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PLAY WITH ME  
– THE PRITZKER PRIZE AS A GAME IN ECOLOGY

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ZAGRAJ ZE MNĄ  
– NAGRODA PRITZKERA JAKO GRA W EKOLOGIĘ

**Abstract**

The most prestigious architectural prize is the Pritzker Prize. However, competing for it there is an awareness of participation. In recent years, the award has been given to architects who in their work referred to ecology, sustainable development, regionalism, and natural and cultural values. Has this architectural game explained the principles and aimed towards highlighting those whose work concerns cooperation with nature rather than negation?

*Keywords: Pritzker Prize, sustainable development, traditional architecture, modern architecture*

**Streszczenie**

Najbardziej prestiżową nagrodą architektoniczną jest Nagroda Pritzkera. Jednak konkurując o nią nie ma się świadomości uczestnictwa. W ostatnich latach nagroda przyznawana była architektom, którzy w swojej twórczości odnosili się do ekologii, zrównoważonego rozwoju, regionalizmu i wartości przyrodniczo-kulturowych. Czyżby ta gra architektoniczna klarowała zasady i zmierzała w kierunku wyróżniania tych, których praca dotyczy współpracy z naturą a nie negacji?

*Słowa kluczowe: Nagroda Pritzkera, zrównoważony rozwój, architektura tradycyjna, architektura nowoczesna*

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What do the participants in the largest architectural game play? What are “the judges of Architects’ World Cup” playing? How to select the card to be noticed in the hand of “Architectural Nobel Prize”?

Analysing the portfolios and biographies of the architects who for the past five years were awarded the Pritzker Prize, it is difficult to discern the rules of managing this most prestigious of awards. The only clearly marked trend is offset from the “big names” in favour of not lesser ideas. Another regularity is the origin of the winners. Since 1979 the Pritzker Prize has been received by eight Americans and six Japanese. In the group of 40 architects (three times a pair of creators were awarded) there are only two women – Zaha Hadid (Pritzker Prize in 2004) and Kazuyo Sejima, who in 2010 received the award together with Ryue Nishizawa. The most perverse of the rules that guide the jury awarding “Pritzker” is the fact that the architect participating in the contest finds out about it at the moment of victory. This deprives the game aspect of the sense of defeat. Nominations for the awards are granted through the acceptance of the candidate. Nominees represent different areas, characterized by the progress of knowledge and interest in architecture. As in the case of the Nobel Prize, the Pritzker Prize may only be received by a living artist. Even so, the game, though it seems absolute, has its deviations. In 2015, the laureate died at the age of 89 years, less than two weeks before the announcement of the results.

In addition to a financial award, the Pritzker Prize carries additional, long-term benefits in the form of undying prestige. It is not accidental that the realization of the Serpentine Gallery summer pavilion invited architects with the “Pritzker”. Although the building only guests for three months in Kensington Gardens, its implementation is considered to be ennobled. Thus the “Playing the Pritzker” also provides an entrance to further games and activities.

In the past five years, the statements and projects of the winners invariably hold a reference to the laws of nature, respect for natural heritage, and attention to sustainable development. Perhaps it would be that the road to the highest of architectural awards, at the head of the “big three” (the Pritzker Prize, the Mies van der Rohe Award, the Praemium Imperiale), leads by understanding and adapting to these laws of nature and natural conditions. In 2011 the concept that the project was to adapt to local conditions and respect for tradition appeared in the grounds of the jury’s selection.

### **1. Eduardo Souto de Maura – the Pritzker Prize in 2011 – A game of neomodernist regionalism**

This outstanding Portuguese architect has been winning awards for his projects since 1980. How does the Pritzker jury justify “his legacy is convincing proof of the expressive potential of the modern idiom and the possibility of its adaptation to local conditions”? In his work he is not limited to local materials but also examines the context, the environment, and local traditions. Combining what is rooted in the culture of modern design he creates objects inextricably embedded in natural, individualized place in space. An example of this is the municipal stadium in Braga, a portion of which structure was hewn in granite residuals on the site of the planned investment. It is a kind of game in which the architect has proposed two independent players – the environment and the projected object. At the junction of two

