

The Pritzker Architecture Prize

Luis Barragán 1980 Laureate Acceptance Speech

I welcome the opportunity to express my admiration for the United States of America, generous patron of the arts and sciences, which—as in so many instances—has transcended its geographical frontiers and purely national interests to confer this high distinction on a son of Mexico, thus recognizing the universality of cultural values and, in particular, those of my native country.

But as no one ever owes all to his own individual effort, it would be ungrateful not to remember all those who throughout my lifetime have contributed to my work with their talents, assistance and encouragement: fellow architects, photographers, writers, journalists, as well as personal friends who have honored me by taking an active interest in my work.

I take this occasion to present some impressions and recollections that, to some extent, sum up the ideology behind my work. In this regard, Mr. Jay Pritzker stated in an announcement to the press with excessive generosity what I consider essential to that ideology: that I had been chosen as the recipient of this prize for having devoted myself to architecture “as a sublime act of poetic imagination.” Consequently, I am only a symbol for all those who have been touched by Beauty.

It is alarming that publications devoted to architecture have banished from their pages the words Beauty, Inspiration, Magic, Spellbound, Enchantment, as well as the concepts of Serenity, Silence, Intimacy and Amazement. All these have nestled in my soul, and though I am fully aware that I have not done them complete justice in my work, they have never ceased to be my guiding lights.

Religion and Myth. It is impossible to understand Art and the glory of its history without avowing religious spirituality and the mythical roots that lead us to the very reason of being of the artistic phenomenon. Without the one or the other there would be no Egyptian pyramids or those of ancient Mexico. Would the Greek temples and Gothic cathedrals have existed? Would the amazing marvels of the Renaissance and the Baroque have come about?

And in another field, would the ritual dances of the so-called primitive cultures have developed? Would we now be the heirs of the inexhaustible artistic treasure of worldwide popular sensitivity? Without the desire for God, our planet would be a sorry wasteland of ugliness. “The irrational logic harbored in the myths and in all true religious experience has been the fountainhead of the artistic process at all times and in all places.” These are words of my good friend, Edmundo O’Gorman, and, with or without his permission, I have made them mine.

Beauty. The invincible difficulty that the philosophers have in defining the meaning of this word is unequivocal proof of its ineffable mystery. Beauty speaks like an oracle, and ever since man has heeded its message in an infinite number of ways: it may be in the use of tattoos, in the choice of a seashell necklace by which the bride enhances the promise of her surrender, or, again, in the apparently superfluous ornamentation of everyday tools and domestic utensils, not to speak of temples and palaces and even, in our day, in the industrialized products of modern technology. Human life deprived of beauty is not worthy of being called so.

Silence. In the gardens and homes designed by me, I have always endeavored to allow for the interior placid murmur of silence, and in my fountains, silence sings.

Solitude. Only in intimate communion with solitude may man find himself. Solitude is good company and my architecture is not for those who fear or shun it.

Serenity. Serenity is the great and true antidote against anguish and fear, and today, more than ever, it is the architect’s duty to make of it a permanent guest in the home, no matter how sumptuous or how humble. Throughout my work I have always strived to achieve serenity, but one must be on guard not to destroy it by the use of an indiscriminate palette.

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Joy. How can one forget joy? I believe that a work of art reaches perfection when it conveys silent joy and serenity.

Death. The certainty of death is the spring of action and therefore of life, and in the implicit religious element in the work of art, life triumphs over death.

Gardens. In the creation of a garden, the architect invites the partnership of the Kingdom of Nature. In a beautiful garden, the majesty of Nature is ever present, but Nature reduced to human proportions and thus transformed into the most efficient haven against the aggressiveness of contemporary life. Ferdinand Bac taught us that "the soul of gardens shelters the greatest sum of serenity at man's disposal," and it is to him that I am indebted for my longing to create a perfect garden. He said, speaking of his gardens at les Colombiers, "in this small domain, I have done nothing else but joined the millenary solidarity to which we are all subject: the ambition of expressing materially a sentiment, common to many men in search of a link with nature, by creating a place of repose of peaceable pleasure " It will appear obvious, then, that a garden must combine the poetic and the mysterious with a feeling of serenity and joy. There is no fuller expression of vulgarity than a vulgar garden.

