

Occasional Address
Royal Exhibition Building, 8 December 2018, 11.00am

Professor Michele Acuto
Professor of Global Urban Politics
University of Melbourne

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Dean, guests and 2018 graduates, thank you for the welcome and the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you in such an exciting occasion.

But most importantly, congratulations!

It is no doubt a day to savored, shared with family and friends and celebrated as the culmination of quite an effort – so hats off to you all really.

It is a privilege for me to offer our compliments and wish you all the very best as you embark in the next adventure of your professional or dare I say, in some cases, academic lives.

I have to admit I have none of the degrees you are graduating with today, being in fact and international law and politics graduate.

What draw me to contribute to major global urban agendas like establishing a global sustainable development goal for cities, a new urban agenda for the United Nations, or advocating for a recognition of the role of cities in addressing climate change, was not a degree but a passion for cities.

I think that this is the main message I would like you to go away with today.

As the great British planner Sir Peter Hall once told me, it is not so much the degree that makes the urbanist. It is as the passion for making our built environment sustainable, hospitable and exciting that shapes the best architects, planners and engineers.

Congrats on your degrees today, but even more congrats on persevering through complicated subjects, tricky assignments, late night submissions and byzantine instructions on how to find your tutorial rooms.

It is that passion and commitment that I would like to commend today as a humble representative speaking for the tutors and profs and lecturers you met along the way.

In particular, I would like you to embrace what a unique moment you are stepping into.

You are perhaps the first generation of the ‘urban age’ where more than half of the world’s population, 4.2bn people, and where another 2.5bn will be moving into urban settlements in the next three decades. That’s as many new city dwellers as facebook users today, for the social media addicts out there.

65 new people move to Shanghai every hour. 80,000 people crowd each square kilometre of Seoul, and a third of Brazil’s GDP is made in Sao Paulo.

Working in cities, whether as architects, planners, policymakers, or champions of sustainability, is working with people's opportunities.

You are at the forefront of managing the single largest migration in human history, shaping the global gateways to the planet and the ways we should be living to thrive even in the face of challenges such as threats of climate disasters and dramatic inequalities.

In that you have a great fortune, but we also ask you to remember you need to be leaders of an urban planet like perhaps no generation before.

860m people live in informal settlements today, 1.2bn lack access to adequate and secure housing. Over 7,000 people will sleep rough on the streets of London tonight, under a very British 4 degrees and rain weather forecast.

As built environment professionals we need your leadership and we need it today.

I ask you to bear that responsibility remembering that you are not alone in this endeavour. Look right and left of you. Just last year I had the chance to address the United Nations General Assembly on the importance of cities in global affairs. I did so speaking just after the Maldives Ambassador and representative of the Small Island Developing States. We might have both been wearing suits and ties giving solemn speeches, but it was still Ali and I, having spent plenty of hours in libraries and lecture rooms, still late on assignments and rushing around campus, having sat side to side just like you today. Remember your colleagues and friends you shared this journey with

Besides, whether you are going to work internationally with the UN or for a neighbourhood action group, you share the same urban condition with other 5 billion people.

There are hundreds of city networks moving ideas between continents. The way waste is managed in Rio de Janeiro comes from stealing good ideas from Johannesburg and Jakarta. Water management in Ho Chi Minh borrows from Venice and Melbourne. So please do not lead staring at your feet, but rather raise your chins and look around as the world is full of great ideas worth stealing and you might make a good mate or two across continents whilst doing that.

You will make friends out there, but do not forget you have friends, and ideas worth stealing, in here too. We are equally proud of calling you graduates of the University of Melbourne than you are to call yourselves alumni.

So please do not forget academia, we are short stroll away: globally the average distance between town hall and the closest university is just about 4.5km – a short walk, or an easy tram, up the road really.

A distance I hope the next generation of city leaders, whether in the public or private sector, will be willing to cross much more frequently.

So, with that, congrats once again on a terrific achievement, good luck for your next steps, and hopefully see you very soon out there on the road.

Thank you.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

This morning I am delighted to welcome as guest speaker Michele Acuto, who is Professor of Global Urban Politics in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning.

Michele is also Director of the Connected Cities Lab at the University, and Acting Director of AURIN – the Australian Urban Research Infrastructure Network.

Michele took his first degree in Law and Diplomacy at the University of Genoa, before postgraduate studies at the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo.

He holds Masters degrees in International Affairs and Diplomacy, and a PhD as well, from the Australian National University.

As a scholar he is deeply internationally engaged. He has completed fellowships and lectureships at the Oxford Programme for the Future of Cities, and in urban theory and global networks at University College London.

He has been an expert advisor to the World Health Organisation and worked on treaty diplomacy for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

Michele is also co-chair of the Nature expert panel on science and the future of cities.

It is a pleasure to call on him to speak today.

Please welcome Professor Michele Acuto