opposing “teams” a contrast is created, a collision that breaking the mould begins to penetrate. Equally spectacular is the Casa das Histórias in Cascais. In the design of the building the elements of historic architecture of the region were used, and are presented in a modern way. The establishment is easily identifiable by two squat pyramid-shaped towers and the red colour of the concrete used to build them. The earth and trees that were on the construction site have also been included as one of the elements of the project. This project meets the requirements posed by the museum and its various functions. The architect does not forget to invite visitors into the game, preparing a welcome for them in the form of the entry zone. In the Casa das Historias project, the author adopted an approach which can be determined as “regionalism.” Looking at the location of the building, blending the surroundings, as well as use the scale and form, we see clearly a reference to the region. Noticeable references and regularity were obtained without resorting to unnecessary decorative ornaments.

A Polish accent in the biography of de Maura is the fact that he was a juror in an international architectural competition for the design of the building of the Museum of Polish History in Warsaw.

## **2. Wang Shu – the Pritzker Prize in 2012 – Game of tradition, having fun in modernity**

This architect of Chinese origin has ideas similar to Souto de Maura, but the place in which he had to work – one of the most rapidly expanding regions of the world, determines the way of working itself and its goals. The urbanized zone of Ningbo city, for which Wang Shu designed the Museum of Modern Art, has almost 5.5 million inhabitants, in Hangzhou, where the Exhibition Hall of the Imperial Street of Southern Song Dynasty there are 2 million people. The architect himself is sceptical about progressive change in his opinions. With the current 50% degree of urbanization of China, raising this to the planned 70% will result in the urbanization of rural areas. As a supporter of sustainable development, traditional materials, and the manufacturing method of creation, Wang Shu had to work with multimillion-inhabitant agglomerations that, as a result of transformation, completely lost their human dimension. His designs are a contrast, a rejection of the developments typical of modern China. Instead of dominating the area and eroding the urban tissue, Shu designs in such way that he interferes with the natural landscape as little as possible. A characteristic feature of his projects are efforts to use materials from the demolition of buildings removed from the site of the new investment. This procedure was applied in Hangzhou where to build the campus of the Academy of Fine Arts 2 million ceramic tiles remaining from the ancient cottages were used. A similar recycling of material is embedded into the body of the History Museum in Ningbo. To create this unusual building he used bricks from demolished buildings, combining them with modern materials. The resulting “mountain” is also the architect playing with the customer. By cutting “valleys” into the body of the building the symbolic effect of the mountain is heightened, and in addition the multitude of entrances covered by arcades refers to Chinese garden art. The building itself serves as an island where function and form are subordinated to clear principles and rules. In giving the award to Wang Shu, the Pritzker Prize jury noted his paying special attention to design based on sustainable development: “The work of this year’s winner goes beyond the age-old dispute – whether to respect the tradition of localism or to be swept away by modernity. Shu’s architecture is deeply rooted in the local context and at the same time universal,” said Lord Palumbo, chairman of the jury.

### **3. Toyo Ito – the Pritzker Prize in 2013 – Game of perfection**

To characterize the works of Toyo Ito it is necessary to create a separate category, to which he belongs, of unpredictable architecture creators. Although he is referred to as an architect, his conceptual projects elude imposed frameworks. Among his projects can be found the concept of light and transparent buildings, which in the 80s was a novelty and challenge. The next cards to be dealt by Ito were ideas and projects that have become benchmarks in new trends in architecture. Among his flagship projects are the two towers forming the Torres de Toyo Ito complex in Barcelona. The biggest challenge in the design of the Porta Fira tower was its shape. The design was inspired by a lotus flower. The facade consists of a double skin. On the inner wall there is a curtain wall system, while the outer wall has a fixed pipe system (with a characteristic red shade) that adapts to the form of the tower. Although the reference to the lotus may seem a far-reaching simplification, Ito himself describes the relevance of his projects to nature thus:

