

CHICAGO ARCHITECT



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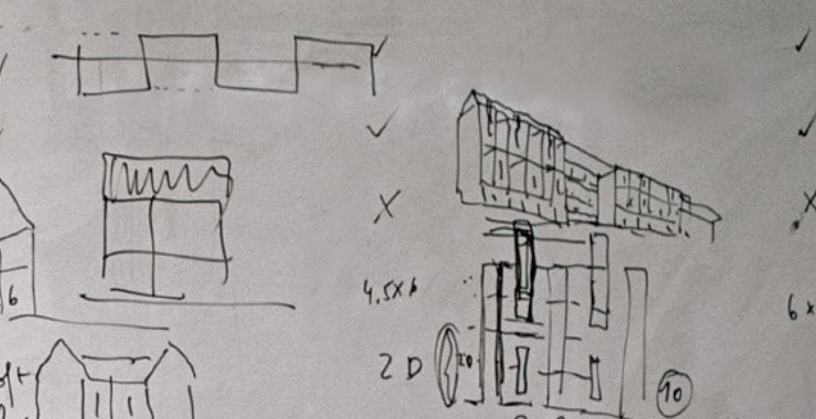
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THE ART OF ARCHITECTURE/ THE POLITICS OF AWARDS:

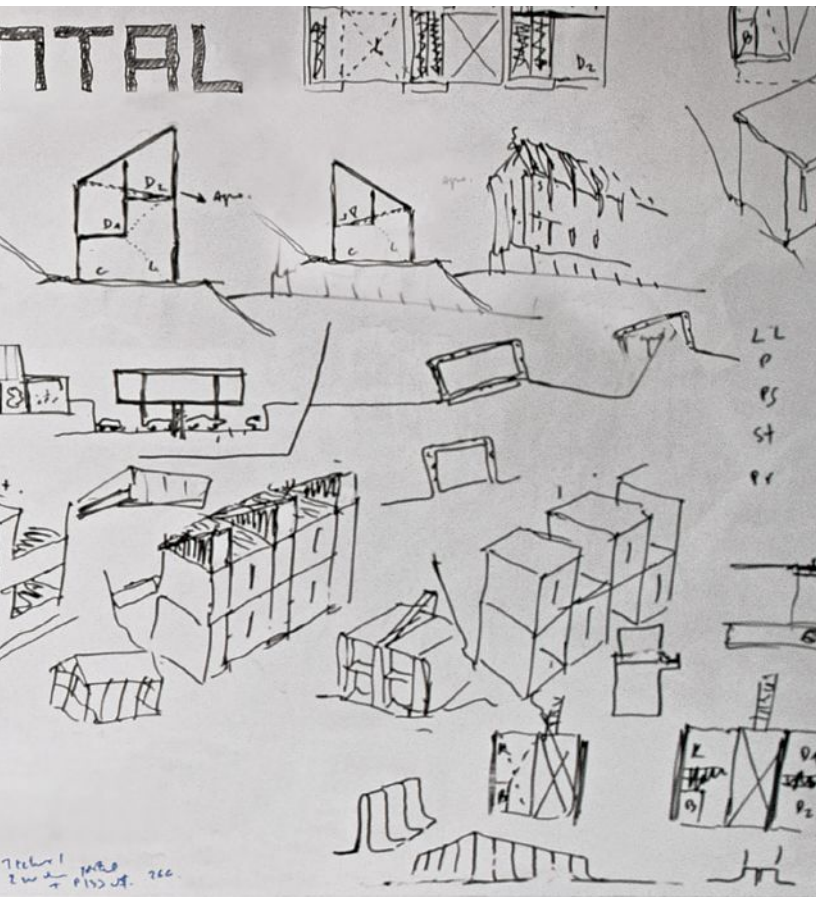
2016 PRITZKER ARCHITECTURE PRIZE CONTINUES CONVERSATIONS ABOUT

BY DAWN REISS





SEXISM AND SOCIAL VALUE



ALEJANDRO ARAVENA, PHOTO BY CRISTOBAL PALMA

Martha Thorne, executive director of the Pritzker Architecture Prize vividly remembers the phone call she made to Alejandro Aravena telling him the eight-person jury had selected him as the 2016 prizewinner.

