

Commencement Address by Henry G. Cisneros, former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development

Presented on May 14, 2021, at the 49th Commencement of the University of Buffalo's School of Architecture and Planning

Dr. Satish Tripathi, Dean Robert Shibley, members of the faculty and staff, and families and friends of our graduates. Most importantly today, graduates of the class of 2021.

Today is a day of gratitude. We give thanks to all who have been supportive and to those who have built this great institution and have provided educational resources. It's a day of celebration and achievement, expressing pride in what's been achieved. And it is a day of optimism.

I've always felt that commencement is an act of faith in the future. Think of it, the SUNY system has built this university for the purpose of building the future. This is the purpose for which the institution was created, to create professionals who would then go and build a better world.

Your tenure here has spanned an unusual time. The pandemic has changed all of our calculations. It has created a time that is memorable, maybe even historic. In fact, I'm fairly sure that when history books are written, along with other seminal moments such as the Great Depression or World War II or the Civil Rights Movement, there will be a section on the pandemic of 2020 and 2021 and its effect in the United States.

The pandemic has also touched your lives in more personal ways. You have shown grit, you have shown adaptability: attributes which are not bad to learn. You will need them in the course of your life and your career.

Andrew Yang, the presidential candidate, wrote a book several years ago entitled, *Smart People Build Things*. I agree with his point that it takes people who are not only smart but also have the presence of mind to know what they want to do in life, and who know what they want to leave as a legacy. Today as we gather to recognize architects and city planners, environmental designers and real estate professionals, it is fair to say we are recognizing people who have chosen a path that will allow them to make a difference in the world.

I think of you as stewards of the built environment. And that is not a small thing. This is a large country, from ocean to ocean and it's made up of physical places. You are in the professions that build, create, enhance, and recycle those physical places. When I was Secretary of HUD working in public housing I saw the effect the physical environment had on people's lives. I came to think of housing as the platform, the essential platform, for every social objective we wanted to pursue. Education, work, better incomes, family health, family stability: all have to happen in a physical place, which is a home. It was a realization that was greatly impactful for me and for my work.

I'd like to pose to you today three questions about your career beyond your education.

These are the three questions. First, who are you?

In the societal scheme of things, who are you? How has this education endowed you with a capacity to know who you are?

Secondly, what will you actually do in our society?

What role will you actually perform? What service will you carry out in our society.

And thirdly, can you by having chosen this profession really make a difference?

Let's consider these three questions. **Who are you?**

An architect at the University of Singapore, Professor Eric L'Heureux, spoke at Washington University some years ago and asked that question. I want to flesh it out a little further today.

Who are you? Are you a builder and constructor? No, you're probably not going to lift materials and do nailing and wiring.

Are you an artist? No, even though many of you probably got your start drawing.

Are you an engineer? Although you need to know about the loads and stresses on buildings you don't have an engineering license.

Are you a writer? You will have to prepare proposals and you will have to be persuasive in making pitches for your work, but you're not a literary professional.

Are you a lawyer? Even though you have to work with compliance regimes and legal structures you are not trained in the law.

Are you an organizational specialist?

Well not exactly. Although you do have to create teams in order to do your work.

Are you financial professionals or business people?

Well, some of you will have major business responsibilities, determining the feasibility of projects and securing financing. But technically you are not financial experts.

Are you interior decorators? Well, you'll work on the inside of structures but you're not certified interior decorators.

So, who are you?

Professor L'Heureux concluded that architects, environmental designers, planning professionals, and real estate professionals – stewards of the built environment - are synthesizers.

What does that mean? You bring people together. You will bring specialists together, even the specialists within this room. For example, architects working with urban real estate professionals have to know a good deal about each other's field in order to work together.

The idea of people in this profession as synthesizers appealed to me in the years that I was Mayor of San Antonio. My training as an urban planner was particularly resonant with the job. I found that it was the perfect training to be a city official, to be a mayor: to think about the future; to bring different factions of the society together; to think about the goals and ambitions of people who have different stakes in the city and to create structures. Who are you? A synthesizer with broad knowledge that requires a lifetime of intellectual curiosity.

The second question: **What will you do?** What tasks will you actually perform? What is the essence of what you will do in our society?

Here's my take. You will make places. Winston Churchill once said, "First we shape our buildings and then they shape us." Physical places whatever their form: home or office building, retail place or public amenity, touch peoples' lives. You will make places.

- You will adapt physical systems and new technologies to create new kinds of places. I once visited a Frank Lloyd Wright home in Wisconsin. It was a building that people said did not work because of leaks from the rain. The reason it leaked is that his vision of design was ahead of what the building materials of the time would allow. It was only later when new materials became available that those designs were truly achievable. We are living in a time when materials, technologies, and applications are changing rapidly and you will have to stay abreast in order to integrate new physical systems.

