

*University of Tennessee*  
*College of Architecture + Design*  
**2022 Commencement Address : Nick Dryden**  
*May 22, 2022*

*Good afternoon. Thank you Dean Young for the introduction and thank you for the invitation and privilege of addressing the Class of 2022. Graduates, it is a distinct honor to be here with you, your families, and your friends today. It is incredible to think that I grew up coming to this arena to see some of my favorite bands as a kid: Guns N Roses, INXS, REM, Radiohead (I'm dating myself here.) So when Dean Young said that Commencement was going to be in Thompson Bowling Arena, I was thrilled to be on this side of the stage, performing for you. (Apologies you don't get Taylor Swift..)*

*My five years at the College of Architecture + Design were some of the most memorable and impactful years of my life. I think a lot about how this place shaped me and my career.....each and every day. I remember sitting where you are and to be truly honest, I was likely dozing off in the back row from 5 years of sleep deprivation. So, I know exactly where you are. Thank you again for allowing me this honor.*

*I first would like to congratulate and extend my sincere gratitude to the faculty. Over the past two years we have*

*experienced a time like no other on this planet; especially in education. The pandemic has proven to be a challenge, yet also an opportunity to invent new ways of sharing knowledge and exchanging ideas. Never have I had more respect and appreciation for educators. The dedication and commitment from our professors has been tireless and at this moment I would like show them our appreciation. (Clapping) The resiliency of both students and faculty is inspiring, and the influence you have had on each other will be everlasting.*

*I do think it is also important to congratulate the parents, families and friends at this moment. It has been your sacrifice, support, and encouragement that has made all of this possible. Your patience with us during all the incoherent phone calls due to a lack of sleep. Your listening to all the abstract and esoteric stories from studio experiences. Hearing about all the new discoveries within this unique curriculum and learning this new language that is being freshly adopted. Does this sound familiar... "I spent most of the weekend trying to get my building to better reinforce the edge of the street on the exterior, but open up all the programs on the interior, suggesting the street is subservient to the building..." Mkkk...Did you wonder why on earth all this tuition money was invested at this university with such a wealth of resources available, and to only spend time in one concrete building on campus...and nowhere else.*

*Most importantly, Congratulations to the Class of 2022. You did it! What an amazing academic achievement and accomplishment to have completed this rigorous course of study. From the day you first walked into the A+A building, you have pushed yourselves beyond what you ever thought was possible. You have endured long juries and murky desk-crits. You have discovered skills that you didn't know you had. Most importantly you have learned that there are no 'easy buttons.'...that design is a layered process that gets refined through persistence.. and more persistence...*

*And now as you begin to think about your next steps, there are many details to bring into focus. "Where will I find my first job?" "Will I ever actually get to design a building?" "You mean I have to take another 6 tests to become a licensed Architect?"*

*On my last day of architecture school, my professor, asked the class a surprising question. **"Who in this room plans on becoming an architect?"** It was a shocking thing to be asked... especially after grinding day in, day out, night in, night out, working harder than I ever had, living and breathing architecture and design (and a lot of high performance glue products.) For me, it was getting lost in this new world of design. It was learning and understanding how everything in our environment informs architecture. For some of you, it was landscape architecture, or interior design that you let yourself explore. All of us discovered within*

*ourselves our ability to develop meaningful conceptual ideas and pushed ourselves to become effective problem solvers.*

*It immediately became clear what that query was intended to do. It cemented this idea that the last 5 years of architecture school had truly prepared us to do **anything**. Our curriculum had trained us with a focused lens at the same time provided us with a broad foundation that could lead to any-number of different careers. My professor was giving us license to continue to dream. He conveyed that there were no lasting assumptions about where we could go or what we could do. It was on our last day, that our professor was opening yet another door, giving us pause, and inviting us to sustain our questions beyond the studio, beyond the hard work asked of us, and beyond the natural end points of a semester, a year, a degree. This was a moment of generosity, sprung on us at a time in which we thought we had completed something significant... and we had... and so have you... but it was a new beginning with that question.*

*SO...*

***Who in THIS room plans on becoming an architect?*** *It is an important question to be asked. It is one that I have thought about each and every day since then. As a graduate of the College of Architecture and Design, you have a powerful ability to apply a unique mix of knowledge to an expansive world. Architects, Landscape Architects, and Interior Designers are big thinkers, but also detail oriented, and think*

*in the way of processes. You've been given the opportunity to introduce ideas that can be positively disruptive. You can affect communities, create products, design buildings and help many others realize their wildest dreams through design.*

*When I was sitting where you are today, I was wild with curiosity, but a bit overwhelmed with what was next. What did I learn? Where would I land? The summer after I graduated, I assisted in an urban design studio here at the College. It was through that experience that I discovered my now home, Nashville. Now, I have to tell you. I am a born and raised East Tennessean, and I was ready to get as far away as I could. Like many young architects, I was bound to end up in a metropolitan city with hustle; London, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles perhaps... But after several visits to Nashville, I noticed something different. I found a very accessible creative community that was deeply rooted in the arts, songwriting, music, performance and production. And the people behind it were incredibly generous with their wisdom. I realized this was where I wanted to be. I sensed I could immediately contribute, not just add more water to the ocean.*

*27 years later and after 21 years of running my own firm, I attribute much of what I have learned and accomplished to the songwriters, artists, musicians, and producers with whom I have worked. They have instilled in me the*

*importance of being open to alternate influences, and collaborating in unexpected ways with different disciplines. Thinking like a music producer has made me a different architect. This was a lesson I learned from one of my first clients, a legendary musician and producer. He once told me, "You have to find your voice within your community in order to make effective change." To be honest, I had no idea what that meant until later in my career.*

*The relationships I have made with several artists and musicians have had a profound impact on me and influenced the way that I work and think about spaces and places. Music is atmospheric. Songwriting is a storytelling process. Architecture is all of these things simultaneously. Never did I ever imagine that I would end up working with some of the most important musicians of our time: Marty Stuart, Jack White, Justin Timberlake, Dan Auerbach, The Kings of Leon,...to name a few. Finding the chance to work with artists whose work I have known and admired for a long time has been one of the highlights of my career.*

*I'm surprised how many people I meet who say, "I always wanted to be an architect. But I was never any good at math."*

*"That's why we hire engineers, like a music producer builds a team of musicians to make a record." Building a team is a*

*key component to being an architect. Design is not a solo gig.*

*So today, I challenge you to be willing to step outside of yourself and your work....and look and listen intently. It is the conversations and relationships that you will make with builders, with doctors, with fashion designers with chefs, with musicians and with your neighbors... that will help you find your voice. And in turn, you will help them find theirs. Design is collaboration. What we do is a lot like songwriting and music production. An essential component of the outcome is understanding your design intent, and establishing an effective narrative that relates to your audience.*

*After my 4th year, another professor asked us to leave a self addressed envelope where we were going to be the following summer. He wanted to send us our semester evaluation formally by letter. I keep that letter close by at my des. In this letter, (HOLD UP LETTER) was a rigorous assessment of my performance, which didn't necessarily match up with my own understanding of my abilities. It was as a reminder to stay humble and always push myself, to never take my talent for granted and always be hungry to learn. Don't be discouraged by critique, learn from it. Chances are you, like me, will remember these lessons. They will have more impact on your ability to develop your*

*character and contribute positively to your community-  
where ever you land.*

*I would like to close with a quote from famed music  
producer, Rick Rubin.*

*“All that matters is that you get to express yourself, and the  
audience gets something that speaks to them, even if these  
two things are not the same.”*

*Congratulations again, Class of 2022. It is now OUR turn to  
learn from YOU. Thank you!*