

Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal 2021 Laureates Ceremony Acceptance Speech

The Present as a Project

Look up, see the sky through the transparent roof, see the clouds and the birds pass by, Further to west, the cranes of the port of Dunkirk, to the east the beach of Malo les Bains, the sea. Two people sitting on a bench, facing the sea.

The memory of the freshness in the gardens of the Alhambra in Granada, the cold greenhouses of Lisbon and many others.

Feel at home, in the city on the 10th floor, sitting in your living room, getting up, going to the winter garden, looking to see if the plants are doing well, going out on the balcony, looking down at the street, at the city, at the sky, in the distance, continuing on the balcony, coming back inside through the bedroom.

Move around your flat. In the public space, to look at the person looking at the person, looking at something...

These simple situations inspire us with their qualities and the sense of freedom they stimulate. They carry the fundamental ideal of INHABITING, or feeling free in a space, independently of any program.

Inhabiting concerns each of us with the same intensity, the same generosity, the same attention and the same desires.

Architecture, as the bearer of these qualities of inhabiting, is intended for each and everyone. Inhabiting is the starting point for all our projects, whatever the program or the usage.

The lightness and simplicity that emerge from these fundamental situations are present in the evolution and history of architecture. They travel across time.

Architecture and architects are a huge inspiration for us. We are interested in many of them, even if they work in very different ways: Jacques Hondelatte, Mies van der Rohe, Frei Otto, Shinohara, Cedric Price, Renée Gailhoustet, Jean Renaudie, Hans Scharoun, Lina Bo Bardi, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Yona Friedman, Giancarlo De Carlo, Archigram, and so many others.

Their architecture gives us a sense of perfect balance between a construction, its environment, and the people who live there.

This equation runs through all societies, and matches what we understand by inhabiting: To feel comfortable, entirely carried by spaces, by what happens in them, and the way in which they are connected, without any limitations.

Where do we stand today?

We are at a point in the history of architecture where the question of inhabiting become an essential subject. We do this by constructing the conditions for freedom through space, in a positive and open relationship with the climate, and by starting from the existing, without ever demolishing anything. This is the essence of our work.

In this respect, the heritage of modernity and experiments with free plan, spatial generosity, transparency and light for all, offer many valuable lessons.

Lacaton and Vassal, 2021 Laureates (continued)

The modernists made inhabiting a central subject of architecture.

Unfortunately, they were confronted with the difficulty of the big number, the excesses of industrialization and the error of the tabula rasa, which makes even less sense today.

We can continue these principles of architecture in the city nowadays, no longer by replacing, but instead by adding, superposing, paying attention to what already exists, and by trusting the inhabitants.

What should be done?

Interpretation, reorganization and re-manipulation of its components, enable the fabrication of new spaces and the making of new discoveries.

We can do with "almost nothing".

This "almost nothing" that we add, is very fine and subtle and precise. Quite marvelously, it can change everything.

This "almost nothing" is based on a profoundly attentive and generous observational view of what the city has become, without any preconceptions or judgments.

This is a radical reversal of perspective. This is where the invention is, and this is the origin of Ecology and Economy.

Lessons from Niger

Our experience in Niger, where we spent the first five years of our professional life, has been decisive in this sense. It was there, that we developed this deep curiosity about working with whatever is already in place, and understood the added value and the richness that this offers.

It is in Africa that we understood how much the existing is a resource, that is direct, free, alive, active, whether it is for constructing a shelter, positioning a water point, dividing up a plot of land, using sunlight or shadow, or organizing a group of people.

We have learned the importance of looking at things as closely as possible, with utmost precision.

We understood that you can build a space without material, simply by attitudes, by use, by the relationship with what is immediately around, by movement. By moving, moving away, gathering, by choosing precisely the place to stay, to talk, to work or to rest, people make space.

Or simply by assembling three branches, stretch out a fabric or a cloth, lay down a carpet. Then, one can improvise, welcome the unexpected, adapt, because the frame is flexible, light and open.

The years we spent in Niger has broadened our way of seeing, and has enabled us to understand that the existing is a present state. This present is made up of situations in movement, of pleasure and of usage.

This present is the only resource, the only thing that is there. We have learned that we must capture it, make it our own, because it is carrying a project.

This present is renewed every day, and it requires us to observe it constantly, to be highly attentive

Lacaton and Vassal, 2021 Laureates (continued)

to its variations and to adapt all the time. This is a philosophy of viewing, that brings us back to the capacities of reality and of the lived space.

The existing as a present material

The lesson from Niger is universal. This is an ongoing reflection that applies everywhere. The generosity that we have observed in housing in Buenos Aires, in the streets of Tokyo, or in agricultural greenhouses and botanical gardens, tell the same story.

As space or climate, the existing is a present material in which we inhabit.

