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Dean Lykoudis, Associate Dean Stamper, Assistant Dean Father Bullene, Professor Bess, Distinguished Faculty, Parents, Guardians, Grandparents, Siblings, Friends - Graduates of the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture Class of 2012: It is indeed a great honor for me to address you on this magnificent spring day – a joy-filled moment as our graduates look back on their experiences at Notre Dame and forward to a new chapter in their life’s journey.

To the parents, guardians and grandparents of today’s graduates, I offer you my heartfelt congratulations. You have been instrumental in shepherding these young women and men toward this day. Long ago, you walked them into a kindergarten classroom, hand clutched in hand. It was difficult to let go – for you and for them. And then time passed - almost too quickly. All these years later, please recognize that their accomplishments at this University are also a tribute to you and the myriad ways in which you taught them, encouraged them, and loved them. They now sit before you, well-prepared by their own efforts under the dedicated mentorship of this learned faculty, to begin their professional lives.

Parents and guardians, I encourage you to look around at this magnificent University to which you entrusted your sons and daughters for their education – their study of architecture, their ongoing faith formation, their development into thoughtful, reasoning adults. This place, and what it represents, will always be theirs and yours – as members of the Notre Dame family. Your graduates’ lives in this community and the ideas they generated now constitute a permanent contribution to the history of Notre Dame and, especially, to the history of the School of Architecture, now in its 114th year. You brought those you loved the most to one of our Nation’s finest universities and I can say, from my own firsthand observation of their work and work effort, and through many individual conversations with them, they fully rose to the challenge. Take great pride in them and, equally, know that they could not have done this without you.

Graduates of the School of Architecture, Class of 2012 – Welcome to your day, to the day you begin your new journey, the next chapter in your story. You have arrived at a threshold. The mythical god, Janus (from whom we get the name of the year’s first month), is emblematic of this moment - the god of beginnings, of gateways, of transitions, he is represented facing in two directions – backward and forward. Over the past several years, you have acquired knowledge and skills that will serve as the foundation for the thinking, drawing and building you will do in the coming years. Make the continuation of that learning a daily part of your life. For after all, a foundation is critical to the success of the structure built upon it, but without more, it is merely a good start.

As you begin this new journey, with the wisdom you have accumulated, I urge you to consciously and carefully establish your narrative: the guiding ideas that will structure your life’s activity, shaped by your sense of purpose and who you have become through the breadth of your experience at Notre Dame.

What do you wish to accomplish during the sweep of your life? What are your aspirations and your standards? You have all read Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise On the Art of Building in Ten Books, which shaped the Renaissance by establishing architecture as an intellectual and professional discipline based on principles. In it, you will recall, he encourages his readers to aspire to rival, if not exceed, the Ancients.

So will you be content to accept and accommodate our culture as you find it? The question is rhetorical. Your answer ought to be “no”. Or will you instead seek to be transformational and work ceaselessly to improve the culture? If you decide to pursue your life’s work as a vocation, you will be purpose-driven to participate in something larger and greater than yourself, laboring in support of the common good instead of merely seeking personal benefit. This is, in fact, what the mission statement of this University calls us to do.

There will be a strong temptation, after so many years of hard work, to settle in to your careers in offices and thereafter measure your life by conventional metrics: pay, vacations and material possessions. However, I urge you not to become careerists, asking what the profession can do for you. You are Notre Dame graduates and the expectations that come with that distinction demand something different, something more, something greater. They require that you carefully structure your every effort to improve the world we share, the built and natural environments, and the way that architecture is practiced today, and will be practiced tomorrow. To do that, you will need to commit to your own continued learning, observation, speculation and participation.

Let yourself be guided, above all, by hope, as Reverend Father John Jenkins said during his homily at last night’s Baccalaureate Mass. Vaclav Havel, the renowned playwright and poet who helped lead his fellow citizens to freedom after decades of Communist rule (later becoming the first President of the Czech Republic), wrote eloquently about the great benefit of hope in effecting change:

“Hope is … not dependent on some observation of the world or estimation of a situation. It transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same thing as joy that things are going well. Rather, hope is an ability to work for something that is good. Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but rather the certainty that something makes sense to do, regardless of how it turns out”.

