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French Architect Wins Pritzker Prize



Amanda Orland/Guthrie Theater

The exterior of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which was designed by Jean Nouvel. [More Photos >](#)

By **ROBIN POGREBIN**
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[Jean Nouvel](#), the bold French architect known for such wildly diverse projects as the muscular Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis and the exotically louvered Arab World Institute in Paris, has received architecture's top honor, the Pritzker Prize.

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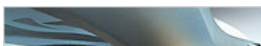
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Mr. Nouvel, 62, is the second French citizen to take the prize, awarded annually to a living architect by a jury chosen by the Hyatt Foundation. (Christian de Portzamparc of France won in 1994.) His selection is to be announced Monday.

"For over 30 years Jean Nouvel has pushed architecture's discourse and praxis to new limits," the Pritzker jury said in its citation. "His inquisitive and agile mind propels him to take risks in each of his projects, which, regardless of varying degrees of success, have greatly expanded the vocabulary of contemporary architecture."

In extending that vocabulary Mr. Nouvel has defied easy categorization. His buildings have no immediately identifiable signature, like the curves of [Frank Gehry](#) or the light-filled atriums of [Renzo Piano](#). But each is strikingly distinctive, be it the Agbar Tower in Barcelona (2005), a candy-colored, bullet-shaped office tower, or his KKL cultural and congress center in Lucerne, Switzerland (2000), with a slim copper roof cantilevered delicately over Lake Lucerne.

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“Every time I try to find what I call the missing piece of the puzzle, the right building in the right place,” Mr. Nouvel said this month over tea at the Mercer Hotel in SoHo.

Yet he does not design buildings simply to echo their surroundings. “Generally, when you say context, people think you want to copy the buildings around, but often context is contrast,” he said.

“The wind, the color of the sky, the trees around — the building is not done only to be the most beautiful,” he said. “It’s done to give advantage to the surroundings. It’s a dialogue.”

The prize, which includes a \$100,000 grant and a bronze medallion, is to be presented to Mr. Nouvel on June 2 in a ceremony at the [Library of Congress](#) in Washington.

Among Mr. Nouvel’s New York buildings are 40 Mercer, a 15-story red-and-blue, glass, wood and steel luxury residential building completed last year in SoHo, and a soaring 75-story hotel-and-museum tower with crystalline peaks that is to be built next to the Museum of Modern Art in Midtown. Writing in *The New York Times* in November, Nicolai Ouroussoff said the Midtown tower “promises to be the most exhilarating addition to the skyline in a generation.”

Born in Fumel in southwestern France in 1945, Mr. Nouvel originally wanted to be an artist. But his parents, both teachers, wanted a more stable life for him, he said, so they compromised on architecture.

“I realized it was possible to create visual compositions” that, he said, “you can put directly in the street, in the city, in public spaces.”

At 20 Mr. Nouvel won first prize in a national competition to attend the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. By the time he was 25 he had opened his own architecture firm with François Seigneur; a series of other partnerships followed.

Mr. Nouvel cemented his reputation in 1987 with completion of the Arab World Institute, one of the “grand projects” commissioned during the presidency of [François Mitterrand](#). A showcase for art from Arab countries, it blends high technology with traditional Arab motifs. Its south-facing glass facade, for example, has automated lenses that control light to the interior while also evoking traditional Arab latticework. For his boxy, industrial Guthrie Theater, which has a cantilevered bridge overlooking the Mississippi River, Mr. Nouvel experimented widely with color. The theater is clad in midnight-blue metal; a small terrace is bright yellow; orange LED images rise along the complex’s two towers.

In its citation, the Pritzker jury said the Guthrie, completed in 2006, “both merges and contrasts with its surroundings.” It added, “It is responsive to the city and the nearby Mississippi River, and yet, it is also an expression of theatricality and the magical world of performance.”

The bulk of Mr. Nouvel’s commissions work has been in Europe however. Among the most prominent is his Quai Branly Museum in Paris (2006), an eccentric jumble of elements including a glass block atop two columns, some brightly colorful boxes, rust-colored louvers and a vertical carpet of plants. “Defiant, mysterious and wildly eccentric, it is not an easy building to love,” Mr. Ouroussoff wrote in *The Times*.

A year later he described Mr. Nouvel’s Paris Philharmonie concert hall, a series of large overlapping metal plates on the edge of La Villette Park in northeastern Paris, as “an unsettling if exhilarating trip into the unknown.”

Mr. Nouvel has his plate full at the moment. He is designing a satellite of the Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, giving it a shallow domed roof that creates the aura of a just-landed U.F.O. He recently announced plans for a high-rise condominium in Los Angeles called SunCal tower, a narrow glass structure with rings of greenery on each floor. His concert hall

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for the Danish Broadcasting Corporation is a tall rectangular box with transparent screen walls.

Before dreaming up a design, Mr. Nouvel said, he does copious research on the project and its surroundings. "The story, the climate, the desires of the client, the rules, the culture of the place," he said. "The references of the buildings around, what the people in the city love."

"I need analysis," he said, noting that every person "is a product of a civilization, of a culture." He added: "Me, I was born in France after the Second World War. Probably the most important cultural movement was Structuralism. I cannot do a building if I can't analyze."

Although he becomes attached to his buildings, Mr. Nouvel said, he understands that like human beings, they grow and change over time and may even one day disappear. "Architecture is always a temporary modification of the space, of the city, of the landscape," he said. "We think that it's permanent. But we never know."

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