The great Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, "You can never step in the same river twice." The water in the river that you stepped into this morning, is downstream by now. In just a few hours, the river is different because the water current is from a different time and place. That observation is true about your work life as well. You can never step into the same moment. Circumstances will change, demographics will change, finances will change, materials will change, skills will change. You will have to be adaptive.

- You will introduce an aesthetic sense that will result in places where the human spirit soars. People may not know precisely what it is that touches them, but something about the place is evocative. You will create those places. You can create places that evoke history and ideals. I once walked into the building created by Jane Addams, the great social innovator and builder of settlement houses. She built the first public housing in Chicago. I could feel her ideals of human empathy in that place. I sometimes have the same feeling walking into a church or walking onto an athletic field, where human emotions have been spent, where human determination has been put forth. You will build those places and they will be your legacy, because those physical places will remain intact well beyond the years of your life.
- You will renew and recycle. After the earthquake in Los Angeles in 1994 when I was Secretary of HUD I saw that the structures that had been damaged could be torn down and replaced. The life of the city would go on through the recycling process. You will be part of that process of renewal.
- You will be part of our urban world. Some of you may work in smaller communities but we are all going to be part of a world which is now more urban than at any time in human history. For the first time in the history of mankind, more people live in cities than in rural areas. Our own nation is an urban nation. Our economy is driven by urban realities and we see the process of urban economic adaptation occurring right here in Buffalo, where Mayor Brown has championed 5G accelerators, a mobility fund, and a race for place in the downtown. Similar efforts are underway in cities all across America. It is exciting that you will be part of that process.

The third question. **Can you make a difference? Will your work matter?**

Let's talk about the big problems, the issues of our time. I want to make the case that each of these challenges has a component that can be addressed by our stewards of the built environment.

- One: the pandemic. What we found during the pandemic is that we need decentralized medical facilities on a broader scale than we have today, including new approaches to telemedicine. The so-called “assembly economy” driven by people coming together has changed our assumptions about the built environment. From convention complexes to university settings to school campuses to hospitals: architects and planners, designers and real estate professionals must rethink, recalibrate, and reconsider.
- Another of the mega issues of our time is economic mobility; building a strong economy that works for everyone, that distributes its benefits to everyone. The social justice agenda. Our society needs skilled professionals such as you working in underserved neighborhoods, building schools and clinics and transit stations; revitalizing neighborhoods and bringing people together across ethnic and income lines.
- Climate change is clearly one of the great issues before humankind today. We will have to change the way our structures relate to climate concerns, building modernized ports in areas where sea levels are rising, electric charging stations for electronic vehicles, new materials in smart buildings, and green spaces as flood control measures. We will have to consider quality of life concerns in the context of climate change.
- Still another one of these massive changes is digital transformation. We need smart people building physical environments for schools that integrate remote teaching and higher education systems that incorporate new digital devices. We must imagine new technological applications within the physical environments we build.
- Finally, it is important to act on another issue which divides our country; that is the geographic dispersal of opportunities. We know that there is an urban-rural divide, a bi-coastal vs. heartland divide. Our stewards of the built environment must be attentive to smaller communities as well as large urban areas. We must link the advanced economy of our leading metropolitan areas to our heartland communities in order to extend the best education possible and create the best health outcomes possible.

If we start with these imperatives that are truly life-changing for our society and relate them to the reality of what you can do with your training in the building arts, you will see without a doubt that you can make a difference.

You have chosen well. You have chosen a profession that will allow you to do good and do well. Indeed, I would say you have chosen one of those few professions that has the potential to touch lives and change the world in such profound ways.

As I began my remarks today, I said that today is a day of gratitude. It is a day of celebration of achievement. It is also a day in which we look to the future with optimism. There are clear reasons why we can be optimistic that your talents and the training you have received here will allow you to make our world better.

I take encouragement from the words of Senator Robert Kennedy. It is one of my favorite quotations from a public life because it speaks to optimism. Here is what Senator Kennedy said: "Our future may lie beyond our vision, but it is not completely beyond our control. It is the shaping impulse of America," he

said, "that it is not fate nor chance nor nature nor the irresistible tides of history that shape our destinies, rather it is the work of our own hands, matched to reason and principle." He said "There is pride in that, even arrogance, but there is also truth and experience. In any event, it is the only way we can live."

The knowledge you have gained at this University, the skills we acknowledge and celebrate today – they will enable you over the course of your career to build a better world, to shape a better country, and to leave a better environment for your loved ones.

Congratulations and go forward into the world.