“Toward a Renewed Culture of Building”
by Philip Bess / June 8th, 2010

An adapted commencement address arguing that traditional building provides us with a durable and beautiful built environment, which in turn provides the best physical and spatial context for the inventiveness and daring that modern life demands.

I am both pleased and honored to be with you to celebrate this milestone and the worthy ambitions to which the American College of the Building Arts is devoted. Your estimable Mayor Joseph Riley has described this school as a gift from Charleston to America. So it is, and so may it be for years and generations to come.

It is no accident that this school dedicated to traditional building was begun in Charleston, a pioneer city of historic preservation. But although you have been born and nurtured in the culture of preservation, and perhaps even now have geared yourselves toward preservation practice, I urge you today to set your sights higher. For what we need today is more than a culture of preservation. What we need today is a renewed *culture of building*, a communal enterprise that includes architects, patrons, founders, developers, and financiers, a culture in which skilled artisans occupy a most important place, and play a most critical role. For here is the truth that you knowingly or unknowingly represent: *human beings should build the way in which students at this school have been taught to build*.

How can this be true, when the contemporary culture of building, when modern culture itself, when so many prominent institutions and so many aspects of our own individual lives, all seem to deny it? The way we live so often emphasizes motion rather than calm, mobility rather than place, the disposable over the durable, the temporal over the timeless, novelty over beauty. I note the achievements of your Board of Trustees in various walks of modern life: in banking, business, communications media, information technology, medicine, the military. All these fields are *apparently* modern in a way that traditional building *apparently*

is not. Is this a contradiction? Are we who are modern, who love traditional buildings and cities, living incoherent and contradictory lives? Are we guilty of thoughtless nostalgia? This is what critics of traditional building—some for ideological reasons, some for ostensibly pragmatic reasons— would have you believe; but they are wrong. For each of these apparently disparate modern activities I have cited has something in common.

What unites these practices is that the respective practitioners of each have a more or less clear, shared and *reasonable* understanding of the nature and purpose of what they practice, of the end or good that the practice seeks—its *telos*. Such, alas, is not the case in our contemporary culture of architecture and building, where there is no such clear, shared and reasonable understanding of their *telos*. Where once there was both theoretical and practical agreement that buildings should be durable, comfortable, beautiful and related to each other in a proper hierarchical order, today we build everyday buildings for short-term economic gain and monumental buildings as exercises in novelty, self-expression, and advertising. The cumulative result is our contemporary built environment of junk and bewilderment—though none responsible for it will admit that this junky bewildering environment is their intent, or argue that it represents a shared purpose, or contend that it is reasonable. But perhaps we have this built environment precisely because we *lack* a shared and reasonable understanding of the nature and purpose of architecture and building.

This is not true everywhere however. At the American College of the Building Arts you understand that the purpose of traditional building is to make good places for human beings; that making buildings should be deliberate; that craft and durability are the essence of traditional building; that traditional builders innovate, but only slowly, testing everything and holding fast to what is good; and that all this is true because the purposes of building, properly understood, are different from, though not unrelated to, the purposes of those faster paced realms of activity that distinguish the modern world.

For here is the paradox: even modern human beings fare better in good places. Indeed, persons best able to successfully navigate the changes and uncertainties of the modern world and of life itself are most often those persons most deeply rooted in stable families in good places. And this suggests a true rationale for traditional building even in the context of the modern world: *A durable and beautiful built environment provides the best physical and spatial context for human life, and thereby supports the different kinds of inventiveness and daring that modern life demands*. If one grows up in a loving family in a good home in a good town or city, one is likely to carry within oneself a foundational sense of *home* throughout one's entire life, whatever other uncertainties, dangers and adventures life presents. Making places in which we are able to be at home in the world—even if we can never be entirely *comfortable* in the world—is therefore a primary task of traditional building properly understood.

But what of your own lives as craftsmen and craftswomen? The future is unavoidably uncertain, but I think you can take comfort in the knowledge that good traditional building practices promote a number of inter-related goods: environmental, economic, moral, philosophical, urban, and spiritual. Allow me to elaborate.

There are *environmental goods* that follow from building traditionally. "Sustainability" is

today's buzz-word, but the most sustainable thing architects and builders can do is to make durable buildings that together make walkable, mixed-use towns and cities. Traditional buildings are durable in part owing to the quality of craftsmanship *with which* they are made, and in part owing to the materials *out of which* they are made—materials typically close to the condition in which they have been taken directly from the earth: stone, clay, wood, lime, sand, metals. These are the pre-modern *low-embodied energy* material elements of your respective crafts, and most people recognize that these materials—being from the earth and in something close to their natural material condition—when transformed and properly employed and maintained will both endure over time and will look good doing so. And when these building materials come from local rather than distant sources, the long-term sustainability of the built environment is enhanced even further.

There are *economic goods* that follow from building traditionally. Setting aside the macro- benefits of being an integral part of a complex society of production and exchange, simply at a micro-level both the skills and the work habits you possess will be always in demand in one way or another, at one scale or another. We may be facing economic hard times of indefinite length, but as traditional craftsmen, you are far better prepared than most to survive and even flourish in such an economic environment. This is no small point.

