

Jay A. Pritzker 1997 Laureate Sverre Fehn Ceremony Speech

This is a ceremony to bestow the twentieth Pritzker Architecture Prize upon Sverre Fehn of Norway, a country that can already lay claim to three Nobel Prizes for Literature, a great tradition in the arts, with painters such as Munch, composers such as Grieg, and playwrights such as Ibsen. The list of accomplishments of this small country could go on indefinitely.

Each year we attempt to pay homage to a number of other people and places. By choosing a site in Spain this year, we chose to honor last year's Laureate, Rafael Moneo. Rafael was with us last night and this morning. His mother just passed away, so he had to leave.

By choosing this particular building in Spain, we honor another Laureate, Frank Gehry. It always gives us great pleasure to see laureates continue to build outstanding works, and certainly this Guggenheim Bilbao is that and more. And we thank the Guggenheim Foundation for inviting us.

In a way, these ceremonies have become a sort of "can you top this." But there's a reason. We try to keep the Prize as prominent as possible, if we are to be effective in making people aware of good architecture. Last year, we were in the construction site of the new Getty Center in Los Angeles, designed by yet another Laureate, Richard Meier. The year before that, we were in the Palace of Versailles. Some of these are not easy venues to compete with. But this does. And before that, we went to Columbus, which is a small town in Indiana, with which many of you are probably not familiar. But it's probably got more great architecture per square mile, certainly more great modern architecture per square mile, than any other city in America. That was also a way of paying homage to one of our original jurors, Irwin Miller, whose foresight made that town's accomplishment possible.

And speaking of jurors, we honor ours for their uncompromising integrity and ability in marking excellence. Carter has been chairman from the inception in 1979, and I think whatever success this Prize may have had is very much due to Carter's leadership. We're delighted that so many of the current jurors were able to come tonight.

This year they've chosen a man to honor whose career spans fifty years. During this time, he's won the respect and admiration of his peers, not only in Scandinavia, but also throughout Europe. He first caught the attention of the international audience with the Norwegian Pavilion at the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels. Within two years, his Scandinavian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale again captured world acclaim. And the latter was built in Venice's only public park. It didn't disturb the trees. They continue to grow up through the building. It's been hailed as a tribute to Fehn's theories of architectural light and shadow. Although he has said that he thought he was running from traditional Norwegian architecture, in the end he realized he was working within its contexts. How he interprets the site, the light, and building materials all have a strong relationship to his origins.

Architecture has always been an international art, more so perhaps in recent history. In fact, one thing I often note is that Frank Gehry comes from Los Angeles to build a building in Spain, and Rafael goes to Los Angeles to build a building in Los Angeles. Doesn't sound very efficient. When Sverre Fehn graduated from architecture school in 1949 in Oslo, Alvar Aalto was exerting a strong influence on all of Europe, including Norway's leading architect of the time, Arne Korsmo, who designed the 1937 Paris Exposition Pavilion. Korsmo became a mentor to Sverre Fehn, introducing him to Jean Prouvé and Le Corbusier. It was also during this period that Fehn rubbed elbows with another Scandinavian, Jorn Utzon of Denmark, who did the Sydney Opera House, another great building of our era.

Jay A. Pritzker, 1997 Laureate Sverre Fehn (continued)

In the years that the Prize has existed, there have been seven architects chosen from the United States. One of them was born in Ireland. One was born in China. Today, they are far outnumbered by the twelve from other countries: France, Japan, Portugal, Italy, Austria, Germany, Mexico. And tonight we add Norway to the list.

In addition to an international panoply of laureates, we embarked on a grand tour of ceremonial locations. It was sort of a late thought, but it worked out very well. We went to Todai-ji Temple in Nara, Japan; to Goldsmiths' Hall in London; to Palazzo Grassi in Venice; to Prague Castle. And it's been a wonderful world tour. We visited a number of landmarks in the United States as well: including the National Gallery, the Met, the Kimball, and what is now the National Building Museum in Washington, and Chicago's Art Institute.

I reminisce about these various locations for the same reason they were chosen to begin with, to make the Prize and its recipients as high profile throughout the world as possible, and thus a recognizable mark of international excellence. For it is only with such status that the Prize can make any difference.

Described by many as the "Poet of the Straight Line," Sverre Fehn thinks in poetic terms, saying that architecture has a story to tell. The materials of construction are his alphabet with which he writes a story. For him, there's no architecture without construction. The Pritzker Jury lauds Sverre Fehn for his fascinating and exciting combination of modern forms tempered by Scandinavian tradition, and for blending fantasy and reality into buildings that are both contemporary and timeless. For fifty years of virtuosity and creativity, I'd like to present the 1997 Architecture Prize to Sverre Fehn.

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