

MARKING

To President Jenkins, Dean Tsolakis, “The Dean” Ken Carpenter, distinguished members of the faculty, graduates, families, and friends, I offer my congratulations on this important day and my thanks to LSU for inviting me to speak at this commencement.

I speak today, first and foremost, as an advocate for the notion of “Designers and Artists as Engaged Citizens”—creatives that seek civic engagement as the opportunity for both creativity and social activism. In my years of architectural practice, I have been privileged to see much success; I have been tempered by many challenges; and I have been sobered by occasional failures. But along the way, I have always valued the adventure and the chance to make a difference.

I love architecture, design, and art—they all share the same fundamental characteristic—the manipulation of space. And I particularly like the marking of my environment. I love cities and urban fabric and the complexity of designing in the public realm. And, most of all, I like building communities.

For me, architecture is a physical, intellectual, political, and emotional endeavor. For you graduates of the College of Art + Design, you have certainly gotten a taste of the elusive quality of this endeavor and dance with the moment of “completion.” When do you know you’re finished? How do you know when you’ve gotten a “good enough” design project? When is a painting finished? When is a concept meaningful or a sculpture compelling? When does good become exceptional? It’s the dilemma of subjective evaluation.

When we create, we leave our mark. Marking is a primary act of civilization. It’s the trace of civilization—the power to endure. From Stonehenge to the pyramids, the cathedrals of Europe, the temples of Asia, and the mountain terraces of Machu Pichu, man has left powerful marks. Acts of art and design mark our civilization’s time. They mark our presence; they mark our dreams. They mark our core values and our aspirational challenges.

As new graduates, you have already been marking, some of you for years, some since your childhood. With your designs, your art, and your constructions, you are a group of markers, leaving your physical marks on all that you touch. And for the most part, you have been educated, here in the university, in that somewhat elusive academic format, “the studio.”

Out of your studio adventures has come your ability to evaluate, create, curate, edit, and advocate. Studio has given voice and format to your creative instincts. Thinking and defending on your feet, in real time, is the currency of your studio-based education—a productive model for the development of your “critical thinking” skills. The type of thinking that will drive innovation in the 21st century.

As you transition today from this academic community, you are launching yourself. Don’t hesitate; don’t delay. Seize your own moment and establish your own traction. Be nimble. Be flexible with your time, open with your attitudes, and careful with your biases. Get out of your comfort zone and explore. And in your initial career launch, don’t wait for someone to step forward to mentor you—proactively seek mentorship, find your advocates, and think apprenticeship. And put in the quality time to learn your craft.

As you launch today, all is possible to the passionate. Perhaps you might want to follow your interest in a “place,” a terrific choice because “place” is such a rich way to study art, architecture, and place-making. For some of you, you may have your heart set on a “who,” a name, a celebrity, a personality, a creative visionary inspires. Or, you may follow a “what.” Maybe it’s a budding artistic movement or a revolutionary project type or a provocative area of expertise.

For your first career launch, you may already see the path you want to follow, and your first internships may provide you the opportunity to focus in a specific content area. Any and all of these choices are valid. For some the ideal sweet spot would be working in a great place, surrounded by distinguished talent, working on compelling content. Don't think this is too far-fetched! If you can envision your future, think it through, and plan it out with the support of family, friends, and colleagues, you, often times, have a reasonable chance of pulling it off.

And always seek your own creative inspirations and mentors in your own place. Some of my most significant influences have come from right here in South Louisiana—individuals who have marked our communities in profound ways and from who I have learned much. Their marks are quintessential.

- Architect John Desmond—his extraordinary mid-century architectural interpretations of vernacular Louisiana regionalism was so inspiring, surpassed only by his superb and deft architectural drawings. He inspired many of my classmates and colleagues.
- Landscape architect Suzanne Turner—a distinguished teacher/practitioner and historian whose seminal book, *The Gardens of Louisiana: Places of Work and Wonder*, offers valuable lessons in how to read and protect the historic landscapes of our region.
- Chrestia, Staub and Pierce—interior designers creating wonderfully fresh contemporary interiors always interwoven with the traditional elements of our architectural heritage and our artistic legacy.
- And Elmore Morgan Jr.—the great painter and environmentalist from the South Louisiana prairies. His exuberant brushwork capturing and holding light on his shaped Masonite panels. And also to Elmore for his joy of and commitment to teaching. Always nudging. Always nurturing. Always optimistic. His students, certainly some here today, were his proudest legacy.

As you launch, build your own personal landscape, your personal narrative. Honor your teachers; respect your roots. Build your personal landscape with personal experiences that define who you are as a creative. By expanding your network; seeking civic activism; and nurturing your cultural engagement, your social activism, and your experiences, you create who you are as a creative.

Today you're surrounded by the beginnings of that personal network—your classmates, many who will find success in their core interests and many that will move into allied professions. It is in the building of your network that you also begin the sharing of your own talent, and it is in this sharing that you accelerate the important work of becoming the "Designer and Artist as Engaged Citizen."

Civic engagement is a wonderful opportunity, stretching. We are all members of civic organisms—be it our cities, towns, or neighborhoods. Use your civic landscape as a laboratory for testing your passions and your principles. And your empathy. And your tolerance. Today, more than ever, we can certainly expect students and young professional interns to call the questions of environmental stewardship and social justice.

To accelerate the pace of your launch, embrace the obligation to travel. You can never travel enough, but travel with a purpose. The design and art world is ever-expanding in its embrace of international influences and multi-cultural enrichment.

- See China as soon as possible to witness stunning economic change
- Feel the optimism of Brazil
- The harsh beauty of India
- The lushness of Asia
- The art and humanity of Africa

- And the Old World treasures of Europe

Know your own world view from first-hand travel. Own your own politics informed by cultural diversity. Feel your own future fueled by a confidence that progress is possible. Embrace diversity and champion inclusion. The global village is now.

At this moment of commencement and completion, take the time to both reflect and look forward to the opportunities at hand. You should honor your family and friends that have stood by as you stayed this course.

Among the many roles to which today's graduates and tomorrow's leaders might aspire, that of "Designer and Artist as Engaged Citizen" must rank high. Find your path, mark your way.

May the force be with you.

Congratulations and good luck.