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Bruce Abbey Convocation Speech

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Convocation: May 11, 2002

Bruce Abbey, Dean
School of Architecture
Syracuse University

Good morning and congratulations to the class of 2002. I am Dean Bruce Abbey, and along with chairs Christopher Gray and Arthur McDonald, I welcome you to 124th convocation for architecture students at Syracuse University

I also welcome you on behalf of all of the faculty and staff, including those in Florence. They have all helped you in this process called acquiring an university education, from recruiting you, to educating you and even to helping you find a job. And we plan to stay in touch with you as alumni, to be sure.

Today you have assembled, marched, or processed, depending on your inclination. Each of you will receive something today, and each of you will be introduced. Yesterday we shared a class lunch to thank all of you for the success, energy and help in making the school what it represents today... this is, one of the strongest programs in architecture in the United States.

As Louis Kahn once said, "Architecture is the marriage of place and occasion" – this is such an occasion and this hall is a wonderful place. This weekend you will hear many speeches about this rite of passage called graduation. It is a special moment and there are a few thoughts that I would like to share with you, if you will permit.

This is an interesting moment, this beginning of a new century. It is even something of a generational shift, at least for my generation - the baby boomers of the past 50 years. As we move into the 21st century, the capital "M" Modernism of the 20th century has been declared by some to be dead, dying or hopelessly irrelevant. I am speaking of the "break with tradition" modernism and the social optimism that animated architecture in the last century. One could be also speaking of the "rational" scientific and political modernism of the Enlightenment since 1750 or even the "humanistic" modernism of the Renaissance, now 500 years past. The values that guided my upbringing, my education and my professional life are being called into question in a manner that is quite challenging.

It is easy to see why. There is ample evidence that things are not working that well. The utopian dream is surely undone by now. (the horrific events of the 20th century finished that one for good, I suspect) and even our belief in the idea of progress, be it social, technical and or political, is starting to wear thin, as the ecological challenges of a global consumerist economy have shown us. The planet Earth is a finite resource. Indeed, we are in trouble. We want too much, have too much information and don't know how to use it, and we are threatened by what we have created.

Moreover the expression of communal values and a respect for civil and political society as represented by a comprehensible physical form, the basis for our urbanity, seem to be under assault by a promised freedom of artistic expression. There is a decided turn against designing a shared urban life. At the extreme, this artistic expressionism is a new/old form of tyranny. It is an entropic state from which there is no return.

How to respond?

Recently I have been reading Thomas Friedman's book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. It is about understanding globalization,

both the obvious and hidden ramifications of the post cold war era. In the book, he cites Andrew Grove, the feisty CEO of Intel, and his book *Only the Paranoid Survive*. Actually, it is a quote from a Harvard Professor of Economics, who argues that only constant innovation which destroys the status quo will prosper and thrive in the new age of globalization. Obviously there is not a lot of respect for the past in that view. "Innovation replaces tradition. The present – or perhaps the future- replaces the past. Nothing matters so much as what will come next, and what will come next can only arrive if what is here now gets overturned." Pretty heady stuff, and only valuable advice if increased prosperity is your only value system or goal in life.

This value system, alas, can also be applied to ideas, even architectural ideas. Novelty and the new triumphs over all else. Yet we, or some of us, still read Plato, Vitruvius, and Dante ... philosopher, architect and poet. A good architect has to be all three. **THERE YOU WILL FIND OBSERVATIONS ABOUT LIFE AND MEANING THAT STILL RESONATE AND GUIDE OUR BEHAVIOR, EVEN TODAY.** Wall Street may find these values quaint, but I do not.

Your architectural education has been one part pragmatic, rooted in the science of building and problem solving, and one part critical, or future oriented that tests limits and looks for new solutions for emerging problems. You will of course by definition have to practice in the contemporary moment. You also have an obligation to be critical of that moment. But where to turn for insight, advice and a plan of action when there is a conflict? First of all, it is a design problem and you should be good at that by now.

In any design problem you do research, define the problem clearly and test alternatives until there is a good fit. Sounds like a thesis, right? But the choices that you make along the way are representative of values. Where do they come from? Certainly your education, your experience and your common sense are good guides.

Beware of false prophets. Bad politics, bad philosophy and bad advice all lead to bad form. Everyone wants to invent a new architecture every morning. But most of it is junk. So learn to distinguish the curious from the beautiful (that is Frank Lloyd Wright, in case you were wondering) and above all understand that not all creative effort is equal no matter how hard you or anyone else worked on it. Respect and learn from models of excellence, no matter when they were created. Remember, stating the problem correctly is only part of the answer. You still have to design the solution. So good luck! I wish you well, as you and many others will have to inhabit the world that you create.

But for the moment you can relax for a few days, at least. Thesis is over! Not every school of architecture requires a thesis project, and the fact that we still do, despite the heavy burden on time, facilities and your sleep, seems justified every year by what you are able to accomplish.

You entered here, for the most part, three, four or five years ago, imbued with the desire to study architecture, even if you didn't know quite what it was or how much sleep you would lose. Hopefully we have nurtured that desire and clarified your knowledge of the discipline. You have, as I said earlier, received one of the more comprehensive and balanced educations that can be obtained in architecture, and you should be proud of that fact. Above all you should be pleased with yourselves for having a very demanding goal. It will stand you in good stead wherever you go or whatever you do.

You have all learned to work very hard and to think clearly about complex and abstract issues – often with no clear or correct answer. But more importantly you have learned a great deal more about yourselves.. the depth of commitment to architecture, the potential of your creative energy, the love of the craft of making. You can all see better than when you started. The world looks different to you.... And indeed you have changed. There is no going back.

You have also shared a great deal together. You have made friends and lost them. You have had moments of great joy and moments of disappointment and no doubt moments of elation and frustration, with yourselves, with us and with the university. All of which, I might add, means that you are normal and that you are experiencing life as it truly is and apparently meant to be.

But today is also a moment of closure and also of beginning.. a true rite of passage and a moment of reflection. There is closure, in the sense that the tests are over, the thesis finished and sleep is once more possible Your GPA is forever more irrelevant. You have in effect at the moment a clean slate. This will not happen too many more times. So enjoy!

In closing let me say again that the faculty and I enthusiastically welcome you to our noble and proud profession. Best of all, this is the time when you are no longer students, but rather friends and colleagues. We look forward to news of your accomplishments, and trust that will retain and active interest in and commitment to our school.

As I finish my twelve years as dean, I can only say that it has been a privilege to lead this school and to have had such extraordinary support from the chairs, the faculty and staff and most of all from you the students, Thank you.