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It's amazing to think that this September, it will be nine years since I first became a student at the school of architecture. I was still a kid, but I knew architecture was my passion. I can still remember putting together my portfolio application — which is something everyone here can relate to — and the anticipation and excitement of opening the acceptance letter — or email, are they emails now?

I never thought of myself as artistic, but I really wanted to design buildings. Skyscrapers, museums, houses. I'm sure each of you has your own similar dream, and I hope that as you graduate with your Master of Architecture, you can each think back to what inspired you to choose this path, and moving forward, I hope you will cherish and nurture that original flame of inspiration.

Coming together as students, we each brought with us our own voice, our own positionality, our own story, and of course, our own aesthetic.

We have asserted our own identities, contributing different perspectives, and this is what gives our school its richness of culture because the school's greatest asset is us, the students, and the work we produce.

Our program is special for many reasons. We've been forced to think conceptually from our very first year, whether it was Federica's drawing class or the MArch 1 studios. This emphasis on critical thinking has lent itself to comprehensive projects like Gateway studio that are sensitive, thoughtful, and show artistry as much as technical skill.

We've all been lucky to meet amazing faculty and staff who are so invested in our success. From what I've heard at other schools, this is pretty exceptional to have instructors who go out of their way for us and go the extra mile, who take the extra time to support us and mentor us.

What I will remember most about my time at this school is the sense of community.

There are deep and meaningful relationships that we've formed with each other. Friendships that have been kindled, in some cases more than friendships, that will last our whole lives. These friends and partners may even become colleagues we'll practice alongside.

It's impossible to talk about community without mentioning the architecture building. So much more than just a space, this was an incomparable place, which, once you spent time there, would leave an indelible impression of you.

Even if it was too hot sometimes (such as the fifth-floor lab), or too cold in studio or the times the roof leaked, or bathroom flooded. Despite its minor flaws, this is a very special building, which has shaped all of us who have spent so much time in it.

We are so lucky to have a purpose-built architecture school, especially one that was designed to reinforce architectural pedagogy and reinforce studio culture and community. We've all heard the design parti — with studios as neighbourhoods, opening onto our upper street, and of course our lower street and our beloved public square, the pit.

Back to community —we all know the feeling of closeness with our cohort, but there's a larger feeling of family that runs through each year and each group. This is something we've all felt in the experience of the building and the school.

Think of the spontaneous moments and random connections. Leaving your studio and walking into the middle of a pin-up on the street. Linger a while to learn about a project completely different from the one you'd be working on. This cross-pollination created an environment where we were all constantly pushing ourselves to be as creative and innovative, and impressive as our peers.

We've all had the nerves and lumps in our throats before a crit. But looking back, what did we have to be nervous about? I have never felt the amount of support that I feel from my friends and peers in this program anywhere else. I've always known that no matter what, someone was cheering me on. And if there was a time I felt alone or felt like I'd totally bombed a project or presentation, there were always others to commiserate with.

This sense of studio culture is so strong in our program, and we should take pride in what we've cultivated. Collaboration is something that, as architects, we will constantly have to do. Even though we've all seen how competitive and individualistic we can get, at the end of the day, we're all in this together. Our work is better because of collaboration. We grow more as people because of collaboration. And we can change the world when we combine our best qualities and work together.

I know as graduate students, we've all been insanely busy, and we've had the pandemic this past year, but hopefully, at some point, you each got to experience some of the student initiatives and events at the school. Some of my favourite memories are of the Coffee Haus in the pit, listening to other students sing or recite poetry, play music, or dance. Also, Kosmic, for those who did their undergrad here, this event has legendary status, but to me, Kosmic is one of the best manifestations of how awesome it is to be an architecture student. I think the world would be a better place with more architects throwing artsy parties with crazy installations and good music.

On a more serious note, on the subject of student initiatives, I'd like to make a shout out to DWG, the diversity working group, for moving us towards a more equitable working environment. Your recent programming has been a real highlight of this past year and has further galvanized the student community. Diversity is truly our greatest strength, and I want to applaud all the students who are outspoken and unapologetic about that.

Each of us has had varying degrees of challenges in our personal lives. For those of us who have faced adversity while students, graduating with our masters has an added level of significance. Not only did we complete all the academic requirements, but we did so while dealing with other obstacles.

We've been pushed hard, the expectations have always been high, and sometimes it's felt like we're had more work assigned than is possible to finish. None of us should ever have to choose between our health and our studies, and the past few years have seen initiatives led by both faculty and students to address these issues. I hope that we can pass the torch to future years and develop practices of empathy.

As you move into the profession, never stop advocating for yourselves and others.

Anyway, we've all had to work extremely hard, everyone has made sacrifices and compromises, but here we are, we made it! And it's time to congratulate each other on this achievement!!

You've all written amazing theses. This is no small feat. Your contribution to academia is now part of a global knowledge base. Whether or not your topic works its way into your practice as architects, you'll always look back to this project as a touchstone. For many of us, we chose topics that were very personal to us. It was such a pleasure to see other students' work develop over the year and watch some of the defenses. At some point in the future, I'll enjoy looking different theses up in the library. I hope that they're all accessible to the public in some format!

Maybe for some of you, that's actually your worst nightmare, and you'd rather bury your thesis under a rock and never think of it ever again. That's okay too!

There's so much more I wish I could say. There are no words to capture the feeling of walking into the architecture building, heading up to your spot in the studio, and just being there, being an architecture student.

My last word will be this. Remember this experience. Reflect on how much you've grown over these past two or three years. Give yourself credit for the insane amount of work you just did. Find a sense of pride. And going forward, don't forget that these people here tonight are a form of family, and the community that we've built will always be a part of us.