

Tom Pritzker

2021 Laureates Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal Ceremony Speech

Thank you Alejandro.

Good afternoon, or good evening, depending on where you are and when you are participating in this, only the second, and I hope the last, remote Pritzker Prize Ceremony in our 43-year history.

The built work of architects is obviously located in the physical space of earth - or the place we call home. Yet, there is another dimension in which the work of architects is located. It is in the dimension of time. Our time is defined by the pandemic, and with the pandemic, we have become so very intimate with our buildings and the buildings upon buildings that make up our cities.

However difficult this pandemic period has been, there is another place in time that is enduring. It is a place in time which tonight's Pritzker Laureates, Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, anticipated decades ago with significant moral prescience.

Theodore Roosevelt wrote:

We cannot afford merely to sit down and deplore the evils of city life as inevitable, when cities are constantly growing, both absolutely and relatively. We must set ourselves vigorously about the task of improving them.

These words, written more than a century ago, describe our Laureates' purpose.

They have sought to improve the city for its citizens. They have sought to improve the city by responding to environmental, economic and social urgencies— for all of its citizens.

Let me make the point by touching on their journey through social justice to architecture. Lacaton and Vassal met in the late 1970s when they were both students at the School of Architecture of Bordeaux.

Vassal moved to Niger in West Africa in order to pursue urban planning. Lacaton visited her classmate. They were captivated by the resourcefulness of the population of one of the poorest countries in the world.

Niger citizens were able to make something "poetic" out of nothing. They recall this time as their second schooling. This experience roused their conscience and passion. They brought back with them from Niger a profound sense of commitment to making architecture work for those whose resources are limited.

They set before their very eyes an image of those in our society who desperately needed social housing.

It was the great French writer, Victor Hugo who taught us,

Architecture is the great book of humanity. The principal expression of man in his different stages of development, either as a force or as an intelligence. Architecture is the great handwriting of the human race. Every important thought humanity has is written in the buildings and stones of architecture.

What are the great ideas and thoughts that Lacaton and Vassal have written in the material things in this, our space and in this, our time?

Speech by Tom Pritzker (continued)

They come to this moment and this time from their first joint project—a straw hut—constructed of locally sourced bush branches. Imagine that!

At the very outset of their artistic journey they were shaped and given vision in one of the worlds most impoverished lands. They were inspired to create one of the world’s most fundamental of human entitlements, shelter, out of the humblest, but most plentiful of materials. It is in that experience that we can see the nativity of their commitment to social housing, that is to say, shelters that give housing, protection, and warmth to the most marginal in our midst.

As noted in the Jury’s citation, Vassal and Lacaton have rejected city plans that sought the demolition of social housing. Rather, they prioritized the welfare of a building’s inhabitants and their unanimous desires.

An example of this is their transformation of 530 units within three buildings at Grand Parc. This was designed to add generous, bioclimatic, flexible space to each unit, some of which nearly doubled in size. They modernized the building’s aesthetics, but more essentially, its functionality, and all without displacing its residents. In their own words, what inspired them was:

“We met people and families, who were attached to their housing, even if the situation was not the best.”

Much of their built work calls on us to be alert to the time in which we are living. It is to the peripheral and the marginal that we are called to serve.

Lacaton and Vassal are surely amongst the most distinguished guides, devoted as they have been for many decades to the welfare and emotional well-being of those for whom they create housing with compassion and aesthetic beauty.

For these reasons, it is a great honor to recognize Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal as our Pritzker Laureates for 2021.

Thank you.

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