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Richard Rogers, architect behind Pompidou Center, wins Pritzker

By Robin Pogrebin

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NEW YORK: Three decades after his Pompidou Center in Paris turned the architecture world upside down and brought him global fame, the British architect Richard Rogers has been named the 2007 winner of the Pritzker Prize, the profession's highest honor.

In the citation accompanying its decision, to be announced Thursday, the Pritzker jury saluted Rogers for his "unique interpretation of the Modern Movement's fascination with the building as machine, an interest in architectural clarity and transparency, the integration of public and private spaces, and a commitment to flexible floor plans that respond to the ever-changing demands of users."

In a telephone interview from London, the architect, 73, said he did not see the award as overdue. "It's not when it comes, it's the gift that matters," Rogers said. (Renzo Piano, his co-architect on the Pompidou Center, received the Pritzker in 1998.)

The award - a \$100,000 grant and a bronze medallion - is to be presented to Rogers on June 4 at the Banqueting House in London.

Rogers earned a reputation as a high-tech iconoclast with the 1977 completion of the Pompidou Center, with its exposed skeleton of brightly colored tubes for mechanical systems. The Pompidou "revolutionized museums," the Pritzker jury said, "transforming what had once been elite monuments into popular places of social and cultural exchange, woven into the heart of the city." Similarly, his 1986 Lloyd's office building in the heart of London's financial district features an inside-out design, with a soaring atrium surrounded by external escalators and elevators.

Asked to describe his own stylistic signature, Rogers said he was recognized for "celebrating the components and the structure."

"That's how we get rhythm and poetry out of it," he said. He added that he would like to be known for "buildings which are full of light, which are light in weight, which are flexible, which have low energy, which are what we call legible. You can read how the building is put together."

Other high-profile projects by Rogers include the sprawling Millennium Dome in Greenwich, England, suspended from steel masts and secured by steel cable (1999), and the law courts in Bordeaux, (1998), which consist of seven "pods" clad in cedar wood surrounded by glass walls under an undulating copper roof.

His most recent major undertaking was the new terminal at Barajas International Airport in Madrid (2005), featuring waves formed by wings of prefabricated steel and a roof covered in bamboo strips. He also designed Terminal 5 at London Heathrow Airport.

Over the years, the architect has become well known for his philosophy as well as for his buildings. His London firm, Richard Rogers Partnership, has adopted bylaws specifying that the directors get no more than six times the salary of the lowest-paid architect, with the rest of the money going to profit-sharing, charities or investment.

"I don't believe in the ownership of work," he said.

The firm, with offices in Barcelona, Madrid and Tokyo, will be renamed Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners next month. "It's time to start to broaden the top," Rogers said.

He has also been in the forefront of the sustainable architecture movement, designing buildings with the environment in mind. His building for the Welsh National Assembly in Cardiff cut Parliament's energy consumption in half, he said; as chief adviser on architecture and urbanism to the mayor of London, he has encouraged the construction of more compact developments around mass transportation.

"It's always been part of our work," he said. "I don't think we realized the limited number of years before we were going to have such serious problems, that mankind might be wiped off the earth. Certainly it's become much more urgent."

Rogers, the 31st Pritzker laureate, was born in Florence in 1933. His father was a doctor and his mother had a great interest in modern design, he said. In 1938, the Rogers family moved to England, where he struggled through the public school system; many years later, he received a diagnosis of dyslexia.

"I was called backward," Rogers said. "We didn't know dyslexia."

Just as he was completing secondary school in 1951 - and seriously considering a career in dentistry - the Festival of Britain introduced him to modern architecture. He was captivated by some of the temporary buildings thrown up along the South Bank.

A two-year stint in the British military took him to Trieste, where he became acquainted with the work of his father's cousin, Ernesto Rogers, one of Italy's prominent architects, and decided to attend the Architectural Association School in London.

In 1961, Rogers attended Yale University on a Fulbright scholarship to pursue a master's degree in architecture. There he developed an interest in Frank Lloyd Wright - "My first god," the architect has said.

After working for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in New York, he returned to England to start his first practice, Team 4, with his first wife, Su Brumwell; Norman Foster; and Wendy Cheeseman.

Rogers and Foster each struck out on their own in 1967. By 1971, Rogers had joined forces with Piano to create Piano + Rogers. That year they won the commission to design the Pompidou Center, where Rogers's work will be featured in an exhibition this fall. Piano and Rogers split in 1978.

Over the years, Rogers has racked up plenty of accolades, including a life peerage in 1996. But the honors have not convinced him that architects deserve the rock-star status that so many enjoy. Richard Rogers Partnership employs more than 100 people, he pointed out, and he could not achieve what he does without them.

"You are leading a team," Rogers said. "I've never really understood how architects can think of themselves as an individual."

Rogers has four projects under way in New York: an expanded Jacob K. Javits Convention Center on Manhattan's Far West Side; a tower at the World Trade Center site; a complex at Silvercup Studios in Long Island City, Queens; and a redesign of the East River waterfront.

Not all of these designs have been well received. Appraising Rogers's vision for the Javits Center in The New York Times, Nicolai Ouroussoff said its boxy design was "a decent but not particularly dazzling work of architecture." But the critic offered glowing praise for the architect's re-imagining of Manhattan's East Side waterfront, designed in collaboration with Gregg Pasquarelli of SHoP Architects and the landscape architect Ken Smith.

"The idea is to create a seamless, contemplative environment along the waterfront that embraces both the fine-grained scale of the surrounding communities and the monumental scale of the freeway," Ouroussoff wrote. "In doing so, the architects shrug off the conflict between Modernists and historicists that absurdly still defines so many urban planning debates in New York."

Rogers said he was gratified by his New York commissions. He described the Javits project on the Far West Side as "the most complex, but also the most exciting potentially - as a public space that could create the regeneration of a large area which is very depressed."

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