BY MARNETTE FEDERIS

PIANO LESSON

In the eve of the California Academy of Sciences' grand opening on September 26, 2008 architect Renzo Piano, famous for co-designing Paris' Pompidou Center, took some time to sit with students and discuss how green structures can be beautiful, how every building has a story to tell and how creating a structure, especially one as complex as the academy, is a lot more complicated than it looks.

Smiling like a proud parent, the world-renowned architect pointed through the building's glass-encased piazza, the heart of the academy.

Tall and lanky, with gray hair and beard, the architect craned his neck towards the sky, showing his audience a spider web of steel frames and the layers of wind screens and light shades that make up the piazza's ceiling.

He told his listeners to watch people as they cross the second floor walkways, which he can see from where he was sitting, center stage, in front of 300 students from the UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design and the California College of Arts.

"I call this a 'Piano Lesson,'" he said about the intimate student lecture. "Without a piano."

The process of creating the academy was portrayed as a simple one, that Piano simply pitched a sketch of several curve lines to the academy's board of trustees, won the honor of designing the building and construction followed. But he cautioned the students, 'that's a myth, don't believe it.'

Piano said designing and constructing the 10,000-square-foot structure, complete with a living roof, planetarium, rainforest and aquarium, was difficult from the very start.

"Nothing is clear in the beginning," Piano said. "The beginning of the story, it's a mess," he said in his thick Italian accent.

The project took architects, engineers and scientists eight years and half a billion dollars to design and construct. When asked about integration and how different teams worked together, from engineers to landscape architects to botanists, Piano said it was important to surround yourself with people who are more knowledgeable, people you trust and can fight with, comparing the process to marriage.

"I have five or six wives in my office—we don't even talk," he joked.

But the building, which Piano said is really comprised of more than 30 pieces, eventually came together. After 10 to 15 prototypes and figuring out which native plants to grow on the living roof and how to house living coral reefs, the result is one of most ambitious green buildings ever constructed and one that garners the highest possible Platinum LEED rating, the largest public building in the world to do so.

In today's world where earth's fragility is clear, the architect stressed the importance of building with sustainability in mind.

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At the end of his lecture, Piano gave students a chance to ask questions. Some sought advice on how to face the challenges of building and designing for a more sustainable future—"Don't compromise," he said—while others wondered how the now 71-year-old architect first began in his career, to which he answered, that he came from a family of builders.

Many in the audience, were CED graduate students who have studied the building throughout the years.

"It was a great experience to be in the building while he was talking about it so he can actually point at locations and talk about how things work," said Gina Siciliano, (M. Arch '09).

With local architects like Kang Kiang of Mark Cavagnero Associate Architects, working on the project and also serving as a Friedman professor at CED, students had the chance to learn about the academy before its opening.

"We actually studied this piazza and how the air and ventilation worked," Behman Farahpour, (M. Arch '09), "We already knew so much about it from class that walking in, it makes sense, you have the information you already have with the experience."

Undergraduate students were also pleased to have an early peek inside the building.

"It's a little bit of over stimulation at first," Ryan Nguyen, a fourth-year architecture student said. "But you see all these systems at play and you're trying to figure out how it all works."

Mary Comerio, chair of College of Environmental Design's architecture department, said an architect like Piano, who has challenged the conventions in the industry, inspire students as they grapple with the social and moral responsibilities of building according to the world's current environmental state.

"This conversation with Piano allows students to really open their thinking not just to try and do what it takes to get a job, but to really think outside the box, to think about what the world needs and what the design field can do in the current situation," Comerio said.

Piano encouraged the students to be first and foremost passionate about their work and to be artists while at the same time being pragmatic. He said all buildings tell a story. The Academy's story, he said, was one of how families have come to the place for generations to enjoy and learn about science. "The building's 'magic' is the proximity of science and exhibition," he said.

When asked about what the building is saying today, what story it has to tell, Piano paused.

He said the building is saying, "Make me happy." FW

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Photos by Karim Elgendy.