Thank you! Thank you, for that humbling introduction and to Director Mortensen for the invitation and privilege of addressing the class of 2015. It is absolutely surreal to be standing here addressing you all in an auditorium that I freely admit to having fallen asleep in one too many times as a student, which given my invitation here today apparently did not matter. So thank you again for this honor and allowing me to get that off my chest.

I would also like to congratulate and more importantly thank the faculty. Though a lot has changed over the past 22 years when I was last a student here, many of you haven’t, and for that I am grateful (and surprised, quite frankly). You have played an instrumental role in my being asked to deliver this speech and I am sure, once this class catches up on the sleep that you all are responsible for depriving them of, they will all eventually appreciate you too. Your dedication, patience and wisdom often go without formal appreciation, but know your influence on us all (even if you all don’t realize it yet) is beyond measure.

To the parents, family and friends, you also deserve to be congratulated, because for all the pride that you feel and deservedly so, it was your sacrifice, your friendship and your unconditional support that has made this all possible, oh, and the beer money, let’s not forget about that. And if they told you that the money was for “model materials” at a place called the “art coop”, they were lying, that place does not actually exist.

Now, to the class of 2015!! Congratulations!! You are the most recent class from a school with one of the longest histories. You all have worked incredibly hard, you have made it through the infamous weeding out year, you have survived many all-nighters, difficult juries, and countless toxic fumes from a panoply of adhesives; your day is finally here! And make no mistake, you all are the stars of this event, far outshining me, which would lead you to assume that you have the best seat in the house, but your vantage point is not as clear as mine, blurred with concerns and nervous about the unknown. What will my first position hold, what kind of firm will I work for, will I be a success, and how hard is that damn A.R.E. exam? The view from where I am standing is much clearer, for I get to look out at you all, and know what the future holds for you, the possibilities that lie ahead and the raw potential that you all are about to capitalize on.

Well, 22 years ago, I was sitting in the same place that you all are, receiving my Bachelors of Science in Architectural Studies otherwise referred to as a “BS” in Architecture, really. My experience at the University of Illinois was invaluable and had unknowingly prepared me for my eventual career. (So you should all take comfort in that). Throughout these years, I have been recognized with both personal and project awards, I have been published in magazines and books, I have been exhibited in museums, I have had the opportunity to teach and have traveled all across the world collaborating in the design of buildings and working with some of
Brian Vitale, Principal | Design Director, Gensler
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Convocation Speech - May 17, 2015

the world’s most amazing people. At this campus alone I have been a visiting professor, built a building for the world’s fastest supercomputer, and now this. This school and its amazing network was my foundation and has served me well, and it will for all of you.

In preparing this speech, everyone tells you to share with the graduating class the path to your achievement; I would rather, however, tell you what I wish I would have known before I started….so you can make your own path. So I want to share with you 3 principles. Some will seem counterintuitive others obvious, but all are crucial to the way architecture is and will be practiced. After that, I have one simple request, and it won’t be to “fail” or “take risks” or “change the world” (I mean for god sakes, do those things), but rather something very simple but I believe incredibly powerful and will change the trajectory of your careers.

But first, here are a few musings:

First, BE PROMISCUOUS:
Now parents, before you try to usher me off the stage, what I am asking you all to do is be promiscuous with ideas, concepts, spaces, program, and the people that you have sitting around the table collaborating. Create hybrids, live in the middle of those Venn diagrams we are always drawing, mix it up, then re-mix it, because that is where real innovation comes from.

In Maria Popova’s review of “Dancing About Architecture” she cites the author, Phil Beadle as focusing on creativity’s combinatorial nature, quoting,” We create the new not generally through some mad moment of inspiration in fictionalized accounts of ancient Greeks in baths, but by putting things together that do not normally go together; from taking disciplines and seeing what happens when they are forced into unanticipated collisions.”

Now when you work in this manner, please be prepared for some push back, as many of the firms that you will be employed by will be practicing architecture like it was 1995 and will not understand what you are trying to do, they might even tell you that “you can’t do it that way”, I am here to tell you to stop listening to those people immediately turn around and carry on.

