

SPA Convocation address to new graduates

Dear graduates,

I congratulate you for successfully completing your Bachelor's, Master's and PhD programmes!

I am an architect and therefore my address will be more oriented towards the architects. However, I hope that this message will also resonate for others and give some guidance as you set out to use your skills.

You have had years of studies, learning all the basic knowledge required to design buildings. However, this knowledge is theoretical and now you have to learn how to build. Therefore, though you are considered now to be architects, your studies are not over. Learning is a lifelong process and our field of architecture is also an endless learning process.

Do you know that the etymology of the name architect comes from the ancient Greek "*arkhitekton*" which literally means "chief builder or principal craftsman"? Therefore, you will truly be an architect the day that you would be able to build a building entirely by yourself.

I received my Master of Architecture in France after 7 years of studies and I did 2 additional years of studies to earn my post graduate diploma in earthen architecture. However, though I had a lot of theoretical knowledge, I did not know how to build.

This knowledge came with practice, by working on sites like a mason, like a labourer, as well as by learning skills from the craftsmen of all the other fields required for the construction of a building, such as carpentry, plumbing, electricity, painting and so on.

With my specialisations in earthen architecture and arches, vaults and domes, I had to develop for myself the engineering skills needed to design and calculate such structures, not only to be aesthetically pleasing, but also to be structurally sound, safe and durable.

I imagine that during all these years, you have learnt how to design with conventional techniques, using reinforced cement concrete and other modern industrial materials. I also learnt about these more than 35 years ago. However, from my early years of studies in architecture, I believed that these materials were not appropriate for building the future. Hence, I became specialised in how to design and build with natural materials, exploring wood first and then earth.

You should know that the global construction sector is responsible for 40% of the consumption of natural resources and 40% of CO₂ emissions. Cement production accounts for 5% of global carbon emissions and some experts even raise this figure to 9%. Therefore, you have to consider if you want to go on building with these unsustainable materials and techniques or if you want to learn alternative construction materials and techniques, more respectful to the environment.

There is another important question to ask. "*For whom will you be building?*" Will you be building for yourself and your pride, to make a name for yourself and become famous? No. You must never forget that you will be building for people and for the greater society. You may become well-known, even famous, or you may not. But this is not what is important. What is important is that you design buildings that are aesthetically pleasing, employ safe building practices, demonstrate appropriate building techniques using locally available resources, and capitalise on thoughtful design practices suited to the specific climate that use the natural advantage of sun, wind and rainfall to make a building comfortable and sustainable, without having to resort to air conditioning.

What is important is to design buildings that are respectful to nature and people.

Do your work selflessly and try to leave behind you a better world. Good luck!