“He literally could not speak,” Thorne said. “The first thing he said to me was ‘Martha, don’t joke about these things.’ I said ‘But I’m not.’”

Thorne says the Chilean architect, who is the director of the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, was genuinely shocked and emotional. “He never expected it,” Thorne said. “In part because he is that type of person, incredibly generous. The jury is committed to the prize and the best. They are committed to the mission of the prize before any other. There’s no benefit for the jury in engaging in politics.”

But as anyone knows, anytime there’s a group of people, there are politics. Since the inception of the Pritzker Architecture Prize by Jay and Cindy Pritzker, which was first given to Phillip Johnson in 1979, the influential prize has been synonymous as the “Nobel Prize for architects.” There’s no doubt that the winners are some of most influential architects from I. M. Pei, FAIA, and Renzo Piano, Hon. FAIA, to Wang Shu and Frei Otto. The prize, as Thorne said, honors a “body of built work that embodies the art of architecture and provides consistent contribution to humanity.”

It also has become known as a cornerstone for the political debate of how female architects are treated within the industry, given the prize’s 37-year history and inclusion of only two females, Zaha Hadid, Hon. FAIA, in 2004 and the husband-and-wife team of Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa in 2010. As Denise Scott Brown, Hon. FAIA, is quick to point out, her 2013 request — and denial by the Pritzker Architecture Prize’s jury for an inclusion ceremony to be honored for the breadth of work she has accomplished at the architectural firm she runs with her husband Robert

VILLA VERDE HOUSING, 2013, CONSTITUCIÓN, CHILE., PHOTOS BY ELEMENTAL
TOP: "HALF OF A GOOD HOUSE" DEVELOPMENT, FINANCED WITH PUBLIC MONEY.
BOTTOM: MIDDLE-CLASS STANDARD ACHIEVED BY THE RESIDENTS THEMSELVES.



ALTHOUGH GEHRY SAYS AT LEAST 50 PERCENT OF THE ARCHITECTURAL STUDENTS HE TEACHES ARE WOMEN, HE SAYS HE DOESN'T SEE THEM IN THE OFFICES OR BEING WRITTEN OR TALKED ABOUT.

"Bob" Venturi, FAIA, who won the prize in 1991 — speaks volumes. Although Thorne said the lack of female winners is "an extremely valid point," she said in the case of Scott Brown, "the jury decided it couldn't go back and overturn a decision by another jury of individuals."

It's a decision many still question. The petition started in 2013 by Harvard architecture students now has more than 20,000 signatures, and still circulates on change.org requesting the jury to recognize Scott Brown's contributions to her husband's prize. "I didn't say re-write history," Brown said. "I said comment on history that went bad by having an inclusion ceremony."

Thorne said even with the selection of Hadid, there was a lot of criticism saying she hadn't built enough. "Or that she only got it because she's a woman," Thorne said. "So you see it's a situation where you're damned if you do and damned if you don't."

It has prompted an industry-wide discussion about what should and needs to be done to grow, promote and recognize the accomplishments of female architects within the industry — and the role of the Pritzker Prize within that realm. It's a situation that Frank Gehry, FAIA, who served on the jury from 1993-95 and 2003-06, after winning the prize in 1989, calls a "complicated issue." "But I don't think we can sweep it under the table," he said, "We've got to get on it. We've got to do it. We've all got to get our shit together. Let's get on with it. It's time."

Although Gehry says at least 50 percent of the architectural students he teaches are women, he says he doesn't see them in the offices or being written or talked about. "They get lost in the system," Gehry said, adding that everyone in the profession needs to help equalize the sexes so important talent is not being drained from the industry. "In our office, we are trying to do things, but it's got to come more naturally. We try to let them grow like we do with the guys on an equal basis."

