

Convocation Speech at the School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal

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THE CREATOR'S CODE

Good day everybody. Thank you for inviting me to speak at this important occasion of the Third Convocation of School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal, where a new generation of young architects and urban planners will enter the profession. From today onwards all of us sitting here are working together to create a better world!

I am honored to be here with wonderful teachers, dignitaries and old friends like Dr. Bimal Patel, Chetan Vaidya, Rajiv Mishra, Dean Ajay Khaire and Vijay Garg.

It has been my good fortune to have great teachers, and I have always said “*there is only one kind of good luck and that is to have good teachers.*” My teachers were people of values and beliefs; and they had high aspirations; aspirations to create a better society and not aspirations to become rich! There have always been values, ideals and principles that have bound people together, making them a fellowship. The path my teachers all walked on was bound on either side by values. Their, and my destination has been our shared ideals and utopian ambitions. I believe our education is essentially about the values instilled in young people, woven into their professional skills, knowledge and sensitivities. Beginning with our education, these values carry us onto a path of service and national building.

I am here today to invite you young professionals to join us on that path. I am here to challenge all of us, that we define our profession as **good people who profess the same good values**. We must be clear that to be a professional, and our professional's work, is to profess values and to realize those values through our creative work! Like the Hippocratic Oath, requiring all new physicians to swear by a code of values to be upheld throughout their lifetime, I propose we architects and urban planners, here today, agree to have such a **Creator's Code** that becomes our **Rite of Passage** from being ordinary laypeople and students to being a uniquely gifted *professional!* I am glad to know that the School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal has an oath for all graduating professionals, echoing the values I am now referring to! I propose that such a professional oath be expanded, and not come at the end of our studies, but at the beginning, and be woven into and throughout the educational process!

What are these values?

I wish to propose a few generic beliefs, themes and causes that have taken us all on an exciting journey. I am doing this with the explicit hope that new young professionals sitting here with me today may see sense in what I say and join our mission and carry the journey forward.

Let me briefly describe a few of the values that must become an integral part of our Professional Oath and code of behavior.

Truth and Objective Reality

Underlying all our work and fundamental to our personalities is our commitment to **truth**. By truth I don't mean a sense of right and wrong; of eating the right foods, or dressing well; but I mean an intellectual commitment that 'what we see to be true is true'. This commitment extends through a faith in the scientific method and a disdain for superstition, gossip, nostalgia and romanticism. It means going out into the world and using life as a laboratory for learning. In the end it means acting on **objective reality**. This is what is called intellectual honesty and it first involves a dialogue with ourselves, assuring us that what we speak is factual and rational. If there is one value we all share, it is a commitment to truth. It demands introspection. It makes us ask, 'How can architecture and planning be dishonest, or honest?' Are we selling our skills and knowledge for money at the expense of our community and humanity?

I know that we professionals would never do that! Another value is equality.

Equality

The **equality of all living things**, particularly human beings, is fundamental to our work. This can be distilled into a slogan (paraphrasing Marx): *From each according to their abilities and to each according to their needs*. Gandhiji refined this concept further into his concept of trusteeship and social commitment.

I feel we all believe in some kind of social net that does not allow anyone to fall below a minimal level of dignified human existence. This means everyone must have access to medical care; all humans must have a minimal sustaining diet and adequate 'humane' shelter. It also means people have equal access to opportunities to develop themselves to do things in life that bring us joy. It means that everyone has an equal right of access to opportunities that exist within society. This makes us ask: is there a 'social contract' between we professionals and our society that transcends the simplistic client-consultant relationship? Can architecture and urban planning further the cause of equality amongst all people? Can our design skills act as channels and paths of access and opportunity for others? Can we design urban systems that make access to education, health care and shelter equitable? I know we can!

Justice

These values evoke a need for **justice** and **fairness**. A rule applied to one must be applied to all and there must be no exceptions to a rule meant for everyone. We have questioned whether it is 'just' to destroy the ecosystem in our own lifetime at the cost of future generations. We have asked if it is fair for one city to consume twenty times the energy per capita of another. We have pondered over the excesses of a minority of greedy people at the cost of the majority. These are concerns we all share. Do such values impinge on how we design humane settlements? Yes, they do!

World View

The times we live in require us to have a **worldview** and understand that we cannot survive in isolation. Be it climate change, sustainability, human rights, nuclear war, terrorism or trade, our shared global space is affected. A sense of geography, history and culture must temper our passions and grant us love and understanding. We must respect diverse cultures and co-exist with many beliefs. In the deepening urban context of India, where we will all share denser urban space, common social and economic facilities and in making community decisions together, this is an integral part of architecture and planning.

