

Thomas J. Pritzker 2009 Laureate Peter Zumthor Ceremony Speech

Thank you, Lord Palumbo. Honorable Mauricio Macri, Mayor of Buenos Aires, members of the Pritzker Jury, ladies and gentlemen:

Tonight we celebrate the 31st anniversary of the Pritzker Architecture Prize. We begin our fourth decade in the spirit of renewal. This is the first time that the Pritzker Architecture Prize ceremony is being held in South America. Buenos Aires now joins the great list of cities that have hosted the Prize. The selection of Buenos Aires for the site of this year's Pritzker ceremony was made prior to the recent American elections. Nevertheless, it is so very appropriate. The Presidency of Barack Obama turns a new page in American foreign relations. This was seen during the President's recent visit to Latin America. The Pritzker Architecture Prize is proud to be part of this new American beginning in South America.

It is fitting that we honor this year's laureate, Peter Zumthor, during this 200th year of Argentine liberation at the Palacio San Martín. Let me quote from the "Anthem to the Liberator General San Martín":

*Great father of the Argentine people
Greatest hero of freedom
Beneath his shadow the Fatherland grows
In virtue, in work, and in peace*

Those last two lines could have been spoken about this year's laureate, for in the shadow of his work, the world of architecture grows in virtue, work and peace.

For many years, I have been delivering this speech to honor the Pritzker laureate. In doing so, I look for language by which to describe a complex art form and the architect's unique accomplishments. It is never easy to describe and convey in words the experience of space. We seek words to portray the beauty and power of great architecture. This year my task may be easier, for not only has Peter Zumthor given us a remarkable portfolio of built work, but he has given us another gift: books, works of literature.

Zumthor extends to us an uncommon invitation. He invites us to further appreciate his work by writing about his architectural thoughts and experiences. Listen to what he writes:

"When I think about architecture, images come into my mind that have to do with my childhood. Sometimes I can almost feel a metal door handle in my hand, a piece of metal shaped like the back of a spoon. That door handle still seems to me like a special sign of entry into a world of different moods and smells."

Zumthor also describes for us his youthful apprenticeship as a cabinetmaker. It is Zumthor's written art that leads us to an appreciation of his built art. Now think about this: the doorknob and the cabinet, two small objects dwarfed by the size and variety of the large buildings that he designs in adulthood. And yet, the cabinet and the doorknob are connected to those large buildings. For in the cabinet and the doorknob, Zumthor demonstrated a capacity for imagining that the whole of something is expressed in its smallest parts.

Thomas J. Pritzker, 2009 Laureate Peter Zumthor (continued)

Perhaps, like his buildings themselves, Zumthor can best be understood by noting the setting in which he lives and works—the small mountain village of Haldenstein, Switzerland. In this village, far from the big cities where only a few of his buildings are found, he practices his craft. In this village, he has created a contemplative environment for himself. It is there, with discipline and diligence, that he pursues the practice of architecture. He does not accept many commissions. This selectivity is best understood by reading his books. When he designs a work of architecture, he does so as a full provider, with great respect for the environment, comprehensive knowledge of materials, and with a keen eye to how things are made and parts are joined. Like the description of the cabinet and the doorknob, he is someone who sees whole structures in their smallest parts. His work demonstrates that modesty of scale and boldness of form can be found in one work. His buildings are always in dynamic interaction with their environment. They are seductive, drawing people to them and to a deeper understanding of their surroundings. Whether it is the museums in Bregenz, Austria, and Cologne, Germany, or the famous baths in Vals, Switzerland, as well as virtue, work and peace, the “Anthem of General San Martín,” are the hallmarks of this year’s Pritzker laureate, Peter Zumthor.

Ladies and gentlemen, tonight in Buenos Aires, in South America for the first time, we honor this year’s Pritzker Prize laureate.

Thank you. Peter will you please come up?

It is with great pleasure that I present you with the Pritzker Architecture Prize for the year 2009.

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