

SHIFTING THE AGENCY OF THE ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION

Introductory remarks to open Agency 2017

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1. Welcome

As we begin we need to acknowledge that where we are meeting was the home of others before us, and to that end, I wish to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the *Eora Nation* as the traditional custodians of this land, and pay respect to the elders past and present.

My name is Joshua Morrin, and I am the Executive Director, NSW for the Australian Institute of Architects. I am something of a late starter to this evening's program – I am deputising for both the National President, Richard Kirk, and the Chapter President, Andrew Nimmo – but with no disrespect to either of them I am perhaps a little closer in age to this evening's audience, and I hope a little more relatable. And I know with architectural audiences that there is always a desire to be 'understood'... so lest you think I am one of those Institute bods who works in the professional association but doesn't have much experience in it, one small disclaimer: two degrees, registration, and at least three buildings that I have worked on actually built. Not currently an architect in the practicing sense, but more or less, some of the time, trying to feel like one. More on that later.

Welcome to Sydney. It is my pleasure on behalf of the Institute to welcome you to Tusculum, a building that is about half as old the Congress. Designed by Neil Durbach and Harry Levine, this is the winner of an architectural competition in 1986 – probably before most of you in this room were conceived. The other – the Tusculum Villa – is by John Verge, c. 1836-41, and certainly before any of us in the room were even dreamt of.

Here you are, at the Congress. There have been a few of these. I myself have been to at least two – Wellington 2007 and then Canberra 2009. It is a great undertaking, particularly in this day and age. There was a time when you would have been able to run this with not

much more than a group of volunteers powered by a few drinks. Not so now. Today, any kind of event that you want to run will throw up at you all sorts of challenges.

The organising team have had to set up a business, open a bank account, and do things like take out public liability insurance – and that's before they even start devising a program, sourcing speakers, and more importantly the sponsors to help pay for the whole affair. Oh, and apparently most of them were working during most of this time. It is genuinely a mammoth undertaking, and before we go any further I want to acknowledge them – all of them. I have always admired the intrepid spirit and complete inhibition that takes hold of some students, and which generally disappears soon after they have start to become aware of just how much risk they are taking on. So to you all – on behalf of the Institute, congratulations, and thank you.

The Institute is really proud to support students, and in particular this Congress, because the Institute is committed to change. We know however that before you can affect the sorts of change you would like to see in the world, you very often need to change yourself.

So it is with the Institute. We have been undergoing what can only be described as transformational change over the last three years that I have been working on this side of the fence. We have reviewed almost everything we do, and how we do it. We have thrown out a lot of stuff. The change is enormous – everything from our governance model, to our constitution, to our finance systems, to everything digital (that part is still underway) – all the while working on a new strategic plan that sets out what we are going to do over the next three years. And while we're at it, we've done a bit of restructuring too. I personally have moved from Melbourne, to Darwin, and now back to Sydney. I feel like there are a few

of us at the Institute who can identify with what the organising team has been through. We have kind of finished a few final projects, year on year.

But why? Why all this change? What are we trying to achieve?

2. Agency

Strangely enough, we are on about the same thing as you are. We are engaging with our agency – as you define it, the capacity of an actor to act in a given environment. Let me show you why.

The Agency of Agency

To have influence, you have to have capacity to influence. Or in other words, to achieve something, you need to be *able* to achieve something. At base, I think this means that you need to exist as a going concern, either as a business, or even more simply as a human being. You need to know who you are, why you are here, and what are trying to do. If you don't have this, you won't get very far. And if you haven't figured this out yet, that's fine – that's all part of being a student.

The Agency of Architecture

This is what we're all here for. A kind of latent belief that architecture has some sort of capacity to do something that is more than just simply exist as a building. For me, it is the capacity to change and shape culture, to challenge the mind, and to impart a sense of self that cannot be found anywhere else.

No Agency, No Act

If you don't design, you won't get a building. But it's more than that: if you don't have any influence, you'll never get anything built. Just speak to any architect that has had to liaise with a contractor.

No Agency, No Change

You've got your degrees, you've got your registration, you're an architect. You're designing buildings and they're getting built. This is all fine by itself, but left to yourself you will just keep designing pretty much the same things, and seeing the same things built. Architecture needs more than that. You need more than that.

No Agency, No Future

So now, without anything changing, the world is moving on, and you're still in the same spot. You might still be an architect, but things are not quite so good as they were. Or maybe you've noticed some things in your practice that you think should perhaps be a bit different, but you either ignore them, or don't have the capacity to change them. You wonder why great buildings disappear from the skyline, as if nobody cared. You wonder why you work to tighter deadlines. You wonder, sadly, why there are less women around the office. You wonder why your pay hasn't really increased. The future, instead of expanding, is shrinking.

What, or perhaps who, helps you here? Who helps you change? Who helps you effect the change that you know you want to see in the world?

No Institute, No Agency

When we start to understand that we need something, or maybe someone, bigger than ourselves, that is the point at which we begin to activate our agency. If you – we – are not as a collective engaged *with* an agency, then we *have* no agency. Our voice will not be heard.

The choice is stark but simple. If you want architecture to have agency, then you need to have some sort of body that is larger than the individual. This is why you have an Institute of Architects. Without it, you – we – don't have a voice.

I must add that the reverse is also true: without you, there is no Institute. Much of it is voluntary. But there is a value question that you need to ask yourselves, if you are in the profession: do I value myself enough to invest in my own future? Because I think this is more or less where you get to. To be involved is demonstrate that you care about your future; to not be involved, that you don't.

No Institute ≠ No Architecture

This is a small disclaimer. It's worth pointing out that you don't need the Institute to practice Architecture. You could keep designing within the very small bubble that you start out in. But it is quite unlikely to get much better than that, and your relevance will be limited to your individual capacity to influence.

3. Shifting the Agency of the Architectural Profession

For too long the architectural profession has held itself as a kind of silent guardian of great buildings that generally were available to a select few. But our twenty-first century world calls for a shift in the way we operate, a quite radical reorientation in the way in which we

think about what we do, and so too a change in the way that the Institute works on behalf of the profession.

For us, we are building our work on three pillars: Advocacy, Education, and Practice.

PRACTICE: In terms of Practice, we are refocusing on what we offer to practicing architects.

Things that are useful in the everyday sense, and being able to draw on the knowledge bank of the Institute. But it also extends to being very clear on what level of professional practice is offered by Institute members.

EDUCATION: The Institute is the guardian of a high level of education, and the quality-based framework for learning. We want design excellence, not averageness. We expect this not just when you are working your way through university, but when you graduate, and then throughout your career. And we provide you with the tools and programs to do so.

ADVOCACY: We are your voice, not only to each other, but more importantly to the rest of the world. This is really where the work is for us – where we are necessarily shifting the agency of the architectural profession. It is a test of our capacity to influence, to demonstrate the good thing that architecture is, the way that it inspires, and supports communities.

The hard thing is that only some of it is visible. Much of it you will hardly ever see. Our success in advocacy might be just as much about the things that don't happen, as it is the things that do.

But to give you a few examples of what we are doing, how we are demonstrating agency:

- **Student Architecture Awards**
- **Venice Biennale**

- **National Conference**
- **Architecture Bulletin**
- **Issues: Sirius, Stadiums**
- **Gender Equity: Champions of Change**

The challenge you have set for yourselves at this Congress is the same challenge that we have set ourselves: our agency is the thing that counts.

Your Institute is your agency. If I can leave you with one final thought, it is this: if there isn't an Institute advocating on your behalf, there may not be a future profession for you.

Best wishes for the Congress.