

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Glenn Murcutt 2002 Laureate Acceptance Speech

Mayor Veltroni, distinguished guests, friends, fellow architects, ladies and gentlemen. To Mrs. Pritzker, the Pritzker family, and members of the Hyatt Foundation, you have honored me with the 2002 Pritzker Architecture Prize, and I cannot tell you just how happy I am to be receiving it. Thank you.

On entering private practice in late 1969, my father said, "son, remember, you must start off the way you would like to finish." And he added, "for every compromise you knowingly make, the resultant work will represent your next client." Tough yet good advice.

Although I have worked as a sole practitioner without staff now for nearly 32 years, I am supported by many others who have contributed to my love of architecture. To fail to recognize those people would be unjust. Mies van der Rohe said, and I quote, that "with every good building, there was a very good client."

I have had so many wonderful clients throughout my career. There are others today that have to wait for more than three years for me to start work on their projects. I have worked with two engineers, a father and his son, and how could our thinking be realized without fine builders. There are writers, photographers and academics, fellow architects, architecture schools in Argentina, Chile, Denmark, Finland, the United States of America, and Australia, collaborators including my wife and family. Each has been wonderfully supportive and many are here this afternoon to celebrate with me this incredible event. Thank you, all of you. And what more wonderful a space and place could there be to celebrate this event than the Campidoglio in Rome? Just how fortunate can one be? The jury each year considers hundreds of architects for the Pritzker Prize, many of whom are worthy of receiving it. But, on the whole, only one is selected. That's how fortunate one can be.

As you may imagine, I've had hundreds of interviews, letters and telephone calls of wonderful support, but I cannot tell you how many times it has been said, "congratulations also go to the Jury." I start to wonder just whose prize is this? Yet such awards tell us much about the jury as it does about the recipient. I am fully aware of the effort and feelings of responsibility borne by each jury member for such a prize.

To each member of this year's Pritzker Prize Jury, I am honored, greatly honored, to have been considered worthy of this prize. It is humbling to become a Pritzker Laureate. I join recipients for whom I have the deepest respect, and today, several I count as great friends. And this afternoon, they are here, as each of you, in my honor. Thank you.

I grew up in Sydney about seven kilometers north of the city. The landscape was typical of the coastal Sydney sandstone basin with its abundance of eucalyptus and other remarkable native Australian plants. In this environment, I learned about the propagation of the flora. I learned about which plants grew where, and which drew the superb native birds, insects and animals. I learned about how a particular species of plants grew differently, very differently, from the lowlands where the water table was higher, where the wind pressures were less, where the nutrients were greater from the very same type of plant at the top of a hill which was shaped by wind shear, less moisture and few nutrients. This was about place, and was, for me, extremely important. I learned about the strength, the delicacy, and the transparency of much of the Australian landscapes, where the clarity of the light level separates the elements compared to much of Europe where the light level serves to connect those elements in the landscape. This gave me a clearer understanding of the legibility of elements, of structure and delicacy within the Australian landscape which has informed my work.

I grew up in a family of five children. There were seven pianos in a house of three levels. The noise was terrible. There was always something being designed and built around the house—canoes, racing skiffs, houses. I learned I needed silence, much silence, to work. This was a very important lesson for me. The amount of noise made me want silence.

Glenn Murcutt Acceptance Speech (continued)

I was conscripted to the joinery shop of my father during school holidays which I tended to resent at the time, but I did join in the construction of boats, building staircases, windows and more. This was an extraordinary training though very tough at times. From 1946 onwards, my father brought into Australia a number of journals, particularly from the United States, and from them I learned about the works of Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe, Gordon Drake, Charles and Ray Eames and others. There were so many architects that I had learned about by the time that I was 15 or 16. This had enormous influence on me.

I had difficulty with my education, but I finally entered the University of Technology in 1956 where I undertook the part-time course in architecture. I was fortunate enough to have had a teacher by the name of Noel Bazeley, who taught building construction. He was largely dismissed by most students, but whilst the other groups studied the construction of footings and foundations, floors, walls, ceiling joists and roofs for the whole year of three terms, Bazeley gave us the subject continuity in nature. What a wonderful subject, continuity in nature, discussed for a full term. Having understood the importance of continuity in nature, the second term was devoted to the understanding of continuity in nature related to the built environment. For term three, we studied foundations, floors, walls and so on.

What a wonderful start for a young architect and for me particularly. This was an extraordinary teaching for a man in 1956. I also worked in offices full time with people like Neville Gruzman and Bill and Ruth Lucas who were very good architects in the modern movement in Australia. I was fortunate enough to be working when Lucas designed one of the lightest lightweight houses that Sydney had ever seen, one of the most extraordinary works still. And I also worked with Allen and Jack, another fine office. They were wonderful places to be learning architecture in the 50s and 60s.

During university, I failed the subject Sunshine and Shade. I had to repeat this subject. I recognize this may have been a turning point for me in understanding the importance and direction it might have been in shaping my future thinking. Failure presents those great opportunities, it is not one of those things where you put your tail between your legs and run. Failure is a wonderful learning experience.