Regional Context

At the same time, we have to build and to design contextually. We have to draw our inspiration from styles evolved from the past that have addressed climate, local materials, craftsmanship, appropriate technologies and culture. *The design of any artifact begins with an understanding of its physical 'place'*. How does context become the starting point of design? How do building programmes and functions reflect the culture of the users? Do the walkways and public spaces we create gift conviviality to their users? What lessons do we learn from the history of the site and of the people who will occupy our structures? How are we contributing to, or are we detracting from, regional cultures?

Are we stealing people's identities, and sense of self, by ignoring their heritage, their history and their patterns of behavior?

Liberty

I think each one of us demands our personal freedom and the **liberty** to pursue our own fate, explore our own talents, and be ourselves in every creative manner possible. Many of my teachers fled oppression in Europe to be where they had a voice. Their diaspora in fear of oppression became my legacy of freedom. Liberty is also an attitude about the involvement and participation of the users of our works. How do we make our design processes more interactive and participatory? How do our plans gift humanity more opportunities and choices? Do we see trampling on the rights of one minority as a theft of freedom from us all? Do we see land grabbing by developers, and evictions for special interests, as affronts to human dignity? Can we allow such things to happen in the name of city and urban design? Can we include in our planning for new infrastructure better habitat for those who must be displaced in order to make way for new infrastructure. If we want to grow this country; if we want to create the large-scale transport and basic services infrastructure we need, people will be affected. This is inevitable! Are we including them in our plans as part of the costs and benefits?

We can and we must do this!

Fraternity

Each of us senior architects and urban planners sitting here today have undergone a number of personal transformations and reincarnations; we have redefined ourselves, explored new manifestations and lived different avatars in life's search. Yes, we are different, but we are the same! What binds us together is a sense of **fraternity**—sisterhood and brotherhood that attracts us and makes us want to come together as we are doing here today.

When I meet my gurus and my professional colleagues, these are the kinds of concepts and values that mold our dialogues, discussions and guide our thoughts. The strength of shared values gives us a sense of meaning and assurance. It keeps us on a path. By sharing these values, with you here today, I want to expand our fraternal circle to include each student and new professional sitting here today, to be part of our professional fraternity! I want you, on this graduation day, to think of your life and your values. I want each student to become a teacher casting our *gharana's* net much wider. To be a part of our fellowship, of our fraternity and our *gharana*, all that you must do is to imbibe in, and promote these simple values I am outlining.

Modern Ideas

All of us on this path have been deeply concerned about the **modern era**, and **globalization**. This has been a time that took away dignity from the craftsman; a time that turned self-sufficient homesteads into mono-cropped commercial fields; a time that pushed ill-prepared, illiterate people into chaotic cities. It is a time when a disproportionate share of the earth's resources shifted into the hands of a few

persons and agencies that lacked what Gandhiji called **trusteeship**. Right from John Ruskin, Charles Mackintosh, through the Werkbund, the Weimar School of Art, the Bauhaus, the CIAM, the Team 10 and the Delos Symposia, right up until today here at SPA Bhopal, our mission has been to bring a better life to humanity. Do we see modern architecture as a mere style, or as a social commitment? Do we see architecture and urban planning as agents to enhance the human condition? I know we do, and that is why I am here to be with you today.

Trusteeship

We live in an era of greed and self-aggrandizement. It is an era in which a person's respect and social position is determined by their wealth, no matter what the methods they used to acquire it. Good deeds are thrown to the wind. Perhaps the fundamental error of socialism was that it did not recognize greed as a generic human quality, but construed it as a symptom of freedom, or thought it drew its source from capitalism. The fundamental error of capitalism was that it has not accepted an 'equal playing field' as the basis of true competition and the rise of a meritocracy. It has failed to provide the social net that we planners are committed to! Greed is in all of us. It is the darkness struggling with the light. Greed is in my nature and in yours. The fundamental purpose of our education is to teach us of our own dark urges and to temper our thoughts and our spirits toward public service.

Perhaps the emphasis on these values is my reaction to greed. By stating them here today it may help young architects and urban planners take a stance on their own values during their difficult careers. We must understand that our talents and our wealth are only loaned to us, in trusteeship, to use toward the greater good. When we die we will not carry any other kind of wealth with us! But all of us sitting here will leave behind our legacy of good thoughts, good deed and better cities and urban fabric for people to live in.

