

## Occasional Address

**Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne, Thursday 3 August 2017, 5.30pm**

**Ms Karen Alcock**  
*Principal, MAArchitects*

I would like to thank the Dean for the opportunity to talk to you this evening, I remember my Graduation ceremonies with fondness, a precious opportunity to celebrate with family and friends all the hard work of the past years.

I wanted to be an architect since I was 12. I love what I do, there is nothing more exciting than walking onto site and seeing something you have designed executed beautifully. I remember a few years ago just after my son was born visiting a project under construction to inspect a folded ceiling I had designed. The builder had done such a beautiful job, I had to wipe a tear or two from my eye. Maybe some of it was being a new mother but it was so exciting to see something turn out just as you imagined – it's a hard feeling to beat.

My Dad worked for the Australian Government and I spent most of my primary school years in Hong Kong and London. Growing up as ex-pat kids in the 70s we were exposed to all sorts of experiences and places.

On reflection I think what inspired me to be an architect is that exposure and the contrast between all the places we visited – seeing the wide range of the way people live – and how the built environment complements and shapes our experience.

I remember visiting some of the northern cities in the UK during the Thatcher era. Cities like Coventry which were rebuilt post war were hostile and depressing – as a young teen, these were not places I wanted to be. Designed as architectural exemplars they were disconnected from the people who were supposed to use them. Returning to Australia in the early 80s was like a breath of fresh air. The open space, warm weather and freedom were welcome changes to the dark days and cold winters of London.

Back in Australia I moved to Canberra – another posting and another contrast. As a teenager Canberra was a safe open city with the Brindabellas as a backdrop. Buildings such as the High Court and National Gallery became our weekend playgrounds as my sister and I looked for things to do in what was a pretty barren place.

Canberra was characterised by long deserted roads between the town centres. The suburbs themselves were shaped by strict development controls, such as no front fences and restricting powerlines to the rear of sites. I don't know if any of you have been to Canberra but each town centre was built about 20 years apart, each reflecting the architectural ideology of the decade they were built in. John Andrews' Cameron Offices in Belconnen was a brutalist contrast to the village like Tuggeranong. In a city like Canberra the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture and urban design are there for all to see like display homes - the good, the bad and the ugly.

These formative years made me sceptical of utopian solutions. I think it is always difficult for architects to design when there is no context. Rome wasn't built in a day so it is

unrealistic to think that a 'new' city can seamlessly integrate with its occupants either. I don't think Canberra is terrible, but it takes both time and occupation by people for cities to be successful. It is important that as architects we provide enough room in our designs for our ideas as well as spaces for individuals to inhabit!

I don't consider myself an academic, I don't read a lot of architectural books (though I do like the pictures) but I do reflect on the work I design and I care about the outcome. I tell my staff I'm a whittler, I'm not about the big concept, I take all the constraints and briefing elements and work with them like a sculptor. I believe buildings should be balanced, joyous and feel effortless, I don't believe in layering them with obvious architectural follies or theories at the expense of the built form and experience. I would prefer the architecture to be beautiful, to sit subtly in the background. A space you walk into and want to be, that relaxes you. An architecture whose absence is felt, rather than its presence noticed.

Although I don't teach, I see my office as an opportunity to share the craft of architecture. It is important to me that my practice is a place where we can build a culture of design that goes beyond the projects.

This is not a one-way investment. As much as I invest in my staff, they invest in the practice and the projects that they do. Most of them have been graduated less than 5 years but they constantly surprise me with their commitment and critical thinking. I am a great believer that attitude is much more important than experience, and the ability to think laterally is essential.

When as a team we are working on a project and we know that we have cracked it, the excitement in the office is palpable. The power of the collective is much greater than the individual. Working with my staff makes me optimistic about the future of the industry and the people in it.

Graduates come to practice with a freshness and a breadth of ideas that is inspiring. The profession I graduated into is different to today's and the contemporary thinking of graduates is critical to the development of a modern profession.

CAD and BIM software may have replaced hand drafting and project managers may have muscled in as the go-to people for project delivery, but this should be of no consequence to the value of architects. Embracing contemporary thinking, challenging the brief and considering the long-term impact of our projects are all critical to the development of the industry. It is our creative thinking, our ideas, our IP that is invaluable.

As the pressure on the built environment increases we must remain agile and adaptable, staying ahead of the issues and offering solutions that go beyond built form. This might be through instigating new housing typologies, alternative funding models or working with clients to develop post occupancy systems to encourage responsible use of resources once buildings are occupied.

Some of you will go on to be Architects, Landscape Architects, Builders or possibly even developers. I wish you luck in all future endeavours. As you sit here waiting to collect your degree take this opportunity to reflect on this milestone:

What are your ideas?

What do you want to contribute to the built environment?

Design can make a difference – will you?

### **Vice-Chancellor's Introduction**

*Presiding Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen:*

*This evening we are fortunate to be addressed by a Melbourne architecture graduate who has gone on to a successful professional career while also remaining a strong supporter of architecture education at the University, Karen Alcock.*

*In collaboration with Design Director Clare McAllister, Karen leads MA Architects, a Melbourne-based architecture studio specialising in residential and mixed use projects.*

*Karen and Clare formed MA Architects after working together for ten years at Neometro Architects.*

*Karen is a practitioner closely involved in promoting the importance of design and architecture in the community.*

*She has been involved in a number of committees for the Australian Institute of Architects, served on the Building Advisory Council and has been an examiner for the Architects Registration Board of Victoria.*

*She is also Chair of the University of Melbourne Architecture Advisory Board.*

*It is a pleasure to call on her to speak at this evening's conferring ceremony. Please welcome Karen Alcock.*