice melting constantly and reforming in the water of the many oceans.

Architecture is thus the mirror of life. This is why the first thing I see in it is curiosity, social tension, the desire for adventure. These are things that have always kept me outside the temple. I was born into a family of builders, and this has given me a special relationship with the art of "doing." I always loved going to building sites with my father and seeing things grow from nothing, created by the hand of man. For a child, a building site is magic: today you see a heap of sand and bricks, tomorrow a wall that stands on its own; at the end it has all become a tall, solid building where people can live. I have been a lucky man: I have spent my life doing what I dreamt as a child.

I was seven years old in 1945, when the miracle of post-war reconstruction began. In the name of progress and modernity, a lot of stupid things have been said and done. But for my generation, the word "progress" really meant something. Every year that went by took us further from the horrors of war and our life seemed to improve day by day. Growing up in that period meant having an obstinate belief in the future.

I belong to a generation of people who have maintained an experimental approach throughout their life, exploring different fields, ignoring boundaries between disciplines, reshuffling the cards, taking risks and making mistakes. And in many different fields. From theatre to painting, cinema, literature and music. Without ever talking about culture. Culture is a fragile term which can disappear like a will-o'-the-wisp just when you call it up. This all makes you grow up instinctively optimistic and makes you believe in the future. It is inevitable. But at the same time, you love your past (as an Italian, or, rather, European, you have no choice). And so you live in a limbo between gratitude towards the past and a great passion for experimentation, for exploration of the future.

Renzo Piano Acceptance Speech (continued)

The final words of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* come to mind: "so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." I find this a splendid image, an emblem of the human condition. The past is a safe refuge. The past is a constant temptation. And yet the future is the only place we have to go, if we really have to go somewhere.

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