

Kazuyo Sejima & Ryue Nishizawa 2010 Laureates Ceremony Speech

The Lord Palumbo

Chairman of the Jury
The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Of all the venues selected by the Pritzker family for the Award Ceremony that has borne their name for the last 31 years, all the sense of history and the poignant memories evoked by such occasions in cities across the world throughout that time, none, I suggest, can compare with Ellis Island, which for 62 years between 1892 and 1954 represented a refuge, a sanctuary, and a point of universal access for more than 10 million immigrant steamship passengers, offering them a new life, a fresh start, and the prospect of becoming citizens of the United States of America. If we were asked to identify three words in the English language, or in any other language for that matter, to account for this incoming flood of humanity, I suppose that freedom, hope and opportunity would rank high on the list. These words were the message that Ellis Island sent with the up-stretched arm and the beacon of light from the torch of the Statue of Liberty to the millions who came to these shores. These three words could be applied with equal justification to define the work and purpose of the Pritzker Prize for Architecture.

The joint winners of this year's prize, Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, captured the imagination and astonished the world of architecture more than 15 years ago in a collaborative design partnership so close that it is virtually impossible for anyone to say who is responsible for what in any given project. This is surprising until it is realised that both share the same underlying core qualities—sensitivity; restraint; a highly attuned lightness of touch; a tenderness and gentleness carried only by those who have a profound love; knowledge and understanding of nature; and an acute awareness of the environment in which their work is placed. Add to these an integrity that is as unyielding as the force of their resolution, immovable once decided upon; a work ethic that is phenomenal even by the exacting standards of Japan in terms of the tens, scores and hundreds of ideas that are rigorously and individually examined, tested, discarded, or stripped away layer by layer, until the solution is finally adopted; and the result becomes one that St Thomas Aquinas, who famously said that 'Beauty is the splendour of Truth,' might well have used to illustrate his words.

So how then, do we summarise the work of Sejima and Nishizawa? Context, precision, refinement, transparency, purity: There is strength in what they decide to include and, just as important, what to leave out in any design. Their work combines function and flexibility with free-flowing circulation of sinuous curves, undulations and openings based upon the essentials of form, structure, and the organisation of space.

The solutions adopted by these two great architects have about them the quality of a magical paradox in which nothing appears to be happening but everything *is* happening at one and the same time. Their work has been described as otherworldly, ethereal, de-materialized; and so it may be. But it is above all, serious, serene and practical, employing the use of everyday materials, whether in projects large or small, whilst taking full advantage of contemporary technology. Mies van der Rohe, one of the greatest masters of the 20th century, defined architecture as "the will of an epoch translated into space, living, changing, new: To create form out of the nature of our tasks with the methods of our time,—this is our task," he said. By that yardstick Sejima and Nishizawa pass those tests with flying colours. Like Mies, they are entirely comfortable with silence, which is to say that they have developed a sense of their own being. If this seems a little too esoteric, let me assure you that they have an infectious and a ready sense of humour interspersed with sudden peals of laughter, in an office that is happy, committed, and totally at ease with itself.

Throughout their collaboration, Sejima and Nishizawa have designed many buildings, both in Japan and abroad. To list them all would take far longer than the time allotted to me, but I would like to mention just a few examples to underline the range and sweep of their work in the fields of domestic, cultural, educational and commercial architecture.

Speech by The Lord Palumbo (continued)

The first example is the tiny but exquisite S-House, in Okayama, Japan, which was completed in 1996.

Next was the O-Museum in Nagano, Japan, completed two years later in 1998.

This was followed in 2004 by the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, in Kanazawa, Japan.

2006 saw the completion of three important projects:

The Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio.

The Zollverein School of Management and Design, Essen, Germany.

The Novartis Campus WSJ-158 Office Building, Basel, Switzerland.

In 2007, Sejima and Nishizawa made landfall once again in the United States with the New Museum in the Bowery, New York.

In 2009, they designed the Serpentine Pavilion on the lawn of the Serpentine Gallery, London, England.

Whilst only a few weeks ago the Rolex Learning Centre, Lausanne, Switzerland, opened its doors to great public and critical acclaim.

It is no secret that the philosophy and the practice of the arts in Japan are as old as time itself and that for centuries they have exerted an immense influence on western culture, most particularly from the middle of the 19th century to the present day. Without such an influence it would be difficult to imagine the work of a whole raft of artists such as Bonnard, Degas, Gauguin, Manet, Monet, Matisse, Munch, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Vuillard, and Whistler, and there are more. The music of Puccini, the glass of Tiffany and Galle, the films of Eisenstein, the pottery of Bernard Leach, the photography of Cecil Beaton and Jeff Wall, and there are others. Imagine the work of that greatest of American architects, Frank Lloyd Wright, without the influence of Japanese art and printmaking, and what he described as its "poetic abstraction," an "inner harmony," and a "living sympathy with nature." Wright added, for good measure, that *any* building should be a "reflection of its environment and be seen to be as organic as everything around it."

Now, we understand very well that it is not culture but context that is the primary theme, the driving force, and the decisive focus of the work of Sejima and Nishizawa. We also know that despite this, their work is now firmly part of the culture and the heritage of Japan, which has been taken to a new level and a higher dimension as a result. For the exceptional and exemplary achievements of these two great architects, we are proud and honoured this evening to present to Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, the 2010 Award of the Pritzker Prize for Architecture.

The distinguished Architect from Santiago, Chile—Alejandro Aravena.

The Chairman of Vitra, Patron of the Arts, and a man who has enhanced the lives of people the world over through the medium of Architecture and Design, from Basle, Switzerland—Rolf Fehlbaum.

After no less than eight years as a member of the jury, Rolf has decided to step down. He will be much missed. He is that rarity amongst human beings—good, clever, wise, modest, compassionate, generous and incorruptible. He is also the greatest possible fun to be with. A true friend, he is unfailingly positive, which makes him a net contributor to life, and to the lives of those around him. When we take our leave of him later on this evening, it will be definitely *au revoir* and not *adieu*, since we know that as day follows night our paths will intersect on frequent occasions in the future.

Rolf will be succeeded by the distinguished Architect and 2002 Pritzker Prize Laureate from Sydney, Australia, Glenn Murcutt, whom I am delighted to welcome to the fold this evening.

Speech by The Lord Palumbo (continued)

The distinguished Architect, Professor of Rice University School of Architecture, and Principal of the Studio that bears his name, from Houston, Texas—Carlos Jimenez.

The distinguished Architect and Architectural Historian from Helsinki, Finland—Juhani Pallasmaa.

The distinguished Architect and 1998 Pritzker Prize Laureate from Genoa, Italy—Renzo Piano.

The distinguished writer and architectural historian from New York City—Karen Stein.

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