

DISTINGUISHED TEACHER 2007-2008

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Delivered by Prof. Douglas Wirls at Pratt Institute, May 11, 2007

What a wonderful setting for a graduation, surrounded by these buildings and all this green. You graduating students know this place well. Those of you visiting today are probably becoming increasingly aware that you are in the midst of a visual culture of considerable size.

Since I have been granted the opportunity to speak to you today I would like to talk a bit about what I think joins these buildings together besides these lovely grounds.

In my view it is a common language and shared experience. These buildings and the activities that go on in them could easily seem much more distant from one another if not for this bond of common vocabulary and understanding of form, space and color and a shared appreciation for all the permutations that arise from them.

Among other kinds of classrooms, these buildings contain the kind of classroom that is called a studio and the particular and, at times, idiosyncratic kind of teaching that I, and many others here, engage in goes on in a studio. Permit me to grossly generalize by attempting to briefly describe what goes on in a studio class. We - my students and I - take a situation, real or imagined, discuss it in relation to the appropriate theories and principles and approaches - put it to practice and then submit the result to discussion and critique in the intense and collaborative company of others engaged in the same pursuit - It is an amazing thing to experience.

Many of you graduating today have gone through this process so many times you might now take it for granted, but you didn't when you first arrived. To those unfamiliar with this kind of place it might appear inefficient and perhaps a bit messy. But it is in this situation of trial and error - conjecture and proof - where much of the communication lies beyond the easy reach of linguistic expression - not easily articulated - but through the practice I have described this visual vocabulary is built and recorded in the adventure and memory of making something.

It is in this kind of place and in this way that much of this common experience and vocabulary finds connection in both the historic and contemporary.

I know this language much better now than when I first arrived and I have depended on it mightily in relating what I teach to my students and identifying with the many other diverse disciplines taught here.

These values of shared and common experience are cherished at Pratt. I have heard them extolled by many here in attendance. Anyone looking for the qualities that make Pratt a special place should be naturally inclined to acknowledge these qualities first. There aren't many places like this anymore.

I also have a sense of how much this common experience matters in an age of such diverse and eclectic applications and greater emphasis on specialization. It is a delicate thread. So I am suggesting that it will require a degree of stewardship in order to maintain this community of common understanding and the essential vocabulary that supports it.

It is the great strength of Pratt that it can offer such an incredibly broad range of options. This place is vast in that regard.

You should know that you, as Pratt graduates, are valued for the breadth of your experience and sensitivity to and knowledge of a wide range of visual endeavors gained in all areas of your studies. Whether it is the interior or industrial designer who knows of painting - the art historian or photographer who can draw, you all have a communication with so many aspects of the visual.

It stands to reason that knowledge and a breadth of experience of this kind can't help but contribute to improving and enhancing the humane condition of the public realm. It is something that we need more of in this world and that is certainly at the core of this Institute's mission.

I have great affection for this place and the people here today. How can you not. It is all so authentic. I have always enjoyed shooing the cats out of my classroom every morning.

Thanks to all of my colleagues past and present for their example and guidance, particularly those in the Foundation Department and our Chairman Bill Fasolino for his gracious and persuasive way in building an important community of understanding - the institute for giving me the opportunity to teach, which I adore - and particularly all of the students who honored me with your recognition today.

You will all now go make something beautiful.