

Christian de Portzamparc 1994 Laureate Essay

Reinventing Architecture: Christian de Portzamparc

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When Isaac Newton was asked how he saw so far into the cosmos, he replied, by standing on the shoulders of giants—acknowledging all that he owed to those who preceded him and made his own achievements possible. Today’s architects truly stand on the shoulders of giants. Their debt to Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright is enormous; they are the heirs of the broad and diverse contributions of those modernist pioneers, from de Stijl to Alvar Aalto, who led a twentieth-century revolution in the art and technology of building. Whatever one thinks of the world that followed them and betrayed their dreams, architecture was never the same again.

In their turn, today’s architects are creating revolutionary change. Building on, but transcending the modernist rationale of structure and function, they are pursuing a new and equally radical kind of design: sensuous, poetic, complex, often fiercely intellectual, frequently daunting, always eye-and-mind opening, offering brilliant and beautiful alternatives to conventional practice. There has never been amore extraordinary time for architecture than right now, more creative and challenging, more filled with the promise of great work and art.

Some of this new work has already been honored by the Pritzker Prize: Frank Gehry and Alvaro Siza, an American and a Portuguese of similar aims and strikingly disparate styles, have both been recent winners. This year’s laureate, Christian de Portzamparc, is French, like the others, he explores architecture in his own very original, distinctive, and one is tempted to say, distinctively French, way. Like the others, he is pushing the frontiers of the art. What all of these architects are doing, in a sense, is reinventing architecture. They are stretching accepted limits, discovering new ways of seeing and building, much as Mannerism and the Baroque stretched the principles of the Renaissance, forever altering its vocabulary and range.

These buildings must be visited personally; what one usually sees in pictures are strange shapes and stylistic mannerisms that merely hint at the unusual design strategies underneath. Portzamparc’s work, which invokes the shapes, colors and images of the 1950s and 60s with unabashed elan, is easily misunderstood. It would be simple to call it clever theater, an example of the fashionable appropriation of the remote (for these younger architects) near-past for its romantic and decorative appeal. His roofs soar, swoop and hover; free-form shapes are lovingly recalled; nostalgic details are reconstituted in aluminum, tile and concrete that honor Morris Lapidus’s “architecture of joy.” In addition to Miami-modern redux, there are echoes of Oscar Niemeyer and Roberto Burle Marx in the undulating curves that transform Corbusian austerity in Latin American exuberance. He clearly loves it all, without condescension.

To dismiss this work as homage to a trendy vernacular, however, one must overlook the logic and originality of Portzamparc’s plans, the expert and effective way in which his solutions flow and function, his sure grasp of scale and proportion, his superior sense of urban amenity, his lyrical use of light and color. Given cultural distance and European perspective, his sources transcend shallow sentimentalism. This is no artfully retro exercise; the timeless elements of architecture are being dramatically reinterpreted. These colorful, light-filled forms serve a functional and social organization of exceptional skill. Portzamparc transforms his obvious delight in Arp-like curves and giant cones and candy colors into a pop monumentality that takes serious high camp into the realm of serious high art.

Make no mistake; this is serious architecture. It is also serious hedonism and profound French chic. But unlike so much French architecture, where the chic is skin-deep, this is seriously innovative work with

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an impressive range of invention.

Only a seriously assured architect could carry it off. Official French taste tends to favor modish displays of real and faux engineering over a “humanism”—a loaded word—that delights in subjective and evocative images. But Portzamparc is not alone in the persistent incorporation of personal stylistic icons—James Stirling had his lighthouses and Aldo Rossi has his haunting skeletal stairs and lonely lookout towers.

At 50—a young age in a field where the more important commissions tend to go to experienced, older practitioners—Portzamparc is already the accomplished designer of a series of major buildings. He has not yet perfected the art of suavely flamboyant self-presentation of the celebrity architect. Trailing a well-worn raincoat that is somewhat more, or less, than Armani-casual, a gently beat-up fedora over curly dark hair and puppy-sad eyes lit by an occasional wan smile, he has the look of a star-crossed, rather than star architect. He is just as likely to wear out a visitor, preferably in terrible weather, with earnestly commendable rehabs than his star turns. But when one gets to them, they are breathtaking.

There have been approximately ten years between the start of the first part of his competition-winning design of 1983 for the Cite de la Musique in the redeveloped area of La Villette and the completion of the second half of this very large complex in the Parisian outskirts. One of Mitterrand’s grand travaux, this national conservatory for music and dance is less well known, but more interesting innovative than many of the projects to come out of that imperial effort.

The completed structure, already in use, contains both performance and student facilities. There is nothing conventional about this building. A dramatic, multi-storied entrance serves as a circulation core; stairs, corridors, and tiers of open balconies surround this central space, creating visible stages at many levels on which people come and go. Natural light, top to bottom interior views, generous vistas out to those controversial cones and curving balconies (one is the organ recital hall, the other connects the roofs of separate units) belie the fact that the building is partially underground. Deco details beguile in colors that conquer an institutional air.

The second structure, which houses a major concert hall, a museum and studios, starts with a stunning public act. Visitors step down from several entrances into a plaza that serves as a collecting point for pedestrian traffic, which is then carried along a curving, covered promenade leading to and circling the concert hall. One follows and narrowing sweep until the corridor reaches the street. Walls change in hue as the corridor unfolds; Portzamparc is also a painter, with an artist’s eye for what color does to a place and the people in it.

