

Jean Nouvel is awarded the 2008 Pritzker Architecture Prize

The French architect is praised for his 'insatiable' creative experimentation. One of his designs, the 'green blade,' is in the planning for Century City.

By Anne-Marie O'Connor, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

Jean Nouvel, the versatile French architect who strives to balance his buildings' settings with a restless architectural language he seems to reinvent with each project, is the winner of the 2008 Pritzker Architecture Prize, the highest honor of his profession.

Nouvel, 62, is known for a body of work that lives up to his name, a variant of the French word for "new."



Jean Nouvel, winner of the 2008 Pritzker Prize, architecture's highest honor.

His 1987 Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris uses a rich arabesque surface to reveal a Moorish compound behind its stark modernist facade.

The roof of his 2000 Lucerne Cultural and Conference Center extends far beyond the building, to the lake of the Swiss city, reflecting the movement of light on the water.

The windows of his darkly rectangular Guthrie Theater, which opened in 2006 on the Mississippi in Minneapolis, strategically frame the vintage industrial signs and soft silo curves of the architecture around it -- incorporating elements of classic Americana.

Nouvel says that for him each commission is a unique "adventure."

"For Nouvel, there is no architectural 'style' a priori," Pritzker jury Chairman Peter Palumbo said in a statement, quoting from the Pritzker citation. "Rather, a context, interpreted in the broadest sense to include culture, location, program and client, provokes him to develop a different strategy for each project."

Nouvel, reached by phone and e-mail in Paris, said he was "honored and surprised."

He said he hoped the prize would give momentum to his future proposals, which include a slender \$400-million, 45-story Century City residential monolith that some have compared to the Le Corbusier-led design of the United Nations headquarters in New York.

"This is important," Nouvel said in heavily Gallic-flavored English. "This can strengthen confidence in your proposals. It is the kind of prize that can help you to propose the best building."

Nouvel said he was surprised because he believed he was a stronger contender in previous years. "I did not think this was my year," he said.

He felt honored "because among the club of Pritzker laureates are so many friends and architects who I admire: Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, Norman Foster, Glenn Murcutt and Herzog & de Meuron -- obviously I cannot name them all."

"I take this prize as a strong incentive to continue increasingly demanding and ambitious work," he said.

The prize, established in 1979 by the Pritzker family of the Hyatt hotel chain, carries a \$100,000 grant from the Chicago-based Hyatt Foundation. Nouvel will receive the bronze medallion June 2 at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Thomas J. Pritzker, chairman of the Hyatt Foundation, noted that the jury's citation acknowledged the "persistence, imagination, exuberance and above all the insatiable urge for creative experimentation" of Nouvel's work.

The citation says Nouvel "has pushed architecture's discourse and praxis to new limits. 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."

"For me, every building is an adventure," Nouvel said. "Every project is an adventure. I research every project. I talk to a lot of people.

Every building has a relationship to the climate, to the wind, to the colors of the buildings around it. I arrive at a concept with all the parameters in place. When I have all of these constraints, I begin. Without constraints, architecture does not exist. You are a sculptor."

Designed for the setting

Nouvel said he is determined to resist what he views as the homogenization of world urbanism.

"When you go around the world, you see all the same buildings, and you feel like you're in the same place," he said. "I fight all the time for the specificity of architecture. I fight against global architecture."

While some architects aim for a standout, Nouvel said the designs of his buildings are inseparable from their settings.

"I feel like every site has a right to have an architectural aesthetic," he said. "Architects today try to create a little world, a *petit monde*, a micro *monde*. It's important to try to create a building in its context."

Every building, he said, must be the "missing piece of the puzzle."

"It must be impossible to put the building in another place," he said. "That is my criterion."

Houston-based architect Carlos Jimenez, one of the Pritzker jurors this year, said Nouvel's willingness to take risks on new ideas with each project had an effect on the jury.

"He has a tremendous intellectual curiosity," Jimenez said. "Each work is quite different than the other because of this fascination."

"It's not like he's bringing a particular brand and deposits that brand wherever he's working. He's more insightful and piercing. Nouvel looks at context, not in a literal way, but as an opportunity for new ideas and new connections."

Bill Lacey, executive director of the prize for seven years until his retirement in 2005, has written that Nouvel broke "the aesthetic of modern and postmodernism to create a stylistic language all his own."

Nouvel said he immerses himself in the

traditions, symbols and landscapes of his sites and appropriates them at will.

For the 2003 Torre Agbar, or Agbar Tower, in Barcelona, Spain, he borrowed the pinnacles most familiar in the designs of Antonin Gaudi, the Catalan artist and architect.

"It's a shape of the relief of the winds on the Montserrat hills near Barcelona," he said. "It's a very phallic shape. Catalan architects have played with this shape for many years because it is a symbol of Catalonia."

Gaudi covered his pinnacles with the cracked tile shards of Spain's Moorish history. Nouvel echoed him with luminous colored squares in what he termed "a dialogue with the history of Barcelona."

The Pritzker jury noted that in one of Nouvel's recently completed buildings, the Quai Branley Museum in Paris -- a showcase of indigenous art from the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania -- the architect incorporated wall and ceiling decorations by artists from those regions, resulting in a "bold, unorthodox building with unusual spaces in which objects are displayed -- and understood -- in new ways."

Jurist Victoria Newhouse, founder and director of the Architectural History Foundation in New York, praised Nouvel's

plans for a new philharmonic hall in Paris, which is designed to be reconfigured so that the audience would not always sit in one place.

"It is extraordinarily innovative," she said. "It's an idea that's been around, but the way he's handled it is extremely skillful.

"He's just always pushing the envelope and trying to take ideas that are around and carry them further," Newhouse added. "I think that I and my co-jurors feel he is really one of the most daring architects working today."

A local endeavor

Still pending is Nouvel's plan for what would be his westernmost U.S. building, at 10000 Santa Monica Blvd. in Century City. Nouvel said that the main plan is complete and that details and permits are being negotiated.

Shaped like an iPod, the building would be just 50 feet deep but 600 feet tall, with 177 residential units with views of a golf course and Century City. It would have a club, a spa, a pool and restaurants.

"It's a very slim building I call the 'green blade,'" Nouvel said. "I put landscapes on this building so all around the apartments you have vegetation . . . and gardens going through the apartments."

Nouvel cited cinema as one of his influences. "Blade Runner," for example, he called an "unbelievable movie" whose most memorable location -- Los Angeles' 1893 Bradbury Building, a vaguely Romanesque exterior with a luminous Victorian interior court -- he described as an intriguing departure from "science fiction movies set in futuristic cities and abnormal situations."

"Cinema was very important in architecture because it established a new relationship between the time and the images," Nouvel said. "You compose a building a little bit like you make a movie . . . the relationship between the color and the shadows and the view of the city."

Nouvel said he became an architect "by mistake."

As a youth, he wanted to study art and had begun painting. But his parents refused to pay for his art studies, so he placated them by enrolling in the more practical field of architecture, intending to quietly return to art classes, "but I never went back."

He chuckled.

"It was a good mistake," he said.