Considering the existing as a present material deeply modifies the way we envisage the city, which is always approached from a perspective, either prospective or conservative, and never in its present state. Yet the future is precisely the present.

Considering the existing as a present material enables us to consider every situation without a filter or reading grid, with eyes open, positive and precise.

This leads to be close to everything, to focus on daily life, on what the inhabitant produces, and to invent from these sensible variations. And adding almost nothing.

Never demolish

In France and all around the world, unfortunately the demolition is developing in the cities and no longer raises any trouble. It is no longer a taboo. Demolition has become a short-term solution, an easy decision as well as a mode of urban generation, even a mode of recycling.

Yet demolition is irreversible. Any demolition destroys a vast quantity of information, knowledge, layers, materials and memories. Life takes a long time to establish and to grow. This time of growth, occupation and habitation is extremely precious. It cannot be reconstituted.

It is urgent to stop demolishing, eliminating, deleting, cutting, and to start from the city as it is, exactly as it is. To do and to invent with all what we have. Any building can be transformed, reused. Any tree can be carefully conserved. Any constraint can be turned positively.

Make-do, to do more and better

To make do, to continue, to extend, to enlarge, instead of demolition and reconstruction, is more ecological, more economical, more gentle and more optimistic. It is also more creative.

Economy is a key point. Economy is first of all taking a rigorous, precise and sensitive look at what is already there. In any situation, it allows to create the conditions for doing, for making possible. It is a vector for freedom, efficiency and sustainability.

This means using all the values already there, without exception, without arbitrary selection, to re-use spaces and places in the sense of what they can offer, never going against their nature and never losing anything. This requires us to observe and understand their qualities, and to love them.

Ecology of the existing

Considering ecology in the city should lead to consider as most important, a form of good living for

Lacaton and Vassal, 2021 Laureates (continued)

all, free of constraints: a way of living associated with the generosity and freedom of a climate. The climate is part of the existing. It is a present state, with which we nurture a friendly relationship.

Fantastic material

For every project, we ask ourselves how we can build a space that does not impose anything. A space of pure freedom. Some will seize this freedom. Others may not. But it is given.

We work with an incredible material : emptiness, air, light. This is the material in which people live, move around, live, sing, kiss. This material is so vital, yet cost nothing. It offers freedom and trigger desires to dream, to move, to appropriate. This is the escape. Viewed this way, this material is poetic and fantastic.

The value of an approach

The Pritzker Prize represents for us the immense satisfaction of gaining recognition for an approach that is not easy to implement. It also comes as a great surprise. We are amazed that it resounds so strongly, in so many countries, among architects as well among people. Perhaps it is because this approach touches on fairly universal aspirations: the desire to live directly with one's climate, to invent one's own way of life, to have enough space to accomplish all the desired uses, in complete freedom.

Inhabiting is the most noble and the most important issue in architecture.

Our intention and our aim is always to build places that offer freedom, that escape from standardization, yet without exiting a normal production system and normal economy, nor subcontracting to regulations, while however re-questioning them.

Intimately linked to the invisible, to the attention and capacity of each individual, our approach is far from being isolated. The Pritzker Prize makes it visible. All those who carry the same approach and who may feel isolated, are also happy and feel now stronger.

Acknowledgements

We are honored and deeply pleased to receive the Pritzker Architecture Prize 2021, and we are impressed and feel privileged to join the prestigious list of the famous architects who have received the Prize before.

We warmly thank Tom and Margot Pritzker and the members of the Pritzker family.

We thank the jury for rewarding our work and for understanding and highlighting the sense of our approach.

We also thank our team. All those who work with us now or before, who have contributed greatly to the realization of all the projects over the time, and also all the interns who have participated in their own way in the projects.

We thank Frédéric Druot, with whom we have long shared a concern for the existing and completed the remarkable projects of transformation together.

We friendly thank, a few faithful engineers and friends, with whom we have worked since the very

Lacaton and Vassal, 2021 Laureates (continued)

beginning of our practice, and who have always helped us to solve complex technical issues in a simple way, and made sure that the technique always finds solutions and never constrains the project.

We thank the clients who have placed their trust in us, and with whom, we have completed wonderful projects.

We think with sympathy to the students we have met in our teaching studios. They have pushed us to question, to see things differently, and they give us a great optimism for the future.

We thank all those who sent us, from all over the world, friendly messages, that deeply touched us.

Finally, we think, with a great pleasure, to the inhabitants and users of the buildings and spaces that we have built, they constantly surprise us with their creativity and talent for using and appropriating space, they prove to us that we are right to give freedom in designing the space.

In 1992, we wrote a short text for our first exhibition in Paris, entitled "It will be nice tomorrow" Its conclusion still expresses our state of mind:

"L'architecture sera directe, utile, précise, économe, ouverte, poétique, libre, et cosmopolite."

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