Planning

The issue of the accumulation and distribution of wealth has been one that called for our attention and drew us to the planning of common resources and assets; to the planning of villages, regions, towns, neighborhoods, cities, campuses and buildings.

To me **planning is the study of stresses faced by different segments of society, and the rational distribution of investments, logical creation of incentives and balanced enforcement of rules that reduce society's stresses.** It is the logical allotment of available resources toward the equitable reduction of human stress. This will result in the creation of infrastructure, services, facilities and institutional modalities, gifting in a humane society.

The word **planning** has now taken on a new dimension. In 1971, when I initiated the School of Planning at Ahmedabad, it was all of these concepts and values that fired the new institution. We were no longer doing colored maps that designated land use zones. We were looking at minimum human needs, the availability of essential goods and services and links between human needs and their fulfillment. The word 'design' took on a new dimension; it took on a social dimension.

Architecture and urban planning took on the character of a social tool. All of us saw these disciplines as vehicles of social change. We saw these professional callings as paths to the discovery of truth; for the analysis of objective reality; for the realization of human equality; as harbingers of justice; and as voices for individual and community freedom. We saw not just problems, but we envisioned their resolution. We were not just talkers; we were doers and the creators of a new society. From this matrix

of ideas and concepts the Centre for Development Studies and Activities in Pune was created in 1976, and the voices became more and louder!

Knowledge

Ignorance breeds ugliness. Values lack context unless informed by knowledge. The collection of facts is essential for us to form ideas. An idea is the logical relationship between two or more facts! Analyzing and understanding the relationships between related ideas allows us to form concepts. Without concepts we cannot state problems. *Concepts are the seeds of good design.*

Each young architect and each young planner must set their own standards and define their own character through the values they adhere to. The love for knowledge, the habit of reading and an interest in analysis are not just activities, but essential values for professionals!

Each of us evolves a unique persona based on our values, attitudes, wisdom and compassion. Do not adopt your persona, and your personality, from people who are mean to you, making you reactive. If you are mean to a mean person you slowly begin to collect all that meanness into your own personality. Instead of mirroring all that is bad in the world, slowly, piece by piece, build upon all the good you see in little slivers in each person. All that good can become your model of yourself. It can be the persona that you project like an aura radiating out from you to others. **That is true knowledge and true wisdom.**

In the ultimate analysis we architects and planners are not just creators. We are builders. We cannot live in the world of mere thoughts and words; we have to plant our feet firmly on earth and leave our footprint. We are ‘thinker-doers’ whose ideas must mesh with the materials around us, and the technology available. We must address the society we live in and build for.

I often hear architects blaming what they are doing on their context, or their clients, or the lack of resources. These are just self-delusions constructed to rationalize defeat. **Our role here on earth is to do good.** If we have a bad client we can walk away. That is unless we are driven by greed. It is only through **knowledge**, tempered by values and compassion, that true architecture and urbanism can raise their heads.

Openness

Our debates, dialogues, presentations, and even arguments, have made us all more open to constructive criticism and self-evaluation. Teaching was never a one-way flow of ideas; it is a back-and-forth flow of sharing and questioning. Most of my teachers taught through the Socratic method of asking questions. They maintained that it was more important to ask the right question than to know the correct answer. Dialogues and questions are more important than monologues and answers. Openness is an essential professional value! You leave here today more open to constructive criticism than the day you arrived here. Your education here has made you so.

Legacy

These values were passed on to me from my teachers and by the examples of true friends. Some of my teachers were wise friends and colleagues at work. I learned from being with them, seeing how they dealt with issues and understanding how they resolved problems. These values were woven into the fabric of everything they said, and underpinned their worldview. In my own life I used these values to deal with challenges and resolve crises. I even used these values to question my friends and teachers,

when I felt they waivered off the correct path. I have watched my colleagues, some of whom are sitting here with us today, employ these values when being wrongly attacked and maligned while trying to serve society and the public good. We often have come together to fight wrong ideas, selfish crusades and groupism.

Now it is my legacy to hold these ideas and values as my only wealth, and it is my duty to pass on this wealth on to you. I have chosen to call these values the **Creator's Code**, and hopefully they will become an oath, taken by all young urban planners and architects, as the Rite of Passage from being an ordinary layman, transforming into a true professional upon graduation.

This transformation is the essence of your stay here at the School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal.

Good luck to all of you.

Thank you.

Prof. Christopher Benninger

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