

“What will you do with it?”

Keynote Address by Jeanne Gang
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As a University of Illinois alum, it is a great feeling to be back at this special place, for which I have such fond memories. It is a tremendous honor to be asked to address the University of Illinois faculty, administrators and staff, the convocation committee members, and my professional colleagues. It is a special pleasure to be able to connect with the families, parents; especially moms who are here today. Happy Mother's day! And most importantly, it is an honor to speak to the graduates and future graduates of Illinois who are here. Thank you for inviting me to share this happy occasion with you all.

Since you are all about to enter the real world (or semi-real world if you are going to grad-school), I thought I would take this opportunity to address a few misconceptions that circulate about architects so that you too will have comebacks for the common complaints you may encounter along the way.

The first complaint that I've heard uttered about architects is that they are only concerned about style. This complaint does not refer to architectural styles, rather, it stems from the observation that architects are hopeless fashionistas. Besides wearing all black, you can always tell an architect by their very weird and overly-framed glasses. I wanted these glasses so badly as a young architect with perfect vision; I ordered overly-framed glasses with clear glass lenses installed.

This complaint generally boils down to architects are only image conscious, not to mention; vain.

The second complaint I hear, mainly from the spouses and partners of architects, is that architects never come home for dinner. They are always working in studio, and can never get their work done on time like normal professionals. This extends beyond missing dinner; sessions in the studio can last all night. This is incomprehensible to most people. Architects use this funny word "charrette" to describe the absences, as if the French word somehow lends some gravity and importance to their all-night endeavors.

Architects will even miss parties to be in studio preferring the company of their computers, drawings, and models over friends. When they do go parties they undoubtedly hang around other architects, and guess what they talk about? Yes, architecture. For normal people this trait is called; boring.

This leads to a third complaint, which is that on those occasions when architects do get out of the office and get to travel, all they want to do is look at, sketch and visit architecture. They can get psychotic about getting inside a special building. Problem is, it can be very difficult to get inside some great buildings which are often private. So when architects get on one of these missions, that's when they really lower their moral standards. We will say or do anything to get inside buildings. Anyone who went to Versailles can probably relate to this. We will climb over walls, con security guards, and lie to get inside.

I once had a friend who, in order to gain entry into the Convent by the famous architect Luis Barragán, taught herself how to say in Spanish (with a perfect accent); "Please let me inside, I want to become a NUN." She got in, but could go to hell for it. This is why architects have even been considered liars.

Finally, architects are accused of just trying to be different for the sake of being different. If we were artists that would not be a problem, but architects cannot do architecture alone, the way artists can be artists. We need clients, we work with others in the world of construction, business, and have to address budgets and schedules. The non-standard way architects think is not always welcome. It goes against the status quo. We stand accused of coming up with crazy untested contrarian ideas.

So dear grads, after working your whole life so hard and trying to learn architecture, now you hear that you are faced with the prospect of being called a bunch of vain, boring, lying, contrarians.

Not only that you must now get ready for change. You thought all of that hard work had paid off. You're at commencement. This ceremony marks a turning point. It is a moment of great accomplishment, but now I am about to tell you that it is a little unclear as to what your role should be.

All your life so far you have been given the outline for the course and you know what you have to do; from now on though, you have to create your own outline, indeed you even have to create your own course. Up until now, there have been only a few ways to succeed, a good studio project and final review, and performance on tests. From now on, there is not only one single path; (even though the well-documented path of internship and licensure might make it seem that way). I am here to tell you that there are an infinite number of paths and an infinite ways to succeed. Where should you focus your energy? I am glad if you are a little unclear about what to do next.

We face the single most urgent problem of civilization to date. We must address the environment and climate change and we must find a way to organize the massive urbanization of the planet. It may seem odd to talk about mass urbanization here amidst the cornfields of Champaign. I came for the small town of Belvidere, Illinois. From that vantage point, maybe the change underfoot is not obvious. But the future change will effect even the sanctity of small-town USA. Consider this, in 1800 only 3% of the world's population lived in cities. This year was the first year in human history that more than 50% of people on the globe live in cities. Massive change is occurring that will change everything we think we know about our habitat from the way we build to the way think about garbage to the way we grow food.

You might wonder what this has to do with architecture. It is very clear that out of the box, new approaches are desired and necessary. Sure, we architects can make green buildings. We have to make green, sustainable buildings, *AND* we have to do more. For the world, the 'more' is going to depend on collaborations between architects and ecologists, hydrologists, scientists, chemists, farmers, local and regional governments officials and others. Architects are crucial to the mix.

This is quite an important role for those vain, boring, lying, contrarians isn't it?

I have found that some of the most amazing people who have the capacity to lead a response to climate change and mass urbanization are in fact Architects. Architects think different.

As opposed to being vain and self-absorbed, it is actually the case that to be a good architect you must think less about yourself and more about others. You must hone an ability to think *like* the other. Architects are very good at the exercise of walking in other people's shoes; an important quality for global change.