In no way is this a traditional promenade in the City Beautiful sense; choreographed as much as designed, it relies on the drama and mystery of movement as well as on traditional monumental scale and architectural form. The space is intriguingly ambiguous in its covered-open, public private nature and the circular path that never quite reveals what lies beyond. Inside the large concert hall—one of numerous performance and practice spaces for which Pierre Boulez has been an active collaborator—a rainbow of lights can instantly imbue the handsome wood panels with Hollywood glamour, a feature dear to Portzamparc’s heart.

His Ballet School for the Paris Opera at Nanterre is also a competition winning design. The building is treated, quite literally, as the sum of its collective parts. A glass-walled entrance provides access to its three areas—dance studios, a classroom and administration section, and student dormitories while acting as a transparent link. These areas are shaped and disposed by circulation patterns based on the acoustic isolation of the studios, the social orientation of classrooms and offices, and the privacy of

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the dormitories in a connected, serpentine wing, narrow and sinuous, that curves across the landscape like a tail. The building's central feature and dramatic focus is soaring, full-eight helicoidal stair that connects the dance studios. Constant movement up and down this spiral, and across the open mezzanines that alternate with studio entrances on different floors, can be seen from all levels. Bridges spanning this central space become lounges that tie the activities together and provide a place to pause between them.

Portzamparc is both a sophisticated stylist and sensitive urbanist—qualities usually considered antithetical. In his housing, sociology coexists comfortably with aesthetics and on insightful understanding of the nature of public and private places. Although it is not uncommon for able architects to court disaster when moving from small to large scale, he is equally capable of handling the bold monumentality of the Cite de la Musique and the knowing and subtle certainties of a small addition to Paris's Bourdelle Museum. Bourdelle's heroically energetic figures tend to barge about a bit in the restricted galleries, but the space has been opened up with natural light washing pale gray, textured plaster walls from above, for a sympathetic setting that offers subtle homage to the sculptor, in spite of overcrowding and distracting spotlights.

Perhaps his famous, or notorious, building, depending on one's point of view, is the "ski boot" office building for the Credit Lyonnais in Lille, one of those "images" that editors rush to publish and architects love to promote. He can go overboard for the occasional oddball idea, zealously promoting something bravely boomerang-shaped to a less-than tuned-in audience. Nor is he immune to the unremitting French fascination with googie, or gimmicky modernism, where funky outrageousness passes for creative inspiration. But Portzamparc's buildings succeed because they address fundamental concerns—the needs and pleasures of the body and spirit—those human values that all great architecture serves and turns into art. And he has something that other architects recognize instantly, the single-minded application of a poetic creativity of rich dimensions.

What is common to all of these buildings, and too much of the new work, is an enormous, tradition-shattering change in concept and design. Architecture is no longer approached as the making of a formal "container," as it has developed over centuries of stylistic evolution. The process of design begins inside, in "deconstruction" fashion, seeking new meanings, breaking the building down into its component parts for a searching analysis of their functional rationale. These architects think first in terms of interior space and second in terms of enclosure; they handle space not as finite form, but as serial, non-static and open-ended. The significance of this approach is that the building's elements can be redesigned and reassembled in a variety of unconventional configurations, with a greater consciousness, and sometimes total reinterpretation, of the relationship of use and form. Circulation holds it all together; movement through the structure is an essential part of its multi-faceted design. In Portzamparc's buildings, this fragmentation and movement involves all of the senses; it induces a profound sense of pleasure. This is a most sophisticated updating of the architecture of joy.

The exterior enclosure of these new spatial relationships becomes a free exercise in style, a matter of personal preference in this time of pluralistic taste and expression. Far more important is the expansion of the art itself: To architecture's conventional definition as a three-dimensional, spatial art, a fourth dimension has been added—an aesthetic of time-related experiences and effects. Movement and change and multi-dimensional compositions replace the classic, static experience of form and space. Interlocking, layered views are seen simultaneously and sequentially. The eye and the body are invited, and required, to register perceptions and sensations of an actual and aesthetic complexity rarely encountered before. Both the vision and the reality of architecture are enlarged by a process that quite literally alters the way we see and use buildings. It is creative change of this magnitude that defines the history of art.

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In the end, it is not how this transformation is achieved, but what it does for us, that matters—whether we receive that extra dimension of dignity or delight and elevated sense of self that the art of building can provide through the nature of the places in which we live and work. Today everything seems to conspire to reduce life and feeling to the most deprive and demeaning bottom line. What counts more than theory or intellectual argument is whether the results improve our experience of the build world; whether they make us wonder why we never noticed places in quite this special way before.

The final test is the manner in which ideas, vocabulary and structure are employed, how far these instruments of exploration carry architecture into new areas of use and sensory satisfaction, how well they move it beyond current limitations, whether the buildings serve and please us, in the personal, and much larger societal sense, and ultimately, how this process engages and reveals necessity and beauty in the language of our time. That this is happening now, in spite of culture of the transient, the shoddy and the unreal, is a matter for recognition and celebration. There are some exceptional talents producing extraordinary buildings on the leading edge of this changing art. It is a privilege to be able to honor them and their creators.

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