My first trip after graduation in 1962 was to Europe—the Greek islands and the Nordic region. I learned about light, about continuity of space, about the nature and limitations of materials, about the formation and carving of space, about inevitability of movement, about unity of color, about reflection, and so many other lessons. To make a material work hard is to seek to maximize its potential, and to make one material do many things has been significant for me. Going to the Nordic region to see the work of Jørn Utzon, those wonderful Kingo houses and Utzon's other buildings, and on to Finland to see the work of Aalto was a great turning point in my career. And it was my very good friend, Keith Cottier, who said to me whilst we were working together in London, "don't go back to the Greek Islands. You must get on and see Aalto! Of all the people I know, you are the one who should be seeing Aalto." I took his advice. I thank you, Keith.

In 1969, I entered practice. I had no work, but most of us were pretty optimistic in those days. So what did I do in the first six months? I telephoned the various producers of building products, those makers of superb extruded metal sections and had them visit me. I was looking at all the possibilities of making standard components and sections to do my detailing rather than designing every detail element. It makes detailing very much simpler and quite strong.

The second trip overseas in 1973 included France and Spain. In Paris, I visited a building I had seen from the street in 1962, the Maison de Verre. This building was liberating. Designed around 1928 by Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoët, it was in the modern period, but was not one of the isms of modernism, this work had life. It was open-ended as a design, and it possesses timelessness. And

Glenn Murcutt Acceptance Speech (continued)

what a wonderful thing to find an architecture of the past that is alive, that's modern, and looks to the future. It was an absolutely important and critical experience at that time in my life.

I also met the great Spanish architect, José Coderch in Barcelona. He also did something very important for me. I was extremely nervous about design, and I still am extremely nervous about design, but then I thought there was something lacking in me, that nervousness. Coderch said that at the age of 62, "with every new project, I am very nervous." And I've realized ever since that nervousness is an essential ingredient with every new project, otherwise, one's work loses its cutting edge. He said, "I also tell my students, you must put into your work first effort, secondly, love, and finally, and very Catholic, suffering. And even if the work is not great, it will show care and dedication."

I have always believed in the act of discovery rather than creativity. Any work that exists, or which has the potential to exist is related to discovery. We do not create the work. I believe we, in fact, are discoverers. I see architecture as a path of discovery and that is very important for me. I have learned through observation rather than text. Even this acceptance speech has been an awful challenge in getting it together.

My family will tell you that I have a restless spirit, and I know that is true. I have always wanted to push more out of everything, in experiencing places, in pushing boundaries; my students will tell you my studios are very memorable. And I push myself. I know when whatever I am doing can be done better. I am relentless in pursuing ideals.

Now I need to tell you a little bit about why I do things the way I do. I work alone because I love silence, time to think and discard work less than I know is worthy of architecture. By working alone, I freed myself of the pressures of responsibility towards staff. I am able to travel and conduct design studios in many universities internationally where I am able to teach and convey ideals and attitudes to students. They are the architects of the future. Yet when a project warrants it, I work in collaboration with those architects for whom I have great respect. That is the way I'm able to expand my practice. The work I cannot do, I send to young, very fine architects I have taught, so that they are able to set up their own practices because, as I said earlier, with every good building, there was a very good client. I have not wanted to undertake large scale work because I know that I require a lot of variation in stimulating my energies.

I tire of working on one project for too long, and larger projects mean years. To work on many smaller projects involves many clients. This provides the opportunity for much experimentation and hence stimulation for me, and yet I am aware that there are offices like Renzo Piano's and Frank Gehry's where they do achieve much of what I expect, but at large scale. To take on work outside Australia would mean that I would have to take on staff. As a sole operator, it would be impossible for me to work overseas and in Australia at the same time because I would lose my practice in Australia. Australia offers me hugely diverse landscapes and ranges of climates. Being the size of the USA, or extending from the west coast of Spain to Israel, and North Africa to the Arctic Circle, you can imagine the potential. Add to that, coastal, inland and altitude, the possibilities are enormous. Ironically, by understanding my imposed limitations, I found that opportunities increased. Working with students and academics is enormously rewarding. I've established wonderful friendships with staff and students which satiates my somewhat nomadic spirit.

This year, the jury identified a critical issue which is now assuming immense importance in every aspect of our future survival—respect for the environment. I cannot pursue my architecture without considering the minimization of energy consumption, simple and direct technologies, a respect for site, climate, place and culture. Together, these disciplines represent for me a fantastic platform for experimentation and expression. Of particular importance is the junction of the rational and the poetic resulting hopefully in works that resonate and belong to where they reside.

Glenn Murcutt Acceptance Speech (continued)

This award therefore goes well beyond one's self. It speaks of the pressing issues of now and our future. It is relevant nationally and internationally and that surely is very significant. It seems to me that underlying the jury's decision there is hope, even as individuals that we as architects have an opportunity to make a difference where we leave for future generations principles worthy of our time. Thank you.

©The Hyatt Foundation

For more information, please contact:

Martha Thorne, Executive Director
The Pritzker Architecture Prize
71 South Wacker Drive
Suite 4700
Chicago, Illinois 60606
email: marthathorne@pritzkerprize.com