“Before we think about the idea of ecology we should look for relationships between architecture and nature and the environment. Traditional Japanese architecture, especially wooden, is open to nature. The boundary between nature and the building is blurred here – they interpenetrate. However, in the case of contemporary architecture this remains very distinct and artificial. I would like change it, but I cannot go back to the past. I believe, however, that by blurring and widening the zone of interpenetration of the building and nature, it can become more environmentally friendly. “

To play the game in which the “Game Master” is the Japanese architect, we must understand the idea of what guided the creation, among others, of the Tokyo ZA-KOENJI public theatre building. The building was constructed to strengthen a sense of joy and fun. The theatre consists of three halls, literary archives, cafes and administrative space. It looks like a big tent, where some people come to the theatre, others to study literature, others in the role of actors. It is intended to be a meeting place for everyone, regardless of age or sex.

Despite many awards and honours Toyo Ito still seems to be an unfulfilled creator. As he says: “I never set the style for my architecture and I will never be satisfied with my work”. So the game in the architecture of Toyo Ito & Associates will continue to be unpredictable, full of rule changes and innovative stratagems, which effectively deceive world architecture. Yung Ho Chang sitting in the Pritzker Prize jury described the work of Ito: “Although Mr. Ito has realized a huge number of buildings in the course of his entire career, in my opinion, the whole time he has been working on one issue – to push the boundaries of architecture. And to achieve this goal, he is not afraid to reject what he has achieved before”.

Toyo Ito is also known for building projects that, beyond their artistic qualities, can provide security during natural disasters. Among the solutions he has used are design barriers against seismic shocks or flood protection.

### **4. Shigeru Ban – the Pritzker Prize in 2014 – Playing humanitarianism**

The biggest surprise still seems the laureate whose work has been recognized not because of the architectural values but its humane dimension. The architect is not regarded as an artist, but as a creator, for which the most important are the needs of viewers of his work. “Shigeru Ban – because he is the winner of this year’s the Pritzker – is in

fact primarily known for designing temporary shelters for victims of natural disasters”. Originally Shigeru Ban focused on the possibility of using local, simple materials and building a strong relationship with the surroundings, context and tradition. However, only the use of cardboard, from which he today builds houses, churches, public utility buildings, has allowed him to extensively use his knowledge in dramatic and extreme situations. The turning point was the earthquake in Kobe in 1995. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese were left homeless and Shigeru Ban showed that cardboard was ideal for building temporary shelters for people who had become homeless during the disaster. The game, which he expressed in traditional construction, was based on inexpensive materials, lightweight, easy to transport and use, and surprisingly durable and safe. Thanks to him, cardboard became an extreme building block that is used to this day. The winning party with his strong conviction about construction materials has provided shelter and any other necessary buildings for the victims, among others, of earthquakes and hurricanes in Turkey, China, Japan, India, Haiti, USA, Italy, New Zealand, and Sri Lanka.

### **5. Fei Otto – the Pritzker Prize in 2015 – Fun with the sky**

The fortieth laureate – Fei Otto – in his remarkable work has combined architecture with the work of environmentalists, biologists, engineers, philosophers, historians, artists, and other architects. As a supporter of team games he is famous for his filigree structures of roofs and covers. In addition to the undisputed aesthetic, Otto’s structures are characterized by a number of advantages in the economic and environmental sense. Tom Pritzker, chairman and president of the Hyatt Foundation, said: “The jury unanimously decided that the career of Fei Otto is a model and should be a template for future generations of architects.” The architect himself, a few days before his death, commented about the award: “I am very happy that I have been awarded the Pritzker Prize and I enormously thank the jury and the whole Pritzker family. I’ve never done anything to receive this award. My path led me to the architectural design of new types of buildings that can help the poor, especially those who have suffered as a result of natural disasters and other catastrophes. So what better could meet me than receiving this prize. I will use all the time that I have left to do what I’ve done so far, to help. You have here a happy man.”

The Pritzker Prize undoubtedly allows for participation in the game at the highest level. An additional complication is the fact that the rules of the game do not allow any preparation or intentional actions. Even the apparent eco-trend does not enable anyone to conduct their career in order to be invited to this race with the best in the future.

### **R e f e r e n c e s**

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