

Jill Stoner
Director, Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism

It is an honour to address students and their families, faculty, staff, and friends of the Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism who are with us today and to speak directly to the Bachelor of Architectural Studies class of 2021.

Dear graduating students,

Thank you so much for inviting me to share this occasion with you and say a few words. For me also, this is the end of a chapter and a time of complicated emotions. I can imagine that you are experiencing excitement for what lies ahead and perhaps a bit of trepidation. Already, a tinge of nostalgia may be starting to settle in. But be sure also to make space to feel pride in what you have accomplished. We are enormously proud of you. Though we see you tonight on our home screens, in our minds you are striding across that wide convocation stage, smiling into a sea of a thousand faces as you cross into a future yet unknown but full of dazzling promise.

As I thought about how to address you today, I reflected back on my own analogous moment, when I had just completed my undergraduate degree in comparative literature. Before taking up graduate study in architecture, I spent a year at sea, during which time the space I inhabited alternated between a tiny cabin below deck and the widest room whose walls and ceiling were the distant horizon and a sometimes blue but often stormy sky. As a member of a small crew on a sailboat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, as far from a constructed landscape as one could be, I found frames of reference for my life and work that followed: a sense of our contingency within a complex ecosystem, the beauty of emptiness and of silence; the exhilaration we feel when collaborating becomes truly a matter of survival; a love of that special intimacy we inevitably share with fellow travelers. During that year, I learned to navigate by sun and stars and came to understand how much I did not know.

Now, many decades later, I have had the privilege of another remarkable voyage, this time with all of you as shipmates. While this journey came relatively late in life for me and relatively early for you, you proved to be more seasoned sailors than I, more skilled at adapting to shifting currents, better at navigating what proved to be a truly uncharted course. You have made this journey with grace and showed compassion for one another. You have channeled adversity into creative energy; at times, you have leveraged anger into action. So I want to thank you and let you know how grateful I am to have had your company and your counsel over all these last years, but most profoundly as we have weathered the storms of the past sixteen months.

When the world retreated into quarantine in March 2020, a refreshing (if unsettling) quiet descended upon us: like an ocean becalmed. The atmosphere became clearer. Animals who had been forced into our hinterlands through decades of overdevelopment grew bolder and reclaimed some of the territory that had once been theirs. (Perhaps these companion species came to bravely remind us that we too are at risk.) Meanwhile, within our domestic cocoons, we discovered the democratic lecture hall of the Zoom grid, where everyone gets a front-row seat. We made new friends on the other side of the world, without leaving black carbon tailings in the air. Our retreat from the streets, the absence of the roar of cars on freeways, made the non-human parts of our world audible again. And when people in Northern Italy emerged onto their balconies to sing a *cappella* into the twilight sky, it was as if they found harmonies with the wolves coming down from the hills. Many of the inexorable things we think of as progress were put on pause as our planet took a long deep breath.

Then just weeks later, on May 25th, that spell of relative silence was shattered by news of the murder of George Floyd on a street corner in Minneapolis. A young woman named Darnella Frazier captured the event on her phone and then shared it with the world. (She has just been awarded a Pulitzer Prize for her courage and presence of mind to bear witness.) An angry shout went up across North America and found echoes on other continents. And shouts went up throughout our school community, impassioned calls demanding that we find meaningful ways to act in response. Many of you challenged me directly to acknowledge and address a previously uncontested pedagogy, to bring more decisive accountability and action to our own enterprise, in fact, to foreclose on our complicity in constructing an often-unjust world.

Western paradigms have been built on questionable foundations, yet they have grown ever stronger through unquestioned repetition. The residential schools that incarcerated young Indigenous people, so regrettably close to home, are the most acknowledged manifestations of architecture as a willing instrument of violence here in Canada. Yet, we would be unwise to imagine they are unique. It can seem paralyzing to recognize that this violence has been systemic and is, literally and everywhere, cast in stone. But even as students, you have shown that this reckoning can also be liberating. You have invented new kinds of drawings, for example, that express radical departures from convention and read as evocative visual manifestos for future spaces not yet quite fully imagined. Even more recently, your deliberate actions and demands, on behalf of things you care deeply about, stand as a rebuke to our profession's rote reliance on precedent and past practice.

These days, as vaccine distribution accelerates, there is much talk about "getting back to normal," as though the world we left behind last March is somehow innocent and sitting idle while awaiting our return. We need to pause just a moment more to acknowledge that many persistent practices that we think of as normal are brutally inequitable, and many are just plain bad for our shared planet earth. What, then, do we do?

I've never believed that the mission of architectural education is simply to prepare students for the profession; it is so much more than that. It is our responsibility to provoke and inspire you to experiment and be critical, to avidly question those canons set in stone. The Faculty at this school is the best there is anywhere. With uncompromised dedication, they have helped you develop technical skills, taught you the fundamentals of our design discipline, and given you solid foundations in history, theory, and visual language. Now you have the literacy through which you can debate the wicked questions and rewrite some of those spatial codes. You can insist that to get back to the old normal is not good enough; that, in fact, there can be no return.

Here we are in the waning days of a pandemic as you step over a threshold that is at once a graduation and a commencement. The past year has illuminated our current challenges in unforgiving light. We who have presumed the ability to teach you will now look to you, collectively, to chart the course ahead. Under the ephemeral skies of a warming planet, and in the company of each other and the many allies you have yet to meet, you will discover where your passions lie, what you wish to advocate for, when to take to the drawing board, and when to take to the streets. You will become designers, teachers, writers, activists, community leaders, inventors, and artists. You will be fellow citizens and stewards of our fragile landscapes. You will hold older generations accountable. And, you will continue to be students, as we all must be for our entire lives.

I am confident that what you will do beyond the walls and words of our school will be not only inspiring but truly transformative. So go forward and meet head-on the fierce urgencies of your time. Remember that the work we have chosen is a privilege and can be enormously fun and rewarding even when the stakes are grave. Lighten the serious days with humor; enrich your work with elements of play. Navigate the vast, often treacherous but always beautiful ocean that lies

ahead with confidence and humility, curiosity and vision, joy and heart. These will be your guiding stars, and you will be ours.

Thank you again, and congratulations.