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## Remarks by Mark Robbins at the Chancellor's Convocation for New Students, August 27, 2010

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### Recommended Citation

Robbins, Mark, "Remarks by Mark Robbins at the Chancellor's Convocation for New Students, August 27, 2010" (2010). *Full list of publications from School of Architecture*. 3.

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Syracuse University: Chancellor's Convocation for New Students

August 27, 2010

Remarks by Dean Mark Robbins, School of Architecture

Good morning and welcome.

So many worlds traveled to get here and so many new relationships. Staring out at this great, green Astroturf field, thinking of your perspective in the bleachers and my own, recalls the classic short movie called the **Powers of Ten** by the husband and wife design team, Charles and Ray Eames. It begins at the scene of a picnic and zooms out from the square meter of the picnic blanket on a green field, to the moon in geometric powers of ten. Take a minute in the midst of this huge space [and the new space that you have just moved into as the Chancellor said) and, if you can, imagine the space you grew up in – the color of the walls, your stuff. Now zoom out. Where did that room sit? In a group of rooms? Then further still, in a bird's-eye view, out above street, or road, to the neighborhood, the city, and the state. You get the picture. Now, look around you. The person behind and in front—each of you has a set of images and relationships—thousands of them, different but linked in ways that you know, and others that you will discover during your time here, as much in class as outside of it.

The influential writer and critic Walter Benjamin wrote about the experience of seeing and place, and the ways that we also forget. The very familiarity that insures that we can smoothly accomplish our daily routines, dulls our

reception to what is around us. He talked about cities and streets as being at the distracted periphery of our consciousness, though they exemplify the very symbol of modern society. The importance of the city is echoed in the later writing of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas for whom the public sphere was (and the city) the site of un-coerced discussion and opinion, a place that transcends politics and ...commerce.

As your first collective act as part of this academic community, you have all been invited to look at Syracuse's Near Westside. Like a book, physical places can be read. They have histories that go beyond the buildings and engage us across all fields of knowledge – from the social to the scientific to the artistic. . This has implications for all colleges, but as the Dean of the School of Architecture, I will dwell (no pun) on the city.

Syracuse, unlike many early American cities, was not located on a navigable river but rather had the good fortune in the early 19th century to be sited on the path of the biggest technological gamble of its time, which was, of course, the Erie Canal. Just outside the city center, one of the earliest neighborhoods was the Near Westside (down the hill and to the left of the elevated highway I-81).

- We could speak of the area's social history, first settled by the Onondagas, a name you will become familiar with if you are not already. Now with a population of 8000, the neighborhood's current vibrancy and racial and ethnic diversity go back to the Civil War and continue to change. We could just as easily talk in terms of land use. It was the city's first industrial site,

driven by the waterpower of Onondaga Creek and later expansive flats of evaporating brine for salt, hence the renaming of the area and the familiar moniker, Salt City. Or we could look at the architecture, the planning of street grids and housing stock (Victorians, shotgun houses, sheds) and about urban renewal and blight in what has become the condition of the American post-industrial city. The place encompasses all of these: ecology, business, social science, engineering, public policy, art, and architecture and can be read through many lenses.

Students of all disciplines are engaged in the Near Westside. Architecture students have worked to construct and modify homes and propose new landscape neighborhood plans. Innovative green houses have been built through the **From The Ground Up** design competition with a national array of professionals. The broadcast station for the region, WCNY, will move into a vacant warehouse that was also a site for students and visiting architects and artists to envision new uses for old places. Students in VPA and the School of Architecture created a mobile arts lab for students in the city and are now working on an historic house, 601 Tully, which will become a creative laboratory. All of this vitality will be linked with downtown *and* campus through the Connective Corridor.

In the Near Westside and in the city of Syracuse, we see life in all of its modern complexity: emerging technologies, and social and political innovation in a city that is remaking itself—a model for housing, energy use, and social practice. As the Chancellor said, “Say Yes” is a model for education,

which may have the most powerful impact on the social life of the city and its future shape.

The architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright wrote in her recent book, USA that, “architecture both represents and helps propel transformation.” In other words the shape of a city and a community is determined by the way we use them and the way we think about them. While information technology offers the immediacy of social networks that seem to collapse space—I can sit in a taxi and call home from Shanghai as easily as Seattle—gathering a group, even via twitter, always brings us back to a physical spot, like this, right now.

And so back to Syracuse and the Near Westside, like your place in the bleachers, the question is **about perspective and place**; how the specifics of your own world view and those next to you can be the basis for understanding the wider world, what the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard calls “the special case of what is possible.” This is critical as you “plunge deeply “ in to the world of that experience. You, we, are all *away* from something – in a new place – quite literally, *out of place*. Use this difference to learn, and welcome to Syracuse University and welcome to the city.