Here's something you may not have thought about: there are *moral goods* that follow from practicing the traditional building arts. Practices such as yours are incubators of moral virtue, because they embody shared standards of excellence to which both practitioners and would-be practitioners aspire. As a novice being initiated into a practice, becoming a successful participant in that practice requires you to develop moral virtues such as honesty, courage, justice and prudential judgment. If you do not develop these *character virtues*, it will be impossible for you to succeed in your practice, not least because learning the requisite skills requires the exercise of such virtues. Don't misunderstand: being a good person requires much more than being a good craftsman. But there is honor among craftsmen, and becoming a good craftsman necessarily entails acquiring certain virtues also essential to becoming a good person.

There are *philosophical goods* that follow from building traditionally, because when you fashion iron or carve stone, lay a foundation or plaster a wall, erect a timber frame or square up an opening, you have no time for and no interest in modern philosophy. Traditional builders instead naturally incline to Aristotelian *metaphysical realism*, and disincline to subjectivist notions of truth and beauty, which is the ideology of people unacquainted with craftsmanship and its full implications. You, however, *know* that matter is real; you know and respect its properties; you know what good work is. You know something true about the world.

There are *urban goods* that typically follow from building traditionally. As traditional builders in a world of slapdash construction, you few are a community unto yourselves. At the same time however, you are members of a larger community, for whom you are builders and makers of places. We call these built places *towns* and *cities*; and traditional builders typically come to acquire certain characteristics common to persons who live in towns and cities. The Greek word for city is *polis*, and Latin doubles down with the words *civitas* and

urbs. Though the etymology is sometimes direct and sometimes indirect, it helps explain why those who live closely together in cities develop sophisticated divisions of labor that include not only builders and architects, but also *police*, why in their encounters with others city-dwellers are typically *polite*, why in both their shoes and manners residents of cities are *polished*, why city-dwellers are in fact *civilized*, and sometimes even *urbane*.

Finally, there are *spiritual goods* that follow from building traditionally. Notwithstanding the mundane purposes that good buildings satisfy, the highest purpose of the building arts is beauty. What can one say objectively about beauty in a culture where it is widely taken for granted that beauty is subjective? Whether painting or photography or music or sculpture or buildings, our encounter with something beautiful pleases us almost instantly. We have an intuitive understanding that beautiful things are well made; were they not, we would not understand them to be beautiful. Beautiful things somehow both embody clearly and reveal the essence of the thing they are. Beautiful things appear to us complete; we would never think of changing them, and they could not be altered but for the worse. Beautiful things not only attract us, they make us grateful. Beautiful things judge *us*; they change us, and make us want to be better than we are. Beautiful things elevate us.

Nevertheless, within a strictly natural frame of reference the apparent completeness of beautiful things is an illusion, for scientists tell us, and tell us truly, that nothing in nature is "complete." But this is precisely why metaphysical realist philosophers and theologians and artists insist that beauty is properly understood as *transcendental*. Beauty is not something we experience *apart* from nature, or as something that *contradicts* nature; rather, beauty *supervenes* upon nature. In this respect therefore, when in your artistic labors you aspire to beauty, you truly are "doing God's work," and I urge you to do so with appropriate humility and appropriate fervor.

Along these lines, let me close by sharing with you one of my favorite small poems, by the 20th- century Anglo-Catholic writer Dorothy Sayers. I suspect you will appreciate the conflict she establishes at the outset, and hope you will appreciate its resolution. The poem is called "The Makers."

The Architect stood forth and said: "I am the master of the art;
I have a thought within my head, I have a dream within my heart.

Come now, good craftsman, ply your trade with tool and stone obediently;
Behold the plan that I have made—I am the master; serve you me."

The Craftsman answered: "Sir, I will, yet look to it that this your draft
Be of a sort to serve my skill—you are not the master of the craft.

It is by me the towers grow tall, I lay the course, I shape and hew;
You make a little inky scrawl, and that is all that you can do.

Account me, then, the master man, lay my rigid rule upon the plan,
and that which serves the plan—the uncomplaining, helpless stone."

The Stone made answer: "Masters mine, know this: that I can bless or damn
The thing that both of you design by being but the thing I am;

For I am granite and not gold, for I am marble and not clay,
You may not hammer me or mould—I am the master of the
way.

Yet once that mastery bestowed then I will suffer patiently
The cleaving steel, the crushing load, that make a calvary of me;

And you may carve me with your hand to arch and buttress, roof and wall,
Until the dream rise up and stand—serve but the stone, the stone serves all.

Let each do well what each knows best, nothing refuse and nothing shirk,
Since none is master of the rest, but all are servants of the work—

The work no master may subject save He to whom the whole is known,
Being Himself the Architect, the Craftsman and the Cornerstone.

Then when the greatest and the least have finished all their laboring
And sit together at the feast you shall behold a wonder thing:

The Maker of the men that make will stoop between the cherubim,
The towel and the basin take, and serve the servants who serve Him."

The Architect and Craftsman, both, agreed the Stone had spoken well;
Bound them to service by an oath and each to his own labor fell.

The forecast is for hard economic times, and there are no detailed road maps to success in the vocation that has called you. But have courage, and be confident and grateful that you have been well schooled and are well prepared. Your education, your art, is *in you*, and cannot be taken away. Stay close to your classmates, your fellow alumni, your teachers. Be entrepreneurial. Be just. Be generous. Try to form local design-build guilds of traditional builders and architects. Above all, settle in someplace and make it better by loving it for as long as you have breath. Remember what G.K. Chesterton said: that we all love Rome because it is great, but Rome first became great because it was loved.