

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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Delivered at the graduation ceremony for graduates from the Faculty of Design,
Architecture and Building

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Pro-Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Faculty Deans, staff, distinguished guests, graduates, families and friends. At the outset of this address I acknowledge the Eora traditional owners of the land upon which this University is situated.

Tradition is a feature of Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies alike worldwide, and at events such as this Graduation Ceremony we perform rituals which are steeped in our ancient Oxford and Cambridge heritage of higher learning. The public ritual of conferring a degree upon a candidate who has achieved knowledge in a discipline, recognises that achievement in the presence of peers, teachers and family. Unsurprisingly, this ancient ritual has been infused with peculiarly Australian values over the past 200 years.

This ritual also confers a responsibility on the graduate to take forth this precious gift of higher learning and to use it for the benefit of the very society that has today, so publicly acknowledged his or her achievement. All of the graduates today have accumulated knowledge in courses which in one way or the other are about human creativity, especially in the built environment, which is nevertheless contiguous with the natural environment. It is this intersection between these two environments that I want to canvas in the body of this address.

Mark O'Neill, the Executive Director of the Australian Coal Association, recently observed that the annual Australian energy output stands at around 30,000 megawatts. He further points out that mainland China is currently constructing each nine months enough coal-powered stations to equal this annual Australian energy output. There is an obvious issue of whether the burning of fossil fuel such as coal is preferable to uranium-powered generation or even renewable energy generation utilising emerging solar, wind and water technologies.

My concern is more that human impact overall on the natural environment is now so pervasive that there are few parts of this planet which could be described as truly pristine. Indeed, the uncontrolled endogenous expansion of urban settlement in the increasing number of gigantic cities such as Mexico City, Sao Paulo, and Mumbai, to name a few, suggests that the near future will be considerably different from that which we are currently experiencing.

However, this is not to suggest that this future is necessarily dystopian, merely that there are important choices that societies throughout the world must now make to avoid unsustainable growth of the built environment, with all its attendant risks. To assist us with these choices, it is useful to note that indigenous and customary resource exploitation was generally conducted within a sustainable regime, perhaps much different from our arguably unsustainable resource consumption of the early 21st century. Many of these prehistoric societies, some still surviving in significant numbers, have demonstrated that natural resources can be sustainably utilised as a source of sustenance and shelter, thereby allowing future generations to have undiminished and untrammelled access to such resources.

In disciplines such as architecture, land use planning and property economics, for example there has been a steadily growing awareness that the built environment can and must be designed, constructed and managed sustainably. It is important to note that many apparent relatively new concepts such as recycling, carbon-neutral design and land use planning gain have been the core values of various indigenous and customary societies for millennia. Indeed, there is evidence that respect for such traditional knowledge is now infusing and exciting natural resource management on many continents, with the result that regulatory regimes are being established in a number of countries that meld the values of modernity with antiquity, notably in the South Pacific.

In New Zealand for example, the *Resource Management Act 1991*, the primary regulatory regime for natural and built environment planning and management, recognises the cultural and spiritual values of the Maori people, establishing principles, objectives and processes in that legislation to accommodate indigenous interests. Nevertheless, significant unresolved issues still remain relating to the efficacy of the Treaty of Waitangi as the primary compact between British settler society and the Maori, but notwithstanding, modern New Zealand society stands as a leader in multiculturalism.

Recognition that there are important values that lie outside predominantly Western European settler society culture is not accidental. The noted psychologist Steven Pinker has observed that all cultures appear to have a capacity to respect and sympathise with other people; however, Pinker inquires as to who are the other people. When our ancestors lived in villages the people who we sympathised with were those who were our fellow villagers. As urban settlements have grown since the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions and especially over the past century, Pinker points out that the circle of people who have interests that we can compare ourselves with has grown exponentially. Arguably, the clan has expanded to the tribe, to a whole nation, and now to the whole of humanity, Pinker observing that today the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the touchstone through which we measure how we should respect and sympathise with other people globally.

Some of the values that customary peoples hold, such as those of the Eora whose land we now occupy, are now being recognised by our culture as appropriate for the global community. Customary peoples condition their actions to respect the rights of all members of their communities, and we are now recognising that respect for future persons should flow to all members of the global community. Customary peoples include the unborn and those who have passed away as deserving equal human dignity and respect. Our care for the environment is the material way we respect the rights of the unborn. Likewise, respect of the knowledge, wisdom and values of past generations is a vital way to respect our ancestors while living and passing on the best of human understanding to future persons.

It is a pervasive notion that the way in which we now attempt to accommodate the values of other cultures, is evidence of a broad perception that Western European culture should not be pre-eminent, but can be melded with the genuine virtues of hitherto exotic and even esoteric values of other even older cultures. The sum of such universality of values is the stark realisation that knowledge must be used for the greater good of the whole of humanity, which leads necessarily to sound environmental stewardship.

Interaction between the built environment and the natural environment has produced new narratives about the quality of our global stewardship, legal scholar Danaya Wright observing that a pressing need exists to re-evaluate ownership and management of natural resources. Wright urges that our stewardship should be reinvested with a dichotomy of firstly a rhetoric of private rights, and secondly a notion of the best interests of the natural environment. There is a need for a welfare model of land ownership which will protect the remainder for future owners. Wright's view is that property law in the USA is lagging behind the expectations of the community, and I believe a similar situation is clearly apparent in Australian property law.

It has been an honour for me to have had the opportunity to deliver the Occasional Address at this Graduation Ceremony, just as it honours the achievements of our new graduates. The new graduates present here today are ritually invested not only with recognition by society that a higher level of learning has been achieved, but more importantly with the desire of society that the learning should be applied for the benefit of the whole human community. I commend to you the greater challenge of using your education in ways that uphold the responsibilities that are bestowed on you today and in so doing, act to fulfil yourselves as human persons.

Thank you.