Second: Give up the ownership of ideas:
I know this may be counterintuitive, because if not for our own ideas, what do we have? “More” is the correct answer. You must worry less about being the initiator of ideas and focus on being the connector of them. Steve Jobs said, “Creativity is just connecting things”

In order to do this, you must always invite more voices to the table rather than less, and make sure they are varied voices, not from a singular point of view. We at Gensler work this way
every day, my job at times is more of editor rather than initiator. I will freely admit it takes courage to do this, because at its core, its process means that you have no idea where a solution is headed, no preconceived notions, there is no certainty from having formulated an answer before the process even begins (which gets harder the longer people practice) but that is precisely the point. Voltaire said, “Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.” You have to trust the process and then hang on for dear life.

THREE: BE CURIOUS, Really curious:
Throughout your career, you will be looked upon for answers to problems posed to you by clients, your colleagues, and society. As you progress in your career, you begin to rely on your perceived knowledge to answer those very questions. “This is how we did it last time” can be valuable to a point (like not touching fire a second time), but ultimately, in the case of architecture, deadly. When Picasso said, “All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.” He was making this very point. We often lose that discovery trait as we gain experience, we stop looking, and we create Best Buys. You must question relentlessly, test and re-test, train yourself to act in this manner and maintain the curiosity of a child for rest of your life and you will always arrive at innovative answers.

AND NOW MY FINAL REQUEST:
A student that had attended an event that I was speaking at recently asked, “What do you attribute your success to?” or as I took it to mean from his inflection, “How the hell did you get to be where you are?” And admittedly, I did not have a great answer; hard work, dedication, late nights, an incredible amount of support and some God given talent was my answer. But as I pondered this question, I began to remember a couple of similar events in my career, which I will share with you before I leave you with my request.

During my first week of High School, you can all remember that, I was brought in, with a group of my peers, to meet with our appointed guidance counselor. We sat around a conference table in an uncomfortably small room and listened to Mr. Sime speak about High School, future careers and how to be social, but not too social. When he was through with his speech about this new academic endeavor, he posed a question to the group, one whose content I don’t remember (and is not important to the story). What followed was typical, awkward teenage silence, everyone trying very hard not to make eye contact as if that would help in this incredibly small room. I was sitting at the head of the table (where I like to sit), opposite of Mr. Sime and decided to speak up. I answered the question, and his response to my answer was, “Brian, you are going to be successful because you had the nerve to speak up, to answer a question when no one else wanted to, to be the first brave enough to share your opinion”. Many years later I confirmed with Mr. Sime that he did this every year with every new group of
freshman and that he really didn’t care what the answer was, but was instilling a life lesson to the group.

Fast forwarding a number of years to my first position after Grad School, it happened again. I was the most junior member at Booth Hansen, a well-known Chicago firm led by Larry Booth, one of the Chicago 7 architects as they were known. Within the first couple of weeks of my employment there, an all office design review was being held in the basement during lunch with the client present. The project was presented, and it seemed to me like very little thought went into it, and that bothered me enough that I mustered up the confidence to speak out and suggested different ways to think about the project. I remember Larry Booth agreeing with me as well as the Client and then Larry asking, “Who are you?” Later that day I was called into Larry’s office, which was pretty cool especially for a young kid like I was, and he was asking me a lot of questions and began sharing with me things he had been working on and books that he had lying around. Afterward, I noticed that I was being treated differently not only by him, but by everyone, people noticed me and asked my opinion of which I was always happy to give. What had happened, by contributing unexpectedly is that I had created an immediate value. Soon thereafter, I was assigned to projects that Larry was working on, presenting with him to clients and becoming a trusted designer. I was now being exposed to opportunities I would not otherwise have been exposed to, I was seen differently by others; my career path was changing and I capitalized on it.

Now I have been focusing on the number 22, the number years that have passed since I was sitting in your seat, because it is also, for many of you the number of years that you have been on this planet. Let me assure you that these years go by in a blink of an eye. So to the Class of 2015, what I am simply requesting of you all as you enter your next venture is to speak up, immediately, let your voice be heard, now, and begin contributing to the dialogue of your firm, community and beyond, as soon as possible. Don’t be intimidated, don’t be shushed, and most importantly don’t think that you are not ready to contribute, I promise you that you are, I have seen it over and over throughout my career. And when you do, it will open up opportunities for you that would otherwise pass you by. Your time is valuable and precious, the profession is changing and it needs your skills, the profession needs your talent and the profession needs your voice now more than ever before. It is now time to turn the tables and let us begin learning from you!

Congratulations, again, Class of 2015, we are expecting great things! Thank you.