Every time you design a dwelling for someone, it is necessary to learn how someone else lives.

If you design a school, you need to understand how students learn. If you are designing a church or temple or synagogue you have to understand particular religious rituals and the culture of the people who will worship there. If you design a clinic, you will have to understand the experience of the patient, the doctors and the nurses, and it doesn't stop there, you have to understand the work of the lab technicians and the administrators and know what the cleaning people need. Not only that, you will have

to understand how the building is made and the issues that the builders may encounter. Architecture is about the concern for others.

You know those big overly-framed glasses we're teased about? I don't think of these as vain. For me they represent the architect's great ability to observe. Architects watch people and are concerned about people, and that is a great quality for the future.

How about all those all-nighters and all that architecture talk? I don't call it boring; I call it being passionate. It demonstrates that we architects love what we do.

As for the liars, anybody who can get into a convent pretending to want to be a nun; I call that convincing.

Perhaps the most important misconception to dismiss is that architects are just trying to be different for the sake of being different or enjoy being contrarian.

Well, research has found that architects constantly utilize both hemispheres of their brain. They use what has recently been termed "design thinking" – it is about connecting the dots, recognizing patterns, looking at something upside-down and backwards. It describes an ability to think about things in unconventional ways. "Design thinking" has been recognized lately by business schools who see it as a "new" approach to promote innovation, and open up business opportunities. But while business schools and corporations have finally seen the value in 'design thinking' and are attempting to imitate it (perhaps they will figure out how to make it profitable) we architects already have this innate ability, which prepares us in unique ways for new and difficult challenges.

The real question to all of you graduates should be: You've got it, 'What will you do with it?'

Perhaps we should stop treating our architecture degrees as prescribed career paths, and start treating architecture as a mechanism for doing things - many different things.

I have been lucky to meet many great architects in my life so far as practitioner and teacher, and I have noticed that what separates the really great people from the rest. The really great people work across professional boundaries. Great architects don't just design buildings, they are integrators of knowledge, they work with others in very resourceful ways.

Maybe all you ever wanted is to be a traditional architect or even the "STAR-architect," but many of the greatest architects today practically gave up traditional practice and have moved beyond it. Here are a few examples:

On one of my trips to Brazil with students, we had the opportunity to meet the architect Jamie Lerner. He didn't run a traditional practice, he had been the mayor of the Curitiba, a city of 3.5 million and went on to become the governor of the State. From this position in government, it is incredible what this architect-mayor was able to accomplish.

Lerner used his power of "design thinking" to find creative solutions for urbanization. He took a city on a flood plain and instead of investing in massive concrete levees, like wealthier cities do, he bought the flood plain land and created eco-parks at a fraction of the cost.

When a nearby bay was being used as a dumping ground, and would be extremely costly to clean up, Lerner began a program that paid fishermen for any garbage they retrieved by the pound, saving Curitiba millions and cleaning up the bay at the same time. He did something similar with slums trading bags of groceries and transit passes for bags of trash. The slums got much cleaner.

To make these connection Lerner had to walk in someone else's' shoes. To know what they needed, and to understand what motivated them, and had to design a system, not a building.

Socially-relevant architects Kate Stohr and Cameron Sinclair started Architecture for Humanity, an aid organization that develops architecture for humanitarian crises and provides pro-bono design services to communities in need. Currently, they are active in fourteen countries building schools, health clinics, and affordable housing. They are now raising funds for community-led sustainable reconstruction for Myanmar when the emergency transitions to re-building. They started this very soon after school.

Carolyn Dry, an architect and former professor from U of I whom I met, collaborates with scientists. She is currently running a small research and development company with a focus on material science and surface chemistry. One project was the development of self-healing concrete, (concrete that repairs its own cracks). Another project they are working on is the creation of a self-repairing aircraft wing - it repair itself in flight.

Extending the life of materials is another way we can use less, create less waste and produce less carbon emissions.

It is interesting to hear what she says about students; She states: "It is my philosophy that we need to develop creative, resourceful students who can create a project from its conception through design development. Preparing students for the job market is not my goal," says Dry. "But rather, helping them reach inner depths of their talent from which springs innovation, independence and creativity, and from which depths they may decide how to contribute to the world." Well said.

These examples demonstrate that we are part of an ecology; A connected universe and social system and reinforces that there are infinite career paths from here on out. These great architects I have mentioned are not the typical architects, they have selected non-traditional paths and have mobilized their creative design-thinking toward significant global issues.

So rather than vain, boring lying contrarians, you now see that architects are really concerned, passionate, convincing, multi-dimensional thinkers.

What better combination of qualities could you have to save the world?

Now, I haven't gone on about how great you all are, and I know you are since I have met some of you. You have met great friends at U of I, and you now have an impressive degree, let's hope it is the first of many.

Good Luck to you the class of 2008, go forth and diversify. Make a difference.