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## Jean Nouvel's Moment in the Sun

Winning the Pritzker Prize makes him this year's architectural "it boy," but the French architect has proven he's no flash in the pan

by [Jennifer Fishbein](#)

Nonconformist, strong-willed, and provocative: sounds more like your average teenager than a winner of the Pritzker Prize, architecture's loftiest award. But this year's recipient, Frenchman Jean Nouvel, lays claim to all those traits, and then some. At 62, "his courageous spirit of new ideas and his challenge of accepted norms" proceeds unabated, in the words of the Pritzker jury.

This is undoubtedly Nouvel's moment. Aside from winning the Pritzker, his offices in Paris, New York, London, Copenhagen, Rome, Madrid, and Barcelona are busy with more than 40 active projects in 13 countries, including an outpost of France's Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi and a 75-story glass residential hotel-museum tower beside New York's Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art.

Nouvel has ridden a growing wave of popularity over the past two decades, kicked off by the completion of his World Arab Institute in Paris in 1987. Its glass wall of automated lenses blending high technology and traditional Arab latticework departed strongly from the often "heavy-handed" modern and postmodern structures that had cropped up in France in previous years, says Mary McLeod, a professor of architecture at Columbia University and co-editor of *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology and Architecture Reproduction*.

### DRAWS ACCLAIM AND CRITICISM

"The Institut du Monde Arabe [Arab World Institute] was an amazing breakthrough—rich, complex, and set another standard of quality at a moment French architecture desperately needed it," McLeod says. It "had a level of design and care that was unusual at the time, both at the larger urban scale and at the level of detail."

A slew of projects followed, mostly in France, including the Lyon Opera House, which drew both acclaim and criticism upon its completion in 1993. When Nouvel mounted the stage on the theater's opening weekend, he was booed by audience members put off by the black interior, blinding floor lights, and balcony railings that obstructed the view of the stage. Over time, though, Lyon has grown fonder of the star architect's project.

The following year, Nouvel's Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art opened in Paris, dazzling critics and the public alike with its chic glass wall that separates the complex from the street—a precursor to a similar partition at his more brazen Quai Branly Museum, which opened in 2006.

### LIVING BUILDINGS

Apart from his innovative and striking use of glass, Nouvel's structures bear no signature style, like the distinct curviness of Frank Gehry's buildings. Nouvel's upcoming residential building on the Chelsea waterfront in New York, for instance, will display 1,700 glass panes of various sizes to produce a glittering reflection of the sun. Nouvel also likes jutting structures: his Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis features a 175-foot-long "endless bridge" that sticks out of the building, while his Cultural and Conference Center in Lucerne, Switzerland, has a slim copper roof that cantilevers out over Lake Lucerne.

Another common thread in Nouvel's work is his collaboration with French botanist Patrick Blanc, [whose vegetation-covered walls](#) (BusinessWeek.com, 10/4/06) grace several of the architect's buildings. Blanc's exterior plant-wall at the Quai Branly museum softens the colossal masterpiece, while the interior "vertical garden" at the Cartier Foundation has never been pruned.

### EXPANDING THE VOCABULARY OF ARCHITECTURE

As with fashion and cuisine, architecture is subject to fads, and Nouvel looks to be this year's "it boy." Last year, that role was filled by [Italy's Renzo Piano](#) (BusinessWeek.com, 11/7/07), while in 2006, the stars *du jour* were [Swiss duo Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron](#) (BusinessWeek.com, 6/6/06).

But like the others, Nouvel is no flash in the pan. His international commissions continue to grow—current ones include an annex to the Qatar National Museum and a concert hall in Copenhagen—as does his renown and influence. The Pritzker jury noted that Nouvel "has greatly expanded the vocabulary of contemporary architecture." We are all the richer for it.

For a glimpse of 10 of Nouvel's most acclaimed projects, [see our slide show](#).

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