As you prepare to leave this University of Our Lady, this campus, this School of Architecture, you leave as members of the fellowship of architects. This is your – our - collective identity.

Architecture is, after all, a form of identity. Over the years, through your studying, writing, designing, drawing, and watercolouring, you have taken on that identity. Here at Notre Dame, the architecture students are known as a breed apart. Docents, offering campus tours to prospective students will, virtually without exception, point out this building where architecture is studied. The students of architecture are described as the group that never sleeps, subjects themselves to constant professorial criticism and does creatively strange things. I saw your mortar board “ornamentation” during the Commencement ceremony this morning and strange and creative are absolutely the first two adjectives that come to mind. Bond Hall is renowned as the only classroom building on campus that is open twenty-four hours a day throughout the school year precisely because, as students, you require that accommodation to complete your chosen course of study – your chosen course of study.

What is the significance of being members of the fellowship of architects?

One of my professors, Ambrose Richardson, the former Chair of the School, which was then still called the Department of Architecture in the College of Engineering, had, earlier in his career, been a design principal at Skidmore Owings and Merrill during the first years of that firm’s existence. A creative problem solver with an extraordinary facility at generating freehand perspective drawings, he rose rapidly through the ranks at a young age.

One morning, in the basement sophomore design studio along the north side of this very building, before most of my studio-mates had even arrived, he shared a story about his days at Skidmore with me. He had travelled to Racine, Wisconsin from Chicago by train with Nathaniel Owings, one of the founding partners of the eponymous firm. As the train rolled along the tracks toward Racine the one point perspective of the rail played out behind the speeding cars. He was instructed to create a series of renderings based on the plans and elevations he and Mr. Owings had just developed for a new corporate office building. The fledgling Skidmore practice needed the presentation to be successful for both cash flow and to establish their reputation.

The pressure to produce the drawing quickly was enormous. By the time the train arrived at the depot in Wisconsin, his charcoal drawings were complete.

At presentation’s end, the clients enthusiastically approved the design, likely due primarily to the beauty of Ambrose Richardson’s evocative drawings of a place that then only existed in their minds and on paper. The building went under construction soon thereafter, while young Ambrose worked long, long hours, month after month, back in the Chicago office, on projects for locations across the nation. Two years later, on the encouragement of Nat Owings, and carrying only a simple lunch packed in a brown paper bag, he took the train back to Racine, to see the completed structure for the first time since the original presentation. He arrived at the site and was pleased to find a bench directly across the street from the structure, perfectly situated to afford a view of the pristine new building from a vantage point that was nearly identical to one he had used to generate the exterior perspective.

He sat down, opened his lunch bag to begin his sandwich, then paused to look up and gaze at the structure – his vision realized in brick and stone and glass. He was suddenly completely overcome by emotion and, literally, broke into tears.

As he told me this, at 8:10 am on a Wednesday morning, my first instinct, as a nineteen year old, was to laugh at the seeming awkwardness of the story’s ending. But out of respect for this professor, my mentor, I suppressed the laugh. I then continued to listen and watch as he turned to my work and critiqued the design I was developing for his studio. His hand and pencil danced across the tracing paper in a choreography of movement that was at once assured and improvisational. He generated a masterful sequence of perspectives of my design that depicted a project whose beauty I myself could not have imagined – fixing the design’s problems, its naiveté and clumsiness, transforming it from an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan, all the while using drawing as a means to teach me the principles that underlie good design. Suddenly, the anecdote from Racine, Wisconsin took on an entirely different meaning.

Professor Richardson had shared a highly personal (and revealing) story with a single objective: to remind me precisely how glorious architecture is. To speak of the joy, the sense of privilege, the sheer awe he experienced in practice. Perhaps that’s why everyone on this campus knows about us architects – we do what we do because we love it. Why, later in our lives, we are the ones who people seek out at social events and dinner parties. Because we are passionate about our discipline. We summon our buildings from the swirling winds of our dreams and from the volumes of scholarship and learning which have imprinted themselves on our minds and serve as both our guide and inspiration. In the depths of our souls we - you and me – all of us - ache to draw and to build, that our efforts might beneficially shape the lives of humankind – the lives of our families, our friends and those we may never meet.