To the south of Mexico City lies a vast extension of volcanic rock, arid, overwhelmed by the beauty of this landscape, I decided to create a series of gardens to humanize, without destroying, its magic. While walking along the lava crevices, under the shadow of imposing ramparts of live rock, I suddenly discovered, to my astonishment, small secret green valleys the shepherds call them "jewels" surrounded and enclosed by the most fantastic, capricious rock formations wrought on soft, melted rock by the onslaught of powerful prehistoric winds. The unexpected discovery of these "jewels" gave me a sensation similar to the one experienced when, having walked through a dark and narrow tunnel of the Alhambra, I suddenly emerged into the serene, silent and solitary "Patio of the Myrtles" hidden in the entrails of that ancient palace. Somehow I had the feeling that it enclosed what a perfect garden no matter its size should enclose: nothing less than the entire Universe.

This memorable epiphany has always been with me, and it is not by mere chance that from the first garden for which I am responsible all those following are attempts to capture the echo of the immense lesson to be derived from the aesthetic wisdom of the Spanish Moors.

Fountains. A fountain brings us peace, joy and restful sensuality and reaches the epitome of its very essence when by its power to bewitch it will stir dreams of distant worlds.

While awake or when sleeping, the sweet memories of marvelous fountains have accompanied me throughout my life. I recall the fountains of my childhood; the drains for excess water of the dam; the dark ponds in the recess of abandoned orchards; the curbstone of shallow wells in the convent patios; the small country springs, quivering mirrors of ancient giant water-loving trees, and then, of course, the old aqueducts perennial reminders of Imperial Rome which from lost horizons hurry their liquid treasure to deliver it with the rainbow ribbons of a waterfall.

Architecture. My architecture is autobiographical, as Emilio Ambasz pointed out in his book on my work published by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Underlying all that I have achieved, such as it, I share the memories of my father's ranch where I spent my childhood and adolescence. In my work I have always strived to adapt to the needs of modern living the magic of those remote nostalgic years.

The lessons to be learned from the unassuming architecture of the village and provincial towns of my country have been a permanent source of inspiration. Such, for instance, the whitewashed walls; the peace to be found in patios and orchards; the colorful streets; the humble majesty of the village squares surrounded by shady open corridors. And as there is a deep historical link between these teachings and those of the North African and Moroccan Villages, they too have enriched my perception of beauty in architectural simplicity.

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Being a Catholic, I have frequently visited with reverence the now empty monumental monastic buildings that we inherited from the powerful religious faith and architectural genius of our colonial ancestors, and I have always been deeply moved by the peace and wellbeing to be experienced in those uninhabited cloisters and solitary courts. How I have wished that these feelings may leave their mark on my work.

The Art of Seeing. It is essential to an architect to know how to see: I mean, to see in such a way that the vision is not overpowered by rational analysis. And in this respect I will take advantage of this opportunity to pay homage to a very dear friend who, through his infallible aesthetic taste, taught us the difficult art of seeing with innocence. I refer to the Mexican painter Jesus (Chucho) Reyes Ferreira, for whose wise teachings I publicly acknowledge my indebtedness.

And it may not be out of place to quote another great friend of mine and of the Arts, the poet Carlos Pellicer:

*Through sight the good and the bad
we do perceive
Unseeing eyes
Souls deprived of hope.*

Nostalgia. Nostalgia is the poetic awareness of our personal past, and since the artist's own past is the mainspring of his creative potential, the architect must listen and heed his nostalgic revelations.

My associate and friend, the young architect Raul Ferrera, as well as our small staff, share with me the ideology that I have tried to present. We have worked and hope to continue to work inspired by the faith that the aesthetic truth of those ideas will in some measure contribute toward dignifying human existence.

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For more information, please contact:

Martha Thorne, Executive Director
The Pritzker Architecture Prize
71 South Wacker Drive
Suite 4700
Chicago, Illinois 60606
email: marthathorne@pritzkerprize.com