

Thomas J. Pritzker
2010 Laureates Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa
Ceremony Speech

Thank you Lord Palumbo. Members of the Pritzker Jury, former laureates, ladies and gentlemen: we are here tonight to celebrate our 2010 Laureates, Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa.

But we celebrate our Laureates in an unusual setting: Ellis Island—a place that is legendary for receiving those who took the risk to seek a new life in a world that was frequently unknown to them.

Ellis Island is the place where diversity, the foundation of America's greatness, began. This variety is sustained by the richness of the cultures, traditions, arts, and sciences that so many people and nations have brought to this land. With diversity, we have also inherited a culture of innovation. And yet innovation requires something else; the capacity for risk. The refugees and immigrants of Ellis Island crossed the oceans at great peril to themselves and their families. The people who came to these shores had risk packed into their bags and bones. In many ways Ellis Island represents the collective imagination of all people who want a better life, who envision a better world. That's why we found Ellis Island to be an appropriate place to celebrate architecture. Architecture is where imagination meets life. This is the place and the island dedicated to those who acted on the universal desire for a better life. Architecture is an advocate for the experience of a better life. It directs and sharpens our perceptions of reality. It provides shelter and solace. It imbues our daily lives with a sense of wonder and excitement.

We live in volatile times. Some would respond to these difficulties by condemning risk and casting it as a threat that laws and regulations should extinguish. This, in fact, is exactly the wrong prescription for managing the challenges of the future. Risk and innovation are the catalysts for progress. Our future holds many challenges and many surprises. If we view risk as pejorative, we will kill innovation and the opportunity to effectively and creatively address the challenges in our future.

Without risk and innovation we would not see the likes of the Sydney Opera house, the Pompidou Center, the Guggenheim in New York or the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Not every one of these turned out as hoped. In fact, some caused problems. Yet without some failures, future successes will not happen. There is not a creative person alive who wouldn't attribute some of their success to the innovators of the past.

Architecture holds lessons for all of us. Great architects understand that the future holds a never-ending flow of new challenges. Great architects understand that they must continue to be restless in their pursuit of novel answers to the next set of problems. Among this crowd, risk is to be managed and innovation is to be applauded.

As we contemplate our response to current events we should keep in mind the importance of an environment that allows and encourages people to think differently, allows people to take risks and drive innovation.

Without such an environment we would not have people like Sejima and Nishizawa and we would not be able to benefit from the products of their genius.

Thomas J. Pritzker, 2010 Laureates Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa (continued)

So now, here on Ellis Island, we welcome this year's Pritzker Laureates, Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, back to the United States, back to New York—a city that they have come to know well over their years of working here. For more than fifteen years Sejima and Nishizawa have collaborated as partners at the firm SANAA. The two work in such a way that it is virtually impossible to untangle which individual is responsible for what aspect of a particular design, because all of their projects come from the union of their two minds. As Nishizawa said of their partnership, "We collaborate as equals but we are not the same. We keep each other from losing our way more than anything."

I had the good fortune to attend the opening of their museum in Kanazawa. I landed in a very dark, wet and windy typhoon. It would be hard to forget. I asked myself why I was doing this. A visionary mayor had brought my friend Yutaka Mino to Kanazawa to build a museum that would make a difference to the life of the people of Kanazawa. They turned to Sejima and Nishizawa for the design. What they created was not just a museum; they created an environment for an experience. Most interestingly, that experience could be tailored by each visitor according to their personal desires and imagination. As I walked through the building, I felt that I could take an adventure around the perimeter of this circular building or I could take refuge in one of the galleries created with such remarkable proportions. Through the glass panes, I could contemplate the rain that was pouring into the garden or I could seek the excitement of the objects that were cloistered in the various galleries.

In their work, Sejima and Nishizawa often blur the borders between inside and outside, reminding us that architecture is not only about objects but also experience. They explore, like few others, the phenomenal properties of lightness and transparency, and materiality and synthesis. So that, in the words of one member of the jury, "Their buildings are a natural part of the life of the communities and the people who inhabit them. These are buildings that allow life to take center stage."

So now, with appreciation for their many accomplishments to date as well as their rigorous process of refinement that propels them ever forward, we will ask them to take center stage here tonight. Asked in an interview what advice they have for younger architects, Sejima and Nishizawa gave a predictably minimal reply, two words: "practice" and "continue." Two simple words—"practice" and "continue"—that manage to convey a code for any architect, or person, to live by.

And so, here on Ellis Island we welcome those who come from distant lands, and who have given to this country, and to many others, the gift of their imagination and perseverance.

Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, please come forward. It is with great pleasure that I present you with the Pritzker Architectural Prize for the year 2010.

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