The prize's wide reach can open doors. Even though Gehry said he was "too far gone" when he received the prize, he admits that people still make decisions based on whether someone is a Pritzker Prize award winner or not.


With the selection of Aravena this year, a former jury member and his focus on affordable housing, many are

saying there is a shift toward "actionable idealism." By expanding the role of what traditional architects have done by reinterpreting the laws of economics, housing policy and working in participatory way, Aravena created a new approach to public housing.

"By using tools architects often don't embrace to re-define the role of the architect is what Alejandro has done," Thorne said. "That's that value-add the jury has seen, and that's where I think the trend is going. Great architecture that enriches the spirit, contributes to our environment, doing something more clearly in that social or humanitarian realm."

Catherine Baker, AIA, principal at Chicago-based Landon Bone Baker Architects, said there's a movement now when it comes to economic equality that the design of cities and their environment affects the health of its citizens with the focus on climate change and CO_2 emissions. "Back in the 1960s with modern high rises, it felt like architecture failed, because there was a reluctance to believe that architecture affects society," Baker said. "It doesn't work in isolation. As architects, we can't live in every community you design, so you have to hear what the public and community is saying and not put your assumptions on them to figure out how you design for them."

Over the years, the focus of the prize has shifted to reflect this. The prize has always been about the "art of architecture," and the industry has focused on the greater humanitarian and social needs, Gehry said.

A photograph of a modern building with a prominent red and blue facade. The building features large glass windows and a balcony. Below the building is a brick courtyard with several tables and chairs. Two people are walking in the courtyard. The sky is clear and blue.

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– FRANK GEHRY



ST. EDWARD'S UNIVERSITY DORMS, 2008, AUSTIN, TEXAS, USA. PHOTO BY CRISTOBAL PALMA

Even though the early winners from Phillip Johnson to Kenzo Tange “were clearly important architects,” Thorne said, they were important because of the recognizable buildings they built. “When I think of the early winners, I think of them with a building or several buildings that have become icons in a way in society,” she explained. “I think if we think about the evolution of the prize, the message of the jury has become broader and deeper over the years. The architecture must be of high quality and it must embody all of those criteria that the jury feels makes for a good building, a public space, but it also has to have something more. And that something more takes different formats.”

To Gehry’s point: “If you only give the prize for social and humanitarian needs, there are 500 architects out there who could get that prize. Every architect I know of is involved with social and humanitarian needs. It’s never been otherwise.”

It is the people selected for the jury who create these shifts, Gehry said. “When you’re on a jury and you’re the architect who does things your way, it’s hard to look at somebody else’s work who is a competitor and be objective sometimes,” he admitted. “That’s why having the different disciplines on the jury really works because they are able to pull you up and say ‘*Oh come on, just look at this without your ego in it.*’”

Still, when it comes to winners like Aravena, the third former jury member to win in the prize’s history, Gehry said that “familiarity breeds contempt” not favoritism.

If that was the case, Scott Brown said maybe things would have turned out differently for her and the Pritzker Prize. Although she doesn’t know Aravena personally, she said, “What I’m telling you is that he’s coming very, very late to things I’ve been dealing with and writing about and practicing since the early ’60s. It’s a way of correcting themselves and a lot of it is to avoid me.”

Although, Scott Brown wants to be judged by her body of work, not by awards, she said receiving letters from the petition and the 2016 AIA Gold Medal with Venturi has brought some closure. She suggested the Pritzker Prize Foundation needs to rethink its jury to include a strong balance of women-to-men ratio and a “rethinking of policy” for a prize she said that has been devalued.

“People who run it are giving the wrong direction, and I feel the Pritzkers themselves should take it over because they made the good decisions in the first place,” Scott Brown said. “And the good decisions were based on good architects and admiration for Lewis Mumford; they should go read Mumford. That will help them restructure it and redirect it and try the right jury.” **CA**