

## Lord Palumbo 2015 Laureate Frei Otto Ceremony Speech

'Time waits for no man.' If I had a jolting premonition of the truth of that aphorism, it most certainly came as a bolt from the blue on the ninth of March, instantly wrapping me in a girdle of grief at the sad news that Frei Otto had passed away within touching distance of his 90th birthday and today's ceremony to install him as the Laureate of this year's Pritzker Prize for Architecture. Fortunately, joy and sorrow go together hand-in-hand as opposite sides of the same coin; and so it was that the sadness that I felt gradually evaporated, like mist under a late morning sun, turning sorrow to celebration for the life of a titan of modern architecture, whose loss will be mourned wherever architecture is practiced the world over, for he was, above all else, a universal citizen; whose influence will continue to gather momentum from those who are aware of it; and, equally, from those who are not.

And so it has been ever since his mother, in a moment of extraordinary prescience, chose to name him Frei, - Frei as in Free, Freiheit as in Freedom, as free and liberating, as a bird on the wing, swooping and soaring in joyful arcs, unrestrained by the dogma of the past, as compelling in its economy of line, and in the improbability of its engineering as it is possible to imagine, cladding the merger of form and function with the invisibility of the air we breathe, and the inevitability of the beauty we find in Nature, as an echo of the immortal words of St Thomas Aquinas who wrote, that Beauty is the Splendour of Truth.

Now, much has been written about Frei Otto's prowess in the air, both as a glider pilot and as a fighter pilot at the controls of a Messerschmitt 109 in the Second World War, but this should come as no surprise for a man of uninhibited freedom, like Frei, who seemed always to wear about his shoulders, with consummate ease and grace, an aura of immortality. Against this background, there emerged someone of innate modesty and humility, - a selfless man who dared to dream, as visionaries do, - in Frei's case, of an architecture that celebrated the human spirit, and the human condition, - transparent, light, and uplifting; an architecture that exuded spiritual generosity, pure, untrammelled, timeless. This free spirit was able to imbue and inform his architecture with the literature of life, in the way that people feel; sublimating the self in the service and for the good of humanity, in particular the poor and defenceless, who cannot fend for themselves: And in so doing he achieved an inner peace of tranquility and serenity.

Of the Pritzker Prize, Frei Otto maintained that for as long as he could remember, he had been cast as an anti-hero, and indeed had become accustomed to think of himself as such: But he also felt that the honour of receiving the Prize would perhaps elevate him to something approaching heroic status, - territory with which he was unfamiliar and therefore less well equipped to fully comprehend. Despite this, in a one-on-one interview with Edward Lifson, a representative of the Prize, in February 2015, he said these words, 'my architectural drive was to design new types of buildings to help poor people, especially following natural disasters and catastrophes. So what shall be better for me than to win this Prize? I will use whatever time is left to me to keep doing what I have been doing which is to help humanity.' And then he paused before adding 'You have here a happy man!'

**Lord Palumbo, 2015 Laureate Frei Otto (continued)**

Man proposes, God disposes: Frei Otto is no longer with us, but his philosophy and the works that he created, will live on to form a rich and lasting legacy. I like to think that he is happy and at peace now in the architects' Valhalla, birdlike features sharply defined; eye-sight restored to its former perfection; head tilted upwards in that familiar trajectory as he strolls with his two close friends, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, chatting about high tensile structures, and the endless fascination of the formation of soap bubbles, and the way in which those same forces could provide a matrix for the design of geodesic domes in scale and volume many times greater than the Pyramids of the Pharaohs, or than the infinitely sublime imagination of Buckminster Fuller had predicted. And all this representing merely the beginning of the beginning, with new worlds to conquer in galaxies unknown, - just the sort of challenge, in fact, that he had always relished and had never been able to resist!

Dear Frei, rest in peace, and accept the Prize that you so richly deserve.

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**For more information, please contact:**

Eunice Kim  
Director of Communications  
The Pritzker Architecture Prize  
Tel: +1 240 401 5649  
Email: [eunicekim@pritzkerprize.com](mailto:eunicekim@pritzkerprize.com)