Professor Richardson’s anecdote was a powerful and authentic reflection on his utter humility in the face of the greatness of this profession, this art, this fellowship, this identity of ours.

Your experiences over the years ahead will bring you great joy, while, at least occasionally, I hope your experiences bring you profound frustration. Why frustration? Because you will not always succeed in your struggle for excellence, but I pray that excellence is your first objective and that you never allow yourself to become content with anything less. In the balance, I wish you a humble sense of accomplishment that will endure as mightily as Ambrose Richardson’s did.

Be vigilant and remember that familiarity is the enemy of awe. Never relinquish your sense of awe in the face of architecture and your involvement in it. The awe you experienced when you first visited the Pantheon, or the Piazza San Marco. The awe you experienced when you drew your first building. The awe I know you will soon experience when your first building is built. I promise you, it will take your breath away.

Never forget the great architects who taught you so much during your time in Italy: Bramante, Palladio, Alberti, Sangallo, Michelangelo, Bernini, Sansovino, Brunelleschi, Cortona and so many others. Seek to understand what it is that allows their architecture and urbanism to sustain, in fact to reward, repeated experience, observation, analysis and interpretation.

Let their excellence be your model, their built work be your standard, their creative engagement with Antiquity be your inspiration. They are, after all, your predecessors in this fellowship of architects. They elevated the tradition you are joining. Whether you build simply (which you most frequently will) or monumentally, look to them. In the inspiring words of a wise member of this faculty, “Stand upon their shoulders as they stood upon the shoulders of Antiquity”.

Demonstrate by the gracefulness of your designs that you have learned well from the Ancients and the Renaissance.

Embrace those principles articulated by Vitruvius, Alberti and Palladio, that the architecture of cities and towns and countryside might always represent a meaningful ideal of human endeavor.

Build buildings in ensemble whenever you possibly can. Either in ensemble with existing buildings or as ensembles entirely of your making. Because there is nothing more beautiful, nothing more glorious than buildings which collectively create public space for the common activities, celebrations, rituals and ceremonies of humankind.

And build in such a way that the work is durable and permanent, useful, and above all, beautiful – worthy of all investments: intellectual, manual, financial and emotional.

Make time to draw or paint or sculpt . Or, better, to draw and paint and sculpt. Those activities, essential companions to architecture, will continue to refine your hands’ ability to execute what your mind conceives. Remember, skills atrophy. Don’t let them. And be sure to read often and with purpose.

In a few moments, when you receive your diploma from Dean Lykoudis, Professor Bess, Associate Dean Stamper and Assistant Dean Fr. Bullene, I urge you to look to your parents or guardians, your grandparents, your siblings, your friends here gathered – the guests who have joined you today to share in your accomplishments - and thank them for making this possible for you. And for those dear to you, now departed to God’s embrace, offer a moment of silent gratitude.

Sometime very soon, if not already, it will sink in that you will not be coming back this August, to your personal place under the bright skies and vibrant colors of an autumn at Notre Dame. To Bond Hall and the Gallery. To the Studios or the Grotto or LaFortune. To the all-nighters and the subsequent walks, in dawn’s first light, to be the first to enter the South Dining Hall. To the improvised midnight tours of Rome with Rick Steves’ guidebook in hand, or the group photo on the steps of Palladio’s Villa Capra, La Rotunda. Those experiences have passed, but the relationships you have built here with your fellow travelers on this journey, through those experiences and others, will endure.

Class of 2012: Celebrate! Reflect! Be grateful! On the way home, as the Golden Dome, surmounted by the figure of our Blessed Mother, glistens in your rear view mirror one last time, remember that day, long ago, when you parted hands with your parents or guardians at the door to a kindergarten classroom and began your academic journey, filled with both separation anxiety as well as a bounding excitement for what would come. Rejoin their hands for a moment, as you reflect upon your time at Notre Dame, then look confidently forward, with a deep sense of purpose, nurtured by hope and guided by a resolve to excel, for today is the day you cross the threshold. You are well-prepared for this next chapter in your narrative.

Felicidades! Congratulations! Go at it!